

Monotony

Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, Romans 8:20, John 1:14, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Psalms 19:1

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How many of you have ever had a job that was monotonous or boring? One man wrote about his experience as a letter sorting machine operator at the post office in 1980.

As the letters came down a chute, about one a second, he would type in the zip code where the letters would then continue on to the appropriate bin.

He stated doing that for eight hours a day was tedious and monotonous. So monotonous that he had to take a 15-minute break every hour because if he didn't, he'd go insane.

But the writer of Ecclesiastes implies that not only are jobs monotonous, but life apart from God can be totally meaningless and monotonous.

When you think about it, a life apart from God, for all practical purposes, is a meaningless life.

In fact, in last week's message, we learned that culture that has pretty much turned its collective back on God and, consequently, pursues meaningless things.

Today, we're going to continue to study this first chapter by looking specifically at verses 4-11 and see how Solomon supports his thesis that all of life apart from God is meaningless.

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Ecclesiastes 1:4, “*Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.*” This verse speaks of the brevity of life against the backdrop of never-changing nature.

Mankind tends to get an ego, thinking it is the lord of our universe when the reality is we’re just passing through. It’s nature that sticks around.

Someone compared nature to a backdrop on a stage or a movie set, and we, mankind, are simply actors that come on the stage, make our appearance, then exit for somebody new to enter. That’s kind of depressing but it’s true.

What Solomon’s describing in this passage and the passages that follow is that life, for all intents and purposes, is monotonous and routine.

In verse 5, he begins with the sun and starts to talk about this idea of monotony and routine. He says, “*The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.*”

He’s not talking as an astronomer. He’s talking about the sun as observed from a human perspective, like sitting in our backyard viewing the sun’s routine.

We see the sun as it rises, goes across the sky, and then sets; then the next day it starts the whole process over again.

This word “*hurries*” that Solomon used here in verse 5 refers to “an exhaustion or a panting,” implying a very monotonous existence or routine; not accomplishing anything.

Now, we could say, “*Sure it accomplishes something. The trees and plants need sunlight.*”

But apart from God, the sun serves absolutely no purpose because there's nothing lasting. The sun produces nothing that lasts for generations.

Then Solomon shifts his focus from the sun to the movement of the wind. Ecclesiastes 1:6, *"The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course."*

He's not speaking to us through the eyes of a meteorologist. He's expressing an observation that the wind goes around and around, doing its own thing, not accomplishing anything.

Again, apart from God, what's the point of the wind? Why do we even need it? What purpose does it serve? I think he's suggesting that, just as the sun is in a rut, the wind is in a rut, too.

Then he goes on to talk about the water cycle. The waters leave the stream, go up to the clouds and back to the sea, but the sea is never full.

Ecclesiastes 1:7, *"All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again."*

We know that the sea never gets full because of evaporation. The water leaves the sea, goes into the clouds, makes its way over land and then drops rain over and over again. That's all it does.

Again, his point is simply that this is very monotonous. Thinking outside of God, the whole water cycle has no purpose. There's no purpose behind it.

In these opening passages, Solomon's using nature, the sun, wind, and water cycle, to express the meaninglessness of nature apart from God.

With all this daily activity going on in nature, you'd think that something long-term and eternal would be produced.

But the reality is, when you think about it, there's nothing productive about the whole process because nothing lasts.

Astronomers, biologists, scientists, and botanists all talk about how things work, but none of can answer the question why.

Why do these work? What's the ultimate purpose behind it all? They have no answers to these questions.

So, these opening verses suggest that the earth, sun, wind, and rain serve no end whatsoever apart from God.

If these never-changing things of nature lead to nothing, then what does that suggest about humanity?

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That's when he goes on to address the whole idea of the monotony of the human existence.

Ecclesiastes 1:8, *"All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing."*

The one word that summarizes this whole sentence is boredom. In fact, Eugene Peterson in *The Message* writes, *"Everything is boring, utterly boring. No one can find any meaning in it. Boring to the eyes, boring to the ear."*

We're a bored people and that's why we're constantly trying to seek satisfaction in something.

Whether it's the newest movie, the newest song on iTunes, the newest piece of technology, or even the newest ideologies.

We're always seeking it out. We buy something thing and enjoy it for a short time, but it doesn't last, so we continue to go on and look for something new.

I recently read an article that says when the millennial generation buys a new piece of technology the thrill is gone within 30 days, so they have to seek out the next best thing.

I started thinking, it's not just technology and it's not just the millennials. It's everybody. Look around your house and all the stuff you have.

You thought it was the neatest thing since sliced bread and were willing to pay all sorts of money for it only to have it show up in the flea market or eBay a few weeks later.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-10, "What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. 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."

This is a strong statement. Solomon is saying that there is absolutely nothing new under the sun. Since this was written 900 B.C., we could give Solomon a little pushback and say there are all sorts of new stuff out there today.

Look at the marvels of technology and science and medicine. But he's not trying to discount that there are no new things that come on the scene.

What he's saying is that a lot of the stuff that we think is new is just a variation on the old. Things people are going to experience 1,000 years from now will believe that it's the newest and greatest thing.

The reality is all this stuff ends up in a trash bin that leads to oblivion, which leads him to think about people.

Ecclesiastes 1:11, *“No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.”*

This is pretty depressing, but it's honest. We like to think that we're going to be remembered, but short of the big names in history like Jesus, Solomon, Moses, Caesar, Hitler, and Elvis Presley, we're not going to be remembered by many people.

Think out 100 years, or 200-300 years. I can guarantee that nobody in this room, 200-300 years from now, is going to be remembered.

Do you remember your great-great-great-great grandparents, or uncles, or aunts?

All these people, at one time, were living real and active lives, just like everyone in this room. They have all been forgotten.

I look at myself and think, 100 years or so from now, somebody else will be standing up here and the pews will be filled with different people.

We're not going to be remembered. As I've said, Ecclesiastes is a depressing book, and we're only in the first chapter.

Having everything, Solomon had the opportunity to pursue all the avenues of life only to come up and say life is meaningless apart from God. But what happens when you put God in the picture? Things change.

When I say, “put God in the picture,” I’m not saying it the way that some people would by saying God created the world like a clock, wound it up, set it on its pedestal, stepped aside, and let it do its own thing.

I’m talking about a God Who loves us. A God whose act of creation was a divine act of love. That’s the kind of God I’m talking about.

A God that loves us so much that He started the process of redeeming the world and bringing all of creation back to the way it was intended.

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God created this beautiful world for us and yet humanity collectively turned its back on Him. Turning your back on God is known as sin.

When sin entered the world, it created chaos. Think about it. Not two steps out of the garden we see Cain killing his brother Abel.

That act began to infuse the world with violence, harshness, hatred, and confusion. This is the kind of stuff that Paul sums up with the word frustration.

Romans 8:20-21, “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”

That’s a mouthful, but it basically says the world, because of sin, has become frustrated. It’s not the way it is supposed to be.

You don’t have to be a biblical scholar to know that the world isn’t the way it was meant to be. Just watch the news. It not right. The wind and rain shouldn’t be causing these huge tornados and flooding.

That's not the way things should be. What about the attacks in churches and schools, not just here in America but around the world. All this is part of the frustration of creation in which we live.

But, again, we serve a loving God Who said, *"I can fix that situation."* So, 2,000 years ago, as John 1:14 tells us, *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."*

In other words, God stepped into this futile creation and began to kick start the reversal process. Through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ everything began a reversal.

In Revelation 21, Christ says, *"I am making everything new!"* That newness begins with us. 2 Corinthians 5:17, *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come."*

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When God creates something new it's not just a variation of the past. It's something incredibly new and something that has an eternal quality to it. It lasts forever.

For those who're not familiar with the term "in Christ," it's just a fancy phrase that means you have received Christ as Lord and you're willing to live out your life under His Lordship, by following His commands, day by day, beginning with baptism.

That's the beginning. Like a brand-new baby, all of a sudden you're experiencing what we call the born-again experience.

Not only are you made new, but you begin to see things in a new way. You don't look at nature as monotonous, repetitious, and meaningless anymore. You see creation as a testimony to God's glory.

Psalm 19:1, *"The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands."* That's the purpose of creation.

Remember how Solomon said the sun rises, the sun sets, and runs back around. Listen to how the psalmist describes the course of the sun.

Psalm 19-5-6, "In the heavens, he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion, a horse, rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes it circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat."

The psalmist is seeing creation as intended. Seeing the majesty, beauty, and glory of God. That's the way we're supposed to see it.

When was the last time you looked at the sun and said, *"That reminds me of Jesus?"* Why not?

When was the last time you looked at the birds and saw it as a creation from God? Have you ever thought about air as God's way of breathing?

The older we get, the more muddied our mind becomes and the more cynical we become about everything, including nature. We lose our ability to see God.

This is why we need to practice the spiritual discipline of noticing God. Going through our day and paying attention to Him.

Whether it's every time you stop at a stoplight, drink a cup of coffee, put a ding on your car, or whatever it takes to wake up your mind and to break you out of the monotony of life and say, wow, I just saw God in creation, in people, in whatever it is.

That's a spiritual discipline. We've been so numbed by the world that we need to train ourselves to see God in everything. Eventually, we'll get better at it, and we'll begin to see God in new ways.

Frank Laubach wrote a little book called *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. It's his observations, or determination, to notice God every single day; at least once every hour.

Constantly staying in God's presence and talking in God's presence. In his mind it's really not that hard.

He writes, "*God's everywhere around us if we only open our eyes. All the world is beautiful if we have eyes to see the beauty, for the world is packed with God.*"

But he didn't get there overnight. You can read about his frustrations of doing it. This is the discipline of noticing God. You have to train yourself because we've been untrained how to do it.

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Conclusion

Many Christians are in a rut, caught in a monotonous routine. Doing work. Going to bed.

They begin to think that life has no point. Like one of those letter sorting machine operators, we're just looking for that 15-minute break.

My prayer is really Paul's prayer to the people in Ephesus when he wrote, "*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you.*"

Why does he pray this? Because he knows when you begin to open your eyes and recall the hope you've been given, you'll not only have a fresh vision for God, but you'll begin to have a fresh vision for yourself.

You'll realize your life does have meaning. You'll begin to view nature and all of creation the way God intended it to be.

This is why we need to confess Jesus as Lord and get up every day and understand that even when we fail, God's mercies are new every single morning.

We can start over again. God's very patient with us. If we do that, we'll begin to have an understanding that when anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone and the new has come.