

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility

Sisyphus was an Optimist

(Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

Study #2

Introduction: Wasting time...

If you've ever had the thought that life is a jigsaw puzzle with a few strategic pieces missing, and you can't figure out the big picture, you're going to love Ecclesiastes.

If it has ever seemed to you that life is a boat with the drain plug removed, and you're having to spend your precious time and energy bailing water - while getting nowhere, I think you'll find that Ecclesiastes speaks to your deepest need.

But, if you're hoping to gain insight from Ecclesiastes, you should be forewarned that the book presents challenges. In this most provocative book, the perspective on life we find is disparate from what we find in the other sixty five books that make up our Bible.¹

Because of its peculiarities, Ecclesiastes has been subjected to some unusual treatment by both Jewish and Christian readers through the centuries.

By some, it has been regarded as the "black sheep of the Bible." There were ancient Jewish commentators who said that it "defiled the hands" of whoever who read it. They actually regarded Ecclesiastes as an unclean book and recommended that it not be read or studied.

¹ There is, in Ecclesiastes, no mention of the Mosaic Law, no reference to YHWH, and no special reference to Israel. Perhaps he wrote to a larger audience than just Israel.

I understand. In Ecclesiastes, we'll hear advice that sounds strange. It is filled with comments like, "*Money is the answer to everything*" (10:19) and "*Don't be excessively righteous*" (7:16) and "*Don't be too consumed with wisdom.*" (7:16)

Some have dealt with this advice by inserting question marks not found in the original, softening the blow, as in, "*Is money the answer to everything?*" While understandable, such a change is certainly not justified.

Others have given up relying on translating and interpreting and have resorted to wholesale paraphrasing, explaining away, and allegorizing whole sections of the book.²

During the weeks of our exploration of this provocative book, our tack will be to take Ecclesiastes at face value and to wrestle with its complexities.

We'll see what it has to tell us about life and see if what we have here is a collection of meanderings from a bitter old man or something else entirely, maybe helpful, maybe even something hopeful.

When you think of Ecclesiastes (which may or may not be several times a day), the word that may most immediately come to your mind is *vanity* – and it would be appropriate if it did.

The Hebrew word we translate "vanity" shows up about twenty times in this relatively short book, more than in any other book of the Bible.

It would be spot on to say that the theme of Ecclesiastes is the *vanity* of life.

We are introduced to the concept of vanity right out of the chute, as the book declares everything to be **vain**. So what do we mean by the word "vain"?

² Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser has said, "No book of the Bible has been so maligned and yet so misunderstood as the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes."

Life's so Vain (1:1-2)

Vain Things

Meaning of "vanity"

The word means, literally, "vapor" or "breath" or "wind."

Think "soap bubbles."³ Just as there is no substance to soap bubbles, so anything that is vanity has no substance. Vanity describes something short-lived, worthless, anything that's as close to zero as you can imagine.

For instance? Well, the Bible provides us with some "for instances" to help us grasp the concept of vanity.

The vanity of...

There is an extended passage in 2 Kings 17 devoted to scolding the Jews for their practice of idolatry. We are told that they "**followed vanity** (i.e. - false gods) **and became vain** (zero)"

The Bible tells us that we take on the character and the nature of the God/god we worship. And those who worship a zero become a zero.

Proverbs tells us "**the getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor**⁴ (or vanity) - meaning **those treasures don't last.**

In Ecclesiastes, the word and the concept are used very broadly.

- It is vain to seek fulfillment in work; work offers no ultimate fulfillment. (2:18-23; 4:4-6,7-8,9-12; 5:10-12, 13-17; 6:7-9; 10:18)
- It is vain to try and figure out how life works; there are too many exceptions to the rules. (3:9-11; 8:16-17; 9:1, 10-12; 11:1-7)
- It is vain to try and figure out the answers to the big "Why?" questions of life when the tough stuff comes our way. (2:12-17; 10:5-7)
- It is vain that our lives are so short. (3:18-22; 6:1-6, 10-12; 9:2-6)

³ This is an image I was given by the pastor of my church in Dallas while I was in High School, J. Dwight Pentecost. I still think that "soap bubbles" pretty well captures the essence of vanity.

⁴ Hebrew = hebel

- It is vanity that wisdom and intellectual horsepower can never guarantee a comfortable life. (1:12-18; 7:19-2, 23-26; 10:10)
- It is vain that that even pleasure doesn't ultimately satisfy.⁵ (2:1-11)

Ecclesiastes takes us on a ride to brutal honesty. The book differs from the way most of us lead our lives in that the author is willing to take the implications of radical thoughts much further than we usually are.⁶

Vanity is the Ecclesiastes way of saying that life is disappointing, unfulfilling, pointless, hopeless, meaningless, purposeless, directionless. And the clearest statement to that effect is found at the very beginning of the book.

The Vanity of EVERYthing (vv. 1-2)

[1:1] The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem

[2] "Vanity of vanities" says the preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Not a terribly upbeat way to begin a book. But then, a few weeks into Ecclesiastes, we may look back on these words with giddy delight, thrilled to recall the positive outlook on life we find here in comparison to some of what we read after this opening shot!

Authorship issues

It has become fashionable over the past century and a half to attribute the authorship of our book to more than one man. Some view Ecclesiastes as a sort of team effort, an anthology put together by committee.

But, there is no compelling reason to do this! All we have to do is assume that one author can write prose and poetry in the same work of literature (a skill many authors have mastered over the centuries).⁷

⁵ In this book, path after path will be relentlessly explored so that we can see utter futility in every arena of life. In the end, Qoheleth (the Hebrew name for "the preacher") leaves us only one way out for the discovery of meaning in life.

⁶ The book of Ecclesiastes, therefore, is an excellent vehicle for transporting people on the road to faith.

⁷ I have long suspected that this is simply the easiest way to interpret a piece of difficult literature, rather than grapple with the text and with the author's meaning.

Anyone skilled in writing and with a decent mind certainly could have written the entire book.

But, if we can come to agreement that one writer authored the book, there is still debate about whether or not Solomon was that one person.

For a variety of reasons – none of them convincing to me – some believe that Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes.

However, based on both internal evidence (here at the beginning where the author identifies himself as the son of David, king in Jerusalem and elsewhere throughout the book where the author claims to have had a Solomon-like life experience), and the understanding of the Jews through the centuries, I see no reason to doubt that King Solomon is the sole author of Ecclesiastes.

And what a life Solomon lived!

Author issues

The two names bestowed on him at birth indicate the degree to which he could anticipate a charmed life.

“Jedidiah” means “*beloved of the Lord*” and “Solomon” meant “*peaceful one*.”

Significantly, his reign was marked by peace AND he was shown great love and grace from Almighty God.

Solomon, the son of King David, was born to wealth and privilege. That was not a silver spoon in his mouth. It was 24 carat gold!

Included in a list of Solomon’s lifetime achievements would be the expansion of the kingdom as well as the construction of the Temple and the royal palace. Early in his reign, he was known for justice, wisdom, brilliance, wealth, and influence.

But, somewhere along the line, he drifted away from the wisdom that had guided him. He turned apostate. And as God-honoring and righteous as his early life had been, his turn away from the Lord was high-handed and rebellious.

Solomon ended up putting his confidence and pride in his material wealth and in his horses, worshipped other gods, and became a sensualist with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines.

So, as we listen to what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes (especially some of the more outlandish statements) it will be important to remember his life story.

He tasted it all, from the heights to the depths, from the joys of a vibrant walk with God to the depths of depravity.

But Solomon’s life didn’t end with apostasy. After a season (probably a pretty LONG season) of walking away from the Lord, he turned. He returned to the Lord. And we know that he returned because of the final book in the Solomon trilogy (along with Proverbs and Song of Solomon) we find in the Bible: Ecclesiastes.

This morning we are going to pay attention to the very first things Solomon says. The first eleven verses give the Prologue to the book and a preview to what is to come. From the Prologue it’s easy to see what is the overall message of the book. Solomon says, “*all is vanity*.”

But he doesn’t just make the statement. He argues the case. And the first line of evidence he brings to the table to demonstrate the vanity of life is from the world of nature.

Evidence of Vanity (1:3-11)

The Vanity of Nature’s Treadmill (vv. 3-7)

Nature yawns at humanity’s might

*[3] What advantage does man have in all his work
Which he does under the sun?*

*[4] A generation goes and a generation comes
But the earth remains forever.*

Generations of humanity are born, live and pass off the scene. All the while, the courses of nature cycle over and over again, oblivious to humanity's big doings.

Throughout recorded history, great, mighty, and powerful kingdoms have had their day.

From the Ming Dynasty of China to the great Khans of Asia to the princes of Arabia; from the ancient Hittites to the Babylonians to the Assyrians to the Medes and Persians; from the Greeks, to the Romans; from the tribes of the American Indians, to the Incas and the Aztecs; from the more modern Khmer Rouge, to the Third Reich, to the USSR and the USA and Mexico and Canada - and the list could go on and on and on - kingdoms have come and gone.

But, all the kingdoms of man's history line up before a passively indifferent earth. The great kingdoms make no difference to Mt. Everest or Mt. McKinley, the Sahara, the Grand Canyon, the Amazon or the Pacific.

Solomon says what he says here about nature to focus our attention on the relative trivial and transitory impact of man.

No one will dispute that certain people and certain peoples have had great influence on the world. But the overall impact of humanity is no big deal on our planet.⁸

Solomon mentions here three natural phenomena that give silent but powerful testimony to the vanity of human life.

Nature's witness to vanity

The first force of nature he mentions is **the sun**.

***[5] Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again.***

⁸ And, if we can say this with less confidence today than Solomon could have said it twenty five hundred years ago, if only because of environmental impact, the impacts that most would of us would point to that have been the result of humanity are nothing to brag about.

For years I thought that Ernest Hemingway came up with the title to his short novel The Sun Also Rises, on his own. Not true. Hemingway wrote a book designed to highlight the pointlessness of life and stole a line from Ecclesiastes (1:5), a book designed to point out the same thing.

Every day the sun rises and the sun sets, without fail. Nothing alters this unalterable repetition of nature.⁹

We depend on the sun rise and sun set for the rhythm of our lives. But we have ZERO control over it. If we dread the coming of a new day because of the challenge it brings, the sun rises. If it's been the best day of our lives and we don't want it to end, the sun sets. Inexorably, relentlessly, the sun marches across the sky.

Then Solomon mentions **the wind**.

***[6] Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.***

Always, there is wind.

A few weeks ago, Kathy and I were driving home from Colorado and decided to take the "scenic route" through Texas, passing near Sweetwater (just kidding - it's no less scenic to go any other route ☺).

There, perched on flat plateaus and stretching for miles were hundreds (perhaps thousands) of windmills designed to capture the energy of the wind.

These windmills are a marvel of modern engineering. But they are testimony to something else.

⁹ Yes, of course we know that the sun doesn't actually "rise" or "set" but is fixed against the earth's rotation. Statements like Solomon's are sometimes taken as proof that there are errors in the Bible. But here Solomon is not making a scientific comment. He is speaking phenomenologically, just as a meteorologist speaks in 2008 about sunrise and sunset.

In addition to the rotating propellers, the windmills are built on a pivot so that they can rotate in such a way as to catch the wind, regardless of which direction the wind is blowing. That pivot is testimony to both good engineering and to our ignorance and weakness.

The wind is an enigma. We cannot control the direction of the wind. And except on those exceptional days when a strong weather system is blowing through, we can't predict it, either. Whether it arrives from the north, east, south, or west, the wind just *is*.

Finally, Solomon wants us to think about **water**.

*[7] All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.*

When I was in Minneapolis this week, I saw the mighty Mississippi (At one point I was not far from the bridge reconstruction project over the part of the River where there was the catastrophic bridge collapse some months ago.)

Solomon wants you and me to think about a water droplet. This droplet is caught up in the hydrologic cycle, a cycle which ancient man understood as well as we do today.

Our little water droplet falls from the sky as rain (or more likely snow in Minnesota) into the Mississippi and flows with billions of other water droplets through Minnesota, following the borders of Illinois and Missouri, Arkansas and Tennessee and Mississippi, making its way all the way to New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico.

Once there, our water droplet will eventually be caught up into the sky through evaporation, will join a cloud which will float northward – only to be rained down into a water basin that will take it to the Mississippi and then to the Gulf again. A meaningless, progress-less never-ending cycle

Solomon's **point** in all this? He mentions the sun and the wind to show that the forces of nature are outside of our control (we are impotent) and that they continue with or without our presence (we are irrelevant).

He mentions the water cycle to demonstrate purposelessness and meaninglessness (we are going nowhere, too).

Solomon looks out from his palace to see the natural world and bemoans the fact that - despite its beauty - there is no point to it. It isn't going anywhere. It is oblivious to him, and he is powerless over it. A perfect picture, it seems to Solomon, of his life, my life and your life.

Then, Solomon brings forward another witness to the vanity of life: human history.

The Vanity of Human History

While technology changes, life doesn't

*[8] All things are wearisome.
Man is not able to tell it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.
[9] That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So, there is nothing new under the sun.¹⁰
[10] Is there anything of which one might say,
"See this, it is new?"
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us.*

Now, of course, when Solomon says here, "***There is nothing new under the sun***" he is not denying progress and invention.

I'm sure that there were "new and improved" ways of doing things (construction, agriculture, maybe even communication) in Solomon's day, just as there are in our own.

If they didn't have cell phones and laptops, wifi and Bluetooth, they probably had their new technologies.

¹⁰ This passage looks at life from a very clearly defined perspective. Solomon calls it, "under the sun" - another key phrase in this book. To live "under the sun" is to only be aware of those things that you can see, hear, taste, smell, or feel. It is the life of the one who lives without God, and without recognizing God.

He's probably saying something like this: "*Despite the fact that some things change, THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME.*"

Consider the world of 2008:

- When one nation suffers at the hands of another nation, it retaliates - and we've certainly never seen THAT before!
- In many marriages today, husbands and wives have difficulty getting along - something that's clearly unique to our own era!
- Children today are prone to be rebellious, and look for new and different ways to express themselves - shocking!
- Crime proliferates, injustice abounds, biblical morality is not upheld - brand new stuff, right?

You've heard it said that those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. True enough. But the follow up to that truism is that the one thing that we learn from history is - WE DON'T LEARN FROM HISTORY!

Solomon's point is that as much as our surroundings change, WE don't change. Fundamentally, LIFE doesn't change.

And listen to the final words of the Prologue, where we read Solomon's thoughts about one of the fondest hopes many of us have - and that is to be remembered fondly.

Lasting legacy? Don't bet on it...

***[11] There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still.***

I loved my parents dearly.

My mother died in 1980 - twenty eight years ago to colon cancer. Now, my mother and I had a fine relationship. But, except for special occasions, like when I wish she were alive to enjoy a milestone event, I rarely think of her.

My father died in 2002, much more recently - and I think about him more frequently. But I daresay that my children don't think of my father - a good man whom they loved - very often.

I had great relationships with my paternal grandparents. But months will pass without my giving much of a thought to them.

I hope you don't think ill of me for so infrequently remembering close relatives - but I don't think my experience is unique.

Most of us don't spend a lot of time remembering our distant or even our near ancestors. And while that is OK (no guilt trip intended), Solomon would say that you and I should not be in denial about how **WE** will be remembered, either.

Life goes on. People get on with their lives. Posterity is not all it's cracked up to be. And a hope for a legacy that will endure is not a hope you want to hang your hat on.

Now, if it seems to you that I'm just standing up here having a slightly overdue mid-life crisis - well, maybe I am!

But I'm not trying to be negative. All I'm trying to do is get a grip on what Solomon has written in the opening lines of Ecclesiastes.

The book has been called by some negative, by others depressing, by others, existential, and by still others, morbid.

Me? I prefer to see it as an honest book about life and death, justice and injustice, wisdom and foolishness, wealth and poverty - and God.

I want to end our time together today with a story. Everybody loves a good story, and this one is taken from Greek mythology.

It is a myth that was popularized in the 1940's by a book with the main character's name in the title. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the story of Sisyphus.¹¹

¹¹ In the book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (translated into English in 1955) French philosopher Albert Camus held that Sisyphus was the ideal "absurd hero." His punishment was representative of the human condition: Sisyphus must struggle

CONCLUSION: Sisyphus, the Optimist

Sisyphus was supposedly an historical figure who was both the founder and king of ancient Corinth. According to the story, he was not a good man, but was something of a scoundrel.¹²

The story turns to pure mythology when we are told that the god of the underworld, Hades, came to earth to claim Sisyphus for the kingdom of the dead.

By some means, Sisyphus escaped the clutches of Hades and actually locked up Hades for some time. This put things on earth seriously out of whack, because with Hades out of commission, nobody on earth could die!

Well, eventually, Hades escaped – and was furious with Sisyphus. He planned to punish Sisyphus, but the wily human again escaped and eluded death for quite a while.

Eventually, though, the inevitable came and Sisyphus died a natural death, finding himself face to face with the god he had tricked.

For his treachery, Hades had prepared an especially frustrating eternal assignment.

Sisyphus' task for all time was to roll a great boulder to the top of a hill. The downside of this assignment, of course, was that once at the top of the hill, the rock would roll down to the bottom. So, up the hill Sisyphus would have to roll it – over and over and over and over and over again.

It's my impression that if Solomon had heard the myth of Sisyphus (and, ironically, he and Homer probably lived within a century or two of each other - had he heard Homer's rendition of the story?), he would have said something like, "*Exactly! That's what I'm talking about!*" Or maybe, "*Sisyphus was an optimist!*"

The book of Ecclesiastes will have much, much more to say about life, meaning, and purpose. Solomon will explore and recommend directions for us to take that will result in meaning.

But he has started us off as honestly as he can. Life "under the sun" is stupid and vacuous - it is vanity!

perpetually and without hope of success. Camus saw Sisyphus as the hero because he lived life to the fullest, hated death, and was condemned to a meaningless task. This myth, according to Camus, served as a metaphor for the human condition. He believed that heroism came to Sisyphus and comes to each person today as we walk down the mountain to re-engage in our meaningless task. We are to keep pushing, despite meaninglessness. This, according to Camus, is the only route to true "happiness."

¹² Another tradition, one held by Homer, has Sisyphus cast as a wise and good man.