



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Life Under the Sun

January 17, 2021

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11

Clint Pressley

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

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

⁴*A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

⁵*The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

⁶*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.*

⁷*All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.*

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.*

¹⁰*Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?*

*It has been already
in the ages before us.*

¹¹*There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.*

(Pastor prays)

It's 17 days into a brand-new year and things don't seem any better than they were last year.

COVID cases are higher than ever before, hospitals are struggling, and health care workers are

living on the ragged edge. Schools are fighting to stay open; teachers and parents are feeling the dreaded tension of remote learning. In addition to that, the riots we experienced in 2020 have been replaced with new ones, even into the U.S. Capitol building itself. We have an outgoing President who has been impeached for a second time and an inauguration that will happen this week under the watchful eye of our armed forces.

Roiling, rumbling and throbbing underneath all of that is the volatile conversation about race. And yet God has blessed us all, preserved us and sustained us and saved us. He's given us a day to worship and technology to make it happen. And presiding over all of that is a book to guide us and nourish us and calm us.

And so we go to this book looking for a soft pillow of grace, and instead what we get is a bucket of cold water thrown in the face of all of us that have been drunk with worry and anxiety, some depression or— for a lot of us— it's been frustration and even anger. And the preacher comes in, puts his hand on our shoulder and says, “wait a minute, let me explain to you how the world works.” And he gives us the book of Ecclesiastes so that we can get our sanity back and start rejoicing in those things that ultimately matter and better endure than those things that ultimately don't.

When you read Ecclesiastes, it can feel pessimistic because it shatters the idols we secretly worship and calls us out. And nobody likes to be called out! This book is not a contradiction of the Gospel but a call for the glorious riches of grace and mercy found in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. I think this book shows us that...

Life without Christ is terrible

Isn't that what verse 2 says?

Life without Jesus has no clear meaning

That's the entire theme of this book: an apologetic to not chase the things of this world, and instead, repent of those things and put your faith in Christ. Verse 2 says, ²*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.* Solomon will look back on his long life and say, “I wasted it! I sought pleasure and identity and self-esteem in business and money and

bigger houses and sex and success and power, education and influence and being smarter than everyone else and it was a waste! It was a spitting into the wind.”

And the utter bankruptcy of his pursuits shows us the beauty of what Paul called the “unsearchable riches” in Christ! And if you are not a believer or you are not sure or you know someone who is not, what better time in our history than now when everything is broken, what better time than now to come to Christ? What better time to be saved and forgiven at His cross? And for those of you that are believers, there are three things I’m going to ask you to do: I want you to love Christ more, take time for personal and corporate worship, and trust in Him. He is our meaning. Life without Christ has no real meaning.

Life without Christ brings no real gain

If verse 2 of Chapter 1 is the driving theme of Ecclesiastes, then verse 3 is the driving question. There’s a lot here worth looking at. Let’s read the question in verse 3. ³ *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?* Let’s define some terms and phrases in verse three. The word gain, *yithron*, is used nine times in Ecclesiastes. It means “profit.” When the bills are all paid, it’s what’s left over. It’s to increase.

The next word is “toil.” It’s your work, job, occupation, and effort. It’s what you give your life and time to.

And the last is the phrase “under the sun.” It is used 29 times and only in Ecclesiastes. Get used to it. It is used to describe life on *this* side of Heaven and life lived like God doesn’t really exist – earthbound.

Let’s go back to the question. It’s one you need to ask yourself because, besides your own saving knowledge of Jesus, it might be the most important question. When it’s all said and done, what have you worked for? What is there to show for all of your hard labor on this earth? What has all your work and effort and worry and pressure and stress and sacrifice, what has all that achieved for you?

Do you know what you ought to hear right there in that question? You ought to hear something really familiar. Jesus asks this exact same question as He is explaining what it means to be a disciple in Mark 8:34-37. ³⁴ *And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If*

anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? And the obvious answer is, nothing! That's one of the pounding drumbeats of the Gospel. It's what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

Let's read Matthew 6:19-21.¹⁹ *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,*²⁰ *but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*²¹ *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Or in John 6:27 when he said,²⁷ *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."* In verse 3, this one rhetorical question clears the deck. Without Jesus, there is no real gain. Without Jesus there is no driving purpose under the sun. Without Jesus, there is no meaning to your work. But in Christ, all of it has a great and lasting value. Paul even says in 1 Corinthians 15:58,⁵⁸ *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.* Or in Colossians 3:23,²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.* There's the gain, the profit, the advantage. While we live under the sun, we work for the One who is beyond the sun. Life without Jesus has no clear meaning. Life without Jesus brings no clear gain.

Life without Jesus leaves no lasting legacy

We need to keep the structure of the passage intact. So in verse 3, the preacher asks the driving question of the whole book, then in verses 4-7, the preacher makes some observations, and then in verses 8-11 he draws up some conclusions for us.

Life is short and people are going to forget you. Let's read verse four.⁴ *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.* At any given time, there are roughly three generations alive at once. The crop of people alive today will be replaced by a new crop tomorrow. This should be a graduation speech. Instead of "God has great things in store for you" or "you are going to make a difference," the graduation speech should say "you aren't going to do great and when you die people we'll soon forget you." Wave after wave of

generations come and go and are soon forgotten and the world is just like it was. Legacy is a false idol.

Then in verses 5-7 the preacher goes into the sun and wind and streams. Verse five is the sun panting like a ground-down marathoner. Pink Floyd would say, "you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking, racing around to come up behind you again." The sun is the same in a relative way, but you are older, and shorter of breath; you realize you are one day closer to death. The preacher, in verse 6, will say the same about the wind blowing and in verse 7 he will speak of the rivers flowing into the sea. It's the depressing feel of this meaningless, monotonous life where nothing changes. It's just one big purposeless cycle and all of that is under the sun. He's going to sum it up in verse 8 by saying it's all full of weariness. ⁸ *All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*

And then in verses 9-11, the preacher will conclude that there is nothing new, it's all boring. Life without God, life without the forgiveness of sins at the cross of Jesus, life without having your eyes opened to the beauty of creation and in God's sovereign controlling and governing of His creation. It's all boring.

I'd like to show you something of a contrast between what Solomon wrote and what David his father wrote. In Ecclesiastes 1:5, Solomon describes the sun as panting, dreary and tired; it's worn out and dreading each new day.

That's where some of you live even now. I would like to give you another perspective of a life changed by grace. Listen to what David said when he thought about how the sun comes up in Psalm 19:1-5. **19** *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.* ² *Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.* ³ *There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.* ⁴ *Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun,* ⁵ *which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.*

Without knowing God in Christ, life under the sun is terrible. Knowing God in Christ changes you and gives you a completely different perspective. Trust in the sovereign hand of God. Love God

for His grace at the cross and forgiveness. Work to please and honor God and live with joy. Each new day God is governing His universe. Life with Jesus is joyful, fulfilling, God-honoring and eternal.

(Pastor prays)