

Stuck Everlasting

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 June 5, 2024

A 2021 study across a dozen countries and over 14,000 individuals found that 75% of people feel *stuck* professionally. 8 out of 10 said they're ready to make a change, but the vast majority say they can't because of the obstacles they face. The researchers went all over the world, talking to C-suite executives, managers and employees alike, ages ranging from 22 to 74.¹

Do you ever feel stuck? You're not alone. Even the king of Israel felt that way. He tells us so in this book. We have just set out on a quest for meaning and purpose with this expert guide that Ecclesiastes calls *The Teacher*. This book is the travelogue that he uses to show us some harsh realities and challenge us to wrestle with what *really* matters. We're told this book is a pointy stick - a cattle prod that drives us out of complacency into truth, despite how uncomfortable that may be.

In these lessons, the Teacher speaks to us from the perspective of a humanist or a secularist² - "not necessarily denying God's existence but trying to make sense of life as though God were optional."³ What he has discovered is that people don't only *feel* stuck, they *are* stuck. In this world, human beings are trapped in a system that ultimately leaves us unfulfilled and forgotten. Buckle up: Tonight's text does not take us along the beautiful Pacific Coast Highway, this route is a drive through the Nevada desert, and the gas gauge is on empty.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 - ²"Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."

We covered this verse last time, but we want to hear the opening line of the Teacher's speech and we also should remind ourselves of what it means. "Futility" (your Bible may have "vanity," or "meaningless."), is the Hebrew word *hevel*. It refers to a puff of smoke.⁴ It can be something that is toxic or something that is uncontrollable or absurd - something that's here for a time and then disappears. You can't grab smoke. You can't build with it or on it. It's there but we can't hold onto it.

The Teacher isn't just a pessimist. Through these chapters, we'll discover he knows more than us, has experienced more than us, and has considered more than us. Derek Kidner rightly notes that Solomon (the author and Teacher of Ecclesiastes) was the "most brilliant and least limited of men."⁵

The bottom line of his many studies was that *everything* is *hevel*. In the Hebrew that is the first and the last word of the Teacher's lecture. He uses it 38 times in 12 chapters.

Ecclesiastes 1:3 - ³What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?

¹ <https://www.oracle.com/no/news/announcement/people-believe-robots-can-support-their-career-2021-10-26/>

² Derek Kinder *A Time To Mourn & A Time To Dance: The Message Of Ecclesiastes*

³ Tim Chaddick *Better: How Jesus Satisfies The Search For Meaning*

⁴ Greg Parsons *Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes*

⁵ Kidner

If the Teacher stopped by for a visit at your job or in your classroom or while you were mowing the lawn, he might say, "What are you working on here?" And then you'd show him the sale you just closed, the paper you just finished after an all-night edit, the sprinkler system you *finally* got working just right. And he'd say, "Does any of that matter? How will that help you when you die?"

You see, after conducting all his research, the Teacher discovered three problems that plague every human life: Time, death, and chance. No one escapes them.

The Teacher says that, in the end, *one day*, you are going to die. And on that day the businesses you built, the degrees you earned, the awards you won, the relationships you maintained, the milestones you reached, *none* of those things will *profit* you as you lie in your casket.

The Pharaohs were buried with their treasure, but it no longer belonged to them. It belonged to the *sand*. And then later to the archaeologists who came and helped themselves to it. Every now and then you'll hear about someone like Sandra West being buried in their Ferrari.⁶ But that car will never drive again. No matter what we attain for ourselves in *this* life, none of it can profit us.

That word *profit* means what is left over.⁷ It's a word the Teacher will use ten times. He's obsessed with finding a *profitable* life. He's looking for advantage. He's looking for net positive. He's looking for a reason why. And he's the *only* Old Testament writer who uses this particular word.

He's also the only one to use this phrase "under the sun." We see it 29 times in this book.⁸ We talked about this last time: *This phrase* cracks the code of Ecclesiastes. *Under the sun* is the field of study. The Teacher is talking about the mortal human experience, disconnected from eternity. *Under the sun* life is hevel. We seem to be trapped in an absurd, meaningless, transient haze.

To begin proving his thesis, the Teacher draws our attention to the natural world.

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

It's not just that times passes. Time and death have partnered together. Generations *die*.⁹ Another one is born, takes the place of the previous one, time passes, then *they* die, too.

"The earth remains forever" makes us scratch our heads. An evolutionist might say, "Well now we know that the sun will run out of fuel in a couple billion years, and that will be that." A Bible-believing Christian would say, "We know the earth isn't going to last forever, so what's this about?"

The point the Teacher wants to get across is that this world is locked into a perpetual cycle that you can't break out of. Linguists explain that what he said there is more like, "The earth remains as

⁶ <https://www.expressnews.com/news/article/sandra-west-ferrari-burial-sa-17852340.php>

⁷ Warren Wiersbe *Be Satisfied*

⁸ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

⁹ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

ever,"¹⁰ or, "the world always stays the same."¹¹ There's never going to be a day where we wake up and the earth decided to spin the other way or not spin at all - a sort of planetary casual Friday.

Ecclesiastes 1:5 - ⁵The sun rises and the sun sets; panting, it hurries back to the place where it rises.

The average American will live just shy of 29,000 days.¹² It begs the question: How many sunsets do you have left? The truth is, we don't know. Because not only are we trapped in a system plagued by time and death, but *chance* is in the mix, too. You may have had your last sunrise. If you're not a Christian, you should think about that tonight. But every time our sun completes his trip across the sky, we've got one less sunrise coming our way. You're going to die one day. I'm going to die one day. And, the morning after, the sun will still rise. That's the cycle. That's the system.

Ecclesiastes 1:6 - ⁶Gusting to the south, turning to the north, turning, turning, goes the wind, and the wind returns in its cycles.

Solomon really was an ingenious discoverer. It seems he knew something of the circular jet-streams of the wind.¹³ In one part of the world, the wind blows from north to south. In another part east to west. We're meant to notice the monotonous, seemingly purposelessness of these activities.

We can chuckle at how even when we think figured out how to harness the power of a force like the wind, so often it ends in a big pile of hevel. CNN published a story last year whose headline began: "*Wind energy has a massive waste problem.*"¹⁴ Another report pointed out that hundreds of thousands of birds are killed by wind turbines every year.¹⁵ We think we've fixed things, we think we solved a problem and we just create 10 more. Why? It's hevel. Chasing the wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:7 - ⁷All the streams flow to the sea, yet the sea is never full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.

I have a bad habit of starting to fill a water pitcher on the sink and then turning to do something else. Five minutes later I realize I've forgotten all about the pitcher and now I have a *pool* in my kitchen. Not so the oceans. They're never *full*.

Israel's famous Dead Sea is land-locked. No outlet. Every day for thousands of years the Jordan has flowed into the Dead Sea, but it's never full.¹⁶ The cycle never ends.

Ecclesiastes 1:8 - ⁸All things are wearisome, more than anyone can say. The eye is not satisfied by seeing or the ear filled with hearing.

¹⁰ Seow

¹¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*

¹² <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/USA/united-states/life-expectancy>

¹³ Ray Stedman *Is This All There Is To Life? Answer From Ecclesiastes*

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/28/world/wind-turbine-recycling-climate-intl/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/green-science/wind-turbines-health.htm>

¹⁶ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

I'm sure many of you have a favorite piece of music. More than a favorite, a piece that *moves* you or arrests your attention. Maybe you've even heard it performed live, at decibels so loud your head hummed afterward. But, after hearing it, you aren't *done* hearing music. What's next in the queue?

You might find yourself saying, "I've seen enough," but that doesn't mean you don't want to see anymore. You just want to see something *else*.

The human experience under the sun is wearisome. We are worn out, like the sun. Oh sure, some people are more cheery about it than others, but tell *anyone* that it's *once again* time for their dental visit, or that they have to go renew your license, and they'll feel like the Teacher in no time.

A person may *distract* themselves, but they can not *deliver* themselves from the realities of this world. The hardships. The unfairness. The goals you couldn't quite reach. Time, death, and chance.

But as we consider these things, we realize this is a *human* problem. The sun isn't *depressed* about its job. Did you know that western lowland gorillas almost never sleep in the same bed twice?¹⁷ They make a new bed for themselves every day. But no gorilla is out there going, "This again..."

But humans are different. We are restless. We feel unfulfilled, stuck, frustrated with the workings of life. Why is it that the earth remains and I do not? Why is it that the meaningless life of a gorilla seems to cause him no worries? Meanwhile I work and strive and struggle just to make it to the end where I die and that's it? The system we're in doesn't seem to match the hopes, the aspirations, the needs we have in the deepest parts of our hearts. It doesn't seem to match what we're made for.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 - ⁹What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰Can one say about anything, "Look, this is new"? It has already existed in the ages before us.

Wait! I have an iPhone. Solomon never had an iPhone. No, but he's not talking about tools and devices. He may not have had an iPhone, but he had other means of communication, of entertainment, of distraction.

Even the laws of physics back up what the Teacher says in these verses. The law of the conservation of mass says that matter cannot be created or destroyed. The atoms that comprise our universe are fixed. This is a significant blow to the secular theory of the Big Bang, by the way.

Devices may be new, but the *problems* of life are the same. The *pursuits* of life are the same. Every generation that has ever lived has struggled to break free of the chains of time, death, and chance. But we can't do it. We've tried inventions, we tried different kinds of societies, we've tried all sorts of cultures with all sorts of values. The cycle is always the same. Nothing new.

¹⁷ <https://nationalzoo.si.edu/animals/news/gorillastory-nest-building>

Ecclesiastes 1:11 - ¹¹ There is no remembrance of those who came before; and of those who will come after there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them.

At work or at school, there was someone who sat at your desk before you and there will be someone sitting there after you. You may make a mark on your company or your community, but, given enough time, *one day* you will be thought of for the last time. *That's* what the Teacher says from his secular, "ground-level" perspective.¹⁸ Life *under* the sun.

Someone might protest, "What about Alexander the Great? What about Hammurabi? What about Shakespeare?" We still remember their names, though it profits those men *nothing*. Give it time. Who among us can name any of the great Incan Emperors? California's first senators? The only three runners in human history who have won two gold medals for the marathon? Can you name your own great-great-great grandmother?

Physical accomplishment or attainment or accumulation are not enough. *Legacy* is not enough. Humans have a need for something more. Why do we care about the meaning of life? Why do people *feel* stuck or unfulfilled? It's because you are a human and humans are made differently. The Teacher will explain that God has placed *eternity* in our hearts.¹⁹ That's the difference. This life, this world with its perpetual cycle, cannot ultimately satisfy. We yearn to break out of the cycle of repetition and disappointment and hevel. We long for something new.

If you're not a Christian, you may not feel the weight of this reality, but it is true all the same. That yearning lurks in your heart. Some are brave enough to say the quiet part out loud.

Pink Floyd sang,

*So you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking
Racing around to come up behind you again
The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older,
Shorter of breath and one day closer to death.*

Maybe you're more of a U2 fan:

*You've got to get yourself together
You've got stuck in a moment
And now you can't get out of it
Don't say that later will be better
Now you're stuck in a moment
And you can't get out of it*

¹⁸ James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:11

Those same respondents who felt stuck at work - 75% of them said they'd be willing to make life changes based on robot recommendations! Human beings are desperate to break free. But we can't. We're looking for meaning. We're looking for answers. We're looking for help. We desperately need to be saved out of the hevel of life.

And so, God broke into our system. Jesus came from heaven - *above* the sun. In some ways He spoke like the Teacher. He once asked a very Ecclesiastes-like question: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"²⁰ But where the Teacher came to the conclusion that everything is hevel, *Jesus* said, "I have door number 2." And He offers us a way *out* of the chains of time, death, and chance. Out of a life where nothing ultimately matters into a life where *everything* matters.

God reveals that when we enter into a personal relationship with Him, when we become His children, His servants, His friends, we receive eternity. Even after this earth finally passes away, we will endure.²¹ And *in* that personal relationship, God does *new* things in your life and in this world.

He makes us new creations and establishes a new covenant with us. He gives us a new heart and new songs so we can walk in newness of life. In the end, He will bring us to live in a new heaven and a new earth.²² This earth, with all its trouble will pass away and all things will be made *new*. *This* world is only here so God can have a backdrop to reveal His love to people and offer them *real* life with real purpose and meaning - a life that lasts forever. A life that isn't forgotten by time, swallowed up by death, or ruined by chance.

Then, as we walk in the newness of life, God tells Christians, "Ok, your mind is going to be set on things *above*, not on things on the earth. You live in this world, but you're not defined by this world, not trapped by this world, not bounded by this world."

Now life is no longer hevel. For the unbeliever, nothing matters. The Teacher will prove it from every perspective. For the Christian, *everything* you do matters. Every experience, every circumstance, every situation, every single thing we do every single day has eternal weight because it is done unto the Lord. Your labor is not done in vain, it's *profitable*. Your future is secure. Your purpose fulfilled because God Himself walks with you to make something new out of your life.

This is the exchange offered to us through Christ. Freedom. Help. Answers. A future. Grace for today and hope for tomorrow. More than a legacy - *eternity*. One filled with rest and joy and rewards and glory.

²⁰ Mark 8:36

²¹ Psalm 102:25-28

²² 2 Corinthians 5:17, Jeremiah 31:31, Ezekiel 36:26, Psalm 98:1, Romans 6:4, Revelation 21:1