

¹*The words of Ecclesiastes, David's son, king in Jerusalem.*

²*“Nothing but vapor,” Ecclesiastes said. “Totally vapor. Everything is just vapor that vanishes.”*

¹²*I, Ecclesiastes, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³I applied my heart to seek out and explore with wisdom everything done under the sky. (What a burdensome task God has given the children of Adam to keep them busy!) ¹⁴I have seen all the actions done under the sun, and, look, it is all nothing but vapor. It is all chasing the wind.*

¹⁸*I also hated all the results of my hard work, for which I worked so hard under the sun, since I must leave it all to the man who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows—will he be wise, or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the results of my hard work, for which I worked so hard and so wisely, under the sun. This too is vapor that vanishes.*

²⁰*So I changed my course, and my heart began to despair over all my hard work at which I worked so hard under the sun. ²¹Sure, there may be a man who has worked hard—wisely, aptly, and skillfully. But he must hand over whatever he accumulated by all his hard work to a man who has not worked hard for it. This too is vapor. It's so unfair! ²²For what does a man gain through all his hard work, through all the turmoil in his heart, as he works so hard under the sun?*

²³*Pain fills all his days. His occupation is frustration. Even at night his heart does not rest. This too is vapor.*

²⁴*There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his work. This too, I saw, is from God's hand. ²⁵For who can eat or enjoy himself apart from him? ²⁶Yes, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to the man whom he considers good, but to the person who goes on sinning God gives the task of gathering and collecting, but only so that he can give it all to a person whom God considers good. This too is vapor, nothing but chasing wind.*

What good is life? With all the struggles and pains, what is the point? Most people have asked these questions, some even considering the conclusion that this life would be better if it were thrown away. Why do we have to hurt so much? Why are we never content? Today, we focus on the words of King Solomon, because he gives voice to how we all feel sometimes.

Solomon was coming to the end of his life. And as many do when they start seeing the end coming, he was taking an accounting of what he had accomplished. He had ruled as king in Israel's heyday, building the temple and many palaces. He had asked for wisdom from God and received it, but what had all the wisdom in the world gotten him? Well, the king tells us here: “Nothing but vapor.” And the word Solomon uses here has a few meanings, each of them helping us identify the point he's trying to make. “Vapor” is one of the meanings. It's here in one second, then dissipates into the air and is lost. Another meaning is “breath.” You can't even see breath. Like wind, it's invisible, and by the time you notice it, it's gone. And the last

meaning is “vanity.” Vanity is superficial. It looks good on the surface, but it's empty and useless. This is how Solomon described his life.

That's not to say that Solomon didn't try to seek meaning throughout his life. He had applied his wisdom to find fulfillment. But in the end, he came to the conclusion that nothing has permanent meaning because everything eventually fades away. He looked at his work and the temple he had built. He looked at his reign and his writings. Having completed all these tasks, would he get to use them? Would he get to kick back and enjoy the fruits of his labors? No, it will pass to his heir, someone who did not build and earn it, and therefore, will be less motivated to upkeep it. Would the next guy build on his success or start scrapping it? As we know from hindsight, the kingdom Solomon worked hard to build would be split into two in the next generation. Solomon may not have known that would happen, but he knew how the world works.

This led Solomon to despair. What he's going through here certainly seems like a midlife crisis at the end of life. All his hard work would eventually turn into naught. Because in life, nothing really has permanence. “Unfair!” That's the accusation he makes in verse twenty-one. What gain does man have to work and build up, only to abandon it all and be buried under it? Yes, there is joy that comes from eating, drinking and enjoying the work of life given, but that joy is limited and often feels like chasing the wind.

These sentiments of Solomon I've certainly echoed before, and I'm sure you have too. You can work and work and work, only to see work lose its purpose. Promotions come and go. Recognition for a job well done doesn't include the promise that you will never be caught up in downsizing or that your work will always be appreciated.

We treat ourselves to new toys, dream cars, and prized possessions—but boats break, cars rust, and even the fondest memories fade. None of it satisfies forever. Too often, time feels wasted. The memories we make die in a generation or two. Around and around we go, only to wind up in the same spot. How can we not look at life and wonder if anything has meaning at all, true meaning that lasts? Vapor. Wind. Passing. Meaningless. Vanity. And on top of it all, we will all be replaced. Someone will work the job you do when you're gone. Someone else will occupy your house when you move. We think we're so important, so irreplaceable. But we're not. This is the life where nothing has meaning.

And that leads us to an interesting question: Did Solomon die in despair? We know that at one point in his life, he turned away from God to follow the idols of life. Did he ever repent? I guess we can't say for certain, but what we read here gives the impression that Solomon began to see life rightly. Here he recognizes that the idols of the world bring no lasting meaning to life. Everything is vapor. Everything is meaningless. But he also recognizes that there is joy to be found in life: “There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his

work.” There can be lasting joy in eating and drinking and working. But doesn’t this conflict with what he just said? I thought he said there was emptiness in all those things of life.

What he says next begins to explain it: “This too, I saw, is from God's hand. For who can eat or enjoy himself apart from him?” The things of life can be enjoyed when they are in their right places, just like we covered in our sermon about Mary and Martha two Sundays ago. But what does it mean that they are in their right places?

Solomon had tried to make his life about self-justification, trying to make himself feel worthy and important in the world. And who could have done a better job than Solomon? He took all the construction supplies lying on the ground and had built the great temple, as well as building palaces and fortresses all over the kingdom. He reorganized the Israel’s government for increased efficiency, opening up new trade routes and making his kingdom the envy of the world. Solomon was a giant in his age. But he still felt empty.

Solomon did a lot of work for himself and his ego. Maybe he even saw some of his work as work to please God. But Solomon could not please God, no matter how hard he tried. The reason? God didn’t need Solomon’s work or his money or his fame. And Solomon wasn’t important to God for any of those reasons. He was important to God because in Solomon, God found a sinner who needed redeeming. God saw a person who was going about life the wrong way, living for the here and now, but not for the joys of eternity. These words from Solomon leave some doubt in our minds if he ever was lifted from this low point. His life was meaningless. His accomplishments were vapor.

What gives our lives meaning? As we thought about before, it’s not the things we do or the people we know. Those things are constantly shifting, and if we make them our foundation in life, we will find no stability. What truly gives life meaning is what God does for sinners. He takes that person who starts believing the value of their life is based on their accomplishments and he shows them how hopeless that way of thinking is. Then he shows them his Son, the Savior who gave his life to set the world free from sin, the one who has set you free as well. He tells them their lives has meaning because he has purchased and won them from sin, death, and hell, freeing them from the hamster wheel of the law, which is always chased but never caught. And to show them that they now belong to him in his kingdom of grace, he marks them in the waters of baptism. This is God’s love for you, and it will never fade or be misplaced or lose contact with you.

And if the foundation is the unchanging nature of God’s love for us, that means that all those other things in life don’t have to serve as our bedrock. They can then serve as the studs built and supported by the foundation. They can be seen as the blessings God gives us that come the freedom of the gospel.

And so, a life grounded in Christ's death and resurrection means we don't have to live as freshmen, trying to prove ourselves. The question is never "am I enough for God?" It's "am I living to prove something or as someone freed in his grace?" A life grounded in Christ's death and resurrection means we don't have to feel bad about rest and relaxation, as if we're not fulfilling our potential or maximizing our time. Your value is not found in efficiency. You've been set free to work when it's time to work and rest when it's time to rest. And it's especially important to remember that in retirement. A life grounded in Christ's death and resurrection means the legacy that we look to leave is not a name on a library. It's meaningful impact in the lives of others, and ultimately, on their souls. The people God gives us (for minutes or decades) were placed in our lives as a gift, so that we could serve them as God's representatives while we have them, knowing our highest hopes are to see them with us in glory. And finally, a life grounded in Christ's death and resurrection means the stuff we own does not define us, but it is another avenue to serve God and our neighbor with it.

Here's the sad thing. In the life without Christ, even the best things become worthless. Ninety years go by fast. The seventy-five-year marriage seems all too short. What good is life when every win is followed by loss? But in the life with Christ, even the smallest things become meaningful. Because I have been set free, I am not living for today. I am living for eternity. And I am not living for myself, to fuel my ego or force God to love me. He loves me already in the Son he sent to die for me. Instead, I get to live for others, so that they may know Christ more and more as Christ works in me and through me.

Friend, your life matters. It matters because you've been washed and sanctified. It matters because God has set you free to serve him and your neighbor. Do not despair. Instead, look to the empty tomb and find that payment for your sin has been made. Then, look at the world God has given you to serve him and give thanks to him in. And this makes life oh so good. Amen.