

Part 1 - Life is Vapor

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[0 : 00] Hey guys, this is a unique special recording. Sometimes technology doesn't go the way we want it to, and so the recording from the Sunday sermon didn't happen. This is me recording that same sermon, and hopefully it comes through well because I'm really not preaching to a crowd. I'm just preaching to a phone basically. Anyways, trust that it goes well. We are starting a new series in Ecclesiastes. Really excited about this. It's a really interesting book of the Bible because it is actually a lot more philosophical. It's heavy on philosophy. It's light on theology, and what I mean by this, it asks a lot of deep questions, really like existential questions about what it means to be alive and looking at life and all its futility, and it doesn't get us right to God, and God's the answer. It actually just kind of leaves us in this place of thinking about these tough, difficult things, these hard questions of life. In Ecclesiastes, it was written by a king in his old age who's looking back on his life, and he's just not an old dude. He's more than that. He was actually considered the ultimate sage of his day.

Think about this. Not just people coming in from his kingdom were asking him for his wisdom. Kings and queens from other kingdoms were hearing about his wisdom. His wisdom was renowned all over the world in his day, and so they were coming to hear, and they would stand in awe at what he knew and his knowledge and his wisdom, and his wise sayings were written in books. These books became bestsellers, and they're still bestsellers to this day, and he was also a very wealthy man, like billionaire club wealthy. He would have been able to have multiple jets, unending shopping sprees, all the homes and castles he wanted, whatever he wanted. He would have been able to do it. He was just that wealthy, and so his position and money afforded him the opportunity to try everything and search out everything. So what does an old man say who knows it all and has done it all, and who has it all? Ecclesiastes 1 verse 1 starts this way, the word of the preacher, the son of David, king of Israel. Check out what he says, vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Then he asks this question, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? So I don't know about you, you read this. My first thought is, man, somebody forgot to take their meds, right? Man, we were hoping when you come to the Bible and read the Bible, you're kind of hoping for a little chicken soup for the soul. We want the feel goods.

We want the encouragement. But man, this, like we read this, and it tastes a lot more like split pea soup. Solomon comes out swinging, right? And he's doing this because he wants to grab our attention right away. He asks us, and he wants us to wrestle with this big question, what is life?

And this is what he gets at. Life is fragile and fleeting no matter what we do. Life is fragile and fleeting no matter what we do. Now, there's a comforting thought, said no one ever, right?

But that's it. It's not supposed to be comforting. He's not here to comfort us. He's here to sober us. Is it better to live as an intoxicated fool by life's vanities or to live sober with the understanding of how quickly it is all gone? Our life is a vanity of vanities. In Hebrew, when you use a word twice in a row, it makes it a superlative. So Solomon is saying, not just life is a little bit vain, he is saying life is the ultimate vanity. You and I were born, we do some stuff, we toil under the sun, and then we die.

[4 : 0 4] Man, this life, it is gone like a vapor. It's up in smoke. It's like poof. It's gone before we know it. And it always feels too soon, right? When we go to funerals, whether those people are eight or 80, the sentiment is always the same. It just feels too soon. We always wish we had more time.

And the vanity of life, the vanity of life's shortness is also amplified by what happens in life. Everything that promises joy and happiness and meaning end up falling short.

I used to listen to this British band called Pulp when I was a teenager. And the guy that was writing the lyrics, man, he wasn't a Christian at all, but he had this sense of what the vanity and meaningless of life is all about. And he writes this song and here's some of the lyrics.

You've got no need, but still you want to go and book that restaurant. The wine will flow, and then you'll just fly away. Yeah. So please can I ask just why we're alive? Because all that you do seem such a waste of time. And if you hang around too long, you'll be a ma-a-a-a-a-an. That's man.

Just how he said it lyrically there. He goes on to say, your car can go up to 110. You've nowhere to go, but you'll go there again. And nothing ever makes no difference to a man.

[5 : 3 3] What is he saying here? Man, we go and we eat at restaurants. We fill our bellies. We drink good wine. We get intoxicated. We drive fast cars. We go places. Why? We do this like in a never-ending cycle.

Because we're bored. Most of our life is lived escaping boredom. We need something to make us happy. We get bored, and we get depressed, and we get down, and we think we're just missing out.

That's life. It just isn't what it used to be. We feel like we got nowhere to go. And so what do we do? We just go where we've already been. We repeat. Same restaurants, filling our bellies, doing the same stuff, driving fast cars. We chase after stuff. We chase after stuff, guys, that promises joy and meaning.

But when we get those things, man, the joy and meaning dissipate like a vapor. And modern psychology is actually catching up to Solomon. A prize-winning psychologist, researcher, and author of a recent New York Times bestseller puts it this way. Nearly all of us buy into what I call the myths of happiness.

Beliefs that certain adult achievements, marriage, kids, jobs, wealth, health, these achievements will make us forever happy. And that certain adult failures or adversities, health problems, not having a life partner, having little money, those things will make us forever unhappy. This reductive understanding of happiness is culturally reinforced and continues to endure, despite overwhelming evidence that our well-being does not operate according to such black and white principles. One such myth of happiness is the notion that I'll be happy when dot dot dot or just fill in the blank.

[7 : 2 6] What is your thing? The false promise is not that achieving those dreams won't make us happy. They almost certainly will. The problem is that these achievements, even when initially perfectly satisfying, will not make us as intensely happy or for as long as we believe they will.

Hence, when fulfilling these goals doesn't make us as happy as we expected, we feel there must be something wrong with us or we must be the only ones to feel this way. So this lady, Sonia Lyabermorski, she is writing about this and she is really scratching at what Solomon just gave us in these first three verses. You and I spend our lives, people, we all spend our lives chasing after things that we think are going to give us joy and meaning. Actually, we're told they're going to bring us joy and meaning. And then when we get them, we're like that two-year-old at Christmas. We are like super excited about it for two seconds. And then it's like, what's next? We're bored with it. What's next? The thing is, we don't realize we do this. Ecclesiastes is telling us, the preacher is telling us, wake up. Let me give you a bigger vision of life than how you are living it. So often, we live like a horse with blinders on.

Horses have these blinders, right? And it's to keep them going in a direction as all they could see is a little bit and a very narrow vision of what's right in front of them. And that's how we live, our head forward, living life, toiling at work, small vision. We have this small little window and we think that's all there is. And Solomon, what he's doing, he's inviting us to stop and ask ourselves the deepest, most unsettling question. What is the point of life? Where am I putting my hope to make this life count? We don't like to ask those questions because if we're honest, we are afraid of what the answer might be. So instead of thinking about them, we keep ourselves busy.

We get preoccupied and we preoccupy ourselves from thinking about the existential crisis lurking in our hearts. Man, we toil away. We work hard, right? Like the seven dwarves. Hi-ho, hi-ho. It's off to work we go. And we just rinse and repeat that all our lives. And when we aren't working, we keep ourselves occupied with glowing screens that fill us with vanities of news and entertainment and social capital. And again, like that horse with blinders on. Man, most of our life is spent looking at a screen that's a foot in front of our face. We don't broaden our vision to consider the past or the future. We're content to live in the smallness of the present, the small little box window of our vision, the smallness of the present. But Solomon, he's pulling off those blinders. He's pulling us out of that drunken stupor. And we like to think that our life is going to be different somehow. We like to think, oh, that's not us. That's everyone else. We're going to be significant.

Our life is going to have mattered for something. My contribution is going to be remembered. But then we die and this earth marches on without us just fine. Verse four in Ecclesiastes, 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, 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 go again.

[11:12] What is this getting at? Well, Solomon's saying this, you'll barely be regarded in life. You will be forgotten in death. And guys, this is humbling. This is a hard pill to swallow, but just because it's a hard pill to swallow doesn't make it untrue. It's actually very true.

People will forget you and me. You know why? Because think about it. We've forgotten those who came before us. We're like that. Every generation is like that. Why? Because we are so fixated on the present. We rarely see past the iPhone in front of our face. Think about this, right? Rome in its heyday, it had these Caesars and every Caesar. And when they were alive, they were worshiped as gods. They were seen as gods and worshiped as such. And today, does anyone worship them as gods? No, no one worships them. In fact, we don't really think about them at all, right? We barely even know their names. We may know a couple of them, but most of them are just totally forgotten. All they are is a name we have to remember to get a better test score when it comes down to it. That's how we treat them today. And when the test is done, what do we do? We don't think about them. We don't remember them. They're out of our minds and memories. Poof, like a vapor. It's all vanity. We were in South Africa where my wife grew up. We were there visiting family and we went up to this town called Franschhoek. And it's this really, really old town established like centuries and centuries ago. It's like older than the United

States. And right at the end, there's this graveyard, really beautiful, pristine graveyard. And definitely like a tourist location when you're there, you got to go see it. And so we're walking around this very well-kept, well-manicured graveyard. There's all these different types of granite gravestones everywhere. Really small ones, really big and ornate ones. You know, the small, you could tell like who was probably important in their day based on the gravestone size, which, you know, is a vanity. If you think about a gravestone, it's kind of this last chance that we won't be forgotten. But here's the thing. Everybody walking around there, myself included, looking at those gravestones, all they were to me was a name and two dates.

Nothing else. I don't know who they were, what they were in that town, what they accomplished in life, if anything, what they added that we enjoyed today. I have no idea. I mean, for all I know, I could have been looking at a gravestone of a guy who invented the chicken sandwich. Who knows?

Whoever he was, whoever they were, however important they may have been when they lived, all of that was forgotten. All of that is forgotten in the present time. The wheels of time keep turning round and round life goes. And for a while, we get pulled into this merry-go-round called life.

[14 : 06] We're born and we're there here for a season and then we die. We get pulled out of it. But the merry-go-round keeps going on just fine without us. And that is the vanity of life. No matter what we do, it's guaranteed to be forgotten. And it's quite humorous because later generations will often discover things and think we found something new. But even that's all vanity. There isn't anything new under the sun, just forgotten things rediscovered. Ecclesiastes 1 verse 8 says, 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 new thing of which it is said, see, this is new? It has been already in the ages before. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. See, some of us think Chick-fil-A invented the chicken sandwich. But let's think about that, man. Chickens and bread, they've been around for a long time, right? Are you telling me that in all of history, in all the places in the world, right, there at some point over the centuries, there wasn't some French farmer in the Pyrenees named Jacques who didn't have this aha moment. Or, you know, maybe because he's French, he had a ha-ha-ha moment. I don't know. But whatever the French equivalent of an aha moment is. So he's, you know, Jacques is up there in the Pyrenees chewing on a baguette, looking at a chicken, chewing on a baguette, looking at a chicken. And then, boom, he didn't think, you know what? Chicken sandwich, amazing. Here's the thing, though, guys. Before we get all puffed up with our new invention or new philosophy, we have to realize, you know what? It's going to be forgotten. It's going to be forgotten that we did that or added that to civilization. Whatever is celebrated in this generation will be forgotten in the next.

Why is that? Because there's going to be new things to celebrate. See, us humans, we have a very short attention span. We're like a cheap cooking pan that gets hot really fast and cools down just as quickly. It's easy to get our interest, but it's impossible to keep it. Look at what Ecclesiastes verse 8 says here. All things are full of weariness, a man cannot utter it. Check this out. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. We get bored with what is and start looking for the next thing to get excited about. History has to repeat itself because no one is listening.

No one remembers. No one pays attention to its speaking. So, how do you and I, how do we get off this merry-go-round of vanity?

How do we stop this cycle? What can we learn? Surely, we think there's a life hack to solve this riddle. Maybe we just need more knowledge and wisdom. Maybe there's a thing that we can learn that hasn't been learned before that's going to solve this unsolvable riddle. This is often what people turn to in search for meaning. Every generation sees things aren't all right, and every generation sets out to fix it. How do we do that? And we add knowledge to knowledge. We add wisdom to wisdom, progress to progress. So, every generation knows more than ever. We can see further into the universe.

We can see deeper into subatomic space. We can diagnose more illness than ever before. We can analyze more mental health problems. But for all that, what have we solved? What have we solved?

[18 : 12] Verse 12 says, I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem. I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and is striving after the wind. Man, if we were honest, we're like that preacher of Ecclesiastes. We stand in this generation still trying to crack the meaning of life, that big question that never gets resolved. It's kind of like that movie Groundhog Day, you know, where that man, he repeats, he keeps repeating the same day over and over again. He falls asleep at night only to wake up to right where he was at at the beginning of the day. And so he's in this endless loop. And that's what life is from one generation to the next. Where our generation ends or falls asleep, the next generation wakes up to the same existential problem. And what do we all wake up to find? Well, it's here in verse 15. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. When you look at life, like Solomon did, he considered everything. He applied with his heart, wisdom, everything. And look, just considered. He looked all over the world and how man lived all over the world and considered those things. And this is the conclusion he came to at the end of his life.

Crook the crooked. What is crooked can't be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted. This world is cruel and full of injustice and inequity. Every generation will fight injustice, will fight addictions, will fight war, will fight poverty. Bad things will happen to good people. Good things will happen to bad people.

And this is meant to put us in a place of hopelessness. It actually should. You should consider those things and sit in this place and just feel the futility, feel the meaningless and the hopelessness of it.

Solomon's pulled off the blinders. Man, I hope for all of us. We're realizing, man, this isn't some madman's raving. This is like wisdom. This is a guy who's sought out the meaning of life, and he's given it to us honest. We're seeing life in 4D now, 360 degrees, not our little tiny vision box of the blinders on. Man, we're seeing everything. And it's not good news.

We look back through history and see that it keeps repeating itself. And therefore, we look forward with real no hope of change. And here's why, guys. This busted up world, this busted up world cannot be fixed by us. We can't fix what is broken. Mankind can't fix what is broken. We can't fill up what is lacking.

[21 : 12] All the need that is out there, man, we cannot meet that need and make it go away and solve that problem. The solution isn't us. We aren't the solution. Therefore, the solution has to come outside of us.

So where there's bad news, where, man, we look and we see every generation, the crooked can't make it straight. Man, there's always need and it can never be filled. That's the bad news, but that's why the gospel is good news. The gospel isn't, you know what, it's all up to you. You got to figure it out. You got to work it hard. You got to crack the code. Do better. Try harder. That just ends up in a false hope.

That ends up in us getting to this place of crisis and saying like, man, it can't get fixed. There is just no way. What we do see in the gospel is this amazing truth that the solution did come from outside of us.

Jesus, God, came from heaven, not from under the sun. He came from a place not under the sun. He lived as a man. He came into our space and he toiled under the sun. He experienced this vanity that is life, but he also came to fix what was broken and to fill up what was lacking. Romans 8 talks about it this way.

Verse 18, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time, the futility, the vanity of life, they're not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. Why? For the creation was subjected to futility, to vanity, meaninglessness, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[23 : 09] For we know this, that the whole creation has been groaning together. Man, we read Ecclesiastes and we feel this inner groaning, oh yeah, things aren't as it should be. Things seem inequitable. Oh my goodness.

You know what? Life is going to march on just fine without me. This groaning, man, it's in us too. We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now, and not only creation, but we ourselves, we have the first fruits of the Spirit. We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies, for in this hope we are saved.

Jesus came from heaven, came to save us from the curse of sin and death that has put everything under the sun in bondage. He conquered this fragile and fleeting life. How did he do it? By bringing eternal life. You and I, we are born into this fragile and fleeting life, but by faith in Jesus, we're set free from that. We die to this world and we're reborn into eternal life. Ecclesiastes paints the picture of life under the curse of sin and death. Guys, it's meant to rock us to our core. I hope for all of us that have listened to this and read this book, man, it rocks us to our core. This life, all on its own, when you take God's redemption out of the picture, man, it is a merry-go-round going nowhere. You and I will live far too short. You and I will work far too hard. You and I will gather far less than we want, and life is going to slip away faster than we want it to, and it's all going to be gone, and it's going to all be forgotten. But because of Jesus, we have this hope.

Life in him doesn't end at death. It continues on forever. And that's the big difference, guys. There's a way to make today to count and continue to count into eternity. There is a way not to be forgotten, but it requires you and I to surrender our life, to give up this life, to die to this life.

How do we do that? Man, we recognize that Jesus Christ alone is our hope. The hope for you and me, the hope for redemption of the futility of this creation that is subject to sin and death, and because of that is just under this scope of vanity. He came. He came and he brought his kingdom.

[26 : 04] That is his forever kingdom, and we know it in part. And he's coming again. He's going to bring it back one day in its fullness. And what we see with him and his kingdom, there's no corruption, no futility, no vanity, no death. Everything, everything is meaningful. And you and I won't die and just be forgotten. We're not going to be a grave marker, a name, and a couple of dates, and that's it.

We will be remembered because we will be continuing to live with him. And he will know us. He will know our names. We will be known by him, and we will know him. And you and I matter to him. He loves us.

He considers us. He hasn't forgotten you or I, nor will he ever forget you. And that's the good news, guys. If you are not a Christian, here is what you do in light of this. Surrender your life to Jesus Christ today. And that looks like this. You confess, man, Jesus, you are my Savior. You are Lord. My hope is in you and you alone. Forgive me of my sins. I'm letting go of my life because I need to die to the futility of it, to be reborn by faith in you, Jesus Christ, to enter into this amazing new life called eternal life with you. If you're here, if you're a Christian, that's what we do. We surrender ourselves again. We do it again and again and again. We do that by confessing what is true. Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and believing in that, that he has come and is coming again. And we choose not to live for this life, but we live putting his kingdom and his kingdom first. And we leverage our lives for that.

And that's how we make everything that we do not meaningless. Our works can count and carry on into eternity. It's one of the promises of scripture. It's one of the graces of God. And so we can choose to live that way and change and leverage our lives and totally live that way. Jesus said, man, seek first my kingdom and my righteousness and all the things that we care about life, man, all those things will be added to us, but put those things first. Prioritize Jesus and his kingdom. Live for him.

And in there we break this merry-go-round, this feeling that life is vain and meaningless, and we get to enjoy Jesus Christ forevermore. Thank you. Let's pray. Jesus Christ, I pray.

[28 : 42] I pray that this truth would sink into our hearts, that you are our hope, that without you, if we are honest and we look around, life is vain. It's quick. It's gone faster than we expected. And it doesn't bring the meaning and the joy and the happiness that we hope it will in our search for things. And so help us to hold the things of this earth lightly, but help us to hold onto you with soberness. Thank you that you loved us enough to step into our mess, step into this vain world, and to break that curse for us. Amen.