

Theme: Everything Turns to Nothing Without God.

In 2002, shortly before his death, country music legend Johnny Cash, my personal favorite, released his last album. The most notable song on that album was actually a cover of a song called “Hurt” that wasn’t even his. Soon the song became his, as it served as the gut-wrenching autobiography of a man, now frail and gaunt, hardly able to croak out the words. The footage of the music video shows him looking back on his youth and his success and his fame and fortune and seeing it later riddled with demons and divorce and drug addiction. One of the most famous lines of the song laments, **“You could have it all, my empire of dirt. I will let you down. I will make you hurt.”**

There’s something captivating about a greyed and wearied old man looking back on his life, filled with regret, lamenting what it all amounted to, an empire of dirt. There’s something about it that can’t be ignored, a gravity that seems to punch you in the gut. In a way, it’s like man from the future, maybe your future, coming back to you to say, “Don’t do what I did; this is how it turned out and I regret it.”

After his death, that song turned out to be one of Johnny Cash’s most famous and awarded songs, winning the best Single of the Year and all kinds of other awards. Today, we’re not here to talk about Johnny Cash, the king of country music, but we can see him as a modern-day replica of the king we do have before us today, and the setting of his late in life memoir, the book of Ecclesiastes. This Bible book is about a king looking back on his life, filled with an emptiness and regret, and finding true meaning at the end of it all.

So the book begins, **“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” (Ecc 1:1).** The word Ecclesiastes is really the Greek form of the Hebrew word that means “the teacher” or someone who gathered people to instruct them. Modern critics of the Bible debate who this is talking about to no end and no purpose, but traditionally, these words are understood as the words of Solomon, David’s son, who was king over all of Israel and who was the one God chose to build a house for his Name.

Early in Solomon’s life, God had appeared to him in a dream, promising to grant him whatever he wanted as he began to lead God’s people. Instead of wealth or long life or the death of his enemies, Solomon asked for something very pleasing to the Lord—a discerning heart and wisdom to govern the people. God was so pleased with this request that he granted Solomon to be the wisest person that ever lived, and also, he gave him unmatched wealth and honor on top of it. Under Solomon’s reign, Israel became the most prosperous nation on earth.

It seems like things were off to a pretty good start, but that’s not the way the book starts as Solomon reflects on his life. He cries out in anguish the theme of the book, **“Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity.”** (1:2) Translations try to communicate this in different ways. The NIV says, **“Meaningless, meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”** The Evangelical Heritage Version tries to communicate the word picture, **“Nothing but vapor,” “Everything is vapor that vanishes,”** like a puff of breath on a cold day or like a misty fog in the morning. It’s here and then it’s gone! *Everything turns to nothing.*

Well, why’s he so depressed? He had everything anybody could ever dream of in a lifetime and more. What more could he possibly want? That’s precisely the point; he had it all and it didn’t make him happy. He went looking to find happiness anywhere and everywhere he could, in wealth, in work, in palaces and gardens, in women, in the wisdom of this world and it

didn't amount to anything more than puff of breath, an empire of dirt. The regretful old teacher remarked, **"I have seen all the things done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."** (1:14). It's like trying to catch a napkin blowing away in a stiff gust of wind.

Here's why Solomon finds it so empty and meaningless. **"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. (Ecc. 2:18-20).**

Solomon isn't just talking hypothetically here, it seems like he's talking about his own life and his own kingdom and his own labor under the sun. See, God had actually made Solomon a promise later in his life that *his everything would be turned to nothing because his heart turned away.*

In 1 Kings 13 we hear, **"The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. ¹⁰ Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord's command. ¹¹ So the Lord said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. ¹² Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. ¹³ Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."** (1 Kings 13:9-13 NIV)

So the Bible tells us of how Solomon's wealth and life's work under the sun was going to be handed over. That's a key phrase that keeps being repeated 6 times in this section, **"under the sun"**. By it, Solomon seems to be referring to the perspective of life as its observed in this world, apart from God. Life under the sun, without God, just keeps going in a meaningless fashion. A person can live and work and amass wealth in this world under the hot sun, but if that person does it without God, here's what happens. **"All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless."** (Ecc. 2:23)

So what do you think? Do you feel like you still want to try it? Feel like you might get lucky and strike it rich and find some corner of this earth under the sun where you'll be happy and retire with your nest egg apart from God? Will you still insist on running off to blow some cash and sew some wild oats like Solomon or the prodigal son? Will you still believe that, like another country song says, *"Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy me a boat, and a truck to pull it"* and that will make me happy. Or will you take Solomon's word for it that it won't. Hear the despair in his voice, **"When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecc 2: 11 NIV).**

Everything Solomon had turned to nothing without God. And it will for you too if you try it or are trying it. If you make your boat or cabin or your 401K or a fancy house into your god,

then who will save you when you hand all those things over to someone else. **“You fool, this very night your soul will be demanded from you,”** Jesus says to that person in our Gospel lesson. And Paul says in Colossians, **“Put to death whatever is worldly in you”** whether lust or greed. **“It is because of these things that the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience.”** (Colossians 3:5,6).

So where do we find anything that’s not meaningless, that’s not a passing mist? Where do we find Something we can hold onto, Something that will last? Well finally Solomon breaks character for a moment. You see this whole time he’s been recounting his life under the sun apart from God, but now he adds just a few little 20-20 hindsight insights. **“A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”** (Ecc 2:24,25)

Nobody, Duh! That’s the whole point. We can only truly enjoy anything in this world when we receive it from God through a right relationship with him. **“To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness,”** (2:26). And who does he consider good and God-pleasing? The wise and learned, the rich and famous, the wealthy and the powerful? Or the people who work really hard? No! **“Blessed are the poor in spirit and the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of God (Matthew 5).** Blessed are the spiritual beggars who receive their everything from the hand of God through Christ. Not to the one who works or earns or buys it, **“but to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.** (Romans 4:5 NIV).

That is the only way God will ever consider us good, and without a spiritual nickel in our pocket, that’s what he delights to do. He sends the “One who is greater than Solomon”, great David’s greater son, the one who will establish the kingdom of God forever (2 Sam 7:16). This is the son with whom God is well-pleased and the same son who steps into our place so that we become righteous and good in God’s sight. Under this Son and inside his kingdom, we become good, and life becomes good as well as we reign with him like kings from another place. We can eat and drink and find joy from the hand of God—true contentment. And God even hands over what the wicked have collected to take care of us. *This is how focused living, focused on Christ, properly views earthly wealth—it’s nothing without God.*

Now back to the matter of Solomon, the teacher. What becomes of wisest man on earth who, despite all his wisdom, turned away from the Lord? It appears the Lord brought him back, back from life under the hot sun to life under the True Sun. Listen to the Teacher’s words at the end of his book, **“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”** Ecc 12: 13-14. Solomon ends his book calling us to repent and believe the truth he had rediscovered, the truth of the God who brings meaning to our lives, the truth of the God who makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Repent and believe the good news. Amen.