



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 1:11

Lesson 1 of 16

2007-08

"Introduction"

TRANSCRIPT

We are beginning a new lesson. We're going to be looking at the book of Ecclesiastes together, and I will be meeting with you tonight and next week, and then we will have a break for the month of August, and then come back together again in the Fall.

I would like for you to mark one passage. I'm going to refer to a number of passages and read them in the context in which they're given in the Old Testament, but there's one in particular that I thought would be beneficial to you and that is Romans 8. And if you would mark Romans 8 we will look at one particular verse written by the Apostle Paul. And now to Ecclesiastes.

You know, in all of the Bible with all the characters, there is not one like Qoheleth. That is an untranslatable title. It means 'the one who assembles'. 'The assembler'. 'The gatherer'. But no one is quite sure how this Qal feminine singular participle can fit into any explanation of this word. The traditional title in English is 'The Preacher', "The Teacher." What we do know is that he is the wisest among men. Some of his sayings come straight out of the book of Proverbs making Solomon, the heir of David and the third King of Israel, the most likely candidate for Qoheleth.

The strongest argument for this, I think, is found in I Kings 8, where the Temple of the LORD is dedicated and there, studded throughout that chapter, is the verbal root 'Qahal' ('to gather', 'to assemble') and it has reference to Solomon being the assembler. And it could very well be that our historian is marking, in a very subtle way, that Solomon is this 'Teacher' of the book.

Of course, also in Ecclesiastes itself, it would seem to point to Solomon. Ecclesiastes 1:12. “I, the Teacher, was King over Israel in Jerusalem.” That would certainly be a very short list of candidates. And also verse sixteen of the first chapter: “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled Jerusalem before me.”

So Solomon is believed to be the most likely candidate and so this book would fill in the gaps of a life that started with so much devotion and promise—And ended in such a shipwreck. I Kings 11:9-10, “The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD’s command.”

This book then, would be a testimony to a rebellious life. You want to know what great gift produces? A great gift absent from a close walk with the LORD? Well, here it is: The book of Ecclesiastes. It is the writing of a very smart, very wise man who looked into life in all of its aspects and comes away empty. Now why is that? When this man started with so much promise? 1 Kings 3: 5,

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you”. Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

The LORD was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.”

He started with such promise! And he shipwrecked. Such gifting; like the gifting given to Samson! They towered over men. These greatly gifted men did the unimaginable. They wasted it on themselves. You know why it's called the Dead Sea? Because nothing flows out of it. Everything is dead. Your great service for Christ; is service for Christ and not for yourself. It is: "...Thy kingdom come". It is: "...Thy will be done on earth". But not Solomon. No sir: His life investments were here; and he had portfolios to prove it:

I Kings 10:26, "Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem."

I Kings 11:1-2, "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.""

He had his portfolios—Gold. Silver. Chariots. Horses. Wives. And he had that great gift. That remarkable gift—And he became soft.

This book is the toll that all of that took. It's a journal of an exhausted man. Desperate for answers he probes like a humanist, but he finds no answers. The tension in the book is that he knows God. He knows him as LORD and Master, but he was a man who had no convictions. Rather than living a triumphant life, he gropes through the years. He pays no attention to his conscience. Rather, he feeds his self-interest. Much like Eli the priest: A good man, a godly man, but a man who spawned worthless sons and left no inheritance.

What a contrast between this exhausted man, Qoheleth, who had lived in self-indulgence, to one like the Apostle Paul, who left it all for the sake of Christ. He tells Timothy in his last epistle, II Timothy 2: 3-6, 'endure hardships like a good soldier, compete in the campaign of life like a good athlete, be a hard worker like a farmer'. And a voice full of hope; that was Paul, (vs 8): 'Remember Jesus Christ of the seed of David, resurrected from the dead', he said; chained in a dungeon to die.

Full of hope. Full of joy. Full of peace. Why? Because he wore three-piece suits and all of his bonds were in the bank? No. Because you see, Rome couldn't touch him. They could chain him. They could torture him. And they could eventually kill him. But they couldn't defeat him. And he tells Timothy, 'I've won. I've run the race. I finished the course. I broke the tape. I kept the faith.'

The amazing thing about Ecclesiastes?—It's never quoted in the New Testament. And that's why I wanted you to mark a spot in Romans 8, because there I think we have an allusion to its message. Here's what Paul says in Romans 8:18-20a, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to *frustration*..."

Now the word translated, '*frustration*', is the word that is translated '*meaningless*' in the Septuagint, the Old Testament Greek version. *Meaningless; Vanity*. The motto of Ecclesiastes. That's the subject of which the Teacher is going to probe for us.

You want to know why you must study this book even though it's not New Testament theology? Because it is a powerful penetrating mind examining life as it is; 'under the sun'. What does that phrase 'under the sun' mean? It means strictly horizontal. Never vertical. No New Testament doctrine here. It's all about the here and the now. It's the present moment. And if you don't understand that from the start, it will make no sense to the Christian mind. I'll give you an example.

New Testament theology says 'absent from the body is present with the LORD'. The moment that you die in Christ you are in the presence of Christ. That's the Apostles' teaching. But in this book, life 'Under The Sun', our Teacher says in chapter ten, verse fourteen, '...No one knows what will happen—who can tell anyone what's going to happen after him?' So, life examined 'under the sun' is only 'life' examined in a limited way. The here and now. The tick of a clock. The moment. What you and I must know in order to understand our Teacher is that God is sovereign. That's what we need to know. And as we make our way through the book, we need to continue to remind ourselves that God is absolutely sovereign,

and He rules His creation by an all-wise providence. If you don't know that, those two great truths, this book will confuse you.

Because you see, as he will tell us, life will appear as if God has no interest in us. So much of life just appears to be random. Righteousness just appears 'under the sun' to have no advantage over wickedness. And that's part of wisdom literature. It's examining the here and the now. The tick of a clock. The moment. A wisdom Psalm, Psalm 73:13, Asaph said, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure; in vain I have washed my hands in innocence." Many times, our Teacher will tell us that the wise and the fool are both in the same boat and certainly, in the end, both will die, and both will be forgotten, and 'under the sun' everything seems to be even-stein. No advantage to anyone. But before we begin we need to know that although that's the teaching of this book, it is not the teaching of the Bible. That's where this man got soft, and he didn't think through all of life. What he tells us for eleven chapters is that nothing is really important. It's all '*meaningless*'.

But in the end, at the very end, to our surprise he tells us everything is important. Everything. So much so, says the Apostle, 'we even bring every thought into conformity with Christ' (2 Cor 10:5). The smallest details of life are important.

I want to make note of a couple of keywords or phrases we will encounter as we go through the book. We've discussed the term 'under the sun'. It's used in this book twenty-nine times. It will be helpful to know the term *meaningless*. And if you grew up with a King James Version you're familiar with the word *vanity*. Its use of this word is in thirty passages. Throughout the book he will specify a number of areas of life and argue that they have no '*value*', but more about this word in just a moment.

Also, let's say something from the beginning about Wisdom: Skill: 'A skill for living'. That is the best translation and understanding for 'wisdom'. Let's think of it broadly as: 'A life that ultimately benefits man and pleases God'. That's the skill for living.

Now for our lesson tonight I want to look at verses one through eleven. The framework and the prolog to the book. And I will be reading from the NIV, so your translation might be different.

The words of the Teacher, son of David, King in Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”
What does man gain from all of his labor
at which he toils under the sun?
Generations come, 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 full 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.
There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered by those who follow.

Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11

The first verse opens with the superscription. Now a superscription is like a title page to a modern book. It tells us the type of subject matter, the author, and the date of the book. For example, you began a study in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 1:1, “The proverbs

of Solomon son of David, King of Israel...” The similarity here may be another subtle way of identifying Solomon as Qoheleth, the Teacher.

Notice the term ‘*words*’ (‘Debar’, (Heb)). Translated ‘word’, can also mean a ‘*thing*’, ‘a *fair*’, or an ‘*event*’. Here, it is a reference to the written revelation of God, and it comes in the form of ‘*words*’. That’s why the ministry of Believers Chapel will make you a student of the Word of God.

Now I know I’m talking on a touchy subject when I mention music, but I’m a guest so I’m going to say what I really believe as a guest. Music is fun. I love music. Music has its proper place. But I’ve been to all the churches. I’ve been to a number of churches in Oklahoma. I’ve been to churches in Illinois. So, I’m a world traveler now. And I have been to large churches and small churches. And I have seen all forms of ministry. And what’s current today in evangelicalism is lots of music. Stand up, sit down, sing, sing, sing.

But the emphasis here; here at Believers Chapel; this is where I grew up. This is where I grew my faith in the ‘70’s under this ministry. At this lectern. At that pulpit—The emphasis here is the Word of God. That is the ministry. Because the Word of God by the resident power of the Holy Spirit that has regenerated your heart and mind and that is alive in your life, that Word with that Spirit will change you. It will change your mind. It will make you a new person, created in Christ Jesus. I am committed to that. I am committed to the Word because I was taught right here that that’s what changes lives: And it changed my life right here.

Very interestingly, The LORD commanded Peter to “feed My sheep”; that is, to disseminate the Word. The elders at Ephesus were told; ‘You are to watch over the flock with Biblical doctrine; with teaching; with correction. You are to feed the sheep’. That is the Christian ministry. John 8:31-32, “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will *know* the truth, and the truth will set you free.”” Listen to that order again: We are to *know* the truth in order to be set free. You see, you must ‘*know*’ in order to live. That is the great ministry of this church. That’s what it’s engaged in. Not great crowds, and not greatly popular, but that’s what changes lives.

I can remember S. Lewis Johnson. When he came back in March 1977 and he said, "We are not interested in numbers. We are interested in depth." And I think that's true of the ministry and the elders' sentiments today. So, you want to become a student of the Word? Be a student of the Word and then you live.

Now, verse two. 'Vanity of vanities. Meaningless. Completely meaningless. Everything is meaningless.' What's the Teacher saying? He's saying that life is a wisp of vapor. It's the nearest thing to nothing. The sad fact is that this is his view of his entire life. Notice what he does here. He doubles and then redoubles the term. First in the singular, then in the plural. Like 'song of songs', (meaning the best song); or 'Holy of Holies', a reference to Exodus 26:33. What is that? It's a twenty-by-twenty space; but a space like no other on the entire planet. Because in that twenty-by-twenty space was the Spirit of God upon the earth. The 'Holy of Holies'.

In other words, to repeat something in the singular and then move to the plural, it means that it's '*meaningless*' to the n^{th} degree. The Hebrew word *meaningless* here means '*breath*', '*breathe*', or '*vapor*'. And of this word's use in the Bible, over half are found right here in the book of Ecclesiastes. Often this word is used to characterize idols of the nations that did not know God. In Jeremiah 16:19: Here's the prophet, "O LORD, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress, to you the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, "Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods..." And now listen for this word, '*meaningless*' (But here in Jeremiah 16:19 it's translated differently. It's translated as *worthless*. Listen.) "Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods... (and here's the word '*worthless*') ...worthless idols that did them no good." That's the idea of the word. '*Meaningless*'. '*Worthless*.' That is the Teacher's view of life. That's his starting point: Life 'under the sun' is '*worthless*'; it's a *vapor*. Reality as we know it, or as it should be, is '*worthless*'. And what's he saying? He's saying something is terribly wrong with life, and he draws his conclusion quite firmly and he's ready now to spell it out and to prove his point.

Verse 3. Notice he asks, 'What gain?' Or 'what profit?' He's actually using a business term here. The only use of this word in all of the Old Testament is found right here, in this book, nine times; and it comes from the root of the word '*to remain*'. What is profit? It is what

remains after expenses. That’s the idea. Very interesting that our Teacher and Christ really connect with the same idea. Christ’s fair question, Mark 8:36, ‘What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’ Here the Teacher has the same thought. You spend your life going to school, finding a job, laboring, and what do you have to show for it?

Chuck Colson not long ago was being interviewed. He and his wife had recently moved to Florida into a retirement community; and here are his observations. Most of the people are very unhappy, he tells us. They’re angry with their children for they have disappointed them for one reason or another. They’re overweight and very unhealthy. They eat and drink too much, and they cuss incessantly. Colson, who is still very active in his ministry of prison fellowship asks, “Is this what we’ve worked for? Is this really the golden life?”

Back to verse 3, notice the word ‘*toil*’; translated as ‘*work*’ or ‘*drudgery*’, has a negative connotation. In Numbers 23:21, the NIV translates it as ‘*misery*’. So when he asks the rhetorical question in vs3, ‘What gain for our toil?’, he answers his own question in Verse 4. Basically, he tells us that life does not reward us. That’s his conclusion. That is as it appears in life ‘under the sun’. Nothing really changes here except time. We’re all growing older in the midst of apparent activity; and yet the earth remains virtually the same.

Our church father, Jerome, states the irony of this verse when he says, “What is more vain than this vanity? That the earth, which was made for humans, stays: But humans themselves, who are to be the lords of the earth, suddenly dissolve into dust and become the earth?” We’ve carved the faces of our Presidents on mountains: Jefferson. Lincoln. Roosevelt. Washington. But where are those great men today? The rock remains, but the men are gone. And the Teacher says, ‘There’s something terribly wrong here. Life is flawed.’

Observe the verbs ‘*come*’ and ‘*go*’. Verse 4, “Generations come and generations go...” Who were those who went before us? What did they say? What did their voices sound like? What were their personalities like? When you die, you’ll only be a memory to those who loved you and for those who knew you. And when those people die, you will be forgotten entirely. That is why he says life is so meaningless.

Now to amplify his point, he will begin with a number of illustrations. The first, the **sun**. Verse 5. It rises and sets as a pattern each and every day. The seasons of the year are determined by our rotation around the sun, but it is predictable. It’s all basically the same.

David in Psalm 19: 5 described the sun as a *‘bridegroom’*. Remember? Those King James words, “...as a bridegroom coming out of his chambers...” like a champion. Rejoicing to run the course. But here’s the idea. The course remains the same. The word *‘hurries’* is literally the Hebrew word *‘to pant’*. Psalm 119:131, “I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.”

Now if you have a dog and you walk your dog you know what this word means. All you have to do is pull out that leash and your dog instantly knows what’s going on. And he can’t wait to get hooked up and to run. And then he can’t wait to run again. You show him that leash and he’s ready to run again. That’s the idea. The sun goes across the sky and it can’t wait to get back again. It doesn’t rest. It doesn’t sleep. It doesn’t stop. It just keeps going. That’s the idea. And it drove this thinking man crazy.

Verse 6. The second illustration: The **wind**. The idea here is the same as verse five. It gives the appearance of great commotion, but in effect it is just going in circles. It stays on its course just like the sun. Notice the five verbs here; *“blowing, turning, round and round, returning’*. All acting as participles to tell us it’s just one big circle. That’s the wind.

Verse 7, our third illustration: The **waters**. The waters tell us that they’re always just going in a circle. Evaporating, condensation, rain, streams, into the ocean. It’s just a big circle. Nothing changes. It appears different, but nothing really changes.

Verse 8 sums up his observation of the earth, saying, “All things are wearisome...” The sun. The wind. The waters. Nothing comes to a conclusion in the cosmos. It’s all the same. Now what does this do to the ‘man with a powerful mind’? Well, it makes him weary; ‘I solve a problem, only to find another one waiting for me.’

I spoke with two college coaches, Division I college coaches. Both in different sports. They had achieved the height of their profession. They had won the national championship. The first was a non-Christian. And I asked him how he felt at this moment to be number one? And he said without pause, "We just have to keep it going." See? There’s always another season. There’s always another game. The Teacher says there’s a weariness to that.

The second coach I asked the same question. This man a committed Christian. I asked, "How does it feel right now to be the number one team in all the land?" And he

said without hesitation, "It doesn't mean a thing. All people want to know is who will win the big one next year." 'Meaningless. Meaningless, says the preacher. It's all meaningless'.

Verse 9. "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; (*because*) there is nothing new under the sun."

Verse 10. How can we say that there's nothing new 'under the sun' when people are today making claims to having created or discovered a matter for the first time? Technology. Look at all the new things. But you see, man is basically the same. Man curses God in the hot sun. Man curses God in the air-conditioned room. Man stays the same. Over twenty-five years ago Haddon Robinson preached in this same building on the book of Ecclesiastes, and he said this. "We've made much progress over the sickle of Ruth, but we've made no progress on Ruth." People are just the same.

In verse 11: 'Those who follow us will not remember us. Just like we don't remember those who came before us.' A couple of years ago I walked into a restaurant in Columbus, Ohio and sat down in a booth: And next to me on the wall was an aerial photograph of the Ohio State stadium; packed. It was a picture taken in 1947. And it was the Ohio State-Michigan game. And as I looked at that picture, I thought, 'all of that energy'. Those players on the field, all the sacrifices that they made to get there, to be on that field that day. And all the people that traveled great distances not only in Ohio, but from Michigan as well. What were those people like? What did they think? What did they have to say? And then I thought; '1947: Most of those people are probably gone. I even thought, I wonder if God could just show us a picture of how many are still alive in that stadium? How many dots would there really be?'

You know, I wouldn't even know the score of that game had not the plaque on the wall told me. Didn't mean anything to me. I wasn't even born in 1947. Didn't affect my life. And yet there at that time and at that moment it was a great game filled with energy. Filled with pomp. Filled with ceremony. It was a big deal on that day, in that hour, at that time. But you know what? In the scheme of things: 'Meaningless, meaningless, meaningless. All so meaningless.'

So, let's consider this thought: When you study this book of Ecclesiastes, you will not profit yourself one thing in regards to your relationship with Christ. It won't teach you about walking in the Spirit; the atonement of Christ; the resurrection of Christ... Furthermore it just will not teach you about your daily walk and fellowship with Him because there's really no New Testament ideas here.

But here's what it will teach you. And here's what it will teach you with great power and authority. It will teach you how to look at life. To really examine it for what it is. So, then you won't have to run down so many dead-end streets thinking you've missed something, for here is a man that did it all: And he ends as an exhausted person.

You know, that's why Christ came. That's why Jesus Christ the God-man came to earth. Not only to save our souls, but to set us free from ourselves; so that we're not only going to be saved in the future but we're saved daily as well. Day by day. From our great enemy—ourselves. The attractions of the world, all those things that charm us most, He saves us from.

Now I preach to you the book of Ecclesiastes. But I tell you of Christ and the power of His resurrection; and the mercy and grace of God that extended Himself from heaven for the sins of sinners. My friend, if you're down one of those cul-de-sacs and you have no way out—turn to Christ. He is the torch. He knows the way out of the darkest cave. He will set you free. And He is a great and grand savior that will change you and make you like Himself. I offer you tonight Christ, and the power of His resurrection in you, the life of the believer. May God give you the grace to respond to Him in the quietness of your heart.

Let's pray:

Father, we're so grateful to be together under the ministry of the Word of God at this place that is so very special to me. And I pray that you will use your Word in a very, very meaningful way in the hearts and minds and lives of each individual here.

I pray for their children. There's no wisdom with children, LORD. They have to go out and they have to test these things, and we worry so for them. We ask that they would not spend any time in the wicked places, but would walk closely with You.

O God, save our souls. Renew our hearts that we don't become Soft; Self-indulgent; Self-centered; Egotistic; Greedy; Hungry only for what makes pleasure for us. Save us; save us by Your grace; save us by Your Word; but save us to the end that Jesus Christ, the great God, might forever be glorified as the remnant encircle Him and give Him thanks and praise forever and ever. In Jesus name, Amen.

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