

Date of sermon: 7/31/2021  
Speaker: Pastor Jeff Poush  
Bible passage or verse: Ecclesiastes 1  
Title of Sermon: What's the Point?

**1** The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: **2** "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." **3** What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? **4** Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. **5** The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. **6** The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. **7** All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. **8** All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. **9** What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. **10** Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. **11** No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them. **12** I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. **13** I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! **14** I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. **15** What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. **16** I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." **17** Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. **18** For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Have you ever had something ruined for you -- before you even had a chance to try it yourself or to experience it? Maybe it was a movie someone ruined, a movie for you by telling you the ending -- "Hey, don't get too attached to the main character, because they die at the end." Maybe you were raised in a Chevy family -- and all you heard was how bad Fords were, and "Ford stands for 'fix or repair daily', so never drive a Ford!" And then you sit behind a Mustang for the first time. And you're like -- "You know, Fords aren't that bad after all!" Maybe it was brussels sprouts. You heard nothing but people ripping on brussels sprouts. "Oh, the only thing worse than the smell is the taste!" And then you broil them with some brown sugar and olive oil -- and you're like, "You know, brussels sprouts actually aren't that bad!"

Well, you want to know what I had ruined for me? The entire book of Ecclesiastes. Let me tell you why -- I never read the entire book all the way through until I was long out of college, and that's because in college I had a friend named "Ashley." That's really not her name, but I googled "Most popular girl names in 1991" -- so we're going to call her "Ashley." Ashley would regularly stand up in our campus ministry -- Campus Ambassadors -- we would have sharing time. And when there was an opportunity to share what you were learning, Ashley would regularly get up and share what she was learning from the scriptures. And -- now, if God were to create, and just one day in Heaven He's bored and said, "You know what? I'm gonna try to create the exact polar opposite of Jeff Poush." Boom! There comes Ashley. We couldn't have been any more different. But this is what Ashley would do -- she would stand up, and she would say, "(Sigh) Well -- I've been reading through Ecclesiastes, and I'm learning that everything is worthless. Life is worthless. Pursuing wisdom is worthless, relationships are worthless. I mean -- we're all gonna die. I mean, I don't even know why I'm at school spending all this money trying to get an education when wisdom is worthless! I mean, it's in the Bible. I'm just so depressed. I mean, what is the meaning of life, anyway? It's just a vain pursuit. It's all vanity. It's vanity. So, to sum up -- I've been reading Ecclesiastes, and I'm miserable."

And the next week would come, and Ashley would get up and she would give a repeat performance! So, one day I pulled Ashley aside and said, "Ashley, I think I know why you're so miserable. Stop reading Ecclesiastes! It's gotta be the most depressing book ever created! Stop it! I mean, listen to yourself! Just quit, and you'll be fine!" So, guess what -- I never read it! I'm like, "I don't wanna be like Ashley! It's a terrible book! It's totally depressing! I'm steering clear! I want nothing to do with the Book of Ecclesiastes." And then, I read it. Ecclesiastes is an unusual and fascinating book. It's part of section, a collection of books called "wisdom literature." And the wisdom literature's designed to help you and I navigate a broken world, navigate life with wisdom, understanding how to live as God-honoring people

in a world that's broken. And as a piece of wisdom literature, Solomon does give us some interesting tidbits on how to navigate life. And there are honestly some sections that make you scratch your head and wonder why he's so dark and pessimistic in his thinking. But one thing I really appreciate about the Book of Ecclesiastes is that it's real. It's authentic. It's a no-holds-barred, unguarded approach that addresses real life issues. You see, Solomon's not afraid to ask the tough questions. Nor is he afraid to tell it like it is when it comes to his observations, and the conclusions that he reaches about life. And I'm not kidding when I say that he's unguarded and has a no-holds-barred approach. I mean, look at the way the guy opens the book!

Ecclesiastes chapter 1 -- the very first words out of his mouth: "These are the words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem." This is King Solomon. David's son. He was the king over all of Israel. That's verse 1. "Nice to meet ya -- my name's Solomon, I'm a powerful smart guy with a really, really good family lineage. I got something to tell ya. Ready? Here we go." Verse 2. "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'" "Nice to meet ya. I just thought I'd give you a little bit of encouraging spirit-filled wisdom for ya. How ya feelin'? I'd like to ruin your day." That's how he starts his book. Solomon, at the end of his life, writes this book as a handbook, or a manual, if you will, to give us instruction on how to live life wisely. And this is his opening salvo! To tell you that everything in life is meaningless. And he will use this phrase 37 more times to make sure you get it through your thick skull. And you wonder why Ashley was miserable. To be told 38 times that life is meaningless -- utterly meaningless. Some translations will use the word "vanity." So, we'll read, "Vanity of vanities." Now, this was kind of a Hebrew technique to emphasize a word. We've heard of the Holy of Holies -- right? The Holy of Holies was the most holy place in the entire temple. So, Solomon uses it as -- "The most vain thing you can do is to pursue meaning in life. It is the most vain thing you could do -- to pursue meaning in life. There is no lasting, redeeming value to life's pursuits. That's what I've learned. I've written this book so that you can learn it, too."

So, what exactly is Solomon trying to communicate? How is this helpful for you and I? Well, I believe what he's trying to communicate is the principle that life is temporary and fleeting. Now, when you say it that way it doesn't quite sound as outrageous, does it? Because we all know this. We all know that no one lives forever. We all recognize -- no one would debate the fact that all mankind is mortal. Now, some of you risk-takers maybe are less aware of your mortality than others of us, but as a general rule, we all understand that life is temporary and fleeting. Now, the word that we translate into English as either "meaningless" or "vanity" is a Hebrew word, *hével*. Now -- *hével* means vapor or mist. So, if you're a visual learner like I am, you can see that, right? You can see what life being a vapor or a mist -- you can see that in your mind's eye. And it feels a little bit better than vanity and meaninglessness, right? Because we know what a mist is. We know that a mist is ethereal and it's temporary. When you're outside and it's cold, and you can see your breath -- it's just there for a minute and then it's gone. Or when you have a community group in just a few minutes and you happen to have three dogs -- so you grab Febreze, and you try to fake everybody out to make everyone think that your house actually smells good -- you can see that mist in the air for just a second, and then it dissipates.

That's what Solomon is saying. He's not saying that life is worthless! What he's saying is, life is temporary and fleeting. It's *hével*. It's just there for a short amount of time, and it's ethereal, and it's non-tangible. So, when Solomon makes the seemingly dark statement that life is meaningless, he's really making a fairly innocuous statement that, like smoke, or like a mist, our lives and even our accomplishments are short-lived. And this point is a building block. It's a fundamental building block that will set the foundation of the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. That's why he starts there -- not to depress you, not to discourage you, and not to get you to just close the book and put it on your shelf like I did! I had a fundamental misunderstanding of what the entire book was about because I interpreted life being meaningless or vain as being worthless, when what it really means is that life is short-term. It's temporary, and it's fleeting.

So, after this opening remark, he goes on to make another somewhat jarring assessment of life. Verse 3. "What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there

they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing." Solomon doesn't get any more encouraging or inspiring as he goes on, does he? None of this really, like, picks you up out of your seat and says, "Hey! Let's go face the day!" These are honest assessments of life, things that Solomon, the Teacher, the wise teacher, the King in Israel, reached these conclusions. So, these are more depressing words. They're not untrue words, but they're also not exactly words that inspire and motivate, right? So, what is he describing? Why is he doing this to the reader? Why is he doing this to you and I? Well, Solomon is using nature -- things that we can observe and see -- to tell us that, like nature, life is cyclical and monotonous.

As I was reading this, I had flashbacks to the water cycle. Do you remember in school the water cycle graph with all the arrows? Right? Where you got the clouds that fill up with water, and then we have precipitation that goes down into the lakes and rivers and streams that flow into the ocean. And then we have evaporation -- right? And then we have condensation that fills the clouds, which leads to -- guess what? Precipitation! So, the water cycle -- I mean, all these arrows -- they're just going around and around and around, right? So, we can see, like what Solomon's trying to describe, that, like the water cycle, there is a rhythm, and even a monotony, to life. Not only is there a repetitive rhythm to the water cycle, but the solar system is on a predictable path that repeats itself over and over. Generations come, and eventually the younger generation becomes the older generation. Twenty years ago, the community group that I lead -- we were the Young Marrieds. And pretty soon, we're gonna become the Drop-Ins! Right? That's just life! That's neither good nor bad. It's just a reality. Generations come and generations go.

The new iPhone will soon become the old iPhone. After another voting cycle, we will have a political party that replaces the old political party. And, like the water cycle, issues will get recycled and repeated, as if life is one big treadmill that just keeps churning along. Life is cyclical and even monotonous. So, where is Solomon trying to take us? Where is he trying to bring us, as he makes these observations that acknowledge the repetitive nature of life that can become wearisome? The monotony and the cycles of life, the rhythm of life can get you to a point where you just get worn out. And there are phrases -- there are little idioms that we have heard in society that mirror this exact point that Solomon observed. Phrases like, "the rat race" -- have you heard that one? "The daily grind." "Time marches on." "The more things change, the more things stay the same." We all know the truth and the reality of what Solomon is saying here. He's being real. He's being authentic. He's writing down what you and I intuitively know about life. That, like nature, life has a repetitive cycle to it. And that can wear people out! It can cause discouragement. It can cause lack of motivation. And we know this to be the case from our own life experience. Making the bed, for some of us, is a wearisome task, because it's just gonna get slept in and messed up the next night. That freshly mopped floor is soon going to have muddy footprints on it. You will tell your first child one hundred times to turn the light off when you leave the room, and then you will tell the next sibling the same thing, and then you will tell the next sibling the same thing. And that can wear a parent out.

We know this from life experience. There is a repetitive nature to life. Since the day God created the sun, it has risen every morning and it has set every evening. And Solomon looks at nature, he looks at life, and he asks the question, "Is there really anything new that ever happens?" Verse 10 -- "Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time." Consider with me some of the most pressing cultural issues that we have dealt with over the past couple years. Just think back -- just in our church some of the issues that we have dealt with. Not too long ago, it was the homeless issue. We had a lot of folks that were camping across the street. We've had a lot of folks across the street this way. And it was something we talked about. We talked about poverty, and how do we respond to the poor? And our security team -- we had to really wrestle with the homeless issue. How do we treat these folks with dignity and respect, and yet, how do we provide a worship service where people feel safe? We wrestled with homelessness. Is homelessness new? No. We have been having that battle from the dawn of time. "The poor will always be with us." Homelessness -- not new. Racial tensions. Boy, we are embroiled in some serious racial tension. Is that anything new? No. Mankind has been struggling for a long time to learn how to get along with each other. Oh, these racial tensions, they are brewing and they are close and they're touching our lives, but they are not new.

Progressive Christianity has gotten a lot of press. There have been some books written talking about how to be a Christ-follower, and yet -- not necessarily hold the Bible in the very highest of regards. And then of course there have been some books written to refute this new movement called Progressive Christianity. Friends, slapping the word "progressive" on something doesn't make it new. People have been trying to discount the authority of Scripture since the day it was written down, because if you can call this thing unreliable, you can live however you want and justify it. Progressive Christianity is nothing new. There is nothing new that a person can look at and say, "Ah, this is new." And how about the big one? COVID-19 -- the coronavirus pandemic. Well, before COVID came some things like smallpox, the Spanish flu, AIDS, cholera, Ebola, yellow fever -- just to name a few. This pandemic is nothing new. Some of the biggest things we've had to deal with, just like Solomon acknowledges -- there is nothing to which we can point at and say, "This is new." And I don't bring this up in an attempt to be insensitive or to belittle weighty issues like these. But rather, like Solomon, I see, and so do you observe, the cyclical nature of life. And I agree that it can become wearisome. We have talked to so many pastors over this past year -- good, good men, who love Jesus, who have simply said, "I'm exhausted. I cannot do this anymore! I can't endure the battle anymore. I've grown weary. I cannot have this conversation one more time." Because, like nature, life has a repetitive, cyclical, monotonous nature to it, and it can become wearisome. Not only is life temporary and repetitive, but life's pursuits can be unfulfilling.

Jim Carrey was one of Hollywood's most famous actors in the nineties and the early two-thousands. He was a highly regarded comedian. He was sought after to be in these very, very popular, huge money-making movies. People wanted him to come do stand-up comedy. They wanted him on their late-night talk shows. His face was everywhere. Jim Carrey, at the height of his fame, was making \$20 million per movie -- and that was just his salary! That's not talking about all the stuff he got on the back end from the ticket sales. \$20 million per movie! And he was making them fast and furious. Jim Carrey at the height of his popularity had it all - fame, fortune -- everything he could want and more. And regardless of how you feel about his movies, this quote is something quite profound. Just last year, Jim Carrey said this: "I wish everyone could get rich and famous and have everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that's not the answer." Jim Carrey is rich. He's powerful! He's well-known, he's famous. Just like Solomon. And they both reached the exact same conclusion. Acquiring things is not the answer to the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is not found through the acquisition of things or of lofty position.

Listen to how Solomon says it in verse 12: "I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I was a powerful, powerful man. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I, as the most powerful man in all of Israel, I set my mind to understand wisdom. I set my mind to understand how the world works and where happiness and satisfaction comes from. And I discovered that that's a heavy burden to bear." Verse 14, "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Another beautiful word picture -- something that we can see. Imagine chasing after wind. Is there a more vain, futile pursuit? Because friends, you've never gonna catch it! You've never gonna reach out and grab that vapor or that mist, because it's ethereal and it's not tangible. Chasing fame, fortune and pleasure is as senseless as chasing after the wind, because friends, there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Chasing after the wind is a vain pursuit. You've never gonna catch it, because it's intangible and unattainable. So, I have to ask -- was Ashley right? Was she right after all? Is Solomon a pessimistic killjoy that only could see the bad things in life? Did he write this book to drive us into the pit of despair? If life and its pursuits are actually meaningless, as Solomon says in black and white, then what's the point? To give up? Should we despair? Should we doubt God's existence? Should we become cynical?

Friends, I'm about to give you the key to understanding the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. Don't miss this, because it's imperative that you catch this principle. It's the very thing that Ashley missed, and it made her miserable. It's a principle that I learned from a seven-year-old. I have a brother who's 13 years younger than I am. When he was seven years old, he comes tearing into the house -- he was playing with a friend. Tearing into the house! "Mom! Can I go sailing? They're going sailing, and they invited me to come! I've always wanted to go sailing! Mom, can I please go? We've gotta hurry! They're in the car, they're getting ready right now!" And my mom's like, doing all the right mom stuff -- "Well, you're sure this isn't just something that you two cooked up? Mom and dad are involved in this process?"

"Yeah, his dad -- he's the one that invited me, and they're going, but they're getting in the car right now -- I gotta hurry." So, we're running around. Mom's like, "Get the life jacket! Get the sunscreen! Get his cute little water shoes! He's going sailing!" So, we get him all decked out, get him on his bike, send him on his way -- he's going sailing. About an hour later, we see him riding down the street, life jacket on, beach towel around his neck, saddest little seven-year-old face you've ever seen riding his bike. Comes pulling into the driveway. Looks at us and says, "They meant garage-sailing!"

If one of us would have had the forethought to ask this question, we could've saved all the discouragement and the depression and the misunderstanding. "When you say 'sailing,' what exactly do you mean?" Solomon, when you say "under the sun" what exactly do you mean? Friends, that's the key to unlocking the Book of Ecclesiastes. Understanding the answer to that question will help you avoid depression, discouragement, and misunderstanding. The phrase, "under the sun" is the entire key to understanding why Solomon spends so much time talking about things that are depressing and frustrating, and toiling in vain! He does it on purpose, you guys! He wants to drive you to this point where you understand the futility of living life with an earthly secular mindset. When you have nothing but a horizontal perspective on life. When all you can see is life lived under the sun, where the people are -- on this orb -- when that is all you can see, you will experience frustration. Solomon uses that phrase, "under the sun," four times in this chapter, and 29 times in the book. Solomon is intentionally trying to paint a grim picture of what it looks like to live with a secular, worldly mindset. A person who lives life with their mind set on temporal, fleeting things will only have temporal, fleeting happiness or fulfillment. And why is that? Because everything this side of the Garden of Eden is subject to futility. Since the fall of mankind, sin has brought death, decay, unreconciliation, discontent, heartache, and pain. Everything under the sun is meaningless because it is temporal, and it will pass away. No matter how much you accomplish. No matter how successful you get. No matter how much wisdom and life experience you acquire, it won't be enough to truly satisfy, because the eye will never have enough of seeing and the ear will never be satisfied by what it hears. We all have this insatiable appetite for more. And under the sun, with a temporal mindset, we will put ourselves in a position where we will experience heartache and discouragement, because there is no ultimate meaning and purpose to be found with eyes set on temporal things. So, in a sense, Solomon is trying to paint a gloomy picture of life because there is nothing new under the sun.

But Solomon doesn't want to leave us here. He wants to reorient our attention, and he's using a technique called a negative apologetic. He shows you what you don't want to have in order to drive you to what you do want, so he intentionally demonstrates what a life without God looks like. He wants to demolish any confidence that you and I might have that we would put into a manmade system or human achievement, and he does that in order to reorient our focus from the temporal to the eternal. Solomon wants us to feel a worldly dissatisfaction in order to drive people to God for their sense of meaning, satisfaction, and fulfillment. He wants to make us desperate for God -- in order to get us to move our focus from the secular, physical world under the sun, to a sacred, eternal, spiritual realm where God resides. And when we do this, when we reorient our focus from under the sun to over the sun, there's this beautiful integration of life that happens where God says, "Let me now inject meaning and purpose into those things you have in life. Don't put all of your hope in your family! Let me infuse hope and meaning and purpose into your family. Don't put all of your hope into your athletic career. Let me infuse your athleticism with meaning and purpose." There's this beautiful integration that happens when we are able to get our eyes off of the temporal and secular onto over the sun and then a beautiful integration happens.

So, what's the point? What is the point of all this? If there's nothing new under the sun, then change your focus. Solomon was frustrated with what he experienced in life, and you can feel it in every word he writes. He had an insatiable desire to acquire and accumulate worldly things, and it left him empty. He was the richest man alive, and yet he was emotionally bankrupt. He was the most powerful man on the planet, but he could not put an end to injustice. He was the world's wisest man, and yet he was burdened by life's unanswerable questions. If there's nothing new under the sun, then change your focus. When we focus on temporal things, we find temporary joy. But when we focus on eternal things, we find eternal joy. Let me be very clear -- pouring your time and energy into loving your family is a good thing. Do it with all your heart. Expanding your mind through study and reading and learning is a good

thing. Gain as much wisdom as you can. Setting career goals and personal health goals is important -- strive to reach every goal you set and aim high. But be cautious, because when you make a good thing the main thing, you will be unsatisfied. When you make a good thing the main thing, you will be unsatisfied. Have you ever tried to hang a picture on a wall using a nail that's too small? You're like, "I don't want to put a bit ol' hole in the wall, so I'm gonna use this wimpy little sissy panel nail." Clink clink clink clink -- and you put it in there, then you get the big ol' hanger and you put it on there, and you're like -- "Looks good!" BOOM! And it's gone. Or maybe you've used those new -- those cool command strips, and you use the medium strength when you should use the mega ultra-strength. And you slap those babies on there, you hang your picture, you step back, and it's like -- Rrrrrr. That's what I did over here in the gym with my Upward banners. I knew I needed the beefy ones! But I was a cheapskate, and I scrounged up some ones that were already in the drawer, and I knew they weren't strong enough. They were inadequate for the job! So, I hung 'em up, stood back, they looked great, and the next morning I came in and they were all in a pile on the floor.

You see, when you hang your hopes on something that's inadequate, you set yourself up for discouragement. When you set your hopes on temporal things that are fleeting and temporary, you will be discouraged. When our focus is on temporal things, we will only have temporary satisfaction. But when we hang our hopes on the Creator who not only resides above the sun but who created the sun -- oh, we can rest in that! We can have lasting, eternal hope, joy, and satisfaction, because we hung our hopes on the One who could truly satisfy. Friends, if we focus on temporal things, we'll have temporal joy. But satisfaction is found when we hang our hope on the Creator who rules over the sun. Do you want to have a family that is happy, healthy and prosperous? Do you want to have a life that's filled with meaning and purpose? Do you want to have a fulfilling and successful career? Well, so do I. So, focus on eternal things, because life is temporal and fleeting.

Copyright by First Baptist Church, Salem OR (July 31, 2021). Please do not copy without written permission of the copyright holder.