



The following is the summary of the Sunday sermon that is sent to the body at Steadfast in an email called "The Weekly"

Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

Living Life in a Closed-Box Universe

Taylor Swift burst on the scene in 2006, singing about the ecstasies of young love and the heartbreak of it. But her mood has hardened now. Her new album plays upon a string of negative emotions—anxiety, restlessness, exhaustion and occasionally anger. Swift is actually part of a larger trend. Researchers have analyzed more than 150,000 pop songs released between 1965 and 2015. Over that time, the appearance of the word "love" in top-100 hits roughly halved. Meanwhile, the number of times such songs contained negative emotion words, like "hate," rose sharply.

The negativity in culture reflects the negativity in real life. The General Social Survey asks people to rate their happiness levels. Between 1990 and 2018 the share of Americans who put themselves in the lowest happiness category increased by more than 50%. [And that was before the pandemic.] Experiences of negative emotions—related to stress, sadness, anger, worry and physical pain—hit a record last year.

Gallup asked people to rate their lives on a scale from zero to 10, with zero meaning you're living your worst possible life and 10 meaning you're living your best. Sixteen years ago, only 1.6 % of people worldwide rated their life as zero. As of last year, the share of people reporting the worst possible lives has more than quadrupled. The unhappiest people are even unhappier. A lot of people are miserable at work as well. In a recent Gallup survey, 20% of all people are thriving at work; 62% are indifferent at work; 18% are miserable.

Joy and the enjoyment of life seem to be rare commodities in this Postmodern, Post-Christian age. Terms such as meaning, purpose, fulfillment, contentment, satisfaction, even happiness are missing. People are living their lives without much direction and certainly without much joy. Life seems void of purpose, excitement and meaning. We live a life filled with structured routines and repetitive cycles of responsibility characterized by meaningless, unfulfilling duties and obligations. Why do we do all this? We seemed trapped in the cycles of life, lived in stages and seasons that ultimately end with death. Why do we work so hard when, in the end, we just die? What is the solution? How do we enrich our ostensibly empty lives? Where do we go for counsel and guidance? A 3,000 year old book might point us in the right direction. Let's probe its wisdom and dig for its nuggets of truth together these next five weeks. The book is Ecclesiastes. The author is Solomon, writing near the end of his life.

The title "Ecclesiastes" comes from a Greek word indicating a person who calls an assembly, the act of gathering people together. So it makes sense that the author identified himself

in [Ecclesiastes 1:1](#) by the Hebrew word *qoheleth*, often translated “Preacher.” Despite leaving only this rather mysterious name to indicate his identity, evidence in the book, along with most Jewish and Christian tradition, suggests that King Solomon authored Ecclesiastes. The Preacher called himself “the son of David, king in Jerusalem,” one who has increased in “wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me,” and one who had collected many proverbs ([Ecclesiastes 1:1, 16; 12:9](#)). Solomon followed David on the throne in Jerusalem as the only Davidic son to rule over all Israel from that city (1:12). He was the wisest man in the world during his time ([1 Kings 4:29-30](#)) and wrote most of the book of Proverbs ([Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1](#)). Therefore, we can safely identify Solomon as the *qoheleth* of the opening verse.

With Solomon as the author of the book, we know it had to have been written sometime before his death in 931 BC. The content of Ecclesiastes reflects someone looking back on a life that was long on experience but short on lasting rewards. As king, he had the opportunity and resources to pursue the rewards of wisdom, pleasure, and work. Yet the world-weary tone of his writing suggests that late in life, he looked back on his folly with regret, pointing us to a better, simpler life lived in light of God’s direction ([Ecclesiastes 12:13-14](#)).

Why is Ecclesiastes so important?

Ecclesiastes presents us with a naturalistic vision of life—one that sees life through distinctively human eyes. In major passages, Solomon argues that he lived his life as if there really was no God. He lived as if he lived in a closed-box universe: There was nothing transcendent beyond the physical world. Doing so led him to futility, meaninglessness and a life void of purpose. Life, in and of itself, is unable to supply the key to the questions of identity, meaning, purpose, value, enjoyment, and destiny. Only in coming to know God can one begin to find answers to these questions. In his book, Solomon ultimately affirmed the rule and reign of God in the world.

What's the big idea?

Ecclesiastes, like much of life, represents a journey from one point to another. Solomon articulated his starting point early in the book: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” ([Ecclesiastes 1:2](#)), indicating the utter futility and meaninglessness of life as he saw it. Nothing made sense to him because he had already tried any number of remedies—pleasure, work, and intellect—to alleviate his sense of feeling lost in the world.

However, even in the writer’s desperate search for meaning and significance in life, God remained present. For instance, he affirms that God provides food, drink, and work (2:24); both the sinner and the righteous person live in God’s sight (2:26); God’s deeds are eternal (3:14); and God empowers people to enjoy His provision (5:19). Ultimately, the great truth of Ecclesiastes lies in the acknowledgment of God’s ever-present hand on our lives—His sovereignty and His providence. Even when injustice and uncertainty threaten to overwhelm us, we can trust Him and follow after Him (12:13-14).

Why does Ecclesiastes paint such a dark picture of life?

Why does there appear to be such “doom and gloom?” Why do there appear to be so many contradictions in the book?

- Solomon demonstrates that life without God has no meaning. Earthly goals as ends in themselves lead to dissatisfaction and emptiness. Solomon shocks us into seeing life and death strictly from ground level, and into reaching the only conclusions from that standpoint that intellectual honesty permits.
- Since much in life cannot be fully understood, we must live by faith, not sight. Humans are not in control, for life is filled with unexplained enigmas, unresolved anomalies, and uncorrected injustices. Solomon affirms human finiteness and that much of life is a mystery. Life cannot be only horizontal; there must be a vertical dimension to life.
- Life “under the sun” (used 29 times in the book) cannot provide accurate and exhaustive answers if this is a “closed-box” universe. If there is nothing beyond the physical world, then all is futile, empty and meaningless.
- The only answer that provides meaning to life is to fear God and enjoy one’s lot (12:13-14). On their own, humans find life empty, frustrating and mysterious. With God in the picture (the box is not closed), emptiness becomes fulfillment, frustration becomes contentment and the mysterious becomes awe-inspiring, even if there is not exhaustive understanding.

If Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived, how could he write in 2:17: “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind?” [ESV] How could such a wise man get it so wrong? Where was his understanding and wisdom? The key is in Deuteronomy 17:14-20:

- Solomon was not to acquire large numbers of horses or permit his people to return to Egypt. He violated that stipulation. (See 1 Kings 10:26-29).
- Solomon was not to take many wives for himself. 1 Kings 11:1-2 declares quite clearly that Solomon violated this stipulation.
- Solomon was not to acquire excessive silver and gold, yet he increased silver and gold for his own selfish profit and taxed the wealth and energy of his people.
- He did not immerse himself in God’s Word. He led a life of defiant disobedience and idolatry. So, his lavish lifestyle lost all significance as he saw death closing in. Hence, he wrote this book confessing a sense of purposelessness, confusion and contempt for how he had lived his life.

The Cyclical Nature of Life: The Thesis 1:1-11

1:1—the title—“the teacher, son of David and king of Jerusalem” points to Solomon

1:2—the thesis statement—“vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” “Vanity” translates the Hebrew word *hebel*, which means something like “vapor” or “breath;” that which is fleeting, hard to grasp or capture. [Paul uses a similar Greek term in Romans 8:20]. Much of life escapes our understanding and often seems meaningless, without substance, value, permanence, or significance. Note that this is applied to “everything,” to “all,” which refers to all human activity, not to the total uselessness of the universe.

1:3-11—Evidence for the Thesis:

- V. 3—there is no ultimate advantage, profit, or gain to human labor.
- V. 4—humans are so transitory, impermanent and seemingly insignificant

- Vv. 5-7—nature shows the lack of value to activity in and of itself. It produces nothing of ultimate value. Look at the sun and the wind, the streams that flow into the sea, for everything seems cyclical without manifesting any progress or reaching any fixed goal.
- Vv. 8-11—what we see in nature we also see in human endeavor. There is nothing really new (v. 9), and even things that seem new really are not (vv. 10-11), for people just forget the past. Things that humans produce are not really new (e.g., even the moon is just another point for discovery) and ultimately only produce indescribable weariness and lack of satisfaction.

Therefore, what do humans achieve for all their sweat, worry and stress? What then is life? Is it merely the dreary rhythm of ceaseless activity? What is left for humanity for all its trouble? There must be an answer!

Dr. Jim Eckman