

Ecclesiastes: A Biblical Philosophy of Life

Ecclesiastes

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Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher

Countryside Bible Church

Well, it was about nine years ago that I had the privilege, on a Sunday morning, of giving a sort of virtual tour of the book of Ecclesiastes and it is my joy to do so again tonight. This fall, our home fellowship groups will be studying the book of Ecclesiastes and those who are involved in spearheading that have asked me to sort of do this message to sort of set the pace for what the book of Ecclesiastes is all about. Let me begin by saying to you, and Sheila and I were talking about this even this afternoon, there really is no book in Scripture that surprises me more than the book of Ecclesiastes, that has, in a very unusual way, shaped our lives and our understanding of life here in a fallen world, than the book of Ecclesiastes, and my hope and prayer is that it will do the same for you tonight as you grasp the message of this most unusual book.

As you know, I grew up in Mobile, Alabama, and Mobile was, at that time, the home of the world-famous Mobile International Airport. It may be international now, but I can promise you it wasn't then. When I was growing up the only thing international about that airport was perhaps that some equipment had been imported from Atlanta, Georgia. The gates, and I'm not making this up, were actually swinging gates that opened directly onto the tarmac. I remember the first time that I flew to Atlanta, now that was an impressive airport, and flying in there and seeing the complicated nature of Atlanta and just its size and immensity I immediately understood why the relatives in my life had always said that if you died in the south you had to go to Atlanta to go to either heaven or hell. It was, it felt true, honestly. Large airports, even to this day, still fascinate me because of the organization required.

You know, I find myself looking out of that tiny little window watching planes and trucks and buses and equipment going here and there, and like so many ants out of that window, and I still find myself thinking, I hope someone, somewhere, really knows what's going on. And, of course, there are such people, such as the control tower personnel, the air-traffic controllers, the pilots. But think how differently, for a moment, all of that activity going on at a major airport, like even the one here locally, looks from the window of a plane sitting there on the tarmac versus how all that activity looks from the person in the control tower.

Now it's important for us to remember that, spiritually speaking, when we look at the events on this globe, God sits in the control tower of the universe, directing all things. We understand that, God is sovereign over all that occurs. But here's the problem. Sadly, many Christians make the mistake of thinking that because they are Christians, because God is now their Father, that somehow God is going to take them into His control tower, and He's going to let them understand His master plan and all that He's doing in their lives. Trials and troubles and

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difficulties come and what do many Christians do? They try to make sense of it all; they try to come up with some explanation. What is God doing? How can I factor this into my life? They work themselves into a frenzy trying to figure out why?

True biblical wisdom, on the other hand, does not devote itself to the question of why? Instead, true biblical wisdom is a lot more like learning to drive than it is about being in the control tower. The key to good driving is not understanding why things are as they are, the foundational key to good driving is what? Seeing things exactly as they are and responding to them appropriately. That's why, when you start driving, you start with an eye test. If you can't see clearly you're not going to be a good driver. In the same way, the key to wise living is being able to be ruthlessly realistic in how you look at life on this planet. You want to live a wise life? You've got to have a clear view of what's really happening here on this planet.

The book of Ecclesiastes is designed to turn each of us into a realist, to help us really be able to see the truth about life here under the sun. It's one of the five books in our Bible that are called wisdom literature, the others being Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon. Such wisdom literature as we have here in the Scripture has an ancient tradition. In fact, secular wisdom literature dates from about 2,700 B.C., that's 600 years before Abraham. But it really reached its zenith in Israel during the time of Solomon. In fact, turn with me for a moment to 1 Kings, 1 Kings 4, and you learn something about what God did in gifting this man. First Kings 4:29,

Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

So there may have been a lot of other secular wisdom literature, but God gave Solomon wisdom that surpassed all of that, verse 31,

For he was wiser than all men, [*and some of the wisest men of his time are listed there,*] and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. He spoke 3,000 proverbs. His songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. [*He had a breadth of mind that was unbelievable.*] Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

That's the background of the book of Ecclesiastes. That's the man who wrote it.

Now let's go back to the book of Ecclesiastes, and let's just get a few introductory things settled in our minds. First of all, where does that title, Ecclesiastes, come from? It is the Greek name in the Septuagint. The word Ecclesiastes, if you know the Greek word *ecclesia*, which is our word church or assembly, it comes from that name. The Hebrew name is *coheleth*, from a root

meaning to assemble or to gather. You'll notice Ecclesiastes 1:1, "The words of the Preacher," that word preacher is literally "one who speaks to the assembly," perhaps an office title, but it introduces us to this man. It's possible that this was a spiritual office in Israel. If I had time I'd take you to Jeremiah 18:18, where there are listed three spiritual offices in Israel. One was the prophet, two was the priest, and thirdly, there was the wise man or the sage. Clearly, Solomon, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, is one of the wise men ministering to the assembly that was Israel. He was a sage, the wisest of men apart from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, I've already made the point that he is the author, but let's just look at that. The author is Solomon, all of the evidence points to that. You'll notice in chapter 1 verse 1. He's called, "the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Again, in verse 12 he's called, he says he's "been king over Israel in Jerusalem," so it's during the united monarchy when all of Israel was together and he was seated in Jerusalem as its king. Verse 16 of chapter 1, he was "magnified in wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before him," and, chapter 2 verse 9, he was known for his amazing wealth. Put the package together and it seems almost certain, it is certain, that the author was Solomon. That is also the voice of the history of the church and so the one who wrote this was none other than the son of David, Solomon.

Now when did he write this book? Probably it was written late in his life. Even if you've read this book before you know he recounts a lot of his life, a lot of what's transpired during his life, and when you get to chapter 12 he details and gives a picture of aging. He describes it like the decline of a great house, and frankly it's far too vivid to imagine that he hadn't already begun to experience some of those very things. I think it's likely this book was written after Solomon repented of his sin. You remember, late in his life he turned from the Lord. He allowed the wives that he had married contrary to God's law to turn his heart. He built them temples in Jerusalem and he became a syncretist. He not only worshipped the true God, but to keep his wives happy he also worshiped false gods. But God sent him, according to 1 Kings 11 God spoke to him twice, God sent three different men to be a source of discipline in his life, and it seems that he came to repentance, and it's, I believe, the book of Ecclesiastes that is written after that repentance at the very end of his life. So probably somewhere near the end of his reign in 931 B.C.

Now the book of Ecclesiastes has fallen on very hard times and there are two basic reasons for that. A lot of Christians sort of steer clear of it, one, because there are these apparent contradictions. On the one hand, you read certain passages and it sounds existential, you know, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and chasing after wind." On the other hand, you read passages that say, "eat, drink, and be merry." That sounds Epicurean. And so there are these apparent contradictions. How do you put those together? The other issue is there are some difficult passages. For example, we're told, "don't be all righteous or overly wicked." What does that mean? We're told that all men, in one passage, die like beasts. Now, all Solomon was saying is that we all will die, all living creatures on this planet will die, but he makes it clear in other

places that death is not the end for the human soul. But nevertheless, there are these difficult passages and these apparent contradictions, and so this book has been one that many believers have sort of scratched their head about. Should this book really be in the canon of Scripture?

Now let me give you the three most common interpretations over the last hundred years. The first one was fairly common when I was young and it's that this book is really man's reasoning apart from revelation, and essentially this approach to the book said the reason Solomon wrote this book was to expose us to the best wisdom of an unregenerate man reflecting on life. In other words, essentially, this view of the book says read it and see what life is like for an unbeliever and move on. The purpose is to just expose us to that wisdom, the best human wisdom, in trying to work out life in a fallen world. You know, the flaw with this approach is that there is no warning in the context. In fact, as we'll see in a moment, we are encouraged to follow the directives of this book.

A second approach that is still very common, this is probably the most common view of the book of Ecclesiastes, and that is, this book was written to show us as true believers the vanity of life apart from God. Here's what life is like when you don't know God. So you have a spiritual man then describing what God says life without Him is like, and the purpose is evangelism. Here's a great book they would say, to share with someone and say if you don't have God, if you don't have Christ in New Testament terms, this is what life will be like. The problem with this view is that he's called *coheleth*, the Preacher, literally "the one who speaks to the assembly of God's people."

The third view, and the view that I'm going to defend tonight and show you, is that this book really describes the vanity of life even with God. When you know God, when you walk with God, in New Testament terms when you have come to embrace his Son as your Lord, as your Savior, life in this world can still be described as vanity. The purpose then of this book, I would describe in this way, it is to provide us as believers with a grid for seeing life with a divinely inspired philosophy of life in a fallen world.

Now let me defend this and show you the support for this. I want you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 12. Ecclesiastes 12 and let's look at how Solomon ends this book. Notice, first of all, in verse 9, his credentials. "In addition to being a wise man," a sage, "the Preacher," the one who spoke to the assembly of God's people, "also taught the people knowledge." Now what follows is, really this is his job description. He was a sage, he was a preacher, and here's what he was set out to do, his goal, verse 9 says, was to teach the people knowledge. And notice his method in verse 9, "he pondered," the word is weighed, "he weighed, searched out," which has the idea of thoroughness and diligence, "and arranged," which means he's put in a skillful order, "many proverbs." We saw that Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs, and those are the ones he wrote, that doesn't include the ones he assembled.

Verse 10 goes on to say, “The Preacher sought to find delightful words.” Remember now, he is talking about his ministry. He's talking about this book we call Ecclesiastes, “the Preacher sought to find delightful words,” that is, words designed to penetrate is the idea, and it's interesting, the words of Ecclesiastes do that. I mean, even those who are opposed to Scripture will often use the words of this book. For example, there's Hemingway's book, *The Sun Also Rises*, finds its title in this book. There's, if you're old enough to remember, there's the Birds number one Billboard hit, “For everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn.” They borrow from these words. Why? Because they are “delightful words.”

Notice verse 10 goes on to say, “and to write.” The wise man, Solomon, was concerned to perpetuate his teaching and verse 10 says he wanted “to write words of truth.” Underscore that, this is what he's saying about the contents of this book, they are words of truth and he wanted to write them correctly, that is, honestly, straightforwardly, in a helpful way. And notice the intended results, verse 11, here's what he wanted to accomplish, “The words of wise men are like goads.” The Hebrew word translated goad here is used two times in the Old Testament, here and in 1 Samuel 13, and it simply describes a large sharp-pointed stick that was used to prod an animal. So Solomon intended this book to stimulate those who studied it to action. “The words of wise men are like goads,” they're to get you moving; they're to cause you to act in keeping with what you learn. And, he says, “and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails.” Masters of collections here does not refer to the people who master them. Rather, it refers to the collection of sayings itself. It's parallel in here, in this verse, to the words of the wise men. So, “these masterful collections,” might be a way to say it, “are like well-driven nails.” This pictures, it's a graphic picture, it's like the way this is structured, the way it's put together, it sinks the truth deep into the mind and permanently establishes the teaching in the memory.

When you really get the book of Ecclesiastes, it never leaves. Its truths never are far from you. I don't think a week goes by in my life that my mind doesn't come back to the truths I'm going to share with you in just a moment, from this book. They are like “well-driven nails.” So, verse 9 is the form Solomon used, verse 10 describes his content, and verse 11 tells us what he had hoped to accomplish, but I want to you notice the end of verse 11 because here's the source of all of these collections of wisdom, all of these words. Notice, “they are given by one,” capital S, “Shepherd.” I think the translators were exactly right. Solomon is claiming that this book and its contents are from God, and it's intended to sink into your mind and memory, and to goad you into action and to affect how you live.

So, with that in mind, let's look at this book. Now as we look at it, the first thing you need underscore is the key phrase. Twenty nine times this phrase occurs, it's under the sun, under the sun. In other words, Solomon is investigating life on this side of the grave, in the realm of living men's activities, what we see. In fact, notice how he puts it in chapter 1 verse 13, he says, “I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done,” note this, “under heaven.” It's what we see in this world, that's what he's investigating, everything that happens

under the watchful eye of the sun. It really defines the limits of his investigation. He will sometimes take us and let us glimpse what's happening in heaven, and heaven's perspective, but that's not his focus, his focus is what you see right here on this planet.

It's like, in a way, a video camera. You probably have, as I do, a couple of old video cameras sitting around somewhere, in addition to the new smart phones which do all that even better. Honestly, I dislike video cameras because, I tell you what, you end up living your life behind a camera and missing the moment itself. And after all, nobody really wants to watch it. The only thing that it benefits is sort of a keeping a little bit of an archive of what is happened in your family. But here's the point, what Solomon is doing in Ecclesiastes is like that video camera. He is only showing us what is in front of the lens and that is life as it appears here under the sun, and the perspective he provides is crucial because it gives us wisdom for living in the world.

Ecclesiastes is designed to turn us into realists, to help us see the truth about life here under the sun, to see life from God's perspective; it gives us a divinely inspired philosophy of life. Now don't be scared of that phrase, philosophy simply means the love of wisdom and when we talk of a philosophy of life we're simply talking about the principles that govern one's thoughts and behavior. Everybody here has a philosophy of life, you may not have thought about it being your philosophy of life, you may not have written out, but you have a philosophy. There are a guiding set of principles that determine why you make the decisions you make. What's your philosophy? It's not what you say you believe. Look at how you live. Behavior always betrays belief.

So what exactly is this divinely inspired philosophy for living in the world? Okay, here we get to the heart of it; the key to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes is understanding two major propositions, or themes, that are throughout this book. These themes constantly recur and they are examined from different angles throughout the book. The book can be outlined, but these two themes are a recurrent, picture these two themes as sort of side-by-side railroad tracks taking you throughout the book. First of all, life is a gift from God to be enjoyed, and secondly, life has serious limitations. Life is a gift from God to be enjoyed and life has serious limitations. Let's look at each of those together and let me show you how it, to some degree, how Solomon unfolds these in this amazing book.

First of all, let's consider the fact that life is a gift from God. This book is often accused of harboring and teaching the most extreme form of pessimism, but it is actually built, as Rome was, on seven great hills, and in this case, seven great hills of joy. There are seven primary passages that drive home this theme of Solomon, that life is a gift from God to be enjoyed. Let me walk you through them just briefly. Turn first to chapter 2 verse 24. "There is nothing better," Solomon writes, "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God." This enjoyment of life is from God's hand, "For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?" This is

what we are told. Now this is a simple propositional statement. There is nothing better than to eat and drink and enjoy, essentially enjoy life as a gift from God. This is from God's hand.

But in the next two references Solomon stresses that this is truth he personally came to embrace. Look at chapter 3 verse 12, "I know that there is nothing better," notice the change,

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor - it is the gift of God.

Look at verse 22 of this same chapter, "I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him." Look at chapter 5, verse 18, "Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting," notice the marginal note in verse 18 on the word fitting, literally beautiful. "Here is what I have seen to be good and beautiful: to eat and to drink and to enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward." This is from God. This is a gift from God. Verse 19,

Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Now, I want you to notice the progression so far. We began in chapter 2 verse 24 with a simple statement. Then, in chapter 3 verses 12 and 22 he tells us he had come to embrace this truth. And here in verses 18 and 19 of chapter 5 he urges us to consider this. That first part of verse 18, "Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting," could be translated, "Take note of what I've discovered." He urges us now to consider what he has come to understand.

Look at chapter 8 verse 15, "So I commended pleasure." The fifth time that Solomon makes his point, he does so in even more exuberant terms, he says, "I commended." The Hebrew word commend is one of the Old Testament words for praise. Six of the eight times it occurs in the Old Testament it refers to the praise of God. The Hebrew word translated pleasure is the common Old Testament word for joy or gladness. Solomon literally says, "I praised joy, there's nothing better." Notice what he says in verse 15, "I praised joy, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun," there's nothing better, "except to eat and to drink and to be merry." Now, "to be merry" is an unfortunate translation. It's literally "to rejoice" or "to be glad." He says, "Listen, be glad; enjoy life as God's good gift to you. This will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun."

Look at chapter 9 verse 7, "Go then, eat your bread in happiness." Now, I want you to notice this sixth passage changes to an imperative. He's told us a propositional statement. He's told us

he's come to embrace it. He's urged us to considerate it, and now he commands us. It's a command to follow his advice, "Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works." In other words, God has already approved your enjoying life like this. "Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head." That, verse 8, describes what would not have been common, for us, you know, some of us take a shower or two a day, that was not common in the ancient world. This describes cleaning up your clothes; this describes washing yourself, putting on oil. This was a special occasion. This was a wedding or a banquet or a celebration. What Solomon is saying is, make life a celebration of God's goodness. Verse 9, "Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun."

One last one, turn to chapter 11 verse 7, and here we have an important balance, an important balance to what we've discovered so far,

The light is pleasant, [*this is 11:7*] and is good for the eyes to see the sun. Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many.

Now, this is a very important balance. By a life of joy, Solomon is not advocating a sort of party atmosphere. He is not advocating a Pollyannic approach to life where you just ignore all the bad things - everything's wonderful, everything's good. No, he says, understand that you are to enjoy all your years. Notice that "let him rejoice in them all" and yet there will be "days of darkness," and there will be many of them. So in other words, don't let the hard and the difficult things of life turn your heart to bitterness and resentment, instead enjoy life as the gift God has given to you. Notice the other balance,

Everything that is to come will be futility. Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. Follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.

What's the point that he's making here? He's saying, I'm not proposing to you a hedonistic approach to life, a sort of party, do whatever you want, don't worry about God and His ways, just do whatever feels good. That's not what Solomon's saying. Solomon is saying, listen carefully, enjoy life as God's good gift within the boundaries of His law, because He will bring you into judgment. This is not reckless abandon; this is legitimate celebration within the parameters that God has established for life in His world. Celebrate life under God, that's what he's saying.

Now, if you're tempted, as we've walked through these passages, to think that what Solomon is writing here in Ecclesiastes is sub-Christian, let me invite you to compare it to the New Testament. Take two passages, for example, Acts 14:17, Paul says, "God did not leave Himself

without witness, in that He did good,” this is to all unbelievers, “He did good. He gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Here we have Paul saying to unbelievers, with whom he will share the gospel, listen, even in your life God has given you life as a gift to be enjoyed. Ultimately it can only be enjoyed, as we'll find out in a moment, in fearing God and in following His ways, and in New Testament terms that means following His Son.

Take another passage, 1 Timothy 6:17, Paul writes to his young son in the faith, Timothy, who is stationed there in Ephesus, and he says to him, listen, you have some wealthy people in your church there in Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the leading cities of the ancient world. He says, “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but fix their hope on God,” and then listen to this, this sounds exactly like what Solomon is saying, the God “who richly supplies us with all things to,” what? “Enjoy.” This is our God. Life is a gift. It's a gift from God.

Listen, we live in an existential world where people believe that there is no point, there is no meaning in life. This shows up in modern art, it shows up in writing, in theater, in movies and music videos. Everywhere you look life is presented as though it were dark. People are cynical; they are pessimistic. That should never be the Christian's perspective. Listen, life is a good gift that God has given to you and it's to be enjoyed. You know, so many Christians miss this; they live as pessimists and cynics. They go through the hard days of life and it turns their heart angry and bitter. They make sarcastic existential jokes about life here. Let me just ask you as you sit here tonight, what is your true view of life? Have you allowed the trials and troubles of this life to turn you bitter and resentful and cynical and dark and pessimistic? If you say well, I don't know for sure, just ask your spouse; they'll know.

Regardless of how you've gotten there, if that has happened, let me encourage you to decide now to repent of the sin of failing to enjoy God's good gift of life. Every moment you breathe is a gift from a sovereign God. And it is a good gift to be enjoyed. Determine to enjoy the gifts of God that are a part of this life, good food, the love of family and friends, the beauty of the world around us, and every other blessing that's a part of this life. “Every good thing,” remember what James says, “comes down from,” whom? “The Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.” Every good thing that you enjoy in this life is a gift to you from God, stop living in cynicism and pessimism and complaining about your station and situation in life. Remember what Solomon said, “rejoice in them all, even though there will be many dark days.” Don't allow the darkness to turn you dark, live in the light. Enjoy, and as you enjoy praise the good God who's given you this life and the good things of this life to enjoy. And give Him thanks; glorify Him for His greatness, for His goodness, for His wisdom. The first major theme that Solomon lays down across this great book is this simple reality, life is a gift from God, and He intends, indeed, He commands that we enjoy it, always within the boundaries of His law.

Now that brings us to the second great theme and that is that life has serious limitations. Now let me expose you, first of all, to the terms that make this clear. The first term is simply the word vanity. Keep your finger here in chapter 12; turn back to chapter 1 verse 2. Here's how he begins his book, "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.'" Turn to chapter 12 verse 8, here's how he ends, "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'all is vanity!'" He begins this book, he ends this book, and it permeates this book, this idea of vanity. What does it mean? The Hebrew word, literally, is the word for breath or vapor. This is a metaphor. Now, let me give you a brief English lesson, the key to understanding a metaphor is understanding the point of similarity between what's being described and the image that you're using to describe it. The example I often cite is the biblical metaphor that Christ uses; He says of Herod, "Go tell that fox." Herod is what He's talking about, the image He uses to describe Herod is a fox. The point Jesus is making is that there is some shared characteristic between a fox and Herod. Well, let's see, is it that they have red hair? Is it that they have whiskers? Pointy snout? Tail? No, you get it, it's that they're both sly.

So what is the point of similarity between breath, or vapor, and life? What are the attributes of breath or vapor? Well, transitory, fleeting, meaningless, futile, don't amount to anything, incomprehensible, it's nothing really to grasp there. So as you're reading Ecclesiastes understand that there isn't just one of those in every case, I mean the same one in every case, it may be a different one of those points of similarity depending on the context, but what Solomon is saying is life is like breath, it's like a vapor. In some cases he's saying it's fleeting; it's here today gone tomorrow. In other cases, he's saying it's meaningless; it doesn't seem to have any clear path to understand, it's incomprehensible. The point of similarity varies with the context.

The other expression that he uses is "chasing after wind." This refers to that which is exhausting but utterly futile. You get the picture, chasing the wind will utterly exhaust you, but it won't get you anywhere. Now that sounds cynical and pessimistic. Why would he, on the one hand, say life is a gift and then, on the other hand, say life is like breath? It's empty, it's meaningless, it's incomprehensible, it's like chasing wind. There is a theological presupposition that causes him to say this about life. I want you to notice it in chapter 1 verse 14, "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind." There are our terms. Why? Why is everything vanity and striving after wind? Because the world is, notice verse 15, "crooked" and "lacking." We live in a world that is crooked and lacking.

Let me show you one other text that makes this clear. Turn over to chapter 7 verse 29, "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices." You see why life here on this planet has serious limitations? Why it's like breath? Why it's like chasing after wind? It's because the world and life in it is not what God originally created it to be or what it will ultimately be, because it is crooked and lacking because God created man right, but man has sinned. In other words, what lies behind the vanity of the world is the fall, man's fall into sin. Therefore, this good gift that God has given us is tainted with serious limitations.

Now what are those limitations? I like the way one writer puts it, let me just give you life's primary limitations, we will come back to these a little bit later. Life is not ultimately satisfying. Life is a good gift, but if you're looking for the good things of this life to satisfy your heart, you've got another thing coming. It's not going to happen. Secondly, man can't know the mysteries of life. You are never going to understand everything that happens here. It's not going to happen. There will be things that happen in your life that you will never in your lifetime understand why. And you can't know the future. You have no idea what's coming this evening, much less tomorrow, or for the rest of your life. Those are serious limitations on this wonderful gift.

Now again, I don't want you to think that what Solomon is saying here is out of step with the rest of Scripture. In fact, it is exactly what Paul says in Romans 8. Look at Romans 8, Romans 8:18, he says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time," there's life in a fallen world, "are not worthy to be compared with the glory which is to be revealed to us." Now notice how he describes the world, "For the anxious longing of the creation," all creation, "waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God." Here's why, "For the creation," the entire world, the entire universe, "was subjected by God to futility," vanity, "not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it." God, because of the fall, because of man's sin, subjected all of creation to futility, to vanity, however, for those who are in Christ there is hope because,

the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. Not only this, but we ourselves groan within ourselves, but we have hope.

You see the same, I mean he's talking here about futility; he's talking about vanity. It's the same thing; he's talking about a world in bondage to the tyranny of the curse. That's exactly what Solomon is describing; life has serious limitations.

Now back to Ecclesiastes. We've seen the terms, the primary limitations. Let me give you an example. Let me just show you how Solomon works this out with just one theme. He does it with multiple themes, but let me show you one. Let's take man's work. Go back to chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes, verse 24, "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself," notice this, "that his labor," his work here in this world, all that he does in this world, "is good."

For this also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him.

So God gave labor, God gave work to men as a source of enjoyment, and there are those of us who love what we do, and there are many of the rest who get glimpses of what it's like to really enjoy work.

There was work before the fall. Work is not a bad thing. It's not a four-letter word. It's a good gift of God. But the curse brought obstacles to that work; that's when work became work. So man's work is a gift but because of the fall it has serious limitations. Let me show you these limitations, just a couple of them, look at chapter 2 verse 18. Solomon says, "I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored on the sun." Now, don't forget, he's going to tell us that labor is a good thing, work, his work is a good gift, but he says, "I hated it." Here's why, here's the limitation,

I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.

By the way, Solomon saw this up close and personal, or experienced it, I should say, up close and personal, because his son was a man named Rehoboam. Solomon was Israel's wisest king, he brought the kingdom together; he consolidated power and control. It was the golden age of Israel and yet what did his son do? Within a very short period of time he wrecked the kingdom, split it into two. Solomon understood the vanity of life. Work is a good gift, but there are no lasting accomplishments. In fact, I was, as I've thought about that I was reminded that in 1851, a man named Henry Raymond began a newspaper for one purpose and that was to give a Christian perspective on the news. That paper is called The New York Times. There are no lasting accomplishments; that's part of life in a fallen world. You don't know whether the guy who comes after you is going to make a mess of everything you've done or not.

There's another limitation, look at chapter 4 verse 4, "I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind." In other words, work is a good thing but in a fallen world the main motivation for work is human rivalry. As Derek Kidner writes, "Effort and skill hide the scramble for wealth and status." Chapter 5 verse 11 gives us another limitation to work, "When good things increase, those who consume them increase." Shall I have a show of hands on how many of you have had that experience? "So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?" In other words, when you have success, when you improve, when you grow, and that you have increased wealth, that brings increased responsibilities, there are more consuming those resources, and so you're really never that much farther ahead.

Chapter 5 verse 15, here's another limitation, whatever you accomplish in this life is temporary. Verse 15,

As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. This also is a grievous evil – exactly as a man is born, thus he will die. So what advantage to him who toils for the wind?

Work is a gift, but in a fallen world there are only temporary gains, death is the great equalizer. I remember standing, one of my early days working at the Mackey Mortuary when I was in seminary, and hearing the mortician as he worked on embalming this body, say to me, “They're all the same when they get to me. I don't know if they were rich or poor. I don't know if they were a failure in life or a success. It's all the same.” That's a serious limitation. Look at chapter 6, chapter 6 verse 7, “All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the soul,” literally, notice this, the side references, “All a man's labor is for his mouth, yet the soul is not filled.” This is true, by the way, of verse 8, whether you're talking rich or poor, wise or foolish. Verse 9, I love this verse, “What the eyes see is better than what the soul goes after. This too is futility and a striving after wind.” In other words, whatever it is you're trying to get to, it looks better than it tastes. You ever had the experience of walking through the mall and coming across the bakery, and that aroma just comes wafting out and it smells really good, and you go in there with the expectation: I'm going to find something that tastes like that smell, but it never happens; it never delivers. What the eyes see is better than what you ultimately taste, that's what he saying.

It's true with life's accomplishments, chapter 9 verse 11, here's a last limitation about work, there's no guarantee of success. “I saw again under the sun that the race is not to the swift, the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all.” Again, remember, he's looking at life under the sun. He understands God's sovereignty. There are other passages that make it clear that God maps a man's life. But he's saying, as we look at it, here's a guy who's the best employee in the company and he's passed over for the boss's relative. Here's the guy who's the fastest runner and he's worked all of his life to get to the Olympics; he should win the race and some slow inept runner trips him up. That's how it is with life. There's no guarantee of success. So work is a gift, but it has serious limitations because of the fall. That is just one example, I wanted you to see, that is just one example of how Solomon weaves his two major themes throughout this book, but he makes the same points with the other parts of life as well.

So how should we respond to these two propositions? How do we respond? Look at chapter 12 verse 13,

The conclusion, [*life is a gift from God meant to be enjoyed, life has serious limitations because of the fall,*] when all has been heard, this is the conclusion: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Ecclesiastes is not the work of a cynic or a hopeless existentialist. Solomon looks realistically at life, and then he points us to the way of faith. At its heart, this book is a call to faith. Often Christians expect life to make sense and when it doesn't make sense they lose their joy, they no longer enjoy God's good gift. Listen, things don't make sense because we live in a fallen world.

So understand that though life is not ultimately satisfying, God is good and He has given us life is a gift. Although you can never know why, you can't understand all the mysteries of life, God is wise and sovereign, and He has a plan. A sovereign God is putting life together and even though you can't know the future, you can't know what's coming, understand that God is just and faithful to His own and He will do, in your future, what is right and good. It's a call to faith.

So understand then, that life is a gift from God to be enjoyed, but life has serious limitations. Those twin realities are meant to drive us to God in faith, in fear, in obedience, and in love. You remember, perhaps, when you were a kid and your parents took you over to your grandmother's house? What did you most look forward to? Hours of adult conversation? The opportunity to express your undying love to your grandparents? The sheer joy of family? No, you went for the cookies. Let's just be honest here, okay? But as you grew up, as you matured, the cookies became less important, and the person became the reason that you went. What Solomon says in concluding this book is enjoy the gift, but keep your eyes and heart focused on the giver. "Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." In New Testament terms, to fear God means to hear His Son and to accept His Son as Lord and Savior. Fear God, keep his commandments, enjoy the gift, but live under the eye, and for the sake of, the giver.

Let's pray together. Father, thank You for this amazing book, may it become a rock on which our lives in this uncertain and fallen world, is built. Father, I pray that You would encourage those here who have become sidetracked, who have become, through the troubles and the trials and the dark days of this life, filled with cynicism and pessimism and have become bitter and angry people. Father, may they repent, may they enjoy Your good gift of life, every moment of life You give us, remembering that life here will never satisfy, only You, in the person of Your Son. Father, thank You for this wisdom, help us to live in light of it. We pray in Jesus name, amen.