

Catching Smoke: Living Life Under the Sun Part 1

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[0 : 0 0] We are kicking off a brand new series in the book of Ecclesiastes today. How many of you opened up your Bibles this morning and read Ecclesiastes? Anybody?

! Don't worry, we didn't spread out the word about that ahead of time. You didn't miss anything out. It's not a book that we often find ourselves gravitating toward in the Bible. I do encourage each of us to try to find some time each day and as often as possible to get into God's Word.

But Ecclesiastes can often be seen as one of the more difficult books to understand. It can even be seen as depressing at times. And you caught a hint of that in that introductory video that takes direct quotes from the book of Ecclesiastes.

And it's developed this concept of catching smoke, living life under the sun. Smoke is a powerful thing, isn't it? Out here, a big cloud of smoke is not something anybody wants to see, is it?

It can be a scary thing. Fires can do irreversible damage. Where there's smoke, there's what? Yeah. Smoke gets people's attention.

[1 : 1 0] Have you ever tried to catch it before? You ever tried to hold it in your hand? It doesn't work very well, does it? You close your hand, there's nothing. You can't grab it. It seems immaterial.

But smoke is real. You can see it. You can smell it. The harder you try to hold it, the faster it disappears. And if we're honest, life can be like that.

Control can be like that. We try to get a grip on it. We try to catch it in our grasp. We chase meaning. We chase the illusion of control.

We chase security, success, certainty. And just when we think we've wrapped our hands around it, it slips through our fingers. It's exactly where Ecclesiastes begins.

Would you take your Bible with me and turn to the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 1. Turn to the middle of your Bible. You'll see Psalms. Keep going.

[2 : 1 2] You'll see Proverbs. And then you'll find Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is all about this idea of life under the sun. I don't know if you've ever thought about it in those words unless you read them in Ecclesiastes.

Can't say that ever occurred to me that we're living life under this sun. Well, of course we are. It's always up above us, right? Shining down on us until it's nighttime. And then we wake up and there it is again.

So what is unique? What is different about life under the sun? This phrase shows up again and again throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes. It means that life as we actually experience it.

It means our work, the money we earn, our time, our relationships, the joy and the grief, the fulfillment, the disappointment. This is what we experience in our life under the sun.

I'm not talking about heaven. I'm not talking about a theory. Just real life. The teacher. He introduces himself, the author of Ecclesiastes, as the teacher.

[3 : 1 6] Most have attributed this teacher to be Solomon, David's son, king of Israel. And in verse 1, Ecclesiastes says, everything is meaningless.

Verse 2. These are the words of the teacher, king David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem. Everything is meaningless, says the teacher. Completely meaningless.

That word meaningless doesn't mean worthless. Notice that. It means temporary. It means vapor. It means smoke.

Life is real, but it doesn't hold still long enough for you to get your grasp on it. So let's read it together from Ecclesiastes 1. If you're still finding your place, I want to give you a very brief background on this powerful book in the Bible that often goes unread or underappreciated.

Ecclesiastes is a part of the section of the scriptures called wisdom literature. We can gain much wisdom from it. It was written in ancient Israel, likely a few centuries before Jesus was born, during a time of stability in Israel, prosperity.

[4 : 34] And this author refers to himself as the teacher. We normally associate that with Solomon. Some other theories have been proposed, but normally it's accepted that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes.

He wasn't writing this biographically. He wasn't writing this necessarily as a story of his life, but he was sharing the wisdom and the lessons that he had learned from his life.

If you know anything about Solomon, he's considered the wealthiest man who ever lived. He's considered the wisest man who ever lived. And we get to see a little clue of why.

Because God offered him the choice of anything he wanted, and he chose wisdom. And God gave it to him. And then we read in the book of James that if you lack wisdom, you should ask from who? God. And Solomon did that far before James was ever written. So this book is not written from youthful optimism. It's written from experience.

[5 : 35] Ecclesiastes asks us an honest question. What does life really amount to when you strip everything away? All the illusions, all the success, all the control.

What does life amount to? What are you left with? And instead of rushing to easy answers or cliches, it teaches us how to live wisely, faithfully, and humbly under this sun that shines down on all of us.

While learning to trust the God who stands above it. And that's where our video left us. How do we live life under the sun? We look above the sun. So let's dive in.

Verse 1. These are the words of the teacher, King David's son. He ruled in Jerusalem. Everything is meaningless, says the teacher. Completely meaningless. That'll grab your attention, won't it?

If I got up here and just said, Hey, y'all, just want to let you know something. Everything's meaningless. There's no meaning to any of it. Some of you might say, What in the world is he talking about? That's not the shot in the vitamin B12 that I came here for this morning.

[6 : 41] He continues on. What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come, generations go, but the earth never changes. The sun rises.

The sun sets. And then it hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south. And then it turns north. Around and around it goes. Blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea.

But the sea is never full. The water returns again to the rivers. And it flows out again to the sea. Everything is wearisome. Beyond description. No matter how much we see, we're never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we're never content. History merely repeats itself. Anybody ever heard that phrase before? History repeats itself.

Where do you think they got it? It has all been done before. There's nothing new under the sun. Sometimes people say, here's something new.

[7 : 39] But actually it's old. Nothing's ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past. Future generations, no one will remember what we're doing now. And then skip down, if you would, to verse 14.

I observe everything going on under the sun. And really, it's all meaningless. Like chasing the wind. How successful would you be?

Trying to catch up with the wind. How successful would you be? Trying to catch smoke. How do we live life under the sun?

Would you pray with me right now? God, we've worshipped you through song this morning. We've sung of your faithfulness. We've tried to quiet our hearts.

We've prayed. We've given to support your work here. Oftentimes it can feel like another week going by, another Sunday coming and going.

[8 : 47] Going to work. Going to school. Maybe we're facing retirement. Maybe we're facing retirement. Whatever the situation is we find ourselves in.

We're surrounded. By everything being the same over and over. Even in a world that seems to be changing. Our lives often remain the same.

God, you put this book right in the middle of your scriptures to teach us a powerful truth. Where do we find meaning?

Where do we find hope? When it's the same sun shining down on all of us. Lift our eyes above the sun. To the one who can restore the meaning.

The one can restore the hope. Teach us from your word this morning. We'll give you the glory for it. In Jesus name. Amen. Thank you for praying with me. I want to share a couple of truths with you this morning.

[9 : 50] As you look back at Ecclesiastes 1. Down through verse 11. And then again in verse 14. You catch this idea. This theme. That the teacher. Or Solomon. Is trying to express to us.

As a result of looking back on his life. This is what I've learned. I like to find people who have been very successful in their lives. In their careers. Especially me in ministry.

In church. I like to find people who have been doing it for a long time. And seemingly doing it well. And then say. What did you learn? What have you learned through your decades? What is the one thing?

That's such a cliché question. Because oftentimes there's far more than one thing. But often I want to try to find out. What is the big lesson? What's the thing that you've learned? And Solomon is sharing it here.

And it's maybe not what we expect. I've learned that everything is meaningless. Nothing really does it for me anymore.

[10 : 50] It doesn't hold much meaning. It doesn't hold much value. Well we see some ideas why. Why did he arrive at this. What could be seen as depressing conclusion.

We're kicking off a new year. A couple weeks ago he said. What is going to make 2026 any different than 2025 or 2024 or the years that came before it?

What's going to make this one different finally? Let's look. Truth number one. Truth number one.

Trying to control life is like catching smoke.

I apologize for how that seemed to not format correctly. So you'll have to pay attention because I'll tell you what it needs to say. Trying to control life is like catching smoke.

Look down at verse 9 if you would with me. History merely repeats itself. It's all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new.

[11 : 46] And then again down in verse 14. We read it a moment ago. I observed everything going on under the sun. And really it's all meaningless. Like chasing the wind. The Amplified Bible.

And by the way I love to read the Amplified Bible sometimes. It takes the normal biblical text. And then it kind of fleshes out the extra meanings. That can sometimes be implied by some of these words.

You know the Old Testament written mostly in Hebrew. The New Testament written mostly in Greek. And so we don't have this original English text. That we can take and understand. So we have to break down these words.

What did they mean in that original language? And how can we get the full picture? Sometimes it requires more than one word. So when you take the Amplified Bible. You can find that online. If you have a Bible app on your phone.

You can usually find the Amplified Bible there. And it will give you several words. That paint the full picture. Of what the original author was trying to say in the Bible. So when we see this.

[12 : 42] We get this idea of catching smoke. From the phrase. It's chasing the wind. Your Bible might say something similar to that. But it's the idea of chasing something that can't be caught.

Trying to hold something in your hand. That can't actually be held. And this is what trying to control your life. Will leave you with.

Trying to control life. Life is like catching smoke. The teacher doesn't argue. About philosophy here. He points instead at reality.

What he's learned. The realities of his life. The sun rises. The sun sets. The wind will circle around. The streams flow. But the sea's never full. He paints this picture.

That life just. Is on an endless loop. Anybody ever watch Groundhog Day? I'm not in the habit of. Recommending movies up here. All right.

[13 : 42] And so if there's something in there. That shouldn't be recommended at a Baptist church. Then I apologize for that. But I remember the concept. That it's just the same day. Happening over and over again. Does life ever feel like that for you?

It's the same day. Happening over and over again. This is the feeling we get. The picture that's painted by the teacher. Life is on a cycle.

A never ending loop. It's a different decade now. Far different technology than they had in Solomon's time. But you know what hasn't changed? We have the same longings of our heart and

our soul.

We have the same desires. We ultimately have the same needs. Same anxieties. Same fears. We might explain them differently.

But it all goes back to the same root. Problems and needs to be addressed. So the problem is not that life has no meaning.

[14:42] The problem is. We keep trying to control it. We keep trying to ascribe or assign meaning. To something that at its core essence is meaningless.

So how does that look? We will assign meaning to something that should have no meaning.

I gotta live in a nicer house. I gotta drive a nicer car. I gotta make a bigger salary. And we'll assign the meaning or the fulfillment of our souls to these things.

That Solomon who attained it all. said, trust me. Trust me. It's meaningless. It doesn't help you. It doesn't fill that craving.

It will never fill that void. We assume if we do the right things, life will cooperate. Anybody ever been there? Well, if I just make all the right decisions, then everything will fall into place.

[15:47] And sometimes it's not the decision you made was wrong. It's that God is in control.

There is a spiritual battle going on. The forces of evil and the forces of good are fighting against one another.

And oftentimes we're caught in the crossfire. And sometimes the decision you think was the right decision was actually not at the time. Because you don't know it all. You're not God. You don't have all of his wisdom.

And sometimes you don't realize that life is not cooperating. Not because the universe is stacked against you. Not because God has abandoned you.

But because everything in this life is meaningless. And we are assigning way too much meaning to something that in our minds and hearts, controlled and driven by the Holy Spirit, we should be able to see that, no, that's not that big a deal after all.

Yeah, I got sick. Yeah, my body failed me. Yeah, we don't have as much money as we had before. Maybe we're going through a hard time. Maybe we don't know where what we need is going to come from.

[16:59] But that's not what's important. What's important is I am getting to know my maker.

What's important is I am being guided and introduced to the king, the ruler of the universe.

I love what Heather said. God, we're so amazed that you would even have time for us, that you would even think of us. That is what is full of meaning. That's what's meaningful.

That's what will satisfy your soul. So, we lie to ourselves. If we do the right things, life will cooperate. If we plan carefully enough, then the outcomes are guaranteed.

We know nothing in this life is guaranteed. And yet we still try to act like it is. If we manage everything just right, then we'll finally feel secure. In Ecclesiastes, the teacher, Solomon, is teaching us that that's an illusion.

You're tricking yourself. You're fooling yourself. You're trying to control life under the sun, and that's like trying to catch smoke. The same illusion is confronted directly in James 4.

[18:04] James 4 and verse 13 says, Look here. You who say today or tomorrow, we're going to go to this certain town. We're going to stay there for a year. We're going to do business there. We're going to make a profit.

Verse 14. How do you know? How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog. It's here for a little time, and then it's gone.

What you ought to say is, if the Lord wants us to, we will live. We will do this. We'll do that.

Remembering that God is in control of it all.

We are not. And any idea we get that we are in control is an illusion. It's a lie. Trying to control life is like catching smoke. So think about this.

Control looks like strength, but feels like fear. Can anybody testify to that? Control looks like strength. Somebody who seemingly has a lot of control.

[19:02] It looks like they're a strong person. They got it all together. But you know what's going on inside? Fear. What are they afraid of? Somebody who's in control.

What are they afraid of, church? Church, losing control. Because they finally got control. But are you really in control when you're filled with fear?

And so they work overtime. They try to set themselves up to stay in control. We've seen that with leaders of nations, kings, and dictators, and people who would do everything to stay in power. Control looks like strength, but it's actually fear. It promises peace, but it only delivers panic. The more we try to control everything, the more anxious we become.

You know, that's interesting that a church also can chase control. We can confuse predictability with faithfulness. We can look back and say, yeah, this is how we are.

[20 : 14] This is what we do. And it means we are being faithful to God. In a reality, we're just being predictable. Maybe God wanted to lead us down a different path at some point.

Maybe he wanted us to shake things up a little bit. Maybe he wanted us to reorient ourselves back on his mission and his calling for us as a church. But we're stuck in what's predictable.

We can confuse the status quo with being obedient. We can say, well, hey, man, we've been obeying God this way for a long time. In reality, we're just falling back to what's expected.

We're just falling back to the status quo. We can confuse creature comforts with blessings. Man, God's been so good to me in my life. I've got a nice bed to sleep on.

I drive a car with leather seats. I've got AC and heat in my house. Carpet wall to wall. Nobody wants carpet anymore, does it? That used to be the thing. You get big, plush carpeting.

[21 : 10] Now everybody wants hardwood. We can confuse creature comforts with God blessing us for our faithfulness. Now, certainly God has promised to provide, but he never promised what he would provide.

He did promise that he would provide his spirit. He didn't promise that he would provide all the creature comforts that we ever want on this life. And so sometimes when we have them, we redirect that and say, well, see, this is evidence of God loving what I'm doing in my life and loving where I'm going, and he has blessed me with all this abundance.

And we should thank God for what he's provided for us in our life, but we should never confuse being predictable with being faithful or sticking to the status quo with obeying him or just the fact that we have some creature comforts with God pouring out his abundant blessings on us.

God's kingdom never advances through control. It advances through trusting obedience, faithful obedience built on our faith in him, built on our trust in him.

God, even if you take it away, even if you change my circumstances, I will be faithful to you because I've figured out that all that is meaningless. You are the one who provides meaning.

[22 : 26] So direction, not perfection. We've been talking about that for a few weeks now. It starts when we loosen our grip. We've got to loosen our grip.

Back in the fall, we went through a study on generosity and we repeated this mantra over and over again. Maybe y'all can say it with me. Hands open, eyes up.

Can we do it again? Hands open, eyes up. That is an attitude that God is waiting for from you and from me. Say, God, hands open, eyes up.

I will remember where my meaning comes from. I look above the sun. And so everything under this sun is hands open, God. I loosen my grip because I realize that trying to control it is like catching smoke.

So, secondly, eternal meaning cannot be found in temporary things. Eternal meaning cannot be found in temporary things.

[23 : 29] Look back at verse 2 of Ecclesiastes 1. Everything is meaningless like chasing the wind. And then, would you flip over with me to chapter 3 and verse 1, just a couple, verse 11.

A couple of chapters over from Ecclesiastes 1. God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart.

God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart. Do you realize that God has implanted you and me, not just with a conscience, not just with an awareness of our maker, our creator, and the one who wants to be our savior, our friend, our deliverer.

But he has planted this idea of eternity. What really matters in our hearts. And so, that awareness cannot be filled by the things that are meaningless.

That awareness, that consciousness of eternity cannot be satisfied by the things that are not eternal. But we try.

[24 : 45] We do our best. And in middle class America, we're the worst at this. Often, if you've traveled around the world and you've seen poor parts of the world, and when I mean poor, I'm not

even talking about American standards of poverty.

I'm talking about real poverty around the world where they truly have no hope of changing their circumstances. And oftentimes, those people have just accepted, this is our life and we're okay with it.

But this idea of the middle class that's constantly striving to get more, obtain more, improve our standing, improve our bottom line, improve our bank account, save up more for retirement, none of those are bad pursuits.

But they must be kept in their compartment. That at the end of the day, none of this really matters that much. I have a responsibility. Provide for my family. I'm going to do the best I can. I'm going to be a good steward.

But I am going to keep the kingdom of God first and foremost in my mind. I'm going to keep the mission of God first and foremost in my mind. Because that is eternal. The rest of it is not. It doesn't really have meaning.

[25 : 56] So here's where Ecclesiastes turns. This is the critical turn of the book. It doesn't say that life doesn't matter. It doesn't say that work is pointless.

It doesn't say that the joy you experience is fake or false. It says meaning cannot be secured under the sun. Why?

Because God has placed eternity in our hearts. The longing you feel for something lasting, something solid, something permanent. It was never meant to be satisfied by things that fade. Meaning is not achieved by trying harder. You say that again. You don't find meaning by trying harder. You don't.

Meaning is received by trusting higher. It's not by trying harder. It's by trusting higher.

[26 : 56] I trust in God. My Savior. The one who will never fail. It's a song by the way.

I love it. Those are the kind of themes we've got to pump into our heads, pump into our hearts, our souls. Because life under the sun can feel unstable, but it was never meant to be ultimate.

This is exactly the posture that the Apostle Paul calls for in Colossians chapter 3. Colossians 3, Paul is writing one of his letters to those early churches, our predecessors.

The ones on whose shoulders we stand up here in Henrietta, Texas in 2026. We can go back to those early churches and say they started this whole movement. They started this whole thing. And Paul was one of the great teachers that God used to shape these early churches. To show them how to follow him and do his work in this world. So Paul's writing to this one in Colossians.

[27 : 55] He says, since you have been raised to new life with Christ, then set your sights on the realities of heaven. Not on the fantasy of heaven. Not on the myth of heaven or the idea or the folk tale of heaven.

On the reality of heaven. Heaven is real. Where God lives. Where God's going to bring us home to someday. That is real. We don't exactly know where it is. We don't exactly know where it all looks. We can look in Revelation and try to get an idea. A picture is painted and it's going to be beautiful. It's going to be eternal. We're going to be worshiping him. It's going to be a place of abundance and fulfillment and joy. In the presence of God.

So when we set our sights on that. That's going to be our eternity. That's something eternal. And it's real. And that's where Christ sits. In the place of honor at the right hand of God.

Then think about these things. Think about the things of heaven. Hidden. Not the things of the earth. Because you died to this life. And your real life. It's hidden with Christ in God.

[28 : 57] But our real life. Tends to not take up most of our pursuits. It tends to not take up most of our time and our energy. Instead we spend most of it.

Chasing this life. That we died to. Chasing this life that God saved us from. At the end of the day.

We generally come to the conclusion. With Solomon the teacher. That life is meaningless. So I want you to think about this. Trade your earthly dust.

For your heavenly destiny. I try to avoid this word destiny. Because it's been co-opted. It's been abused. And misused. By so many preachers and teachers over the years.

But we do have a destiny. It's eternity with the Father. We have a destiny in heaven. If we have placed our faith in Jesus.

[29 : 57] And God has made us one of his own. Then he promises. What our destiny will be. He says your destiny is eternity. Of joy with me. In my presence.

So don't exchange that. The pursuit of that. With the earthly dust surrounding you. We all came from dust. We're going to return to dust. Maybe a lot of people will be at that funeral. Maybe they won't be. Maybe they'll make a big hoopla. Out of the graveside service. I was conducting a graveside service. A few weeks ago. For a man who served in the military. And the guns were sounded. And they folded up the flag. And gave it to his family left behind. And maybe there'll be a big performance. And a big ceremony. But then. That sound will fade. And the memories will start to fade. And. Back to dust. It will all go. But what is meaningful. What is eternal. What will last.

[30 : 54] Is what was done. With our heavenly destiny in mind. So. So. Despair comes. From trying to find eternal meaning.

In temporary places. This is why the direction of our lives matters. This is why the direction of our church matters. This is why I believe that God.

Pressed on my heart. To give our church the theme of. Direction not perfection. For the year 2026. because we have a choice. We can either join God's mission or we can avoid discomfort.

We can either join God's mission or we can avoid discomfort. Our church finds meaning when we join God's mission. Our church finds meaning when we celebrate life change.

And our church finds meaning when we welcome differences. These are the things God calls every church who names the name of Christ and says, we are Jesus followers.

[32 : 01] This is what he calls us to be. It's what he calls us to do. And so when we do this with our heavenly destiny in mind, then we find meaning at church.

We find meaning on Sundays. We find meaning on Saturday night thinking, man, I can't wait to go back and be with my church family because that's where we join God's mission.

That's where we celebrate life change. That's where we welcome the differences we have and set them aside and prefer others, Christ at the top over ourselves. But instead, we often find ourselves doing our very best to avoid discomfort, doing our very best to preserve our preferences, doing our very best to cling to what is familiar.

And we wonder why we're dissatisfied. We wonder why we don't feel that joy and that life that maybe we used to experience when we came to church. And so we'll blame the music.

We all know Jared is just a problem up here. I tell him that every day. He's a problem. Now we give each other the business in the office. We'll blame the Sunday school class. Well, if that teacher was just more interesting, we'll blame the preacher.

[33 : 20] Look, I know I'm the source of 99% of the problems here, okay? We'll blame whatever we can blame because it's much harder to accept that we're not prioritizing what actually matters.

We haven't done a whole lot to join God in his mission. We see others celebrating life change through discipleship happening or baptism happening or the steps that they're taking to grow closer and follow Jesus more.

But we don't see ourselves celebrating that. We don't welcome the differences. We fight against them. We cling to what is familiar.

So how do we live life under this sun? We look above the sun. We live under this sun by trusting the God who stands above it.

Even when it's uncomfortable, especially when it's uncomfortable. Ecclesiastes begins by tearing down our illusions. Not to crush us.

[34 : 26] Not to ruin our day. But to free us. Free us from the shackles of chasing what everybody else in the rat race is chasing. And what will never provide meaning.

When we stop trying to catch smoke, we finally free our hands to receive life as the gift from God that it is. So we begin this series, we begin this year by asking this question.

How can we live life under the sun? Would you bow your heads with me? Ecclesiastes will help us learn the answer to this. We can't control it.

We can't master it. We can't perfect it. We have to trust God. We have to pursue his kingdom. We have to walk faithfully one season at a time, individually and together as a church.

God, you hear your people. You hear the cry of our hearts right now. We're not lifting our voices loudly, but you hear our hearts calling out to you and God saying, we see this meaningless surrounding us every day.

[35 : 30] We feel it. We try to ignore it. We try to assign meaning and value to something, even though we know it can't fulfill. God, teach us, change us.

