We have been working our way through the book of Ecclesiastes in this series, Chasing After The Wind. The more we have progressed into this book, the more it has occurred to me that Solomon was way ahead of his time. God knew what would be coming down the pike many centuries after Solomon wrote these words, he knew the questions that would be asked, the assumptions that would be made, and so he provided a reference point to anyone willing to listen.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the scientists Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton launched a scientific revolution with their new understanding of our world. Though they all had a Christian worldview, their discoveries were used as a means of dismissing God. God was no longer needed to explain things. The universe was increasingly being revealed to work according to discoverable laws. Things could be explained from an, "Under the Sun" perspective.

This scientific revolution led to a philosophical revolution, the Enlightenment. We were taught to question everything, to be skeptical of all traditional narratives and authorities including the Bible and the church. Instead of defaulting to revelation, what God had revealed in his word, all hope was placed in reason. Faith and Reason were pitted against each other. Trust only in what can be empirically observed. Seeing is believing. Our hope need not be in an invisible god. The problems that confront us as humans are fixable. Through knowledge, through education, through improving our environment, we can lift ourselves up. We can be our own Savior.

These assumptions were the very things that Solomon put to the test.

Where does reason take us, when we simply rely on what we can observe under the sun, apart from God?

Is knowledge and wisdom really a lifeboat capable of rescuing us from drowning in hopelessness?

Is human progress, advancement, success the route to happiness and fulfillment?

Can we find meaning, purpose, and significance if we cut the umbilical cord from our Creator?

Sure enough, the Enlightenment imploded on itself. The more we have discovered, the more we realize we don't know. Knowledge and wisdom have their limits. Multiple world wars have proven that any hope in humanity to be our own Savior is short sighted.

When you cut ties with God, life gets drained of meaning and hope.

Solomon said as much many years earlier:  Meaningless, Meaningless, says the preacher.

Why does this matter to us today?  It matters because we all live downstream from the Enlightenment.  Even though the Enlightenment imploded, we are still influenced by its ripples.

We have a natural distrust of everything and everyone

We are still inclined to think that all problems are fixable with the right info, policy, technology.

The physical world is still considered more real, the spiritual world less real.

God is seen as just one component of our very full life, not as the one in whom we live, move and have our being.

And finally, we remain hypnotized by a consumer mentality, this idea that happiness is one purchase, one vacation, one acquisition away.

In the overall canon of scripture, Ecclesiastes, like Proverbs, like Song of Songs, and like Job, is considered wisdom literature.  The second half of Ecclesiastes is filled with proverbs.  These proverbs are statements of how things tend to go under God's ordering.  They are principles meant to instruct and guide.

They are challenging to preach through because they are seemingly so random.  So today, instead I want to focus on one theme that surfaces over and over again throughout the entire book and then next week we will conclude the series.

A theme that threads through all of Ecclesiastes is this idea that life is uncertain, that nobody knows what will happen in this life or the next, if in fact there is a next life.  We're going to explore that today.

Join me as we pray.

Ecclesiastes 2:16, "The wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered, in days to come both will be forgotten.  Like the fool, the wise man too must die."

There are many things throughout Ecclesiastes that Solomon will say are uncertain. Things that nobody knows. Against that backdrop is the one thing of which Solomon is absolutely certain. We all will die.

Death is the fate that awaits us all. It doesn't matter if you are the wisest person to ever live, someone like Solomon himself, or if you are the biggest fool to ever live. It doesn't matter if you spend your life in pursuit of those things that are good, noble, honorable, right and pure or if you squander your life in selfish pursuits. The same fate awaits everyone. We all will die. We all must die.

The next four words from Solomon's pen were such surprising words. Like the fool, the wise man too must die. So I hated life.

It's not what I would have expected him to say. In light of the fact that we are all going to die, in light of the fact that we only have so many days, I would expect him to say, "So I loved life." It's the reality of our death that makes every single day of life so incredibly valuable. The most valuable thing that any of us has is time. Time is not on our side. Because we are going to die, doesn't it make sense to seize the day, to do everything there is to do, experience everything there is to experience, live life to the fullest because tomorrow we die.

Why would the reality of death cause Solomon to hate life? It's because he was honest enough to acknowledge the truth that

there was something in him that hungered for more than just a passing thrill ride.

There was something in him that hungered for more than just a passport filled with all the places he visited.

There was something in him that hungered for more than a showcase of earthly trophies celebrating his wins, his accomplishments, his successes.

Solomon felt deep in his bones the same thing that we feel, that we were created for purpose, we were created to live meaningful lives, we were created for life, we were created for eternity, not for death. So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Nobody cheats death. If our life is a story, the last page of every story is the same. And he died. And she died. And so for Solomon, this reality made him hate the whole story.

Credit Solomon for having the courage to stare death straight in the face.

The way many people today deal with death is by not dealing with death. Ignore it. Don't go to the place of mourning, don't stare into the casket, stay away from the cemetery. It's

unpleasant. Instead, fill your life with as much noise and amusement and busy-ness and occupation so that you don't ever stop and consider that your days are numbered.

Others choose the path espoused by the poet Dylan Thomas. In his poem titled "Do not go Gentle into that Good night," he pleads with his dying Father. Rage against the dying of the light. Fight it. Don't surrender to it. Don't surrender because it's really not a good night. It's a terrible night. It's the last night. Death wins. Life loses.

Death is a subject that we avoid at our own peril. The book of Ecclesiastes is really a treatise on the subject of death. Solomon hated life because he hated death. Solomon hated life because from a purely empirical standpoint, he had to acknowledge that nobody can prove if there's anything beyond death. The only thing that can be proven is death.

Over and over he acknowledges this:

3:20-22 All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth...:Who can bring him back to see what happens after them.

With this uncertainty, the only thing that could really be said at a graveside service is "we commit him/her to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"...period...the end

Who knows if there's anything else?

6:12: Who can tell a person what will come after them under the sun?

8:7: No one knows what will be, and no one can tell how it will turn out.

9:1: People don't know whether love or hate awaits them.

9:11-12: Time and chance befall everyone, and no one knows when their own time will come.

10:14: The fool piles up words, yet no one knows what is coming or can say what follows.

Who Knows? This really is the question. Does anyone know? Solomon, the wisest person under the sun didn't know. If somebody knows it is going to have to be someone who is above the sun. It is going to have to be someone who sits outside of time.

Who knows? God knows.

Who can tell a person what will come after them under the sun? God can tell a person.

We are blessed to have something that Solomon didn't have, and that is the added revelation that came by way of God's own Son, Jesus Christ, and the revelation provided by

the new testament. We have the rest of the story and the rest of the story is that the last page is not…and he died. The last page is not…and she died.

What is the rest of the story? We talked about it this last week at Dinner Church. Jesus told a parable regarding a fishing net that describes "The rest of the story."

The Kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Anyone who thinks Jesus was not one to talk about unpleasant things like hell has obviously never read much of what Jesus said. Jesus did not dodge the subject of death and he didn't dodge the subject of hell. Why didn't he dodge it? One, because it's real and Two, because he loves us.

He compared the Kingdom of heaven to a day at the office for those disciples who were professional fisherman. They caught all kinds of fish in their trawling nets and then they separated them, discarding the bad, keeping the good. At the end of the age, this is how it will be, Jesus said. There will be a separating. The wicked will be separated from the righteous and thrown into a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We hear that parable and the problem is that we don't identify with either of those two words: wicked or righteous. We think of the word wicked in terms of degree, to be wicked is to be exceptionally exceedingly terribly sinful. And to be righteous is to be exceptionally, exceedingly, incredibly holy. Nobody would raise their hand and identify as wicked and nobody would raise their hand and identify as righteous.

But that's not what those words mean. They are courtroom words. The word wicked is a word that means guilty of sin. The word righteous is a word that means innocent of sin. For the fishermen there are only two kinds of fish, the good and the bad, the keepers and the tossers. Likewise, there are only two kinds of people, innocent and guilty.

God's word claims that there is nobody righteous, no not one. For all have sinned. All are guilty. All are "wicked." All except Jesus himself.

Jesus, the righteous one, innocent of all sin, suffered as one who was guilty of sin. He took on the sins of all who would call on him in faith, and in exchange gave them the gift of his innocence. "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, the righteous for the wicked, to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18)"

In order to accurately know the answer to what happens to us after we die, it must be understood whether we are wicked, guilty of sin before God, or righteous, innocent of sin on account of the gracious gift of Jesus Christ. I don't pretend to know exactly what hell is anymore than I know exactly what heaven is.

What is clear is that hell is separation from God and separation from God is truly awful.

Heaven is to be brought near to God.

What has God promised awaits for all who believe? Solomon's question, "Who knows?" has an answer.

"Today you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus said to a dying thief who demonstrated faith.

Paradise is what awaits. The last page of our story is not…and he died…and she died.

Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth…Solomon said

God knows. The perishable will be raised imperishable. Death will be swallowed up in victory. Where o death is your victory? Where o death is your sting?

The graveside service is not concluded with the words, we commit him or her to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust…period." No, in place of the period is a comma, earth to earth, ash to ash, dust to dust, in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Who knows if anything we do during this life matters? Is it not all meaningless, is it not all a chasing after the wind?

God answers that one in the book of Revelation. " I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." Yes, says the spirit. They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.

That's a far cry from Solomon's, "I hated my life because none of it matters…it's all going to end in death." No, in Christ, everything matters. Everything bears meaning. What is done here on earth will follow us.

Jesus Christ changes everything.

Apart from Jesus, nothing matters.

With Jesus, everything matters.

Apart from Jesus, this life is it and there is every reason to fear death.

With Jesus, this is only the opening act.  There's much more to the story.  Death has lost its sting.