

## THE QUESTION – Week 1

### Monday, January 3

For the next few weeks, we're going to be learning from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. This study may present a challenge to us because as Christ followers we spend most of our time pondering the answers to life's questions. We look at the cross of Jesus and the resurrection whenever we meet for worship. We live at the place where God gives us the answers to life. Indeed, some skeptics claim that we are not realistic. They say: We refuse to look at the difficulties of life straight on. We look away without taking into account the heartbreak that is part of our world. They see how broken our world is, and they believe Christians refuse to admit how deep the darkness in our world is. So, this book has the purpose of helping us see the questions of life. If the rest of the Bible is the answer, this little book poses the question. Now, right up front, this book tells us that life is empty. The book calls it vanity.

Here's our text for today:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-5

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

<sup>2</sup> *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

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

<sup>4</sup> *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.*

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

Have you ever felt like life might be meaningless? I remember spending many hours with my younger brother rebuilding an old Porsche. It was the night we finally got that car on the road that the engine blew up. It was during the first ride in our rebuilt car. It just didn't make sense that we put all that work into that project car, and we didn't really even get to drive it. Our time felt wasted. The whole thing seemed like a mistake, meaningless really. Now, the writer of this little book does not tell us his name. He only tells us that he is the son of David. This identifies him as Solomon, but likely he wants us to see his story as the story of every man so that we might see his story as our own. He wants us to ponder, to wrestle with the meaninglessness of life. You can imagine this book telling the tale of a person waking up on earth and looking around and asking the question: what is the meaning of it all? Then this person sets out on an immense search for meaning, looking everywhere. Doing a comprehensive search.

Notice from the start of the book we hear this word "vanity." It means something like "empty." The Hebrew word brings up the image of bubbles. Have you ever watched a child blowing bubbles? They look beautiful for a moment, and then they are gone. They are passing away and empty. Like the wind. This is the image we are given as we start this book. The preacher of Ecclesiastes says: it's all bubbles, folks. It looks great but has no meaning below the surface. I think of the words written by Shakespeare, spoken in his play by Macbeth, just after Macbeth hears of the death of lady Macbeth. He says: Our lives are a tale: *Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.* This is where the book of Ecclesiastes begins, and we need to see why. Now, we can only benefit from this book if we are willing to hang out here for a while, to consider the meaninglessness of life before rushing to the answer. That is what we will do in the days and weeks ahead. So, brace yourself.

Now, one of the main premises of the book is that our world is a closed system. That nothing is getting in from the outside, from God. That is what those words mean that appear again and again in the book, the words: *under the sun.* As we hear in our text today: a generation comes and goes, and another one comes and goes, but the earth just is. It is the same. It never really changes. We see the repeated cycles. The sun rises and then it sets. Then it rises again. There is another day, and after that another. How can you find meaning in this? The seasons change. Life goes on, but it is really going nowhere. It returns to the place where it was yesterday. In truth, nothing has changed. This is how life in our world feels and often how we experience it. What is gained from another day

when the sun comes up and goes down? You can see why so many people are captured by the sense of meaninglessness, and how difficult it is to escape the gravitational pull of hopelessness. In our lives, God is in view, but in the lives of so many people, they feel nothing of God. You might say that Ecclesiastes is the most modern book in our Bible. These are the questions of our age as people have turned away from God. As we finish up today, how can we use the power of the pull of vanity to cause us to appreciate the light of life? It is here where Jesus comes into even greater focus. Let's think upon him today.

Let's pray:

Lord God, without you, life is empty and lacks real purpose. Help us, as we look into the darkness, to behold the beauty of your light. In your name, we pray. Amen.

## **Tuesday, January 4**

This is week one of our new study called The Question. Have you ever watched the TV game show called Jeopardy? For a generation, Jack Trebek hosted this show for NBC. One of the unique features of the show is that the answers were given to the contestants, and the contestants had to give the question. It sounds strange because we naturally go from questions to answers and not the other way around from answers to questions. But this is the way the game works.

Now, one of the goals of the book of Ecclesiastes is to drive us to the major questions of life. C. S. Lewis once said that if a ship goes out to sea, the people on board need to know three major things. First, how to keep the ship from sinking, how to keep the ship what you would call ship shape. That is personal ethics. How to live a good life personally. The second thing you need to know is how to keep from bumping into other ships, that is how to get along with others. We call that social ethics. But if we know all that, we still will not know the most important thing of all. Why the ship is at sea to begin with. That is a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. This is what the book of Ecclesiastes tries to help us with. This book helps us by showing us how much we need meaning and why it is difficult to find meaning under the sun, or you might say in our world.

That is where we pick up today:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

<sup>2</sup> *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

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

The book covers the main "toils" of our world. Toils is a word used to speak of all of the ways we seek to find or make meaning in our world. Let's stop and think about that. Just using the word "toil" reveals the frustration of our search. Toil is something you must work very hard at, but doesn't produce what you hope. That is what we experience in our world.

Have you heard the story of Sisyphus? He is a character from Greek Mythology, and his myth teaches an important lesson. Sisyphus was an evil king known for trickery. When it came time for his punishment, he was required to push a very large rock to the top of a hill. But the rock had been enchanted, and just before Sisyphus could get the rock to the top, it would roll away and then drop all the way to the bottom of the hill. This meant that Sisyphus could never get the rock to the top and complete his task. He would have to begin all over again, but he could never accomplish his task. His story is a parable of useless efforts and unending frustration. He would always be working but never making any real progress. This is a picture of toil. This may be how we feel about our lives. We do the same things over and over, and yet we wonder what progress we are making.

The preacher of Ecclesiastes has gotten honest about this. We go to the grocery store and buy food, we cook it, and eat it, and take out the trash, and then we do it all over again next week. This is a cycle that never ends. Yes, we continue doing the same things over and over again. This is the frustration the preacher lives through. This is why he says that it is all empty and meaningless. In Jeopardy the answer would be stated like this: Doing the same work day in and day out without relief. The question is: what is meaningless? We feel trapped in a story that never seems to change.

Now, at this point we want to raise objections. But aren't we making progress? Don't we have new technologies? Isn't the world better than it was when Solomon wrote this little book? And, yes, we will take each of these answers up on the journey we are taking. You know, if you've seen the show Jeopardy, that the game ends with what is called Final Jeopardy. The contestants are given one answer that is often more difficult than all the others. They can wager as much of their accumulated winnings as they desire. The whole game rides on finding the question. That is true for our study of Ecclesiastes. Except it is not a game. It is our life. Now, as we are learning the questions, we don't want to forget that this entire journey is leading us to Jesus. I think as we are getting honest about life, we will see the gospel even more clearly and how our longings are met in him.

Let's pray:

Lord God, there are days when we wonder the purpose of it all. Why do our lives feel so meaningless at times? We know you have a purpose for us and for our world, but why can we not see it? As we learn in the day ahead, guide us by the light of Jesus to see you and to see our lives in him. For we pray in his name. Amen.

### **Wednesday, January 5**

A year ago, when I was visiting with my sister-in-law in Colorado, I noticed an interesting discussion piece on her coffee table. It was a lock-picking set. There were some sample locks and some very interesting instruments that looked like probes. The unique thing about the sample locks was that they were made of a clear plastic. This allowed you to see how they work and also see what was needed to open the different locks. Don't worry, none of us has turned to a life of crime. It was fun to experiment as we sat and talked together.

Now, the book of Ecclesiastes is like a lock, a riddle really. And it can be solved, but it is not easy. As we have learned, the question of the book is pretty simple: what is the meaning of life? The book presses us to take life seriously and to seek answers and explanations. It is like one of those clear locks that we need to fiddle with for a while to learn how it works and learn how to open it. In truth, all of us humans are philosophers. We are always seeking an explanation for the way life works and the way our lives are turning out. We want to know: why? Why is my life the way it is? Where is my life heading? Ecclesiastes invites us on the journey one man took to find the answers. When we reach the end of the book, we will not have all the answers, but only a few. Instead, we will have gathered up the important questions that require our attention. The book begins questioning the thing we take for granted. Progress.

Listen to these words:

Ecclesiastes 1:4-9

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

<sup>5</sup> *The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens[c] to the place where it rises.*

<sup>6</sup> *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.* <sup>7</sup> *All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.* <sup>8</sup> *All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.* <sup>9</sup> *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.*

The preacher sets off on this long discussion of life in our world. Yes, things seem to be changing. From all appearances, we are moving forward, learning, growing, and advancing. But look closer. The sun rises and sets, and a day is over. Then another follows it. Nothing changes. One season comes and goes, and then another. and soon we are back to where we started. The rain falls and flows into streams, and then rivers, and then finally into the sea. There, convection lifts water into the clouds that then condense, and there is rain once again. The cycle seems stuck in endless repetition. This all seems meaningless. The writer of this book puts it like this: there is nothing new under the sun.

Now, of course, we want to object. Visit Publix, and you will find shelf after shelf with items labeled new and improved. We seem to be constantly coming up with new things. It wasn't that long ago that we didn't have the internet. I remember sitting with my grandfather. He was born in the year 1900, at the turn of a new century, before cars were on the roads, and before people used radios as

we do today. It was before airplanes and long before the first human beings landed on the moon. There were no skyscrapers and no cellphones. He saw all these things happen during the years of his life. How can anyone say human beings are not making progress? That there is nothing new under the sun? Our writer is not talking about short-range meanings. These advances have not given to us a sense of meaning. The story of human beings has not changed. It is the same, and we are the same. We can fly around the world, but we still do not know why we are here and what our lives mean. We have advanced the ball, you might say, but we are not really sure what game we are playing. Now, it is good that we are thinking about this, because answering this question, the question of meaning will help us know how to live. It is better to be found naked in truth than clothed with fantasy, living by wishful thinking. We can try and run from this big question, but we cannot hide. It is always there with us.

Here are some reasons why asking the question of meaning is important. It forces us to connect our faith with the way our lives really are. Some people have said the book of Ecclesiastes is the most honest book in the Bible. This book also addresses our greatest fear, the fear that there is no meaning to our world. (Some people think that today this fear is greater than our fear of death!) Finally, it will help us to weed out those things in our lives that do not matter so much. It will help us keep from living for toys and petty things. This is an age in which we desperately need this wisdom to be directed back to what matters. Ok. I want to go back to the lock-picking set that we had fun with. Once I figured out how to open the clear locks, the ones that were samples, I then turned to a real master lock. This was like going from the minor leagues to the big leagues. Would what I learned in concept work in the real world? That really is the question of our faith. Will my faith in Christ, will my world-view taken from the gospel, work to guide my life as I live it every day? That's where we are heading in our study, to the firm foundation of Christ.

Let's pray:

All-powerful God, guide us into your truth, we pray. We can so easily forget who we are and why we are here. Enable us in the fog of modern life to travel safely to a place of understanding. We pray in your name. Amen.

### **Thursday, January 6**

As part of children's ministry last year, GranadaKids provided Granada families with a 500-piece puzzle. The puzzle, when completed, depicts the days of creation. Despite the rather large pieces, the puzzle is difficult to assemble. There are two reasons. First, the pieces are all of very similar shape. We use the shape of pieces to determine where pieces fit, but with every piece looking the same, it looks like many pieces might just fit the same space. And, second, there are sections in the puzzle where the color is very similar on multiple pieces. Combine the two, and a small puzzle becomes deceptively difficult.

Now, the book of Ecclesiastes is a puzzle like this. The question of the book should be simple to solve, but as we see, reading the book, we are deceived and cannot solve the riddle.

Here is our text for today:

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

*<sup>12</sup> I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>14</sup> I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

The preacher, that's what the writer is called, tries every piece he can find to see if it will fit and complete the puzzle and solve the riddle. But here's the thing. What if we don't have all the pieces to the puzzle? I know a man who, when he saw his kids working on a puzzle, would steal one piece. Yes, it's pretty cruel. His kids would be preparing to finish the puzzle, and they could not find the last piece. In some ways, this is what it feels like God has done to us. We want to make sense of life, and we have many hints to the solution, but there is a missing piece. How can we complete the puzzle and solve the riddle of life if the most important piece is missing? The truth is that we can't. That's part of the purpose of the book. The experiment of the book is trying everything in the world to see if it opens the door to ultimate meaning and real satisfaction in life. The book works like salt put on

potato chips that leaves us thirsty for more, really thirsty for God. Looking at life straight on will give us this thirst. I think of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. She was there to draw water, but Jesus turned her attention to a far deeper thirst she had. She was trying to meet this thirst for life with men, and she had had a whole bunch of men. Jesus promises her living water, water that would spring up and open the way to eternal life. The writer of Ecclesiastes is like that woman, but he doesn't explore sex and relationships as the only ways to meaning. He searches out everything. Maybe the way to meaning is work. Maybe it is wisdom itself. Maybe it is religion. Maybe it is pleasure. As we are reading about the preacher of Ecclesiastes, it begs the question for us. Where have we looked to find satisfaction and meaning in life? Where has this hunt taken us? The preacher of Ecclesiastes says that this hunt is itself miserable business. Why is it unhappy? We are doomed to search without finding the answer. We can't find the missing piece of the puzzle. It is frustrating and also tiring. Yes, this book will feel tiring for us because we will go on the search and come up empty. And as the preacher of Ecclesiastes says: he has seen it all. He leaves no stone unturned. He goes the extra mile in his search. Now, of course, he can't see everything in the world. He cannot explore everything. But he's seen enough to know that what he sees next is more of the same. That is where we live every day. It is the Biblical statement of "been there and done that." Okay. The preacher feels trapped in a world that seems like a repetition of the same old thing, and he cannot get out. Now, perhaps, missing the missing piece, we will see our thirst for living water and begin to see what we have in Jesus as the treasure that it is. Jesus told the woman at the well:

*Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*"-John 4:13-14

Let's pray:

Lord God, our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you. We've tried, Lord, to fill that vacuum in our hearts with almost everything. Nothing fits but you. Give us, we pray, living water welling up to eternal life. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

### **Friday, January 7**

Years ago, a reporter was in a small English town to catch a train. He had about an hour before the train was to leave, so he walked around the town. On his walk, he saw a very impressive monument erected to honor members of the town that died in the great war. The moving monument carved in stone had these words: *their sacrifice will never be forgotten*. The reporter was curious about what had happened and why the monument had been built, so he stepped into a shop across the street and asked the shop owner. The shop owner had no idea what the monument was about, nor anything about the people honored there. The reporter went down the street and found that no one he spoke with had any knowledge of it. *Their sacrifice will never be forgotten*. But it had been forgotten. The town moved on, and life moved on.

Here's our text for today:

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

*All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us. <sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.*

As the preacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes explains, he is gathering up aspects of life in our world that seem meaningless. First, he notices that as much as there is to see, we never reach the end of seeing. We cannot reach the end of the internet, yet at the same time he says there is nothing new under the sun. Now, at the time he wrote this book there were no cellphones, no Velcro or duct tape (let me say, he was really missing out), no movie theaters or jet airplanes. How can he say that there is nothing new under the sun? He isn't saying that nothing new has been or will be invented. He is saying that there are really no new answers to the questions we have about life. Yes, we have electric cars, but we continue to live with depression and anxiety. Yes, we have laptop computers, but we lack answers. This is the reality of our world. While we might point to immense technological progress, human relations have not improved in any substantial way. While medical science has

advanced immensely, human beings are as dialed into addiction as ever. You can see why the writer says what he does. We want to be hopeful about the future, but we don't see any real change on the horizon. I'm not trying to depress you, but to be honest. This is the world we live in.

Now, before we jump in and say that for the preacher the glass is half-empty, and he is just a pessimist, we need to see that he is just being honest. Every one of us has wrestled with how difficult life is. Each of us has to work, provide a way of life, to make our way in the world. To provide for a home, for children if we have them. Each of us lives with aging, sickness, changing weather patterns, sin and forgiveness. Putting people on Mars is not going to change this or make it any easier for us. Going to Mars will not answer the great questions we have. And, this is the line of thought of the writer. Everything and everyone is passing away. Our time here is brief. Going back to that town, no one even remembered the town's heroes. People are forgotten. Today, kids I meet were not around for 9-11, and so they only know what is written in history books about it. I remember nothing of the Kennedy assassination. I was four years old at the time. A few years back, a friend of mine mentioned that the world, as depicted in the show the Jetsons, has not come about as promised. A younger person asked, "Who are the Jetsons?" Think of the people that have been forgotten. Here's what our text said about this: *There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. Verse 11.*

Recently, Sandy and I walked a cemetery and noticed how many of the old headstones had eroded over time, and now the names could no longer be read. They faded away. In truth, there is almost no trace on earth of nearly everyone that has lived. This is the world we live in. Honesty about this will enable us to see the bright light that came into the world when Jesus was born. Indeed, the light that gives light to every man had come into the world. Hope was born. It is because of his sacrifice, his life, that we have hope we will not be forgotten. You can begin to see why Jesus is the hero of our story when you become honest about the story we are living in.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we like to fast forward through the painful parts of movies, the parts we don't like. But we can't do that with our lives. Give us an honesty about life that enables us to appreciate what you have done for us in Jesus. Help us to stay in the question long enough to see the glory of the answer in him. For we pray in his name. Amen.

### **Saturday, January 8**

Recently, I saw an article about the various stars that we know something about in our galaxy and a discussion about the life of our sun. Scientists tell us that our sun came into being about 4.6 billion years ago. That's a very long time, and in its current phase, it will likely continue for almost 5 billion years. The sun lies at the center of our solar system and on one of the inner branches of the Milky Way Galaxy. Just thinking about this can make us dizzy. The distances and times challenge us to think of things beyond us. Here's the thing that the preacher noticed about the sun and the solar system. It just keeps on going. We can see that we are aging, but the sun still is burning. The universe doesn't need us and doesn't really take notice of us.

Here's our text for today:

Ecclesiastes 1:4-6

*A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. <sup>5</sup> The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. <sup>6</sup> 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.*

Now, the preacher of the book, he calls himself the son of David, takes note of the way the world is just going on. This is more than a statement about the lack of real progress in our world. He is speaking about the experience common to human beings. Perhaps, as followers of Jesus, we find it difficult to find points of contact with people that do not believe. But all humans share this world in common. We have the same experiences. We know the frustration of toil, the passing of time, and the great questions of life. This book can help us identify with our neighbors and family members. It is in being honest about our world that we can encourage others to think about our world as well. We can give others hope for meaning, but we need to begin where all of us live. That is what the writer of this book does.

Now, this little section calls us to see how the world around just seems to carry on and not take notice of us. I remember recently when tragedy came into my family. The sun came up the next day. The earth took no notice of my loss. This is not a caring universe. We come and go, and the universe keeps doing its thing. Now, these thoughts can be unsettling, but this is where we live. A pastor-teacher that helped me much as a young man said that people in our world try to shield themselves from the truths of life. They do this by trying not to think about them, by entertaining themselves and diverting their attention to something else. In a sense, they build a little shelter to protect themselves from truth raining down on them every day. One of the ways we share the message of faith with them is to tear the roof off. We let them experience the questions, so that they will seek the answers. We talk about the things that other people are squeamish about. We point out the elephant in the room. This becomes the way to life. We give room for our aches, questions, frustrations, and fears, so that there might be room for hope and peace and joy and salvation. Instead of running from the pain in our world, we run toward it, and then we discover we have run into the arms of Jesus. It is a beautiful thing, indeed. It is the long winter that causes us to appreciate the spring when it comes. Perhaps, that is the thing today, we often announce a salvation people do not even think they need because we have created a giant bubble of safety where we do not have to face our need and the reality of the broken world in which we live. We've kept the difficult questions far away from us. The truth is, as the preacher says, that without God and the purpose and meaning he gives to us, life is meaningless and empty. One day follows another. The universe does not care about us at all, but God does care. He cares for us enough to come to us and redeem us and give us a living hope.

Let's pray:

Lord God Almighty, when we look up and see the stars. we feel small, and we are small. We are surprised that you care for us and that you created us with such glory, and even more than you set your affection on us. Help us to rejoice in your steadfast love. We pray in your name. Amen.