Ecclesiastes 1 (1-14) – *Resolving the Ridiculous*

I am indebted to pastor Bobby Jamieson, of Trinity Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. A review of his recent book, *Everything Is Never Enough: Ecclesiastes' Surprising Path to Resilient Happiness*, inspired me to write this message. And where many Bibles use the word" vanity", he uses the word "absurd." And I will use the word "*ridiculous*."

The opening chapter in the book of Ecclesiastes introduces us to two Hebrew words and two Hebrew phrases that are used frequently. And they help to give you an understanding of the basic ideas of the whole book.

The first is found in vs.1. It starts with – *The words of the Preacher.* The word "preacher" is the Hebrew word *Qohelet* (Ko-HELL-et). This is actually the title of the book, "Ecclesiastes" (Qohelet), which means the preacher. And the preacher continues to use this word throughout the book. And this is the pen name of the writer, who identifies himself as "*the son of David, king in Jerusalem*." Traditionally, this is seen as Solomon.

Vs.2 gives us the thesis statement of the writer: *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity*. And the book is an account of how he explores and examines every angle of life. Which he could do because he was a rich and powerful king, and the wisest man in the world.

1 Kings 3:12-13 – *Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days."* Solomon was richer and wiser than anyone else, and so he was in a unique position to address life's main questions though his own life experience. And to pass down his timeless and timely wisdom through the ages. Everyone needs to hear the preacher. He investigates every type of thing people chase after or hide from. He tried it all. But none of it was enough to truly give him a lasting fulfillment. "So, what now?", is the question he finally answers.

And vs.2 introduces us to the heavy and yet healing power of the book using just one word. It is the Hebrew word *hevel* (like "heavy," but HEV-el). The word is used at the beginning (Ecclesiastes 1:2), at the end (Ecclesiastes 12:8), and throughout. And this word is vital to understanding this book. But it has been translated several different ways in our English Bible versions. The ESV, KJV, and NKJV render "hevel" in 1:2 as "vanity." But the NIV and NLT render it as "meaningless." And the NASB, NET, and CSB as "futility." The NET elsewhere renders hevel as "fleeting" (3:19, 6:12, 7:15, 9:9, 11:10). And hevel can be translated literally as "vapor", or "smoke."

All of these words give some idea of what the preacher is trying to convey. But none of them seems to fully convey just what he is getting at. Which is why I am going to use the word "*ridiculous*." It delivers more meaning and application than these other words. Qohelet uses hevel 38 times in 30 verses. Often when describing things that are fleeting, temporary, or transient.

2:13-15 – *Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.* The reality is that life is short, and everyone eventually dies.

2:21 – *sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.* When you die, you can't take it with you.

6:2 – *a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil.* Sometimes, someone else gets to have what you worked for. And success can be stolen.

7:6 – *For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.* Fools fail to realize that living for fun never lasts.

Ok, so we see that the preacher is definitely concerned with how nothing seems to last. But the passing nature of things is not the only thing Qohelet is remarking upon and lamenting. He is also describing how life is a paradox. It is a mysterious contradiction. It is <u>*ridiculous*</u>.

Here is his greater issue: Everything that everyone does to try and be happy, at its core, doesn't really make you happy. It just keeps you chasing after happy. How ironic. How irritating. And as Qohelet says in vs.14 – *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind*. Some versions use the phrase "*chasing the wind* (NET)."

This striving, this chasing after the wind, is the Hebrew phrase "*redifat ruach*" (reh-dee-faht roo-akh / faht sounds like hot / akh sounds like loch, as in loch ness monster). It is trying to take hold of something that is not actually the solid thing you crave. Sounds like a <u>*ridiculous*</u> run, doesn't it?

Here are some examples of that. 1:17-18 – *And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.* The wiser you get, the more you have to deal with foolishness. And the more you know, the more you need to know.

2:11 – *Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.* The more that you do, the more you'll have to do. And the more success you get, the more success you'll need.

4:4 – *Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind*. People want to make their mark. They want to keep up with the competition, or get ahead in life. But winning the rat race just makes you a rat.

6:9 – *Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.* The more you get, the more you want.

And this chase is more than just a pursuit of fleeting pleasures, safety, and satisfaction. The reason that we have to keep "chasing the wind" even if we get a measure of "what we want", is because we never really find fulfillment in it. It can never be enough. And this is because it is a *ridiculous* quest for contentment from things that cannot ultimately give it. Including ourselves. And the reason they aren't enough is not just because they fade away. They aren't enough because you can have them without God. And anything and everything without God can never be enough. But when we find our fulfillment and satisfaction in God, whatever else is enough.

Vs.3 starts Qohelet's quest, and introduces us to the phase "*under the sun*." This is the Hebrew *táchat hashémesh* (TAH-khaht hash-EH-mesh / khaht sounds like hot). It is used more than 25 times in Ecclesiastes. It refers to what we can know through this material world. In other words, it is life considered without an eternal perspective. It is counting on physical life without spiritual life. It is trying to find meaning and purpose without God.

1:9 – *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.* No matter what people try, there is no real hope for lasting fulfillment to be found in the things of this world. They are fleeting. They are ironic. People keep repeating the same *ridiculous*.

4:1 – *Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them*. Without God, there is no ultimate justice. Just never-ending injustice and oppression.

8:17 – *then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out*. You cannot figure God out, and you can't control him, you just need to trust him.

With all his wisdom, wealth, ability, and opportunity, Solomon tries everything. It is a sad journey to realize that simply pursuing anything and

everything is *ridiculous*, and that even if you are somehow able to try everything you can think or dream of, and achieve all you want, and you gain the whole world, it is still like chasing after the wind. But Solomon finds hope, and the preacher finally lets us all know what the result of his quest has revealed. And in the end, he finds that true enjoyment, fulfillment, and satisfaction, and the only way to *resolve the ridiculous*, is by embracing our limitations, and accepting our gifts, as signposts to God himself. God is what your heart truly wants.

Solomon was the wisest man in the world. And the book of Ecclesiastes is the story of his quest for true, lasting satisfaction. He experienced all life has to offer. And he wore himself out studying. But he said it was all just chasing the wind. And at the end of his journey (12:13), he says – *all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*

What Solomon discovered was that the things of this life are more meaningful with God. And yet, those things can never be enough to fully satisfy the redeemed soul. There is no satisfaction in the self. Why? Because your eternal soul hears the eternal call of your eternal savior from your eternal home. But Jesus has made his home, in believers. And in Matthew 5:6, Jesus says, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be* ***satisfied***." May your heart find its home in Christ. Amen.

God is the reason that you feel a longing in your heart that nothing you do seems to satisfy. At least not for long. Maybe, like Solomon, you can just go from one thing to another. But just like him, you'll find the same dead end. Solomon isn't the only one who discovered that this life isn't enough. And there are a lot of good, wonderful, and joyful things in this life. But nothing in this life is enough to satisfy that longing in your heart. No job, no spouse, no children, no career, no fame, or fortune, and no amount of justice, or healing, or freedom, or wisdom, or whatever. You see this all over. Everyone clamors for more, more, more. Even those who are in a sense content have times of loneliness, and distance, and wondering if this is all there is. Even people with everything are still missing something.

And you know all too well that there is something missing. Something you need but you don't yet fully have. But no matter how many people try to find it, it is not of this world. Only a Christian can truly find it. What is it? It is this: Your eternal soul longs for your eternal home. You want God himself.

That is the way God designed you, with a longing for what you cannot yet fully see, but somehow know exists. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says it this way – *he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end*. 1 Corinthians 13:12 says – *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known*. Home is what your heart really wants. Philippians 3:20-21 says – *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself*.

What do you do while you wait? Your need for now is to realize your significance, satisfaction, and security in Jesus. Augustine said – "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you." You live for today by having an eye for tomorrow, an eye for the treasures in Heaven. Otherwise, you'll look to fulfill that longing with the things of this earth. The things of this life are more meaningful with God. But even so, they can never be enough to fully satisfy the redeemed soul.

We all long for more when things aren't going well. But sometimes, you long for more even when things are going well. You know how it is. You've got it the way you want it. Everything is right. Nothing seems out of place. And yet you still feel out of place. Why? Because your eternal soul hears the eternal call of your eternal savior from your eternal home. And Jesus is reminding you that he's coming to bring you to him as home. Forever.

"So, what now?" Listen to the preacher. Stop looking "under the sun" for satisfaction the same way as those who don't know God. Stop "chasing after the wind," and start clinging to the cross. Tell God you've been a fool and ask Jesus to save you. Stop being *ridiculous*. Amen.