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Tied to the Treadmill of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:2-7

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Does it ever feel like life is like being on a hamster wheel, doing the same things day after day without actually getting anywhere? Does it seem like you toil in vain? Do you ever ponder what really matters in this life? Solomon addresses these familiar contemplations in his book, *Ecclesiastes*.

Discussion Points:

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

- In what ways does Solomon's proclamation ring true in your life? Do you really gain anything over a lifetime of being tied to the treadmill of life?
- How does the world view life and meaning in life?
- How does scripture give hope when it seems like life is nothing more than being on a treadmill?

God has designed the earth to keep spinning, the sun to keep shining, the wind to keep blowing, and the rivers to keep flowing.

- When your gaze is focused 'higher than the sun', how does that perspective differ from someone whose gaze goes no higher than the sun? In what ways is life with God different than life without God?
- How does knowing that God is sovereign over all of creation encourage you in your daily life?
- Why does it matter to follow and obey the God who created and orchestrates the earth, sun, wind, and waters?

Without God, life is pointless; with God, life has purpose. Without God, life is a series of accidents; with God, life is a series of assignments.

- What are things the world chases after to give their life meaning?
- How do these two statements ring true in your life?
- Why is it important to remember that God has a plan in mind?
- What are some scriptures that reinforce the truth that God has a purpose and divine motivations for your life?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

(From the message) Just remember, beloved, that Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone whose gaze is going any higher than the sun. He is describing life with God. He is telling the truth about the tedium of life apart from the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ left Heaven and entered this fallen world and stepped onto the treadmill of humanity. He toiled under the sun, getting splinters in his carpenter's fingers and callouses on his hands. He grew weary, hungry and thirsty, too. His schedule was governed by sunrise and sunset.

He came to redeem us from a broken life that is bound up in and focused only on life under the sun! He showed us the value of work and integrity and how the smallest act of kindness, like a cup of cold water, can bring His character and His reputation greater glory.

Practical Implications:

Think: Have I been running on the treadmill of life without eternal purpose?

Pray: Praise God the he has given divine purpose and salvation to those who believe. Ask Him to guide you in this purpose.

Do: Seek God and His ways. Worship and obey the Creator of all things.

Tied to the Treadmill of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:2-7

A pastor once wrote in an article about a mother who walked into her five-year-old son's bedroom and found him crying as he was getting ready for the day.

She asked, "What's the matter?"

He replied, "I can tie my shoes now all by myself."

"That's wonderful! You're growing up so big!" his mother exclaimed, "but why are you crying?"

He answered, "Because now I have to do this every day for the rest of my life."ⁱ

Poor kid. He is already feeling the pain of growing up with all that responsibility, like tying your shoes and picking up your toys and making your bed. He has picked up on the drudgery and the duty of life. In fact, at five years of age, he is already disappointed in having one more thing to do.

Is that all there is to life? An ever-growing list of chores and responsibilities and repetitious details?

This kid is going to grow up and start asking harder questions, like:

- What do I do that really matters in life?
- Did anything I accomplish have any lasting value?
- Am I condemned to simply repeat a list of chores and responsibilities all over again?
- Am I going to be tied down on the treadmill of life?

Five-year-olds aren't the only ones bothered by life on the treadmill. Fifteen-year-olds ask

the same questions. So do 35-year-olds . . . and 50-year-olds . . . and 85-year-olds.

Does anything in life really have any meaning beyond the endless cycle, or am I like some gerbil trapped in a cage, running around on a wheel? Is there any lasting purpose to the things I do in life?

There is an old man who wrote the same questions down in his journal. God evidently wants us to be exposed to his questions and answers and learn from them so He included Solomon's journal in the record of scripture. This journal is called the *Book of Ecclesiastes* where Solomon is asking some hard questions. We arrive today at **chapter 1 and verse 2:**

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

Now anytime you find one word repeated five times in the same verse, you ought to notice it.

Question is, what exactly does vanity mean?

In the 4th century, a church leader named Jerome translated this Hebrew word *hebel* into Latin using the word *vanitas* (vuhneetuz). And *vanitas* was then transliterated *vanity* into many English translations for centuries to come.

The problem is when the average English readers hear the word *vanity*, we think of someone who is vain, stuck on themselves, or absorbed in their own appearance or opinion. Everything is about them. They can't wait to post their next selfie. They're so vain!

That's the idea behind that famous song – you know the lyrics, “You're so vain. I'll bet you think this 'sermon' is about you.” I tweaked that a little for Ecclesiastes, but you get the idea.

The truth is, we had better get the correct meaning of this Hebrew word, or we are going to miss much of what *Ecclesiastes* means, because Solomon is going to use this word 37 times throughout the book.ⁱⁱ

It is his favorite word.

If you look up the word vanity in your Hebrew lexicon, you discover that it means “vapour or breath”. Secondary meanings can be translated fruitlessness or transience.ⁱⁱⁱ

Solomon will use this word to describe futility, frailty, senselessness, desperation and frustration. So when you see the word ‘vanity’, understand that its nuanced meaning is going to be determined by the context.

How you and I use the word love today is similar in learning the term's meaning through the context. You say, you love your wife, but you also say you love football...hopefully you don't mean the same kind of commitment.

- you love coffee
- you love reading
- you love mountain climbing, scrapbooking
- you love crossword puzzles
- you love chocolate covered doughnuts with Boston crème filling (That's actually a deep commitment!)

In the same way Solomon uses the word ‘vanity’, which is why it is best to let the context determine the nuance of this somewhat elastic term.

But notice that Solomon is putting a lot of emotion into this expression. He is stating it as a superlative – this is the highest degree possible. ***Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity*** – in other words, to the highest degree life is vanity. Life isn't just fast, it is really, really fast. It isn't just frustrating, it is really, really, frustrating, or it really, really futile, or whatever.

By the way, you have read other superlatives in the Bible, like Holy of Holies, which was a really, really holy place. In fact, to the highest degree, that was the most holy place of all.

Wayne C. Kells, *Life Under the Sun* (Westbow Press, 2017), p. 18

When you read that the Lord is the Lord of Lords that means that He is really, really, really in charge as sovereign. When you read He is King of Kings, it indicates that to the highest degree possible Jesus Christ is King. He isn't just the King, there is no King higher than Him.

Back to the opening line in *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon is effectively claiming that everything on earth and in life – to the highest degree – can be described as either totally empty, entirely meaningless, or absolutely futile.^{iv}

And that leads Solomon to deliver next this really penetrating question which people are still asking to this day in **verse 3**:

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun
(Ecclesiastes 1:3).

The word ‘gain’ is a commercial term normally used in the business world of commerce and it refers to surplus; it refers to have something left over to show for your hard work.^v

Solomon is basically asking, “So what do you have to show for all your hard work under the sun?”

By the way, ‘under the sun’ is another favorite expression of Solomon's. He will write the words ***under the sun*** 29 times. In fact, *Ecclesiastes* is the only book in the Bible where you find this expression.^{vi}

He is lamenting about the lack of profit, the lack of substance, the lack of progress and the lack of meaning from the perspective of living life – where? – down here, ***under the sun***.

Don't miss that clue.

As I mentioned in our last study, Solomon will eventually task us to remember our Creator God. Because without God – who reigns above the sun, who rides upon the clouds as His chariot, and names and orders the stars and

planets He created by His word – without Him your perspective is limited and tied to a treadmill of existence down here, ***under the sun***. And if that is all you get and that is all that matters, Solomon will show us that this perspective will lead to ultimate frustration and despair.

A popular magazine some time ago cataloged the answers to the question, “Why are we here?” A taxi driver by the name of Jose Martinez got right to the point when he responded, “We’re here to just live and then die. I do some fishing, take my girl out, pay taxes, do a little reading, and then get ready to drop dead. Life is a big fake. The only cure for the world’s illness is nuclear war – wipe everything out and start over.”^{vii}

I’d be afraid to get in that guy’s taxi.

Nominated numerous times for the Nobel Prize in Literature in the early 1900’s, Leo Tolstoy, the author of War and Peace, acclaimed as one of greatest works of literature in the world, put these thoughts in more philosophical terminology, yet arrived at the same point.

He wrote in his later years, “The age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide. A question without an answer to which one cannot live is this: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live; why wish for anything; or do anything? Is there any meaning in my life that death does not destroy?’”^{viii}

In Solomon’s bestseller, it goes like this:

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun
(Ecclesiastes 1:3).

In other words, do you really gain anything over a lifetime of being tied to the treadmill of life? And he knows the answer – the answer is no. Life under the sun, if that is all you are living for, ends up empty, frustrating, and futile in the end.

And, if anything, the world of nature around us happens to be showing us how small and powerless we happen to be. To begin proving

his point, which will take chapters in his journal, Solomon begins by taking us on a field trip into nature around us beginning in ***verse 4***:

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever
(Ecclesiastes 1:4).

In other words, Solomon seems to say, “Have you noticed yet how the earth seems to remain as steady as ever, but we do nothing but come and go?”

It doesn’t seem right, but we can’t find a way around the funeral procession, especially when 158,904 people die on average every single day, at the rate of nearly two people every second.

And the earth just keeps on revolving at the same speed, on the same course, steady as she goes 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year as if earth doesn’t even seem to care that last year, as it made one revolution around the sun, 55 million people died.

Solomon ponders the question if you really think you are something? You think your life matters? You are just one of millions in many generations on their way to the grave.

So work overtime if you want to or take a vacation, read a book or go hunting or eat that doughnut (you might as well have two), and go earlier than expected, but whatever you do, you cannot avoid the funeral procession taking place on planet earth.

It occurred to me that Solomon might be hinting at something else here. He writes that generations come and go – people come and go – but the earth they occupied goes to someone else after they’re gone.

We built our home in a neighborhood that used to be a field. Now it has a dozen homes. Who is to say in a hundred years, it is not going to be a field again?

The earth is going to remain, it seems to Solomon, and we come and go.

Three hundred years ago, the Catawba Indian tribe used to hunt and fish in this region where they lived for several hundred years. Spanish explorers documented the presence of Catawba

Indians here, in what would become North Carolina, all the way back to the 1500's.

By the time settlers arrived, smallpox had decimated the tribe and the land around here was deeded in the mid 1700's to Francis Jones, who began developing a large farm.

About 50 years later, Nancy Jones turned her house into a stagecoach stop, and John Bradford built an inn for travelers. It was the same land the Indians once roamed, but now stagecoaches were crisscrossing this Piedmont area.

Another 50 years later, the Chatham Railroad built a railroad junction just a few miles from where you are seated, and a man by the name of Francis Page saw the potential growth and purchased 300 acres.

About the same time the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill began. Also around that time, Francis Page incorporated his land into a township and named it after a senator he liked from up North by the name of Samuel Cary. Page then built a Sawmill, a Post Office a General store and eventually a school house he named Cary Academy.

In 1864, General Sherman was returning from burning Atlanta to the ground during the Civil War and he camped out on property in this area that was being farmed. That same piece of property would end up being farmed for another 130 years until a church bought and built a worship center you are now sitting in, a church named Colonial.

The earth remains, but generations come and go. From Indians to settlers to soldiers to farmers – they have all come and gone. The funeral procession marches on and it doesn't seem to change the earth at all.

Solomon goes on to tell us that we can't affect the sun either.

***The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises***
(Ecclesiastes 1:5).

As if to imply, the older you get, the harder it is to get out of bed in the morning, but not so for the sun. It rose this morning right on time, and

it hastens, it hurries – literally, it *pants* — on its mission to make its way, as it were, across the sky. It rose this morning at 6:40 am and it will set tonight at 7:51 pm. You can set your watch by the steady, seemingly unchanging movement of the sun. It doesn't seem to be winding down, but we are – is Solomon's point.

Solomon continues his observations with regards to the wind:

***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*** (Ecclesiastes 1:6).

By the way, before Solomon could ever observe global circulation of the atmosphere; before he could ever scientifically prove the existence of the great jet-streams of earth which run in circles, he writes of that very thing here.^{ix} One of the proofs of divine inspiration is when authors of scripture reveal truths that science doesn't figure out for thousands of years.

Solomon seems fascinated with the wind. He observes the fact that mankind cannot change the direction of the wind. The wind just keeps on blowing and it seems to be on a course mankind can't change. He'll refer to it once in the *Song of Solomon*; six times in the *Book of Proverbs*, but he'll refer to the wind 14 times in *Ecclesiastes*.^x

Solomon reminds us that the earth keeps spinning, the sun keeps shining, the wind keeps blowing, and, finally, the rivers keep flowing.

***All streams run to the sea, but the sea is
not full; to the place where the streams
flow, there they flow again*** (Ecclesiastes 1:7).

There is this sense of cycles and repetition in nature – the reference here to rivers or streams is a reference to “winter streams” which take their water to the sea and the next year they have an abundant supply to do it all over again.^{xi}

These verbs here in this field trip through nature communicate the idea of perpetual motion – the earth keeps abiding; the sun keeps rising and setting; the wind keep circling and blowing and the rivers keep running.^{xiii}

And don't forget where Solomon started – generations keep coming and going, people keep on dying.

It's as if we're tied to a treadmill and we can't escape.

Just remember, beloved, that Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone whose gaze is going any higher than the sun. He is describing life with God. He is telling the truth about the tedium of life apart from the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ left Heaven and entered this fallen world and stepped onto the treadmill of humanity. He toiled under the sun, getting splinters in his carpenter's fingers and callouses on his hands. He grew weary, hungry, and thirsty, too. His schedule was governed by sunrise and sunset.

He came to redeem us from a broken life that is bound up in and focused only on life under the sun! He also showed us the value of work and integrity and how the smallest act of kindness, like a cup of cold water, can bring His character and His reputation greater glory.

- Without God, life is pointless; with God, life has purpose.
- Without God, life is a series of accidents; with God, life is a series of assignments.

Therefore my beloved brethren (Paul wrote to the Corinthians) *be steadfast, unmovable* (stay the course) *always abounding in the*

work of the Lord (that is, always abounding in the work, assigned to you by the Lord) *knowing that your labor* (Solomon, are you listening? Beloved, are you listening?) *knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Life under the sun can seem like vanity of vanities – brief, meaningless and futile. But listen, when you became a Christian, and every day as you dedicate whatever it is you do in obedience to Christ, you are effectively moving your vanity of vanities into the Holy of holies.

The repetition of life, the cycles of life, and the toil of life – the smallest things to the most significant things are equally designed by the sovereign purposes of God. So give everything you've got to whatever God has given you, from tying your shoes all by yourself to teaching that class, fixing that machine, writing that code writing that contract washing those dishes or mowing the lawn.

Life has sacred purpose – you have moved your life with its vanity of vanities into the very presence of God – which turns your life into a Holy of holies. By faith in Christ you belong to the King above all Kings and the Lord above all Lord's.

Without God you're running in circles; with God, you're running a race. You are not tied to a treadmill going nowhere. You are on assignment; you are here for such a time as this. And we are not just dying, we are ultimately heading home.

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- i John Ortberg, *Leadership*, Volume 14, no. 3.
- ii Adapted from Russel L. Meek, *Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Reads of Hebel in Ecclesiastes* (Currents in Biblical Research, Vol. 14(3), 2016), p. 279
- iii Adapted from *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* editors; Brown, Driver & Briggs (Clarendon Press: Oxford, seventh printing 1980), p. 210
- iv Adapted from John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest For Meaning?* (EP Books, 2016), p. 16
- v Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (Crossway, 2010), p. 24
- vi Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 1983), p. 68
- vii Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* (Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 11
- viii Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (P & R Publishing, 2014), p.
- ix David Jeremiah, *Heaven on Earth* (Integrity Publishing, 2004), p. 7; Ray C. Stedman, *Is This All There Is To Life?* (Discovery House, 1999), p. 13
- x Adapted from Jeremiah, p. 7
- xi Adapted from David A. Hubbard, *The Preacher's Commentary: Volume 16* (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 51
- xii Ibid, p. 50