

Where Happiness Won't Be Found (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

Big Idea: Life is temporary, fleeting, and repetitive, and we'll all be forgotten. So don't base your happiness on what won't last forever.

At some point, every person must face the question: how do we make sense of life when it's so beautiful and so futile at the same time?

Life is amazing. The world is full of beauty and joy. Even in the middle of COVID we have Uber Eats and Netflix and Jess Ray's music and Jimmy's Coffee in Kensington Market. John Rockefeller was the richest man who's ever lived in America. He lived a hundred years ago. Your standard of living is higher than his. We have better food, healthcare, entertainment, and creature comforts. We live better than the richest man lived just a hundred years ago. Our lives are unbelievable.

But our lives seem so futile. Someone here in Liberty Village once confessed to me, "I have the job, the car, the condo, and I'm still not happy." A 2016 article in the highly regarded science magazine *New Scientist* asked several basic philosophical questions and attempted to give answers from a strictly scientific point of view. One of the questions was "What is the meaning of life?"

In trying to answer about the meaning of life, the author begins with a bleak reality:

The harsh answer is “it has none.” Your life may feel like a big deal to you, but it’s actually a random blip of matter and energy in an uncaring and impersonal universe. When it ends, a few people will remember you for a while, but they will die too. Even if you make the history books, your contribution will soon be forgotten. Humans will go extinct; Earth and the sun will be destroyed.

Eventually the universe itself will end. Against this appalling reality, how can a human life have any real meaning?

How do we make sense of life when it’s so beautiful and futile at the same time? The book of Ecclesiastes is going to help answer this question.

Why Ecclesiastes?

Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books in the Bible. You could define wisdom as masterful living. It’s the priceless gift that God gives to anyone who’s humble enough to receive it. It’s about the skill of living in a broken world.

And so you have Job, which is about suffering. You have Proverbs, which is about living wisely in the details of life. You have the Song of Solomon, which is about love. And you have Ecclesiastes, which is one of the most unusual and controversial books of the Bible. It helps us make sense of how to live in a world that’s beautiful and futile at the same time.

Here’s the thing you’re going to love about Ecclesiastes. It’s not afraid to ask hard questions about life. It’s honest about “the drudgery of work, the injustice of

government, the dissatisfaction of foolish pleasure, and the mind-numbing tedium of everyday life—“the treadmill of our existence” (Philip Ryken). It asks some of the questions that you may be afraid to ask.

We’re not exactly sure who wrote it. It’s attributed to “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1), probably Solomon.

Two Themes

Ecclesiastes begins with some shocking realities about life that we must understand if we’re going to know how to live wisely in this world. Here’s the first:

Life is temporary and fleeting.

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

We’d better get used to this message. It’s repeated 38 times in the book. One translator (Robert Alter) puts it, “Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.” Everything is temporary and fleeting, like a wisp of smoke. It looks like there’s something there, but when you try to grasp on to it, you can’t. That’s what life is like.

And that’s true, isn’t it?

The Bible says that “Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow” (Psalm 144:4). It says, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades” (Isaiah 40:6-8).

Our lives are a little like building sandcastles. No matter how much work you put into that sandcastle, when the tide comes in, it’s going to erase everything. You won’t even know it was there.

On our vacation this summer, Char and I explored around Toronto. One day we hiked part of the Beltline Trail, which takes you right through Mount Pleasant Cemetery. That is one beautiful place. But of the 168,000 people buried there, only a few are remembered today. Most are completely forgotten.

We can’t hang on to any of this stuff. I’m going to be forgotten, and so will you. So what’s the point of all the effort we put into all of this?

Life is temporary and fleeting. That’s the first theme. Here’s the second.

Life is repetitive. It’s like going around in circles.

Verses 4 to 10 create a beautiful but depressing picture for us. In case you think that the answer to the brevity of life is to make a lasting mark before you go, verses 4 to 10 talk about the ceaseless making and unmaking that goes on in the world. The world keeps doubling back. Generations come and go; the sun keeps rising and setting; Lake Erie keeps flowing into Lake Ontario, but Lake Erie is never emptied, and Lake

Ontario is never full. History keeps turning back on itself. Sure, things have changed, but the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Every generation comes and looks new. Pretty soon the younger generation becomes the older generation, and they seem out of touch. And then they're gone. In every generation it looks like something new is happening, but it never does. New governments are exciting, but soon become old governments. New iPhones become landfill in just a few short years. You spend all your life working, but you never really get ahead.

The preacher isn't saying that, in an absolute sense, there isn't anything new. There's lots that's new. 5G is new. Private space exploration is new. But no matter how much changes, we can't escape the treadmill. We can't change the fundamental reality of life. No matter what changes, people still have the same fallen nature. They still have the same basic problems and insecurities. Things still fundamentally remain the same.

Life will go on without us, and we will be completely forgotten.

This sounds bleak and hopeless, but it is true. And it should inform the way we live. Ecclesiastes teaches us to face the reality of our lives. All of this is true whether we're a Christian or not. Life is temporary, fleeting, and repetitive, and we will all be forgotten.

So What?

So what is the point of this part of Ecclesiastes, other than to depress us?

This part of Ecclesiastes offers us a gift. It points us to the true source of meaning and fulfillment.

No matter what you accomplish in your life, no matter how successful you become, no matter how much you work out, no matter what relationships you cultivate, it won't be enough. Ecclesiastes saves us the trouble of building our lives on what won't satisfy, or expecting too much from what won't last.

The Preacher is exposing one of the greatest problems of life, and he's creating a hunger for something better. He's showing us the futility of doing what everyone else is doing, because he knows that it's a dead end. These verses are like a giant "road closed" sign. All the things we look to won't give us the happiness we're looking for.

In his new book [*Hoping for Happiness*](#), Barnabas Piper talks about those adhesive-backed plastic hanging hooks. When he first lived on his own, he thought they were amazing. He used them to hang pictures and dust mops and calendars. But then, an hour or a day later, he'd be startled by a crash. He'd go over and find whatever he'd hung crashed on the floor. It wasn't strong enough to hold the weight. And yet, for some reason, he'd grab another hook and try again.

He writes:

We hang happiness on hooks in the same way that I hung pictures, thinking that our job or our kids or our vacation can bear the weight of our expectation. The problem, though, is that our expectations for happiness are too heavy for the hooks we use. Those little plastic ones are designed for light

or temporary weights, but we weigh them down with expectations for deep and lasting happiness.

I was slow to learn my lesson, but eventually I figured out what kinds of hooks I needed for heavier pictures. We are much slower to learn what kinds of hooks we can hang heavy expectations on. We keep being shocked when they crash into pieces on the floor. Then we grab the same kind of hook, maybe in a different color this time, and try again with predictably disappointing results. Next we try moving the hook to a different location. Same results. And we just keep on going, rarely, if ever, considering whether our hooks are strong enough to support the happiness we expect.

What are the hooks that can't bear the weight of our happiness? Piper lists some of them: work, love and marriage, friendship, church, self. All of them are designed by God. All of them are good things. They all have their place. But they're all too weak to hold our hopes for happiness. None of them will ultimately satisfy. When we keep placing weighty expectations on them, we're bound to fail.

"The real crux of our problem," he writes, "is that we expect temporal things to deliver lasting happiness."

So where should we hang our hopes for happiness? There's another way to pursue happiness.

What if this world isn't all that there is? What if God himself entered this broken world and broke the curse of sin and death? What if God himself adopted us as his children, and promised that we would never be forgotten, and that our lives would go on past

death? What if he promised to undo all that's wrong with this world and renew and restore it the way it's meant to be?

We could hang our happiness there.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

In other words, don't hang your happiness on anything other than Jesus and his kingdom. God wants us to be happy, but happiness will never be found here.

As Piper concludes, "hang your happiness on the right hooks, hang your hopes on God's promises, fear him, and obey his commands—and in this you'll find happiness, now and forever."