

## Is This All There is To Life: *Superficial*

May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023

### INTRODUCTION

Good morning, West Portal. We want to continue our search as to whether there is a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life. For those of you who may be visiting, we've been walking through the OT book of Ecclesiastes (which is the Greek word for *the Teacher* who speaks prominently and pointedly throughout this book). Against the backdrop of our propensity towards assuming or pretending things are better than they really are, this book is definitely a cold shower of gritty, edgy reality.

We began by looking at the restlessness and seemingly endless, inconclusive repetitions to be found in nature and in the human scene. What goes around might come around, but are actually getting anywhere? On this hamster wheel of life, we've tried different lifestyles. We've compared wisdom with ignorance. We contrasted trivial laughter with sobering seriousness. We've sampled the pleasures of hard work and the beauty of accomplishment. We've tried living for the moment and planning for the future. If some of these had much to give, none survived the acid test of time and death. To find anything that time would not undo, we should have to look elsewhere. But, while we like to think of ourselves as captains of our ship, the tides and currents of time often leave us feeling more adrift than in command, struggling just to keep our bearings. A more sinister note crept in in chapter 3 and 4—the theme of human tyranny, cruelty, and oppression. At its worst, this bitter reality that can make death, even at its most hopeless, seem no longer the last enemy, but the last remaining friend.

Last Sunday we contemplated not the losers in this human struggle, but the apparent winners—those who, to all outward appearances, have hit the lottery or won life's prize. They've embraced the rat race. We describe them as successful. They've spent their lives acquiring prize after prize. The question is, does the person who dies with the most toys (or academic degrees, or fame) win, or do they simply die like everyone else? I felt this when news came in October 2020 that Eddie Van Halen had died of a stroke. The fact that some of you have no idea who I'm talking about makes this an even more emphatic point. His parents moved from the Netherlands to the U.S. in the 1950s because of the mistreatment they were experiencing due to their mixed-race relationship. Eddie and his brother Alex were considered minority students because they didn't speak English as a first language and were bullied as a result. Eddie would go on to become regarded as one of the greatest, most innovative rock 'n roll guitarists of all time. He once joked, "We came here with approximately \$50 and a piano, and we didn't speak the language. Now look where we are. If that's not the American dream, what is?" Does achieving the pinnacle of human fame and fortune leave us satisfied and fulfilled, or is it yet another anticlimax in a lifetime of ultimately empty achievements?

The short verses we come to today at the beginning of chapter 5 may feel out of place. We've spent much time looking at life *under the sun*, in a universe where there may or may not be a god. Suddenly we're talking about worship, sacrifices, and vows. What is our author saying?

- We try to bend the universe to our will & way = *futile*

*What is twisted cannot be straightened.* Life does not come to us or unfold the way we think it should. We can fight against this, trying to bend the universe to our will and our way, but at best this is frustrating, and at worst, futile. Life can only be received as a gift.

- We try to bend God to our will & way = *futile*

*Life is a sorry business, this too from the hand of God.* It turns out, God also does not come to us the way we think he should. Accepting life from the hand of God hardly unravels life's puzzles or guarantees immediate happiness. So, we try to bend or manipulate God to our will and our way, but at best this too is frustrating, and at worst, futile. We cannot insist God come to us on our terms. Rather, we can only approach God on his terms. This is the path toward satisfaction, and this is where the Teacher turns his attention. **Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7.**

CONTENT – *Ecclesiastes 5:1-7*

Watch your step (in your worship)!

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.* This is almost certainly a reference to the temple which, for an Israelite, was understood to house, at least as much as an earthly structure could be said to contain, the presence and glory of God. Access to God's presence is greatest good. This is the primary lament of the Genesis story of sin entering the world, not that Paradise was lost, but that by being evicted from the Garden, access to God's presence was lost. God, in his grace finds ways for his presence to dwell with his people, but like an ant getting too close to the sun, or like bacteria getting too close to a disinfectant, humanity can no longer take this for granted. God's presence is still the greatest good, but in our sinful state this something that can't be taken for granted or treated casually without consequences. When God's presence descends on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19) to meet with the Israelites in the wilderness after their slavery in Egypt it comes with some serious guidelines that involve getting properly prepared and not coming too close or even touching the mountain. When God's presence later fills the Tabernacle (Ex. 40) Moses can't even enter. When God's presence later fills the temple Solomon builds (1 Kings 8) the priests have to leave. Hence the warning this chapter opens with, which says in essence, "Watch your step!" When it comes to approaching and worshiping a holy God there is a right and a wrong way to do this, and we get an abbreviated snapshot of both.

- a) Proper posture – *listening*
  - Hearing
  - Heeding (obedience)

*Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.* The proper posture in worshiping and approaching God is outlined in brief, and it involves listening. Make no mistake about this, from a Jewish perspective *listening* always implied more than simply hearing something.

It implied hearing and heeding—responding or obeying what had been heard. To have heard something but done nothing about it is the same as not having heard it in the first place. I suspect this is why Jesus, after many of the parables he used as teaching tools, finishes with the phrase, “He who has ears, let him hear.” It’s an odd phrase considering almost everyone is born with functional ears. Jesus isn’t doing a mic check. *Can you all hear me in the back? You can, okay, just checking.* Jesus is doing a heart check. *Listen up! Pay attention to what I’m about to say and start to live it out.* We preached through the SOM this past fall which closes with a memorable parable about two different house builders—one who built on a solid foundation, the other who did not. Do you remember the way Jesus sets up the story? *Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man.* This is the biblical assumption of *listening* and the proper way to worship and approach God—ready to listen, ready to respond.

b) Improper attitude – *sacrifice of fools*

*Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.* In contrast to the proper posture of listening, we’re given its alternative, the *sacrifice of fools*. Whereas we find the OT prophets often criticizing those who are either far from God or worshiping other gods, the critique being offered here seems to be the well-meaning person who turns up cheerfully enough to church, likes to sing a good song, but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets around to what he or she has volunteered to do for God.

- Thoughtless activity (*going through the motions*)

The Hebrew word for *sacrifice* used here referred to an offering (an animal) that was killed and then used for a meal, in contrast to some sacrifices which were totally consumed by fire. The idea behind this kind of sacrifice is the blending of the seriousness of sin (the death of the animal) and thankfulness enjoyed before God (the meal). However, this had the potential to degenerate into thoughtless festivity—focusing on the party and forgetting about the seriousness of the sacrifice. The sacrifice of fools has become a thoughtless activity. They’re not sinning intentionally, they’re sinning involuntarily (not that this makes it any better). They’ve fallen into the trap of going through the religious motions, but it’s no longer engaging their heart.

- Rash promises

The thoughtless activity, however, is masked by many good sounding words. They sing heartily, they pray publicly, they’re involved in the conversation in the Sunday School classroom, but their religious language spills out faster than their thinking and certainly than their intending. So, vows become a great case study or example of this. Temple vows were a common feature of OT worship and involved promises to dedicate or give such things as sacrifices or money to God in return for granting a request in prayer. As strange as this might sound to us, how many of you have ever prayed, “God if you answer this prayer, I’ll do this...or I’ll never do this...?”

God doesn't have to respond to these prayers or promises, but sometimes he does. The temptation then, as now, was to avoid following through on the promise once the prayer had been answered. The Teacher insists on integrity. Honor your promises. We take this seriously at a human level. Don't be surprised God does too. But words come quickly and easily to those whose heart isn't engaged, and their lack of obedience (or follow through) is precisely what contrasts them with those who approach God properly.

Reality check – *God is in heaven and you are...um...not.*

The reality check that should always motivate proper worship seems to be found in the second half of verse 2. *God is in heaven and you...um...are not (are on earth), so let your words be few.* If I was paraphrasing this sentence, I'd borrow a line from former professional wrestler Dwayne *the Rock* Johnson, who loved to say, "Know your role and shut your mouth." It's a bit rude, but it makes the point. When you and I catch a glimpse of the greatness and holiness of God, we'll immediately understand our place, and the words that we use to argue with and control situations and people around us will seem empty. This idea is captured in the final chapters of the book of Job. Do you remember that one? Job has had disaster after tragedy hammer him and his family. He hasn't sinned specifically in a way that would invite these circumstances. He pleads with God to finally show up and answer his objections, which amount to, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" God does show up and he challenges Job to respond to him. In that moment Job's response is, "I put my hand over my mouth...surely I spoke of things I did not understand." *God is in heaven and you and I are...um...not.* This reality check will always inspire properly oriented worship.

#### APPLICATION

Good news – *God is approachable*

Not-so-good-news – *God does not come to us on our terms*

The Teacher has hinted at a God who has placed eternity in our hearts, from whose hand our life flows, and from whom good gifts like pleasure and work can be joyfully received. The implicit question is, "Is this God approachable?" This is the good news of this passage. The answer is yes. God can be approached, worshiped, and enjoyed. However, like some products you and I purchase, God comes with a warning label. *Caution! Do not approach carelessly.* A holy God is not to be approached trivially or carelessly, and he does not come to us on our terms. You cannot control or manipulate him with religious behavior or pious words. Either we approach him on his terms, or we cannot approach him at all.

- a) Improper worship – we act, God responds
- b) Proper worship – God acts, we respond

The inherent problem with the improper worship outlined in Ecclesiastes 5 is that the focus is on us. It begins with our religious activity, biblical words, and prayer-infused promises, and then insists God should respond to us.

Don't misunderstand me, I'm a firm believer God interacts genuinely and in relationship with his children. He loves to respond and answer prayer more than we're willing to pray. But he's not obligated to, and we can't control or coerce him like we can those around us. We cannot bend the universe to our will and our way. We cannot bend God to our will and our way either. But we can adjust our expectations and our posture. We can bend ourselves to God's way. This is why properly oriented worship understands that God acts, and God speaks, and we are invited to respond perhaps with thanksgiving, repentance, generosity, and always with obedience. Hearing and heeding.

Here's the simple and sad reality, all of us, at least occasionally, fall into the trap of going through the motions. Why? Because it's easier to perform religious activity than it is to submit to God. Most of us would rather show up to church Sunday morning than alter the way we spend our Friday night. Most of us would rather listen to a Christian podcast than listen to one of our lonely classmates or coworkers. It's easier to sing a few Christian songs than it is to forgive someone who's hurt you. It's easier to read my bible than it is to selflessly serve my wife and kids. Most of us would rather add another religious behavior to our lives than let go of a sinful one we've grown to love. This is why most Christians today are over-knowledged and under-obedient. We know more than we're putting into practice.

How do we avoid this kind of superficiality in our faith? We need to learn not only to hear but to respond to God's voice and this takes practice. Let me make this highly practical. We put out discussion questions to go along with our Sunday morning teaching. Some of your small groups use these. Anyone can grab these off our website. After all the fun, rabbit-trails, I end with the same two questions every time, and I believe they're the most important ones.

### **For Sunday mornings...**

- What is one thing that stood out from the teaching this past week? What is one question this raised?
- Where and how do you sense Jesus nudging you to respond? What might a faithful, obedient step towards this look like?

I think these are questions a person should press themselves to answer every Sunday. It might be specific to the message preached, or it may just be something Jesus is wanting to address in your life. Who or what situations is God bringing to mind? Are there people you need to connect with, reach out to, befriend, forgive, serve, or love? Are there behaviors Jesus is asking you to start (joining a ministry team, praying for a missionary, reading your bible with your family)? Are there behaviors Jesus is asking you to stop or curb (reducing your work hours, your drinking, finding an accountability partner to help you say no to pornography)? If nothing comes to mind, you can always pray, "Jesus, if there's a place in my life you're inviting me to follow you more fully faithfully and fully, please reveal it to me." I dare you. That's a prayer Jesus loves to answer.

Here's one other suggestion. I was part of a multi-week program this spring called Authentic Living (you'll be hearing more about this as we head towards fall). One of the tools they taught and encouraged us to put into practice involved a way of reading your bible and journaling. I hate journaling, but this has changed the way I read my bible and so I'll share it with you. What I love about this, is you can make it work with any bible reading or devotional study you're doing. If you have a routine, you don't need to change it. Simply pick a passage, read it slowly (twice helps) and take a few minutes to fill in the following.

### **For weekly bible reading...**

Day:  
**Scripture**  
**Thoughts**  
**Application**

*Andrew, my son,*

### **Response**

*Dear Holy Spirit,*

Record the day. Write down the passage you read and make a note of any phrases or pieces that stood out to you. What drew your attention? Then jot a few thoughts. What did God bring to your mind as you were reading and reflecting on this? Then, in first person, write out what you believe God is saying to you. I promise you, this will feel weird. Candidly, none of us hears the voice of God perfectly. But I believe God speaks more frequently than we're willing to acknowledge, and this makes the message personal. Once you've written out what you sense God saying to you, write your response. Here's an example from my journal this past week. I don't recommend this, but I've been reading the OT prophet Ezekiel a lot this year. It's as obscure and complex a biblical book as there is. This past Monday I read Ezekiel 18. It's a chapter where God pleads with people to course correct. He repeatedly invites people to repent and live or to turn from their ungodly ways of living to follow and obey him. The line that stood out most to me was...

Day: Monday, May 15<sup>th</sup>

### **Scripture** (Ezekiel 18)

*(God speaking) But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live...*

I found myself thinking...

### **Thoughts**

This should motivate our willingness to share the gospel with others more readily.

I had just shared my story of how God has been working in my life at the Freedom Session graduation the previous Wednesday. This is what I sensed God saying to me...

### **Application**

*Andrew, my son, you have a story to share. While it was difficult, you shared it in front of the church in part because you know it's good news in your life. You reminded yourself, it's not your story as much as it is mine (my work in your life). Keep your eyes open and know that I may ask you to share it with people outside of the church. Trust that it can be good news in their lives as well.*

My response...

### **Response**

*Dear Holy Spirit, give me the eyes to see those opportunities and the courage to speak when I'd prefer to keep silent.*

The antidote to our tendency to go through the religious motions is heartfelt obedience. Push yourself, whether it's on Sunday mornings or as you read your bible or pray during the week, what do you sense God saying to you and what would a faithful response look like? Continue to practice this and not only will going through the motions no longer be an issue, you'll begin recognizing God's voice and seeing answers to prayer.