

“Meaning in the Monotony” (Ecclesiastes: The Meaning of Everything – Pt. 1)
(Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

- **The Meaning Crisis**

- The other day I was walking on the beach with my son, Edison, and he asked, *“Dad, how many grains of sand do you think there are? Do you think there are more grains of sand than people?”* *“I don’t know, son, but I bet there are.”* Google says there are about 8 billion people on earth, and for every person, *there are roughly 1 billion grains of sand.* (Yeah that tracks, I’ve got a couple billion in my car after that trip!) Now, are you ready to feel small? *For every grain of sand, there are roughly 20-30 thousand stars in the observable universe. 8 billion people: 1 billion grains of sand per person: 20-30 thousand stars per grain of sand.* That’s God’s great universe for you! *Who are we that you are mindful of us, Lord?*
- Well, happy June! I’m excited for the start of summer, and I’m even more excited to start a new series today on the O.T. book of *Ecclesiastes*! Before that, let me tell you about a cultural trend I’ve been really fascinated by. It has a little bit to do with all those stars and grains of sand, and a lot to do with *Ecclesiastes*: psychologists and philosophers over the past decade have labeled it, **“The Meaning Crisis.”** John Vervaeke, a cognitive scientist, describes it as, **A widespread cultural and psychological feeling that life lacks inherent purpose, significance, and deep connection; it is a modern “existential vacuum” where people enjoy material comfort but struggle to find a reason why they are here.** What got us here was a collision of cultural shifts centuries in the making: the rise of things like *secularization, industrialization, scientific materialism, hyper-individualism.* With it, we’ve seen dramatic spikes in mental health issues—*anxiety, depression, addiction, deaths of despair*—also increased polarization and destabilization in society. Filter this through pandemics, geo-political crises, dizzying technology advances, and we’ve got quite a cocktail of potential existential angst! You don’t need fancy labels to feel the impacts in our culture: talk to schools, mental health professionals, public servants, parents.

- 150 years ago, when these forces were just picking up steam, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, analyzed the culture and predicted a future that looks alarmingly like our present: **Nietzsche envisioned a society of comfortable, hyper-individualistic consumers, seeking nothing but safety and shallow pleasures, drowning in comfort, technology, and entertainment, yet profoundly empty inside.** *Woah.* Welcome to the crisis of meaning, I guess.
- **Solomon's TED Talk**
 - All this is why this Old Testament book you may have never read, and probably can't spell, is so relevant today. Rewind with me 3,000 years, when a guy who had *everything* had his own kind of "existential crisis" and by the mysterious inspiration of the Holy Spirit, turned it into a book of wisdom that became part of the Bible. *This is Ecclesiastes.* I'm sorry, it's not a very *sunny* start to the summer—don't do Ecclesiastes in the winter! Do it in a season when you can go back outside, enjoy the sun and get some ice cream at the board walk, trust me! But after we face the *bad news* of it, we will find a profound freedom in the Good News. This perspective is essential for us to hold life the right way as God's people. So, open up to Ecclesiastes 1.
 - First off, where do you get a name like "Ecclesiastes" from? My goodness! Like many books in the Bible, its original name came from the opening line of the book—in this case, a Hebrew word, **Qohelet**. When translated to Greek, the word became **Ekklesiastes**. It describes someone who calls together an assembly—a teacher or a preacher. So, picture Ecclesiastes as a Biblical TED Talk about "*The Meaning of Everything.*" There's the title. More importantly, *who* writes a book like Ecclesiastes, where does this come from? Traditionally, it's attributed to King Solomon, the wildly successful and tragically flawed son of King David. While Biblical scholars debate whether the author was ultimately Solomon, or another king of Israel, or an author writing in the persona of a Solomon-like figure, King Solomon is exactly the kind of character we can imagine this book coming from: known for his legendary wisdom, immense wealth, building the first Temple of Jerusalem, Solomon is the classic archetype of *the guy who has everything, and wakes up one day to realize he has nothing!* The tragedy of his story is, he started

so strong, but through a steady drift of character, the very things he accumulated and achieved as signs of blessing became the sources of compromise and downfall. His decadent was a snare of idolatry. Ecclesiastes reads kind of like the memoir of a rock star who finally sobers up, and in his old age reflects on the disillusionment of having it all, with the silver linings of what the scars have taught him, and a clearer perspective on what *truly matters*. So, Solomon, rockstar of wisdom and living-large, walks up to the mic and begins his talk:

- ***“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new?’ It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.” (Ecc. 1:1-11)***
- **“Meaningless”**
 - Well then...who wants ice cream? Ecclesiastes has 11 chapters. It’s not super linear, it kind of meanders through ideas and images, flowing from prose and poetry, repeating lots of phrases. The most repeated phrase is *“Meaningless”* almost 40 times. It’s a difficult word to translate, in Hebrew: **Hevel**. It’s literally like **vapor or smoke**. You think it’s something you can touch, but you reach out to grasp it, and it slips through your fingers. *Vapor of vapors, vanity of vanities, smoke, nothing but smoke, utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless! What do people gain from all their labor and toil under the sun?* That’s the central question

of Ecclesiastes—he looks around and goes, *What’s the point?* How is this in the Bible? I thought the Bible teaches that *God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives!* I thought we were supposed to have a *Purpose Driven Life!* But there’s something much deeper going on here in Ecclesiastes that’s really important for us to see, even if we’d rather look away.

- The second most repeated phrase in Ecclesiastes is “*under the sun.*” It’s the only book in the Bible that uses this specific phrase. The teacher, Solomon, looks at all human activity “under the sun,” much through his own personal experience, and concludes, *it’s all just dust in the wind.* The pursuit of pleasure, wild-living, wise-living, work, achievement, wealth, even the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom—it’s all grasping for smoke. Time marches on, and soon the earth forgets the place the castle once stood, the next generation forgets the ones who came before, however low you go or high you rise death comes for *all.* **“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless (hevel), a chasing after the wind.” (1:14)**
- *Everything under the sun.* You see, Ecclesiastes is a really unique piece of biblical inspiration because, in essence, God allows the smartest, wisest person who ever lived to take the stage and offer the perspective of *what can be observed within the confines of human wisdom*—life on earth, within the realm of earthly perspective, as far as we can see with our own eyes—in order to show us that human life, human wisdom *is bankrupt apart from God.*
- You think you know what you want, you think you know what will make you happy, you think if you could *finally* check off “X-Y-Z” on your list, *you would finally find peace.* But you get the thing you crave—and the next morning, you wake up, and you’re still hungry, you’re still thirsty, you’re still empty. Or in the immortal words of the greatest rock band U2, “*But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for...*” Because your heart was made for God, by God, and your heart will be restless until it rests in God (that’s Augustine). Thomas Aquinas said that humans possess an infinite desire for beatitude (happiness); things of this world are created good by God, but they are still finite, and they cannot satisfy this deepest longing, it can

only be fulfilled by an infinite God. He said, **“Nothing created has ever been able to fill the heart of man. God alone can fill it infinitely.”** (Aquinas)

- This whole perspective comes from Ecclesiastes. Solomon identified the problem, even if he couldn't fully see the resolution in the Gospel of Christ: **“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”** (Ecc. 3:11-12)
- This is Ecclesiastes—Solomon's TED talk on the Meaning of Everything. It is a depressing reality-check on the futility of life apart from God—that forces us to confront the only real source of hope and life, for which we were made. But the “bad news” about the futility of life outside of God is the foundation for the “Good News” of Jesus, and this hard perspective underlies a lot of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, like when He said: **“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”** (Matt. 16:25-26)
- **God-Shaped Hole**
 - Perhaps more than any others, the youngest generations, like Gen Z, have had to bear the bitter inheritance of “the meaning crisis.” Statistically, these younger folks tend to report the highest levels of loneliness, depression, anxiety—correlating with their higher exposure to technology and social media. They have carried the darkness. But along with it there is hope: because this same generation appears to be quietly waking up to the reality that *maybe if this world has failed them, they need to start looking beyond this world again for answers.* There is a greater level of spiritual hunger and openness in this generation, leading many of them back to Jesus—that's why some are calling this “the revival generation.”
 - Ryan Trahan is a world-famous YouTuber who, like many famous people, had a Solomon-like rise to success. **(Pic - Ryan)** He abandoned his college scholarship to pursue YouTube, hit a million subscribers at 20, and by 23, he was globally known for his channel with things like “the Penny Challenge.” This past Easter Sunday, Ryan released a video called “My Testimony.” It's a 37-minute video of

Ryan playing Minecraft...while explaining his testimony of how he became a follower of Jesus. (**Pic - Testimony**) (I challenge you to find a more YouTube-y example of how weird YouTube is.) He had a tough childhood, with a split home, and a dad who struggled with alcohol. Ryan became a self-made guy who sought redemption through success: he was valedictorian, got a D-I scholarship, and was running a massively successful YouTube business by his early 20's. He was a cynical atheist at the time, but his girlfriend and future-wife was a serious Christian. He liked to ask her hard "gotcha questions," but she'd always give a thoughtful response and leave the door open for him. By 21, YouTube was taking off, he was getting everything he dreamed of, leaving behind the struggles of his childhood—and he told Haley, "*I feel so empty.*" She looked at him, after months of praying for him, and said, "*Ryan, that emptiness in your heart is a god-shaped hole, and you're never going to be satisfied without Him.*" Ryan began a journey of discovering Jesus, that ultimately led him to surrendering his life to Christ. He's often found in interviews talking about how his faith in Christ is the source for all of his joy and all he does. The top comment on his testimony video is this one: "*Ryan I am 17 years old. I am an atheist. I am often confused on what to do in my life. I have attempted suicide twice, but watching your videos gives me so much hope and so much glee. You are such a great influence and such a great inspiration...this video makes me want to change. Makes me want to read the Bible. This was a great video. Thank you.*" Ryan had a God-shaped hole in his heart. And then God filled it. Now God's using him to help do that for others. First, he had to discover that everything else was *meaningless*.

- The wisdom we're going to gain from Ecclesiastes this month is *uncomfortable* but *irreplaceable*: we need to hold the pleasures and aspirations of this life *so loosely* and *so gratefully*, and we need to see that every gift is just a glimpse of the glory that leads us back to the Source. Ironically, this darker perspective on the reality of life *will only make you appreciate it more*. And it can help you to calm down, not take the small things so seriously (like me). Maybe it would do some of us good to walk around our lives and start saying, "vanity of vanities!" whenever we get spun up about something that stresses us out at work or home. Maybe if we did that

more, we'd spend more time turning to the only real source of meaning, and eternity would fill our hearts and our homes a little bit more. *In the end, it's all from Him, it's all for Him, so let it go, and live free.* (Thanks for coming to my TED talk...)