

“OUR SEARCH FOR MEANING IN A FALLEN WORLD.”

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Text for the Sermon: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Introduction.

The year was 399 AD. The place was the capital of the Roman Empire, Constantinople. We know it today as Istanbul in Turkey. The Emperor was Arcadius who ruled the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Because he was a weak ruler he was easily dominated by strong ministers of state, like Prime Ministers to a king. Sort of like a Joseph to the Pharaoh but without the moral character.

In fact, like Joseph, an ex-slave, Eutropius, ruled Constantinople by controlling the puppet emperor. His trouble started when Eudoxia married Emperor Arcadius and quickly discovered that Arcadius was weak and was being dominated by Eutropius. She wanted to be Empress and gain more power, so she began to plot Eutropius's downfall. She got her husband to expel him. As a fugitive he fled to the Great Church of Constantinople, St. Sophia, and clung to the altar.

The pastor of this great church happened to be John Chrysostom, considered the greatest preacher of the early church, one of the great early church fathers. Both the Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church consider him a great saint.

When Eutropius fled to the church, armed soldiers entered, demanding that Chrysostom release him but he refused to give up his church's right to be a place of sanctuary.

The next day was Sunday morning and with Eutropius clinging to the altar for dear life, John Chrysostom preached what may have been one of the most dramatic sermons ever preached. His text was Ecclesiastes 1:2, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity," and he used the decline and fall of Eutropius as the sermon illustration of all sermon illustrations.

Here was a man who had lost everything--position, wealth, freedom, safety. Only days before, he had been the second most powerful man in the world. But it was all vanity.

“Where are now the brilliant surroundings of your consulship? Where are the gleaming torches? Where is the dancing, and the noise of dancers' feet, and the banquets and the festivals? Where are the garlands? Where is the applause which greeted you in the city, where the flatteries of spectators?

“Where now are your feigned friends? Where are your drinking parties, and your suppers? Where is the wine which used to be poured forth all day long, and the manifold dainties invented by your cooks? Where are they who courted your power and did and said everything to win your favour? Where are now your cup-bearers, where are they who cleared the way for you in the market place, and sounded your praises endlessly in the ears of all?

“They were all mere visions of the night, and dreams which have vanished with the dawn of day: they were spring flowers, and when the spring was over they all withered: they were a shadow which has passed away — they were a smoke which has dispersed, bubbles which have burst, cobwebs which have been rent in pieces.

“Therefore we chant continually this spiritual song — Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. For this saying ought to be continually written on our walls, and garments, in the market place, and in the house, on the streets, and on the doors and entrances, and above all on the conscience of each one, and to be a perpetual theme for meditation.”

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1914.htm>

Chrysostom did not stop there, however. His purpose was not to condemn Eutropius but to save him, and also to give his listeners the gospel. To that end, he challenged his listeners to recognize the vanity of their own existence. Whether rich or poor, one day they would all leave this world with nothing.

<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/78097/chrysostom-on-ecclesiastes-by-sermon-central>

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

How much more powerful is it that the words of Ecclesiastes are written not by a Eutropius or a Job or someone who has fallen from power and prominence, from riches and glory?

King Solomon is still the wisest and wealthiest king in the history of the world. He hasn't lost his power and position, his freedom or his faith. So how could he come to call wisdom, wealth, labor and honor, vanity of vanities?

These are the profound ponderings of a man at the end of his life. These are the soul searching musings of a man who has lived long enough to have the vantage point of perspective, who can now see the fleeting nature of all things under the sun and the dangers of grasping those things.

There is something of a confessional nature to Solomon's writing. This is a man who has learned the hard lessons of life and error of his ways. There is an undercurrent of repentance in this book as he rejects all of his sinful folly.

These are the words King Solomon, a man struggling in the midst of faith, struggling to affirm his faith, not deny his faith. The words of a man of unparalleled wisdom and all the more so because of a lifetime of experiences that have made him even wiser. These are the words of the wisest of men, but more importantly the words of the only wise God.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

And his first words of wisdom are vanity of vanity, all is vanity.

All! Everything, nothing is excluded. He is utterly convinced of this and means for us to be as well. This was not hastily arrived at, but considered over the long course of life and experience.

This word vanity will follow us all the way through this letter 35 more times, almost every five verses. Since it is the most dominate theme in the book we need get the best grasp on it we can.

When you hear the word vanity, don't think vain or conceited. Your labor is not just in vain. And when you hear the word vanity don't think meaningless as the NIV translates. Everything is not meaningless. Life and work are not utterly without meaning.

Even futility is not a good translation. Futility suggests purposelessness and God has a purpose.

Instead think the way Chrysostom described it as dreams that vanish at dawn, flowers that wither, shadows that pass away, smoke that quick disperses. Think of vapor, mist, fog, a puff of wind, things you can't grasp or get your arms around.

Psalm 144:4 Man is like a breath [hebel]; his days are like a passing shadow.

James 4:14 What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Life is a quickly fleeting vapor, a vanishing smoke. But, and this is important, this is not to be taken in the sense that life is not worth living. This is not pessimism, this is not nihilism. This is not fatalism or cynicism.

Ecclesiastes 1:3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

When you set out to write a research paper or book, you start with a thesis statement. You write down what you want to prove or argue.

All of your best efforts and toil and striving are not going to give you what you expect. You hope for some great benefit, blessings, reward, pay off, and it all vanishes. Toil and labor will not supply your soul, satisfy your desires, cure your diseases, save you from sin.

Our toil is like building sandcastles on the beach. There is some pleasure derived from doing that, but we also know the inevitability of the tide and waves and wind and water. It will all be swept away. We must understand the limits of sandcastle building. We must understand the limits of all our human endeavors. There is wisdom in knowing the limitations of life under the sun.

Solomon starts with the dark side before moving to the light. He starts with several reflections on the limitations of human experience and nature that prove his opening statement.

He gives three illustrations of why he says life is an illusory vaper.

There is no permanence, there is no progress and there is no purpose.

First, there is no permanence to our lives.

Verse 4. Generations come and generations go, but the earth carries on. Who of us remember or think about great grandparents? The cycle of life or circle of life goes on and on.

You washed the dishes last night and now the sink is full again. You changed the oil four months ago and now it needs it again. You did your homework and now there is more.

Parents go, children come. The house remains, the occupants change. We get everything we have from others, hold it for a brief moment and then leave it all for others.

The earth is the stage, and the players move back and forth, come and go, enter and exit. The stage remains, but all the actors die. Man is not permanent.

You will not find the key or meaning of the mystery of life in history.

Second, there is no progress.

Verses 5-7 draw from three things in the natural order of things.

1. *The sun rises* and sets and then rises and sets again and again, ad infinitum.
2. *The wind blows* first one direction and then another, always moving, always changing. First a pineapple express and then a northeastern. But no meaningful sense of progress.
3. *The rivers flow* into the sea, but the sea never fills up and the rivers never stop flowing. There is this continual motion, activity, but no consummation, no completion. We know the science of the water cycle, evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and back into the sea. Around and around and around.

Behind the repetition of it all there is the nagging question, what is the point and what is the profit of it all? The day after we die, the sun will rise, the wind will blow and the water will flow.

All there is, is ceaseless, repetitive, restless activity with no conclusion, no finality or resolution. Man is no different in his ceaseless pursuits, filling and accumulating but never satisfied or content.

You will not find the key or meaning of life in nature.

Third, there is no purpose found under the sun.

Verses 8-11 Solomon draws three things from human experience.

1. *Nothing is fulfilled.*

We get to the end of our work day tired and weary, only to have to get up the next day and do it all over again. Like nature, our lives and work are repetitive, ordinary and seemingly pointless weariness.

The old Tennessee Ernie Ford song, Sixteen Tons.

“You load 16 tons, what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.”

Like the ocean, our five senses are fed and fed and fed, but never fully satisfied.

We have thousands of pictures on our phones and in our computers and we still keep taking more. We have thousands of songs on our Spotify play lists or SoundCloud and keep loading more. The eye and the ear are never satisfied.

2. Nothing is new.

We think we might find pleasure and purpose in novelty, invention, newness, change. We boast of new things, new fashions, new gadgets. Everything is touted as new and improved. Yet is it?

What would Solomon say if we could bring him back to our modern world? Is that true?

Skyscrapers are just buildings. People have been building buildings for thousands of years. Remember the Tower of Babel, the pyramids?

Airplanes are just modes of transportation, like chariots and ox carts. All they do is get us from point A to point B. Yes, faster, but not new.

Computers. They help us write, calculate, communicate, organize our life, learn things. Things people have been trying to do for millennia. All of these things are just tools that help people do stuff better, like axes and plows.

Nothing new under the sun doesn't mean we don't discover new things or invent new things. It just means that we have been doing that since the beginning of time, inventing, making, creating, building, finding new ways to do all the same old things we have been doing. All inventions are imitations of what has been done before.

3. Nothing is remembered.

We think there will be a lasting legacy, something celebrated in posterity. Who remembers the past, who remembers history,

Who here knows who Mark David Chapman is? Who here knows who John Lennon is?

Mark David Chapman, shot John Lennon, and when he was being charged for murder, he said, "In order to be the most famous person in the world, I have to kill the most famous person in the world."

Someone has said we all get fifteen minutes of fame. But fame is hebel, it is a vapor, it never lasts very long. The Beatles and John Lennon are fading memories. 9/11 is a fading memory. We will all be buried in oblivion, covered up with dirt and dust. Just as we have forgotten, so we will be forgotten.

You will not find the key or meaning for the mystery of life in technology, science, or posterity.

Conclusion and application.

It is the beginning of wisdom to see our limitations and the limitations of what we can expect to gain from life. It is wisdom to live with humility and quietness, to accept what is given.

Solomon pulls no punches. This is reality. This is the world as it really is. He wants us to be as clear headed as possible about the reality of things, so we can have a deeper understanding of why it is this way and what we can do about it.

When Solomon says all is vanity, he is actually saying something meaningful and true. We will not find the meaning of life in all the usual places everyone looks. It will take more wisdom and deeper searching. Satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, purpose, meaning will not come from anything we have power or control over, nor from anything in this world, under the sun.

And this is the world Jesus Christ came to save. He came to rescue and redeem us. Jesus experienced the very things we experience, the repetition of life, the ordinariness of days, the toil of work as a carpenter.

Christ came not to take us out of the repetition and ordinariness of life, but to save us from the fallenness of our world and our lives, and prepare us for a world where nothing is ordinary and everything is new.

I Peter 1:18-19 ... you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.