

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Eric Howell
“Life Has Purpose When Lived in God”
Ecclesiastes 2
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Ecclesiastes is an autobiography of unlimited and unparalleled success, the kind most of us can only dream of and do dream of sometimes. The Preacher, as he's called, Koholeth in the Hebrew, Solomon by tradition, but a later author by scholarly judgment, has done it all. Anything you think you can imagine doing in life, he's achieved it. This is someone who has achieved the dreams of many people and it's like he's coming back with a report about whether it's worth it or not, whether it means anything or not, whether there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

He amassed property: houses, vineyards, gardens and parks -- all the symbols of wealth.

He amassed possessions: fruit trees, herds, flocks, silver and gold, treasure -- a financial kingdom.

He claimed power: slaves, singers, concubines -- he controlled people.

He gathered experiences and influence -- wisdom, pleasure.

He had decided to shoot for everything that people try to lay hold of during their lives. And he did it.

He is very much like the man in the parable Jesus tells of who was so wildly successful with his crops that he outpaced his ability to store all he had, and decided to build bigger barns. The short parable doesn't give the details of that man's business or possessions like we have in Ecclesiastes; but it's a similar story in the least.

Both of these men probably achieved more than you or I will ever achieve in life. They have both risen to the top of the heap, climbed the tallest mountain, achieved all there is to achieve, accomplished everything that the world says to accomplish; done all that stuff they tell you that you should try to do at your graduation ceremony, and all the stuff they tell you to do in commercials from there on through life.

Most of us will fall short of this in life. Sometimes that's hard to admit or accept. The gap between what we thought life would be, and what life is; is sometimes too much to take. It can lead to blame when we think others got in our way; it can cause guilt when we think we have fallen short; it can lead to depression when we see other people seemingly become who we will never be. I went through a struggle of awareness like this and I am aware of many others who have had the same sort of experience. When you are a kid, everyone gets a trophy. When you are an adult, there just aren't that many trophies to go around.

Some people get them. I was fortunate to go to a certain Dallas Cowboy quarterback's house once years ago when I was in school. At home I had a trophy shelf with little basketball and soccer men. He had a trophy room with Super Bowl trophies and MVP awards.

I was fortunate to get to know the CEO of a major oil company once upon a time. I was the chair of a couple of student committees. He was a world-wide leader in business.

I was fortunate to play basketball once against a future NBA player. I got the ball, dribbled to my left, got around my man, and pulled up for a sweet little mid-range jump shot. That's when he came out of nowhere and my shot ended up in the 2nd row of seats behind me. It was the highlight of my whole athletic career.

I'll never be those guys. I've met pastors of churches with thousands of people in them, preachers with TV and radio programs, authors of best sellers, people of eloquence and influence. I'm the golden-tongued guy who once met the college basketball commentator Dick Vitale and got so star-struck I could only squeak, "Hi, Dickie."

In the parable and Ecclesiastes, both men have big trophy cases. Captains of industry, both men are at the top of their games and their lives. And they both come to a point of assessing what they had spent their lives amassing. That's where the stories diverge. In Jesus' parable, the man looks at all that he has gained and earned and finds sufficient significance in it to build bigger barns to store it all. He doesn't want to let any of it get away, much less give any of it away. His life has exceeded his expectations. And now, with self-congratulation, he sets out to collect and protect all that he has for his trophy case as the meaning of his life, a life that will be required of him that very night.

The preacher in Ecclesiastes also takes a hard look at all he accomplished. He stands back and surveys his trophy case and sees all there is in it and comes to an unexpected conclusion. For this conclusion he has been called a cynic, depressed, a grumpy-old man, demoralizing, nearly heretical, disillusioned, frustrated and frustrating. And yet, deep down, we might not have put it the same way, but we have the same suspicions about the meaning of this life.

"Vanity of vanities, says the man, vanity of vanities. All is vanity." (1:2) This word, *hebel*, usually translated 'vanity' is used over and over again through Ecclesiastes -- 38 times. The literal sense is sigh, blow, and breeze. It is virtually untranslatable but is like mist, smoke, fog. It's something that looks solid, but isn't; it looks real but it's not; it is passing, fleeting, hollow, empty, passable. Meaningless gets at it, but is probably a bit strong. Everything is *hebel*. He says, "So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was *hebel* and a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." It's like he's come back down off the mountain we are just beginning to climb and reports, "I've been to the mountain top. . . don't waste your time." There's no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I've done everything you are about to work hard to accomplish, and friend, it's not worth it. You won't be a bit happier or have more meaning then, than you do right now.

His conclusion, looking back over his life and all that he thought was important, is that it's not important; actually it's pretty empty.

No wonder many have concluded that Ecclesiastes is a strange book, all the more when read as scripture. This is not the message of Scripture is it? Everything is virtually meaningless? When we come to worship and hear the scripture, don't we yearn to hear about the deeper meaning of our existence -- that there is a deeper meaning to the seeming randomness of life, that what we do matters, that who we are in our character, our wisdom, our witness, makes a difference somehow? Isn't this what we believe, or at least want to believe about life -- that the earth is more than just a cosmic accident, more than just the one fortunate, however unlikely, perfect combination of carbon, oxygen, sun and rain to support life. Aren't we more than just a big mistake?

It seems like much of the message of scripture is that God has a purpose, and thus life has a purpose when lived in God. The story of creation is about God purposefully fashioning humans and the rest of creation. Jesus' life was lived purposefully teaching and living in such a way as to give witness to the character of God and He was willing to receive the consequences, even going to Jerusalem knowing full well what would await Him there. The stories that paint the picture of the end of time are not about a world that just ends in a whimper, but of one that is brought to fullness and completion by the divine hand in the divine plan. The scripture is full of living on purpose. One might even say that we are to live a purpose-driven life. Hey, that would be a good book title. Maybe I will be a famous author someday. (What -- seriously? Oh.)

Yet here is this message, all is smoke and fog, not hidden somewhere in the outer reaches of the Bible, but right in the middle, right about halfway. If you open your Bible to the middle of the pages, you might hit this book. Right in the middle, in full view, is this other perspective, a raspy, thoughtful voice, seasoned by life's experiences, an existential realist, someone coming to terms with the world not maybe as it should be, but as it is. You would think that there would be great meaning in all the stuff that it seems that life should be about, but there's really not, he says.

The world in which the author lived had very clear expectations of meaning in life under the sun. The simple math of life went like this: if you are a good person and do good, you will be blessed, particularly with long life and many sons. If you are a bad person, you will suffer the consequences. Good -- blessed; bad -- suffer. There's an ordered justice in life -- you get what you deserve. This life with its accomplishments, under the hand of God, is about all there is.

Ecclesiastes takes a more dispassionate view. God is in heaven, but you are on the earth, he says in chapter 5. In a world where everything is *hebel*, there is nothing good that one can hold onto forever. It's all passing -- the good and the evil, the wisdom and the folly, the days of prosperity and the days of adversity. We might normally associate this sort of assessment of life's work with someone who is depressed and cynical. It might be someone who wanted to end their lives and cease to live; someone who regards themselves as such a failure that they conclude that nothing really matters anyway. I don't matter. Why should I go on living?

But that's not the place this is coming from. This is not just a deconstruction of human wisdom from a place of disillusionment with all things. This is coming from a place of deeper wisdom about the meaning of life. Maybe it's cynical to say vanity, all is vanity. But until you come to the place where you can unmask the lies, you can never recognize the truth. It's like Indiana Jones in that movie when he has to pick out the true Holy Grail from the rows of chalices. Do you remember what the old knight who was guarding the grail said? "You must choose, but choose wisely; for as the true grail will bring you life, the false one will take it from you." The antagonist in the movie, who does not have this deeper wisdom in him, immediately assumes that the cup of Christ must be one of gold. He drinks from that chalice made of gold and rubies, thinking that the meaning of life was found in such things -- and his face melts off. In one of the great understatement in the history of observation, the knight adds, after they watched this guy reduced to dust: "He chose poorly." Jones, however, knows the cup of Christ would be a simple, unadorned cup and he lives to be healed and to heal. Life is strangely a lot like that scene in the movie. We have many, many choices in front of us in life. We must choose over and over again that in which we will seek meaning and purpose. And we must choose, and choose wisely between that which will give us life and that which will take it from us. Ecclesiastes is one sort of road map.

When we come to the place where we can see that the stuff of this world is fleeting, we are free to seek that which is permanence and eternal; able to see clearly that nothing under the sun is to be ultimately gained, we are free to turn our eyes and our hearts to that which is beyond the sun.

If you have read C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, you might think about the scene when the humans arrive in heaven and find themselves encountering for the first time that which is really real. They know that all they experienced in their lives before was just a fog in comparison. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 13 when comparing the human experience with the experience of God, "When the perfect comes, the partial shall pass away; for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face."

The preacher examines life and comes to the conclusion that we are most in touch with that which is eternal and lasting not when we ascend the highest mountain peaks of human achievement -- whatever the arena or whatever the goals, but we are most in touch with the divine, with what really matters -- in the simple things of life. "There is nothing better for a person that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from Him who can eat or can have enjoyment?" (Ecc. 1:24)

When thinking about this eating and drinking, enjoying the work you do, it is interesting to note that virtually the first commandment in the Bible is to eat freely (Gen 2:16), and the last commandment in the Bible is to drink fully (Rev 22:17). The bookends of scripture are about life. In Genesis, God is creating life and telling us to eat. In Revelation, God is bringing life to fulfillment and giving the water of life. Jesus was always eating and drinking with people -- at a marriage feast -- on a hillside. Those often seemed to be times of miracles. And then He shared that meal with His friends in that room that night. There wasn't a miracle that night, just a simple meal with deep reflection on their life together and deep significance on the meaning of bread and drink.

No matter the appearance, everything in this life is in a temporary state. *Hebel* is a breath, a vapor, a substance unseen yet experienced, short-lived and fleeting. It is all that is passing. Remembering this lets us seek and find that which lasts. Ecclesiastes points to the transitory nature of humanity versus the permanence of God's universe. Acquisitions and actions are *hebel*. Rules and experience are *hebel*. Toil is *hebel*. Youth is *hebel*. Pain is *hebel*. Life is *hebel*. But God is eternal.