



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

The Futility of Life

THE GOOD LIFE

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Tim Badal | September 18, 2022

It's a pleasure to have each and every one of you with us. My name is Pastor Tim, and I have the great privilege of opening up God's Word with morning. If you're new to church, you

picked the right Sunday to be here, as we open a new series on the book of Ecclesiastes. Grab your Bible and turn to the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, smack dab in the middle of the Old Testament, right after the book of Psalms and Proverbs. This is a 12-chapter book that we're going to be studying for the next 12 weeks. Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*, said upon reading this book, "It was the most honest book ever written." We're going to explore it, seek to understand it, then apply it to our lives.

Some of the greatest books ever written are not works of fiction or books about someone's life, but rather are diaries. My favorite presidential biography is the personal memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant. Reading things they put on paper from their own mind and heart, without any translation by someone else, is something really awesome.

When we talk about diaries or memoirs, another one that comes to mind is the diary of a young girl named Anne Frank. It's a powerful and intimate story, one she never dreamed would be read by millions of people generations later. She wrote the intimate details of her own life and what it was like to be a Jewish girl under Nazi occupation. It's raw, personal and often uncomfortable to read. Although it's mandatory reading in our schools, we have come to realize it is not easy to swallow. It brings us to a place of reality. No matter where we're living now, the reality of evil and the reality of what she experienced is more than we can bear.

Like the diary of Anne Frank, Ecclesiastes is that kind of book. It's raw, intimate and personal—and it's altogether negative. It's hard to read. We can walk away wondering what the purpose of life is, if this is all it entails. We're tempted to give up and give in. We're going to learn over the coming weeks, as we study this Old Testament book, that we are going to receive a massive dose of reality. Real life is going to sink in each Sunday as we look at this portion of Scripture.

So with the time I have this morning, with the opening verses before us and by way of introduction, I want to break this sermon down in three ways. One, I want to look at the man who wrote these words. Second, I want to understand the message he's trying to convey. Then third, I want to ask, "What's the meaning of it all?" So let's move quickly through this.

The man behind the book.

First, let's look at the man who wrote these words. Right away, in Ecclesiastes 1:1, we read, "*The words of the Preacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.*" No name is given, just this description. First of all, he's a preacher. What is meant there is not that he's a pastor in a church, but that he's an individual who is standing in an assembly of people to share something that is on his heart. It's the ancient version of a TED talk. He's going to stand up and share what he's been thinking about.

He then explains he's the son of David and the king in Jerusalem. We have no doubt in our mind that the author of this book is King Solomon himself. Some people have speculated about this, because he doesn't mention his name, but every verse and phrase screams "King Solomon."



- First, he was a son of David.
- Second, he was king in Jerusalem.
- Third, he was a man who had built great things, as we'll see throughout this book.
- Fourth, he speaks as a man who has been given great knowledge and wisdom from God. That describes Solomon, to whom God gave wisdom.
- Fifth, Solomon was a man who deprived himself of nothing he desired, which is stated over and over again.

So we can accept that King Solomon is the author.

Now we need to know a little bit about him. Biographies of this man are found in three places in the Old Testament. We're told of his birth in 2 Samuel 12:24–25. Then we'll learn about his life in 1 Kings 1–11 and 2 Chronicles 1–9.

Here are the basics of what we need to know, then we'll let him introduce himself in a moment.

- He is the second son of King David and his wife Bathsheba.
- His older brother had died in infancy as the consequence of his father's adultery.
- In 2 Samuel 12:24–25, we're told that when he was born, he was loved by God, so he was also given the name Jedidiah, which means loved by God.
- Solomon was also purposed by God to do great things and God promised to give him everything he needed to accomplish that purpose.

That's not something God promised only to Solomon. It's also true for every one of us. When you were born, God said, "I love you and have given you everything you need to bring Me glory and do good in the world around you. I will resource you with everything you need." God knit us together in our mother's wombs (Psalm 139:13) and, according to Ephesians 2:10, He planned in advance good things that we should do. He has equipped us with all we need, so we who are loved by God might bring glory and honor to him and do good in the world around us. Some of us are thinking, "I guess I missed out. I haven't been given all those things." Yet as we see in the life of Solomon, we're just like him. We're loved by God and resourced to do what God plans and calls us to do.

But you say, "Wait a minute—Solomon and I are very different people." That's right. Solomon was a prince who lived a privileged life. He had everything—the best of educations, the best clothing and possessions, the best food, the best opportunities. Yet as we look at his life, we'll see it was really messed up. Even though his dad was known to be a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), his home life was a wreck.

I want you to imagine for a moment Solomon coming to your small group. Our small groups started up again this last week, with dozens of people introducing themselves and getting to know one another. I want you to imagine this new, good-looking guy coming up to the house, driving the nicest of cars, wearing the nicest of clothes. He steps into the family room and sits down, then it's his turn to share who he is and what he's all about. He says, "My name is Solomon." Everyone says, "Hi Solomon." "I need to tell you a couple things. I'm part of a royal family." Right away, that separates him from the rest of the group. "I grew up in a mixed family." Well, there are a lot of mixed families in our day, so that's no surprise.

Then he says, "My dad was married eight times." People are thinking, "That's a lot more than usual." "I'm the second love child of my parents. My brother died in infancy, so I'm the picture of my parents' romantic zeal for one another. But that relationship was kind of ugly. It was an affair. In fact, my father had my mother's first husband killed. People talk about our family behind our backs."

"Well, Solomon, how many siblings do you have?" "I have lots of siblings. When your dad has eight wives, you've got a lot of siblings. I have full siblings, half siblings, step siblings—it's a mess. In fact, one day when I was younger, I had a brother who raped one of my sisters, and as a result, another brother, avenging the honor of my sister, had the other brother killed." Now people in your group are getting really uneasy. "Wait a minute. We just wanted your name, where you're from, and how long you've been attending Village Bible Church." But he goes on.

"My dad had a son that was favored. It wasn't me. I wasn't my dad's favorite. Because of my dad's *laissez faire* approach to leading his family, this favorite son became so angry that he tried to kill our father and take his throne." Now, one of the guys in the small group who likes awkward situations says, "Tell us more." The small group leader says, "Wait a minute. This is going off the rails

here." But Solomon continues. "After everything was said and done, I was the one who became king. It's like I'm the president or prime minister." The leader of the group is thinking, "Maybe I should just hand this group over to Solomon."

Solomon says, "When I became king, the Lord, through a prophet, asked if there was anything I would desire. I could have pursued possessions, pleasure, and prestige, but I asked for wisdom and discernment. So second to Jesus Christ, I'm the wisest person who ever lived." At that point the group is thinking, "I'm never answering any questions now, because this guy will have all the right answers."

Then Solomon goes on, telling them what this wisdom brought him. His life became great. "For all these years I have been known for my accomplishments. As king of all Israel, I resided over the most peace and prosperity Israel would ever experience. I employed more people than any president would ever be able to boast about. Some of my projects are known the world over. I built the temple my dad wanted to build but wasn't able to. It took me 46 years to build this temple for God, and the day it was dedicated, grown men cried when they saw it because it was so magnificent. God sent fire down from heaven to indicate that His stamp of approval was on it. I built amazing things. Because I was so wise, statesmen and even the queen of Sheba came to gain my advice and wisdom on all manner of issues."

Everyone in the group is now riveted by what he is saying. Then one of the women in the group says, "Okay, you're a pretty special guy. Where's your wife?" Solomon pauses. "Well, you're married, right?" He says, "Yeah." "Well, where is she?" "I didn't know which one to bring." The group says, "What do you mean, which one?" Now, Solomon is feeling a little uneasy. He finally says, "You know what? I'm not going to answer that question. I'll give you a riddle. I could have breakfast, lunch, and dinner for an entire year with each of my wives, and after a year I will not have had a second meal with any one of them."

So Al Gonnerman, the mathematician in the group, leans over to Jim, saying, "That's a thousand women." Solomon, still feeling uneasy, says, "That's a little excessive. I had 700 wives and 300 concubines." Now things are really awkward, so he pivots. "Let's forget about that. I'm also an author. I've written three books! People want to know what I have to say."

He goes on, "When I was a young man I wrote this book called Song of Solomon—a book about love and romance. It was a best seller. People loved it. Oprah had it in the book of the month club. It was great. You can't put it down; it's really a page turner. Then I got a little older and a little wiser and wrote this book about resourceful thinking and living. It's called Proverbs. I dedicated it to my children, so they would live lives that would honor God."

He then said, "Recently, in my old age, I wrote a book called Ecclesiastes. I call it my book of regrets. You see, I've lived life to the fullest and have come to realize that there's a lot I regret." He pauses. Everyone is thinking, "This Solomon who has come today? What a life and what a person!"

After the meeting, the people tried to explain him to others who weren't there. "Hey, we've got this new guy in our small group. His name is Solomon. He's an older gentleman." Someone asked, "Well, how would you describe him?" "Well, he has the intellect of Stephen Hawking, the charisma of Frank Sinatra, the leadership prowess of JFK, and the debauchery of Hugh Hefner. Merge those together and that's the new guy in our small group. Oh, and he's written three books."

So now you're asking, "Why would a church like Village Bible Church dedicate itself to a book written by that kind of guy." Because it's in God's Book. God has given us this book for a reason—to study it and to know it. I'm here to tell you that as crazy and as messed up as Solomon may have been, as messed up as his family was, God used his life. God's purpose for Solomon was to write a book about regrets, the cautionary tale of living a life apart from God.

And now God wants to use your messed up life, your dysfunctional family, and your dysfunctional experiences for a purpose.

So that's Solomon. Let's look now at his message.

The message he brings

The book of Ecclesiastes opens this way:

¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.

⁶ 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.

⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow,

there they flow again.

⁸ All things are full of weariness;

a man cannot utter it;

the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

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.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?

It has been already in the ages before us.

¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

Aren't you glad you came to church this morning? What a dose of reality. The opening verses of this book do not lighten anyone's day. What you're going to get is more of the same in the weeks to come. This book is by far the most earthy of all the Scriptures. What I mean by that is it's an altogether human book. It's utilitarian. He's going to talk about pots and pans, pants, pain, pleasure and purpose. He's going to talk about how that impacts everyday life. When you read this book, you will no doubt get to a place where you're thinking, "Yep, been there, done that." This book is a book that results in lots of questions.

The Bible is not foreign to asking lots of questions. One of the most questioning books in all the Scriptures is the book of Job. Job brings up a lot of pain, sorrow and questions. We look at Job and think, "Man, what is going on?" But at least in Job, God speaks from heaven and addresses the questions that befuddle us. In Ecclesiastes, God does not speak. It is all one old man lamenting about how bad life really is. Solomon's message to us is this: "You live, you die, then you'll be forgotten when you are dead and gone. God bless you. Have a wonderful day."

Now there is great salvation at the end of all this, but to understand what he's trying to prove, we need to look at some words. The first word we need to look at is mentioned no less than five times in verse two. It is the Hebrew word *hebel* which is used 38 times in this book. It's "*Vanity of vanities...vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*" First, it's a word that speaks of a vapor. We're just days away from getting up in the morning and having the vapor come off our breath because of the cold air that will be hitting us this fall. Try to grab that vapor, that mist, that comes from your mouth. Try to contain it. Watch where it goes. It will be difficult because it's there and then it's gone. James must have been reading the book of Ecclesiastes when he said life is a vapor or a mist—it's here for a moment, and then it's gone (James 4:14). So *hebel* refers to the brevity of life, the fleetingness of life.

Second, *hebel* also refers to being meaningless or vain. It literally describes an unproductive activity that yields nothing of value. What Solomon is saying to us today is that life is unproductive and leads to nothing of value. That's a sobering thought. He's saying is that metaphorically life is vain. It is lived in utter futility. To put it in layman's terms, life is meaningless, pointless, worthless and frustrating, because it is frail and fleeting. In short, there's not much to life. One commentator said it this way: "Life is like driving in a cul-de-sac, round and round we go."

On my first date with Amanda, I picked her up at her house. She lived in the Sans Souci neighborhood of Aurora which is a massive subdivision with only one exit which is hard to find. I think the developers still have a camera somewhere and get a kick out of it. There are people still trying to get out of that neighborhood.

So I was planning this wonderful date with this young lady, but it took me an hour to get out of the neighborhood. No GPS, no phones, no navigation, just round and round we went. That was a lot of time for me to think, "She's beautiful, but I'm not sure she's worth it. I'm never getting out of here."

Solomon is describing life like Sans Souci—just driving around, missing the exit, over and over again. It's the roundabout. You just keep driving roundabout, never exiting, then when you do, you're dead. This is life, all right? I'm 46 years old and that about the time Ecclesiastes starts to make sense. If you're under the age of 40, this is the dumbest book ever written, because you're thinking, "No. Life is great. I'm going to graduate, I'm going to find the love of my life, we're going to buy a house, we're going to have kids, we're going to get a dog, we're going to do this, we're going to do that." Then by 46, you're on the second half—the back nine of the golf course of life — and you're thinking, "Been there, done that."

To be realistic, at 46 years of age, I'm not sure there's much more in church I'm going to do. We preach, we teach, we lead people, then we do it again. There's nothing new in business.

In my catering world, we feed people, clean up, feed people again, clean up, feed people again, clean up. Then I look at my family life. I've had 46 birthdays, 46 Christmases and am about to celebrate my 25th wedding anniversary. Amanda's thinking, "Been there, done that."

The milestones I have left—just to be honest with you—are to see the high school graduations of my two youngest sons, college graduations for each of the boys, them getting married, then them bringing kids into the world. Then at some point Tim or Amanda will pass away. There's not a lot left. You're probably thinking, "Wait a minute, Tim. Are you having a nervous breakdown?" Some of you are thinking, "Get Badal some help." If you look at life honestly, there ain't much to it.

So Solomon is saying, "If you don't believe me, let me give you some examples." Look at the text. He talks about work, saying in verse three, "*What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*"

You've probably dedicated your entire life to this your career. You're going to spend more time at work than anywhere else, then what do you have to show after all the blood, sweat and tears? "Forty years I've worked for the company, for the school, the factory, in the office. Then my last day comes and they bring me a Walmart cake." "Hey, happy retirement! We got you a balloon. Everybody put in two dollars and got you a gift." There are only four people in the office; that's eight dollars.

Some years ago I celebrated my 25th anniversary as the general manager of 5 B's Catering, a company owned by my parents. I have taken it from a ma-and-pa company to a very large caterer. Man, I've done well. So I shared with my dad in passing, "Hey, Dad, it's been 25 years." He's like, "Aw, son. Happy 25th anniversary. Take a couple pork chops home on the way out." What do you get for your toil? You pour all this time into work and you get nothing, right? If we're really honest, nothing.

Solomon moves on with, "*A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.*" Each generation thinks they're going to figure it out. They're going to fix the world's problems.

Listen, Millennials. You guys have bought into this. You guys came out guns blazing. "Those guys were idiots before us. We've got this. World hunger, gone. World troubles, gone. We're going to create a not-for-profit and take care of this." Just wait 'til you're 40. You're going to be too tired to fix anything. At times it's going to be hard to clip your own toenails. We're getting real here. Generations will come. They're going to fix it. They don't, right?

Have you ever noticed this? I'm going to get real personal here. Every election is the one that matters. How many times are we going to have the election of a lifetime? I've had 47 lifetimes now and it's all the same. The opposition hates the one in power, doing everything in their power to get rid of them, then round and round we go. Nothing under the sun is different.

Solomon goes next to weather. The weather comes, the weather goes, but nothing changes. The sun goes up, the sun goes down. Here we go. It's Nick at Night over and over again, rerun after rerun after rerun.

When we drove into the church parking lot today, I said, "Oh, honey, look—the leaves are falling!" She replied, "Are you okay? The leaves fall all the time. It's September, Tim. Leaves fall." I'm trying to get through life just a little excited, and the leaves are falling.

We're being told we're going to experience the worst weather we've had—a quadruple El Nina, El Martina, El Something, La this, La that. I read an article about how bad it's going to be, and this is what they said: "Winds are going to be bad. Snow. Cold." And I'm thinking, "Have you never been in a Chicago winter? That's what we always have!" So weather is going to come and go.

Then Solomon says this in verse seven: *"All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full."* The idea is there's a lot of activity that produces nothing. Life means you are busy, but nothing gets filled. Nothing fills up. Now, right away, you're thinking, "Well, this is dumb. The Bible is stupid. Nobody thinks like this. I like what the world says. The world says we've got purpose, a lot of good is happening. The world speaks so nicely, but the church and the Bible are so pessimistic."

Let me tell you something. Go through songs that you listen to and you'll see Ecclesiastes all over the place. Let me give you an example. Rolling Stones. "I get no satisfaction." I try, I try, I try, but I can't get it. Let's move on—U2:

I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her fingertips
It burned like fire
This burning desire

I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone

But I still haven't found
What I'm looking for

He's talking about life. He's talking about love. He's on this journey to find something, but he can't find it. That's Ecclesiastes.

For those of a different generation, let's go with Kelly Clarkson. She looked at her life and said, "I didn't like where it was going." So she pens these words:

I'll spread my wings, and I'll learn how to fly
Though it's not easy to tell you goodbye
I gotta take a risk, take a chance, make a change
And breakaway

Break away from what? The monotony and mundane nature of life. If there's anybody who nails this, it's our friend Paul Simon when he sings this:

God only knows
God makes his plan
The information's unavailable
To the mortal man
We work our jobs
Collect our pay
Believe we're gliding down the highway
When in fact we're slip slidin' away

Carrie Fisher, the actress who played Princess Leia said this. "Life is a cruel joke and I'm the punch line." The world is talking about this, saying, "Life is meaningless." So what the world does, church, is what Solomon does. They don't let any desire leave them. They fill their lives with all of this stuff. Work—I'm going to give my life to work. Education—I'm going to give my life to my education. Family—I'm going to give my life to family. Sex and pleasure—I'm going to get all I can. Drinking and drugs—I'm going to give my life to that. Hobbies, possessions—I'm going to fill my life with them.

But like the seas of the world, there is a lot of activity, but it never fills the void. Like Mick Jagger says, we never find the satisfaction we're looking for. Some of you right now are trying to fill the meaning of life, thinking, "Another house, another car, another boat, another person, another wife, another job, another degree." We're filling our lives with all these things, thinking that in and of themselves, they will bring purpose, meaning and happiness. Yet Solomon is telling us, "I've been there, I've done that. What good is it for you do all of those things, then just die?" Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" (Mark 14:9). Some of you are trying to gain the whole world, but in the process you're losing your soul. This is the life that Solomon says is meaningless.

Here's how we know. He uses another phrase 30 times in this book. The phrase is "under the sun." You will walk away completely and utterly depressed if you don't put that phrase in the equation. Life is meaningless under the sun. If this earth and this life is all that you're about—your work, play, family, kids, education, paycheck—if the totality of your life is in the here and now, you will one day die, people will be sad, then they'll move on with their lives and you'll be forgotten. Then you'll endure eternity in a place called hell.

So gain the world. Make all the money you can. Have all the sex you can. Do all the drugs you can. Get all the possessions you can. Get all the promotions you can. Get all the degrees you can. Do it. Then at the end of that sad, meaningless life, you will breathe your last, and it will be over. Solomon says, "That's the perspective I'm writing from."

Church, life is meaningless without God. Let me say that again. Life is meaningless without God.

The meaning of life He bestows

So God in His grace, love and mercy looked down at the lot of man and woman, and saw us living utterly meaningless lives. Then when the time was right, God sent Jesus to be born into this world. He sent Jesus so we could live life under the sun through the power and provision of the Son of God. When we live life under the sun with the Son, He brings meaning, purpose and joy. Now, do we still long for all those things? We do. But instead of those things being a means to an end, they now become things we place on the altar of Jesus' throne. Our job, families, children, marriages, possessions, pleasures. We set them at the feet of Jesus, saying, "Jesus, I want to have these things according to Your ways and according to Your will."

So what's the premise of this book of Ecclesiastes? Don't live a life that is meaningless. Find God and follow God. He says at the end of chapter 12, the whole purpose is that you and I would follow God, that we would stop chasing after the wind. That we would begin living life backwards, as one book says, with death in mind, knowing that Jesus is the only One Who comes to give us life and to give it abundantly (John 10:10).

If you live life apart from God, you will live an utterly meaningless life. If you live life with Jesus, then my friends, you'll live the good life. That's what we want, amen? J.I. Packer put it this way: "What are we made for? To know God. What aim should we have in life? To know God. What is eternal life that Jesus gives? To know God. What is the best thing in life? To know God. What in humans gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of Him."

The good life is a life that is lived in relationship with the Almighty. Maybe today you're not living in that relationship. I want you to know that yesterday life without God was meaningless. I don't care what you accomplished; it was meaningless. You will come, you will go, you will be forgotten. Whatever you built, someone will take over. It's all meaningless. But when you give your life to Jesus, your life carries meaning, not only in this life, but for the life to come. So give your life for Jesus and follow Him. Jesus says, "I've come to give you life and to give it in all abundance" (John 10:10). He says, "I want to give you the good life."

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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