

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

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[0 : 00] I think the children are talking to each other this morning. And please take out your copy of God's Word. Turn to the book of Ecclesiastes. After a long couple weeks of introduction, we are going to really look at the text this morning, I promise.

So turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 1. I'm going to read the whole chapter to us, verses 1 through 18. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. 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. 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 flow again.

[1 : 16] All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 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 already been already in the ages before us.

There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of latter things yet to be among those who come after. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem, and I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.

[2 : 22] And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceive that this also is but a striving after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. This is God's word. It's written for his glory and our good.

We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands. So this is a bit of a sermon.

If you haven't been here with us the last couple of weeks, the title, Ecclesiastes, simply means the preacher. It's from the Latin Vulgate translation of the Hebrew text.

It's an Anglicanized version of that word. The Hebrew word quohaleth, which we get the preacher from, carries some idea of an assembly. And so that's why we look at this.

[3 : 29] And although it's written likely by Solomon, although we're not completely confident of that, that he intended for an audience to pick up and to read as we do today.

And so it's the words of the preacher. And it has a text, verse 2. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

And most of the rest of the book is an explanation of that. And so we must ask, what is the main point that the preacher wants us to grapple with as we study this book together?

And that main point is that everything is meaningless. But we shouldn't stop at that point. That would be a very miserable place to cease. Why is everything meaningless?

Verse 3. He says, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? And the answer is because the gain we seek cannot be found under the sun on this earth.

[4 : 39] Mankind tries so very hard to do so, but it simply cannot be done. An analogy for this jumped into my head this morning as I was getting ready to come up to the building early, and I was

looking for matching socks.

And what a challenge this has been this morning for me to find I have matching socks on, but it took some time. Those of you who don't know, my wife is pregnant with our third.

She's not really showing quite yet. Let me tell you that you have something adorable to see. If you've not seen my wife pregnant, when she starts to round out, you just have no idea. Prepare you for that.

As such, we're a little behind on folding laundry. Our clothes are clean, but we're a little behind on that. I had to compliment her before I talked about being behind on laundry. So I was digging through that.

Where does the matching sock go? This is one of the great mysteries of the universe. I found five mismatched socks. What in the world? I have five socks in my hand going, any of these will work.

[5 : 47] If I could find a match for any one of these, it would work. Finally, I found the one that matched. Now, in this case, I was looking in the proper place, right? I was looking amongst the laundry for the matching sock.

Hopefully, I'll find the other four that go along with those. But mankind, in trying to find gain in this world, does not look in the proper place for that gain.

And as such, we are so very dissatisfied. Jeremiah Burroughs, who was a 17th century Puritan preacher, wrote a wonderful book that I commend to you called The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment.

Where he wrote, and I quote, The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment.

No, the reason is because the thing is not suitable for a craving stomach. Yet there is really the same madness in the world.

[7 : 12] Gain cannot be found in the world in the same way that an empty stomach cannot be filled by the wind. Last night, my family took a trip to the Mall of Georgia, which is not a place that we frequent, but we needed a power cord for a device here at the church building that's gone missing.

And Sam was craving some particular food. So those two things combined, we said, okay, it's worth the trip down to the Mall of Georgia. And as we had to venture into the actual Mall, I am so burdened by a place like that.

I am so incredibly uncomfortable by that degree of consumerism. So much that we don't need. John Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress, which I'll probably quote to you a number of times in our study of Ecclesiastes, writes in part of the story about Christian and his travel mate at the time faithful, getting diverted off their path to a place called Vanity Fair.

The book is almost prophetic concerning the Mall of Georgia. You read his writing and there's so many people, and I'm not being cynical about anyone in particular, but so many people walking around like zombies, just intoxicated, looking for the next fix to try to be satisfied.

Souls made for God cannot be filled with anything but Him. And the preacher spends the rest of chapter 1 convincing his readers that this is so.

[8 : 53] So I want to look at five observations from the text that reinforce this idea that gain cannot be found in this world. It has to be found elsewhere. So five observations.

Number one, our lives will not be remembered. First part of verse 4. The preacher says a generation goes and a generation comes.

He's marking out a generation at the beginning of your life and at the end of your life. This is the span of a generation. Our lives are passing.

They are momentary. They are here today and they are gone tomorrow. The psalmist says in Psalm 90.10, The years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80, yet their span is but toil and trouble.

They are soon gone and we fly away. Our lives pass by in a moment. Allow me to prove my point for just a moment this morning.

[10 : 01] A little crowd interaction. If you are 22 or under, please participate. If you're 22 or under, raise your hand. Okay. Large portion of the crowd.

Okay. 22. Keep your hands up. No, no. Keep your hands up. Come on. Sorry. You'll be okay. Now I want you, when I say a name that you're not familiar with, and I don't mean like you've heard of them, but like you don't know who this person is. You couldn't tell me some facts about their life.

I want you to put your hand down. Okay. You ready? Ready? Johnny Carson. Oh, I started with the easy one.

Oh, gosh. Okay. Joe DiMaggio. Hey, okay. All right. All right. Don't put your hand back up. That's not okay. That once... If you didn't get Johnny Carson, you were eliminated. I'm very disappointed that my Mac device doesn't know how to spell DiMaggio. I had to correct the spell check there.

[11:02] Shirley Temple. They're getting easier than Johnny Carson. Oh, geez. Dizzy Gillespie.

Way to go, Brigham. You win. You win. These are all incredibly significant individuals. For the sake of time, I won't tell you who they are. Incredibly significant in American culture.

And yet, they're forgotten. Really think about it. We have never heard of most people who have ever lived. Most of the people who have lived before us, we've never even heard of.

They have passed through life under the sun in relative obscurity. Even those individuals who are significant enough to be in our history books are not known for all that they were, but rather for a few facts, maybe a couple of qualities.

They are remembered, but they're remembered incompletely. Passing. Vapor. Passing through. The preacher reiterates this point in verse 11.

[12:14] There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. And again, later in the book, in chapter 6, verse 12.

For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow. We're just blowing through.

And to go further, the preacher juxtaposes this reality against another. The last part of verse 4, he says, But the earth remains forever.

Now, don't try to pull eschatological theology out of that phrase. He's just saying in relation to our observation of the way man comes and goes, the earth stays fairly the same.

After you are gone, the sun will rise and the sun will set. The waters will still ebb and flow. And you will have had very little effect.

[13:16] Our lives will not be remembered. Second observation. Everything is tired.

Everything is tired. Because there is a sense of the permanence of the earth. There is a temptation to look to it for our source of gain.

To look to those things, those material things that we can see that seem not to change. And those of you who particularly enjoy being outside, which I think is a large part of our congregation, like getting outdoors, like me, have enjoyed rock climbing and whitewater paddling.

In so many ways, you find fulfillment in that. You really need to hear this. I am saddened by that culture that says they're spiritual and says that they find God in nature.

They're missing it. Their minds haven't gone quite high enough. We certainly cannot deny that there is a pleasure to be found in nature. The preacher agrees with us on this.

[14:22] Ecclesiastes 11, verse 7. He says, Light is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. It's an enjoyable thing to be under the sun.

The sun is a blessing to men. But we are warned in other places not to worship the creation. One example, Deuteronomy 4, 19.

Says, And beware, lest you raise your eyes to heaven. And when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the hosts of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them.

The creation cries out to us of a creator. And it is him that we are ultimately meant to enjoy.

So go outside and be outside. I would encourage this for you. But as you enjoy those things that we can visibly see that are beautiful and appealing to us, make sure that your mind goes high enough.

[15:24] Make sure that you worship the creator who made those things. Psalm 19, verse 1 says, The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

It's there to turn us to him, not away from him. And the preacher goes on because he wants us to see how ultimately lackluster the creation is.

And I think you need to rightly read this with a bit of sarcasm. Verse 5, The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises again and again.

The sun runs its course. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind and on its circuit the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.

To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. These things just happen over and over and over again. Nothing new, nothing exciting. It just continues the way it's always continued.

[16:25] Verse 8, All things are full of weariness. All things, including man, is full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. Picture him mumbling to his bed.

A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. Paul takes up this imagery in Romans chapter 8 and says that the creation is like a slave subjected to futility, in bondage to corruption, longing to be set free.

This place that was once eaten, but that is now corrupted by sin, screams of our need of God. Everything is tired.

Third observation. Everything is old. Everything is old. Verse 9, 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, and it's been already in the ages before us. Now, the preacher here is not referring to the things that people create.

[17:36] Surely, he would recognize that the smartphone, and the MP3 file, and the Hubble space telescope, and lasers did not exist in his day.

We could list off many other things. Rather, his focus is the striving of man to find gain under the sun, and his inability to do so.

These are all just other manifestations of the very same thing. It's all old. All men have tried to find gain apart from God.

It's already been done. Don't think you can come up with a new way to do it. There is nothing new. It's all been tried. So as you may as well stop thinking, you can figure out some new way to find gain under the sun.

Everything is old. And then the preacher in the text gives us a bit of his own story to further make this point. This seems to be at the end of chapter 1, kind of the summary of what he goes on to give us explanation of later on in 2 and 3 and beyond.

[18:40] Verse 12 says, I, the preacher, have been king of Israel in Jerusalem. So we have our fourth observation. Number four, we are personally limited.

We are personally limited. The preacher, like us, has an interior life. He is a sinful man.

He has had his heart and flesh altered by sin. And therefore, he is dependent on God. He must dependently lean on God to ultimately sort out and understand what is of value in the world and what is vanity.

Just like us. Limited in this way. First part of verse 13, he says, And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

I sought this out. I worked at this task. And although we know that God is the one who provides wisdom, he provides it in proper measure.

[19:53] Proverbs 2, 3, and 5 says, Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

So he brings us to that place. He helps us to understand in enough measure the vanity of what's under the sun so that will be brought to him.

The preacher, unlike us, has great experience, although still limited experience. Just think of yourself in comparison to the preacher.

He says, verse 14, I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all this vanity, and a striving after the wind.

Now we know that the preacher is a king over Jerusalem. Again, likely, this is Solomon. Likely well connected, connected to other kings, has knowledge beyond the knowledge of the lay person, certainly beyond the knowledge that we may have had, although it's still a limited knowledge.

[21:09] It's still a limited experience. And in that limitation, he's still able to say all is vanity, and it is a striving after the wind. The preacher, unlike us, has great wisdom.

I don't think any of us would say we have great wisdom, but still it's limited wisdom. Verse 16, he says, I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

I don't know anybody amongst us that can say that, that we have surpassing wisdom, and great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And as such, we would do well to listen to the man who has great experience of wisdom and of knowledge.

The preacher, unlike us, seems to have the time to wrestle with the realities of the world, although it's limited time.

Verse 17, he says, And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. We see many examples of this later on in the book, and there are avenues that he runs out.

[22 : 30] Possible places to gain under the sun that he seems to explore to its very end. Still limited in his ability to explore, but are we not so much more limited than he?

To try to work out every possible experience that can bring us gain. And he goes on to say in verse 17, I perceived that this also is but a striving after the wind.

The preacher, like us, is limited. We are limited in our ability to search out these things. He says in verse 15, What is crooked cannot be made straight.

He's suggesting that this confusing thing that I looked at and perceived to understand could not be understood. And what is lacking cannot be counted.

This is an expression of his own limitation to understand. And then in verse 18, For in much wisdom is much vexation. And he who increases in knowledge, increases in sorrow, in this effort to know and to understand what can be gained under the sun.

[23 : 49] That's our fourth observation. Our fifth observation is that we have an unhappy business before us. The last part of verse 13, the preacher says, It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

So, the preacher has told us where gain cannot be found. He has clearly said, It cannot be found under the sun.

And we will expound upon this as we continue to look. He recycles through this idea, You cannot find gain under the sun. And it would seem at this point, at least to our minds, the most appropriate thing to tell us is where gain can be found.

He hasn't quite done that yet, has he? I've been saying it, but he hasn't said it yet. Doesn't it make the most sense that he would do that at this point? It already seems time to wrap the sermon up. He's presented the problem. Give us the solution to speed us along to the end. I want to cry out, Don't go on for another 11 chapters. I get it.

[25 : 01] I see the vanity of life. Where then is the gain? Is what we cry. But the preacher uses a much different tactic.

Now let's say to you it's a valuable one. The preacher presents us with God in verse 13. It's an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man.

He presents us with God, but he does so in such an unsatisfying way. He presents God as the one who is providentially over all that is under the sun.

As the God who allows the vanity of the world to continue. As the God who wants us to deal with the worthlessness of the world.

The preacher leaves us uncomfortable and longing for an answer. That's a good place to be, beloved. Especially if you're found in Christ.

[26 : 06] Because you know the answer. You can anticipate the answer. You've experienced the answer. But it's good for us to just stop and consider how, having been delivered by Christ, do we still look for gain under the sun?

Is that not an uncomfortable place to be at the end of chapter 1? If I haven't taken you there, go back and read it. Stop at the end of chapter 1 and consider all that the preacher has said so far. Zach Eswine, in *Recovering Eden*, a commentary on this very book, wrote, Taking time amid things not yet answered provokes discomfort. A discomfort often required in order to recover spiritual health.

A sickly child grimaces to swallow the dark liquid that would recover her smile. It is good for us to consider this unhappy business that is before us because it is a business meant to lead us to God. Now, as we consider this text week over week, I have no idea yet how long this study is going to take us. We're looking at it in a much different way than this was meant to be considered.

[27 : 27] It was meant to be considered as a sermon. It was meant to be considered from the beginning to the very end that I would maybe come up to you and just read you the text. That I would get to the conclusion that we find in chapter 12 verse 13.

As we look at it individually and we try to give application to each bit of the text, it's important that I constantly remind you of the bigger picture. That we do, in fact, speed along to the end.

So, I'm stepping out of his intention a bit to remind us where it is that we find gain. But I just wanted you to hear and to see that his intention is that you stew for a little while.

That you become uncomfortable. That you say this world is not worth living for. That you would be uncomfortable at the Mall of Georgia.

This would be a place that you would get in and out of as quick as you can for the thing you actually need if you find your most happy at a place like that and you have some soul searching to do.

[28 : 31] So, the end of the matter. The end of the matter is that gain is not found under the sun. What is ultimately good for us is not found under the sun.

Rather, gain is found in God and everything has its proper place and its proper time in Him. Ecclesiastes 12.13 The preacher says the end of the matter all has been heard.

Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man. I appreciate this simplification of the Christian life.

Fear God and keep His commandments. This is the whole duty of man. Now, a proper fear of God, a right fear of God, a fear of God that is informed by who God has revealed Himself to us in the Scriptures, sends men running to the cross.

A proper fear of God drives us to Christ. All of the religious efforts of this world, the work to find acceptance before God, the labor of trying to work out acceptance before God is a misguided fear.

[29 : 49] If we properly and rightly understand who God is, we know that there's nothing that we can do that will satisfy Him. A proper fear of God presses a splinter into our souls that festers until it is removed and only Christ can remove it.

It presses this issue upon us, this problem before us that only Christ can fix. not only does He bear our punishment, but He gives us His righteousness and restores our relationship with the Father. This is so good. This is the greatest and highest good. This is our gain. Psalm 16:1 says, in Your presence there is fullness of joy.

At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. So Christ is the gain that we seek. Nothing that can be found under the sun is gain to us, but Christ is gain to us.

A familiar text for you, potentially, I hope, is Philippians. Paul writes about this. Turn to the book of Philippians with me. Beloved, it's not that you were dissatisfied apart from Christ and then Christ picks you up out of the mire and you suddenly become satisfied and this is a state of being.

[31 : 24] You are now satisfied and then you can go along with the normal stuff of the world. But then you become satisfied in Christ and then you go pursue the American dream. We continue to pursue satisfaction in Christ.

This is an ongoing process for us. Paul writes Philippians 1.21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Why is it gain? Because it's more Christ.

He casts off the world and he gets to be in the presence of Christ. So, for to me, the gain is Christ and to die is more gain because it's more Christ.

He writes later in Philippians 3 beginning in verse 2. Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

He's talking about the Judaizers. Those who wanted Christian people to be circumcised in order to work for favor in God. To not accept the favor that they had in Christ but to work for it by their appearance and by their works.

[32 : 28] Verse 3. For we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Now, verse 4, he begins this religious pedigree that he has.

This outward working, this labor to be pleasing before God. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also, if anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.

Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

He's saying if there is value in the man-made religion of the world, which was in his day the apostate Judaism, not God's way, but the apostate way, the manufactured, fabricated Judaism, if there's any value in that at all, I've far exceeded anybody else's value in this regard.

But then in verse 7 he says, But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

[33 : 47] For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. You see this?

Paul had learned this lesson that there was nothing in this world. He goes beyond his religious pedigree to everything else. There is nothing in this world that is gained to us apart from Christ. And beloved, this is a lesson that we need to learn. We need to understand rightly that everything minus Christ equals nothing. and that nothing plus Christ equals everything.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Thank you.