

Affected by Vanity's Effects
Ecclesiastes 1:1–11
September 11, 2022

Wednesday night, while the police were looking for the gunman that was terrorizing the city, Action News 5 reporter Joyce Peterson detailed to us the events of the evening. As she was capably doing so, she suddenly looked off camera, breathed out a heavy sigh and—while appearing to choke back palpable emotion—went off script and said, “Memphis is tired right now.”

I think she’s right. The past couple weeks of senseless, horrific violence have affected many of us. Maybe we knew someone that knew Eliza. Maybe we used to park in that parking lot. Maybe we run early in the morning. Maybe we go to the gas station where someone was carjacked. Regardless, the few details we know have been horrific. Hearing about it and thinking through it exhausts us, both mentally and emotionally. And though many have tried, there are no pat answers. Joyce is right; Memphis is tired.

On a related note, it’s tough to love your neighbor if you hate your city. And loving your neighbor means you’re affected when they’re fearful, when they’re in danger, and when they’ve lost hope. In part we’re tired because we care. We’re spending our days laboring for better things, for us, our children, and those we love. And when things don’t seem to get better, we’re wearied by it.

The author of Ecclesiastes doesn’t give pat answers to the horrific events that have unfolded in the Mid–South; but he does identify with those that are heavy laden, with those oft-disillusioned living under the sun, and with those longing for something better.

Last week we introduced the book, focusing on the Preacher’s shocking hook: **Vanity of Vanities! All is vanity** (Eccl. 1:2). Our chief aim was to attempt to define vanity correctly. Defining that word rightly might be the most important interpretive issue in the book. But words find meaning in contexts. Seeing a “bat” at the Memphis Zoo is different than seeing a “bat” at Busch Stadium or seeing someone “bat” their eyes. Today’s text will more fully explain vanity by detailing some of its effects. And it will describe to some degree how those effects affect us. Note first,

1. The effects of vanity through us (vv. 1–3)

The Preacher’s notion of vanity is not meaninglessness.¹ Though some have pigeon–holed Ecclesiastes wrongly, he’s not advocating nihilism. The word “vanity,” instead, means “vapor” or “smoke.”² It’s the same word used in Proverbs 31 to say that “beauty is fleeting.”³ As mentioned last week, the idea is best illustrated by considering the smoke from a blown–out candle. You blow it out. You see the smoke; and then it’s gone. Yet, that alone doesn’t exhaust the meaning. Vanity’s not only that all things are briefer than we imagine, it’s that we have less control over them than we think we do. After we blow out the candle, we might try to grab the smoke. But it’s elusive.⁴ Any effort to corral it would be a striving after the wind. In our text today, focusing more on verses 3–11, we’ll see the Preacher develop this idea further. If *that’s* true—all is vanity—what’s that mean for our lives?

You know how Preachers love their rhetorical questions. They’ve been doing it for thousands of years. Hear this Preacher’s rhetorical question in verse 3: **What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?**

¹ Contra NIV.

² Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, 18; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker, 105.

³ CSB; NKJV, etc.

⁴ David Gibson, *Living Live Backward*, 21; Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, 42.

We'll work through this question backwards. First, the key phrase "under the sun" means that there's actually a boundary to "all is vanity."⁵ The Preacher's fixing our eyes on life and experience in a fallen world. He's not speaking of pre-fall Eden. He's not speaking of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 22. He's speaking of the created order that currently groans. He's not saying anything all that different from what Paul wrote in Romans 8:20: **For the creation was subjected to futility.**⁶ The fall wasn't limited in its scope. *All* things under the sun are affected by this vanity.

And because all things are affected by this vanity, vanity has a number of effects. The rhetorical question seeks to expose some of those effects. He's asking a question about, v. 3, **all his work which he does under the sun.** It would be wrong to *limit* this idea of "work" to a particular kind of vocation. They didn't clock in at some 45-hour a week job in Ancient Israel. Work, or labor, refers to the "gamut of human endeavor under the sun."⁷ What are any of us seeking to attain through effort? Teenagers are studying for this or that test, maybe they're applying to colleges. Moms and dads are laboring to raise children. We're mowing our grass. We're painting our mailbox. We're serving our neighbors. *All that* is effort or endeavor. Further, just because we shouldn't *limit* "work" here to the 9–5, the idea definitely includes that. Some of you are crunching numbers, some of you are selling products, some of you are organizing chaos, some of you are treating patients, some of you are teaching children. All of us are seeking to do what Adam and Eve were commanded to do, that is, cultivate the raw materials in creation for the good of the world.

Now that we've attempted to define "vanity," "work," and "under the sun," we can proceed with the crux of the question. Verse 3: **What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?** "Advantage" is a business term, meaning "profit" or "benefit" or "gain."⁸ This is an honest question, one some of you might've wrestled with, wondering if the return will equal the investment. You labor. You work hard. Is there "gain"? One commentator puts it in his own words: "What reward is there on the balance sheet of life?"⁹ Another says it this way, "At the end of my life, what will the surplus be? What will I leave behind that will count as a lasting monument to all my effort?"¹⁰

We want things to last, don't we? At least we want the effects of our work to endure. We want our kids to remember what we said, what we did, for them. We want our client or co-worker to remember our loyalty to them. Yet, the Preacher isn't merely talking about one aspect of life. He zooms out and asks the question of the entirety of our experience, v. 3, **What advantage (gain/profit/benefit) does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?** It's a profound question. Will the Preacher answer it immediately, giving us an excel spreadsheet with a number toward the bottom that tells us, precisely, the profit margin? No, not even close. Solomon's a renaissance man. He asks a math problem; then he answers it with a poem.

2. The effects of vanity around us (vv. 4–7, 9–11)

Verses 4–11 are most likely a poem. The structure of it, which we'll come back to, makes this most apparent. But, keep in mind that the verses to come are an answer to the question of verse 3. Verse 4: **A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.** Maybe you hear the clever reversal in that first phrase. Generally we say "comes and goes." The Preacher flipped the

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ecclesiastes*, BST, 23.

⁶ The word for futility is the same Greek word used for vanity. Of course I'm speaking of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. But the word in Romans 8:20 and the word in Ecclesiastes 1:2 is *ματαιότης* (*mataiotēs*).

⁷ Bartholomew, 116.

⁸ Bartholomew, 108; Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, NIVAC, 54; Kidner, 24.

⁹ Provan, 54.

¹⁰ Gibson, 23.

order—goes precedes comes—putting the emphasis squarely on the replacement of one generation by another.¹¹ It's hard not to think of Queen Elizabeth. She ruled for 70 years. It seemed as if she'd be queen forever. Has anything under the sun been as unchanging as Queen Elizabeth since 1953? Yet, **a generation goes and a generation comes.**

The Preacher has another clause, **but the earth remains forever.** In Andrew Peterson's book, *The God of the Garden*, he talks about some of the oldest live oaks in America. One in Thomasville, Georgia they've dated back to the 1680s. Trees don't have eyes, of course, but that tree has been a witness to South Georgia's conditions during the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the War of 1812, World War I and II, and now its limbs "watch" people stare at their phones while they walk into First Baptist across the street.¹² That tree has seen a lot. Generations go and come. The earth remains. Tolkien masterfully captures this reality with the oldest of all creatures under the sun, Treebeard. Don't forget that the Preacher is answering a question about gain from all our labor.

The poetic answer continues in verse 5: **Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its places it rises there again.** Some of the idea of vanity, as we'll continue to see in this poem, is its incessant repetition. Does the sun look different today than it did yesterday? Is it better? No, it's the same. There's furious activity of course. Our planet is orbiting the sun at the speed of 67,000 miles an hour, while also spinning. The Preacher says the sun is **hastening to its places.** But though there's fevered activity, the experience for us is almost always the exact same. I told you about the guy from South Africa that flew to my parent's farm in Sparta, TN to watch the eclipse back in 2017. I drove to Sparta and back in a day with small children to see it myself. What would possess folks to do that? Something different!

Creation testifies again and again to both activity and sameness. Verse 5 uses the sun. Verse 6 uses the wind: **Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; and on its circular courses the wind returns.** Thankfully, the temperature has settled down a little this week. So I wrote much of this sermon sitting outside. There was almost always a nice little breeze cutting around the north side of the building. If you stare at the tree line, you can almost always find a leaf that is moving. Yet, if I took a picture of the tree line every five minutes on Thursday and Friday, all of those pictures would be nearly indistinguishable. Constant activity. Sameness. The wind turns toward the north; it swirls along, and **on its circular courses the wind returns.** Don't forget that the Preacher is answering a question about gain from all our labor.

The Preacher keeps on looking around, observing the order of creation. Verse 7: **All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again.** He's talked about earth, the fire of the sun, wind, and now water. Their powers combined form the crux of the poem. Does observing water tell us anything all that different from observing the sun or the wind? The rivers flow. They always flow. And, yet, the sea is not full. Wouldn't there eventually be a surplus? With all that activity, wouldn't there eventually be gain?

Go to Niagara. Every second three tons of water thunder over that cliff. And yet, the water level doesn't change. Maybe the Preacher has in mind the Dead Sea. Many streams flow into it, yet it's never full.¹³ It's the same point as before. Constant activity. Sameness. Don't forget that the Preacher is answering a question about gain from all our labor.

One of the features of Post-Enlightenment thinking is faith in progress. Based on an evolutionary premise, human endeavor through science or through technology will inevitably lead us to something better.¹⁴ That's an all-encompassing worldview. And it's probably the predominant

¹¹ Greidanus, 43.

¹² Andrew Peterson, *The God of the Garden*, 27.

¹³ Bartholomew, 111.

¹⁴ See Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 10.

worldview of the secular world. We're evolving. We've always been evolving. And, therefore, technology will deliver us. If we keep working hard, things will get better.

Do some things get better? Is medicine better than it was 100 years ago? You bet. But do the most fundamental things change? The question the preacher asks is, **What advantage (gain) does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?** The poem is answering that question. Creation itself is busy. It's always busy. But is there a surplus?

Verses 9–11 answer plainly. Maybe we're seeking gain, maybe we're seeking an advantage over what's happened before us in time, maybe we think vanity doesn't have effects, but in essence, though the wind continually blows the picture of the trees stays the same. Verse 9: **That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already it has existed for ages which were before us.**

Now, maybe we want to quibble with the Preacher here. Had he heard of the iPhone 14? The internets?¹⁵ He never had a burger at Huey's I bet. That's new. The Preacher doesn't mean there isn't creativity. The book of Ecclesiastes hadn't been written before, for example. The Preacher's not concerned with the passing novelty of innovation, he's exploring the deepest questions of our existence. What he means is that the problems the world manifests, the patterns of human behavior in the middle of those difficulties, and the solutions we offer are repeated again and again throughout history. History might not repeat, precisely, but it certainly rhymes.¹⁶ You'd think after all these years—if we're getting better—we wouldn't still be murdering one another like the Barbarians.

The Preacher's answering the question, after all this labor/work, is there gain or advantage? The centuries since have only confirmed the veracity of God's Word. Empires rise and fall. Generations go and come. In essence, the song remains the same. Kidner writes, "In their new guise, the old ways go on. As a race, we never learn."¹⁷ It's not only true that vanity means things are fleeting, or that we can't control things, it's that the things we seek to accomplish very often don't last. The effects are fleeting as well.

And when we think otherwise, it might be because we're chronologically challenged. Either we've not studied history, or our memory is short. If in verse 10 someone says, **See this, it is new** it is because of verse 11: **There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur; there will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.** We think something's new at times because we don't know what happened prior.

Today is the 21st anniversary of a Tuesday many of us will never forget. Yet I read last week that one of Manhattan's museums dedicated to September 11th—The Tribute Museum—shut down in August. In the first 13 years of its existence, it welcomed over 5 million visitors, 3–400,000 tours a year. In 2021, however, 26,000 walked through the door. The museum went in the red financially. They appealed to the state of New York and to the city's philanthropists. Yet, no one saved them. 18,000 photographs donated by the victim's families will soon go in boxes and likely never be seen by the public again.¹⁸ It's hard to imagine those memories, those people, being forgotten by the city around them. But in 50-60 years, there will only be a handful of people on the planet that even

¹⁵ By the way, is the internet more revolutionary than the printing press? Is the printing press more revolutionary than the alphabet?

¹⁶ Attributed to Mark Twain, but I'm sure someone said it before him. :)

¹⁷ Kidner, 26.

¹⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-9-11-tribute-museum-cultural-commentary-september-11-terrorist-attacks-families-association-world-trade-center-jennifer-adams-webb-peter-bitwinski-jonathan-ielpi-11661982391>

remember that Tuesday. Verse 11, in essence, bookends verse 4: **A generation goes and a generation comes.**

In this poem, the Preacher is answering a question about gain from all our labor. Vanity around us shows us that vanity clearly has effects *through* us. Our labor is much less permanent than we think. Does that mean we no longer care? Or that we're lazy? No, the Proverbs would warn against that. So would Ecclesiastes 9:10: **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.**¹⁹ Work/labor precedes the fall, according to Genesis 2. Yet, Genesis 3 makes clear that our labor will be affected by futility (Gen. 3:17–19). That's why you're often frustrated in your efforts. Vanity's effects are everywhere. But, good news: though the world often attempts to reduce us to accomplishment, the gospel declares that you are *not* what you do. God is not more impressed with you on your more productive days. The Son's accomplishment pleases Him.

Vanity has effects that we see constantly around us and through us. And if we're swimming in this world, vanity has effects upon us.

3. The effects of vanity upon us (v. 8)

The structure of this poem actually seems to say that the *center* of the poem—the essence of its message, its *point*—is found in verse 8.²⁰ **All things are wearisome.** Surely we can see why the Preacher concludes this. Under the sun, everything is vanity. Things pass, over and over again. And because everything is fleeting, *including* the effects of what we do, everything is wearisome. We're tired of the pattern. Two steps forward and two steps back.

Humanity deeply longs to come across something that will break that repetitive cycle.²¹ So many times they decide, “Let's try something new!” You've seen it over and over. Someone's dealing with malaise, so they change their circumstances. Maybe they buy something. Maybe they move to a different house, or get a new car, or a new “friend,” or move churches, or quit their job. In Lewis's Screwtape letters, he advises the young demon, “The horror of the same old thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart.”²² Folks will turn their whole world upside down in search for this elusive something. This “something” that always seems to be missing. The bad news, however, is that after all that upheaval the mirror in the new house tells the same story.

And part of that chase is due to us expecting more under the sun than what it offers. Like consumers, we thought fulfilling reward would come *now*. Yet, as verse 8 continues, it's clear: **The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.** The “not satisfied” in verse 8, interestingly, is the same word used in verse 7 for the “sea is not full.” You see the image, right? The rivers are continually flowing into the sea; they never stop. But though there's activity, the sea is still not full. Likewise, the eye keeps looking. The ear keeps listening. There's continual activity. Our senses are bombarded. And yet, the eye is not satisfied.

As Christians, how do we battle that weariness under the sun? David Gibson writes of the repetitive cycle of life, “Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't true.”²³ We don't have to chase the mirage, living as if *this* is all there is, placing our hope and trust in that which is seen. The Preacher is telling us about the nature

¹⁹ If God is excellent, and He is, then we pursue excellence in all things. See Andreas Köstenberger, *Excellence*.

²⁰ Bartholomew, 110. Bartholomew believes the poem is a chiasm, meaning it has an A, B, C, B, A structure. In that structure, C is the main point of the poem. There's also repetition of a key word in the Hebrew that seems to indicate this structure as well.

²¹ Gibson, 25.

²² Quoted in Gibson, 30.

²³ Gibson, 28.

of the world in order to expose it, and to stir a hunger in us for something better, something that lasts.²⁴

Conclusion

C. S. Lewis wrote, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”²⁵ Under the sun, we can look all day. History will seem to be merely repetitive and cyclical and hopeless. You won’t find hope without lifting your eyes. It’s only in the revelation of God that we’re told that the author of the past also directs the future. And that one day, like the smoke from a blown-out candle, vanity *itself* will disappear. What we’ve longed to grab, to experience fully, will be held on to. We’ll see and hear and be satisfied. That’ll be the new rhythm. And weariness will be a thing of the past.

That kind of hope has been purchased, not by perishable things, but by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Apostle Peter describes its certainty, using images of creation too, writing, **For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God, for, “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever”** (1 Pet. 1:23–25).

²⁴ Kidner, 27.

²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.