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Ecclesiastes 1:2-9

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.
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.
All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.
All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
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.

What do Netflix, the iPhone and the book of Ecclesiastes have in common? Each have have been disruptive in their respective arenas. Netflix killed Blockbuster and ushered in the era of streaming videos. The iPhone destroyed the Blackberry and revolutionized both the cell phone as well as personal communications. And Ecclesiastes? This book of wisdom shakes us from illusion that satisfaction and meaning can be ultimately be achieved in this life and disrupts our self assessment that our accomplishments have lasting eternal value. But, this book also reminds us that what God does in this world is good, even if it is temporary. Finally, all of this frustration and futility lead us to ask what else is there and ultimately brings us to Christ.

So where do we go with a book like Ecclesiastes? To be candid, for many years my approach has been to “learn by negation”. I would look at the Preacher, as the author calls himself, and think “I should not view things as simply ‘under the sun’” Or “I should not get caught up in trying to find all my value here and now”. Admittedly there is nothing wrong with that approach and those are important themes that Ecclesiastes teases out.

But as I've looked a little harder at Ecclesiastes this year I've come to sense its disruptive power over my life and over my faith. As is always the case, the Spirit will lead us to deep into the mind of Christ, if we let him and Ecclesiastes is no exception. But here is a warning or perhaps a spoiler alert: disruptions are often painful to the one being disrupted. Think of Blockbuster or Blackberry; Kodak or in-person movie theaters. Our journey into Ecclesiastes may be the same. But we also know God is good and that his goal is for us to grow up into salvation. And that really is my prayer for us today.

As we start, there are a couple of things to note about the book of Ecclesiastes itself. First and most important is the Hebrew phrase *hebel*. It is used frequently throughout the book and knowing its meaning is crucial to understanding the Preacher's point in writing and God's message for us today. *Hebel* is translated in the ESV as vanity. The NIV and New King James and several other translations use the term meaningless. The NASB and Holman define it as futility. But what is the essence of this word? The best description I have heard is that of fog or steam or vapor. Fog, steam and vapor are real and visible. Think of a foggy late summer morning. We can see the fog. We can step into it. We can even touch it. But if we try to grasp it? Try to possess it? Try to depend on it? Poof, it is gone. Meaningless. Futile. Vanity.

The next phrase that is essential to have in our mind is what the preacher often refers to as "under the sun". There are two aspects to this phrase which are distinct but overlap and both are important as we consider the message of Ecclesiastes. The first element of this phrase is that of physical creation. The earth, the sky, marriage, family, life, death. In this sense the phrase is neutral and is focusing our attention on things in our day to day lives.

But, there is a second component to the phrase "under the sun". The preacher has found himself adrift and focusing on earthly things instead of heavenly things. "Under the sun" is his catch phrase for his worldly perspective or better the absence of a heavenly, Christ-centered perspective.

One last item of setup before we dive in. The human author, the Preacher, is often attributed as Solomon, David's son and king of Israel during the nation's golden era. There is much to support this position and I'm not here to debunk that claim. The point to be made is this: the Preacher experienced everything this life had to offer. All success, all largess, all wisdom, all folly, all everything. He experienced everything he could, "under the sun". And in the end he realized that everything is *hebel*, meaningless, futile, vanity, a vapor.

For our remaining time I would like to "fly over" Ecclesiastes and look at it from three perspectives. The first two are the disruptive factors that I'm trusting the Spirit will use to shake us and remake us. Third, I believe is the answer the Preacher was searching for and the one we are called to embrace as followers of Christ.

The first thing Ecclesiastes teaches us is that life “under the sun” is frustrating and futile. The next thing we are shown is that life “under the sun” is good and a gift from God. And finally life “under the sun” points us to something greater. It points us to Christ.

Consider the word *hebel*. Consider the fog. The Preacher stresses that life is *hebel*, a vapor, vanity, meaningless, futile? But why the continual drumbeat on this theme? Let’s look at some of these verses:

Ecclesiastes 1:2-4

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

Ecclesiastes 2:11

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 6:1-2

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

Again, I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

And, we could look at dozens more examples of the Preacher reminding us that life “under the sun” is frustrating and it is futile. It seems as if he is trying to show his original audience and us

as well that there are no exceptions from this rule. Rich or poor, young or old, wise or foolish, powerful or weak, extraordinary or plain. It doesn't matter. Under the sun, everything is vanity. Everything is meaningless. Everything is frustrating and futile. And no one is exempt.

Compare your life to the Preacher's measuring stick. What is it the one thing that gives you meaning? The one thing you hope God never takes away? Is it your marriage? Your parenting? Your career? Your retirement? Your health? Your social status? Your theological knowledge? Your vacations? Your frugality? Your generosity? Your prayer life? Your spiritual disciplines?

I could go on, but the Preacher's point is this: we all have something (or multiple things) in our lives that we are striving to achieve and to give us meaning. It is easy to set these things up as something ultimate. Something that provides a heart level of satisfaction.

But, the disruption is that this is a lie. Everything I just listed is a struggle and will ultimately end. Cars break down. Spouses die. Children move out. Careers end. Bodies and minds fail. Phones and computers become outdated. Even the Grand Canyon is slowly eroding. Despite all of this, world and our own minds tell us these things will satisfy the longing and ache in our souls. The preacher is here to tell us the truth. Everything is vanity, meaningless futile.

At this point I sense a little self-disclosure is in order. As many of you know, I have worked at Dairyland Power for a long time. With each of my successive roles I have striven to work heartily, as unto the Lord. And yet for a most of that tenure I have sought promotions for two main reasons: money and responsibility. And by God's grace I have received what I have pursued. But my experience mirrors the Preacher's in a lot of ways. Money and responsibility are a vapor, a fog. Vanity. Meaningless. Futile.

I need to add a post script to this example from my own life. As my gray hair can attest, retirement is now a career step I must consider over the next 5 years or so. And what does my internal voice say? "This is it. This is career step that will make all the difference. You will have arrived." And what does the preacher say?

Ecclesiastes 5:10-11

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?

Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

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.

If we stopped here our assessment of Ecclesiastes and of life “under the sun” would be stunted. Is everything a vapor, visible yet impossible to grasp? Is everything futile and frustrating? Yes. The Preacher’s assessment is accurate. And we know this from our own experience. But thankfully he doesn’t leave us hanging. He also wants us to know that everything has been created by God as a good gift from God.

Take a look at these verses:

Ecclesiastes 2:24

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,

Ecclesiastes 3:11-12

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;

Ecclesiastes 5:12

Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

Ecclesiastes 11:7

Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

You may be asking yourselves, has the Preacher lost it? Is the Bible contradicting itself? Those are fair questions and on the surface the claims of Ecclesiastes seem to be at opposite ends of the cognitive spectrum. And yet doesn’t this line up with other parts of God’s word? There is Joseph being sold into slavery and then rescuing the nation. There is David committing adultery and murder yet being proclaimed as a man after God’s own heart. There is Isaiah proclaiming the nation corrupt, Jeremiah proclaiming the nation unfaithful and Ezekiel proclaiming the nation spiritually bankrupt yet each of them also proclaiming that God himself will rescue, redeem and restore. And then there’s Jesus. Perfect, yet tempted like no other. Righteous, yet

condemned and ridiculed. Always giving Caesar his due yet tried and executed as a traitor. Sinless yet bearing our sins on the cross.

Consider my “if only” list from a little earlier. Is it your marriage *hebel*? Sure it is, but it is also a good gift from God. How’s your parenting? Limited? Frustrating? You bet. But God has blessed you with wonderful children and an incredible responsibility. I could go on. Your career? Your retirement? Your health? The Grand Canyon? All of these are a vapor, if we try to cling to them for meaning or significance, yet God has blessed us way beyond what we could ask or think. James said it well: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

Now consider my career self-disclosure. Has my career proven to be *hebel*, a vapor? There is no doubt. But where would I be without God’s gracious intervention? The skills, the opportunities, the fortuitous twists and turns. Are they not all good gifts from God?

You see the Bible is full of paradoxes. And this is one of them. Nothing we have will last. Nothing we have will satisfy. Nothing we have will fill that ache that is in our hearts. And yet everything we have has been given to us by God and is ultimately for our good. Remember Rom 8:28? Easily a cliché verse, I know. And yet it is still true. God does work all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

But this leaves us with a quandary. How do we respond? Do we give into despair as it seems that is where large portions of the Preacher’s thoughts seem to take us? Or do we pivot 180 degrees and become Pollyanna ignoring the futility and frustration of the world around us?

Or is there a better way?

Here is the true wisdom of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher wants us to see that even though life “under the sun” is *hebel*, a frustrating, meaningless vapor and is simultaneously a good gift from God, it was never meant to be an end in itself. This good and frustrating world and everything in it are pointers and paths to something greater. The love, grace, mercy and faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

Let’s consider these verses:

Ecclesiastes 3:14

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Ecclesiastes 7:13

Consider the work of God:
who can make straight what he has made crooked?

Here's the disruptive truth of Ecclesiastes. God has merged his good and gracious gifts with the vain, meaningless, frustrations of this world for a purpose. He wants us to seek him rather than his gifts. Think about the trajectory of the people of God given to us in the Bible. God blesses them. They respond in faith. But then the gift supplants the giver and sin ensues. And in love God disciplines and call his children to repent. We see this repeated in the kings. We see this repeated in God's people. And, if we're honest, we see this in ourselves.

God's word is clear: The trajectory of the human heart, of my heart, of each heart in this room is to wander away from God. Our internal GPS wants to go our own way and do our own thing. "Prone to wander; God I feel it; prone to leave the God I love"

And doesn't Jesus say something similar in Matthew 6?

Matthew 6:25b

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Matthew 6:32-33

For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

At the end of the day, the beauty of the cross is that Jesus died for men and for women who willfully chose to chase a vapor, who took a good gift and make it ultimate, who sought to make a permanent dwelling here under the sun. Now Jesus is calling us out from that frustration, out from that blindness and into the light of his love and grace.

So where do we go from here? I have two thoughts for us, although I trust the Spirit to use the disruptive power of God's word however he sees fit. My first recommendation is this: seriously and prayerfully read through the book of Ecclesiastes. I know all the excuses to not do so, but trust me the disruption is worth it. And as you are reading, ask the Spirit to expose where you have made God's good gifts into something they were never intended to be and ask him for power to repent and return to your first love.

The next recommendation comes straight from the Preacher:

Ecclesiastes 12:13

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of mankind.