



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

An Intro into Futility

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

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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.*

(Pastor prays)

In 1851, Herman Melville wrote a novel of lasting acclaim entitled "The Whale" better known as "Moby Dick." Of all the worthy things noted about that book over the years, any reviewer can't help but see the Bible stitched in and out of its pages. Melville's own King James Bible was careworn and marked up throughout. And the book that was marked the most is the book we know as Ecclesiastes. Even in "Moby Dick" itself, Melville wrote, the truest of all men is the "man of sorrows" and the truest of all books is Ecclesiastes.

I love this little 12-chapter book for several reasons. I love it because the professor in seminary who influenced my preaching the most was Rick Byargeon. Rick Byargeon wrote his dissertation on Ecclesiastes. And because he loved it, I loved it. I love it because it confronts problems head-on and doesn't give "pat" answers. Ecclesiastes asks the questions that the 65 other books of the Bible answer. Namely, "why?" Why are things the way they are? Why did this happen to me? Life is dull? Or not fair? Or depressing? I'm getting older and still not happy? And I want to know why! Kent Hughes said that Ecclesiastes is the only book of the Bible that was written on a Monday morning. Derek Kidner says that, in Ecclesiastes, wisdom is the base camp and the author of Ecclesiastes is an explorer who pushes the boundaries. He's the student in the classroom who, when you answer one of his questions, says, "yes but what about this?"

Ecclesiastes is a bucket of cold water on the American dream, and we could use a little reality. Ecclesiastes allows the questions: "Why am I so unhappy?" "Why is there injustice?" And "Is this life actually worth living?" Ecclesiastes offers a unique perspective on human life, unmasks the myth of human achievement, autonomy and self-sufficiency. It shows us our inability to find real meaning in such a crooked world.

Ecclesiastes is needed right now because it exposes the mad quest to find satisfaction in knowledge, work, pleasure, sex, stuff, power, wealth and fame. This book is a sandblaster and a power-washer. This book strips us bare and leaves us with nothing to stand on but the grace of God found in Christ. So today in this intro I would like to point you to a broad theme:

Don't build your life on lies. Build your life on Christ.

Today will be a little different. Today I want to set the stage and give a bit of an introduction to this enigmatic book. I want to give some meanings of words and then offer up a few truths to hang onto near the end of the study this morning.

The title. Ecclesiastes. Where does that word come from? It sounds like the Greek word *Ecclesia* which means "one who calls an assembly." That comes from a Hebrew word *Qoheleth*.

The author. There is some debate on this. Historically Jews and Christians alike have attributed it to Solomon. He was the son of David and King in Jerusalem. Others think it is anonymous. But the easiest and plainest reading is Solomon.

Themes. There are several themes. The major theme is in verse 2, and it's restated at the end of the book in chapter 12:8. "Vanity of vanities" says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

The meaning of "vanity." "Vanity," which is used 38 times, comes from the Hebrew word *haviil* that has multiple meanings. It is like vapor, mist, smoke. It's a puff of wind, a puff of wind and then it is gone. It is breath on a cold day, breath you can see it and then it is gone. It's nothing you can get your hands on. It's not to say that it's not real. It's just a whisper on the wind, an enigma.

Gospel. How does the Christian view this book? There is no book in the Bible quite like the book of Ecclesiastes and no writer quite like the preacher. At first blush, he can feel like a skeptic or a pessimist. But as with many pessimists, they are easily misunderstood. God is here. He is introduced as creator. He is sovereign. He is inscrutably wise. He is to be feared. He is to be

worshipped. Ecclesiastes exposes the gap between God who is holy and man who is a sinner. That gap or chasm can only be covered in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

That gets us to these first two verses. And what I would like to do in our remaining time is to squeeze these two verses for truths we can take away.

Perspective is helpful. King Solomon is attested to have written three books: Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Many believe he wrote the Song of Solomon when he was a young man in love and easily swayed by a pretty woman. Proverbs was probably written when he was in midlife and had learned some hard lessons and the way the world works. Ecclesiastes would be written as an old man who had done everything, had everything and was still empty on the inside and finally found satisfaction in God alone.

Listen, you don't have to learn every lesson the hard way. You have the Bible, the church, Christian friends and the Gospel. One of the things Solomon says in Ecclesiastes Chapter 5 is that God is in heaven, you are on earth, let your words be few. That is the perspective of someone who's been there and is now pointing you to the futility of your life without Christ.

Words have power, and God's word has the most power. Verse 1 says, "these are the words of the preacher." This is an often-used introduction that is in Amos and Jeremiah also. Jesus said, "The Word speaks of me." This word has power, and Ecclesiastes has the power to melt away all the stuff that doesn't matter so you can cling to that which does matter, God and His Gospel. Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the forgiveness of sin, and joy in the Lord. Find your joy in the Lord.

Life is perplexing. It's just confusing on so many levels. The theme in verse 2 is "vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities." There are two things about this. When things are said twice for emphasis and then the way it speaks to it being confusing to the highest degree. Vanity of vanities. Think of Holy of Holies as the most holy place. Song of songs as the most beautiful songs. Lord of Lords, King of Kings. "Vanity of vanities" is like a double vapor, it's absurd. It makes no clear sense. It's totally beyond human comprehension. I worked hard, loved my kids, took them to church, and now this! That perplexing pain is there for a reason. It drives us to the mercies of God found in Jesus.

Life is short. Verse 2 has "vanity" in it five times. Five times here is a vapor, a puff of air. It's here one second and gone the next. The older you get, the faster time passes. James 4:14 says,

you are a mist that appears for a little while then vanishes. The Psalmist in Psalm 103:15-17 says, ¹⁵ *As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. ¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children.* Life is short. Turn to Christ and live for Christ.

Nothing is reliable. Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities. All is *haval*. Vanity. And nothing lasts. Cars are in the scrapyard, houses break down, buildings rot, clothes wear out, our legacies fade. And so the preacher makes this sweeping statement that all is *haval*, all is vanity. Only one thing remains and matters. Jesus, the lamb which was slain from the foundation of the world. You can put your full weight, your life and pain and hopes and frustrations and worries and all your sin and addiction and junk, you can put it right here on the cross of Jesus.

Drudgery means something. Vanity is built into the creation order after the fall. It is boredom. It is hate for your job, loneliness. Go back to the very beginning when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. They were cast out, and listen to what the Lord said to Adam in Genesis 3: 17b-19. *cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ 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.*” This futility and pain and struggle makes us long for another world. Drudgery makes Heaven real.

You are more fragile than you think. Vanity -*haval*. Next time you are out in the cold and see your breath, count the seconds before it's gone and that's your life in relation to eternity. That's your life in relation to COVID-19 or heart infections, car wrecks, wrong medicine, unseen malignancy. All of that is to point us to the grace of God. That He would save sinners like us who are so transient. All of that points us to the love of God, that He would love such transience and sinful, short, confusing lives. That points us to the joy of God that you can have in Christ, that our delight is Christ in His Kingdom.

Life doesn't make sense, but neither does grace. We have talked about the word “vanity” quite a bit. *Haval*. The first time it shows up is through Abel. Abel never speaks. His brother kills him, but Abel's blood cries for vengeance. Draw a straight line from Abel's blood calling for vengeance to the blood of Jesus that doesn't call for God's vengeance but calls for grace and mercy. That is the truth of God in Christ. Don't build your life on lies. Build it on Christ.

(Pastor prays)