

IT'S ALL MEANINGLESS

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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I want you to imagine you are from another planet. You have come to learn about life on earth. You decide to do it by observation of all you see. That's your only input. No interviews or other ways of researching. Just watching and trying to draw conclusions. You compare how different people act. You watch some people work endlessly and others hang around lazily. You notice how some people jog every day and others just sit and watch TV. You notice how people fight each other for money and land. You notice how some are very rich and others desperately poor. There are those very conscious of their health and diet and others who are gluttons. However, you observe that despite all the differences amongst people, they all have something in common. They all end up the same. No matter what they do, they all die. What conclusions would you reach from your observations? Would you ask yourself 'What is the point? What is the meaning to this existence on earth?'

This is the assignment the author of Ecclesiastes set for himself. Ecclesiastes 1:12&13 *"I the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven."* So, he had done a lot of investigating of life in his day. So who was this person doing all this research. In Ecclesiastes 1:1 we read *"The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem."* This is like the title page in a book, listing the title and author. The author calls himself 'the teacher'. The Hebrew is 'koheleth' which means 'a person who gathers people to speak to them.' So, it can mean 'preacher, teacher or professor'. The English title 'Ecclesiastes' comes from the Greek word 'ekklesia' which means 'people who are gathered together'. The author calls himself *"...son of David, King in Jerusalem"*. It does not specifically mention Solomon but has him in mind. Traditionally it was thought Solomon was the author. But, the writer does not call himself Solomon as he does in Proverbs and the Song of Songs. In 1:16 he says, *"I said to myself, 'Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge'".* So, he is saying he surpassed all the kings before him. But there was only David and Saul before Solomon. Scholars suggest the writer was probably an unknown writer who wrote hundreds of years later. He used the style of Solomon, writing from his perspective as a rich and wise king. You could say the writer pictures for us a 'super Solomon'. Only Solomon would have had the power and riches and wisdom to try all

the pleasures and riches described in this book. From the content of the book it's been worked out that it was written in the time of Malachi, about 450BC. The people of Israel had been back many years from their exile in Babylon. They were depressed. They had hoped that when they were back in their own land all would be good again. But now, years later, their situation was no better. The Messiah had not come. They were still oppressed under the rule of other nations. There was ongoing injustice and corruption in high places. People had lost interest in God. They were spiritually very low. At that time there was a lot of trade between growing empires. Rome and Greece were flourishing. So, the Israelites thought they would latch on to that trade boom. They figured they would get their joy and pleasure from trade and material possessions. It was, in many ways, a situation remarkably like our current culture.

In chapter 1:2 the teacher gives us his 'executive summary', if you like, of his investigations. He has observed life in Israel in this time and his conclusion was (1:2) *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."* Another Bible version puts it, *"Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."* The traditional reading was *"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."* It sounds like the Hebrew superlative 'Holy of Holies'. The Hebrew way of saying the biggest or best was to repeat the word. So 'Vanity of Vanities' implies it is the worst. There is nothing more futile. The Hebrew word here is 'hebel' which means 'vapour' or 'breath'. Think of breathing out on a cold day. You have a vapour that barely lasts a moment and disappears. In other words, it refers to something that is fleeting, brief, passing, unreliable. Put another way, it's like chewing fairy floss when you thought you had steak. There's no substance to it. The Professor is stressing how quickly things pass away. How little material things have to offer. It's not just that there is only a fleeting pleasure, but that the sum total of it all is 'a puff of wind'. It all adds up, in the end, to nothing. Absolute zero. Zilch! The problem was that the people were putting too much of their expectations on material possessions. They expected their earthly comforts to make them happy. But their expectations were false. Their whole way of life was futile. Pointless.

There is a deliberate method in what the teacher is doing here. He wants the people to put their hope and expectations in another place. So, he poses a question. (1:3) *"What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?"* That is a hard-headed question drawn from the business world. The word 'gain' means 'whatever is left over'. In other words, what's the bottom line here? What is the 'profit'. What profit do you make from all your work? Jesus asked a similar question (Matthew 16:26 (NKJV)) *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"* The answer? 'Hebel, a vapour, nothing, it's all pointless and futile.' The professor is not just

being pessimistic here. He is very realistic. As James put in his letter (4:13-14) *"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."* In other words, you are just 'hebel'. It's true isn't it? We finally pay off our overpriced houses, we have all our comforts, and then sickness strikes. We have our problems. We all die. What's the point?

Now to keep the professor in perspective we must understand the last phrase in verse 3 *"...under the sun."* That phrase occurs repeatedly in this book, over 30 times if we include "under heaven". In other words, it is very significant. Each time it occurs it is like the teacher says 'Let's for the sake of argument assume there is no God. Let's assume life is only that which is under the sun. There is nothing above. Just us on earth and no heaven or God. Let's think in the terms of many in the world. That God is gone. It is just us struggling on this earth.' In other words, for a very old book, it is a very modern position it takes. So, the argument is: 'From that particular perspective, what is the value of life?' The Professor's conclusion, from his observations, is: 'It is meaningless. There's no point to it. It's all futile'. What he is doing is he dares to say out loud what was in the minds of his readers, that they didn't dare say. 'Let's live without God. There's no real benefit in worshipping God'. He takes them further than they would care to go. And then shows them the logical conclusion. In other words, 'Be radical. Do away with God. That's where you are going in your thinking. Just live life with all its pleasures. Have everything. Indulge in everything. And see where it leads you. Hebel. It's all meaningless. Ultimately it's all futile!'

I think you can see this is a very relevant issue. Many in our own communities have that perspective. The latest census says one third of our population has no religion. For them there is no God. For many others who say they are religious, they live as if there is no God. For so many life is about working hard to get into the housing market and then paying it off. It's about having lots of stuff in the house, having good times going out, enjoying the moments of life when it's good because that's all there is to life. A predominant philosophy of our times is 'nihilism'. The word comes from the Latin 'nihil' meaning 'nothing'. This philosophy argues that life is without real meaning or purpose. There is no inherent morality. Nietzsche famously wrote 'God is dead'. From that perspective life is all about trying to find some meaning for yourself in a meaningless life. That explains a lot about our culture doesn't it. The young, in particular, suffer from the spirit of our age. They have been brought up in a period of massive change in moral values, the destruction of the environment, been through a financial crisis. They have experienced the tragedy of broken families and wonder where they fit in society.

They have taken drugs to find happiness in their perceived meaningless existence, hoping to find pleasure in their hallucinations. The ice epidemic in Australia is rife.

In the verse 4-11 the professor goes on to show how this world view perceives all of existence. *"Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing."* The conclusion is that not only the work of human beings, but everything is meaningless. Nothing has any real significance or purpose. Everything just goes around and round in meaningless circles- the sun, the wind, the streams. That is the logical conclusion if there is no creator, and all that exists is by random happenings. There is no intrinsic meaning in anything. So, the earth's own pattern is as restless and repetitious as ours. Everything ends where it began. Nothing really changes no matter what you do, despite all the work and effort. In verse 9-11 the professor laments that there is no progress. There is nothing new in the world. It's all been before. And it will happen again. Nobody remembers the former generations. We continue to make the same mistakes. And for all our effort, when we are gone, people won't remember we existed. The professor says in verse 8 *"All things are so wearisome-you see and hear the same old things. It's more than one can say."*

So why bother doing anything at all? What's the point? Does all this seem depressing? Well it is! But that is the whole point. By showing the result of this view of life "under the sun", the teacher is encouraging people to look elsewhere. He is saying, 'Don't limit your view of life to just here and now, under the sun, without God.' The professor actually gives a remarkable apologetic to show the need for Christianity in our culture. In a sense we could say he goes all the way down every alley of humanist thought and shows each to be a dead end (literally). He calls it as it is: 'Life without God is meaningless. It's pointless'. That's the theme of the book. For an ancient book it is incredibly relevant. It's the key to outreach today. Before people are ready to drink from the gospel we need to create a thirst by having them see the logic of their view if life.

The intent of the teacher is that we look not at life 'under the sun' but 'in the Son'. By showing the meaninglessness of life without God he is creating a hunger for living with God. He is tough and exposes the truth that so many are not willing to look at. In other words, the emptiness that longs for filling. For when we have tasted the grace of God, through his Son, then we will see things differently. When we have been reconciled to

God through the death and resurrection Jesus, then we have a very different perspective on life. One that gives joy and meaning. Then we will see creation not as a meaningless circle of existence, but as a declaration of the glory of God. As Psalm 19 puts it, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands". As Genesis 8 points out, the continuing cycle of the seasons is the guarantee of God's promise of his presence in the world. It's a demonstration of his faithfulness.

Knowing God means we can accept and see all that is happening as having deep meaning and a lasting value. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 *"Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain"*. None of what we do is in vain! We can go on and struggle for the kingdom of God. Even if it seems like we are getting nowhere. For we are those who trust in the Son. We know that Christ is coming. All our work for him will bear fruit for eternity. Life is not just a meaningless cycle. All of life is heading for the time when Jesus returns. When he does he will bring justice and peace to all creation. Just observing life 'under the sun' will not tell us that. But the scriptures tell us a very different story. All is not meaningless. In Christ we already have the victory. We are a forgiven people. All we are required to do is live in obedience to him. That is the conclusion of the professor. 12:13-14 *"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."* How do you view life? 'Under the sun' or 'in the Son'? The difference has huge implications.