

Jason Upchurch - Ecclesiastes 1:1-4 - Life Without Jesus Is Meaningless - Part 1

This morning we embark on a journey through the book of Ecclesiastes. I've had my eye on this book for some time for a number of reasons and when I asked the elders some time ago if they had any considerations for what I should preach next this book was mentioned in the discussion.

I love Ecclesiastes although it's sort of the black sheep of the Bible. How many of you have struggled to know what to do with Ecclesiastes? A lot of people have no idea what to do with this book. On a quick read it seems like something of a constant whiplash of some crotchety old man who's railing at the world.

Everything is vanity.
Our lives are vain.
Our work is vain.
Wealth is vain.
Wisdom is vain.

That word vain or vanity is used over and over. The word itself means a vapor, a mist. You know those little air fresheners people use in the bathroom that don't really eliminate the smell but make us feel better? A little spray and it's gone forever never to be remembered? That's what a lot of life seems like.

That word in Hebrew is often used of mist or vanity or pagan idols - things that are around for a small while and then they're gone.

And so when we read verses 1-2 there could be a lot of pessimism here. **Read 1-2**

We'll talk about why it's vain in a bit. But we know this is written by Solomon. He is the son of David, he is the king in Jerusalem. His wealth and his wisdom surpassed really any man.

Now, I want to give you a little bit of an illustration for how to handle the book. How many of you guys have been to Silverwood? At Silverwood there's a water ride called Thunder Canyon. And the ride is a made up river that goes round and round. And you get on this round boat that sort of spins as it goes through the river.

And there's a lot about the river that is cyclical. And in some ways the river is the same for everyone and in some ways it's different but everyone goes through the same basic ride and at the end everyone gets off.

What are the similarities? Every hops on, buckles in and begins the journey. The round boat spins as it goes. There's a waterfall that everyone has to go through. There's places of peace and calm and sunshine. Everyone goes through some rapids. I think there's a cave that everyone passes through.

That's kind of like life. There's commonality that we all have in a general sense. But there's also differences.

What's different? Well, on the water ride, people can have dramatically different experiences? Sometimes you're drenched and the guy next to you is bone dry. That's because even though it's cyclical, there are a lot of variables to life. Right out of the gate there's a place where people can put a quarter in and soak people on the boats. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Sometimes the rapids get you wet, sometimes they get your neighbor wet. Sometimes the waterfall drenches you, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you get all of that or none of that or some of that. The cave part is a little scary for little kids not so much for others.

And the whole ride takes 3 minutes. Just when you're getting used to how things work it's over. Maybe you wanted it over right away maybe you'd like for the ride to keep going. But the whole thing is over really fast.

That's a lot like life. Although we all have similarities in the general sense, there are also differences. And just when we think we've got it figured out, the ride is over. And I think as an illustration that's what this book is like.

And if you remember the ride, there's a place where people can walk by and see the beginning of the ride. And you can watch people get on and off. And as a dad I've stopped there several times with my kids over the years to explain the ride to them. Explain the good and bad of riding the ride.

I think that's kind of what Solomon is doing in the book. He's been on the ride, been on various parts. He's watched other people on the ride and he's telling us about it. And he's not pulling any punches. Sometimes the ride is good, sometimes it's bad. Some people want off early, others want to keep going. And he gives us some principles to live by in so that our 3 minutes on the ride of life is lived to the glory of God.

And as Christians we need to live our proverbial 3 minutes of life well. Part of what happens when we become Christians is that our perspective on life changes because God has changed us.

He's revealed to us the reality of sin - in us and in others. He's revealed that Adam's sin has affected humanity in general, the world in general, and us in particular. We know the world is sinful and we're either going to be able to navigate that well or we're going to be constantly frustrated by the world. News flash for you: the world is broken.

He's revealed that he has a plan to redeem humanity through Jesus. He's also revealed that his timescale is much, much different than ours. It's been 2,000 years since Jesus. And it was 4,000 years before that that Adam was in the Garden. We know that God's timescale is much different than ours.

This week I was talking to some cabin leaders who want all their campers to get saved this week. Right now. That's a good desire - that's not bad. But we need to understand that the timeline is up to God. We plant, we water, but who gives the growth? God does. In his own timing and way. Maybe these kids come to faith in Jesus this week, maybe it's next week or next decade. God has his own timeline of how things operate.

That's why Peter can say that with the Lord a day is like 1,000 years and a 1,000 years is like a day.

For the unbeliever, life is a lot like the pessimistic portions of Ecclesiastes: it's all vanity. It's all a mist and meaningless. Money is meaningless, justice is meaningless, work is meaningless. Why are we here? It's doesn't make any sense.

But for believers we understand cycles are good and part of God's plan. We understand that God has designed the world to move in cyclical patterns and we need to rejoice in that.

We also need to understand how to think through that.

Now let's talk about the book itself. Who wrote it? **Read 1:1**

Most Christians throughout history have simply accept Solomon as the author. There were some liberal Germans in the mid 1900s who wanted to argue about that, but Solomon has been regarded as the author almost unanimously throughout history - and I believe he wrote it.

He's the king in Jerusalem, David's son, he has wisdom and riches and power which all fit with the book. He also has a knack for writing wisdom literature.

But notice, Solomon isn't coming to us as the king, he's coming to us as a teacher. **Read 1-2**

Twice he's mentioned as the preacher. What's that mean? It means that Solomon is addressing us primarily as a preacher or teacher. Not a father, not a king, not as a cynical skeptic or angry "get off my lawn" old timer. He's a teacher.

And one of the aspects of wisdom literature - which Ecclesiastes is - is that you have to think hard about it. Whether it's Proverbs or Song of Solomon or Job or Lamentations: we usually have to work a little to get what the author is trying to tell us.

You remember in Karate Kid where Daniel wants to learn karate and so Mr Miagi makes him do all these ridiculous chores: wax the car, paint the fence, sand the deck? And just when Daniel-son thinks this is utterly pointless and ridiculous and is about to give up Mr. Miyagi shows him that actually all the hard work was teaching him? Daniel-son is a karate master because he's done all this hard work of sanding decks.

That's kind of wisdom literature. We read it but we usually give up before we really get a grasp on it. But the hard work of figuring out what the author is getting at is sort of the whole point. He's actually training us to understand it, and apply that's the point. Solomon is a teacher, he's a preacher trying to help us grasp life. And he's not making it easy for us.

We live in a day where we want everything just handed to us without any work. We want perfect houses and perfect lives, perfect bodies and finances and perfect everything without having to do any of the hard work to get there. Solomon doesn't let us do that. You want wisdom? You're going to have to work for it.

He's going to talk about politics, wisdom, money, death, friendship, seasons of life. And sometimes it's confusing.

Turn to 3:16-22. Read

We just got done with the doctrine of anthropology. The study of man and one of the main points I tried to emphasize was that we are made in the image of God. We're to rule over the beasts. Here, Solomon says God wants us to understand we're basically just like cattle. They die, we die. Oh well. Do we go up or down when we die? We don't know.

And you're thinking: wait, what? That's the point. He wants you to pause and work through that. Is that true? Is he trying to make a bigger point? We know that Solomon doesn't think we're all just like beasts. So why does he say that? You gotta work for it.

I like puzzle games. I like Wordle and Connections. I like crossword puzzles. Because it takes effort to put the thing together. You got to want it in wisdom literature.

Look at 7:15-18. Read What's that supposed to mean? Don't be too holy? That doesn't sound like Paul who says to strive with all the might we have to put off sin and put on righteousness. He wants you to work for it.

Now, there is one key that I think helps us understand the whole book. It's like the compass and map if you're ever frustrated by the book. It's the very last two verses in the book. **Read 12:13-14**

This is the summary of everything. No matter what's going on in life, injustices or difficulties or prosperity fear God and keep his commandments.

No matter what season you're in: a time for war or peace, a time for love or hate, a time to keep silent or a time to speak - fear God and keep his commandments.

Solomon will talk about a lot of evil that he sees under the sun. Things that are frustrating and galling. We see court cases that go awry and so injustice reigns. We see wise and godly men who are thwarted and fools put in positions of power. You know what we need to do? Fear God and keep his commandments.

Why do we do that? **Read 13-14** Because God is going to judge us. He's going to bring everything we do into the light. And we will give an account to him for all of it. One of the biggest mistakes people make - Christians included - is that we forget the judgment. We forget that we will give an account to God for all that we do in this life. It's easy to think that it's far off and out there a long ways off but it's sooner than we think and we need to order our lives rightly around it.

Through faith in Christ we're justified and stand righteous, but we still give an account and that should guide our lives. As we're thinking through the many issues in this book we need to constantly keep in mind that one day we're going to stand before the Lord in judgment. No matter how bad things seem or good or sometimes pointless or whatever - we will give an account to God for our faithfulness to him. And that's our guiding light, our compass in life.

Okay, let's work through this section of Ecclesiastes back in chapter 1.

Big Picture: Without Jesus life is meaningless. Following the Lord is the key to meaning in life.

We see this in several ways here. We'll get through about half of this paragraph this morning.

1. Without Jesus Everything is vanity. Read 2-3

We're going to see this phrase "under the sun" a lot in the book. And with only a few exceptions, it's always negative. It's not life under the watchful, caring eye of God. It's life under the hot blazing indifferent sun. "Life under the sun" is a unique phrase in this book. And it's basically like "life without God."

Read 1:3, 1:9, 1:14, 2:11, 2:17-23, 3:16, 4:1.

Under the sun is basically life without God. Life as, what we would call an atheist. Imagine the book of Job, with Job's tragedies but there's no God with no purpose or no control.

That's what atheists believe and many people who might even give a nod to God. Maybe God is up there doing something somewhere, but it doesn't relate to us at all.

If that's a person's belief, then everything really is meaningless. If there's no God, no purpose of why we're here, no direction, no future. If we live and work and die and just turn into dust. If we're all just carbon computers who have the same value as slime then everything truly is meaningless.

This is basically what we talked about last week in anthropology, isn't it? If we're all just random chance and matter then nothing really matters. For those who hold to atheism, there's a philosophy that comes out of that worldview called nihilism. And basically it's the extreme position that really nothing matters. Why eat, why work, why get married, why get out of bed. And although it's rare, there are actually people who fall into deep despair because they understand the logical end of their worldview.

They understand if life is just lived under the sun, that's there's no God up there anywhere, then life really is meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

But with Jesus, everything has purpose and goodness.

Rom. 8:28: and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.

Without Jesus everything is meaningless. With Jesus all things - even hard things - have meaning and purpose in the grand design of God. We might not know what the meaning is or how it works. But we can trust that God has a purpose in all of it.

2. Without Jesus Work is Meaningless. Read 3

It's kind of interesting to see people get lots of money who have never had it before. Especially people who have poor money management skills.

I remember hearing about a famous hip hop singer in the 80s who had so much money he would go buy brand new really expensive cars, drive them to the ghetto in LA and park and walk away and watch what would happen to the car when gang members walked by. They beat the car up and set it on fire - whatever. I mean, who cares. It's just money.

What do we gain by all this? People work for 40-60 years of your life. Maybe you save up some retirement money, maybe you give it to your kids. I've heard of people who are fairly well off and they have made millions of dollars and they make it really clear: when they die their kids get none of it. Sorry, kids. You gotta figure things out for yourself.

What do we actually gain by all the toil that we toil under the sun? Well, if you don't know Jesus you get nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's all just one big game of monopoly and who cares.

But if you have Jesus you know that God has specifically designed us for work. For labor. He's designed us to tend the garden of the world and subdue and take dominion over all things. Our work has purpose and meaning. Too much work is a sin: we're also called to rest. Too little work is a sin: it's laziness. God cares about the work we do.

We also use the fruit of our work to support our family, give to the church, build wealth, give generously. We're going to be held accountable to Jesus for what we've done because this work we do and the money and results of it are going to be judged by him.

That's why we see the parables of the talents and the parables of the minas - parables that use money - to help us understand the Christian life. Because God not only cares about what we produce with our toil but he also uses that obvious connection to help us understand he cares about how we live our lives for his glory.

Without understand that we're stewards of God's money the money we get is meaningless.

What does a man gain by all the toil that he toils under the sun? Without Jesus nothing but judgement. But with Jesus a sense of purpose and fulfillment. It doesn't matter if you make a lot of money or a little money.

Turn to Gen. 1:26-28. Work is the point of our existence. It's what God designed us to do. **Read**

So we're to be fruitful multiply and subdue the earth. That's exactly what God designed us to do. Inasmuch as we're doing that we have meaningful life.

Actually the one caveat we'll see in Ecclesiastes to life under the sun is that we should enjoy what we eat, enjoy our wife, and enjoy our work.

3) Without Jesus the human generations are meaningless. **Read Ecc 1:2-4**

So everything is vain, work is vain and generations are vain without Jesus.

Without God, people made in the image of God are just masses of humanity that have no real meaning. Your parents and grandparents have no real meaning. You children and grandchildren have no real meaning.

We're really no different than ants or bees or rabbits. Things to be subdued and hunted and exterminated. I mean if you think about many of the crazy godless ideas out there, they basically reduce humans and generations to worthlessness.

Abortion - basically says these little ones in the womb have no value. Actually, these little babies are burden to people and society so we need to get rid of them.

Old people are a burden so we just get rid of them. Grandparents and parents and children and grandchildren don't matter. And without God that's true.

But God cares about generations. **Turn to Exo. 34:6-7.** While you're turning there think about all the genealogies in the Bible. All the lists of sons and grandsons, and great grand sons. All the places where inheritances are mentioned as being precious passed down from one generation to the next. This is why it was so offensive that Esau gave up his birthright for soup to Jacob. He hated what his father had given him to have and to give to his children and grandchildren.

Familial connection in the Bible is a big deal. **Read 6-7**

Do children and grandchildren matter in God's economy? Do generations matter? Yes. On all kinds of levels.

Lev. 19:32: You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of the old man, and you shall fear your God; I am Yahweh.

Children, young men and women: you are called to honor older adults. To stand up and greet them when they enter the room. Why, because generations matter. Older people matter. If you don't honor the gray head and face of an old man you don't fear the Lord.

Christians are called to honor their older parents and grandparents in **1 Tim. 5**

In 2 Timothy 3 Paul reminds Timothy of where he first heard the sacred writings. Where he first heard the Bible and history of God's redemptive purposes. From his grandmother and mother. Grandmas matter to God. Mothers matter to God.

In fact, it's part of the 10 commandments isn't it? Parents and I would argue grandparents and beyond are so important that God attaches promises to honoring them. **Exo 20:12:** Honor your father and mother - and I think all your older family - that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God gives.

That command didn't die with the OC. It's still in force in the NC. And in the NC future generations matter.

Eph. 6:4: we are to train our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Why? So they will know Jesus because Jesus cares about your children and grandchildren.

Without Jesus children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents don't matter. They're just another burden under the sun.

With Jesus we understand that family is precious. And I was reminded at camp this week that sometimes when you follow Jesus family abandons you. Parents or siblings cut you off. Children despise you.

Jesus says that if you follow him and people despise you and cut you off, you are grafted into to an even bigger family. "Truly I say to you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands - with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life. **Mark 10:29-31**

You don't have a family? Your family gave up on you because you followed Jesus? Here's a hundred moms. Here's a hundred sisters and brothers. We have a family reunion every week right here.

When you see older folks, those are your moms and dads. When you see babies, those aren't just someone else's fussy kids, those are your spiritual grandchildren that you should be praying for and teaching and encouraging in the Lord just like you would your physical grandchildren.

Families and generations might be meaningless to those who don't know God, who don't love Jesus. But they are not meaningless. They're not a burden under the sun. They matter to God.

We're going to learn wisdom from Solomon. We're going to learn how to live life to the glory of God. That even in situations that the world thinks are ridiculous and pointless we know that God has decreed them all for his glory.

Pray

Colossians 3:15-17