

**Sermon preached by Mr. Jarrett Van Tine at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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JESUS: OUR “NEW” AND GRAND SOLUTION

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

When I found out I was going to preach today I asked Pastor Neil to give me an idea of what the congregation is like, so I would understand my target audience. He said that you are primarily middle class, well-educated, with a lot of military and political involvement, and a loving community. He thought that the one possible weakness might be the need for evangelism.

My purpose is to encourage us from the book of Ecclesiastes with the message that, although in and of ourselves, we are unable to achieve *anything* of lasting worth and redeeming value for our lives, for our society, or for our world, Jesus has already achieved everything.

I love the book of Ecclesiastes because it is so relevant to our lives here in the D. C. Metropolitan/northern Virginia area. If you didn't already know, our student ministry here at Faith has just begun a series on the book and we are studying it at Sunday School, in large groups, and in small groups. I started studying it on my own last winter and, even before being hired as the new youth director here at Faith, was blown away by how ripe it is with application for both students and adults, especially in this part of the country.

Let's do a quick overview of the biblical story so far, so that we can understand where we are by the time we get to Solomon's world of Ecclesiastes. In Genesis 1-3 we find the garden of absolute happiness where mankind enjoyed a perfect experience of the love and goodness of God, immeasurable wealth, a breathtaking world filled with nature like we've never dreamed and free from death and decay which now plagues the great outdoors in our day. Finally, man had meaningful, satisfying, enjoyable work.

Then, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and God, like any good parent, gave them the consequences He said He would and separated them from paradise and His presence. At that point, they died spiritually, being separated from the goodness of God's presence, and all hell broke loose in the world. One of Adam and Eve's kids killed the other one, people started sleeping around with multiple women, violence increased exponentially, such sexual perversion as rape, incest, bestiality, and homosexuality spread like wildfire, oppression and injustice abounded, tears and suffering flowed without reservation, and physical death eventually hunted down and destroyed everyone. This was all because humanity had once and for all died spiritually when they were separated from the presence of God. The separation of the created order from God is the root of all our world's problems.

As we read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, you know you are in for a good read when the author begins his book by screaming at the top of his lungs, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” What's worse, just in case you are holding out for a good ending, he'll conclude his book in the exact same way in 12:8, again declaring, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”

The Hebrew word here translated as “meaningless” is *hebel* and occurs 38 times in the book, often in key places where Solomon’s conclusions on a particular matter are stated. The word itself is always translated as “meaningless” in the NIV although in actuality it can take on a variety of closely related nuances and could be translated as “absurd,” “short-lived,” “futile,” “vain,” “empty,” or “inexplicable apart from faith in God.”

Solomon’s declaration is jarring and peculiar and immediately forces us to ask, “What the heck are you talking about, Solomon? What do you mean when you say that everything is meaningless, short-lived, absurd, empty and inexplicable?”

Our answer is simply the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes, which is also summarized in verses 3-11 of chapter 1. If we continue reading, we’ll find that Solomon laments the cold, harsh realities of life, such as the stressfulness and transience of wealth. He talks about injustice and oppression and says that oppression seems insurmountable. We think of warlords in Africa, child prostitution, sex-slaves, child abuse, bullying in the schools, etc.

We see the inability of education to solve the real issues of life. All that comes is sorrow and grief. Maybe you work hard to get into a great school, then through your education you become a lawyer, but the system has substantial flaws and you can’t change them, leaving your hands tied. Maybe you’re a politician but people will not listen to your ideas and, even if they do, eventually you die and the person who takes your place may be a moron and reverse all your great policies. Maybe you’re a military officer but no matter how hard you work you cannot create the peace and justice you long for in the world, perhaps because of bureaucratic red tape or the unwillingness of those you are trying to help to cooperate.

Education often just allows us to see the problems from a more informed vantage point, but it will, more often than not, not provide lasting solutions to our world’s problems, and it certainly won’t solve the most difficult problem, that of spiritual and physical death!

Great leaders come and go, and yet, the problems people have are never finally solved. There are always new parties, new agendas, new solutions. This is not to say that there aren’t great political leaders and that a country isn’t blessed when they are in power. As it says in Proverbs 29:2, “When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.” Righteous rulers are a blessing; yet even in their best moments they are not able to solve their peoples’ or their own greatest struggles – sin and death. Moreover, they will die or their terms will end and new rulers will step into their place and what will *they* be like?

Nor is it to say that the state is not a blessing from God. Paul declares that it is when he writes in Romans 13:1-2, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”

Nor is this to say that we should give up our political labors altogether. Ecclesiastes 8:3, 2-6 speaks of a wise man involved in the political affairs of his country who sees major problems. In verse 3, Solomon instructs him to “not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence,” that is,

don't leave the political arena and throw in the towel just because it is flawed. On the contrary, as verses 5b-6 say that such a one "will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him." He should stick it out in the political arena as miserable as it may be and wait for the proper time and procedure to tackle those problems and promote a better course of political action.

But what Ecclesiastes is saying is that, as long as the political powers of our world remain governed by sinful mortals and as long as their constituents are sinful mortals, death and sin will continue to keep the political arena an impotent source of the fundamental change and world transformation we long for, i.e., a life where justice reigns, nobody suffers or dies, everybody loves God and one another, and prosperity abounds both in nature and in humanity.

And, *most tragically*, there is nothing new from our world that will or even could be discovered and brought forth to change things. This is the sense of "new" in the sense of an authentic solution to the pointlessness of life caused by death – new in the sense of undoing the separation and curse of God from mankind; not "new" in the sense of creating a new invention like a computer or something like that. Solomon is lamenting the fact that, as far as the available resources of humanity are concerned, we are powerless to create a world of meaning and eternal life.

Some resources from the created order which we use to try and create something "new" that will never provide the solutions we long for include health diets and exercise, a better version of Windows, the iPhone, better graphics for video games, 3D TV, educational resources, political resources, military resources. We still have death, poverty, oppression, injustice, stress, anxiety, tears, sin that fills us all, and the certainty that our life's work will eventually fade away after we are dead and gone. In short, we are unable to achieve *anything* of lasting worth and redeeming value for our lives, for our society, or for our world.

But there is good news! Jesus has already achieved it! He is that "something new" for which Solomon calls in the book of Ecclesiastes. As One who is uncreated He has entered from heaven into the hopelessness of our impotent and bankrupt world to be the solution which we so desperately need. As He Himself declared in John 8:23: "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world."

On the cross, Jesus took not only the physical death of our creation upon Him, but the spiritual death as well, for which He cried, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me? Why have You abandoned Me, why have You separated Me from Yourself?" He did so for us, to stand in our place to be separated from God's presence so that we might not have to be any longer.

As Paul says in Ephesians 2:13, Christ-followers who were once dead in their trespasses and sins, and separated from God's presence have now been "brought near [to God] through the blood of Christ."

In 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul also describes Jesus as the great one who “has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Now, Paul writes, our work in the Lord is no longer vain or futile: “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Not only is Jesus the Conqueror of death, but He is the one who is and will continue to accomplish what no politician or military leader and no amount of education or money could ever accomplish: justice and righteousness in the world. “Here is my servant,” Isaiah writes, “my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations... In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged till He establishes justice on earth. In His law the islands will put their hope” (Isaiah 42).

Now as people who have been united to Jesus, we await the day when Jesus will return and our world shall be transformed back into a worldwide Garden of Absolute Happiness. Speaking of that day, God Himself declares, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” In the new creation, we Christians shall enjoy what our education, wealth, and occupations could never bring us apart from Christ: a continual and unimaginable experience of the fullness of God’s good and loving presence, as well as an unending life filled with meaningful and deeply gratifying work in a world filled with incomprehensible beauty and wealth.

How do we apply this to our lives? There is a great need for evangelism because Jesus is the “new” and grand solution to the world’s problems that none of our country’s best political or military or educational or financial efforts can ever accomplish. Knowing the biblical story of Ecclesiastes is a key tool for evangelism! It is an example of how separation from God can explain suffering for neighbors, coworkers, etc.

Let’s thank God for becoming the New and Grand Solution for which Solomon longed and which our world so desperately needs. And let’s plead for the Son to return soon and complete His transformation of creation from one of absurdity and meaninglessness to one of glory.