

October 13, 2019

Jed Linder

“What’s the Point?”

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23



Let us pray: *Gracious God, today is a blessing from you, and all good things we have are a blessing from you. Thank you for your blessings. Pour your Spirit out now upon us, and speak your message to our hearts. In Jesus name, amen.*

Just to let you all know ahead of time, no, I did not pick this text when I was lying in a hospital bed right after surgery last week! This text has actually been on the books since August, it just happens to speak to my own life’s difficulties a little closer now than it did back then. And, as I have been dealing with some extremely painful setbacks in my life – things no one ever wants to deal with – I am reminded of just how frustrating and painful life can get. And how easy it can be to just give in to despair.

Life can seem so futile sometimes... You try to live an active life, but your body breaks. You work hard in life, but can’t seem to get ahead. You lovingly nurture friendships and relationships that, then, turn around and break your heart. All around you, you see power and money corrupting. Generation after generation passes on an out of control financial debt and a poorly stewarded environment. Year after year we get higher taxes, higher costs of living, and street construction that never seems to END. Sometimes it seems like we are just going around in circles: having the same conversations, leveling the same arguments, grappling with the same problems, and suffering the same pains. It’s as the book of Ecclesiastes says: “There is nothing new under the sun.” And, as our text for today argues, all of this is “perfectly pointless. Everything is pointless” (v. 1:2, CEB).

## EVERYTHING IS POINTLESS

This is one of the central themes in what is actually a *real* book in the Bible – the Book of Ecclesiastes. It’s a wisdom book in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and it consists of the poetry and personal reflections of its author. It seems that people either really like, or *really* do not like it. For some, it’s too bitter, too cynical, too skeptical, and too honest about things we aren’t supposed to be honest about. For others, they find Ecclesiastes speaks directly to parts of their own experience, and, perhaps, that the book anticipates many of the biggest questions plaguing 21<sup>st</sup> century believers and non-believers, alike. I, personally, find it unfortunate that we

don't talk about this book, or preach on it, all that often, as it gives such a unique voice. As Frederick Buechner writes,

“In that great chorus of voices that speak out of the Bible, it is good to have this one long-drawn sigh of disillusion, skepticism, and ennui, if only because the people who read the Bible sometimes feel that way themselves, not to mention also the ones who wouldn't be caught dead reading it.”<sup>1</sup>

Ecclesiastes is given to us by a person using the pseudonym *Qoheleth* (this is the Hebrew name of the book), which can be translated as “gatherer.” So, he is one who gathers wisdom. Christians have often translated *Qoheleth* as either “preacher” or “teacher,” because the name also suggests one who speaks in the assembly.

Traditionally, the Jewish people and Christians have identified *Qoheleth* as King Solomon. In verse 1:1, the *Qoheleth* identifies himself as “David's son, king in Jerusalem.” Modern scholars now reject Solomon's authorship, but the original association was not without its reasons. For one, it gives credence to the wisdom being shared. After all, Solomon was the wisest of the wise, so we should pay attention to what he is saying. Additionally, since Solomon was king, that meant he had the resources and power to investigate the questions being raised. Regardless of who wrote it, by attributing it to Solomon, the text is calling on us to sincerely grapple with the statement that “everything is *pointless*.”

Now, this word we translate as “pointless” is a key to understanding the *Qoheleth's* thoughts. It appears 9 times in our passage, and 38 times throughout Ecclesiastes itself. The Hebrew word is *hevel*, and while it has variously been translated as “pointless,” “meaningless,” and “vanity,” it really does not have a great English equivalent. The word connotes an absurdity, which is something that cannot be made intelligible through any of the current frameworks people have to give meaning to their experiences. It makes no more sense in the beginning than in the end. This is similar to his often repeated phrase “chasing the wind” – unless you're a storm chaser rolling around the Midwest, you simply look unhinged running around in a futile enterprise. And, like the wind, *hevel* is something fleeting, and unable to be grasped. It's like a puff of air, or water vapor – it's suddenly here, and quickly gone.

Last February author, speaker, and former pastor, Rob Bell gave a talk here in Lincoln and his focus was Ecclesiastes. I liked his visual of using a common spray

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, “Kohleth,” *frederickbuechner.com*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/7/12/>.

bottle to illustrate the idea of *hevel*, so I will be borrowing this from him [I held up a spray bottle during delivery]. And during his talk, it was a powerful illustration to choose some of the things we hold dear, and call them *hevel* [followed with a SPRAY from the spray bottle]. So, a new car is... *hevel* [SPRAY]. A promotion at work is *hevel* [SPRAY]. A great day is *hevel* [SPRAY]. A terrible day is *hevel* [SPRAY]. Even, dare I say it, football is *hevel* [SPRAY]. My slipping a disc in my spin is *hevel* [SPRAY]. Surgery is *hevel* [SPRAY]. Recovery is *hevel* [SPRAY]. *Qoheleth* concludes that all of the things under the sun are *hevel*, that is to say, all of our earthly experiences are pointless [SPRAY]. So the question, then, is how does he come to this depressing conclusion.

## LIFE UNDER THE SUN

To come to the conclusion that everything under the sun is *hevel*, the *Qoheleth* ran a series of experiments. He looked at the experiences and values on earth that we often claim give life purpose and meaning, and investigated if this was ultimately so. His first experiment was looking into the value of wisdom. Remember, this is attributed to Solomon, the wisest of the wise. But despite his emphasis on wisdom, he ultimately concludes that “the more knowledge, the more pain” (1:18). It is not unlike that famous line from Thomas Gray’s poem “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” (1742): “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise.” Now, he does temper this a bit, as the *Qoheleth* argues it is still better to be wise than a fool, but nonetheless, he says, “What happens to the fool will also happen to me. So why have I been so very wise?” (2:15) In other words, death has leveled any distinction between the wise and foolish – even between the good and bad. Thus, wisdom is pointless [SPRAY].

Next, the *Qoheleth* turns his attention to many of our current society’s favorite things: earthly pleasures and possessions. But he learned what so many people here in 2019, affluent America have been learning: you cannot find meaning and purpose through self-indulgence and consumption. You are, ultimately, left feeling empty and unfulfilled. These things are nothing but *hevel* [SPRAY].

Finally, the *Qoheleth* turns to our passage on hard work and wealth. He ruminates about how you can work hard all your life to gather as much as you can, but what you end up with are sleepless nights, wondering if it will be enough, and wealth that you can’t take with you when you pass on anyway. This was not a foregone conclusion back then, that’s why they built the pyramids in Egypt, so the powerful could be buried with all of their stuff and take it to the afterlife. Now, it is possible your stuff might end up being the next King Tut Museum tour, but more likely, as the

*Qoheleth* laments, it will simply be passed on to another who might just fritter it all away.

*Qoheleth's* thought is a popular one. Consider that traditional Chinese proverb: "Wealth does not pass three generations." Or, for the Baby Boomers, think of that song, "Handbags and Gladraggs," which follows a young woman foolishly wasting all that her grandfather had sweated so much to pass on to her. Or, for Millennials, consider Jack Donaghy from the Television sitcom *30 Rock*, who argues, "The first generation works their fingers to the bone making things; the next generation goes to college and innovates new ideas. The third generation snowboards and takes improv classes."<sup>2</sup> The *Qoheleth's* wisdom speaks VOLUMES today! And, thus, all of it is simply [SPRAY] *hevel*.

Taken all together, you might say that what *Qoheleth* has stumbled upon is the Biblical example of an existential crisis. This is the study of existentialism fathered by the Christian, and "Moody Dane," named Søren Kierkegaard. In this field of inquiry, questions like "why do I exist?" and "what is the point of life?" are bandied about. This is not all that different than Douglas Adams' creation *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

How many of you have read this book or are aware of Douglas Adams? *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is both a popular science fiction, comedy series and book that was originally published in England in 1979, though it has found success worldwide. In it, the protagonists are led to find the "answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything." Do any of you remember what they find? It's... "42." This answer to any existential crisis is ultimately, "42." Do you know why it's "42"? Because it's pointless, it's an absurdity, it's *hevel* [SPRAY]. "42" is Douglas Adams' way of saying *hevel*. So, wisdom is 42 [SPRAY]. Work is 42 [SPRAY]. Pleasure is 42 [SPRAY]. Life is 42 [SPRAY]. Maybe this sermon is 42 [SPRAY]... is there even a point?

And, if you think about it, why *wouldn't* it all be "42"? At least as far as Douglas Adams is concerned. You see, Adams was an honest, and outspoken atheist. Now, I'm not looking to attack atheists, I'm simply saying that Adams was correct in suggesting that without God, there really is no ultimate point because the universe is going to go kaput one day. Scientists used to think the universe would be destroyed in "The Big Crunch" when the universe collapses in on itself into a dimensionless singularity. More contemporary, scientific consensus has now shifted to "The Big

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<sup>2</sup> From the season 5 episode 3, "Let's Stay Together" (2010).

Freeze,” which argues that the universe will end when all the energy is exhausted, movement ceases, and everything dissipates into nothingness.

Thus, everything we value now, including ourselves, will ultimately be forgotten. There will be no memory. There will be nothing. Without God, time just hurtles towards an unavoidable... cosmic... end... [SPRAY] *Hevel*.

Don't worry, I'm not going to leave it here...

Because, you see despite the *Qoheleth* and Adams' sharing similar sounding views on the pointlessness of life, they ultimately end on a very different note, because the *Qoheleth* is NOT an atheist. Indeed, the *Qoheleth* cannot help but believe in God, and that ends up changing everything!

### THE DIVINE PERSPECTIVE

Although it is not immediate, *Qoheleth* does bring God into his teaching. The *Qoheleth* speaks about God and a sort of divine perspective, or heavenly point of view, which sees things “under the sun” very differently. He points this out by reminding us that “...God is in heaven, but you are on earth” (5:2). Now this is not some ancient cosmology he is referring to, but the fact that God has a different viewpoint from which to see things than we. Compare this idea to the view from the bottom of a wooded valley, and the very top of a mountain overlooking said valley. In the valley, we see whatever trees are right in front of our faces and not much farther. But from the top of the mountain, you see everything. Looking out over the horizon, it appears that time and space go on forever. This, hopefully, should help explain why *Qoheleth*, who has only focused on a fleeting vapor [SPRAY], would then write, “I know that whatever God does will last forever; it's impossible to add to it or take away from it” (3:4). You see, it is from God's divine perspective and prerogative, that God introduces eternity, and with eternity comes purpose. We can now align ourselves with something that lasts, something that is not simply *hevel* [SPRAY]. We can align ourselves with something eternal. After eternity is introduced, what we do actually matters!

Our work matters – it has an eternal purpose.

Our wealth and what we do with it matters – it has an eternal purpose.

Our relationships matter – they have an eternal purpose.

Even the pleasures of life matter – they have an eternal purpose because they are God's gifts.

And this brings us to one of the most important qualities of this eternal perspective – a core quality of the eternal God – and that is generosity. Generosity is an eternal disposition, and a key to understanding the eternal God. We Methodists might say “grace” instead of generosity – something God gives freely out of love. It is, then, when we align ourselves with this generosity, this eternity, this grace, that we find purpose in God... a purpose that does not pass away and is not pointless.

This is central to the message that Jesus points to throughout his ministry, with, perhaps, the “Parable of the Rich Fool” being most relevant for our sermon today. I will recite the parable briefly:

“A certain rich man’s land produced a bountiful crop. He said to himself, What will I do? I have no place to store my harvest! Then he thought, Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. That’s where I’ll store all my grain and goods. I’ll say to myself, You have stored up plenty of goods, enough for several years. Take it easy! Eat, drink, and enjoy yourself. But God said to him, ‘Fool, [psalmist word for those who deny God] tonight you will die. Now who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?’ This is the way it will be for those who hoard things for themselves and aren’t rich toward God.” (Luke 12:16-21, CEB)

It sounds like a frightening parable, yes? But I don’t think Jesus is telling you all to get rid of your 401K’s. Look at this rich man’s pointless existence: life is just him and *his* stuff. It’s *his* land, *his* work, *his* harvest, *his* grain, *his* goods. Even the enjoyment in his life is simply a gift from *himself*. Missing are any other people and, of course, God. It’s just him and his many possessions. So, when he dies suddenly – not necessarily because of a punishment or anything, it was simply his time – it turns out all of his stuff is not his stuff at all. Instead, it will simply be left to another, and, presumably, the other is someone he doesn’t know, because he has no others in his life. Without God and living his life aligned with God, all his plans and his life ended up in folly – ended up *pointless* [SPRAY].

But Jesus points us beyond this pointlessness, and invites us to live our lives aligned with God, aligned with God’s grace. Jesus invites us to live our lives according to the eternal, instead of the fleeting, pointlessness of *hevel*. Again, Jesus reminds us that what we do matters. So how we spend our time and talents, the focus of this last September, matters. And, what we do with the fruits of our labors, our wealth, matters. That is the focus on this October. In our glad and generous giving of ourselves, our time, and our money, we are actually aligning ourselves with the eternal perspective, the eternal grace, the eternal purpose! You might say we swap out the U in SUN for an O – living our lives under the SON.

It's all just as the Apostle Paul – our namesake – writes to the Corinthians... and I'll end on this. Paul writes at the very end of his letter:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is never pointless. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Let me pray: *Gracious God ... What is life without you? Pointlessness? Meaninglessness? Vanity? Thankfully, we don't have to answer that question today, because we live our lives WITH you! You make our lives invaluable, blessing us and blessing others through us. Is there anything more magnificent than your love and grace? Then you? The one who is eternity and purpose itself! In Jesus name, amen.*