

In a World of Smoke and Mirrors

Finding Meaning . . . Under the Sun, Part 3

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

In the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, King Solomon describes the futility, brevity, and meaninglessness of what life is like ‘under the sun’. He defines life’s meaninglessness through several illustrations from the natural world and human nature to reveal that what seems satisfying and what appears to be meaningful isn’t. Life tricks you with illusions of significance and satisfaction. Life under the sun exposes whatever you are chasing after is nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

Discussion Points:

We so easily grow restless and bored with life. We aren’t satisfied with the experiences of life.

- How does *Ecclesiastes 1:8* reflect the truth of day-to-day living?
- What are some ways that the world seems restless and unsatisfied with life?
- How does knowing and living with Christ’s salvation influence a change of choices and perspectives in your daily life?

We don’t create anything new in life. We won’t be remembered after the end of life.

- How could this knowledge impact your life?
- In what ways is this truth reflected in the world’s decisions and direction?
- Why does living with your passions and perspectives tied to life down here ‘under the sun’ end in despair?

With the perspective and assurance of life alongside the Son of God as your Lord and Savior, it demonstrates that creation isn’t redundant, it’s resplendent – enjoy it!

- How does a life with Christ reflect that all in life isn’t pointless?
- What are things that Christ makes new in a believer’s life? How could this encourage anticipation rather than desperation?
- Why does being remembered by Creator God in the future give hope for life on earth now?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Apart from God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth about life under the sun can lead to despair. Without God everything becomes repetitive, unsatisfying, old, and then dies. But for the one who has come by faith to God the Son, everything is new!

Practical Implications:

Think: How does knowing truth about life ‘under the Son’ encourage you while living life ‘under the sun’? What does this teach you about God and His character?

Pray: Praise Him for blessing us with His Word and sharing truths that challenge and encourage us in this present life and beyond. Ask God to help you live life ‘under the Son’.

Do: Live daily in God’s truth and share His truth with others.

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Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

In the early 1600's, a Dutch scientist invented the prototype of what we would call today the slide projector; light was projected through painted glass, casting the image up on a wall that would make it larger than life. The projector was called, in those early days, a magic lantern.

It wasn't long before The Globe Theatre in London became the first to use the Magic Lantern to create special effects by projecting the image off a mirror and reflecting it back into a smoky air on stage. The image appeared to be alive as it moved and shifted in the smoke. It created a sensation.

It was used for all types of dramatic effects. In fact, in 1770, a religious deceiver by the name of Johann Schröpfer became famous after using smoke and mirrors to claim he was bringing up the spirits of the dead. Using a Magic Lantern he successfully deceived audiences, some of which included heads of state and even royalty.

By the 19th century, this sort of illusion was popular among fortune tellers and in amusement parks around the world. It created an expression for tricking or deceiving people – we call it to this day “smoke and mirrors.”

That phrase “smoke and mirrors” has actually found its way into the Cambridge Dictionary where it is treated as a noun with the definition as an illusion that makes you believe what you are experiencing is real or true, when it is neither real nor true.

Three thousand years ago a king by the name of Solomon came to the conclusion that he and everyone else lived in nothing more than a world of smoke and mirrors.

What seemed satisfying wasn't. What appeared to be meaningful wasn't. Life tricked you with illusions of significance and satisfaction.

As an old man, Solomon owned up to the fact that fact that he had been duped and deceived. He had spent his life chasing after what turned out to be nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

And now he publishes his private journal, *the Book of Ecclesiastes*, where the Spirit of God through Solomon gives us one reality check after another. He describes the futility and brevity and meaningless of what life is like under the sun.

Life under the sun, an expression for life on earth without any perspective of godly wisdom, is one of Solomon's favorite expressions which he had abandoned for decades.

Beginning in chapter 1 of *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon is going to prove that if life under the sun is all we are going to get, it will lead to despair. Apart from God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, this is the truth about life under the sun. And to prove his point, he takes us on a field trip through the world of nature.

We can't sidestep the funeral procession.

By way of a really quick review, Solomon refers to the world of nature in showing us that we can't sidestep the funeral procession.

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

In other words, generations come and go, and the earth just seems to keep on revolving. We can't stop the funeral procession.

We can't slow down the sun.

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

No matter what you do, how you live, or what you accomplish, you don't affect the rising and setting of the sun one iota. Not only that, but you can't steer the wind either.

We can't steer 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).

You can listen to the weather channel to learn when a hurricane is going to make land fall. You can measure the size of the wind rotation, and you can even clock the wind speed to verify if it's a category 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 – but you can't do anything about it.

Solomon is saying, "If all you have is a perspective of life down here under the sun then all you are going to conclude is that humanity is at the mercy of ecology."

You can't stop the earth from revolving, the sun from shining, the wind from blowing, or the oceans from flowing.

You thought you were something. You thought you had power and prestige, but, no, that was just smoke and mirrors.

Now Solomon shifts gears from the natural world to show us the realm of human nature and deliver four observations about life under the sun.

1. We get tired of the repetitions in life.

All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it (Ecclesiastes 1:8a).

You could translate Solomon as saying, "Life is so wearisome and toilsome that it's hard to even put into words. Life is more tedious and boring than words could ever say."ⁱ

Some Hebrew scholars believe this phrase is an introduction to the observations that follow. In other words, we so easily grow restless and bored with life.

2. We aren't satisfied with the experiences of life.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing (Ecclesiastes 1:8b).

Solomon is alluding to the senses of sight and sound. We have experienced things in life, but there are things we still want to see and hear and taste and do. We are restless and unsatisfied.

Have you ever driven the Blue Ridge Parkway? Have you ever taken a cruise to the Caribbean? You have?

But have you hiked the Appalachian Trail?

Have you ever camped at Yellowstone or climbed Mount Everest?

Have you flown in a helicopter over the Grand Canyon or four-wheeled it out on the sand dunes of the Atlantic?

I googled places to visit in North Carolina to see how much I had seen and a site came up with the title "The 17 most Beautiful Places to Visit in North Carolina". I pulled up the list of 17 and realized I've only seen three of them.

One of them is a lake, and I recognized the name of it. I've been on the interstate and

driven past that exit sign. I've seen the sign. Does that count?

There is so much more to see and experience. And we forget the thrill of what we have already seen.

Do you remember your first car? You might have repressed that memory. Do you remember your first paycheck? Your first home? Your first bicycle?

Human experience grows bored with life and is never satisfied.

You heard that river cascading or that music playing the first time - you stopped and barely breathed. Not anymore. That breathtaking sunset that was so beautiful last night – you got over it. Now you can walk down the street and not even lift your head to glance at the next one.

Solomon is making an observation about our fallen nature as human beings, that what was once breathtaking becomes background.ⁱⁱ

You thought that if you got to do that, or see that, or hear that, or buy that, or visit that or taste that, or experience that, you would find lasting satisfaction.

Oh, no, it was only smoke and mirrors.

We grow tired of the repetitions in life. We aren't satisfied with the experiences of life. And:

3. We don't create anything new in life.

Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us (Ecclesiastes 1:10).

Solomon asks a rhetorical question here, "Can anybody ever say, 'Look, this is new'? No, the answer is, 'It's been around for ages!'"ⁱⁱⁱ

The packaging might change. We are driving cars instead of chariots; we have technologies that Solomon never dreamed of.^{iv} But even Thomas Edison, one of the world's greatest inventors, inventing everything from the carbon microphone to the light bulb to the nickel-iron battery to the phonograph (that's a record player, a machine that plays round plastic

things), said, "My inventions are only bringing out the secrets that already exist in nature."^v

He just packaged what already existed.

Keep in mind that Solomon is observing human nature in this immediate context. You could understand him to be saying, "There is nothing new about human beings that hasn't already been observed in the ages before us."

Does this sound familiar? One author wrote, "Young people of today have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they know everything."^{vi}

That was a church leader writing 1,000 years ago.

Another author wrote, "Children have bad manners, contempt for authority, they disrespect their elders."^{vii}

Socrates wrote that 2,400 years ago.

So what does that mean? It means, it is about time young people straightened up! No, what that means is that young people are still critical of old people and old people are still complaining about young people.

Nothing about fallen human nature, lived out here under the sun, is anything new.

We still get tired of the repetitions in life. We still aren't satisfied with the experiences of life. We still don't create anything new in life.

Solomon makes one last observation:

4. We won't be remembered after the end of life.

There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after (Ecclesiastes 1:11).

The word translated 'things' in the English text is supplied by the translator; it could as easily been translated 'people'. Both are true in this context. You are not going to remember former things, former experiences, or former people who lived earlier than you.

He's not talking about deceased family members which leave a life-long memory.

Solomon is speaking in general terms about former generations being forgotten by later generations.

He's cutting to the heart of the human desire to make such a significant difference that you'll never be forgotten by society or the world around you.

Somebody might brag that they'll never be forgotten. Like John Lennon, the leader of the Beatles, who made news back in 1966 when he made the prediction, "Christianity will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We are more popular now than Jesus."^{viii}

Can you imagine coming to the conclusion that the Beatles are forever and Jesus and Christianity are going to fade away. Talk about being deceived by smoke and mirrors.

One man wrote perceptively, "Today's celebrities are tomorrow's obituaries. And if that's true of them, when the world is talking about them and listening to everything they write or speak or sing, what will become of you and me?"^{ix}

This is so depressing. How much more of this can we take? We are not even out of chapter one yet.

Remember, this journal needs to be understood backwards; you have to remember how Solomon ends his journal. ***Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.***

Don't live with your passions and perspectives tied to life down here under the sun. Remember your Creator and His perspective above the sun.

Better yet, develop a relationship of obedience and trust in the Son – S-O-N. And what a difference that will make as you fill out the pages of your own journal.

Life under the sun says that creation is redundant. It is the same old wind, earth, sea, and sky. The cycles of nature don't change, and we can't do anything to change them. Creation is redundant.

But for those who believe the opening staggering lines of scripture, ***in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,***

creation is not redundant, creation is resplendent.

The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim His handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

The sunset was designed for us to admire and ponder the creative genius of God. That sunrise is not just a boring repetition, it happens to be a testimony that God's faithfulness to us is as predictable as the sunrise. Count on it! *His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23).*

Life under the sun says life is pointless. Bertrand Russell the atheistic philosopher expressed this kind of despair when he wrote, "We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and the emptiness; sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness, but it is the voice of one drowning, and in a moment the silence returns."^x

If there is no purpose to our existence and no Creator beyond our awareness then there is simply no point to life. Solomon wrote with that perspective, "Why bother toiling away under the sun. What's the point to anything?"

For the believer who walks through life alongside the Son of God, life isn't pointless, life has divine purpose.

Life is an expression of trust, assurance, obedience, and anticipation. We are not gerbils running around on a wheel. God created history to be linear; we are heading somewhere, and, in the meantime, we are giving glory to God as we follow Him, awaiting that coming day when we will live with Him.

But if you are stuck down here with a 'life under the sun' perspective, another brutal truth is that nothing is new. Life is just the repackaging, redesigning, and reselling of faster, shinier, hand-me-downs. And none of it lasts.

But for the one who has come by faith to God the Son, everything is new!

- We have a new name – ***Isaiah 62***
- We have a new heart – ***Ezekiel 36***

- We are new creations in Christ – old things are passed away – all things are become new – **2 Corinthians 5:17**
- God has given us a new song – and a new joy – **Psalms 33**
- The Lord is going to create for His redeemed a new heaven and a new earth – **Revelation 21**
- In fact, God makes this incredible promise to the believer in **Revelation 21:5** – *Behold I am making all things new!*
- What is that going to be like? Paul writes, “*Eyes have ever seen, nor ears heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him*” (**1 Corinthians 2:9**). One day in our glorified eternal bodies, perfected in holiness and perspective, we will never grow bored or tired of anything we see or hear – in fact, our senses will one day in Heaven be saturated with the glory of God.^{xi}

Life under the sun says you will never be remembered. And that’s true. Two hundred years after you die, chances are no one on the planet will even know you ever lived.^{xii} You will never be remembered.

But God’s word tells us you will never be forgotten.

Your name happens to be written down in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Revelation 21:27).

Your life is engraved upon the palm of His hand (Isaiah 49:16).

Even the smallest action or attitude of obedience, trust, and service will be remembered. The writer of Hebrews tells us that *God will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people (Hebrews 6:10).*

He is not going to forget anything!

Life under the sun says whatever you are chasing after is nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

But with the perspective and assurance of life alongside the Son of God as your Lord and Savior, it demonstrates that creation isn’t redundant, it’s resplendent – enjoy it!

Life isn’t pointless, it has divine purpose – live it!

Nothing is new? Oh, in Christ everything is new and about to get newer – anticipate it!

And you won’t be remembered? Oh, no, you will never be forgotten!

Heavenly Father, to what do we owe these promises? Your grace which you lavish upon us? Your creative love and plan which has assurances and mercy for this day and a future that is beyond our comprehension? Thank you that we are not stuck in endless cycles; we are ultimately heading home.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
 Praise Him all creatures here below
 Praise Him above ye heavenly host
 Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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- i Philip Graham Ryken, Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters (Crossway, 2010), p. 28
- ii Adapted from Ed Young, Been There. Done That. Now What? (Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 24
- iii William D. Barrick, Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament (Christian Focus, 2011), p. 40
- iv David Moore & Daniel L. Akin, Holman Old Testament Commentary, Volume 14 (Holman & Broadman, 2003), p. 17
- v Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, Ecclesiastes: Be Satisfied (Victor Books, 1990), p. 27
- vi Ryken, p. 25
- vii Ibid, p. 26
- viii Douglas Sean O'Donnell, Ecclesiastes (P & R Publishing, 2014), p. 22
- ix Ibid, p. 22
- x Quoted in David Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes: Heaven on Earth (Integrity, 2004), p. 4
- xi Ryken, p. 32
- xii Adapted from David Gibson, Living Life Backward (Crossway, 2017), p. 32