

Dust In The Wind  
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Intro:

Illst: In the 1993 cult classic movie, Ground Hog Day, actor Bill Murray plays weatherman Phil Connors, who relives Groundhog Day over and over in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania where the main Groundhog Day festival is taking place. Some hardcore fans of the movie think that Phil Connors lived the same day over for 30 years. While the movie is a comedy the message is clear when Phil tries some crazy things to cope with the repetitive monotony of his life. He looks for happiness in all kinds of places and all kinds of experiences. His quest is reminiscent of Ecclesiastes.

- Hedonistic pleasures: food, drugs, smoking cigarettes, women
- Crime: he robbed an armored car, he tries to live out the life he had never lived
- He falls into despair: Faced with the reality that he cannot escape his curse he tries to kill himself only to wake up the next morning on Groundhog Day
- Next, he tries self-improvement: he reads, learns French, piano, ice sculpting and becomes a well-rounded man but none of it lifts the curse.
- Only until he becomes content in his circumstances does the curse lift. He finally looks into the eyes of Rita, the woman he has fallen in love with and says, *"I don't know what will happen tomorrow; all I know is I'm happy right now."*
- The point of Ecclesiastes of 1:1-11. We are living in a world that is broken by the curse and we no control over this broken world in our lives under the sun. True gain is only found in fearing the One who bore and paid the penalty of the curse for us and enjoying the ordinary gifts He has given us as He leads us back to Eden on our journey through this broken world.
- Two points this morning:
  - How to read the map of Ecclesiastes (vv. 1-3)
  - Live life with the destination of the journey in mind (vv. 4-11)

I. How to read the map of Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3)

A good song tells a story by taking you on a journey through its lyrics. Ecclesiastes is that kind of song. But just like a good song, you must understand the meaning of the words that the poet intended in his song. Words have meanings and if you do not understand what the poet meant then you may wind up somewhere he never intended you and hear a message he never intended you to hear. Understanding these words is like understanding the legend of a map. A legend is like a dictionary for the map, it defines what certain symbols are so you will know how to get to your destination on your journey.

The destination: where are we going on this journey? We are going to find the end of the matter and it will take us 12 chapters to reach the end. So where are we going on this journey? We are going back to Eden. We will eventually arrive at the place where God gave the original good gifts to His people to be enjoyed. What we will find is that these gifts are still here to be enjoyed in this broken world if we will follow the One who blazed the trail back to Eden.

The Driver: Who is the leading the journey? Verse 1 tells us Solomon is leading. There is one author of Ecclesiastes but he speaks to us as a narrator of his own life experiences in order to teach wisdom to us. What Solomon wants to teach us is that real biblical wisdom is found in honest acknowledgment that the experience of the brokenness of this world is the same for the Christian and the non-Christian. There are things and experiences in our lives under the sun that are confusing, inconsolable, incomprehensible, inexplicable and painful. Life seems out of our control but that does not mean God is not in control. God is in control and He wants us to find joy on the journey.

The Legend: How to read the map of Ecclesiastes? What we need to do now is drill down into some key words in Ecclesiastes to help us understand God's message in this book. There are theological dead ends we can drive down if we are not careful and we will miss the meaning of the book.

Look in vv. 2-3. Let's consider the road signs (key words) we need to understand in Ecclesiastes. Let's walk through these two verses:

Verse 2: "*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*"

- In v. 2, the Preacher uses the word *vanity* five times. The repetition of words is important. He is going to use *vanity* 33 more times before he finishes his sermon. It reminds us of how Isaiah uses the word *holy* to describe Yahweh in Isaiah 6:3 where he says, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!*" This was to emphasize the ultimate holy character of God. For Solomon to use the word *vanity* this many times is to say this is the ultimate of vanities. *But what does the word vanity mean?*
- **Vanity:** The Hebrew word is: *hebel*<sup>1</sup> and it has several meanings. Your translation likely says *vanity* or *meaningless*. It literally means *vapor, mist, or breath*. It refers to something that is *temporary* and has *no lasting permanence*.

To be fair, some Christian scholars believe that the word *hebel* is best understood as meaningless. They believe that the significance of Ecclesiastes is to tell unbelievers the meaningless of their lives lived apart from God. I am not saying that is not true but this is not the meaning of the Hebrew *hebel*. *Hebel* is not primarily a negative evaluation of the *meaningless of life under the sun*. Everything is not meaningless. If it meaningless then the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes and the Bible is a waste of time and Christ death and resurrection has no purpose. We know that is not true.

Literally, the Hebrew word, *hebel*, in v. 2 is saying, "*All is vapor*" (*mist or breath*). It like being outside on a cold morning, you breathe, you see the mist and then it is gone. You cannot catch it. You cannot save it for later. It eludes your grasp and defies your attempts at comprehension and to control it. This is the idea of the word *hebel*.

The Psalmist cries out in Psalms 39:5, "*Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! [hebel]*"

In Genesis 4, Abel's name is the Hebrew word *hebel* (*vapor, mist, breath*). After Adam and Eve were removed from the Garden of Eden the first murder takes place when Abel was killed by his brother Cain. It is no coincidence that Abel's name is *vapor*. The Psalmist and Solomon want us to understand that in our fallen condition we are not unlike Abel. Our lives are so short they are like a *mist or breath* on a cold winter morning or like dust in the air. You look into a steam of sunlight and see the dust and then it is gone. If you were to reach out to grab the dust you could not take hold of it. James 4:14 confirms this, "*What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*" We are here one minute and carried away on the wind the next.

I am not trying to depress you but Ecclesiastes is going to strip away any illusion that we may have about our importance and our ability to comprehend or control what happens to us in life. This book is humbling because it is wisdom for people who are broken living life in a broken world under the sun.

Don't get depressed yet. Solomon is going to show us where true gain under the sun is found. However, you have to ride with him for 12 chapters to get there. You will see road signs that are up ahead but for now, find joy in the ordinary gifts of the journey.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hebel* is also the name of Abel in Gen. 4. I believe this gives us more connections to life as it moved out of Eden after the Fall.

Next, in v. 3 we see the signpost of *gain*: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"

- Gain is an economic word, which means profit.
  - It is what is left over after the expenses have been paid. As humans we are created with a desire to show a profit, to be in the black, whether financially or otherwise. So Ecclesiastes will make us think about what is left over at the end of our lives so we may leverage that for our gain. What will the surplus be? What will I leave behind for all of my efforts? It will make us think about what we do to find meaning or purpose in life. What are our ideas about making our lives count? It will confront us with the fact that *gain under the sun* does not pay off. The problem is we are a vapor. It is futile to think we can gain the whole world and somehow leverage that for the value of our soul. What we need is to find true gain in this life under the sun.
  - *The idea of gain in Ecclesiastes is contrasted with what true gain is. We do not find the words true gain in Ecclesiastes but we find the idea of true gain. True Gain is seen in a two-fold idea:*
    1. God: *It is to fear God and keep His commandments.* [Adam and Eve did not do this in the Garden of Eden]
    2. God's Ordinary Gifts: *There is nothing better in life than the ordinary gifts of God that were given in the Garden that of contentment found in work, food, and drink.* These are the gifts of Eden given to people to enjoy but now in our lives under the sun we fail to find contentment in them.
  - We need to look for the road signs of true gain as we travel through Ecclesiastes. They will give us hope
- The word *toil* in v. 3 encompasses all of our earthly doings.
  - It is our labor and effort in whatever we are seeking gain. Sometimes it is translated a misery or trouble or suffering. In Ecclesiastes, it is the effort we make to achieve in some endeavor.
- Finally the phrase "*under the sun*" is the key signpost we will be seeing a lot of in the book.
  - *Under the sun* is life in its fallen state or condition in which we all live. A popular understanding of the phrase *under the sun* is that it is secular perspective or secular wisdom and if we just get wisdom from over the sun then all of life will make sense. Another way to say it is if we just get Jesus then all of life makes sense and falls into place.

Friends you need Jesus but even when you have Jesus it does not mean life will all of a sudden make sense and you will understand why things work the way they do. Suffering and hardships and incomprehensible things come to both Christians and non-Christians. This is one of the messages of Ecclesiastes.

I remember as a young man in my late 20's looking back on my life and thinking, "Wow! I grew up in a really dysfunctional family. It was hard on me and marked me. There was abuse and neglect and lots of things that went on. Then when I began to follow Christ, I thought, "Oh Lord thank you for saving me. I have been through so much and surely the worst is over and no matter what happens I won't have to go through something that hard again in my life." I don't know if you have ever had those kinds of thoughts but I have. Then as I got older and I was blindsided by things that were just as hard as when I was younger and I thought, "Why Lord? I have already been through so much. Isn't this enough?" This is life under the sun.

Ecclesiastes is a corrective to this kind of defective theological dead-end road. Life under the sun is broken. We all suffer and will go through things for which we may never find any answers or have any resolution or find any justice under the sun. *Life under the sun* is how everyone is experiencing the fact that we are all *dust in the wind*. We need to stop pretending that the world is not broken and as Pastor Eric said last week be honest with what the world is and who we are.

- Ecclesiastes is wisdom for life's journey through this broken world. Now that we have identified and understand how to read the map and road signs for the journey through Ecclesiastes we can ask the question that the Preacher as in v. 3 and begin our exploration of this book: "*What does man gain by all the toil as which he toils under the sun?*"

II. Live life with the destination of the journey in mind (vv. 4-11)

- Jesus asked a similar question that Solomon asked in Matthew 16:26, "*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*" What is there to gain under the sun when life is only a vapor?
- You don't have to be a Christian to ask that question. In 1978, the rock group Kansas sang about it in a similar fashion with their now famous rock ballad *Dust in the Wind*:

*I close my eyes, only for a moment, and the moment's gone*

*All my dreams pass before my eyes, a curiosity*

*Dust in the wind*

*All they are is dust in the wind*

*Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea*

*All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see*

*Dust in the wind*

*All we are is dust in the wind*

*Now, don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky*

*It slips away*

*And all your money won't another minute buy*

*Dust in the wind*

*All we are is dust in the wind<sup>2</sup>*

There is a futility that seems to be built into human life and all of our money and all of our toil will not change this cycle of futility. Solomon the Poet-King illustrates this cycle in vv. 4-11.

Verse 4:

- How is Solomon illustrating His point in v. 4? He is saying that in comparison from generation to generation, life is short, it is like a breath that is breathed in and breathed out and gone. Yet it is not only that brevity of life that he is pointing to but that in all the generations of people there is really no gain in all our toil.
- Verse 4 is similar to v. 7 where he says all streams run to the sea but the sea is not full. In spite of all of the water that pours into the sea, in spite of all of the rain the sea is not full. Nothing changes and there is no gain. One generation follows another and we still have the same old problems we have always had. There is no gain.

Oh sure there may be a new law or a new technology that looks like it is going to revolutionize the lives of people and make significant gain only to find that there is still poverty, there are still wars, people still kill one another and no one is satisfied with things because there is never really any gain. Sure the faces change but we still have the same problems every generation has had.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://genius.com/Kansas-dust-in-the-wind-lyrics>. Also see: <https://www.popsongprofessor.com/blog/2016/02/29/what-does-dust-in-the-wind-by-kansas-mean>. Many people think this song is a Christian song. While it certainly has a biblical theme Kerry Livgren wrote this song before he was a Christian. Livgren had come to realize that fame and fortune left him empty and all his accomplishments were only temporary.

- What is God saying through Solomon? He is deconstructing our lives. He is stripping away the pride that makes us think we are going to be the generation that finally fixes things. This is what we do is it not?

We look back at generations and we think the *Builders* were the greatest generation and then along come the *Boomers* and they are going to surpass them. Then *Gen X* comes along and then the *Millennials* and now there is *Gen Y*. On and on the generational saviors come and go. One generation comes after another but none of them can solve the problems. There is nothing new under the sun every generation is just like the last one—it is filled with sinners who think they are the saviors because they are smarter than their parents and after a while, they realize like the rest of us there is no gain for all their toil under the sun.

Verses 5-7:

- What do we learn? A generation comes and a generation goes and there is no gain for all their toil. What do we learn? The sun will come out tomorrow bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow it will shine.
- The sun, the wind, the sea, they all out last us. They keep right on existing and far outlast our small human span of life. We are all part of the cycle of life that has been going on since creation. It just seems like we are not able to get anywhere. There seems to be no gain. The sun chases its tail. The wind blows to the south and then comes back around from the north. All streams flow to the sea and the water evaporates and then it rains on the land and if flows back to the sea but the sea is never full.
- Just like there is never any gain for all of the toil of the sun, wind, and sea so it is for us - we are like them. We are insatiable for gain but there is never any gain for our toil. We fill our days with constant movement and activity. We check our Fitbits to see how many steps we have gotten in all day long trying to one-up the next person or previous day. It seems like we are in perpetual motion and there is no gain for all our toil. Then we get to v. 8.

Verse 8:

- Are you tired yet? Because Solomon is not done ripping out our pride. We are just like creation in Romans 8 and we groan with weariness. We are weary creatures who are never satisfied with what is before us.

Here Solomon puts before us another three-fold illustration to humble us: *the mouth (speech: man cannot utter it), the eye and the ear*. Unless you have some physical issue the point is the mouth can always speak, the eye is never so full of sight that it cannot take it in and the ear is never so filled with sound that it cannot accept any more impulses of sound. They may be tired but they are not satisfied. That is the reason you will stay up late binge-watching your favorite show or on the Internet or working or scrolling through Instagram or Snapchat.

- Verses 9:
- Here is where Solomon is going with this. There is nothing gained for all of the toil of our lives on the treadmill and we know it. History is still repeating itself. Governments come and go. Leaders of nations come and go. If there is a war today in time it will be followed by peace and then later it will be followed by war.
- A couple of weeks ago winter storm Quinn blew through the upper Midwest and dumped snow from the west coast to the east coast. On the heels of Quinn winter storm Riley came through and did the same thing. The weather is following its repetitive cycle and there is no gain. The snow will melt and drain into the lakes and ocean, people will rebuild and next winter the same thing will happen.

- We are stuck in this repetitive cycle. So . . . consciously or unconsciously we long for something to break the repetitive cycle in which we are stuck. We long for something to remove the boredom in repetitive nature of our lives under the sun. In our journey through this broken world of Eden under the sun, we strive after the new and the novel to break us out of the monotony. This takes us to v. 10.

Verses 10:

- Solomon is still not done stripping away our pride. At the end of v. 9 and moving into v. 10, he declares there is nothing new under the sun. Then you hear the voice of objection. *"Hey well yes, there is something new that will revolutionize this world and break the monotony and here is it."*

- If we could bring Solomon into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the conversation might go something like this:

*"Look, Solomon, at all the new things that we twenty-first-century humans have produced!" He says, "Where?"*

*"Over there! That is a Burj Khalifa Hotel in Dubai. It is an architectural master-piece." Solomon says, "It's a building; people have been making those for the last six millennia."*

*"Well, have you read this great novel? This is one of the greatest novels ever written. No one has ever written anything like it." Solomon says, "It's a book, a story. What's new about that? Show me something new."*

*"Okay how about this jet plane? You have never seen one of these. You have never seen this technology. That's new." Solomon says, "Yeah I acknowledge the newness of the technologies, but what does air travel do? It is a form of transportation so you get there faster. It is the same thing we were trying to do in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. We have always been trying to get from point A to point B."*

*"Okay well here is one you have never seen. It's a smart phone!" Solomon says, "Okay, what does it do?" "Well with it you can send messages to other people, communicate with other people long distances away, take pictures, calculate numbers and organize your life." Solomon says, "Man has been trying to do these things more efficiently all throughout history. When I was king I had people do it for me. You see . . . there is nothing really new."*

*Then Solomon says, "Now you tell me something. Has the smart phone and all of these things you think are new changed your life for the better?" You have to admit, "Well no, not really." "Oh so for all of your toil under the sun you have gained nothing."<sup>3</sup>*

- The new, the novel or the unique will not bring gain in our lives under the sun.

Verse 11:

- What do you notice about v. 11? This whole poetic lament has cycled back around to where we began in v. 4. A generation comes and a generation goes but there is no remembrance of the former things and eventually, people will not remember the latter things that they have done.
- Illst: My grandfather was born in 1880. My dad was the baby of eleven children so he was born very late in my grandfather's life. My dad was nine years old when his father died. Do you know what I know about my grandfather? Basically nothing. All I know is that he was 6 foot 6 inches tall. I don't know where he was born. I know he lived in Alabama and then moved to Tupelo, Mississippi. I don't know when that was or anything about his life. All of the things he did have been forgotten and he was my grandfather. I never knew him.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Jeffrey Meyers, *A Table in the Mist*, 47-48.

- This will be all of us one day. Eventually, enough generations will pass and no one will remember us. You can try as hard as you might to leave your mark on your family and the world but in the grand scheme of things, it will not give you meaning or significance for all your toil because you will be dead. Like sandcastles on the beach, the tide will roll in and wash away all that your labor.

#### Conclusion

- It all sounds pretty hopeless when we say it like this doesn't it? After all, if we are a vapor, like dust in the wind, and all of our toil under the sun is feverish activity with no lasting impact and gives us no gain, how should we live? If everything is just going to go on the same and there is nothing new under the sun what is the point? How should we live? Two things:

1. First, we should live with the end in mind. This means we should learn how to live by preparing to die. God is not going to remove us from life under the sun until He is ready. We should learn how to find satisfaction in the true gain He gives.

So instead of trying to find gain under the sun we pretend that we are in control of our lives and that we can somehow rise above our created condition. This is what we do, we pretend we can rise above it all and find our own satisfaction without God. We pretend that somehow we will never have a serious illness. We pretend that if we change jobs we will finally find meaning under the sun. We pretend that if we get the latest smart-phone that we will be get organized and connected under the sun. We pretend that the constant stream of new messages on our phone will alleviate the boredom of our lives. We pretend that if we were married or if we were not married that we would be content. We pretend that if we had more money we would be satisfied. We pretend that if we can just get through another week of college, junior high or high school or home school that spring break will bring newness to the semester. We pretend that if we can get the house cleaned, wash all the clothes, change all the dirty diapers and get everything on the shopping list that things will be slower and quieter next week. We pretend that we can break free of the cycle of repetition that makes us weary but it never works.<sup>4</sup>

Let's stop pretending and come to terms that God has stitched repetition into the very fabric of creation. We are looking for spring in the next week or so and we expect it because it is the pattern of how God has created the world. There is a measure of permanence and repetition in the cycles that God has created in the world. God has created us in such a way that we enjoy newness and change but we cannot make change and newness "ends" in themselves. We glorify God when we learn to enjoy the ordinary gifts that he has given us under the sun this is true gain.

2. True gain for our toil under the sun is only found in Christ. We have to continually look at the end of Ecclesiastes to remind ourselves of the Preachers point. In our fallen condition, there is nothing new under the sun but Christ gives a new word, new birth because He has established a new covenant. It is not in our toil that we find true gain but in the toil and labor of Another, Jesus Christ. It is in the Person and toil of Christ that true gain is found. He enables us to find contentment in our lives in a broken world.

When Christ came to earth He is the only One who has ever done what no one has ever done and that was to keep God's commands perfectly and then die on the cross for our sins. On the third day, He rose from the dead and defeated death and Hell. No one had ever done that before. In doing this Christ gave us the new word with power, established by His blood the new covenant and gives new birth to those who come to Him by turning from sin and trusting Him only for salvation.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from David Gibson's, *Living Life Backwards*, 29.

What we learn is that Christ is the One who blazed a trail back to New Eden. Then what we learn is that it is not Solomon who is leading us through Ecclesiastes and life under the sun but it is Christ. He does not remove us from the brokenness of this world but He does walk with us along life's journey and He gives us His church to journey arm-in-arm together so that when we stumble we slow down and help one another get back up. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:58, *"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."*