

Let's go to Ecclesiastes, a wildly, wildly, wildly popular book. Ecclesiastes, such a positive message. A warm fuzzy book. The Byrds wrote a song about it, "To every thing, turn turn turn. There is a season, turn turn turn." Yeah, the author Herman Melville, who wrote Moby Dick, also called Ecclesiastes "the truest of all books." And he would say that you could trust Ecclesiastes because of the sorrow in it. You can trust a man who's lived hard was his rationale. That someone who had lived charmed and perfect and never suffered or been bothered that you can't trust that person, but someone who's bled and suffered and had it horrible, you can trust what he says. And so, we're going to start in Ecclesiastes this morning, and we'll be there for the next twelve to fourteen weeks. And we'll just kind of do like we did through Hebrews. We'll just read a little bit of it, talk a little bit about it, read a little bit of it, talk about it a little bit.

And so, success is a passion of not only our generation, but really any generation that's ever lived. And we want to be successful. With the marketing tools of our time period, it's even more of a desire. In fact, you've even got companies whose sole job is to motivate you to be successful. I'm thinking of things like "successories," you know the posters, "Teamwork" and then it has the little phrase underneath. I even more like the posters that mock that. One of my favorites is a ship sinking and it says underneath it, "Sometimes the journey of a thousand miles ends very, very, very badly." So, I even like the ones that mock that, but successful is something is that we all want to be. I've never met the guy who's like, "I don't want to be successful." Whether it's in business or in life or in family or in relationships, we all want to have some kind of measure of success. Now, the Bible, the sacred literature of ours, it's going to address success. It's going to address it a lot. But specifically, it's going to address it in these five books that stand together in the middle of the Old Testament. They're called the "wisdom literature," and most people, if they told you their favorite verse out of the Old Testament, it's probably going to come out of these five books. It's Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Those five books make up what's called the "wisdom literature." And people who read the Scriptures, they love these books. Specifically, they love these Old Testament books because they're not as historical as they are individual. And so, they don't kind of carry the historical, "This battle took place and this many died." They're not historical like that, but they're more narratives of individual people's lives. And so, we can kind of resonate with their joy and with their sorrow and with their hard times and with their good times. And the men that are kind of exemplified or talked about in these books, they're very, very, very human men. And so, they're easy to read and go, "Okay, I get that."

Each one of the books carries its own purpose. The book of Proverbs is really how you find success. If you want to be successful, whether you're a business man or a student or a business woman or a housewife, no matter where you fall on line of things, if you want to be successful in life, Proverbs is kind of that field guide to how you do that. It addresses everything from money to relationships to character, alright. So Proverbs is that book.

Psalms, one of my personal favorites, is the writings of the great schizophrenic king, David. And I think he's schizophrenic because he, in one line will say, "How long, Oh Lord, will You forsake me?" and then two lines later, say, "How great You are to be so near to me." And my soul resonates with that. Maybe not you, maybe you flutter about in a kind of glory, but for me, that resonates with me. I also resonate with how he argues with himself within the book. Everybody who's ever tried to walk with Christ knows that at times, there's this chasm between what he head knows and what the heart is walking in. And David addresses this when he says things like, "Why are you so downcast? Oh my soul, put your hope in God." It's like he knows what's right, but his heart won't join him there. Anyone feel that way too?

Then you've got Song of Songs, and oh what a book. Song of Songs is a book about sex and the celebration of sex. In fact, so graphic is the Song of Songs, that young Hebrew boys are actually forbidden to read it until they got a little bit older. It is a very graphic celebration of sexuality. And so, you've got that book, and then you've got two books left.

You have the book of Job, and you have the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, these two books form kind of one lesson from two opposite sides of the spectrum. If you're not familiar with the story of Job, I'll give it to you very quickly. The Accuser walks into heaven and basically says to God, "I've been looking around the earth and these people You've created, they're a mess." And God says, "Have you considered Job?" Now, if Job knew what was about to happen, he'd probably go, "Don't worry about me. I'm good down here. I'm fine. Move along, move along." And God goes, "Have you considered Job?" And the Accuser goes, "Give me a break. You have so blessed him, made him so wealthy and made him untouchable to us..." And I love that line, because how many people in the church ascribe this kind of dualistic nature of good and evil, like God and the devil are doing battle against each other? Not true. What's about to happen to Job requires God's permission. If you'll remember in the New Testament, when Peter's about to be tempted, Jesus says, "Satan has asked Me permission to tempt you, and I have turned you over to him." So, there's not this cataclysmic battle of good vs. evil, there's this little runt pawn that goes, "Can I bother him?" And then, God goes, "Hmm, maybe." And so, the Accuser walks in and says, "You know, these guys are bums." And God says, "Consider Job." And the devil says, "Give me a break. You've so put a hedge around him, but I tell You what, if You let me strike him, if You let me hurt him, he'll curse Your name." And so, God thinks, as only God can and says, "Okay, do it." Now, the Bible tells us that in the cool of the morning, Job is walking in his garden and a servant runs up and says that the Sabeans have attacked and they have killed all of his donkeys and all of his oxen and all of his servants but this one delivering the message. That servant with the message is the only one that survived. And the Bible tells us then, before that one finishes speaking, another servant comes up and says, "Fire fell from the sky and burned up all your sheep and killed all your servants except me, and I alone survived." Now, when people like steal your stuff or something like that, that's a bad day, but when stuff starts falling out of the sky and destroying your property, then things have gone horribly, horribly wrong. Now, before that one finishes speaking, another servant runs up and says the Chaldeans raided from the east, and they stole all your camels and killed all your servants, and I'm the only one that survived. Before that one finishes speaking, another one comes up and says, "All of your children were in your oldest son's house eating lunch, and wind struck the house, the house collapsed and all your children are dead." At this, the Scriptures say that Job tore his clothes and began to worship God and you get the very famous, whether your a believer in Christ or church folk or not, you get the very famous line from Job there, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD," which infuriates his wife. So all of this destruction has happened, she's gone the bitter route, he's kind of tried to say, "Alright Lord, this is all Yours." So she walks up to him, and after this cataclysmic day, she goes, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die, you fool." To which, Job then got on his knees and said, "Give me back the camels, take the woman." No, I'm just kidding, that's not how it reads. I mean, you gotta think it crossed his mind. "Give me back the dog at least." So, the Accuser goes back, and God goes, "Huh? Ha ha ha." (That's a paraphrase). And the Accuser goes, "Please, You've given him his health. He's still healthy. Let me take his health. You give me his health, and he'll curse Your name." So God says, "Okay." And the devil strikes him with boils. And so Job sits in ashes, completely poor, dogs licking his wounds and arrives at the end of all of this by saying, "We have no hope on earth. Our only hope is beyond the sun."

Now, people who have Job-like experiences, now most of us haven't had that day, most of us haven't had that life, but for those of us who have suffered, for those of us who don't have a lot of money, for those of us who have been diseased, those who have had a hard time in life, here's what they do. They say, "Well, if life wasn't like this, if I had more money, if I had more power, if I had more friends, if I had better religion..." And what they'll do is "...if my parent's weren't so mean, if I would have grown up in a different place, if I could just get this..." And what they do is they begin to create, in their

minds, this better existence that exists somewhere over the rainbow. Are you tracking with me? Now, the problem with that is Ecclesiastes.

So, let's get running. Ecclesiastes 1:1, "The words of the Preacher..." This can be translated "teacher." Okay, so "In the words of the teacher..." I want you to here right out of the gate that this is more than just a life story, although you're going to see some of his life story here. He is wanting to teach something that he has learned. He's wanting to teach here. Here we go, "The words of the Preacher [or Teacher], the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Who is this? Solomon. This is Solomon. Get this in your head, because you've got to make sure you get this. This man is the king of a very prosperous, wealthy, powerful nation, i.e. He has more wealth, power and fame that you will ever, ever, ever, ever, ever..... ever have. He is more educated. He has, from the second he was born, had privilege and tutors in how life works. So this isn't just some guy off the street. He is beyond us, honestly, in terms of education, wealth and power, beyond us. Verse 2, "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities!" Now, this word "vanity" here is the Hebrew word "meaningless." So, here's his chipper introduction to his book. "Meaningless, meaningless, meaningless, meaningless." And if you're going, "Why did they put "vanity" there?" Well, they put "vanity" there because it means the same thing and it's very difficult to say "meaningless of meaningless." So, "Vanity of vanities," he's saying that life is, it's meaningless. Now surely, we can all look at life and agree that there are major portions of life that have no purpose, they're just there. But he's going to take it a step further, and he's going to tell you exactly what in life is meaningless. So look right there in the end of verse 2, "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Talk about your Debbie Downer. This is not just, "This bothers me and this doesn't have a point and this doesn't have a purpose."

He says, "Everything is meaningless."

"Everything, Solomon?"

"Everything."

"What about marriage?"

"Meaningless."

"What about pleasure?"

"Meaningless."

"What about wealth?"

"Meaningless. Everything under the sun, everything that is, is meaningless."

I mean, I read this and chuckle and want to hug him. I want to hug him and have him in my house and go, "It will be alright, Solomon." I mean, he is going to methodically, for the next twelve chapters, talk about every aspect of living and then attach to it, it's worthlessness. That it doesn't mean anything when it's all said and done. In fact, in all twelve chapters, he will use the Hebrew word "hebel" thirty-eight times. He's going to use this word, "meaningless" thirty-eight times in twelve chapters. Do the math.

So, everything is meaningless. Why? Why is everything meaningless? Look at this with me. Verse 3, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" Here's why I believe life is meaningless. Because for all of our work

and all of our labor and for all that we do, we die and leave this place unchanged. For all that we do and all that we accomplish, whether you get up at 5:00AM or you sleep in till 10:00, no matter what you do, you die and you leave this place unchanged. This is a philosophy, I believe it's called Empiricism. It is the idea that the only things that matter are on earth and can be pulled in by the senses: seeing, tasting, touching hearing. That the only things that matter and the only things that are real are things that can be touched and handled, and it's this philosophy of the five senses being what makes something real and right. Now, as believers in Jesus, we have a sixth sense, but we'll talk about that later because it ain't seeing dead people, alright.

Now, let's look at verse 4. So, everything's meaningless because we're going to die and we're not going to change anything. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again." Now, what he's saying here is that life is like a treadmill. I mean it is this kind of silly circular pattern that we all get caught up in, and at the end of the day, each generation is born into this world and runs with all the vigor of the sweaty man on the treadmill at the gym. And when all is said and done, he didn't go anywhere. He's sweaty, his heart rate is maybe a little bit better, but he didn't go anywhere. And just like the sun does the same thing every day and the wind does the same thing every day and the streams and the oceans, just like nature testifies that we're stuck in this kind of circular silliness. And so our lives work. And in the circular silliness of life, you and I have found our lives to be somewhat boring, somewhat in a rut. Like, here's what I mean by that. No matter how hard you work, there's always laundry. Isn't there? I mean, I know. I do the laundry at our house. No matter how many times you wash it, it's dirty again. I had to mow the lawn yesterday. I just did it a week ago. I had to get my hair cut this week. I got my hair cut a month ago. It needed to be cut again. It grew back. I had to pay bills again. He's going to say this. He's going to say, "Listen, all of this is just exhausting because it doesn't matter.

Look at verse 8, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." So, he's just talking about this non-satisfying existence that we get ourselves into. Maybe this circular pattern, I can best explain to you like this. Tomorrow morning, the alarm will go off at 6:30, we will wake up, shower, get dressed, get in our car, we will stop at Starbucks, and you will sit in traffic, you will get to your office, your cubicle, even worse, your workstation, which just means you're in a closet or your shop, where you work. You will get there, you will work until lunch. At lunch, you will eat something, probably with some friends. Now, after lunch, you will go back to your workstation/cubicle/office/shop/classroom/whatever, and you will work until 5:00, 6:00, whatever. You will then leave there, maybe go to the gym, probably not. You'll want to, you know you should, but instead, you'll go to dinner, you will eat dinner, you will go home, you will watch a little television and you will go to bed. And guess what you're going to do Tuesday. Same thing. Same drink at Starbucks. Nobody ever orders anything different. Maybe the same lunch. If it's different, it's one of three things you order from there. Back to the same office, same traffic, same television shows, same bed. Life is more like the film "Groundhog Day" than anyone wants to admit.

So, there are people, and maybe you're one of them, that pretend that their lives aren't in this predictable rut. And let me show you how they do it. Look in verse 9, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us." So, he then goes, "Listen, people like to pretend that their life isn't meaningless, that their life isn't stuck in a circular rut of boredom by getting trinkets and pretending that those trinkets are a new idea." And he says, "In the end, they might have more color to them, but they're not new. There is nothing new." And what he's saying here is that trinkets and new things are a deceptive part of the circular silliness that gets our minds away from the predictable, boring rut that is our lives. Now, if you're honest, and I'm not pretending that we are, but if you're honest, you've got to see this play out in life over and over and over again, that a gadget or a new bit of clothes or a new house or a new boat

or a new car, it brings this weird relief and excitement to life. Doesn't it? I mean it just does. Have you ever thought about how weird that is? That a new cell phone, the cool one, makes you feel better. I mean, it has an emotional effect on you. Like, you get it and you just hold it. When you're around people, you pull it out to check the time just so they can see. I mean it's this really weird, "This validates the reason I'm here." And the Scriptures are going, "Give me a break." Trinkets are trinkets. They're just that. Nothing's changed. Okay, so your cellphone now has Windows on it instead of Palm, congratulations. You had a calendar six months ago. And guess what, a thousand years before that, we had a calendar. So he's saying there's nothing new. You deceive yourselves...now, you follow me here because we live in a very affluent city, this area is very affluent. If you want to look up the census numbers on this area, this is a very wealthy upper-middle class area. I'm not saying you all are; I'm saying the dominant household income in this area is upper-middle class. And in this area, this is probably one of the greatest dangers to depth of life and meaning: trinkets, toys, trips, cars, new houses, new wives, new husbands, you add it in. There's nothing new under the sun. You might have heard it like this. In Recovery they'll say this, "Wherever you are, there you are." Yeah, so no change of work, no change of job, no increased income, it's not going to make things better inside of you. This is what Solomon is lamenting.

And then look. He's going to get you here too, because there's always the alpha males out there that are like, "Not me. I will change the known universe. I will do such a great job in business, such a phenomenal job with my family that the memory of me will live on for generations." Alright, verse 11, "There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after." Solomon's answer, "Hmm, no. You're going to die, and no one's going to remember you. No, you are pretty much going to die, and no one's going to remember you. Does anybody know their great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather's name? It wasn't that long ago. Does anybody know their great-great-great grandfather's name? One of you, good. So, absolutely proved my point, 1 out of 725.

Moving on, let's go verse 12, "I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." Let me stop there and try to explain this. What he's saying he's going to do here is, "I the king, with all my resources and all of the things I have learned..." Now, if you'll remember, when David died and Solomon became king, God offered Solomon anything he wanted. What did Solomon want? Wisdom. He didn't ask for wealth, he didn't ask for power, he said, "I want wisdom. I want to be the smartest man alive." And God, thought it was an honorable request, not only gave him that but gave him wealth and power. So this is what Solomon just said in that verse, "I king Solomon, wealthy, wise, powerful Solomon, set out to discover all that is occurring under heaven." So, here's what he's going to do. He's going to use the five senses: taste, touch, seeing, hearing and smell. So, he's going to use his five senses with all his wealth, power and wisdom, and he's going to use those five senses to apply those five senses to the six favorite things among men. Here are the six favorite things: wealth, power, religion, friends, work and pleasure. So, Solomon uses his five senses to engage the six favorite things of man as a kind of life experiment to see what's really going on under the sun. And when all is said and done, he says it's meaningless, it's absolutely meaningless.

Let's go verses 16-18 now, "I said in my heart, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.'" Basically, he's saying here really quick, "In case you think I'm a liar, let me remind you of this. I'm smarter than you, more powerful than you, have more women than you..." That's basically what he's doing here. He's saying, "Listen, trust me on this." Verse 17, look at this, "And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind."

So, here's what he said he did. He says, "What I did first is I went the high-brow route first. What I did was, I marbled everything and encrusted it in gold. I ate caviar, I drank Cristal, I went to the opera, I went to all the right clubs, I spent my wealth and power, I played polo. I did all that the rich and famous do, and I found it to be meaningless. And so, after I had acquired all that stuff and had all those things and did all the things that the rich did, I decided that it was

meaningless. So, I looked down and found some redneck brothers of mine, and I went and hung out with them. And I burned stuff and drank Old Milwaukee and played horseshoes and went to NASCAR and ate macaroni and cheese and hamburger stirred up in a pot. And I did that, and that also is meaningless. And no one e-mail me about the NASCAR comment. It's not a sport. If it's a sport, I am an athlete. And so, he does them both, and he goes, "Listen, it's not here or it's not there." Look at what he's attacking, because what ends up happening, if you tend to be more wealthy here, what happens when you feel burned out is the advice you get is to simplify life, to slow life down, if life was just simpler, if it just smoothed out. In fact, even some of the things about men's material for Christian men is they're all about, "Hey, go out in the woods and kill an animal and..." There's not this kind of outdoor simplistic life that, all of a sudden, brings meaning and purpose. And that's what he's saying. "Listen, I lived the wealthy life, and simplicity isn't the answer." And then he's saying on the other end, "Listen, I had nothing and life was unbelievably simple, and still it was meaningless." And the thing is, those two groups always look at each other and think the other is better off. The poor look to the wealthy and go, "Oh man, if I just had more wealth..." And the wealthy go, "Oh, if life was just simpler... Do you know the stress that comes with overextending all the wealth you possess?" And then, they want each other's life. And Solomon's like, "Um, yeah I did them both. They're both pretty much lame and meaningless."

Now after this, you're probably going, "I thought church was supposed to be happy. I thought this was a place to find hope." Some of you aren't bothered at all because you're going to use this all week. "Honey, are you going to mow the lawn?" "Why?!? Why should I? Vanity, vanity, you heard the pastor. I'm not even going to work tomorrow." Some of you are like, "Are you kidding me? I love this series already. This is my favorite series ever." You know, you came in here and you're going, "What? This is horrible, Matt. Thank you. This is horrible. I came to church feeling good. We woke up, my wife and I had a great breakfast, we were talking about how things were coming together and we come here and you're like, 'Welcome to church. Everything stinks! We hate it all.'" Well, there's something happening here. And listen, we're going to come back to this at the end of every message for the next twelve to fourteen weeks. Until you honestly, until you are ready to honestly evaluate life under the sun, until you are ready to look at your life and see what the real meaning is there or real lack of meaning is there, until you're ready to do that, you're stuck on the treadmill. But if you will finally slow down enough to look, when you come to the same conclusion as Solomon, that is the beginning of the development of the sixth sense. The problem is five senses looking at earth. In order for life to have meaning, there has to be the development of a sixth sense that we will call for the rest of the series, faith. And that sixth sense has the power to take us beyond the sun. Not just focus on what's under the sun, but faith gives us the ability to see what's beyond it.

Now, I've said this to you from day one around here: Everybody knows something's broken in the world. Now, you're at church, and so let me tell you what we believe. We believe that what happened to the world is, the fall of man and sin entered into the world. And if you're a guest with us this morning and really not in church a lot, you're probably like, "Oh, here we go with the sin stuff." Let me just define sin as best as I can for you, because I know some of you are just ready for me to pounce on you and tell you what beverage to drink and what games to play and where you can go and where you can't go. That will never be me. What I will tell you is this. My favorite definition of sin comes from a philosopher named Søren Kierkegaard. I don't recommend all of Kierkegaard. Sometimes he goes loony, but some of his stuff is brilliant. And Søren Kierkegaard said, "Sin is building your self-worth on anything other than God." Because when you take a good thing...remember the six things we mentioned, religion, power, wealth, pleasure, friends & work. They are good things. They are not intrinsically evil things. They are good things, but when you take a good thing and you make it an ultimate thing, you have ensured that that thing will drive you into the ground. Are you tracking with me? When you take a good thing and you make it an ultimate thing, you have absolutely guaranteed that that thing will drive you into the ground. I'll give you some easy examples. You can make it the ultimate goal of your life, wealth. And you can spend all your time on it, and you can accumulate it, and you can buy a house that you rarely get to go into because you're working fifteen hour days, and you can accumulate a massive fortune. And in the end, you're going to be painted up like

a clown, put in a box and buried. I'm not being crass; I'm being absolutely honest with you. Vanity, it's all vanity. So, pick another one. Religion. Christ didn't come to start some new religion, He came to bring the kingdom. What, friends? It's vanity. It's meaningless if we don't have the sixth sense that brings meaning to it.

So this circular silliness that we find ourselves caught up in, it needs someone from beyond the sun to come break it. So the Scriptures tell us that Christ comes, John 10:10 said, to give us life to the full. You want to hear a really good translation of what's going on in John 10:10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." He's basically saying this, "You're living and you're breathing, but you're not alive. You're just existing. In Me, there's life. You're existing, but you're not living. I have come so that you might have life, what you were created for." Now all of a sudden, these things do have meaning. Now all of a sudden, when this happens, money can just be money. Like, money no longer becomes our master. We don't have to have to have some kind of social status. It just becomes money. So, we can give it away or buy a house and it doesn't own us. Christ removes the futility and vanity from the soul and brings about the purpose that you and I are dying for. Everything else under the sun is running on a treadmill. My hope is that you'll start to honestly evaluate life and that that might lead you to look beyond the sun. And that we might develop, even more fully, the sixth sense of faith.

Let's pray. "Father, I thank You for these men and women, and I thank You for the truth that You are not the enemy of pleasure, You are not the enemy of wealth, You are not the enemy of friendship, You are not the enemy of any of those six things, but You are the one that brings meaning to those things. And I don't know what's happened out there that, all of a sudden, You have become the enemy of all that is good, being the author of it and all. I pray, Father, that You would bring meaning to it, because so many of us have these six things, and still they're lacking because the meaning behind those things is absent from our lives. And so, Father, help us to fully submit to you, and if there's sin in our lives, to confess that and repent of that, and that we might seek not what's under the sun but what's beyond it while You bring meaning to what's under it. So help us with all of this. I know it's a lot to think over and digest. We love You. It's for Your beautiful name I pray. Amen."