

Under The Sun
Ecclesiastes 1:1-3

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How many of you have seen *Jurassic World*? The plot takes place 22 years after what happened in the movie *Jurassic Park*.

Everything was going okay, until the engineers created a new hybrid dinosaur that was bigger and meaner than the others. Unfortunately, as you might suspect, the dinosaur ended up eating a lot of people.

As I thought about it, I realized this was actually a commentary on our culture today. Like the people in the movie, who got bored of the standard dinosaurs, we get bored of life.

We're constantly seeking something that'll give us some new sense of satisfaction, some new sense of meaning only to come up short. Or, in the case of the dinosaurs, to possibly get eaten by the very thing we desire.

That's not just the message of the movie but the message of the book we're beginning today, the book of Ecclesiastes.

How many of you have read Ecclesiastes? For those of you who're not familiar with Ecclesiastes, it's an Old Testament book that falls under the category of wisdom literature like Proverbs and Job.

Wisdom literature refers to a number of things, but at a minimum what it does is teach that the best choices in life are connected to Godly choices.

That's why Proverbs opens up by saying, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*"

The key idea is *“the fear of the Lord”* because, if you’re going to make Godly choices, you should have a reverent fear of God and attempt to keep His commandments.

The word *“wisdom”* used in this verse is not related to IQ or intelligence.

The word *“wisdom,”* as it is used here, speaks of an orientation towards God and away from the world. This one reason Ecclesiastes is considered wisdom literature.

The author tries to convince us of the importance of living a life of submission to God, as opposed to simply living a life on this earth or under the sun.

Now, sometimes it’s hard to follow what’s going on since he meanders a lot.

Another thing you’ll notice, when you have read it, is that it’s a very negative book. In fact, it’s so negative that some people ask, *“Why would God want to include Ecclesiastes in the Bible?”*

They think, *“Isn’t the Bible supposed to be about hope, and God’s love expressed through Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and that sort of thing,”* but Ecclesiastes isn’t like that.

Ecclesiastes is a book that causes a person to reflect on their life. The first three verses set the tone of the book.

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-3, *“The words of the Teacher, [a] son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?”*

You must admit, these verses are very negative, and, when you read Ecclesiastes, things don't get much better.

As the writer goes on to rant and rave about how all the things that he's pursued turned out to be meaningless.

The first question you might ask is, "*Who is this person referred to as 'the Teacher' and why is he so negative?*"

The Hebrew word used in this passage has been translated "*teacher*", but a better interpretation would be "*one who assembles*" or "*one who gathers*." Others translate it "*preacher*."

In fact, the word *Ecclesiastes* comes from the Greek word *ecclesia* which means "*an assembling of people*." It's a word we associate with church.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translated the word *Teacher* as "*questor*" because of someone who's on a quest. Another person suggested "*searcher*."

As in someone who has had the opportunity to learn about all the different philosophies of life and then gathered people together to tell them his findings.

Although the name isn't mentioned, most people believe that the book was written by Solomon because in the very first line it says, "*The word of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem*."

It's not just because it's written like this that the scholars assume it's Solomon, Solomon was the only one qualified to write such a book.

In case you don't know much about King Solomon, he was a king of Israel who had found favor in the eyes of God.

When he became king, he was a very young man. Even then we see that Solomon was wise because when God said to Solomon, *“Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”*

Instead of asking for money, possessions, soldiers, or weapons or anything like that, he said, *“So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”*

Because of his selfless request, God not only granted Solomon’s prayer, but gave him more.

1 Kings 10:23-24 tells us that *“King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart.”*

Yet, similar to the other kings in the Old Testament, although Solomon started out strong, he didn’t end strong.

He had too much time on his hands, and having a thing for women, he accumulated them as somebody would collect coins.

1 Kings 11:3-4, *“He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”*

Obviously, God became disappointed in Solomon. So much so that God ended up dividing Solomon’s kingdom in two.

So, “the teacher” is believed to be King Solomon because he had the time, money, and power to pretty much pursue any avenue of life where he thought that he might be able to find pleasure or satisfaction.

The Rolling Stones sang, *'I Can't Get No Satisfaction.'* Well, Solomon sang it 3,000 years earlier.

He was the one man in history who had the opportunity to pursue everything for satisfaction, yet he always came up short.

Many commentators believe he might have written Proverbs at the beginning of his life, Song of Songs in midlife, and finally, Ecclesiastes, towards the end of his life.

He was an old man who regretted how he had squandered his life on wine, women, songs, possessions, and all that stuff.

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The question some of you may be asking is *"What do you do with a book like this?"* You could do like some people or even some pastors and just say, *"Let's skip over this book. We don't need to look at this one, the passages are too difficult."*

But, if we really believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then we need to figure out why God chose to include such a strange book in the Bible. What relevance does this type of book have for us today?

As I studied and read different commentaries, what came to me is that most commentators believe Ecclesiastes is one of the most relevant books in the entire Bible.

It speaks to a culture that has turned its collective back on God. You may or may not agree, but there are a lot of people, pastors, leaders, and politicians who suggest that we're in what's called a post-Christian America.

Which basically means, among other things, that we can no longer assume that most of the people we meet have some affiliation with Christianity.

There was a poll taken by the Gallup agency that found out that *“The percentage of Americans who identify with some form of a Christian religion has been dropping in recent decades and now stands at 77%. In 1948, the percentage of Christians was 91%.”*

The poll also found that 15% of Americans claim no religious affiliation at all, nearly double the percentage of 1990.

We can no longer accept that everyone believes in God, which means we can no longer assume that people believe in things like the virgin birth or that God created the heavens and the earth.

Many people no longer believe in things like sin or the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These things don't mean anything to a good percentage of the world because they were never exposed to it.

Not only has culture turned its back on God, but it has also rejected the fact that there's any sort of absolute truth. In other words, truth is defined by the person, and it becomes a relative thing to that individual.

It's often tied to happiness. The common message we hear throughout culture is *“Your truth is your truth, my truth is my truth, and all that matters is that we are happy.”* Everybody's truth is relative.

The problem is, if our culture doesn't believe in God and doesn't believe in any sort of absolute truth, then they're going to seek meaning from other sources on this planet.

They'll seek it through drugs, alcohol, pornography, entertainment, sports or whatever only to come up short. Eventually finding that these things have no lasting sense of meaning.

As Christians, we know that trying to find meaning apart from God is a fruitless endeavor. That's the message of Christianity and that's the message found in Ecclesiastes.

When *"the teacher"* makes the statement, *"Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly Meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What does man gain from all of his labor at which he toils under the sun?"*

It's not just words coming from a man who's sour on life or upset because he wasn't able to achieve what he wanted to achieve. No.

What you're hearing is a man who had first-hand experience with pursuing just about every opportunity life could offer without receiving any sort of satisfaction.

As a side note, the word *"meaningless"* used in this passage is translated *"vanity"* in some Bibles, in fact, Eugene Peterson translates it as *"smoke"* in the *The Message*.

"Smoke! Nothing but smoke." There's nothing to anything. It's all smoke. I think that's an interesting way to say it.

But really, the idea of meaninglessness, vanity, and smoke all fit because what we're talking about here is emptiness, something that's transitory, like a vapor. That's what the main emphasis is here.

In fact, this word *"meaningless"* is mentioned 38 times. The book begins with it and ends with it, basically becoming a bookend that highlights this theme.

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Then he emphasizes this point by saying in verse 3, *"What does man gain from all of his labor at which he toils under the sun?"*

The word “*gain*” used here is also translated “*profit*” in some Bibles, and profit’s what’s left after you pay the bills.

He’s saying that after you have used every bit of energy to pursue some sort of enjoyment in life, whether through work, pleasure, hedonistic-type activities, or whatever; after you have pursued all these things, what’s left?

What’s left that’s going to continue to sustain your need for satisfaction? The implied answer is absolutely nothing.

He goes on to summarize this later in chapter 12, “*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.*” In fact, Ecclesiastes ends how Proverbs begins.

After he had pursued everything all through life and found that it all came up empty, the conclusion he learned was to fear God and keep His commandments. In other words, live a life that’s bent towards reverence and obedience to God.

Ecclesiastes is a relevant book for today because it speaks to the spirit of the age that says you can find your own purpose in life.

You don’t need God. Go for the gusto. Go for the experience. Do everything you can and go for it.

Some of you might say that’s well and good, but we’re all Christians here and we know this stuff so why do we have to read this depressing book?

The reality is that, if statistics are right, most of you spend one hour a week in church, but what are you doing with the other 167 hours?

I'll tell you. You're spending it in a culture that is constantly forming and shaping you by the spirit of the world. That's what's happening.

You're being shaped by the spirit of the world, and you don't even know it.

The world is enticing you, pulling you down paths that are leading to dead ends. Paths that have the possibility of destroying your life and you don't even know it!

So, Ecclesiastes is not a book that's written to the world. It's written as a warning to Christians. A warning to not seek out anything apart from God.

What I'm hoping to do in this series is not just go through Ecclesiastes, but contrast life under the sun to life under the Son, Jesus Christ.

In fact, some of you are capable of doing it because some of you are wiser than King Solomon. How can I say that?

Think about it. With all the knowledge and things King Solomon had at his disposal, he didn't have the full revelation of the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ that we have today.

He only had half of the picture. That's why he looked at life as half-empty.

We've been given the full knowledge of the goodness and grace of God through Jesus, so we don't have to go through life looking at life half-empty and negative.

We can actually embrace, not only the life to come, but this life because we can rely on the promise of Jesus when He said, *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."*

Jesus wasn't just talking about the afterlife, even though that's part of it, He was saying, *"I have come so that you can have life right now and have it to the fullest extent that's available."*

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Conclusion

I want you to think about reading through all 12 chapter of Ecclesiastes this week. It'll take no more than a half hour.

That way you can get the thought pattern of King Solomon and where he's going as one chapter builds on another.

Then think about what you may be doing in the next few weeks and how you can contrast this negative life of living under the sun with the full life of living under Jesus Christ.

As you sit down and read Ecclesiastes, reflect on it. Are you like Solomon, using all your time, talent, treasures, and power to pursue things in life that you think are going to provide satisfaction or happiness?

Or are you living a life under the Son of God, Jesus Christ, that you know will provide hope, a sense of meaning, provide a sense of satisfaction, again not only in the future life but the life we live right now under the Son?

As Jesus said, *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."*