

**The Bonfire of the Vanities**  
*"The Meaning of Life"*  
**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

**Introduction**

- [Slide #1] Nobody remembers [William Ernest Henley](#). He was undistinguished as a journalist and poet. In 1890, he published a work which he described as "a mosaic of scraps and shreds recovered from the shot rubbish of some fourteen years of journalism." Pretty hard self-assessment.
- Henley longed to be someone important. He surrounded himself with the literati of the day. Fame and recognition hovered near him his entire life but never touched him. At the age of twelve he suffered from tuberculosis of the bone which led to the amputation of his left leg below the knee. His friend, [Robert Louis Stevenson](#), based his *Treasure Island* character, [Long John Silver](#), on Henley. His doctor [Joseph Lister](#) pioneered the use of sterilization and became a world renowned surgeon. Where do you think Listerine gets its name? His daughter Margaret was the inspiration for the character Wendy in [J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan](#). The irony. The absurdity. The futility. A man wants to be important, to make something of his life, to be known, and it surrounds him but eludes him.
- It's fitting that a life like Henley's would produce a poem called *Of the Nothingness of Things*. It's printed there in your bulletin.
  - ... a smoke that curls—  
Curls in a flickering skein  
That winds, and whisks and whirls,  
A figment thin and vain,  
Into the great Inane.  
One end for hut and hall!  
One end for cell and stall!  
Burned into one common flame  
Are wisdoms and insanities.  
For this alone we came:  
O vanity of vanities.
- Listen again to the words of Ecclesiastes 1:1-11. *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: 2 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." 3 What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? 4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. 5 The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. 7 All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. 8 All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. 9 What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. 10 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.*

*11 There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.*

- Henley, who was most certainly familiar with these words, struggled with the same struggle every single one of us in this room face. What’s the meaning of life? It’s not just a **Monty Python** thing. It’s the greatest question. What’s life about? What’s the point? Why are we here? What’s our purpose? What are we really doing day after day after day after meaningless day?

## Background/Setting

- This book, Ecclesiastes, is for those kinds of questions. It was written by an unnamed editor who compiled the words of a dude called Qoheleth. In the Hebrew, **verse 1** reads like this, *the words of Qoheleth*. Our title for the book, Ecclesiastes, is just the Greek translation of that name. Qoheleth means convener or one who assembles. It’s a title. That’s why it’s translated into English as *the Teacher* or *the Preacher* or *the Quester*.<sup>1</sup>
- Qoheleth is traditionally associated with King Solomon, David’s son. Solomon may or may not be Qoheleth. The book doesn’t say. The point is that Qoheleth has done some thinking. Some wise thinking. A lot of thinking. [Slide #2] He’s like **Rodin’s** sculpture *The Thinker*. He’s spent more time thinking about these big picture kinds of questions than you and I will ever do.
- And Qoheleth has figured something out. **Verse 2**. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."* The word *meaningless* means “that which is unsubstantial” and comes from the word breath or vapor.<sup>2</sup> The word is suggestive of something that doesn’t endure. “Everything is utterly temporary.”<sup>3</sup> “A wisp of vapor, a puff of wind, a mere breath—nothing you could get your hands on; the nearest thing to zero.”<sup>4</sup> *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

## Transition

The message of Ecclesiastes, the kernel of Qoheleth’s thought, which is summarized in the prologue, the first eleven verses, and especially in **verse 2**, is that...[Slide #3]

## Proposition

- **There is nothing under the sun capable of giving meaning to life**
- Frustrations are inevitable. Answers to the hard questions of life? They never come. The pleasures of this life? They’re hollow. They offer no lasting satisfaction. Life is saturated with absurdity.<sup>5</sup> It’s all vanity. It’s all futile. It’s all meaningless. “Life is full of trouble and then you die.”<sup>6</sup> **There is nothing under the sun capable of giving meaning to life.**

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<sup>1</sup> NIV, ESV, The Message, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, p. 191-2.

<sup>3</sup> *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up*, p. 30-1.

<sup>6</sup> Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 34.

## Transition

You don't believe Qoheleth? Look at his proof.

### Main Points

- **Verse 3.** What about work? *What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?* Qoheleth leaves the question unanswered because he knows we already know the answer. Work rots. What's the net profit of all our hard work? What do we gain from all our labor? You clean the dirty dishes in the sink and by the end of the day there's another pile of dirty dishes. You shovel the snow and a day later you shovel it again. Net advantage nothing. What's the point? What do we gain? Nothing. It's meaningless. Our work pays no dividend. It's tedious. Unfulfilling. Ultimately, Qoheleth says, your work, what you do, your job is not capable of making life meaningful.
- And it's always been that way. **Verse 4.** *Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.* Generations come and go and this struggle for meaning has always been present. Nothing's changed. It's always the same. The tide of humanity rolls on *ad infinitum*—without end. We're born. We live. We die. And we continue to wonder to ourselves “is this all? Is this it? Where's the meaning?”
- Even the sun. **Verse 5.** Think about the sun for a second. Is there some profound meaning there? Nope. *The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.* As **Tremper Longman** points out, “The sun toils across the sky, only to reach its destination and achieve no rest, no closure, but needing to rush back and do the whole meaningless task over again.”<sup>7</sup> Its plight is no different than ours. It's just like us. Its existence is as boring and repetitive and monotonous as ours.
- The wind, **verse 6**, is the same too. There must be a purpose behind the wind, right? Wrong. *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.* It's just more of the same. Just a lot of blowing in circles.<sup>8</sup> *Round and round it goes.* There's no meaning there.
- The rivers, they too prove Qoheleth's point. **Verse 7.** *All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.* What progress do the rivers make with all their flowing? Think about it. They perpetually flow into the oceans but are the oceans ever filled?<sup>9</sup> Do the oceans ever fill up? Is what they do meaningful? Like the sun, like the wind, the rivers, they're no better than we are. **There is nothing under the sun capable of giving meaning to life.** Everywhere you turn there is meaninglessness.
- Qoheleth leaves nothing out. He can't find meaning in anybody or in anything.<sup>10</sup> *All things are wearisome, verse 8, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.* Like the oceans our senses are fed and fed and fed and fed but never filled.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Longman, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Longman, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Longman, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Kidner, p. 26.

- *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. 10 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. 11 There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.*
- *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

### Transition

As we begin this series, let me clarify something right up front. Listen to me. The message of Ecclesiastes is not that there is nothing capable of giving meaning to life. That's not the message. If it were we'd all be on Prozac by the end of the book. The message of Ecclesiastes is that there is nothing under the sun capable of giving meaning to life. That's the message of Ecclesiastes.

- That phrase from [verse 9](#), *under the sun*, is key. It's used twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Old Testament. It simply means "on the earth." There is an underlying assumption that runs throughout Qoheleth's thought in this book. Look at Ecclesiastes 5:2. *God is in heaven. And you are on earth.* The underlying assumption is that there is meaning. Life has meaning. But only if God is in the picture. If God is out of the picture, if it's just life *under the sun*, life without God—you won't find meaning anywhere. You are absolutely kidding yourself if you think you can find something meaningful in this life, *under the sun*, on this earth, apart from God. "Life is meaningless without God."<sup>12</sup>
- Author, columnist, speech writer, [Peggy Noonan](#) says it like this. She's right. "I think we have lost the old knowledge that happiness is overrated—that, in a way, life is overrated. We have lost somehow a sense of mystery—about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role. Our ancestors believed in two worlds, and understood this to be the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short one. We are the first generation of man that actually expected to find happiness here on earth, and our search for it has caused such unhappiness. The reason: if you do not believe in another, higher world, if you believe only in the flat material world around you, if you believe that this is your only chance at happiness—if that is what you believe, then you are more than disappointed when the world does not give you a good measure of its riches, you are in despair."<sup>13</sup>
- This book of Ecclesiastes is important because we continually try to find meaning in things that are incapable of providing any real and lasting meaning. **There is nothing under the sun capable of giving meaning to life.** [Slide #4] I've entitled this series *The Bonfire of the Vanities* because that's what Qoheleth does. He takes all the things that we think provide meaning and purpose and satisfaction in this life and he throws them in the fire. He burns them all up. They're breaths. They're vapors. He shows us how and why these things which we think are so important are really absurd.
- The point is not to drive us to depression, or to despair, or to an existential crisis. Qoheleth is doing us a favor. He's trying to drive us to God. As one of my old college professors said,

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<sup>12</sup> Fox, p. xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Peggy Noonan, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" *Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, no. 11.

“We cannot really see in God the highest good unless we have first of all discerned the vanity of that pretended good which is laid before us by the world.”<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

- In the end, our experience of frustration over the meaninglessness and futility of life is actually a gift. C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* says it like this. “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”<sup>15</sup>
- Our hunger for meaning, our want of meaning, our desire for meaning means that meaning does exist. It’s out there. And as Ecclesiastes will show us, it’s not found under the sun. It’s found in God. I want to invite you on a journey. Join me around this bonfire. And in the end, together, may we find God.

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<sup>14</sup> Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, p. 192.

<sup>15</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 120.