

Chasing After the Wind

Ecclesiastes 1: 1-14

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So what happened to Solomon years down the road? After all his achievements as king, he reflected on his life in the book of Ecclesiastes. We learned last week that in pursuing hundreds of wives who worshipped false and destructive gods, Solomon himself became corrupted. He lost hope. When a wise but hopeless man writes down his thoughts, you get some pretty bracing stuff. Like a smack in the face. “Vanity of vanities,” says Solomon, “All is vanity. It’s all meaningless—a chasing after the wind.” He tells us that we are born, we toil and sweat under the sun, we die. The cycle goes on and on but means nothing. Nothing of us endures. Yet everything in the world stays the same. “What has been is what will be. There is nothing new under the sun. Every life is more of the same. What a heavy burden God has laid on man! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Well, there’s a cheery message! Can you believe this is in the Bible? Can you imagine having this guy as your preacher each Sunday? Good morning. Welcome to church. How’s business? What? You say they’re going to repossess your car? Well, don’t worry. It’s all a chasing after wind anyway. You say you’re tired? Yeah, you do look tired. But just wait. One day you’ll be so worn out you’ll die. You say you had an interesting thought—listen, someone has already thought it before, already said it better than you ever will. There’s nothing new. It’s all just more of the same. In fact, I think I’ll just stop preaching right here. But thanks for coming to church anyway. Amen.

Ecclesiastes is the nectar of melancholy souls and appeals to every soul with a tragic sense. But, how can Ecclesiastes be included in the same Bible with such passages as Revelation’s promise of a new heavens and a new earth where there will be no more tears? How could those who recognized the Holy Spirit in Paul’s words, “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God,” ever have accepted a book whose recurring theme is “It’s all Meaningless”?

Ecclesiastes just gives us part of the whole picture, but that portion is very important. The book helps us to see the game that is going on all around us. And once we see the game, we have a chance to get free.

The book represents an experiment in living and the conclusions drawn from it. The Teacher, who is king over Israel, takes up his first hypothesis: pleasure can produce meaning and joy in life. Here was a man with the means to truly test his idea. He had sufficient power and wealth that he could undertake the experiment on a grand level. “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure” (Ec. 2: 10). First, he filled his senses. The Teacher cheered himself with wine. If it were possible to get the first Nouveau Beaujolais shipped in from Gaul, he would have done it. He had whatever was the equivalent of a humidor of fine Cuban cigars. Any chef of renown would have been in his service. He procured the finest singers and cultivated his taste for music and art. He garnered a harem of beautiful women—the pleasures of sex were his with a selection of hundreds to choose from.

Then, he turned to the pleasure of design, construction, management and control. He planned great houses and had them built. Contractors came when he told them to come. The King created lush gardens and spacious parks. He experimented with reservoirs, creating state of the art devices to grow forests in the desert. The Teacher bought and sold, not only herds and flocks but also human slaves. In essence, he had his own football team. Thus, he manipulated the human pieces on the board, making deals, controlling lives, bending the world to his will as his ideas became reality. And he dabbled in the thrill of the financial markets, amassing gold and silver. Perhaps he experimented with the Warren Buffet effect: so influential was his word that the markets would tremble when he made a pronouncement. He became a connoisseur of antiques and collectibles, acquiring the best that other kingdoms had. In other words, he knew the art of the deal. He swam with the sharks and ate them for lunch. He built a Middle Eastern Microsoft from scratch, split it in half and built two again.

He said, “My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ec. 2: 11).

The king got into the game, and played at the highest level. In athletic terms, he stepped up, got the job done, and took the title home. But long before Tom Brady asked if this was all there is to a Super Bowl, Solomon, from the vantage point of the top, he said, “It’s nothing.” He saw the game for what it is. In particular, he had some reflections about his finances:

“Whoever loves money never has money enough. Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them...All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. (Ec. 5: 10-12). Solomon saw the game the advertisers are playing. There’s always one more thing to want. The next thing, our appetite says, will satisfy me. But like a dog gulping down table scraps, the next one is looked for before the last one is even swallowed. *See the game.* By itself, the addition on your house will not create the sense of home for which you’re yearning. See the game. The next trip, by itself, will get you no closer to be satisfied than a walk around the block. *See the game.* Beating your competitor, in itself, is only a fleeting pleasure before you realize there’s someone else to challenge. There’s always someone else. And you never stay on top long enough to be content. *See the game.*

Solomon concluded “that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in his toil—this is the gift of God” (Ec. 5: 18-19). Eat, drink, find some joy in the work you do for the few days you’re on the earth. After all the achievements, all the pursuits, all the wealth, all the women, all the art, and all the power that’s all there is: eat, drink, and try to be happy in what you do.

And perhaps that would be enough for some of us. Just to be happy with the way things are as long as they are. But as often as Solomon urges his readers to eat, drink and be merry, he admits it can’t be done as an end in itself. It doesn’t work. When you’re in the game, there is no time to enjoy what you’re doing. You can only think about the next thing. You work like a dog and plan a vacation. On vacation you think about work. You slave away and think about time at home. At home you can’t even remember what your daughter told you because you were thinking about what had to be done on the house. It’s always the next thing. *See the game.*

Is there any way out? The wheel turns on and on. We ride until it crushes us and keeps on turning. Solomon asks the question, “Is there a thing of which it is said, “See this is new?” (Ec. 1: 10). He means it as a rhetorical question. He doesn’t expect a reply. For there is nothing new under the sun. The world grinds on same as it ever was. It is what it is. And he was weary of the game.

But how interesting it is to me that he asked the question. Even a rhetorical question leaves room for an unexpected reply. It asks for an interruption. Break

the cycle. Do something different. Give me some hope. Is there anything of which it can be said, “See this is new?”

Several hundred years later, the LORD would answer with a tantalizing hope through the prophet Isaiah:

Behold, I am doing a new thing;
Now it springs forth.
Do you perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness,
And rivers in the desert (Is. 43: 19).

God promised that he would interrupt the cycle of futility. In the trackless desert of passing time, a road would appear to lead us out. Amidst the parched sands of our lives of toil, rivers of life would run cool and clear.

For centuries, God’s people languished with Solomon’s dangling question, “Is there anything of which it may be said, ‘This is new’?” For centuries they strained to understand Isaiah’s enigmatic hope, “Behold I am doing a new thing.” But then, in the fullness of time, something new did happen. The most important thing in the history of the universe.

John’s Gospel says it so simply, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1: 14). This is something that had never happened before. The unimaginable. God came to us as a man. The eternal Son entered our world as one of us. He interrupted the endless cycle of vanity and futility. The vanity of looking to our own selves for meaning got replaced. Now we could look upon him and see grace and truth. Instead of illusion. Instead of working to create meaning that always slips away. Jesus is the God made flesh, making known to us the reality at the heart of the universe.

In Jesus, everything changes. The wisest man in the world could create buildings so grand that they were the envy of the world. And then Solomon would declare of even his *greatest* works, “They are all meaningless. Because everyone dies. Everything fades. Only the world keeps going in its endless grind.” By contrast, when Jesus came into the world he could declare that the *least* act done in love for him can be of eternal significance. “Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water...will by no means lose his reward” (Mt. 10: 42). The

least gesture of love is of eternal significance when it is done in his name. “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me” (Mt. 25: 40).

Jesus has interrupted the futile cycle of life. He arrives conferring eternal significance upon us by joining us here. If someone shinningly famous or ridiculously important picks your house to visit, or speaks to you in a crowd, or invites you to visit, you feel incredibly important. Part of that one’s fame and dignity is conferred on you. Multiply that by a million. The Creator of the universe comes to visit us by becoming one of us. He unites himself to his particularly special creation, to humanity. What’s more, he gives his life for us. Then he breaks the futility of our mortal lives by rising from the dead. Jesus, on our behalf, in our flesh, for our sake, shatters the power of death in his resurrection.

This too is new. No one has ever come back from the dead as a new kind of person, as a man outfitted for eternal life. First, Jesus interrupted the endless cycle of futile toil that is life on earth by coming down from heaven. Then he interrupted the endless cycle of death by rising from the dead. New things have happened. Solomon’s hopeless question, “Is there anything new?” has been answered with a resounding Yes! His name is Jesus. He is the new man. The God who became man. The God/man who rose from the dead. And he confers his significance upon us when we are joined to him by the Spirit through faith.

So Paul could write, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5: 17). Alone, we are chasing after the wind as we seek to establish our lives. We are trying to grab hold of a vapor as we try to make our own meaning. But in Jesus, God has come to lay hold of us. When we turn to him in faith, yielding our striving to him, he gives us a share in his resurrection life. He puts eternal life in our hearts.

Then, he invites us to join him in his mission. To tell his story. To love in his name. To give to others the hope that Jesus declares in Rev. 21: “Behold, I am making all things new.” Our message is, “Get in on this! Step out of futility. Step into fulfillment. Step out of meaningless, frenetic activity and into the significance God’s Son gives to us. Alone, our greatest achievements crumble back to the dust. In Christ, the tiniest acts of love reverberate into eternity. A cup of cold water given becomes greater than building an empire.

Solomon experimented with every kind of achievement and pleasure. He sought fulfillment. But in the end, he was just living for himself. And by ourselves, we can never fill the emptiness, never answer the questions, and never

make life work beyond the futility of all this toil and all this dying. But in Christ Jesus, we can enter the adventure of love. Of giving thanks and praise to the new man, the new thing God has done in coming to us as one of us to redeem us utterly. Of loving others in his name, showing forth his love to our life's end.

See the game. The world's game cannot be won on its own terms, even if you get to the top. You die anyway. *See the game.* One has come to free us from it. He broke the cycle. He defeated death. He conferred eternal worth on the least one who is joined to him. Jesus is the new creation and he makes us new when we are his. See the game, and be wiser than Solomon: step out of the game and into the truth!