

The Message of Ecclesiastes #1

Oct. 31, 2020

The Teacher's Provocative Perspective:
"The Reflections of a Realist"

CEFC 10/31/21

"Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless" (Eccl. 1:2).

"All things are wearisome,

more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,

nor the ear its fill of hearing" (1:8).

"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun;

all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (1:14).

"For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;

the days have already come when both have been forgotten.

Like the fool, the wise too must die!

So I hated life,

because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (2:16-17).

“Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals;
the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other.

All have the same breath;

humans have no advantage over animals.

Everything is meaningless” (3:19).

“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—

and they have no comforter;

power was on the side of their oppressors—

and they have no comforter.

And I declared that the dead,

who had already died,

are happier than the living,

who are still alive” (4:1-2).

“For who knows what is good for a person in life,

during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow?

Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?” (6:12).

“In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

the righteous perishing in their righteousness,

and the wicked living long in their wickedness” (7:15).

“There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth:

the righteous who get what the wicked deserve,

and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve.

This too, I say, is meaningless” (8:14).

“So I reflected on all this and concluded that

the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands,

but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them” (9:1).

“I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift

or the battle to the strong,

nor does food come to the wise

or wealth to the brilliant

or favor to the learned;

but time and chance happen to them all” (9:11).

“Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,

or birds are taken in a snare,

so people are trapped by evil times

that fall unexpectedly upon them” (9:12).

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.

“Everything is meaningless!” (12:8).

Who is this Teacher?—

A member of the New Atheists Society?

It sounds a lot like the words of the atheist Richard Dawkins,

in his book *The God Delusion*—

When he says, "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."¹

Is this Teacher giving us a Cynic's Creed?

captured in the words of Chicago journalist Mike Royko—

"Show me somebody who is always smiling, always cheerful, always optimistic, and I will show you somebody who hasn't the faintest idea what the heck is really going on."

Where in the world do the words of this Teacher come from?

Why, they come from the Bible.

This is it—

the message of the book of Ecclesiastes—

not the whole of it, mind you—but a major part of it.

What are we to make of it—these perplexing words?

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher.

"Everything is meaningless!"—

these words provide the bookends—

put at the beginning and at the end of this Teacher's teaching (1:2 and 12:8).

¹ [*River Out of Eden*](#), Basic Books, 1995, p. 133

Is that really true?

Is that really what the Bible teaches?

What in the world is going on here?

This book of Ecclesiastes—

there's nothing quite like it in the rest of the Bible.

And some have questioned whether these words

really belong in the Bible at all. /

This morning we begin three weeks in which we will try to make sense of a book

that says the world is senseless.

What does this Teacher mean

when he says that everything is meaningless?

Now it is true that at the very end,

the message of this Teacher is summed up by a narrator

to give the book a very orthodox ending—

12:13—"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."

OK, that sounds good.

But that comes only at the end.

And because it only comes at the end,

the writer intends that we wrestle with a lot of stuff we may not like

before we are ready to grasp that truth.

And that same narrator not only says that the Teacher was wise,
but also that what he wrote was upright and true (12:9-10).

How can all this stuff about meaninglessness be “true”?

I call the message of this book “perplexing”—
which may be one of the reasons that I have been preaching for thirty-five years
and I am only now gathering the courage to expound this book—
even if only in an abbreviated way.

I’ve come to the conclusion that this book is meant to be perplexing.

It is designed to provoke us—
to provoke us into thinking deeply about life in this world.

The narrator says as much—

12:11—“**The words of the wise are like goads,
their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails.**”

A goad is spiked stick used to drive cattle—

it spurs them on—
it prods them to go where they aren’t inclined to go.

That’s what this book does—

it provokes us;
it makes us feel uncomfortable;
it can be exasperating,

ruffling our feathers,
unsettling our unexamined assumptions.

That's why some people like the book;
and it's why other people don't—
for it forces us to face up to some tough questions—
and especially what real significance our lives can have
in the light of the certainty of our own death.

Who wants to think about death?

Death is rarely the subject of polite conversation,
and it's not something we want to talk about even to ourselves.

The 17th century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal
observed it in his day—

“As men have not been able to cure death, misery, or ignorance,
they have taken to not thinking about them
so as to become happy.”²

To avoid such unpleasant subjects, he says,
we become obsessed with distraction and diversion.

And Pascal said that before the invention of the smart phone,
Facebook, Twitter, Tik-Tok,
twenty-four hour cable news,
and ESPN.

We now live in a culture that bombards us with incessant entertainment—

² *Penseés* (Penguin, 1966, p. 235, cited in Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, p. 43).

we now crave constant amusement.

I learned just this week that the word “amusement”

comes from the Old French verb *‘muser’* which meant “to stare stupidly.”

In the 1640s, “amusement” referred to the “diversion of attention,”

especially in deceptive military actions.

And in the spiritual battle of our age,

amusement is one of the devil’s primary tactics.

People don’t want to think long and hard about the meaning of their lives,

especially in the light of the reality of death.

But the Teacher of Ecclesiastes forces to do just that./

And when we do think about our lives in the world,

we want to believe that this world has some rational order—

some predictability that enables us to know what’s coming.

If we do this, this will happen;

it we act that way, we can expect that result.

In other words, we like to believe that our acts have predictable consequences.

The book of Proverbs paints a picture of a world like that—

with its general truths based on observable patterns—

Prov. 11:23 **The desire of the righteous ends only in good,**

but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.

Prov. 11:28 **Those who trust in their riches will fall,**

but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

Prov. 12:11 Those who work their land will have abundant food,
but those who chase fantasies have no sense.

Prov. 12:21 No harm overtakes the righteous,
but the wicked have their fill of trouble.

That's the way life is supposed to operate,
and we can say that usually, that is the case.

There is quite often a temporal reward for righteous living.

Things tend to go better for those who follow the rules.

But the Teacher of Ecclesiastes seems intent on focusing on all the exceptions.³

He's been compared to someone trying to teach you to spell in English.

You learn simple rules, like "i" comes before "e."

But then you have words like "receive" or "believe,"

so you add to the rule—

"i" before "e" except after "c",

but then what about words like *neither* or *neighbor*?

the exceptions, it seems, could go on forever.⁴

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes seems to keep saying "But what about this"

and "What about that."

³ Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, p. 6, citing Curtis and Brugaletta, 192.

⁴ Eswine, p. 6.

“In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

the righteous perishing in their righteousness,

and the wicked living long in their wickedness” (7:15).

“I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift

or the battle to the strong,

nor does food come to the wise

or wealth to the brilliant

or favor to the learned;

but time and chance happen to them all” (9:11).

That’s disorienting,

it’s confusing,

it doesn’t help us manage our lives.

How can you plan for the “chance” happenings of life?

when we “are trapped by evil times

that fall unexpectedly upon [us]” (9:12)./

But isn’t the Teacher’s view of life realistic?

Isn’t that how life often works?—

Haven’t you seen life work that way—

Someone you love gets diagnosed with cancer.

Another is fatally struck by a drunk driver.

Why did that happen to that person?

What did they do to deserve that?

They sure didn’t see that coming—

“time and chance happen to them all”

As one writer put it:

“If Proverbs is like meteorology
giving us indicators so as to predict certain outcomes,
then Ecclesiastes is like the actual weather,
fickle and unpredictable in its ability to rant with storms
or breathe easy with a mid-morning breeze.

In Proverbs a good man plus God’s love and wisdom
equals a good life.

In Ecclesiastes a good man plus God’s love
still dies like the beast or the fool.

In Proverbs, wisdom gives us eyes to recognize the storm clouds
and what to do in response.

In Ecclesiastes, death is a piece of tornado
from which no proverbial basement can shelter us.”⁵

Yes, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes is a realist—

He looks at the world as it is—
just as he sees it.

Nineteen times he says, “I **saw**” or “I **have seen**”—

4:1—“**I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:**”

6:1—“**I have seen another evil under the sun”**

The Teacher is a shrewd observer of life in this world.

He writes from the vantage points of age and experience,
telling us what he learned from his lifelong quest

⁵ Eswine, p. 9.

to understand the meaning of life.⁶

And this is why the book is said to appeal especially to old people, like me—
those who have gone around the block and few times
and have seen it all.
For the Teacher certainly has.

In an autobiographical section, which we will look at next week,
he looks back on his own aspirations and desires,
and mulls it all over in his mind--

“I said to myself,” he writes five times.

“I reflected on all this and concluded,” he writes (9:1).

And his conclusion is clear—

“This too is meaningless” (2:15). /

This is the real world he is dealing with—
the world as we all see it.

This book captures the futility and frustration of a fallen world—
“the drudgery of work,
the emptiness of foolish pleasure,
and the mind-numbing tedium of everyday life.”⁷

I like how one writer put it:

“Think of Ecclesiastes as the only book of the Bible
we know was written on a Monday morning,

⁶ Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, p. 20.

⁷ Ryken, p. 4.

probably by a philosophy major.”⁸

And his vision focusses particularly on the human pursuit of knowledge
and the pursuit of wealth,
and then especially on the reality of death—
certainly, a subject that young people rarely, if ever, bring to mind. /

The Teacher’s realism cautions us against any trite formulas or superficial answers—
which Evangelical Christians are sometimes known for—
You know, the Sunday School answers for every question—
God, Jesus, and the Bible.

I heard someone just the other day on the radio
talking about how Evangelicals never let you ask hard questions.
Well, Ecclesiastes sure asks them.

Let’s face it--life is messy,
and that perspective may lead some to a hardened cynicism.
But, despite his observations,
our Teacher remains a believer in the goodness of God,
for his realism also includes glimpses of light and hope—
in those passages scattered throughout the book
that speak of the God-given joys in this life
which we have a duty to receive and appreciate.
Those joys serve as pointers to something bigger,
something beyond,
which we dare not neglect.

⁸ Ryken, p. 4.

But that is getting ahead ourselves. /

I confess that it is sometimes hard to grasp

exactly what this Teacher is trying to teach.

The book is hard to place in any one literary form—

it contains prose narrative,

but also poetry and proverbs and parables.

It doesn't follow a logical progression;

it seems repetitious and even contradictory.

It's simply not tidy.

It sometimes comes across as a kind of riddle.

Questions, rather than answers,

account for much of the book.⁹

But isn't its very literary form a part of its message?

If it is about the meaning of human life in this world

why should we expect it to be clear and simple,

and easy to understand,

for life is not like that—not at all.

And in that way, Ecclesiastes has a lot in common with the book of Job.

Job is personal,

Ecclesiastes is more philosophical—

but they both point to deep questions about life in this world,

and neither gives us easy answers.

⁹ Bartholomew counts 38 rhetorical questions in the book (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 107).

So before we jump into the book and look more closely at the opening section,
we must first ask, **Who is this Teacher?**

The Hebrew word translated “teacher” or “preacher”

is the word *qoheleth*.

And in some commentaries, that Hebrew word is used to refer to him.

The word *qoheleth* comes from the Hebrew verb **קָהַל** (*qâhal*) which means “to gather.”

So a *qoheleth* is presumed to be someone set over the gathering,

the congregation, of the people—

and in the Jewish context

that would often have been a teacher or preacher of some sort.

The title of the book ***Ecclesiastes*** comes from the Greek translation of this Hebrew term,
and you can see the same connection in Greek—

The *Ekklesiastês* is the one who stands over the *ecclesia*,
that is, the gathered community or “church.”

So who is Qoheleth, the *Ekklesiastês*--this Teacher or Preacher?

He is not named,

but he is described in v. 1 as “**son of David, king in Jerusalem:**”

Traditionally, it is assumed that this is a reference to King Solomon,¹⁰

who was well known for his wisdom.

And much of what we see in chap. 2

about the pursuit of wisdom and wealth and pleasure

mirrors Solomon’s own life.

¹⁰ cf. Prov. 1:1.

This Teacher may have been Solomon,
but that identification has been questioned,
because a number of things the Teacher says
would seem odd coming from the mouth of Solomon,
and it is commonly argued that the Teacher may have been
a literary figure created in the guise of Solomon to make a point.
Who else would have had the immense wisdom, wealth, and power,
to be in a position to make judgments
about the emptiness of human wisdom, wealth, and power?

The Teacher could have been Solomon,
but in the end, our understanding of the book
doesn't depend on that identification.

As J. I. Packer writes,

“The sermon is certainly Solomonic
in the sense that it teaches lessons
which Solomon had unique opportunities to learn.”¹¹

So after this rather long introduction to the book,
let's actually dig into it
and look at what has been called
its “thematic prelude” found in 1:2-11.

Turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chap. 1--

¹¹ *Knowing God*, p. 104, Cited in Erswine, p. 20.

1:1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

1:2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

1:3 What do people gain from all their labors

at which they toil under the sun?

1:4 Generations come and generations go,

but the earth remains forever.

Immediately, we encounter two key expressions for understanding the book.

The first is the word “**meaningless**.”

This word saturates the book,

occurring, in some form, thirty-eight times.

“**Meaningless**” is the NIV translation of the Hebrew word *hebel* (לרבותן),

and that Hebrew word is so important in this book

I want you to learn it.

So repeat after me—“*hebel*.”

So what does *hebel* mean?

In one sense, that’s what the whole book is about.

The Teacher wants us to actually feel what this word means,

as we travel with him on his reflective journey.

In its concrete sense found elsewhere in the Bible

hebel refers to “breath,” “breeze,” “mist,” or “vapor,”—

Psa. 144:3-4—"LORD, what are human beings that you care for them,
mere mortals that you think of them?

They are like a breath [a *hebel*];
their days are like a fleeting shadow."¹²

Psa. 39:5—"You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.

Everyone is but a breath [a *hebel*],
even those who seem secure."

Prov. 21:6 –"A fortune made by a lying tongue

is a fleeting vapor [a *hebel*], and a deadly snare."

In its metaphorical sense,

"hebel" refers to something that is insubstantial and fleeting—

It is often used of "**worthless**" idols.¹³

Something that is *hebel* is elusive and ephemeral.

It is "like a cloud of steam that comes from a hot breath on a frosty morning."¹⁴

Eight times in the book, *hebel* is compared to "**chasing after the wind**."¹⁵

The teacher is saying that life in this fallen world is impossible to grab hold of,

it is enigmatic;

¹² cf. Psa. 39:11; 62:9; Isa. 57:13:B

¹³ Jer. 8:19; 10:3,8,15, etc; Jonah 2:8; Ps. 31:6.

¹⁴ Ryken, p. 5.

¹⁵ 1:17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4,6, 16; 6:9.

it doesn't make sense, it all seems so pointless, so futile.
Some object to the NIV translation of the *hebel* as “meaningless,”
because that seems too definitive and final,
and in the end, we'll see that's not all there is to say,
but surely that's the way it seems—“meaningless.”
How can it be otherwise,
when we take a good, long, hard look at the fleeting nature of our lives.

We are here today and gone tomorrow.

That's why it's been said,

“Inside every old person is a young person wondering what happened.”¹⁶

Where did it all go?

“The book of Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means

for our lives to be like a whisper spoken in the wind:

here one minute, and carried away forever the next.”¹⁷

“Meaningless” may be too strong a translation of *hebel* simply because,

as we'll see as we proceed in the book,

the Teacher is no nihilist, in total despair,

with no conception of good or evil.

No, he will talk about some things being “better” than others,

which requires some sense of “meaning,”

and ultimately, he will talk about the judgment of God—

which gives meaning to everything.

¹⁶ Terry Pratchett, quoted in *The Times*, cited in Gibson, 131.

¹⁷ Gibson, p. 20.

But his emphasis is on what life looks like “under the sun.”

This is a second key expression in the book.

It occurs twenty-nine times.

“Just look around,” he seems to be saying,

“What do you see?”

In one sense, this phrase “**under the sun**” is limitless in its scope—

it encompasses everything—

everywhere the sun shines.

But in another sense, the phrase is limiting in its perspective.

The Teacher’s focus is on the visible,

the tangible,

what is knowable through our senses as we look at this world—

what exists “**under the sun.**”

This is why Ecclesiastes seems so applicable to our modern world—

for that seems to be the view of life that dominates our culture.

We call it “secularism”—

a word which comes from the Latin secularum,

which means “of this age.”

The world “**under the sun**” appears to be a world where God is absent.

Look at life around you—really look at it—

and what do you see “**under the sun**”?

That’s what the Teacher is doing./

And the book begins in v. 3 with a central, programmatic question--

**“What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?”**

In other words, when all is said and done,

and I reach the end of my three-score and ten,

or, by the current actuarial table, my four-score and four ,

what will be left?

What impact will my life have?

What sort of legacy will I leave behind?

And as he looks at life **“under the sun,”**

what does he see?--

It all will come to nothing.

v. 4—**“Generations come and generations go,**

but the earth remains forever.”

Compared to the timeless stability of this earth,

our lives are just blips on the screen.

And this was written before the emergence of geological theories

that measure time in millions and even billions of years.

What lasting significance could any of our brief lives have

in the light of the numberless millennia of the earth? /

From looking at the earth,

he sees the same pattern is seen in the other basic elements of our cosmos—

the sun, the wind, and the sea—

v. 5—"The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say."

Things come and go, and then come around again
in an endless, repetitive cycle that never seems to go anywhere.
Why should we think our measly little lives should be any different?
Why bother?
Why keep exerting ourselves tediously
on "the treadmill of our existence"?¹⁸

I think of the figure of Sisyphus of Greek mythology,
who was condemned to an eternity of rolling a bolder up a hill
only to see roll back down over and over and over again.
What's the point of it all?
Do you ever feel that way?
You clean the kitchen, you wash the clothes—

¹⁸ Packer, cited in Ryken, 9.

but it all just gets dirty again—it never ends.
Day after day, you fight the traffic to get to work,
and you wonder what it's all for,
what does it accomplish?
Will your tiny little contribution
to the workings of the massive bureaucracy of the US Government
or to our gross national product
be any more than a drop in the ocean?
“All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.”/

v. 8—“The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.”
In other words, nothing ever satisfies—
there is always one more YouTube video to watch,
one more championship game to attend to,
one more hit song to put on your playlist.
Our appetites are insatiable.

v. 9 –“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.”

It's not as if the Teacher would deny the newness of the internet or the iPhone.

We human beings are always coming up with new things—

we are almost obsessed with new things.

That's what fuels our economy.

But are these new things really all that new?

Aren't they just new ways of seeking to satisfy the same old human longings--

the longings for comfort or convenience

or community or social status?

Those are the same old human aspirations that never seem to change.

We may work hard to achieve something that will make the world a better place,

and our lives will have made a difference,

but in the end, all our labors will pass away and be forgotten—

v. 11—"No one remembers the former generations,

and even those yet to come

will not be remembered

by those who follow them."

Do you recognize any of these names?—

Owen D. Young, Pierre Laval, Hugh S. Johnson, James F. Byrnes,

Mohammed Mossedegh, Harlow Curtis?

You should--these are all people who have been designated

"Man of the Year" by *Time Magazine* during the last 100 years.

They were chosen as the person who had the greatest impact

in that year of all the persons living on earth.

Fame is a fleeting thing, isn't it?

You have to ask yourself--

What difference is my life going to make in the grand scale of things?

None! None at all, says the teacher of Ecclesiastes.

**"No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them."**

We labor and toil—

we build our sandcastles on the beach,

but then the tide comes in and washes it all away.

"The life of mortals is like grass," writes the Psalmist;

"they flourish like a flower of the field;

the wind blows over it and it is gone,

and its place remembers it no more" (Psa. 103:15-16).

It's as if the Teacher wants us all to experience

something of that mid-life crisis,

or approaching retirement,

when you look back on all that you've done

and realize that it doesn't really amount to much at all.

How can we ever avoid his conclusion—

Our lives are *hebel!* it's all *hebel!*—

a fleeting breath, a vanishing vapor—

insubstantial, empty and ephemeral,

worthless and without any real meaning. //

Let me pause for a moment and let that sink in.

So what are we to think of what we have just read?

How are we to respond to it?

Let me suggest two responses that the Teacher's provocative words

ought to evoke in us.

1) First, it ought to foster some real honesty.

The Teacher wants us to think hard about the real world—

the real world that confronts every day.

And the questions he raises are, if we are honest,

questions we will all ask at some point in our lives.

They are questions we must ask, if we are to be truly human—

for to be human is to seek meaning for our existence.

As one writer said it,

“Of all the biblical books,

Qoheleth is the one closest to his readers:

he says aloud things that everyone else is thinking.”¹⁹

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy put it this way—

¹⁹ de Pury (1999, 187), cited in Will Kynes, *Obituary for “Wisdom Literature,”* p. ?.

“My question—

that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—

was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man. . . .

a question with an answer to which one cannot live.

It was: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow?’

What will come of my whole life?

Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?’

It can also be expressed thus:

Is there any meaning in my life

that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”²⁰

This book calls us to be honest about addressing that question.

“Is there any meaning in my life

that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?”

There’s no place for trite and simplistic answers—

He wants us to get honest about real life in this fallen world.

And an honest reflection on that question

should elicit a second response from us—

and that is humility.

This book humbles us.

It humbles us

because “The reflections of the sage in Ecclesiastes

²⁰ Ryken, 49

unmask the myth of human autonomy and self-sufficiency.”²¹

The book declares that “Life has lost the key to itself.”²²

We can’t control our lives;

we can’t figure it all out;

the world doesn’t seem to make sense—

it remains an enigma—

who can unlock its mystery?

In other words, this book drives us to the conclusion—

we cannot be like God.

That’s humbling.

The project of this preacher is to cut us down to size.

He is intent on forcing us to come face-to-face

with our mortality and our finitude.

“Everything is a breath.

Fleeting, fleeting, everything is fleeting.”

As one writer puts it:

“That eternal WHY hangs over our lives.

It meets us at every turn.

²¹ D. Brent Sandy and Ronal Giese, *Cracking the Code*, p. 271, cited in Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, p. 2.

²² Wright, *Classical Essays*, p. 140.

Our fondest hopes are shattered.

Why? . . .

Where is the sense of it all?

And yet we must go on looking for the sense.

It is incredible that life should make no sense.

Every man who thinks at all believes that there is sense somewhere,

if only he could find it.”²³

“Life has lost the key to itself,” he continues.

“If you want the key you must go to the locksmith who made the lock.

Since you cannot get the key,

you must trust the locksmith to open the doors.”

That applies not just to the unbeliever—

No, not even Christians are allowed to grasp the mystery of the plan of God.

We must simply trust that there is a plan.

That is humbling for us all.

As I close this morning,

I'd like to race to the end of the book and put a happy ending

on this look at the musings of Qoheleth, the Teacher.

But I won't do that—

because he doesn't do that.

²³ Wright, *Classical Essays*, p. 141.

We have to take this journey with him—
a journey we will continue next week.

We must resist easy answers,
and reflect deeply on the questions that this book raises—
for these are questions we must all wrestle with.

If you are not a Christian here today—
I challenge you to think deeply and honestly about the big questions of this book.
Resist the temptation to go back
into that world of distraction and amusement.

What can give your life meaning in the face of shortness of our lives
and the inevitability of our death?

Take this journey with the teacher and face the real world
with his honesty and humility.

And if you are a believer, Christian here this morning—

Don't think you won't ask these questions—
for if you haven't already, you will.

This book will brace you to face life in this fallen world,
and even death,

with a renewed certainty that the only answer

is to be found in the God who created us
and who sent his Son to redeem us.

Let's pray.

Prayer

Closing Song: The Doxology

Benediction:

Rom. 11:33-36 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Oct. 31, 2020

**The Message of Ecclesiastes #1--
The Teacher's Provocative Perspective:
"The Reflections of a Realist"**

The book of Ecclesiastes is perplexing in many ways, and purposely so—it is meant to provoke to us to think realistically about the world and our lives in it. It asks hard questions and gives no easy answers. May we be challenged to reflect deeply on our lives as we work through this book and discover meaning in the midst of life's "fleeting vanity."

I. Introducing the Teacher's Perplexing Message

A. It is Provocative—

*"The words of the wise are like goads,
their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails . . ." (12:11)*

B. It is Realistic—

"time and chance happen to them all" (9:11).

**C. The Teacher/Preacher=Qoheleth=Ekklesiastês
=Solomon?**

II. The Thematic Prelude (1:1-11)

"What do people gain from all their labors

at which they toil under the sun? (1:3)

Two key expressions:

1) "*meaningless*" (Hebrew: *hebel*) 38x

2) "*under the sun*" 29x

Our Response—

1) Honesty

2) Humility

Sermon Response:

**The Message of Ecclesiastes #1--
The Teacher's Provocative Perspective:
"The Reflections of a Realist"**

- What about this book confuses you, disturbs you, or encourages you? Why?

- Why do you think this book is in the Bible? What does it offer us that many other biblical books don't?

- The Teacher asks, "What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?" (1:3). How does this relate to Jesus' question: "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mk. 8:36)?

- How much have you felt some of the *hebel* ("meaninglessness") of life that the Teacher points to? How do you deal with that?

- Why is the phrase "under the sun" so important in understanding the book? What is the Teacher's method of understanding life?

- Like the book of Job, Ecclesiastes declares that life is not tidy, and we should resist easy answers and trite formulas. How can we hold on to real, comforting truth without appearing to have all the answers to life's problems?

