

**WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?
Ecclesiastes 1:1-6**

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Amarillo, Texas
July 28, 2019**

Jerry Seinfeld in *SeinLanguage* says:

Life is truly a ride. We're all strapped in, and no one can stop it.

When the doctor slaps your behind, he's ripping your ticket and away you go. As you make each passage from youth to adulthood to maturity, sometimes you put your arms up and scream, sometimes you just hang on to the bar in front of you.

But the ride is the thing. I think the most you can hope for at the end of life is that your hair's messed up, you're out of breath, and you didn't throw up."

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

When I was a child, I would lie in bed and hear the wheel going round and round. It was a gerbil in his little cage. Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. I wish he would stop going round and round. "Dumb gerbil," I thought. "Doesn't he realize that he's not really going anywhere – just around and around?"

I guess I'm pretty much a hypocrite. I made fun of the gerbil's circular excursions as a child – all that time and effort only to end up back where he started! As an adult, I am the gerbil – treadmill, life cycle, rowing machine. Round and round I go; where I stop, everyone knows – just the place where I began. The gerbil doesn't look so dumb any more. I guess he was right – life seems only to go around and around in cycles.

When we are children, we ask the right questions. "Why?" "Why?" "Why?" Our children really do ask a lot of hard questions. "Why do birds fly?" "Why does the trash man come on Tuesday?" "Why are circles round?" Children ask the tough questions. I suppose they never really get any satisfactory answer. No one can always satisfactorily answer all the "whys" of a three year old.

When we get older, we stop asking "why," and we start asking "how." We give up on "why." The answers always seem to escape us, and we settle for "how." How-to books are the best sellers for adults. The "why" books stay on the shelves.

Barnes and Noble offers the following books on their shelves – a lot of "how-tos." *The Abacus: A Brief History of the World's First Computing System and How to Use It* (by Jesse Dilon); *Angelspeake: How to Talk with Your Angels* (Barbara Mark and Trudy Griswold). I love this one: *The Alien Abduction Survival Guide: How to Cope with Your ET Experience* (Mark Davenport, editor). And who wouldn't want to read this one – you'd better go get it – *The Aladdin Factor*:

How to Ask For and Get Everything You Want (Mark Victor Hansen). Or *All About Blue Crabs: And How to Catch Them* (by Russell Roberts). This is a good one – you’d better go get it – it’s only \$4.95, a real bargain today – *How to Dig a Hole to the Other Side of the World* (by Faith McNulty and Marc Simont). Oh, some of you really better get this one. May I recommend it? In fact, I’ll buy it for you – *How to Become a Sweet Old Lady Instead of a Grumpy Old Grouch* (by Marilyn Carlson Webber and William D. Webber). At Barnes and Noble you can get it for \$8.79 – a 20 percent savings off the publisher’s price of \$10.99. Wow, look at this one, singles: *How to Attract Anyone, Anytime, Anyplace: The Smart Single’s Guide to Flirting in the ‘90s* (by Susan Rabin and Barbara J. Lagowski). *How to Be A Vampire* (by R. L. Stine) – I don’t recommend that one. Here you go – *How to Babysit an Orangutan* (by Tara Darling). You never know when that’s going to come in handy. \$16.95. Oh – *How to Disappear Completely & Never Be Found* (by Doug Richmond). I wonder if he’s tried it? *How to Avoid Huge Ships* (by John W. Trimmer). Oh, *How to Entertain People You Hate: Tips on How to Have A Good Time with Bad Company* (Cliff Carle, editor). It’s on sale – \$3.96. *How to Die in the Outdoors; 100 Interesting Ways* (by Buck Tilton). I wonder if he’s tried them all. \$7.96. Finally, *How to Catch a Ghost* (Rosemary Wallner, editor) – \$18.49.

See how ridiculous the “how-tos” have gotten. It’s because nobody wants to read the “whys.”

There is one adult, however, who dared to continue to ask the hard questions. Solomon asked the big questions. “Is life really worth living? Why?” Solomon asked the right questions, but his answers are not completely satisfactory for two reasons.

First of all, he views things from a single, flat dimension. Notice Verse 3 – under the sun. Twenty-nine times we hear this, over and over again, from the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. Under the sun.

Secondly, he speaks in limited terms of time. “From birth to death” – he explained no further, not beyond the grave.

Notice Solomon’s answers when he asked “why?” – a very wise man, indeed, we must admit.

Vanity, futility, meaningless, mystery, enigma, absurdity, irony, brevity, unrelieved gloom.

Look at verse 2.

“ ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says Koheleth. ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’” It’s a superlative expression. If the Song of Songs means the finest song, and King of Kings means the greatest king, then Vanity of Vanities means that full meaning of life is totally beyond our reach. Our quest for understanding is marked by the worst sort of futility.

The strong words of the Preacher were prompted by his disagreement with his fellow wise men. Their teachings were full of promises about the possibilities of wealth, security, happiness, and blessing. Koheleth, the Preacher, objected. He thought that the other teachers were promising more than life could produce. They were misleading their students with the unrealistic dreams that they painted. (*First Demonstration*, Hubbard)

Notice verse 3 – “profit from labor.”

Work does not really make an ultimate difference in life. We do not fully subdue the earth, despite all our trying. We till and rake and plant and water; we build our dams, develop our lakes, reshape the contours of our land – but in the long run the earth wins the struggle. It wears us down – generation after generation.

You wash all the dishes and walk into the bedroom, only to find that another glass escaped the cycle. Besides, they will all need washing again tomorrow.

Wash the car – go ahead – it will rain.

Pick up all the toys – the kids will take them out again.

Cut the grass – it will grow.

Paint the house – it will chip.

Change the oil in the truck – 3 months or 3,000 miles, it will be ready for a change again.

It's all a treadmill – we are not going anywhere.

While the other sages had taught that there was profit in toil, Solomon did not. What they prized, he questioned. What they valued, he called empty.

Look at verse 4. He begins to demonstrate the futility of life. People come and people go. We are born – we die. Others are born – they die. “One generation comes and goes, and another does the same, but the earth,” Solomon says, “remains.” Man was created to subdue the earth, but man disappears and the earth remains.

Death is a puzzle to the writer throughout this book. He's right. We all die. The wise sage looks at death and thinks that life loses its meaning. In Chapter 2, verse 3, he says that life is too short.

It was like the experience of Antonio Parr in Frederick Buechner's *Open Heart*. As he stood at the Brooklyn graveside of his twin sister, “some stirring of the air or quick movement of a squirrel or bird brought me back to myself,” Parr recounts, “and just at the instant...I knew that the self I'd been brought back to was some fine day going to be as dead as Miriam....Through grace alone I banged right into it – not a lesson this time, a collision.”

Interestingly, polled Americans repeatedly list health at the top of their preoccupations – above love, work, money, or anything else. They see it as their primary source of happiness. Why? Perhaps because health helps us forget the finality of our frailty. (*Christianity Today*, June 24, 1991, Timothy K. Jones)

Life does seem so futile, so short.

William Vickrey waited 45 years for his economic theories to be recognized with a Nobel Prize. He enjoyed it for only three days before dying, collapsing in his car on the way to an

academic conference. The 82-year-old retired Columbia University professor had been relishing his sudden honor as a Nobel winner since Tuesday, enjoying a champagne party with colleagues and giving interview after interview with the media. “We were all a bit concerned that maybe this was too much,” said Professor Ronald Findlay, chairman of Columbia’s economics department. Vickrey told *The Star-Ledger* of Newark, New Jersey, “I feel that at long last I may have some audience.” “Forty-five years is a long time to wait for your ideas to take hold,” he said. “I want to make the most of the good bully pulpit. And I have a couple of books to write.”

Vanity of vanities. All of life is vanity.

Eventually, we must all come to the same conclusion – we are going to die.

The author of Ecclesiastes saw people being born and people dying, and he concludes that men come and go – all futile. Shakespeare had it right. We occupy our brief time on life’s stage, and then we’re gone.

In verse 5, notice the cycle of the sun.

Sunrise. Sunset. Sunrise. Sunset. Sunrise. Sunset. “The sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there again.” It’s almost the language of a runner in a race – panting to keep the pace.

In verse 6, the wise one becomes an amateur meteorologist. Look at the wind. It blows southward, then turns north. If the sun gave the east to west course, now the wind gives us the north-south course. The wind continues in its circular pattern.

Verse 7.

Look at the river. It flows into the sea, but the sea is not full. And it all just flows again.

You begin to feel that awful, rhythmic drum beat. Men come and go, but the sun keeps its course, the wind blows, goes back and comes again. The river goes to the sea, only to come again. Life is a boring, futile cycle. What can it all mean? Sunrise. Sunset. Sunrise. Sunset. What can it all mean?

The picture of the creation’s stability is comprehensive. (1) It embraces the four essential elements of earth, sun, wind, and water. (2) It ranges to all points of the compass – the east-west orbit of the sun, the south-north circuit of the wind. (3) It catches the unending dependability (a) of the “earth” which abides “forever” (Heb.), that is, as far ahead as anyone can imagine and beyond; (b) of the “sun” which sets nightly into the Western Sea (as the Hebrews called the Mediterranean) and races back under the earth to spring forth in solar glory over the eastern steppes of Bashan, Gilead, and Moab, never faltering in its course; (c) of the “wind” which swirls in all directions (“south” and “north” in verse 6 balance the implied east-west movement of the sun in verse 5; prevailing winds in the Holy Land were normally west winds from the Mediterranean and, periodically, the *hamsin* or *sirocco* which blew hot and dry from the east), yet always returns to its starting point to being its swirling

again; and (d) of the “rivers” (called wadis by the Arabs), which dump their water into the sea and the next year have an abundant supply to do it again. (*First Demonstration*, Hubbard)

Are you depressed yet? Feeling defeat? Overwhelmed by the meaningless of life under the sun? Solomon was. He added that life is so meaningless that there are no words to describe it. “The eye is not satisfied with seeing,” he wrote, “Nor is the ear filled with hearing.” His assessment would be tough to debate. No matter what you and I see, we continue to look for things more pleasing to the eye.

[We now have hundreds of cable television channels available in our homes (that is, for everyone over 50 who still subscribes). Netflix, HULU, and Amazon Prime multiply our media choices. Rocker Bruce Springsteen’s song “57 Channels and Nothin’ On” can now be modified to “10,000 Choices, But Nothing to Watch.”] But we’ll surf those channels all the same, just to be sure we’re not missing anything – because the eye is not satisfied, no matter where it looks. (*Preaching*, November-December 1994, Young)

All these things toil along toward their goal,
Our tongue cannot describe them accurately,
Our eye cannot see them clearly,
Our ear cannot hear them fully.
(*First Demonstration*, Hubbard)

Verses 9-11

Solomon summarizes his argument with these words: “That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun.”

Do you believe that there is anything new in our world today? What about space travel? Penicillin? Microwave ovens? Actually, the elements of these inventions have always been with us – we’ve just learned how to combine them into different forms. And how far have we really come? The seven deadly sins are as deadly as ever – every single one of them. Men are still at war with one another, and no less inclined to fight than before. There is no less greed, no less immorality, and certainly no less dishonesty, as far as I can see. Is our world getting better?

Leon Uris, the author of *Exodus* and *The Haj*, has written a book on the history of Ireland called *The Trinity*. At the conclusion of this book that chronicles 300 to 400 years of Gaelic history, Uris states, “There is no future for Ireland, only the past happening over and over again.” Even though history tends to repeat itself, we don’t remember it. (*Preaching*, November-December 1994, Young)

The Preacher said that any notion of novelty is an illusion based on either (1) limited perception or (2) faulty memory. Solomon looked at the evidence. Life is a weary cycle. It is boredom, and then you die.

What is it all about?

Some say it's about relationships – relationships with family and friends. These people look to others around them to find meaning in life.

Some say it's about service – helping others.

Some say it's about obtaining -- getting material goods.

Some says it's all about work – like the gerbil, “just do something.” Some of you find your meaning in work. You feel guilty on Saturdays because you're not at work. You take work home with you every evening. Ouch! Your life finds meaning in work. One of the first questions we ask each other as Americans is “What do you do?” “Where do you work?”

Some of you say it's about pleasure – the Freudian approach. The meaning of life for you is to be content, happy, authenticated.

But Solomon could find no real meaning under the sun. Vanity of vanities. Sunrise. Sunset. Around and around the gerbil goes.

But is there a way off the treadmill? Can we step off the stairmaster? Is there an alternative? St. Augustine suggested there is when he said, “He who has God has everything. He who does not have God has nothing. He who has God and everything has no more than he who has God alone.” You see, God never meant for man to have a circular existence. From his very beginning in Genesis, man was built for linear living. He was created to go somewhere – with purpose. Solomon said life is pointless. God says life is full of purpose. We were meant for linear living, but sin has forced us into a circular pattern. We are meant to live in relationship, but our sin has forced us into isolation. (*Preaching*, November-December 1994, Young)

We who are heirs to the magnificent history of God's revelation and the redemption are not satisfied with Solomon's answers. He only looked under the sun. He only looked from life to death. His outlook locked us into the present only, and life with past or future is a bed too short to cover, too narrow to be comfortable in.

In the deeds and words of a later, greater, wise man, we find our answers. Part of the Gospel's good news is that our work – even though routine and tedious – need not be futile. Jesus had, as part of His mission, the purpose of taking us beyond futility to profit in our work.

Perhaps that is why he came as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). Tools He knew how to handle. Orders from customers He had to fill. Wood and iron were the stuff He worked with. His knuckles felt nicks and His fingers held blisters. The Son of God entered our human labor crew. Shoulder to shoulder, He toiled with the rest of us. Doing God's will entailed doing menial work. He did it with diligence and delight.

As David Hubbard has said, He linked his daily work to the work beyond work – the doing of the Father’s will and the trusting of the Father’s power. He urged His hearers to engage in this same spiritual work: “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life...” (John 6:27) And more positively, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” (John 6:29)

To trust Jesus for rescue from our sins, to trust Jesus for guidance for our lives, to trust Jesus for power in our service – that is the work of God, the work beyond work, the true work in which all our work becomes profitable.

When it comes to creation, Jesus again had good news for us. His very birth in our kind of manger and our kind of flesh told us about creation – the place where God’s love and care are at work. Not a frustration to our welfare but a means of our sustenance, not just evidence of life’s constancy but witness to God’s glory – that is creation as Jesus treated it. Spiritual stories from seed and soil (Mark 4:1-20), fatherly care of sparrows and lilies (Matthew 6:25-34), kindly transformation of water to wine at a wedding (John 2:1-12) – Jesus, the Lord of creation, was at home in what He had made. And we can be too.

But his miracles sometimes took us to the creation beyond creation: the new creation, the wonder of the coming age. As Lord of the sea, He subdued creation’s turbulence (Mark 4:35-41). As Lord over disease, he healed creation’s woundedness (Mark 5:21-43). As Lord of demons, he defeated creation’s enemies (Mark 3:20-27). As Lord of death, He determined creation’s outcome (John 11:1-44). And by His resurrection He has led His people into the realm of the new creation, where God’s will is fully done and God’s glory is clearly seen.

And what about history? Nothing new? Is history headed nowhere? Nothing worth remembering? Is history a stagnant heap of oblivion?

“No” is the answer which Jesus’ good news shouts to these questions. History still has its surprises, and Jesus’ appearance in human flesh was one of them. New covenants, new commandments, new persons, new heavens and a new earth are all yet to come. Jesus entered our history to teach us to remember and hope. He pointed to a past worth recalling in His death and resurrection; He depicted a future worth anticipating in His church and His return. (*First Demonstration*, David Hubbard)

In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” the gods punish Sisyphus by making him roll a stone up a mountain. Just as he manages to reach the top, exhausted, the stone rolls back down the steep incline. This nightmare occurs again and again. Endless, futile, fruitless labor, it is. Cruel labor imposed by the gods.

Camus argued that life is like that. He said that we are all Sisyphus. We eat, we work, we sleep. Or more precisely, we arise, eat, work several hours, eat, work some more, go home, east sleep and start over again. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday (and sometimes Saturday and Sunday), we do this. We then have children, and they repeat the futile routine. Life has no meaning unless we make it have meaning, said Camus, or unless

we at least find its meaning, a Christian might prefer to say. (Randall O'Brien, "The Secret of Life," *I Feel Better All Over Than I Do Anywhere Else*)

We need to remember there was a Friday that changed everything. A Friday when the cross happened. And then there was a Saturday, and we waited to see if things really had changed. And then, on Sunday we knew the cycle had been broken, and things would never be the same. The tomb was empty. The Creator was at creation again. And the One who had formed human flesh out of dust of the earth had formed life out of death and invited us to "follow Me." Step off the treadmill. Find worth in your work. Find meaning in your being.

Let us pray.