

# The Futility of Life

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you will, go with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 1, the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

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.

[ 1 : 10 ] Is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new? 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.

Now let's skip ahead to chapter 2. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity.

I said of laughter, it is mad, and of pleasure, what use is it? I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.

I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

[ 2 : 19 ] I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them.

I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 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. When Danae and I bought our current home, I was pretty excited that the entire backyard is wrapped with a tall white vinyl fence.

The house directly behind us is fairly close, so I thought we would enjoy a little bit of privacy. We had a dog when we first moved in, and I knew he'd have a place to run around without running into the street.

[ 3 : 30 ] And best of all, I thought, I'll never have to paint this thing because it's vinyl. After we got settled, I decided the fence could use a good washing. It was green in places.

It had turned black in places from the tree sap falling on it, and more than a few birds had desecrated it. So I got out the pressure washer and went to work that summer.

I started in the morning, and by the evening, I'll be honest, I was a little discouraged at what little progress I had seemingly made on this huge fence that wraps all the way around the yard.

It was taking much longer than I anticipated, but it needed to be done, so I continued to work on it throughout the remainder of the summer. And by the end of the project, the work was getting to be

kind of tedious.

You probably know the feeling. You know, when I first got out that pressure washer and fired it up, I thought to myself, okay, let's do this, clean fence, here we come. And by the last time I got out the pressure washer that season, I felt a lot more internal groaning than enthusiasm.

[ 4 : 40 ] But at least I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. I was almost finished. Do you know that feeling of satisfaction you get after you've completed a project?

I certainly had that feeling when I was finally finished with the fence, and it lasted only as long as it took me to walk to the place on that fence where I had begun and realized it needed to be washed all over again.

Would you like to guess which book of the Bible comes to my mind most every spring and summer as I'm washing that fence all over again? 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? In Ecclesiastes, Solomon is addressing the problem of futility.

And this is a universal problem. Every people of every generation has faced this same dilemma. How can life or anything in life have meaning if the end is the same for all mankind?

[ 5 : 47 ] According to Solomon, throughout this book, it doesn't matter whether we are wise or foolish, righteous or wicked, rich or poor, accomplished or not, the same event happens to us all.

We all die. With this thought in mind, Solomon says, I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

In other words, we have a better chance of catching the wind in the palm of our hands than finding satisfaction in anything we do under the sun.

Why? Our satisfaction will always be temporary. Our work will never be done, and we will eventually die rendering our accomplishments personally useless.

Now, if anyone understands this dilemma, it should be 21st century Americans. We occupy a very unique place in history.

[ 6 : 51 ] We are the wealthiest people in the history of the world. The wealthiest people in the history of the world. And if you are thinking to yourself, not me, I'm not wealthy, let me challenge that thought.

Well, if we compare our net worths or our annual incomes to the most wealthy people in America, say Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos or someone along those lines, then no, we're not rich.

I'm not anyhow. But I've often encouraged people to think a little differently about wealth. What if we stop comparing ourselves to other people living in this country today?

What if we stop thinking about net worth and annual income, and instead, what if we think about wealth in terms of quality of life? Quality of life.

Take King Solomon, for instance. He was once the wealthiest man Israel had ever known, possibly the wealthiest man on earth in his day. I don't know that for a fact, but in 1 Kings 3, God says to Solomon, I give you both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days.

[ 8 : 02 ] Yet, there were quite a few things Solomon didn't have. He didn't have running water. He didn't have electricity. He didn't have a climate-controlled house.

He didn't have refrigeration. He didn't have a comfortable car to take him a mile a minute. He didn't have a phone in his pocket to send a message to anyone in the world at any time he wanted. I'm certain he had very nice clothing, but I'm guessing you and I are a little more comfortable come wintertime than he ever was.

I know that he had access to physicians, but I don't think health care in those days can compare to what we have today. We can go back just 100 years.

Just 100 years, and the richest man on the planet did not have the quality of life that most of us have today. So laying aside net worth and annual income based solely on quality of life, I'm richer than John D. Rockefeller.

I doubt anyone has ever looked at me or the clothes I wear or the car I drive and thought to themselves, this guy's rich, but I am. In a very real sense, I am rich, and so are all of you.

[ 9 : 12 ] Why, then, does study after study show Americans are a discontented, dissatisfied people? In his book, The Progress Paradox, Greg Easterbrook makes the same point that I've made about wealth and quality of life.

For example, he was writing in 2003, but he notes that 95% of all Americans have central heat. Just two decades prior, two generations prior, I should say, only 15% of Americans had central heat. Today, we enjoy better homes, better transportation, better working conditions, many more daily conveniences, and a much higher disposable income, yet the volume of diagnosed cases of clinical depression has risen 10 times what it was 50 years ago.

Easterbrook concludes that depression has been, quote, rising in eerie synchronization with rising prosperity. Interestingly enough, the things that should be making our lives easier and more satisfying are, in fact, making us miserable, which is precisely what Solomon discovered.

Now, I love the book of Ecclesiastes because, if for no other reason, its message and themes are timeless. They are still as relevant and relatable today as they have ever been.

[10:48] To summarize the primary problem Solomon addresses in this book, we may struggle to find meaning in this life because everything, including ourselves, has an expiration date.

Everything is perishable. Everything is bound by the confines of time. Nothing, it seems, can last forever. All is vanity. All is a vapor. It appears quickly and then vanishes just as quickly.

Try your best to reach out and take hold of it and it slips right through your fingers. In Ecclesiastes 1, Solomon begins by highlighting the monotony of life.

You know, when I finish washing my fence, I may feel accomplished, but any sense of satisfaction is always short-lived because the fence won't stay clean.

Soon enough, I'll have to do it all over again. And even if I wash that fence a thousand times, and even if I maintain the cleanest fence in the entire neighborhood, I assure you I don't, sooner or later, I'll die.

[11:53] I will die. I will die. That's the end of the story. In chapter 5, Solomon says, as a man came from his mother's womb, he shall go again, naked as he came and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

This also is a grievous evil. Just as he came, so shall he go. And what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? When we set out to do a task, we're motivated by the prospect of finishing that task, aren't we?

We want to enjoy the feeling of a job well done. We're pursuing that sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, but whatever gain is to be found is always short-lived.

The sun rises and the sun goes down. And you know what? Tomorrow, the sun will rise and the sun will go down. And the day after that, and the day after that. My favorite analogy here is in verse 7. All streams run into the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. So no matter how long the stream flows, it never runs out of water.

[13:02] And no matter how long the stream flows, where it flows into never overflows. Ultimately, nothing changes. For all that running water, nothing changes.

Instinctively, I think we sense the futility of our efforts. So what some people do is they strive to make a name for themselves, you know, to be remembered for something.

At least they can grasp that. We strive to build a lasting legacy. You know, we want to be famous now, if possible, and celebrate it for generations to come. So, as silly as it sounds, let's stick with the fence analogy.

If I know cleaning my fence is a perpetual, futile pursuit, which will necessarily come to an abrupt end one day, well, perhaps I can be known as the guy with the cleanest fence in the community. Solomon says, there is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

[14:13] So if I make a name for myself as the guy with the cleanest fence, what great thing have I achieved? Any neighbors who once marveled at my fence will soon return with me to the dust.

And after a few short years, no one will remember. And even if they do, no one will care. My example is ridiculous, of course, so let me borrow one from Matthew McCullough.

Consider the award-winning newsacre, Brian Williams. Now, at one time, his evening broadcast was the most viewed news program on all of television.

One publication listed him as the 23rd most trusted person in all of America. That is, until he was caught lying.

You may remember he got caught making up stories about near-death experiences on Iraqi battlefields while reporting some 10 years earlier.

[ 15 : 20 ] What could possibly drive a man like Brian Williams with his level of success and his number of accomplishments and his impressive reputation up to that point lie to make a handful of stories a bit more sensational?

Well, I think he sensed what Solomon teaches us here in Ecclesiastes. One's legacy will never be great enough to overcome its inherent futility. Though we know this is true, many still try. We're trying to overcome that futility. For many others today, what we accomplish in this life is actually a means to a different end. In other words, we're not working for a sense of satisfaction from the work itself and we're not necessarily trying to, you know, make a name for ourselves. We're working for the weekend, if you will. We're like the rich man in Luke 12 who produced plentifully and then he said to himself, you have ample goods. Eat, relax, eat, drink, and be merry. In short, some people live for pleasure and work along with any wealth that work may produce are just means by which they obtain that pleasure, right?

[ 16 : 45 ] As we come to Ecclesiastes 2, we see that Solomon attempted to find meaning and pleasure as well. He says, I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure, enjoy yourself.

Since his work and his legacy proved meaningless, maybe he could find satisfaction in materialism and simply having a good time. He built houses and vineyards and gardens and parks for himself. He has slaves to serve him. He has power. He has more money than he knows what to do with. He has entertainment at the snap of a finger.

He even has what Sigmund Freud believed wrongly, I might add, was the very essence of happiness, physical gratification. Now, some people might read this and think, now, if only I had what Solomon had, I would surely be satisfied.

But think back to what I said before, we have all of this and more. We have at least this much. Our homes are more comfortable and convenient.

[ 17 : 56 ] We may not have full-time servants, but I'm guessing we probably hire people to do the kinds of things we either can't do or don't want to do. We also have technology to make things altogether easier.

I mean, we hardly need servants in this day. We have much more entertainment at our fingertips than Solomon had. But for argument's sake, though, let's say we're positively destitute compared to Solomon.

Could we find satisfaction if only we had more money and more access to life's pleasures? others? I'd like to read to you from a recent article by Tim Challies.

I don't know if you know who he is, but coincidentally, he published this article the same week we started our study of death. He writes, Why is it that the 1% of the 1% almost always seem to veer from their core businesses in attempts to prolong their lives indefinitely?

Amazon's Jeff Bezos is invested in Alto's lab, which is attempting a kind of biological reprogramming to extend lifespans. Google's Sergey Brin and Larry Page were instrumental in launching a business called Calico, which is carrying out studies that may eradicate all disease.

[ 19 : 21 ] PayPal's Peter Thiel is a big supporter of the Methuselah Mouse Prize Foundation, which means to dramatically improve health and longevity. Ethereum's Vadelic Buterin has decided it's likely that people born today will live to the age of 3,000 and is already participating in experimental treatments he believes may slow his body's aging.

Now, Challies is talking about some of the richest people on the planet. If they see something they want, they buy it. If they find something they think might give them pleasure, they get it.

They're successful, they're accomplished, they're famous, they're wealthy. I mean, according to the hedonistic worldview, they already have everything that could possibly satisfy a person.

So why, then, do they all feel drawn to spend time and money and effort in these various endeavors to extend their lives? That's exactly right.

Obviously, these things haven't satisfied them, so they need more time to pursue meaningful satisfaction, but even if they do feel satisfied for the moment, they know they will die, and death takes it all away.

[ 20 : 44 ] Solomon says, I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem, and whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

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.

Why? Solomon goes on to say in verse 16 how the wise dies just like the fool. Furthermore, he says in chapter 1 verse 18, 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.

The glaring problem is death. It taints everything. It brings down the value of everything we think has value. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Ever since I was a young boy growing up in rural Georgia watching reruns of the Dukes of Hazzard every Saturday morning, I have often dreamed of owning a bright orange 1969 Dodge Charger.

[ 21 : 59 ] If only I could just jump over one pond in that car, you know? I'm not even a car guy, but I've always thought owning that car would be a lot of fun.

Let's say I finally get one. I buy it, I drive it home, I'm as excited as you can expect, and later that day, I have to run to the doctor to get some test results.

While I'm sitting there with the doctor, he starts using words like stage four, and inoperable, and terminal. home. Now, before I heard that news, that car was the most valuable possession I owned. After I got the news, the value of that car drops to practically nothing. What difference does it make anymore? Or think about it another way, when I leave that doctor's office, which is going to be most prevalent on my mind, the car or the terminal diagnosis.

Death reduces everything to vanity, which is yet another reason we may avoid confronting death.

We'd like to believe our next job, or that next promotion will bring us meaningful, lasting satisfaction.

[ 23 : 18 ] We'd like to believe we'll finally have contentment. If only we make just a little more money, or have a little more free time to do the things we enjoy. But death says it won't ultimately matter because all of these things.

All of them are fleeting. They can't last. Now, oddly enough, you may remember it was Solomon who said, it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.

Now, that's pretty strange advice from a guy who claims death robs everything of meaning. If anything, you would expect him to be like the philosopher I cited a couple of weeks ago who told people to live in denial of death.

He concluded that life is altogether meaningless because we die, but we may as well pretend otherwise. Why not? We may as well push mortality from our minds and carry on as though life does have meaning.

Well, Solomon doesn't agree, believe it or not. Solomon wants us to confront death because he wants us to see the vanity of life. as we examine the world around us, as we evaluate our own lives, he wants us to be as dissatisfied and disillusioned as him by everything that is done under the sun.

[ 24 : 35 ] Why? Glance down to the end of chapter two, verse 24, in a surprising change of tone, Solomon says, 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 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. Now, how does Solomon go from the despair of verse 23, all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation to verse 24 where he says there is nothing better.

nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. Now, keep in mind, he's not taking the denial approach because, again, he later tells us it's better to go to the house of mourning.

He tells us sorrow is better than laughter in chapter seven. He wants us to confront death. He wants us to see the vanity it creates.

So, how could he possibly suggest we can and should enjoy the things of life? Solomon uses a key phrase here to indicate he's shifting his perspective a bit.

[ 25 : 55 ] He's now looking at life from a different angle. He says, this also I saw is from the hand of God. What's the difference?

God before this point in the book, he was examining a hypothetical world, if you will, where God doesn't exist. He was showing us what life would be apart from a sovereign creator who providentially rules the universe.

He was showing us what life is like under a secular worldview. And it's all meaningless. It's all meaningless. Notice verse 25 again, for apart from him, that is God, who can eat and who can have enjoyment.

If there is no God, the entirety of life is vanity. Life is really just a cosmic accident that will eventually come to an end. There can be no inherent meaning in anything.

But if there is a God, not to mention an existence outside of time and space, then things do have meaning and we can consequently enjoy them.

[ 27 : 09 ] You see, God intentionally created this world and he created this world with a purpose. And furthermore, the existence of God in his divine purpose means, number one, things do have value because God the creator gives them value.

And number two, their value actually extends beyond the boundaries of time because we will exist beyond the boundaries of time. There is an existence beyond the boundaries of time.

Now, under a secular worldview, we die. Then comes what? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Under a biblical worldview, it is appointed for man to die. even death has a divine purpose.

And after that comes judgment. Paul says, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, or we might say under the sun, whether good or evil.

[ 28 : 24 ] In other words, death doesn't eradicate the past altogether, or its consequences. It may destroy the body, it may destroy the fence I worked so hard to clean, it may destroy my dream car, but I'll still be accountable for all of it.

How did I use my body? How did I use my time? Was I a good steward by taking care of that fence, or had the fence become an idol to me?

This is the message of Ecclesiastes. Believe it or not, Ecclesiastes is actually a very evangelistic book, at least at the most basic level.

Solomon is imploring, particularly young people, to acknowledge our creator and trust his divine purpose. He wants us to lift our heads above the fog of time-bound life under the sun and see that there is more to the world than meets the eye.

If we believe in God, if we trust in God, we can, in fact, enjoy the things of life. As Solomon says in chapter 5, verse 18, Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him.

[ 29 : 52 ] For this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil.

This is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

So with God, life has meaning. With God, life has pleasure. satisfaction. It has enjoyment.

With God, life has satisfaction. Solomon, of course, takes the discussion only so far though. After reading Ecclesiastes, we may be tempted to think that overcoming futility is simply a matter of maybe changing our mindsets.

things. As long as we think there's a God and a purpose behind all things, problem solved, right?

No. Because changing our mindset doesn't objectively solve the problem of futility.

[ 31 : 03 ] Merely changing our mindset is no different than the philosopher who says we should just pretend we don't have a problem. That doesn't work. Whether we change the way we think or not, the problem remains.

we will die. That's the problem that needs to be solved to restore meaning to life. But how?

Well, quickly, go with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Now, chances are we'll come back to this chapter later in our study of death, but I'd like to highlight at least a couple of Paul's points here this morning.

Now, as you likely know, the Apostle Paul is defending the Christian doctrine of the bodily resurrection in this chapter.

He begins with a simple summary of the gospel, and then he proceeds to explain and defend the resurrection of our bodies on the basis of Christ's own resurrection.

[ 32 : 16 ] Since Christ was raised, we too will be raised as his people. Or put another way, since Christ defeated death, we don't have to.

Alternatively, notice what Paul says would be true if Christ was not raised from the dead. Glance down at verse 14. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain.

So much for believing in God, right? Do you see how Paul seems to be picking up the discussion where Solomon left off? Paul continues, We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise, if it is true that the dead are not

raised.

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.

Then, those also who have fallen asleep in Christ, have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, or we might say, hope only under the sun, at least that might be how Solomon would put it, we are of all people most to be pitied.

[ 33 : 51 ] Solomon says death creates a major problem for us. Namely, it robs life of meaning. So in turn, Solomon says God and only God can restore meaning to life.

Look to him, trust him. Paul takes the discussion a bit further. He tells us how God restores meaning to life.

He restores meaning by conquering death itself. death. That has always been the problem. Death, right? Through the sinless life, through the substitutionary death, and through the subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ, death is defeated.

So those who are in Christ joined to him by faith no longer contend with the looming problem of death. Death is ultimately swallowed up in victory.

In fact, the Christian can go as far as to taunt death, which is what Paul does here. Oh, death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God, Paul writes, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 35 : 08 ] Christ. Then again, if Christ is not raised, death isn't defeated. Our sin still remains. Death is still a problem.

Life is still vanity. And if Christ is not raised, then Christians are the most miserable people on the planet. Why?

Well, while everyone else knows death is a problem, and many are trying to create a solution for themselves, like the 1% of the 1%, Christians, we think the problem is already solved when it isn't in that hypothetical scenario.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins, which remember, our sins is the reason we experience death.

The wages of sin is death. We know, however, Christ did rise from the grave. So, what does that mean regarding our apparent problem of futility?

[ 36 : 22 ] Notice the last line of this chapter. Therefore, my beloved brothers, verse 1, is steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

In the Lord your labor is not in vain. That's a much different tone than what we heard from Solomon, at least in parts of Ecclesiastes.

Christ restores meaning to our efforts under the sun in this life, on this earth.

Our lives will indeed have significance, even beyond the grave. Though Christ has defeated death, and he's restored purpose to life, I want to be clear, this does not mean we have the liberty to become hedonists.

Elsewhere, Paul says, set your mind on things that are above, not on things on earth. Lift your eyes up. Focus on the right things.

[ 37 : 39 ] The conclusion of Ecclesiastes says, fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Let me summarize this last point. Believers in Christ can and should enjoy our work and our wealth and our possessions in the Lord.

But we should always remember a couple of things. Number one, these things are a gift from God. A gift from God.

And number two, he gives them to be used for his glory. They are a gift from God to be used for his glory.

Now, if we fail to recognize the former, we are bound to become ungrateful or worse. others. And if we fail to do the latter, if we fail to take the time we have and the wealth we have and the possessions we have and use them, not selfishly, but for the glory of God, if we fail to do that, well, Ecclesiastes says, God will bring every deed into judgment.

[ 39 : 06 ] So after reading Ecclesiastes, don't be too discouraged, thinking that life is all vanity because the problem that brings this futility to our lives is death.

And because of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, we are conquerors over death in him. we are dismissed.