



Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
January 14, 2018

Today we are going to begin two new series of sermons. This morning we will start with Ecclesiastes and this evening we will start a series on the Ten Commandments. So, Ecclesiastes this morning.

I have considered preaching through Ecclesiastes a number of times before, but decided against it because I wasn't sure if I could preach through it without a lot of repetition. The book of Ecclesiastes is sort of like a sermon and I wasn't sure how to preach a number of sermons on it. I did once preach one sermon on the whole book, but I wasn't ready to try to preach through the whole book. But during my reading break in November, I did some background reading on Ecclesiastes and found a number of helpful books, and so I decided it's time to tackle this book. I'm looking forward to it because it is a fascinating book.

It is part of the wisdom literature of the OT. The wisdom books are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Solomon and some of the Psalms. The wisdom literature is different from all the rest in that it does not deal with the history of salvation and it does not deal with the temple and sacrifices and similar topics. The wisdom literature deals with how everyday life works, and it deals with problems such as the problem of suffering and the apparent futility of life. The book of Job is an example of a book that deals with suffering. One of the things that the wisdom literature brings to our attention is that life is complex, and it is not always easy to understand how it works. There is a lot about life that is puzzling and does not appear to make sense. This is especially the focus of Ecclesiastes.

It is interesting to compare Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The book of Proverbs is largely observations about life. It is wisdom based on experience, and so it is largely about how the world works. It seeks to

uncover the patterns that God has built into the creation to help us navigate life successfully. It teaches that that begins with the fear of the Lord, but then it goes on to deal with all kinds of practical subjects. If you hang out with violent men, you will be pulled into their ways. If you work hard you will get ahead. If you sleep with someone else's wife you will ruin your life. If you listen to advice you will succeed. If you don't you are a fool. The wise men of Israel were observers of life and they learned how life worked and what kind of attitudes and behaviors led to success and what kind of attitudes and behaviors led to failure and ruin.

Ecclesiastes deals more with the exceptions – with things that do not seem to make sense. It deals with the fact that life often seems meaningless and futile. It deals with the fact that in the end it does not seem to matter how you live because both the righteous and the wicked end up in the same place – in the grave. Proverbs teaches that it makes a great difference whether we are wise or foolish. Ecclesiastes grapples with the fact that it often seems to make no difference whether one is wise or whether one is a fool. According to the book of Proverbs, life makes sense. According to the book of Ecclesiastes, it often does not.

Now that may sound like a problem for our doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. How can an inerrant Scripture contradict itself? The answer is that this is wisdom literature and wisdom literature deals with the fact that life often seems contradictory. The Bible here is reflecting the fact that life has its mysteries and its riddles and its conundrums and its things that do not make sense. Both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are true because sometimes life makes sense and sometimes it does not. The wisdom literature is designed to help us to deal with life as it is and life as it is does not always add up the way that we think it should.

So, Proverbs tells us how to succeed in life and Ecclesiastes says, "So what. It doesn't really matter whether you succeed or fail in life because life is meaningless. We all die anyway and everything that we have done will be forgotten." Both of these perspectives are true in some sense. There is a sense in which how we live is important and there is a sense in which how we live really makes no difference because in the end we all die and are forgotten and nothing we accomplish will matter.

Now we all know the answer to Ecclesiastes' problem. What we do matters to God and God is going to judge us all. Eventually Ecclesiastes will get to that answer. But it is not going to get there till the end of the book and it wants us to grapple with the fact that in some sense it is true that death destroys all meaning. From the perspective of our observed experience it is true that we die and are forgotten and within a few generations it is as if we have never lived. Ecclesiastes grapples with life as we experience it. It is part of the Word of God for us and this part of the Word of God invites us to wrestle with the parts of our lives that do not fit neatly into little boxes – the parts of our lives that do not seem to fit with the overall message of Scripture. There are important lessons to be learned by thinking deeply about some of the conundrums we face as we live in a fallen world.

So, who wrote this book? At first glance it seems like Solomon, but he is not identified as the author in the book itself. The author identifies himself as “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” In verse 16 he tells us, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.” That makes it sound like Solomon because he is associated with wisdom, but then it doesn't, because there were not a lot of kings in Jerusalem before him – only David. Solomon was only the second king in Jerusalem, but this verse makes it sound like the one speaking was further down the line of kings in Jerusalem. Some conservative scholars think it was Solomon and some think it was someone else later than Solomon who was reflecting the tradition of wisdom associated with Solomon. In the end we don't know. And we must take into consideration the fact that since the author did not identify himself, maybe he did not want us to know who he was.

J.I Packer has a chapter in his book *Knowing God*, in which he discusses Ecclesiastes and wisdom, and this is what he writes about the authorship of Ecclesiastes, “Whether this means that Solomon himself was the preacher, or that the preacher put his sermon into Solomon's mouth as a didactic device, . . . need not concern us. The sermon is certainly Solomonic in the sense that it teaches lessons which Solomon had unique opportunities to learn.”

So, the preacher begins his sermon. “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Among the major translations only the NIV uses a different word here. The NIV has “Meaningless! Meaningless! says the teacher, Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” The point that the Preacher is making by using this word is slightly different in different contexts in the book. It is used many times and its meaning is not always identical, and so we have to consider it each time in the light of the context. But even before we do that, this is a strikingly odd thing for a biblical writer to say, for one of the great purposes of the Bible is to teach us the meaning of life. One of the great blessings of belonging to God is that we know that our purpose in life is to serve and glorify God. And now we have a wise man blurt out at the beginning of his sermon “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” We read statements like this in the writings of the atheistic philosophers. We do not expect to find a biblical author saying that everything is meaningless. And yet here it is.

Now one of the keys that helps us to understand why the preacher says that everything is vanity is the phrase, “under the sun.” He is talking about life in this world, life on the horizontal level, life as we experience it from day to day. What he is saying is not absolutely true. This is the nature of wisdom literature. It often makes statements that are not absolutely true but true from a certain perspective. So, we might say that there is a sense in which it is true that life is vain and meaningless and futile. This is the reality of life in a fallen world. And sometimes we can take a step back and look at our lives and wonder, “What is the point of it all?”

The curse that God pronounced upon Adam because of his fall into sin hints at this. In Genesis 3:17-19, God says to Adam, “[C]ursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17–19). Because of this curse, there is something futile about life. You struggle to survive. You struggle against thorns and thistles or their equivalents. You sweat in order to eat. You do that for a few years and then you die. James speaks of this

as well. In 4:14 he writes, “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” And the apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:20 that “the creation was subjected to futility....”

There is sometime futile about life in a fallen world. This is not the whole story, but it is part of the story – it is part of our experience. The author of Ecclesiastes begins to develop this point in verses 3-11. In verses 3-4, he says, “What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” Now we might disagree with the Preacher here. Actually, we gain quite a bit from all the toil at which we toil under the sun. Many of us get a paycheck. There is some satisfaction in working. Life is a lot more pleasant if we work than if we don’t. We have homes. We have nice food. We have cars. The life of working and supporting ourselves and enjoying the extras can be quite pleasant and satisfying.

The Preacher would not deny this. But he is thinking longer term. He is thinking of life as a whole. He is thinking about the fact that we are only on this earth for a short time. And what then do we gain from all our toil? We do all this work. We put in a lifetime of effort. And then we die, and the next generation does it all over again. What do we gain in the end? Does any of it matter in the end? Do our lives add up to anything significant? The generations each spend their breath of time on the earth – one after another. All that remains is the earth.

I’m reading a novel by James A. Michener called *Centennial*. The stories that Michener tells span many centuries. He is not a young earth creationist, and so he goes back billions of years. He tells of the first human beings coming to an area – in this case a part of what today is the state of Colorado. He imagines a story in each of the eras that he covered. We get to know one or two people. We live with them for a hundred pages or so. We experience something of their goals and their struggles. But then they die. Their era is over. Then Michener describes the next era. It is a different story with a new cast of characters. The earlier inhabitants of that area are long gone. Perhaps a few of their artifacts remain. The land on which they dwelt remains much the same. But the earlier inhabitants are gone and mostly forgotten.

This is the reality that the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is talking about. From the whole life perspective, there is a futility about life. “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” Psalm 103 makes the same point. “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” The place is still there, but it does not remember those who have lived upon it in the past.

Well, the Preacher is in a gloomy mood. He goes on to dwell on examples of vanity or futility in nature. His point is that life is like these meaningless cycles in nature. “The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow there they will flow again.”

Now we know that the sun and the wind and the running water are wonderfully productive. The sun warms the earth and gives light. It enables plants to grow. The wind causes the weather that is part of the productive system of growth on earth. The streams and flowing water and the cycle of evaporation, rain and runoff is extremely important and productive. The Preacher, of course, knows all that. But his point again is the endless repetition of it all. The Zondervan NIV Study Bible says, “The poem draws from the circularities observable in nature ... to argue that there is never real progress; life just endlessly repeats itself.”

The sun makes the same circuit every day. The wind blows one way and then the other way. The streams flow to the sea and then the water makes the circuit all over again. But nothing changes. Like a dog chasing his tail. It is the same old, same old. There is no progress. Just endless repetition. That is what life is like when you step back and try to make sense of it all. What is the point if you are born, you live and work, and then you die, and the next generation does it all over again? The question is where is the gain from all this activity? Does any of it matter in the end?

The Preacher goes on to describe what the result of this vanity or futility of life is for human experience. “All things are full of weariness; a man

cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” There is a special kind of weariness that comes from mindless repetition. This kind of weariness is often discussed in connection with the industrial revolution and the advent of assembly lines or even the specialization that is often part of life in the modern world. In many jobs, work tends to be repetitive and often a worker is not part of a product from start to finish. There is a lot of doing the same thing over and over again.

Now the efficiency that comes with that way of producing things makes them affordable. But there is no denying that some jobs are mind-numbing and that results in a certain kind of profound weariness that comes from meaningless repetition. The Preacher is saying that you get this kind of weariness just from thinking about life from the perspective of the whole thing. You do all this work and in the end, there is no gain. “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” You work year after year after year. You build your life. And you know that soon you will die and none of it will matter. As an old person you look back over your life and what you have accomplished under the sun and you realize that within a few years you will be forgotten, and it will be as if you have never lived. There is a mind-numbing weariness about that. Unutterable weariness.

And there is no satisfaction in that. “[T]he eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” Any satisfactions that we experience are temporary and fleeting and therefore we are never really satisfied. We eat and are satisfied but a few hours later we are hungry again. And everything is like that. There is nothing that satisfies us so that we stay satisfied. Everything is temporary and fleeting and what we have longed for before, we will long for again. Or there will be new longings. We never arrive. We are always on the move. Our hearts are restless, always searching, always longing, never truly satisfied. And then it is over, and we are gone.

He continues the theme of repetition by saying that there is never anything new. “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See this is new?’” It has been already in the ages

before us.” Again, he is not denying that things change. But he is saying, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” There is superficial change. We live in a time of tremendous change. And yet for all that, the cycles that the Preacher is talking about remain the same. We live. We die. We are forgotten. There is still no gain from all the toil at which we toil under the sun. The futility of life does not change. The endless repetition does not change. The dreariness of it does not change.

And finally, with the passing of time all is forgotten. “There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.” Duane Garrett gives a good summary in his commentary on these final verses of this section, “The Teacher’s words are not contradicted by technological advances or by the fact that we can remember the names of famous people such as Homer, Caesar, and Shakespeare. The fundamental events of life (birth, marriage, work, death, etc.) remain unchanged. The desire for something new is the desire for something that alters the nature of life in the world. Cars, computers, and jet airplanes may have made some things easier and faster. For us, however, as for our ancient predecessors, the sun rises and sets; the rivers run their courses; and people continue their endless quest for fame, power, and happiness even as they move steadily toward death. The vast majority of people never achieve lasting fame, while those who do gain nothing by it.”

And on that cheery note we come to the end of this section. What are we to make of this? Well we must understand that this is wisdom literature and it is part of the truth. It is not the whole truth. The Bible has much more cheerful ways of looking at life, but this is part of the picture according to the author of this book. This is a way of looking at life. This is part of the truth about life in a fallen world. This is part of the truth about lives that inevitably end in death. And the author of the book wants us to think about this because this is part of our reality.

There is something futile about life because we live under the curse of sin. If Adam and Eve had not sinned, none of this would be true. None of this will be true in the new heavens and the new earth either. But it is part of the truth of the present. Sometimes life is like a hamster on his

wheel. There is something pointless about life when we think that everything that we have done under the sun will amount to nothing. The author of Ecclesiastes clearly wants us to feel the vanity of life under the sun.

One of his purposes is to teach us not to expect too much from life under the sun. If we put too much value on this earthly life, we will surely be disappointed because of the realities that he has paraded before us in these verses. Jesus tells us the same thing when he says in Matthew 6:19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” The treasures of this earth are fleeting. They do not give lasting satisfaction. There is no permanent gain.

If we look at this passage in the light of the whole biblical story, we see that the author of Ecclesiastes is teaching us that in order for life not to be meaningless, the curse of death must be overcome. He will give hints at the answer along the way, but the Bible, as a whole, answers this conundrum of the meaningless of life by pointing to Jesus Christ and his defeat of death. 1 Corinthians 15 is all about the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of those who are united to him by faith and this is how that chapter ends. “Therefore, my brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” Under the sun your life is vain; but in the Lord, it is not.

What Ecclesiastes says in this passage about the vanity of life is true, but it is not the whole story. It is part of the Old Testament witness that prepares the way for Jesus by impressing upon us that a life that ends in death is ultimately futile and meaningless. The only answer to that dilemma is a life that does not end in death – a life that is eternal. And that is why Jesus came and that is why the other side of the truth that Ecclesiastes focuses on is that it is possible to escape the meaninglessness of life under the sun by a life that lasts forever. And so, Paul, after dwelling on the resurrection can say to believers, “in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” Ecclesiastes is part of the preparation for that message and it helps us to see another aspect of the wonder of what Jesus has accomplished.

Table Meditation

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 is about our experience of living in a fallen world. Even though there is much more to be said about life for God's people that is much more upbeat and cheerful, what the preacher is talking about in these verses is part of our experience as people of God. There is a certain futility to life under the sun. There is a lot of repetition that accomplishes nothing that lasts. There is no lasting satisfaction from the things that we accomplish because ultimately, they and we fade into the oblivion of the past.

The reason for all that is death and the reason for death is sin. And the good news is that there is a word from God that speaks into the dreariness of life under the sun that death has been defeated. And that is what we focus on when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper reminds us why the dreariness of Ecclesiastes one is not the whole truth and why it is not the final word. We remember a death that led to a resurrection. We remember a death that paid the penalty for sin and we remember that once that penalty was paid, the curse was lifted, and death was defeated.

And so, while we still suffer the futility of life under the sun, we know that it is not the final reality. In Jesus Christ, God has broken into the meaningless cycles and has done something new. The Preacher said that "there is nothing new under the sun." There is a sense in which that is true. But there is also a sense that it is false because Jesus has come, and he has broken the meaningless cycles by bringing the beginning of the new creation. And we are part of that new creation by faith. And so, what we now do in the Lord is no longer in vain because it will matter forever.

The cross is the end of futility because through the cross we inherit eternal life. Because of the life that Jesus obtained for us by his death we are now able to lay up treasure in heaven "where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" and that is the end of meaninglessness and futility.

The vanity that Ecclesiastes is speaking about is part of the groaning of the creation and our life in a creation subjected to futility. But as Paul

puts it in Romans 8:23, “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit groan inwardly, as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

That is what it means to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.