

Remember Your Creator

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- [0 : 00] Imagine you are a citizen of ancient Jerusalem. Let's say it's approximately 945 B.C. Now, the last 30 years or so have been good for you and for everyone else in Israel. The nation is at peace. It's been very prosperous. Business is good. Food is plenty. All things considered, life has been pretty good. Now, maybe you've noticed a few cultural changes in recent years. Though the nation of Israel serves Yahweh, the one true God, you have noticed some altars, some idols popping up around the city over the last few years. You've seen evidence of pagan worship, which is concerning, no doubt, but God is still worshiped. You have a brand new temple. And again, most things are going pretty well.
- [1 : 00] It seems that God is quite pleased with His people. Well, one day you're going about your ordinary business when you hear shofars or trumpets blaring in the distance. Now, you know it isn't time for one of the sacrifices in the temple, so evidently the sound is coming from the king's palace. The king is summoning everyone to come to his palace for some sort of announcement, which isn't altogether unusual. It's been a while since the king has addressed the people, but he used to do this kind of thing quite often. Every time he had made a new peace deal or negotiated a lucrative trade agreement for Israel, he'd call the entire city together to share the good news. Great, you think. He has more good news to share. So you make your way to the palace along with everyone else. Now, once you get to the palace, something feels a little off. There's none of the usual pomp and show. There are no musicians playing. There's no pre-speech entertainment, if you will. Everyone's just huddled together waiting.
- [2 : 16] And you wait. And you wait. You wait for a long time in the heat of the day under the blazing sun until the king finally emerges from his palace, and you know right away something's wrong. You see, the king is a tall man who usually carries himself with dignity, his chest out, his chin up. But today, today he walks out of the palace slowly, kind of slumped over, staring at the ground. He looks a little disheveled. His robes look like he's slept in them, but he has bags under his eyes like he hasn't slept in days. And when he finally reaches the front of the stage to address the crowd, he doesn't speak. He just continues to stare at the ground. Something is clearly wrong. Well, after several long, awkward, silent minutes, the king finally opens his mouth, but he struggles to speak. He says something, but no one can quite make out what it is. He's kind of mumbling. His voice is low as he continues to stare at the ground in front of him. And then he finally looks up, not at the crowd, but kind of past the crowd, and he shouts, vanity of vanities.
- [3 : 43] And he shouts again, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. And then for the next 30 minutes or so, he seems to ramble about the futility of life.

All things are full of weariness, he says. All is vanity and a striving after wind, and there is nothing to be gained under the sun. Everyone in the crowd is, you know, looking at one another.

You're all thinking the same thing. What is this? What's wrong with the king? What's he talking about? Has he gone mad? You also notice a scribe sitting at the edge of the stage, furiously writing as the king speaks.

He's probably recording the speech, you think. But you also think, I'm not sure anyone will want to read it. Clearly, this is not a well-prepared, well-rehearsed speech by any means.

Well, when the king finally brings his speech to a close, he repeats his opening line, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Then he gazes at the crowd one last time.

[4 : 57] And you notice something in his face. Sincerity. You may not understand everything he just said, but it's apparent that he meant every word of it.

You now realize he was speaking from some very deep emotions. He was speaking from some regret. He was speaking from pain. This man is carrying a tremendous burden on his back that no one can see.

But it'll be several years before you have any idea what was really troubling him. Now, admittedly, I've taken some creative license with this story.

I don't know the exact circumstances of how the book of Ecclesiastes came about. But my version may not be that far from the truth. You see, when we read the book of Ecclesiastes, we see there are two people speaking, two voices, if you will.

One is the so-called preacher or teacher in some translations. The other is, well, we might call him the narrator. The narrator introduces the preacher at the start of the book.

[6 : 13] And if you want to turn to Ecclesiastes, please do. The narrator introduces the preacher at the start. He writes, the words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Then you'll notice in verse 2, he writes, vanity of vanities, says the preacher. And from there, the preacher's words are recorded. Then the narrator returns in the final chapter to essentially summarize what the preacher has said.

He offers his own conclusion. It's almost as though he isn't confident that the readers will understand what the preacher was trying to say. So he sums it up in his own words.

Now, the preacher doesn't identify himself. The book never uses his real name, but all the clues point to King Solomon.

He's introduced as the son of David, king in Jerusalem, in the conclusion, the narrator says of him, besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many Proverbs with great care.

[7 : 29] Of course, God blessed Solomon with great wisdom when he became king. Solomon was the primary author of the book of Proverbs. Plus, the preacher himself describes his power and his wealth and his great building projects.

Solomon constructed both the temple and the king's palace, which required thousands of men 13 years to build. So all of the evidence points to Solomon being the preacher.

But why is he called the preacher? Well, this title, preacher, or teacher, is used to describe someone who addresses an assembly of people.

One Hebrew dictionary defines the term as assembler. Another says, one who calls together and instructs the assembly. And if Solomon were speaking these words out loud in a speech, it would certainly explain a few things about the book of Ecclesiastes.

It would explain why there is a narrator. The narrator may very well be the scribe who recorded and possibly edited the words. And it would also explain why the book feels somewhat disorganized to us.

[8 : 47] I've read a lot of commentaries on this book and all of them seem to make the same point. There's not a lot of structure to it, which can make it a little confusing as you're reading it. But that makes sense when you stop and think about Solomon's words not so much as a book, but more as an unrehearsed speech.

Of course, we should also factor in the circumstances. By the time Solomon delivered this speech, the reason we might say he delivered this speech, he was a broken man.

After King David's death, Solomon ascended the throne of Israel as a relatively young man, and early in his reign, God appeared to him in a dream and said to him, ask what I shall give you.

And Solomon humbly acknowledged his inexperience, and he simply asked God for wisdom so that he might govern God's people well. Of course, God was really pleased with this request and granted him exceptional wisdom, not to mention riches and honor, promising that if Solomon would remain faithful, he would have a long, wonderful life.

You can read this in 1 Kings 3. In fact, Solomon's wisdom became legendary. You likely remember the story of the two women who came to him, both claiming to be the mother of the same child.

[10 : 26] Well, Solomon proposed cutting that child in half, knowing that the true mother would rather give up her child than see her child harmed. And that judgment really established his reputation throughout all of Israel as being an extraordinarily wise king, and this reputation went even beyond Israel.

Well, under Solomon's reign, Israel experienced unparalleled peace, prosperity. As I said, he undertook these massive building projects, the most significant being the construction of the temple in Jerusalem.

And this temple, of course, became the center of worship for God's people for generations to come. And notably, in 1 Kings 8, Solomon dedicated this new temple with fervent prayer, asking God to bless his people as long as they remained faithful to him.

So, we see what kind of king, what kind of man Solomon was in the beginning. He went on to write many proverbs, he composed songs, he conducted research into nature, animals and plants, and that sort of thing.

leaders and dignitaries from all around the world came to hear his wisdom and just observe his greatness, most famously the Queen of Sheba, marveled at his wealth and his great understanding.

[12 : 00] But despite all of that, Solomon's later years were marked by spiritual decline. he married many foreign pagan women in blatant violation of God's law, particularly for kings and rulers.

And he allowed these women to turn his heart toward idolatry. He built so-called high places around Jerusalem, those elevated places of worship on hills, for example, for idols and altars to false gods.

And these high places were used for the worship of various pagan gods. In short, Solomon failed miserably to remain fully devoted to the Lord as his father did.

And as a result of Solomon's disobedience, God declared that the kingdom would be torn from his son and divided. After Solomon's death, Israel would be split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north, Judah in the south.

So whatever glory Israel enjoyed during Solomon's reign would come to an end. And it's in the aftermath of God's judgment that Solomon likely spoke the words we read in Ecclesiastes.

[13 : 22] 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? Solomon knew that all of his accomplishments would soon be upended.

And he's heartbroken over this. He's full of many regrets. But here's the thing. Solomon doesn't make this speech to complain about his situation.

He's not venting and he's not cynical or pessimistic or, you know, many commentators have suggested as much. It's actually quite the opposite. He delivers this speech not to claim life is utterly meaningless and we shouldn't even bother.

Don't even get out of bed. But he says these things to implore others, especially young people, to essentially avoid his mistakes.

When he complains about the futility of life, he's focusing very narrowly on the kind of life he's left, a life that has largely forgotten about God.

[14 : 36] Notice how he concludes his speech in Ecclesiastes chapter 12. And I'm not referring to the narrator's conclusion, which begins with verse 9.

I'm talking about Solomon's conclusion. Here's what he says. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.

Before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say I have no pleasure in them before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain in the day when the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men are bent and the grinders cease because they are few and those who look through the windows are dimmed and the doors on the street are shut.

When the sound of the grinding is low and one rises up at the sound of a bird and all the daughters of song are brought low they are afraid also of what is high and terrors are in the way.

The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails because man is going to his eternal home and the mourners go about the streets before the silver cord is snapped or the golden bowl is broken or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain or the wheel broken at the cistern and the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

[16 : 07] Vanity of vanities says the preacher. All is vanity. Granted Solomon uses several idioms there that you may not readily understand but his primary point is clear enough.

Don't become like me. Young people remember your creator before you're old and broken like me.

Turn to him before you've piled your regrets as high as heaven. Enjoy him in your youth and you will enjoy him even more in your old age. Now is the time.

Remember your creator before it's too late. Personally, I have found it very helpful to think about Ecclesiastes in this way.

As I read the book, I think about everything Solomon has been through. I think about his sins. I think about his regrets and I imagine him pleading with people to learn from his mistakes.

[17 : 12] When he gives this speech, he's still a very wise man but he's a wise man marred by years of idolatry and unfaithfulness and as disorganized as his speech may be, undoubtedly affected by all of that inner turmoil he was experiencing, he does impart sound wisdom here and at the heart of that wisdom is a very simple principle.

Remember God. And what I'd like to do now is show you how this changes everything. It changes how we approach everything in life.

For example, let's consider a passage from Ecclesiastes chapter 1 starting with verse 4. Here's what Solomon says. 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.

[18 : 35] 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. 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 this sounds relatively pessimistic, doesn't it? Sounds like a man who's tired of life. He's tired of the mundane. He's sick of routine.

He sees life as monotonous and repetitive so he determines it must be futile and meaningless. The sun comes up, the sun goes down.

[19 : 39] Then it comes up again and it goes down again. The streams pour into the sea but you'll notice the sea never overflows and the streams never run out of water. Then no matter how much we see, no matter how much we experience, we never reach a point of absolute satisfaction.

We always want more. from day to day, year to year, generation to generation, life just repeats itself over and over again and when all is said and done, life ends, we leave this world and eventually no one remembers anything about us.

Is that something you can relate to? You ever had that kind of pessimistic feeling about life? life? When I was in high school, I was a terrible student and I was terrible not because I wasn't smart enough or capable enough but because I did not want to be there.

I hated the monotony of school. Every day was the same. I had to get up early at the same time every day, go through the same routines to get ready every day, go to the same classes with the same teachers at the same time every day and I couldn't stand it.

I played hooky just as often as I could possibly get away with it. Of course, there were times when I didn't get away with it but even then I convinced myself it was worth it just to break up the monotony.

[21 : 13] I had a guinea pig when I was in school and I distinctly remember watching him run on a wheel in his cage and thinking that's exactly how I feel. I'm running and running and nothing ever changes and what's the point anyhow?

Now, that probably sounds very depressing and it is but it's also to some degree or another how many people feel. Now, we may not feel that way when, you know, we're on vacation or during the holidays.

We may not feel that way when something new and exciting in life happens. Maybe we get married. Maybe we start a new job. Maybe we move to a new place but most of life is not a vacation.

Most of life isn't new and exciting. Most of life is a series of daily routines. Most of it is altogether ordinary and mundane possibly even boring.

I don't know what a typical day for you looks like but mine goes something like this. My alarm goes off every morning at 6 a.m. I go through a pretty typical morning routine coffee, shave, get dressed, try my best to get out the door and beat the school bus traffic in the morning.

[22 : 34] I spend my 35 minute drive to work listening to the news or audio books or podcasts or just quietly thinking. I spend most of my day at work of course meeting with people, navigating inter-office politics, trying to avoid all the latest gossip.

I leave work nine, sometimes ten hours later. I make the 35 minute drive back home assuming I don't need to run a few errands and I spend what's left of the evening with my family.

We eat dinner. Eventually we go through our bedtime routines and once the kids are in bed, Danae and I might enjoy a little time to ourselves or I might go read and study for a while then by 10, 30, 11 I go to bed anticipating that I will do it all again tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that.

Now I doubt anyone would consider my life exciting. For the most part it's just one routine after another not much changes from one day to the next or even one week to the next.

However, I feel much different about the monotony of my life now than I did when I was in high school. Back then I hated having the same routine every single day.

[23 : 53] Today I love routine. In fact, please don't disrupt my routine. I strongly prefer that my day hum along today just like it did yesterday and the day before that.

I don't really want much to change. Well, what's different? What changed? Why do I feel different about life today than I did in high school?

Well, I'll tell you in just a moment. But first, notice that Solomon addresses a bit more than the repetitive nature of life. He also touches on our inability ability to reach satisfaction.

Verse 8, the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. It's quite natural for us to crave satisfaction. I mean, our standard operating procedure is to always be working towards something, right?

When we're single, we strive to find a spouse. When we're married, we look forward to having children. We have a job, but we're hoping for an opportunity to get maybe a better job.

[25 : 03] We have a house and car, but we'd like to get an upgrade if at all possible. We look forward to retirement when we can finally determine our own schedules and maybe do a little bit more of the things we enjoy doing.

Maybe we'll even catch a break before then and something unexpected will happen that will finally give us that satisfaction we crave. But we never quite get there, do we?

I often joke with Danae about this. She has turned every room of our house into a beautiful home. And this has been a work in progress since we moved in, I guess it was five years ago, and I joke with her because I think we've started over already.

It's been subtle, but we've begun to remodel or redecorate rooms we already finished. And I'm not picking on her because I'm no different. For example, about twice a year, I would say, sometimes a little more than that, I make a transition between analog and digital.

You know, one day I say to myself, physical books and notepads are just too inconvenient. From now on, I'm using my iPad for everything. I've got my Bibles on it, I've got my books on it, I can write on it, it's easy to carry, the matter is settled.

[26 : 28] But then a few months later, I say, you know, there's just something about a physical book, a physical Bible. There's just something about holding up an actual pencil in my hand.

That's it, I'm done with the iPad, I'm going analog from here on out. And that's just one example. Every time I achieve a measure of satisfaction, it doesn't seem to last.

Can you relate to that? Okay. Well, Solomon's pessimism doesn't end with chapter one. He looks for satisfaction in other things.

Wisdom. Education. He looks for satisfaction in all kinds of pleasure and entertainment. He tries to find it in personal accomplishments.

But he comes to the same conclusion as the great philosopher Mick Jagger. He can't get no satisfaction. He can't find it anywhere under the sun.

[27 : 28] Under the sun is a phrase Solomon uses 29 times in this book. And I believe it's key to understanding the book.

It's key to understanding Solomon himself. You see, when Solomon delivers this somewhat disorganized speech, he is attempting to articulate two competing worldviews.

As it happens, he's not a cynic. He doesn't believe all of life is mundane and meaningless. But, if we are to find meaning, if we are to find purpose, if we are to find enjoyment in the mundane, then we have to look beyond the mundane.

What do I mean by that? Well, let me show you from here in Ecclesiastes. So, I read a portion of the first chapter. Again, verse 3, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

Verse 9, there is nothing new under the sun. He's describing the futility of life. He's describing the monotony of life.

[28 : 45] He's actually, actually though, being very specific about the worldview from which he is saying these things. That phrase, under the sun, signifies a purely materialistic, naturalistic worldview.

It's a worldview that disregards the spiritual. It disregards the prospect of eternity. And most crucial, it disregards God, not to mention all of the implications of God's existence.

And I mean Yahweh's existence, the existence of the God of the Bible, not merely a vague notion of some God, right? And that's where Solomon found himself.

He isn't speaking hypothetically. Despite his faithful beginnings, through the influence of his pagan wives, he fell into this kind of under the sun thinking.

And now, in hindsight, he realizes how miserable, how devastating that worldview is. It made everything meaningless. It stripped life of purpose.

[29 : 56] It robbed life of its joys, and he could never find satisfaction in anything under the sun. Now, let's jump over to chapter 3 and read what is undoubtedly the best-known passage in all of Ecclesiastes, thanks to the birds.

And listen carefully to what Solomon says here. Pay attention to the tone of these words as well as the similarities it shares with what I read from chapter 1.

For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted.

A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek and a time to lose.

[31 : 08] A time to keep and a time to cast away. A time to tear and a time to sow. A time to keep silence and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 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 perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live, also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man. Now, do you see the shift in worldview here?

It's a shift that actually began in chapter 2, but I started reading in chapter 3 because it's here we really see the stark contrast between these two competing worldviews.

In the former, life was frustratingly tedious, and in the end, Solomon could find no meaning in it. But in the latter, here in chapter 3, every facet of life has a distinct purpose. For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. God has given it to the children of man.

[32 : 48] He has made everything beautiful in its time. In chapter 1, the world just moves in circles, seemingly without rhyme or reason, and nothing can satisfy in it. But in chapter 3, the world moves from one predefined season to the next according to, and this is important, the sovereign plan of God.

And Solomon says it can and should be enjoyed. In fact, it's all beautiful. So what changed? Well, let's consider just a few things we find in chapter 3 that we don't find in chapter 1.

And the first is that Solomon moves from using the phrase under the sun to using the phrase under heaven.

In other words, he's no longer limiting his perspective to only the material world. He's now thinking beyond the scope of this world, which leads him to mention two more important things.

God and eternity. God and eternity. And that changes everything.

[34 : 12] Remember your creator, Solomon says. Why? Because it changes everything. Now, someone might ask, how does it change everything?

How does acknowledging God's existence, better yet, how does trusting in God's sovereignty change things? I mean, my alarm still goes off at 6 every morning.

I still have to go to work. I still have chores around the house. I have bills to pay, kids to wrestle, grocery shopping to do, meals to prepare, and so on. How does knowing God change any of that in a meaningful way?

Well, let's start with the obvious. Life won't be dramatically different on the surface. On the surface, Solomon admits as much.

The seasons of life, they'll continue just as always. Believers will go to work just like unbelievers. Believers will have yard work to do just like unbelievers.

[35 : 17] Believers have kids to raise just like unbelievers. The activities are the same. The seasons of life are the same. So what's different?

Well, I'm tempted to say it's simply a matter of perspective. But it's so much more than that. And we're not even going to get into the depths of it today.

We just don't have time. But I do want to read for you a beautiful prayer written by Douglas McKelvey. Now, this is not a prayer about the big moments in life.

This is a prayer about the smallest moments. There's not a lot of deep, complicated theology here, but there is theology in it.

And I want you to hear it. Listen carefully. Many are the things that must be daily done. Meet me, therefore, O Lord, in the doing of the small, repetitive tasks, in the cleaning, in ordering, in maintenance, in stewardship of things, of dishes, of floors, of carpets, and toilets and tubs, of scrubbing and sweeping and dusting and laundering, that by such stewardship I might bring a greater order to my own life and to the lives of any I am given to serve, so that in those ordered spaces bright things might flourish, fellowship and companionship, creativity and conversation, learning and laughter and enjoyment and health.

[36 : 57] As I steward the small daily tasks, may I remember these good ends and so discover in my labors the promise of the eternal hopes that underlie them.

High King of Heaven, you showed yourself among us as the servant of all, speaking stories of a kingdom to come, a kingdom in which those who spend themselves for love, even in the humblest of services, will not be forgotten, but whose every service lovingly rendered will be seen from that far vantage as the planting of a precious seed blooming into eternity.

And so I offer this small service to you, O Lord, for you make no distinction between these acts that bring a person the wide praise of their peers and those unmarked acts that are accomplished in a quiet obedience without accolade.

You see instead the heart, the love, and the faithful stewardship of all labors, great and small. And so in your loving presence, I undertake this task.

O God, grant that my heart might be ordered aright, knowing that all good service faithfully rendered is first a service rendered unto you. Receive then this my service, that even in the midst of labors that hold no happiness in themselves, I might have increasing joy.

[38 : 32] Amen. Well, that's a different perspective. A creator with a purposeful design for everything.

A sovereign God who personally, providentially guides us through life, including the most ordinary, seemingly mundane moments, moments, and an eternity to come.

All of this points to a reality much bigger than ourselves, much bigger than our seemingly trivial activities. Doing the dishes, for example, is not merely doing the dishes.

It's an opportunity to serve. To serve our creator even. It's an opportunity to fulfill our created purpose.

It's an opportunity, believe it or not, to participate in the eternal plan of God. And it's an opportunity to tap into a profound joy that most of the world will never know.

[39 : 46] Yes, all of this can be experienced by simply doing the dishes. But we'll have to explore it more further next time.

I pray that as time goes on, we'll get a fuller sense of how and why, and of course make some very practical applications as we study what I'm calling everyday theology, or the gospel in the grind.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, what a wonderful thing it is to know you and to trust in your sovereign will over our lives.

You have given us these seemingly mundane tasks, these things that are necessary in this life to do, but you've also provided a way that we can experience them with great joy.

Through Christ, believers who are saved, redeemed, looking forward to the kingdom to come can go through life with the knowledge and comfort that there is something greater coming, and that even what we're doing now is in service to that greater world to come.

[41 : 04] Lord, we are a part of your eternal plan. And these daily routines, they are also a part of that eternal plan. As simple, as mundane as they seem, Lord, help us to see these things with greater clarity, with gospel light, understanding that all that we do can be done for your glory and for the joy that you provide us through these things.

I pray that we will come to see throughout this series better and better what your word teaches us about the mundane, about the boring, and may our view of these things be elevated.

And again, may we glorify you. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.