

# **Living a Meaningful Life**

## **All Is Vanity**

*Ecclesiastes 1:2-11*

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July 18, 2010

# All Is Vanity

## Scripture

People today want to live meaningful lives. They have questions such as:

- What is the meaning of life?
- Why am I so unhappy?
- Does God really care?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?
- Why is there so much injustice in the world?
- Is life really worth living?
- Is this life all there is?

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes answers these questions. The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live a meaningful life. And so last week I started a series of sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes that I have titled, “Living a Meaningful Life.”

So, with that in mind, let me read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11:

**<sup>1</sup> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.**

**<sup>2</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**

**<sup>3</sup> What does man gain by all the toil  
at which he toils under the sun?**

**<sup>4</sup> A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.**

**<sup>5</sup> The sun rises, and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the place where it rises.**

**<sup>6</sup> 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.**

**<sup>7</sup> All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;**

**to the place where the streams flow,  
there they flow again.**

**<sup>8</sup> All things are full of weariness;  
a man cannot utter it;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.**

**<sup>9</sup> 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.**

**<sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said,  
“See, this is new”?**

**It has been already  
in the ages before us.**

**<sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of former things,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of later things yet to be  
among those who come after. (Ecclesiastes  
1:1-11)**

## **Introduction**

Taxi drivers like to boast about the famous people they carry in their cabs. A story is told about one such taxi driver who said, “I had the philosopher, Bertrand Russell, in my cab the other day. I said to him, ‘Bertie! What’s it all about then?’ Do you know, he couldn’t tell me!”

From time to time everyone pauses and asks, “What is the meaning of life?” For some, it is only a momentary question—and they soon turn their attention to other matters.

But others want to probe the question more deeply. Probing the meaning of life can be an uncomfortable pursuit as it brings us face to face with reality and eternity.

When things are going well, we may easily avoid the question, busying ourselves in our day-to-day activities—filling the gaps with entertaining diversions—making the most of the time we have allocated to us.

On occasions of sickness, national disaster, or bereavement,

however, the question comes back to us and we pause a little longer—trying to make sense of the seeming futility that lies before us—before getting back on track and avoiding the issue until the next time it is thrust upon us!

The writer of Ecclesiastes, however, does not run away from the problem—he faces it boldly—devoting much time to its study. His conclusions strike a chord in the heart of modern people and point us to the true meaning of life.<sup>1</sup>

## Lesson

In this introductory section the author identified himself (1:1), stated his theme (1:2), and defended his theme in general terms (1:3-11).<sup>2</sup> In today's lesson we are warned that apart from God, we will not gain anything from all our toil.

### I. The Author of Ecclesiastes (1:1)

First, notice the author of Ecclesiastes.

The author of Ecclesiastes simply identifies himself in verse 1 as follows, **“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”**

The Hebrew translation of **“the Preacher”** is *Qoheleth* (1:1-2; cf. 1:12; 7:27; 12:8-10). *Qoheleth* is a title and not a name. In the Greek translation of this book *Qoheleth* is translated as *Ekklesiastes*, which is where the English name of this book comes from. Both *Qoheleth* and *Ecclesiastes* mean, “one who calls an assembly.” And that is why various Bibles translate the word as **“the Preacher”** (ESV, KJV), “the Teacher” (NIV), or “the Leader of the Assembly” (NIV margin).<sup>3</sup> As I said last week, I shall refer to the author either as “the Preacher” or as “Qoheleth.”

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 8.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), Eccles. 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 975.

Scholars are divided on the question as to whether or not Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. I am not so sure that he did (for reasons that I mentioned in my previous message on Ecclesiastes).<sup>4</sup>

Most likely, Ecclesiastes was “written many centuries after Solomon, most probably in the third century BC.”<sup>5</sup> (Again, see my previous message about the reasons for the dating of Ecclesiastes.)

One author says that the Preacher “is addressing Israelites for whom a new day had dawned. They no longer lived their quiet, agricultural existence—depending on the LORD to provide their daily bread. They lived at the crossroads of a new, booming international trade between Egypt and Asia/Europe. Fortunes could be made, and lost, overnight. The Israelites were scrambling to get rich.”<sup>6</sup>

## II. The Theme of Ecclesiastes (1:2)

Second, observe the theme of Ecclesiastes.

After identifying himself, the author declares most emphatically that all is vanity. He says in Ecclesiastes 1:2, “**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**”

The Hebrew word for **vanity** is *hebel*. The Preacher uses that word five times in this verse, and some thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. It is also translated as “meaningless” in some Bible versions. Obviously, it is an important word. But what does it mean?

**Vanity** means “vapor” or “breath.”<sup>7</sup> It is what happens when you blow your breath on a freezing winter’s morning. You see it for a while, and then it is gone. **Vanity** is “whatever is left after you break a soap bubble.”<sup>8</sup> So, **vanity** refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

<sup>4</sup> See my sermon on “Introduction to Ecclesiastes,” preached on July 11, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Norman Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 41.

<sup>7</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996).

The Preacher therefore uses **vanity** as a “metaphorical term throughout the book to refer to what is without real substance, value, permanence, significance, or meaning.”<sup>9</sup>

By twice repeating “**vanity of vanities**” the Preacher is emphasizing the utter meaninglessness of everything. In fact, just so that we don’t miss it, he concludes by saying, “**All is vanity.**”

Interestingly, the Preacher closes his argument in Ecclesiastes with exactly the same statement as in verse 2. He says in Ecclesiastes 12:8, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.” In Bible study that is known as an *inclusio*. That means that everything between the two statements refers to the same subject.

And so the theme of the entire book is: *All is vanity*. Everything in life is meaningless.

Now, before I go further, let me say that the Preacher eventually gives a corrective. He says that everything in life is meaningless *without God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life only when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don’t live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

After the *inclusio* statement in Ecclesiastes 12:8, the Preacher gives his conclusion in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14. He states these words in verse 13, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”

So, as we work our way through Ecclesiastes we will be mindful of the theme of the Preacher: *All is vanity*. However, we will also be aware that everything in life is meaningful if lived in a right relationship to God.

### III. The Defense of the Theme (1:3-11)

Third, let us look at the defense of the theme.

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<sup>9</sup> John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), Eccles. 1:1-2.

The Preacher defends his theme (that all is vanity) with one specific example—the example of toil.

A. *Thesis: We Will Not Gain Anything from All Our Toil (1:3)*

The Preacher asks a question in Ecclesiastes 1:3, **“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”**

The term **gain** is translated from the Hebrew word *yitron*. It is unique to the book of Ecclesiastes (1:3; 2:11, 13; 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12; 10:10, 11). The word comes from a verb that means “to be left over” or “to remain”—as when one invests in a business, paying expenses and receiving income, and at the end of the year checking to see what is left over. So **gain** can be translated as “profit.” So, we can read verse 3 as follows, “What does man profit by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”

Now, the phrase **“under the sun”** is extremely important to our understanding of Ecclesiastes. **“Under the sun”** is also found only in the book of Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Bible. The Preacher uses it twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15 [2x], 17; 9:3, 6, 9 [2x], 11, 13; 10:5). If you understand how the Preacher uses this phrase, you will understand Ecclesiastes better.

**“Under the sun”** refers to living in this world without taking God into account.<sup>10</sup> One commentator puts it this way: “The scene in mind is exclusively the world we can observe, and. . . our observation point is at ground level.”<sup>11</sup> So, we live **under the sun**. But God’s perspective, as it were, is *above the sun*.

So, **“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”** The answer is, “Nothing.” When we live our lives apart from God, we will not gain anything from all our toil.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the Way of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 23.

*B. Proofs: Ceaseless, Wearisome Rounds (1:4-11)*

The Preacher supports his thesis by referring to the ceaseless rounds of generations (1:4) and of nature (1:5-7). From them he concludes that people's labor, like these ceaseless rounds, produces nothing permanent or satisfying (1:8-11).

1. The Impermanence of Man (1:4)

The first fact the Preacher uses in support of his thesis that we will not gain anything from all our toil is the impermanence of man.

He says in Ecclesiastes 1:4, **“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”**

People come and people go, **but the earth remains forever.** In contrast to the permanence of this earth, we are impermanent.

2. The Ceaseless Rounds of Nature (1:5-7)

The second fact the Preacher uses in support of his thesis that we will not gain anything from all our toil is the ceaseless rounds of nature.

Mere activity does not in and of itself produce anything meaningful.

The Preacher says in verse 5, **“The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.”** From his perspective, **the sun** is constantly moving but never arriving at any fixed goal or lasting rest.

Similarly, in verse 6, the Preacher says, **“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.”**

And in verse 7 the Preacher says, **“All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.”**

All the activity of nature is ceaseless, but it does not seem to



accomplish anything.

### 3. The Repetition of Human Endeavors (1:8-11)

The third fact the Preacher uses in support of his thesis that we will not gain anything from all our toil is the repetition of human endeavors.

What is observable in the ceaseless rounds of nature is also true of all human endeavor. That is why the Preacher says in verse 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.”**

But someone is probably thinking to himself, “Of course, there are new things!” The Preacher anticipates someone asking that, and says in verse 10, **“Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’?”** As several commentators note, the Preacher did not intend to deny human creativity but to deny the complete newness of people’s accomplishments. For example, man’s journey to the moon and the discovery of America, though different, were both explorations of distant places, involving adventure and risk. And the invention of dynamite and of the atomic bomb shared the element of discovering an “explosive.” And so the Preacher concludes in verses 10b-11, **“It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.”**

And so, what is true in the realm of nature—the constant repetition of previous accomplishments—is in essence true of the activity of people and is included in the observation that all things produce only indescribable weariness and lack of satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

One commentator said that the Preacher “is not so much claiming that human beings are utterly oblivious to the past as he is undercutting their deepest and vainglorious aspirations to secure some permanent place or ‘remembrance’ in history. A life oriented

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<sup>12</sup> John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), Eccles. 1:2–11.

toward ensuring its legacy for posterity only purses the wind. The future cannot be controlled any more than the past can be remembered.”<sup>13</sup>

Another commentator said, “People have had mountains named after them, but a following generation changes the names. People have had their names etched into buildings, but in time the buildings will be demolished and the names forgotten. People write books to be remembered by posterity, but in time the books will be replaced by other books and the authors will be forgotten.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The Preacher has clearly made his point that we will not gain anything from all our toil at which we toil—under the sun. That is, we gain nothing from the toil at which we toil—apart from God.

The Preacher will reinforce this later on with other images. In Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 he says, “I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.” And in Ecclesiastes 5:16 he says, “This also is a grievous evil: just as he [i.e., man] came [naked from his mother’s womb], so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?”

In the New Testament Jesus makes the same point. He says in Matthew 16:26a, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” When a man forfeits his soul, he has gained nothing. There is no profit. There is no gain.

Jesus also makes the same point as the Preacher with a simple story, a parable. He said in Luke 12:16-20:

The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought

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<sup>13</sup> William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 47.

to himself, “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?”

And he said, “I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

When the rich man died, he had gained nothing from his toil. There was nothing left over. No gain. Jesus concludes this parable with these words, “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). Apart from God, we will not gain anything from our toil.

Is there nothing to be gained from our life on earth? No gain from our toil when we die? Yes, Jesus says, there can be gain, but only when we do not store up treasures on earth but store up treasures in heaven. He says in Matthew 6:19-21, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Elsewhere Jesus says, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man [i.e., Jesus] will give you” (John 6:27a).

Jesus also said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus’ message is clear: we gain nothing if we store up treasures on earth. We gain nothing if we toil apart from God. We gain nothing if we serve two masters. But, we can live meaningful lives if we are, in Jesus’ words, “rich toward God,” if we store up “treasures in heaven,” and if we “serve God.” Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher warns us that apart from God, we will not gain anything from all our toil.

Teach us how to live a meaningful life by being “rich toward God,” by storing up “treasures in heaven,” and by “serving God.”

And all of this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.