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All is Vanity

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

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The song *Dust in the Wind* was released in July of 1977. It was recorded by the rock group Kansas, and written by one of the band members, Kerry Livgren. It quickly soared to the top of the charts because it so well captured the despair and the searching of a generation in the 70s. I heard an interview with Kerry Livgren, where he talked about, in those days with the band Kansas, he said, "Almost every song I wrote was spiritual in nature, because I was so empty. I was so desperate." He said, "I had all the fame; I had all the money; I had all the pleasure; I had everything that the world says will make you happy, and I was absolutely empty and miserable, and desperately seeking something that would satisfy." Exactly two years later, July of 1979, after trying all these different Eastern religions, Kerry Livgren said he finally found what he was looking for when he encountered the resurrected Christ, and Jesus changed his life. It's an amazing story. He still has a wonderful testimony today.

I would say to you, as a child of the 70s—I graduated from high school the same year that *Dust in the Wind* came out in 1977—and I would say the emptiness, the searching, the desperation that a generation felt in the 70s, is nowhere close to the emptiness and the desperation and the searching that defines our culture today. Somewhere in the 60s, we made a decision to pursue a secular worldview. We made a decision to kick God to the curb and decided that we can do this ourselves. If you think of secularism like a factory on a hill, dumping its pollutants into the river, it just takes time for those pollutants to travel down the river, into another river, into the lakes and the streams and the seas and the oceans until everything has become polluted and is being destructed along the way. This is where we find ourselves today. We are an empty, despairing, searching culture.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who was captured by the Nazis and spent years in one of their Nazi death camps. He said that while he was there in that death camp, what he observed over the months and years, is that the primary motivational force of mankind is not the search for pleasure, as Freud had suggested. But ultimately, the primary motivational force is man's search for meaning. When he eventually got out, he wrote a book by that title, *Man's Search for Meaning.* The testimony that he had put his finger on something significant, is in the fact that book sold over eighteen million copies.

Well, there's another bestseller that was written about 3000 years ago that wrestles with many of the same themes, and that book is going to be the source of our summer study. That is the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn with us to Ecclesiastes—Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes. Interestingly enough, the name Ecclesiastes is actually a Greek word, and it's the same root word from which we get our English word *church*. It means *to gather or to assemble.* Chapter 1, verse 1:

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 1:1)

So, Ecclesiastes is considered poetry as the genre. The opening lines, **The words of**… fit that. It's very common in poetry, as it basically carries the idea that this is a collection of sayings and writings, pulled together under a theme. There's a lot of conversation these days about, "Who actually is the author of Ecclesiastes?" Traditionally, it was believed to be Solomon, and in the first two chapters, that seems very clear. But you get later into the book and there's certain things that seem to call into question whether or not that's true. I think the best way to understand it, is that it is a collection of the writings and sayings of Solomon, as well as some other wisdom teachers later on, that are pulled together in one book, and voiced by the **Preacher**. The Preacher is essentially the narrator, or the editor, and speaks basically as the voice of Ecclesiastes. Verse 2:

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,
"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Vanity is an important word in the book of Ecclesiastes. It is used 38 times. The Hebrew word is a little bit difficult to pin down, depending on the context. It means something like smoke, or vapor. It can mean something that's absurd. But it often carries the idea of something that is meaningless, something that is void, something that is empty, which is primarily how it's used in the book of Ecclesiastes. So the Preacher is saying, "**Vanity of vanities**, it's all *empty*. It's all *meaningless*. There's really *no point*." The idea of **Vanity of vanities** is a Hebrew technique that basically carries the idea of "*utterly so"*. So, think of the example of the Holy of Holies. It was "utterly holy". In this case, it's a way of saying utterly vain…empty…meaningless. Solomon had everything the world had to offer. He had power; he had position; he had wealth; he had pleasure…but his life was empty. It was devoid of meaning, and he's desperately trying to figure out something that will satisfy. Verse 3:

What advantage does man have in all his work,
Which he does under the sun?

Under the sun, meaning on earth. So, the word translated **advantage** means what *benefit*, what *profit*? We would probably say, "What's the point?" It reminds me of Jesus saying, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?" What's the point? The Hebrew word that's translated **work** there, is not the typical Hebrew word that means work as in something that's good and right and noble. It's a rarer word that means something that's just toilsome…that we're sweating it out…we're just surviving. And he's wrestling with the question, "What's the point of that?" Whether you're a workaholic or an alcoholic, whether you're a king or a peasant, whether you're wealthy or homeless, what difference does it make? At the end of the day, "What's the point?" That's what he's wrestling with. Verse 4:

A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.

The Hebrew word that's translated **generation** is a word that means something like a *circle* or a *cycle*. A generation comes; a generation goes. They're born; they live; they die. The next one is born. They live; they die. It just keeps making this endless circle. We tap into that when we refer to the *life cycle*, or we might say, *the circle of life*. This is where it comes from. But the Preacher

is using it in the sense that it all seems so empty, so meaningless, so pointless. It just goes on and on and on. In Verse 5, he begins to illustrate what he's feeling with three images:

Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening (*Literally, the Hebrew is panting.*) **to its place, it rises there *again*.**

So his first imagery is the **sun**. The sun comes up in the morning; the sun goes down in the evening. And then it has to run to its place, so it can come up in the morning…go down in the evening…and it just does this day after day after day. Whereas David saw the beauty of the hand of the Creator in the sunrise and the sunset, the Preacher isn't seeing it that way. It's just so monotonous. It's so empty. It's so pointless. It comes up…it goes down…it comes up…it goes down.

The second one is in verse 6:

Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.

The second one is the **wind**. It blows here; it blows there. You can't see where it comes from; you can't see where it goes. It just swirls around. He's wrestling with, "What's the point of that?" Like, "Why does it do that? What difference does it make?"

The third one, in verse 7:

All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.

The **river** flows into another river…which flows into another river…that flows into the sea. But the sea doesn't fill up. It dumps into another river…into another river. And he's wrestling with, "What is the point of that?" It's just monotonous. Year after year after year, this just goes on. There's a lyric in the song *Dust in the Wind* that says, *"We're just a drop of water in an endless sea*." It comes right out of Ecclesiastes chapter 1. So he says in Verse 8:

All things are wearisome;
(The Hebrew word means emotionally exhausting: "I don't get it. What's the point?" It's just monotonous; it doesn't make any sense.)
Man is not able to tell it. (*Nobody can explain it.*)
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.
(You'll never see enough to figure it out. You'll never hear enough to figure it out.)
That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"?
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us.
There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still. (Vs. 8-11)

He's saying, "There's nothing new. Whatever is going to be, has already been. What's already been is going to be." Probably one of the more familiar lines from Ecclesiastes is: **There is nothing new under the sun.** To which we might reply, "Wait a minute; that's not true. There's lots of things that are new. Cars are new; airplanes are new; cell phones are new; color TVs are new; air conditioning is new; the internet is new. There's lots of things that are new." He anticipates that when he says, somebody might say, "See this, this is new." To which he says, "You know, the next generation is going to come and go, and it won't be a big deal. And who really cares?" In terms of what he's talking about, he's talking about this emptiness, this searching, this seeking for happiness, this seeking for something that will finally satisfy. He's like, "There's nothing new. It's just the latest. It's going to come and go."

Here we are 3000 years later, and we're still just as empty, just as confused, just as despairing as they were 3000 years ago. The big thing these days is artificial intelligence, A.I. You see people talking about it everywhere, "Oh, this will change everything!" Newsflash! It's not going to change anything. It's not going to ultimately satisfy. It's not going to make people happier. It's not going to solve our problems. It's not going to remove the hate and the racism and the despair that defines our culture. A. I. is not going to put your marriage back together. It's not going to give you freedom from your addiction. It's not going to satisfy your soul. It's not going to change any of that. It's just going to come and go. That's what he's saying.

This is an election year. It's good to remind ourselves: the politicians can't change this. The government can't change this. All the philosophers…all the social media sites…all the opinions… all the new morality…. all this stuff that our culture offers, is not going to change anything. People are just more and more desperate and confused.

About now you're thinking, "I'm sure glad I came this morning! *(laughter)* This should be a great summer." *(laughter*). I understand that; it's not very cheerful, but it is very, very honest. And there are millions of people in our culture that identify with exactly what the Preacher is saying. If you, actually, physically look at the text in your Bible, you'll notice that verses 1 through 11 are structured differently than the text starting in verse 12. That's telling you that the first 11 verses are poetry, and so it's structured that way in your Bible. This sets the mood for the discussion to come. So, let's imagine that the Preacher is going to see a therapist, and he opens the session by reading his poem that he's written. And the therapist would say, "Whoa, man, what is your deal? What is your story? What happened to you?" Well, that's what he's going to explain, starting in verse 12. It gets very personal.

I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It* is a grievous task, *which* God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.

Solomon was considered to be the wisest man on the planet during his lifetime. What he's saying is that there's no one more qualified to figure this out than he is. He has the power; he has the position; he has the wealth to bring in the greatest thinkers of his day, in order to figure this out and present it to the people. But what he's figuring out is, "I can't figure it out. I don't get it. There's no point. I don't have any answers. We're the wisest people on the planet, and we don't have a clue." What he says is, "It's a **grievous task**." We would probably just say, "This is a lousy job," because there are no answers. There's no way to figure this out.

It's worth noting that the Preacher is not an atheist. If the Preacher was an atheist, you would just conclude there is no point; there is no meaning; there is no purpose. We are just *dust in the wind*. "Eat, drink, and be merry and die;" that's all you get. It's not that the atheist is happier or more satisfied. They're not. But their worldview says there is no point, so give it up. But the Preacher is not an atheist. The Preacher believes in God, which, in some ways, just makes this more baffling, makes it more difficult, makes it more frustrating. There's got to be a point if there's a God, if there's a Creator. I mean, "He made the sunrise and the sunset. He made the wind to blow. He made the rivers to run. There's got to be some point to this, other than just being born, living and dying." But he can't figure it out. So he's like, "This is a lousy job…and I don't have answers."

Verse 14:

I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity (It's empty; it's meaningless.) **and striving after the wind,** (chasing the wind).

(Even if you could catch it, what are you going to do with it? There's no point to it. Literally, the Hebrew is "shepherding the wind," like you would shepherd sheep. If you've never tried it, give it a try this afternoon. How do you shepherd the wind? That's what he's saying. It's meaningless; we're just chasing the wind.) Verse 15:

What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

(Literally, what he's saying is what is twisted—what is crooked; the world is fallen; *it's all messed up; it's all twisted up—and there's nobody that can figure out how to untwist it to straighten it out. He's like, "I don't even have enough words in my vocabulary to describe everything that's wrong with this world. It's just a mess.")* Verse 16:

I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who are over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." And I set my mind to know wisdom (In other words, "I've gathered the smartest people on the planet. We've given it our best shot to try to figure this out. And what's his conclusion? He says…) **to know madness and folly;"**

*(**Madness** is a very rare Hebrew word that means to be delusional. He's like, "At the end of the day, what we've figured out is this quest to find meaning is nothing more than delusional." **Folly** means foolishness; there's no answer.*)

…I realized this is also striving, chasing the wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results* in increasing pain. (Vs. 16-18)

In other words, the farther they get into this, the more they realize there is no answer. There is no solution; there is no meaning. So, rather than coming up with an answer, it's just more **pain**; it's just more **grief**; it's just disillusionment. This whole pursuit is utter foolishness. To which we might say, "Whoa, I mean, like now what?" I'll tell you "now what". You'll have to come back next week, as we continue to take this journey with the Preacher to see if we can figure something out!

But as we wrap it up this morning, I want us to think about a couple of things. So, here we are 3000 years later. We have more information; we have more knowledge; we have more technology; we have more opinions…more experts…more philosophies…more slogans…more psychiatrists…more medication…more comforts than any generation in the history of the world. Yet all the research shows: we're more unhappy; we're more miserable; we're more despairing, we're more medicated; we're more addicted than any generation before us. Wouldn't you think, at some point, we as a culture would stop and consider: *This isn't working…this isn't working! Maybe we need to make a change?"* But here's the rub. The loudest, most oppressive voices in our culture, have so terrified and intimidated everyone else, that no one is willing to admit that what we're doing is utter foolishness, and it's not working. We're destroying peoples' lives. But people know that if they say so, if they dare to speak off the approved script of the culture, that they will be terrorized; they will be bullied, and they will be verbally beaten into submission until they follow the script. So, everyone is required to pretend, "This is working."

It all reminds me of the old story of the *Emperor's New Clothes.* The Emperor loved his clothes, and a couple of hoodlums convinced him that they could make him a very special suit of clothing. It's so special, that only people who are qualified, only people that are special, can see it. So, when the king sees his clothing, he actually sees nothing. But he won't admit that he can't see it, for fear that people will think he's not special; he's not qualified. So he's forced to pretend, "Oh, the clothes are lovely, I've never seen clothes so lovely." All the people around the Emperor, they too cannot see the clothing, but they're not about to admit they can't see the clothing, for fear someone will think, *they're* not special; *they're* not qualified. So they pretend they can see the clothing. "Oh, it's beautiful. You've never looked so good."

So, eventually, the Emperor makes his appearance, and he's traveling through the streets and everyone on the street, can't see the clothing. But they don't dare say that they can't see the clothing, for fear they're not special, that they're not qualified. They all pretend to see the emperor's new clothes. Until, finally, there's one young, courageous boy, who knows nothing of the politics of all this, who finally tells the truth. "The Emperor has no clothes on." (*Hello*!) "The emperor is naked!*"*

We cannot allow ourselves to be intimidated and bullied into pretending this is working. It's not working! "The Emperor has no clothes; the emperor is naked!" Somebody has to say it, because

the necessary first step for anything to change, is we have to be willing to admit the Emperor is naked; this is not working…which is the first step toward finding what will ultimately satisfy the longings in your soul!

Our Father, we resonate with the words of Ecclesiastes this morning. We live in a culture that is so empty. It's so full of despair and pain and struggle. Lord, may we be clear as to what ultimately satisfies, as Your people. And may You use us to be a light in the darkness, that others may know the truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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