

Sermon Transcript from July 3rd, 2016 Ecclesiastes: More than Mist Pastor Alex Rettmann, Bridgetown Church

So good to be with you guys tonight. My name is Alex. I'm one of the leaders around here. We are in a series. We've taken a whole year to talk about biblical literacy. We want to understand what the Bible's about. Is there a narrative that flows through the whole thing? What are the main themes? What is it leading us towards? And, within this series, we have had these little mini series! And, currently, we're in a mini series on the wisdom literature in the Scriptures and we're calling it "The Sage." We're looking at the deep wisdom tradition of the Israelites.

Last week, Gerald kicked this series off talking about Proverbs and talking about how Proverbs, they give us more than information. They give us deep wisdom on how to live skillfully, how to make the right decision when things are grey and how to have emotional intelligence. Now, I'm tired because I just got back from a week of basically just staying up super late and playing tons of games of Mafia and digging trenches. So, bear with me. But, by the power of the Holy Spirit, turn your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 1:1.

Tonight, we're going to look at the entire book of Ecclesiastes in one shot and how it fits into that wisdom tradition. I love Ecclesiastes. I don't know what your experience with Ecclesiastes has been, but I absolutely love it. I love it because Ecclesiastes is human. Out of all of the books in the Bible, it's like maybe one of the most human books. It's so us. If Ecclesiastes were a song – no judgment here – it would be Mike Posner's new song, "I Took a Pill in Ibiza."

If you don't know that song, look it up. It's awesome. If it were a movie, it would be Fargo. But, deep down, the depth of this book is so profound because I think the entire book's purpose, the reason why it exists, is to show us that most of us would rather do just about anything than have a real relationship with God. Now, I know that sounds crazy in church, but let me explain. One of the things that we, people who are religious, tend to do with the Bible is make it into a formula. The formula goes something like this: if I do these wise things or obey at these times, I will get blessed. I'll have a good life. I'll be safe.

I mean, the full force of the book of Proverbs essentially is this: be honest, fear God, seek wisdom and life will be good. But, hang on a second. What about the time when you told the truth at work and you got fired? Or what about the time when you devote your entire life to God in some euphoric moment only to continue to experience incredible pain and suffering and, honestly, even when you pray and you sit down to listen, you just don't even feel like He speaks to you anymore? What about that?

See, I think Proverbs doesn't seem, on the surface, to account for that glitch. That things are not a formula in life. And Ecclesiastes gets that. It doesn't just get that, it celebrates that. It's almost sort of a slight reality check for the Proverbs. Is it a contradiction? No. It's just that you cannot read one of these books and get the fullness of Jewish wisdom. We have to read all of them in concert with each other.

Something that I like to do – and I listened to the podcast on the plane yesterday – with these wisdom book is kind of imagine in my mind what sort of person they are. If we met them, who would Ecclesiastes be? Who would Proverbs be? Proverbs is lady wisdom. She's smart, she's successful, she's played by the rules and won. She's ancient and tested, proven, trustworthy. Who is Job? Job's an old man. He's been hardened by life, but He's still joyful. You know how when people get old either they get really bitter and incredibly cynical or they get really saintly? Have you noticed that?

Well, Job is the kind of guy who gets saintly in his humility. He's the kind of guy who just says, "Hey, sit down. I'd like to share my story with you and tell you what God has done in my life."

And then there's Ecclesiastes. Middle-aged. Cynic. Good taste, because you have to be a cynic to have good taste. Think about that next time you desire to have good taste. He's had incredible experiences. He's traveled all over the globe. He's met famous people. He's been in the halls of power. And yet, he's cynical and depressed. He's Portland, right? This man is Portland. The reality is that each of these people, they all have a piece of the truth. But, the work of theology is always to battle in order to not settle for half truths. That is the work of theology.

So, tonight, what is Ecclesiastes' contribution? So, let's go to the next.

Ecclesiastes 1:1: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

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

There are two people involved in the book of Ecclesiastes. There's the Teacher and then there's the author. The author, though, is the one who's taking the Teacher's words, taking the Teacher's teachings and compiling them into a concentrated book that we have called Ecclesiastes. And the Teacher is the one who's actually speaking for most of the book until we get to the end. And what is the refrain of the Teacher? Vanity. Now, that's an interesting word choice. Does anybody else have a different translation just by any chance? Meaningless. Probably a lot of your Bibles say "meaningless." Vanity is like the old school word from the King James Version.

But, meaningless. Right? The Hebrew word there is "hevel." Can you say that with me? Hevel. Hevel. The simplest translation in Hebrew is "vapor" or "mist" or "smoke." Super interesting. Because, there's other words in Hebrew that could've gotten the point across. But, the Teacher decides to use this word "hevel." Why? Why does He used the word "hevel" for this?

Well, because it's a picture; something that we can see in our lives. He's going to say, throughout this entire book, that much is hevel and, in fact, He starts out here and He says, "All is hevel."

Think about what that could mean. All of life is smoke. Interesting. All of life is a vapor. Interesting. It's kind of like this. Oh, yes. I brought some matches with me. We'll see if this works. Maybe you can see it. It's like this.

That's it. Right there. That's your life. See, smoke's interesting because it appears to be solid. You can see it. But, when you reach out to grasp it, you realize that it dissipates. What is the Teacher saying? I think the point that He's trying to make throughout this entire book is that life isn't what it seems to be at first glance. That life, at times, doesn't make sense. You reach out for the vapor but it just disappears.

One of the leading Hebrew scholars in the world, his name is Michael Fox. He's retired now, but he was just so brilliant. He says that because the meaning of words change, vanity probably doesn't capture "hevel" for us today. To him, he says this: "'Hevel' is more like the word 'absurd' or 'enigma.'"

Have you ever experienced something in life, a situation in life, and just thought, "Oh my gosh? Life is so absurd. It's an enigma. How could you figure this out?"

Because it seems to me that life matters so much, but then everything in life can be so easily thwarted and so easily dissipate. Hevel. It's the woman who slips on a longboard while playing with her kids, hits her head and dies. It's hevel. The man who puts his life savings into Enron stock. Hevel. It's the girl who finds a cancerous mole on her neck two months too late. Hevel. Or the person who reads all the wisdom of the Proverbs on how to raise good kids but, in the end, his kids only hate him. It's hevel.

In Nicaragua, we were tasked at one point to dig a drainage ditch. It rains a ton there. It's a tropical environment. So, we're supposed to dig this ditch so that we can kind of channel the water past the gate of the place that we're staying so that it doesn't flood the area. So, we're digging this ditch and it was probably like two football fields long and about a couple feet deep. So, it was a lot of work. We're digging this thing. And we actually had a guy on the trip who is an engineer. And he's like, "Because of the way this place is designed, this isn't going to work. It maybe will withstand one time of rain and then it's totally just going to be destroyed by the power of water."

And, sure enough, later on that day after we've done all this work, it just starts pouring down rain super, super hard. If you've ever been in a region like that, you know how hard the rain can be. It's just raining. I'm thinking, "This is going to be great. We're going to go look and really see if this guy was right and see if our ditch worked."

So, the rain stops and we go out there and, right as the gate opens, we look out and water has just flooded everywhere. Like, after four hours of work water is everywhere. And then we keep on going and it looks like, "Okay. The canal's kind of working at some points, but at the very end it totally blew out."

And then, when there was no more water, you could see that it had dug all of this dirt into the ditch that we had just dug and filled it up more than half way. It's hevel. That's what it's like. Because, life is absurd. It's not always like the Proverbs say it is. So, our Teacher in Ecclesiastes goes on throughout the book to pick on a few things in life that look especially solid, especially worthy of our investment. But, in the end, are just smoke. And the most amazing thing is that these are the very things that most of us, thousands and thousands and thousands of years later, still work to build our lives upon.

So, turn over to Ecclesiastes 2:1. The first thing that the Teacher goes after is pleasure. Pleasure. It says this:

Ecclesiastes 2:1: "I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But behold, this also was hevel. I said of laughter, 'It is mad,' and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' I searched with all my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life."

But, it's hevel. Skip down to Ecclesiastes 2:10.

He says this: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was hevel and a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."

Pleasure. It sounds, honestly, when I read that, like most of us here in Portland. Saying "yes" to everything that we desire. But, he says this: "If you live for the weekend, you can save all you can so that you can spend all you can. But, Monday will still come and so will your end. It's absurd. It's hevel."

And notice why is it hevel? Because it's here one day and it's gone tomorrow. Pay attention and you'll find it. Over and over and over again, the culprit behind hevel is time and death. Time and death will steal it away. And then he goes after wisdom and righteousness. Go ahead and look down at verse 12.

Ecclesiastes 2:12. He says, "So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness."

Sounds kind of like the Proverbs.

"And yet I perceived..." – wait a second – "...that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, 'What happens to the fool will also happen to me. Why then have I been so very wise?'"

Good question.

"And I said in my heart that this also is hevel."

Flip over a few pages to Ecclesiastes 9:2.

He says this: "It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all."

Wow. What a contrast to the Proverbs. Even wisdom doesn't work out perfectly. The fate of the fool is the same as the fate of the wise. And, once again, death and time are the great equalizer. The same event happens to all. What else does He go after? Let's find out. Career and honor. Flip back to Ecclesiastes 2:18.

He says this: "I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me."

I hate my work because it doesn't last.

"And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I have toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This is hevel."

You can work and work and it will only cause you stress while you're working, because by the time you get old enough to enjoy the stuff that you actually have amassed in your life, you'll be too old to enjoy it. And when you die, it will all go to someone who may not care about the stuff that you cared about. Or you might work and work and work and amass an empire only to get sick, to get Alzheimer's and forget all that you did. And everyone's praise who used to matter to you, you no longer remember. Time and death.

Finally, he goes after wealth and possessions. Flip over to Ecclesiastes 5:10.

He says this: "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money."

Really? It's hard to believe.

"Nor he who loves wealth with his income; this is hevel. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

"There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his own hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is a father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand."

You may have the nicest house on a hill looking out over the city or the poshest apartment in the Pearl with your own parking space and a concierge who walks your dog when you're on vacation, but it won't matter in the end. You could lose it all in the stock market. Why would you build a life on that? Naked you came into this world and naked will you leave it.

So, okay, wisdom of the Israelites, what is there to live for? Life is smoke. What is there to live for? Not much to lean on here. Now that we all have had coffee with the depressing, wise Teacher of Ecclesiastes, I have two thoughts for you tonight. Two thoughts from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. If you're taking notes, write these down. If you're not taking notes, write them down. There you go.

First is this: living in the enigma of hevel. Notice that as we read through those passages, the Teacher doesn't spare anyone. You could build your life on morality and wisdom and you will die just like Charlie Sheen. You could build your life on pleasure and possessions, but you will get old and unable to enjoy pleasure and you don't get to take your possession with you. They will be taken away by time and by death. So, how do you live in this enigma? How do we find meaning and purpose in this? This truly does seem meaningless.

Well, I think the Teacher would commend us to three things. The Teacher would say, first off, don't be a hedonist. A hedonist is somebody who believes that all that matters in life is just what's in front of them. It's the tangible. It's the experience. It's drugs, sex and rock and roll. That's the hedonist. And He says, "Don't be that person, because none of it is going to matter in the end."

But then He also says, "Don't be a relativist. Don't read Ecclesiastes, throw your hands up and say, 'Well, nothing's true then and life is truly meaningless. There's no right; there's no wrong. Have an open mind. Just live.'"

G.K. Chesterton has a great quote that goes like this:

"The point of having an open mind, like having an open mouth, is to close it on something solid."

Don't be a relativist. But then, I think He would also say, "Don't be religious. Don't close your mind on some kind of formula so that you can be certain that you're living rightly and everybody else is living wrongly."

It's not a formula to be figure out. So, how do we live then? How do we live? Flip over to

Ecclesiastes 9:7. One of the brighter points within the book of Ecclesiastes. He has this for us.

He says this: "Go." After all of His teachings. "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

"Let your garments always be white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

"Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your hevel life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol [the grave], to which you are going."

Enjoy life. Have a good time. God's gift to you is a sunny day, friends, family. Probably a lot of things that you're going to be doing tomorrow. A barbecue. Just enjoy it. And I honestly think that there is a place in the wisdom of our tradition for enjoyment of life as being "a" reason for life. But, if I ended the sermon here, you would be like, "How was Alex tonight."

"Uh, it was okay."

Right? Because, is that all? Is that really all? Like, just enjoy your life? After you just demolished everything, that's it? Enjoy it? Really? Enjoy your life and then just die? Probably many of you have had somebody in your life who was really significant to you pass away. It's absurdly painful to lose someone out of this life. Right now my grandmother – well, for the past few years she's had Alzheimer's. But, for the past year, hasn't been able to really function at all. And like, I remember her when she was able to function and I'll even sometimes have dreams about where she'll get better.

In my dream I'll be like, "Oh, that was crazy. You were so sick. How are you doing?"

And we have a full on conversation. But, I only wake up to find that, actually, she's not there anymore. And when I go and visit her, I look at her and something in me just says that it just seems like life matters more than this. It just seems like life matters more than smoke. Don't you agree? And I think that we need to pay attention to what we long for; that we have to pay attention to what we hunger for. Because, there is no such thing as a desire for something without the fulfillment for it. So, if we long for life that matters so much that it can't simply be snuffed out, what does that tell us?

This is what the Teacher wants us to think about. Sit in that. What does that tell us if we long for life that doesn't end, for love that is always given back and goes into eternity, for a life without loss? What does that hunger within every single human being tell us? You see, the great twist is that, in the Bible, there are not three people of wisdom only. There's no just Job, lady wisdom and the Teacher, there's actually four people. See, we need a fourth person. We need someone who doesn't just make wise observations about life from a window, but we need somebody who is wisdom, who is able to make us wise.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul calls Jesus "the power and wisdom of God." Interesting. See, in a hevel world where things don't make sense, a world that seems to be absent of judgment and thus absent of justice, there's something else that doesn't make sense. When I was studying this book this past week, I thought to myself, "Okay. Yes. Hevel. Hevel doesn't make any sense. Life is absurd. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. It's ridiculous."

And Jesus comes to make sense of life for us. He comes as the judge to say, "These are the bad people and you'll get what you deserve and these are the good people and you will get what you deserve."

He makes sense of things. But, He doesn't. In fact, Jesus makes life even more absurd. You see, to make sense of this life, all He would do is something very sensible. Sort of like, "Here are the good people and here are the bad. You both get what you deserve."

But, He doesn't do that. God actually comes to live in our hevel so that we don't have to stay there. Jesus comes to give the beggar a seat at His heavenly table. How absurd. To show the apathetic teenager that things that are dead can come back to life. To show the unwise person that they can have a heavenly inheritance in relationship with Him and to show the divorcee what vulnerability and fulfilled trust and intimacy looks like. He

doesn't make our world normal or make sense at all. He goes 10 steps further.

Most of you know the story of Lazarus. Lazarus was a friend of Jesus and Lazarus dies while Jesus is still around. Lazarus dies. Jesus shows up a couple days later and they're like, "If you had been here, Lazarus wouldn't have died."

And it's one of the most famous verses in all the Bible. What is it? "Jesus wept." He wept. And I know many of you, probably, and many theologians have pondered, "Why is Jesus weeping? He knows that He can just raise Lazarus from the dead and He's going to be hanging out with Him in just a second. Why weep? Why are you crying?"

Have you ever wondered why He cries? I think Jesus cries because it's one of the first up close and so personal encounters with hevel. He has gotten so up close and personal with hevel and He realizes that sin and death have made God's most valuable creation nothing more than a smoke that dissipates with time. But, in that story, in a moment, Jesus shows us what we have all suspected all along to be actually true. That life really does matter more than mist.

Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 2, that he doesn't bother with philosophical debates and the wisdom of men. Instead, he says that he preaches Christ and Him crucified. And this is the wisdom that no one saw coming, Paul says.

In 1 Corinthians 2:9 he says this: **"But as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.'"**

We all longed for it, but we never believed it could be true that the one who was free from hevel would trade us so that we could live a life of meaning and power, freedom and life, liberated from an absurd existence. That rather than God coming to earth to judge our lives and make sense of the mess that hevel is, He comes and redeems us by giving Himself over to time and death so that He can beat it and so that anyone who wants Him can beat it too.

1 Corinthians 15:20 says this: **"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."**

In Christ, all will be made alive. As you're sitting here tonight longing for a life beyond meaninglessness, beyond the vapor, do you want in? Do you want in Christ? Because, this is ancient wisdom. This is so deep that this is what God has longed for for His people from the very beginning.

For one last time, flip over to the right in your Bibles to chapter Ecclesiastes 12:13. This is how the author of Ecclesiastes, the one who's organized the Teacher's teachings, this is how he ends the book.

He says this: **"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."**

Fear God and keep His commandments. Where have we heard that before? Oh, yeah. Deuteronomy 30. Genesis 12. All throughout the Torah is the command: walk with God. I think Ecclesiastes perfectly exemplifies what I like to call "The Disenchantment Cycle." The Disenchantment Cycle, whether you know it or not, all of us are on it. It goes something like this: all of us are either hoping for something – something out there. It's the car, it's the house, it's the spouse, it's living in that neighborhood or moving to this city or getting that kind of job. We have something that we're hoping for; longing for. And we all subconsciously believe that when I get that, life will be fulfilled. Life will finally mean something.

Or we're at a different place on the cycle. We're realizing what we've hoped for. We're getting the job that we've always wanted, we're getting the degree that we've been working so hard towards, we're marrying the person that we've always dreamed of marrying, we're living in the neighborhood that we've always wanted to live in. Some of us are there. And then the finally stop on The Disenchantment Cycle is disenchantment. We got what we wanted, we got what we'd longed for, what we'd hoped for all along, and we realize that, yes, that too did not fulfill us like we had hoped.

I remember when I got married – and yes, my wife and I have talked about this. When I got married, well, back up. Before I got married, I remember – maybe you've had this prayer. You're like, "God, if You could hang on a bit up there until I get married, that'd be awesome. Because I really, really want to experience what it's like to be married. It's going to be so great. All of my hopes and dreams and desires are like, 'I'm going to be married. It's going to be awesome.'"

So, I remember a couple years back, I got married two years ago, I get married and there was this point on our honeymoon where I just had a moment. I was alone with God and I just was like, "So, that's marriage? That's it?"

And, obviously, marriage gets better with time and all of that. It does. It really does, actually. I was like, "Hmm."

And I'll never forget what God spoke to me in that moment. He says, "Oh, yes. Now you finally get to put that desire that you've had for marriage in its rightful place and you get to put me at the center and worship me again."

And how good is that? See, the cycle, in some ways, is actually a good thing. Because, in theory, it will leave you with one less idol if you choose to worship God. And what the teacher of Ecclesiastes invites us to realize is that after going through the same cycle that we are all a part of, that the only solid thing in all of life is to choose life with God. You have a choice before you, Bridgetown. Blessing and life or cursing and death. The Disenchantment Cycle. And the only truly enchanted thing in all of life, if you can get yourself to believe it, is that to walk with God means life.

Life is not hevel when you are friends with God. Life is not hevel when you are in Christ. So, what I want to do tonight, we don't ever do this, really, is I just want to ask you. For a lot of you, you are followers of Jesus, and this is an encouragement, wherever you are on that Disenchantment Cycle, to ditch the idol and to worship God and to find yourself truly living. But, if you're here tonight and maybe you're curious about Jesus or you don't follow Jesus or you're skeptical, is there not something within you that hungers for more than what you're experiencing? Isn't there something within you that longs for an enchanted life? This is what Jesus offers you tonight.

So, here's what we're going to do. The worship team's going to come back up. Tonight's a great night to start following Jesus, because we actually are going to do baptisms later on. What we read in the Scriptures is that when you start following Jesus, it's not just an intellectual decision that you make, but it's a whole life decision. And you show that by getting into the waters of baptism, getting actually wet and symbolizing that you want to be a part of that death burial that Jesus went through so that you can be a part of that resurrection; so that you can get out of this hevel existence and truly start to live.