

“What the Hevel” // Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 // Ecclesiastes (Life Without God) # 1¹

Welcome, **Summit Church**, at all of our Triangle locations. Remain standing for just a moment if you will. I know that over the last couple of weeks, some of you have been looking around at some of our campuses and feeling like everything got a lot more cramped all of the sudden, and that’s because our college students have returned back from summer break! So, **Summit Church--at all campuses--**would you put your hands together and welcome back our students?

Let me say to all our students: you guys are an important part of our church and we miss you when you’re gone! By the way, if you’re a student, the most important thing you can do is get connected. Church, we always say, is not an event you attend; it’s a community--a family--you belong to. If you’re a college student or in the general age bracket of college students—and you want to know more about how to connect—text **COLLEGE to 33933**.

OK, if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, open them to the book of Ecclesiastes, and let’s stand for the reading of God’s Word.

1:1 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. 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. 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.

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God
 Congregation: **Thanks be to God**

¹ Sources consulted: Bobby Jamieson, *Everything Is Never Enough: Ecclesiastes' Surprising Path to Resilient Happiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2025); David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Tim Mackie, “[The Book of Ecclesiastes Summary](#)”, June 10, 2016, The Bible Project; Tony Merida, “[Introduction to Ecclesiastes](#)”, January 19, 2020, Imago Dei Church; Alistair Begg, “[A Word to the Wise](#)”, October 20, 2002, Truth for Life website; Tim Keller, “[Problem of Meaning: Is There Any Reason for Existence?](#)”, May 31, 1992, Redeemer Presbyterian. And others as noted throughout.

You may be seated. Ecclesiastes is one of the most confusing books in the entire Bible. And some of you might say, “Well, the whole Bible feels confusing to me.” And that’s ok, because what we try to do each week here is break it down to make it simple. But the book of Ecclesiastes is especially confusing, even for more experienced Bible readers--and that’s in part because it’s got a bunch of strange verses like this one:

- **Ecc 7:16**, “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you wear yourself out?” In other words, “Back it down, Bible banger; you’re getting into this wisdom and righteousness thing a little *too* much.”
- Or, how about this one? **Ecc 10:19**, “Wine makes life happy, and money is the answer for everything.” And all God’s people said...

Plus, we find in Ecclesiastes just some odd, random advice, like:

- **Ecc 9:8** “Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne!” **Granted, I know some single guys** who probably need to hear this, but is that important enough to include in the Bible?
- And one more: **Ecc 4:11**, “If two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?” He’s saying that it’s always better to travel with a friend, because that way if it gets cold, you’ll have someone to spoon with. If nothing else in this series, I’m praying I never have to apply this verse.

My friend, Pastor Tony Merida, says that Ecclesiastes doesn’t sound like the kind of Bible book you hear read on positive, encouraging K-LOVE; it feels like it was written on a Monday morning by someone who hadn’t had their coffee yet!

And yet, this is a book that gets at the core questions of life. I know a lot of people who feel like Ecclesiastes is the Bible book where they feel the most seen. In this book you’re going to see a man wrestle with unanswered questions, disappointments in his life, and frustrations, why things didn’t turn out the way he thought they were going to, and he’s going to show no tolerance for simplistic, pat answers--***even religious ones.***

Last year I read through this book several times, and I thought it so perfectly captured some of the struggles I was having, the questions I was asking, as a middle-aged man and I knew I wanted to take you through it. Maybe think of this as my “**mid-life crisis**” series. (Although... Can we say I’m still middle-aged? I mean, technically, if this is the middle, I’m gonna live until I’m 106, which doesn’t feel right. I don’t know. I’M NOT A YOUNG ADULT anymore; I can say that.)

OK, first, “Who is the author of Ecclesiastes?” **1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.** **Traditionally, both Jewish and Christian interpreters have understood this to be Solomon.** The author describes himself as the “son of David, king in Jerusalem,” and the stuff he shares about his life fits Solomon to a “t.” Others say this book was written about Solomon. Personally I think Solomon himself wrote it, but² the most important thing to understand is that there are **two DIFFERENT voices** in Ecclesiastes:

- **One is the voice of “the Teacher,”** whose observations make up the majority of the book. He muses about the absurdity of life. Honestly, he’s a little bit like a stand-up comic. He looks at life and says, “Have you ever noticed how crazy this all is?”, making little off-the-cuff comments that poke fun at the absurdity of life.

² Interesting note: Vs. 12 says the writer was King over all Israel from Jerusalem. Only Solomon would qualify for that, because after that Israel divided and so only Solomon ruled over all Israel from Jerusalem.

- **The other voice is that of a Narrator**, who introduces the Teacher at the beginning and then steps offstage, and then steps back in at key moments—especially in the conclusion—to help us make sense of what we’ve just heard the Teacher say.
 - Think of it like a stage play, where the Teacher stands center stage, wrestling aloud with the hardest questions of life. And then, at key moments, **the Narrator** steps forward—not to argue with him—but to help us interpret what we’re hearing. Saying things like, “Now, does that make sense?” Or, “If what he says is true, that raises **this** question...”³
 - This was actually a common literary device back then called “**Accadian biography**,” where the author recounts a story from the perspective of one character and then from time to time steps out of character to interpret the story.

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

- **Vs 2 introduces the theme of the book: All is vanity.** The word “vanity” appears 38 times throughout the book.
- Vanity is the word I’m using since that’s how the ESV (which is the version of the Bible I am using) translates it, but it’s actually a really hard word to translate from Hebrew. In Hebrew it’s “**hevel**” and it literally means “vapor” or “smoke.”
- **Some translations render it “meaningless” or “futile,”** and scholars say it means a little bit of all those but is not fully captured by any of them.

Probably the **best way to grasp the meaning** is to consider the word picture itself: smoke or vapor.

- Think of a CLOUD. You know how when you were a kid **the clouds looked like a gigantic, comfy pillow** you could bounce around on, or curl up in? I remember as a kid on my first flight, I think I was about 8 years old, how disappointed I was when we passed through the clouds and you could see that there’s really nothing substantive to even the fullest-looking clouds; you pass right through them like they’re not even there.
- **How many of you have skydived before?** (skydove? skydiven?) I’ve promised each of my kids that when they turn 18 if they want to go skydiving, I’ll take them. My most recent was Ryah (**PIC of me and Ryah**). This is a look of sheer delight on her face, and this is my look of delight when we’re both safely back on the ground.
 - The best part of skydiving, I think, is if you get to pass through a small cloud. They look so solid and substantive from the outside, but when you go through them you realize there’s nothing in them to grasp--they’re real; you can see them and feel them; they provide rain and shade--but they have no substance for you to rest on. They’re transient; elusive; they’re HEVEL.
- *That’s what every pleasure and every pursuit on earth is like, Solomon says.*

One scholar says the best translation of “hevel” is “absurd.” Life has a quality for all of us--whether we’re Christians or not--that makes it feel **absurd** sometimes.

It’s very important to note, btw, that this book comes right after the book of Proverbs in your Bible, which is intentional—You see, both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are part of the ‘Wisdom Literature’ of the Bible, which are reflections about life and how it works. And Proverbs and Ecclesiastes sit on opposite sides of a divine tension.

³ And, it’s possible that Solomon plays the role of both “Teacher/Commentator” and “Narrator,” as in Solomon gives us his reflections on life and then corrects himself. That was a common literary device in those days called Acadian autobiography, where you’d step into another character and speak as if you were that character and then you’d step out of that character and comment on it. Or, it could be that some anonymous prophet is reflecting on the life of Solomon.

You see, **Proverbs** lays out these principles for us and says, “If you live this way, here’s generally how your life will go.” For example:

- “Honor God with the first fruits of your wealth (In other words, tithe; put God first in your finances) and your barns will overflow with plenty and your vats will burst with new wine” (that’s **Prov 3:9-10**).
- Or this one: “Train up a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it” (**Prov 22:6**).

Now, are those true? Yes. Generally. But are those ironclad guarantees? No.

You see, some of us have done **exactly what Proverbs says** in one of those areas and the opposite happened.

- Some of you worked hard and tithed—but then the market crashed.
- Or, you ran your business with integrity—and it still failed.
- Or, you raised your children to know the Lord, you were faithful in church, you were a good example to them, yet one of them (or, several of them) still walked away. I remember Crawford Loritts, Bryan’s dad, said right here on this stage, “*Raise your kids, and you can spoil your grandkids; spoil your kids and you’ll have to raise your grandkids.*” That’s wisdom, and it’s generally true. But I know faithful parents who did everything they could, and one (or more!) of their children still chose the wrong path.

That doesn’t mean those parents failed; nor does it mean that the book of Proverbs isn’t true. The book is called Proverbs, not Promises.

Proverbs shows us how God laid out his world to work, and it generally does work that way. But see, we also now live in a world under the curse of sin, a world now subject to futility.

- By the way, did you know, in **Romans 8:20** when Paul describes the world we live in now, the world under the curse of sin, he describes it as “*subject to futility*”—and the word he uses for “futility” is “hevel”—at least the Greek version of that word?
- Life under the sun is broken. Wisdom is still wisdom, and it still works, but there’s definitely a glitch in the system.

Haven’t you experienced that? Some of you have, and you haven’t really known you could talk about it in church, so I’m going to talk about it for you. You did everything the right way and everything still fell apart.

One of my worst college jobs was standing outside a department store at Crabtree Valley Mall, trying to get people to sign up for credit cards. Yes, I was “that guy.” I actually did pretty well—for the first couple of weeks, I was the top performer. (**PIC**) I mean, how could you say no to this guy? My boss even gave me a bonus. But then he called a little meeting and told all of us credit card pushers to start slipping in this expensive insurance program into every application without explaining it. He said, “Just tell them to initial here, here, and here, and most people won’t ask any questions.” I told him I couldn’t do that, because that didn’t feel right. So, on each application, I explained the insurance program honestly, and of course almost everyone declined. My boss called me in, asked why none of my customers were buying the insurance, and when I told him the truth, he fired me. End of story. I was jobless over the rest of the break.

And I thought, “Wait, Isn’t Proverbs supposed to apply here? Doesn’t it say the one who honors God will **prosper**?” And yes, I know ultimately it will prove true in my life, especially from the perspective of eternity. But see, in this broken world, righteousness doesn’t always pay off immediately.

Some of you have experienced that on a much deeper level than simply losing a part-time job. Even after you did the right thing, you lost a marriage, or a business, or your livelihood. Or, you’ve tried to honor God with your dating life, and you still haven’t gotten married, even though you’ve watched several friends who didn’t do it right, and they got married. And it’s all felt absurd, and you look at it and say, “**What the hevel?**” It’s where I got the title of the message. (Is that ok to say? I mean, it’s biblical.)

In **vs 3** the Narrator asks the controlling question for the whole book: “**What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?**”

- “Life under the sun” means life on earth; life not taking into account God or eternity--those things would be “above the sun.” Life under the sun means life under the curse; a life characterized by hevel.
- And he asks, “What gain is there to be had here?” How can one find permanence--and meaning, and satisfaction?

And then the Teacher sets his sights on the most common answers we give to that question. Following **the lead of Tim Keller**, let me identify 3 of them from the 1st couple of chapters, and then show you how the Teacher deals with them.

Stock answer #1 to the human dilemma...

I. Leave a Legacy

In other words: “**I can make my life matter by leaving something behind.**”

This mentality says that when it’s all said and done, what matters is if we made the world a better place. This is what you always hear brought up at funerals when people talk about how the deceased person enriched others and they made the world a better place and therefore they didn’t live in vain. Their life had meaning.

But here’s the author of Ecclesiastes’ response to that (again, he’s speaking from the perspective of if this world here under the sun is all there is). The truth is, he says, Vs **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.**

In other words, “Within a generation or two, very few people, if any, will remember you even existed.”

- Let me prove it: How many here could name, right now, the first names of all of your great-grandparents? I’m talking about your mom’s and dad’s grandparents’ first names. There would be **8 of them**. Anyone? OK, if so, what about their parents? Could you tell me the first name of any of your grandparents’ grandparents? Do you know the names of any of your relatives farther back than your grandparents?
- The point is, it doesn’t take long for a person to be forgotten, even in their family!

For most of us, what we've done will be pretty quickly forgotten. I was in London a few years ago and I wanted to see where the **famous Charles Spurgeon** had preached back near the beginning of the 20th century. If you don't know, he was maybe the most famous preacher in the world at the time, and his church was the largest in the world! So I did some research and figured out the site of the church was right where I was staying! So I asked my taxi cab driver, who literally seemed to know everything there was to know about London, and he'd never heard of him! I was like, "You know, *Charles Spurgeon*!" He had no idea what I was talking about. Eventually, I found it, and there's a small shell that remains of that once great church, and most of the people who live in the area, two doors down from that church, have no idea who he was.

The only way people will remember you in 50 years is if you leave millions to your alma mater, and if you do that, they'll put up a little plaque with your name on it--so that a bunch of students can walk by it and never really look at it, and eventually, they'll tear that building down and put a new building in its place, and your name won't transfer. In 500 years, it's safe to say no one will remember you or me. You say, "Well, what if I become president of the U.S.?" OK: What decade was Millard Fillmore president in? What accomplishments did he make that contributed to United States history? How many of you even knew Millard Fillmore was a president?

The point is: Everything fades. The teacher says in vs **4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.**

- Scientists say that organic life leaves virtually no trace on earth. If the conditions are just right, MAYBE you'll leave a fossil. But you're going to have to be buried in a sudden, cataclysmic flood in order for that to happen, so that has some downsides.
- The point is: Life under the sun is transient, temporary, passing. If you're trying to gain meaning by leaving a legacy on earth, it's not going to work. It's like trying to grasp the wind. It's all *hevel*.

By the way, this is often the realization that fuels a midlife crisis. In midlife, your health and your beauty and your strength start to fade and you realize that **THIS** is not going to last forever. (The actress Joan Collins always said being beautiful in life is like being born rich and slowly becoming poor over the rest of your life. Beauty fades.)

And so, in midlife, some people try to start doing something to hang onto that. If you're a guy, you pump yourself full of peptides and buy a really hot sports car and unbutton your shirt down to your navel and gross everybody out; some ladies will nip and tuck and inject and start flirting with their tennis instructor. But the simple truth is youthful beauty is not something we can hang onto. My wife always says, "As you age, you can look older or you can look weird. You have to choose."

- Well, after this happens, a lot of us start looking at what we're building in our career, thinking that will be our mark, our permanency, our legacy, our glory. But by midlife you start to realize that all those youthful dreams you had of leaving a permanent mark on the world aren't really going to happen. And even if they do, eventually they'll all be forgotten.
- Steve Jobs famously said right before he died, "Is everything we've accomplished really going to be all erased in the death of our sun?" He said, "One day the sun will burn out and then literally it's all gone? All our accomplishments?" Literally, he said, it's *hevel*.

“Leaving a legacy” is our first response. Existentialism is our next response. It’s a little nerdy, so I’ll cover it quickly--if this feels like it’s over your head, just give me four minutes, and I’ll come back:

II. Existentialism

Existentialism says: “Meaning doesn’t exist; we must *create* our own.”

Existentialism is a worldview that says that because *life is a cosmic accident, it’s inherently meaningless. Thus, it’s up to us to create meaning.* That was how some of our most famous existentialist and nihilist philosophers, people like **Jean Paul Sartre** and **Friedrich Nietzsche**, literally said it: *When you embrace that there is no God, no design, no plan, you are free to concoct your own meaning.*

Or **Albert Camus**, who said that because we are the result of blind force and chance, it’s literally insane to think that life has meaning. But, he said, it’s a useful and happy insanity, and we should all participate in it. Or commit suicide. Both, he said, were valid options.

Existentialism is essentially what popular atheists like Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins say: They say developing a sacrificial love for others or pursuing meaning doesn’t make a lot of sense in a “survival of the fittest” based evolutionary model, but they are useful fictions that evolution has programmed into us, and they feel good, so we should embrace them.

The problem with that is it’s intellectually self-defeating. I mean--if we’re the product of blind force and chance, why should we demand that life have meaning? Why should we expect it to? And why should we care about things like justice? Justice is merely a preference, a useful tool in propagating our species, but there’s no such thing as actual justice. As **C. S. Lewis** said in *Mere Christianity*, “A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.” The book of Ecclesiastes is filled with “ought” language: The world “ought not” be this way; the innocent “ought not suffer.” Many of you have said that. Even if you don’t believe in God, you’re like, “That’s not right; that ought not be that way.” But to say “ought not” presupposes you have some idea in your head of what “ought” to be.

Existentialism and nihilism are essentially self-defeating. If life under the sun is all there is, it has no meaning. And many atheists come to a point where they realize that. In fact, most of the atheists I see that become Christians, this is usually part of their story.

For example, last spring I read the autobiographical account of a guy named Charles Murray, who is one of America’s best-known social scientists and public intellectuals--an MIT guy. For decades he wrote and spoke as an agnostic, but has recently become a Christian, and he said that one of the things that moved him toward belief in God was when they had their first child, his wife said to him, “I seem to love my daughter far more than evolution requires.” You may have never considered this as a prime argument for Christianity, but many people recognize in the love they feel for a child, or in a longing for meaning, that they were created for something more than blind, materialistic, Darwinistic evolution can account for.

III. Hedonism

Hedonism is the idea that you should: “Stop searching for meaning and just enjoy life”

Some of you are like, “Aww... you just talked about a big word, ‘Existentialism,’ and now you’re using another one, ‘Hedonism.’” Fine, the urban way of saying this is “Treat Yo’Self.” Hedonism is a “treat yo’self” life.

There’s a movie that came out a few years ago called *Crimes and Misdemeanors* that was a social commentary on modern life, and one of the main characters said at the end: “All the meaning you can hope for in life is to simply enjoy the pleasures of the day: enjoy creativity, write a poem, hug a child, take a ride in the boat on the lake, enjoy your family and work. That’s all you can do.”

Enjoy your life. That’s all there is. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes says that the problem with hedonism is that *fleshly pleasures never satisfy*.

In chapter 2 the Teacher puts forward himself as exhibit “A” for this. Check out chap **2 v 1**: I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” See? “TREAT YO’SELF.”

Jump down to vs **10** And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure... According to the book of 1 Kings, everything in Solomon’s house was made of gold. He was smart, well-read. His kingdom was prosperous; his power was unchallenged. He ate great food and had 1,000 different sexual options every night. **In addition to all this** he wrote NYT bestselling books on just about every subject, was one of the most popular songwriters of his day. Furthermore, he built not only an incredible house for himself but also the most impressive temple to God the world had ever seen. **11** Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was useless and like striving after wind, and there was *nothing* to be gained under the sun.

He said, “I thought I would feel complete if I accomplished everything I set out to accomplish and had every kind of pleasure and power at my fingertips. But I didn’t feel complete when I got there.”

I am reminded here of what the hip-hop star Drake said in an interview **once**: *There was a point where I felt like I needed to keep the company of a different woman every night. I was trying to fill a void. But in those moments after sex, I’d know it wasn’t working. Those quiet moments are the realest moments a man will ever have in his life... the next day I’d convince myself to do it again. But during that time, I knew it wasn’t working.*⁴

And you know I could quote **a bazillion rich, famous people** who would say nearly the exact same thing. I have quoted them to you before: Jim Carrey, Tom Brady, Katy Perry, and lots of others.

⁴ I have edited his words for clarity. <http://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a2465/drake-looks-for-love-608879/>

That realization leaves you with an **especially despairing kind of pain**: a hopeless kind of pain. The British Christian philosopher G.K. Chesterton said: **"Meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain. Meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure."**

- In other words, you've traveled this long and winding road to the destination, only to find out the land it promised you didn't exist.
- Recently in my life I've been wrestling with a couple of deep seated idols in my life, that's the best way I know how to describe them--things that for my whole life, since I was a teenager, I've believed that if I could just get them, life would be so perfect. Complete. And some of them are legitimate: goals I've set; professional or financial milestones I'd love to reach.
- And then, like everybody, there's other things I've struggled with desiring that are overtly sinful; some sinful pleasure about which I've thought, "I bet you that kind of sinful pleasure yields a joy and thrill in life like nothing else can."

I've had to preach to myself the message of Ecclesiastes: Those things are a mirage; they are hevel. They are clouds you try to grasp that turn out to be meaningless vapor!

- **In fact, worse than vapor.** If you believe this lie about something like adultery, Solomon says in Proverbs 7, *"It looks so inviting, so fulfilling... but once you get there not only will you find it's not everything you thought it was, he said, also, 'Her steps take hold of hell and her feet lead down to the grave.'"* There will be a temporary euphoria, sure--but it ends in emptiness and disaster.

Friend, hear me: Your enemy's primary tactic is to hold up empty clouds and say, "Pursue this! Happiness is **here!**" But you give your life away to pursue it, only to find out when you get to that cloud it was empty. There was no substance. Like grasping the wind. Hevel.

Listen, the author of Ecclesiastes is not against pleasure. In fact, that's one of the ironies of the book: He is *very* pro-pleasure! Multiple times throughout the book this Teacher will say, "Money is good. Love and sex are good. Health is good. Power is good. These are gifts of God to enjoy! Even the simplest things--like a great meal or a walk through the woods or splash of cologne are gifts God gives you to delight you. But the only way you can actually enjoy them is to not look at them as the substance of life. If they become the primary place you seek meaning or happiness, you'll find them empty. Grasping at the wind. Hevel."

You see, look at what the Narrator says at the end of chapter 2: **"For to the person who is pleasing in his (God's) sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy..." (2:24-26):** When you live to please God, you can actually start to enjoy these things, because you can receive them for what they are; a GIFT, an expression of God's goodness; but NOT as the substance of your life; not as the thing you're trying to "gain" or hold onto. And when one of these things are withheld from you for some reason, you won't despair, because, again, they're not the substance of your life.

After reading Ecclesiastes several times last year, I came up with this word picture that summarizes how the Narrator wants us to see life (It's my own word picture, but I think it's accurate based on what the writer is trying to tell us):⁵

- ...**Imagine life as if you were living on a beach** before a vast and uncontrollable ocean. You can't leave; this is the only place you can be. On some days, the ocean provides enjoyable, pleasant waves and other days, big unpleasant ones. You can't change what the ocean does or even predict it--the ocean is too vast, wild and uncontrollable for you to predict or control. All you can do is enjoy the good waves when they come;

⁵ I adapted this from Bobby Jamieson, *Everything is Never Enough*, p 188--I have significantly altered what he did with it, however. Thanks to him for the inspiration for it.

and, on the days when bad waves come at you, you just have to endure them, knowing that the unpleasant waves are simply a part of life under the curse.

- That's what the Teacher says life basically is--if that's true, you might as well enjoy the good waves whenever you receive them, because whatever you don't enjoy to the full you lose; you can't bottle up the good waves and save them for later. They're only for the day.
- And, when you're in a season of unpleasant waves, you can't avoid them--nobody can live a life that avoids all of them; so, pray for strength to endure them and realize they don't last forever.

Henri Nouwen said it more beautifully. Let me walk you through this quote slowly, because it's deep and beautiful: "A meaningful life is... a slow discovery of the mortality of all that is created so that we can appreciate its beauty without clinging to it as if it were a lasting possession. (that is, you realize that everything passes, fades, and dies). Our lives are... a school in the art of dying. I do not mean this in a morbid way. On the contrary, when we see life constantly relativized by death, we can enjoy it for what it is: a free gift."

The pictures, letters, and books of the past reveal life to us as a constant saying of farewell to beautiful places, good people, and wonderful experiences...

This week we dropped off my 3rd daughter at college for her freshman year. And, I'm telling you, every time, it feels like a death. And when it was time for her to go to her "orientation to nursing" program, she bounded off into the hall, and I called out to her because I wanted her to come back. (And I kind of know what they mean when they say your life flashes before your eyes, because all I could think about were all those nights and days of her being in the house--wishing I'd enjoyed them more while they lasted. And it's good and right that she goes to college and moves on. I can't, and shouldn't want to, hold on to her forever. She's not my "gain" in life; but I can receive each chapter of life as a gift from God--a gift I can't hold onto forever, at least under the sun, but a genuine gift of God to be enjoyed to the fullest.)

It always reminds me of the wise words of that great saint, **St Andrew of Bernard**, and by that I mean "Andy Bernard" of the Office, who said in the final episode of The Office ([PIC](#)): "I wish there was a way to know you were living in the good ol' days before they pass you by." See, we're always thinking, the good ol' days, that's where life's gonna be complete. And then you get to the end of it and you realize, there is no change that's going to lead me to the good ol' days; this is what there is.

David Gibson, whose book on Ecclesiastes I've found very helpful, says: "Hedonism says, 'Eat, drink and be merry for this is ALL we have.' The Teacher of Ecclesiastes says 'No, eat, drink and be merry, for this is WHAT we have.'" Do you understand the difference? This first one is life under the sun. Hedonism. Party it up because this is all we have. This latter one says, "It's not all we have; it's not the whole substance of our lives--there is a God; there is an eternity where pain is reversed and tears are wiped away, but this right now, these days of small pleasures--these are what we have, so enjoy them!"

Enjoy every hug. Every moment with your kid. Every night with your spouse. Every cool autumn day. Enjoy every football game. Every spicy chicken sandwich from Chick-Fil-A. Enjoy them all to the fullest, because they are gifts of God to be enjoyed--but don't turn them into gods, because if you do, they'll break your heart when they turn out to be hevel. Something you can't control, predict, or hang onto.

Let me conclude our first week with 2 takeaways I want you to carry throughout this book. We'll call these "The Laws of the Hevel."

Law of the Hevel #1: Embrace Life Above the Sun as the Only Satisfying Answer for Life Under the Sun

And by life *above* the sun, I mean life *with* God. I told you that when Paul describes the earth under the curse, Romans 8:20, he says the result of sin was that creation was subjected to "futility," and that's the same word that the writer of Ecclesiastes uses--hevel.⁶

The writer of Ecclesiastes is describing life in a world under the curse of sin, a life divorced from God. Life after Genesis 3 when man has sinned. Which is why Tim Keller says, *"Ecclesiastes should go at the beginning of the Bible because it raises the questions that the rest of Scripture answers."*

Ecclesiastes is life in the Genesis 3 world; life under the curse of sin. And see, that sets us up for the good news of Ecclesiastes: Into the futility of our cursed world stepped the Author of Life himself. And on a cross he absorbed the heart of the curse--ultimate futility--death itself went into him. The only perfect person who'd ever walked on earth took our futility--the curse for our sin--into himself, and he carried it into the cold, dark, meaningless grave and then walked out 3 days later, restoring meaning to life to all who would come to him.

- Futility says, "It all ends here." The resurrection says, "No it doesn't."
- Futility says, "This is all there is!" The resurrection says, "There is more."
- Futility says, "Death is the end." The resurrection says, "Those who live and believe in me will never die."
- Futility says, "Nothing matters." Paul stands on the other side of an empty tomb and says, "No, everything matters. Be steadfast, immovable, always *abounding* in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain--because of the resurrection."

The resurrection changes everything! It ends ultimate futility.

Ecclesiastes is an incredible book because it answers the world's greatest dilemma better than any other philosophy does--and it does that first by exposing the emptiness of all the other answers.

- **You say, "I'll leave a legacy."** Ecclesiastes says, "No, eventually you'll be forgotten."
- **Existentialism** says, "I'll create my own meaning." Ecclesiastes asks, "That doesn't make any sense."
- **Hedonism** says, "Then I'll stop asking this question and just enjoy life." Ecclesiastes replies, "You'll find it's like striving after the wind!"

⁶ This is the same Greek word that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, uses in Ecclesiastes, which we translate today as "vanity" (ESV) or "meaningless" (NIV).

The Teacher shows us that every path “under the sun” ends at the same place—the grave; meaningless death--and he shows us that not because he’s cynical, but because he is clearing away every false hope until we are ready to hear that the only hope comes from above the sun. Hope only comes from Jesus.

Law of the Hevel #2: Build Your Life on Eternal Things

I’ll only touch on this now, but if all this is true... you need to ask yourself what you’re living for!

So many of you are pouring your life into things under the sun, things that don’t matter. You’re not an atheist, but you’re living as if “life under the sun” is what really counts.

You’re trying to make a big impact. And maybe you’re wealthy enough to get your name on a building at your Alma Mater. But a lot of you are giving away your life’s work to things that won’t eternally matter. Your investment dies here.

I’ve often told you two statements that embody the philosophy my parents taught me to live by. They come straight out of the perspective of Ecclesiastes:

- The first is from the missionary **CT Studd**: “Only one life to live, ‘twill soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.”
- The second: **Only 2 things truly last forever: The Word of God and the souls of men. Make sure you build your life around those.**

Don’t give your energy and your money and your time to things under the sun--second and third homes; getting your name on a plaque somewhere; creating a life of ease.

- *Build your life on eternal things.* Things that last forever.

Oh, there’s so much more in this book. But this is a good place for us to stop for today, because **(these)** are the principles you want to carry with you through this book.

I’m going to put these two laws up here and let you think about them for a moment, before our worship teams come.

But first, let me ask you to bow your heads so I can ask you a question: Who might say, “Pastor, you’ve been describing me the whole morning. I’m the person who’s been living for themselves and life under the sun, but this weekend I’m recognizing that Jesus is the only answer and I’m ready to give my life to him”? If that’s you, would you raise your hand?

If you’ve never received Christ...

- Pray with me
- Text **READY to 33933**

Otherwise, let me leave you to reflect on these 2 “Laws,” and then our worship teams will come at all our campuses...