

“Five Takeaways From a Vain Book”

Special Edition

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Rev. Ted Wood

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Ted: Don, would you take us to the throne of grace? *(Music)*

“Lord, You have been our dwelling-place in all generations. You return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O child of man.’ For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood. They are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. For all your days pass away under Your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty, yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone and we fly away. So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”

Transcriber’s Note: From Psalm 90.

Ted: In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Men: Amen.

Ted: I start nearly every morning with prayer and Bible reading and meditation and journaling, as I’ve shared with you. And I journal what’s been happening in my life and what thoughts the Scripture strikes me with. I may have read maybe a couple verses or maybe an entire chapter. It just depends on what speaks to me at that time.

Transcriber’s Note: Temporary interruption; the mike was not on.

Ted: Sorry, Sig; I had a great start. *(Laughter)* Thank you, Sig. Do you think it’s on now?

Sig: I think it’s on.

Ted: Good. Sometimes I go back and read through my journals. And the primary thing that I’ve learned from reading back, years back, (and the journals I’ve kept go back to 1986), the interesting thing that I find is this. *“Do not be anxious about your life. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”*

I’ve found that in all the things I’ve written about—work-related, family-related, faith-related,—I’ve found that all the things I worried about and was anxious about, almost nothing happened. And the things that did happen turned out for my good.

I’ve used this example in the past about the time I got fired from the University of Pittsburgh. It’s very hard to get fired from Pitt. You really have to have gotten on the wrong side of the wrong administration. Well, I got fired in 1995. And it seemed like it was the end of the world. And within a month or two I had more income coming in than I had previous to that. And at the moment it seemed like the end of the world. But indeed it was the beginning of a new world, because that’s when I started my own business. I wish I could say I started my business because I had such great foresight. But it was because I was desperate to put food on the table. *(Laughter)*

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A year ago I went back and looked at over ten years of journaling. And I surveyed the Bible readings that I had done in that ten-year period, because I just take a book and I go through that book. And then when I’m finished with that, I go on to another book.

And I found that in that decade I had read the book of Haggai, Mark, and 1 and 2 Timothy four different times. But I found, to my shock, that I had never read in the last ten years, and studied and meditated on Revelation, Numbers, which I’m doing now!—that’s penance for years of sin!—(*Laughter*) and Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books of the Bible, along with Proverbs, Job and the Song of Solomon. It may or may not have been written by King Solomon. I just can’t seem to find any consensus on that. In the book of Ecclesiastes the writer calls himself “*the Preacher, the Son of David, king in Jerusalem*”, and that could be several different people.

But that’s not the main thing I want to talk about, because the book begins with the words “*Vanity, vanity, all is vanity! Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher.*”

Now the word *vanity* is translated by the Hebrew word *haddell*. And it means in concrete form “a mist or a vapor or a mere breath.” It’s as if something is just fleeting or elusive.

So it’s not so much to go along with Carly Simon’s song. “You’re so vain! You probably think this song is about you.” That’s not the kind of vanity they’re talking about. They’re talking about a vanity of something that has no substance and is like a mist or a breath.

So with this happy thought I dove into the book of Ecclesiastes in September and October of this year. And I came to the conclusion that the Preacher, that is the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, is giving his best shot at the nitty and gritty of life and living, his understanding of how things work, and his interpretation of the good, the bad and the ugly. The Preacher uses expressions like “*I applied my heart to weep and search out. I saw. I perceived. I thought. This is what I found. All this I observed. I said in my heart.*” And in the book he begins with the words, “*The words of the Preacher.*”

So the Preacher expresses part of the truth because he’s searching for it himself. He expresses part of the truth, but not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He ends up in his final analysis, as he’s talking about life and living in the time that we have, as it said in Psalm 90, as it said in the prayer that I read you that I prayed this morning, Psalm 90, if we make 70 or even 80, that during that time he ends up without hope and God beyond this life.

The Preacher sounds like Paul’s reminder to the Ephesians before they knew Christ. And these are a number of reminders that Paul gives us as to what we were like before we came to know Christ. In Ephesians he writes, “*Remember that you were at one time*”,-- that is, before you came to Christ,-- “*remember that at one time you were separated from Christ, having no hope and without God in the world.*”

But even with this kind of dreary and dark understanding, I found Ecclesiastes very encouraging, because its words reminded me of how absolutely clueless I was before I came to know Christ, and how critical it is to be in Christ, to be born again and to know Him. And often we take these things for granted. But if you meditate on the 12 chapters

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of Ecclesiastes, you’ll come out with a whole understanding of what this world has to offer in the time you have.

So here are five takeaways or reminders from Ecclesiastes, conclusions that I would come to when trying to figure out things on my own. Remember, the Preacher keeps saying, “This is what I thought. This is what I observed.” It’s what he’s thinking about. It’s him trying to figure it out—left without hope and without God in the world.

So the first takeaway is this. *When I was without hope and without God in the world, life and living had no purpose or meaning beyond death.* When I’m without Christ, without hope and without God in the world, I have no meaning in life beyond death. All life is like a vapor or a mist or a breath, here today, gone tomorrow.

Now this sounds very much like many of the modern materialists. The only reality is matter and there is no God. And many scientists, for instance, hold to that position. They really don’t know what happens after death. But all they know and can be sure of is the matter that makes up the world.

There is a very famous and well-publicized astrophysicist, Neil DeGrasse Tyson. And he says, *“We are atomically connected to all atoms in the universe. We are figuratively merely stardust.”* So as far as this man is concerned, and many others in that field, who you are is ultimately just dust or stardust.

You remember Carl Sagan. And this was his take on it. *“Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us.”* And he was pointing to the earth. *“On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived here on a mote of dust suspended on a sunbeam.”*

So in fact, if you look at what this life has to offer, you’re going to be without hope and without God. That’s the first takeaway, that there is no purpose or meaning beyond death.

The second takeaway is that *when I was without hope and without God in the world, I really was, in fact, forgotten, a nobody, as if I had never existed.”*

Participant: You have a question over here.

Ted: Is there a question? Yes?

Participant: Just a comment. I find it interesting that Carl Sagan uses the terms “saints” and “sinners.” He was an atheist.

Ted: Yes. Well, for him, because we’re just stardust, it really doesn’t make any difference, does it?

Participant: Right.

Ted: You’d have to get down and figure out what was important and what was not important then. Thank you, Don. So the second takeaway is that when I was without hope and without God in the world, I was in fact forgotten, a nobody, as if I’d never existed. Ecclesiastes 1 says that *“there is no remembrance of the former people, nor will there be*

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any remembrance of latter things yet to be among those who come after.” You and I are just very easily forgotten. And in a short time you’ll be forgotten forever.

I love going through cemeteries and walking because there’s no traffic. And the Mount Royal Cemetery On Mount Royal Blvd. Up in the North Hills in Shailor is a great place to walk. There are a lot of old tombstones in that graveyard. I see funny combinations of things. For instance, I see the Easter bunny put alongside of a cross on a tombstone. That always seems to be a great contradiction to me. *(Laughter)* But nevertheless, they have tombstones that say, “Together forever,” or “forever in our hearts,” or “never forgotten. Those things are simply not true. *(Laughter)*

I looked this up and I found that since the beginning of modern man there have been 106 billion humans that have lived on earth—106 billion humans. We have about six or seven right now. All forgotten—if not now, very soon.

Just to think about this and bring this to a point, do you know about famous Presidents? Do you remember William McKinley? Do you know much about him?

Participant: He was assassinated.

Ted: He was assassinated, right.

Participant: He lived in Ohio.

Ted: What?

Participant: Wasn’t he from Ohio?

Ted: No. That was James Garfield.

Participant: Well, we know that.

Ted: Yes, but that’s another one. *(Laughter)* What do you know about James Garfield?

Participant: He was a cat.

Ted: What? He was assassinated as well. Do you know that if you study both of those men, I can mention that, and especially to those people who are millennials, and they have no idea who I’m talking about. But the fact of the matter is that if you study the history of those men in their time, Garfield was the early 1880s, and McKinley, I think, was what?

Participant: 1898.

Ted: Thank you very much. Excellent! This man’s a good man. *(Laughter)* They were considered saints. Garfield was considered the solution to the problem of the restoration of the South and the adversity between the North and the South. He was looked to as a great savior for this country. And when he died there were wonderful eulogies written about him.

The same thing is true of McKinley. If you go into antique shops today, you can find plates that are engraved with his image. And they will say things like “He’s almost a saint” at that time. Yet I mentioned him and you didn’t know that, did you? At that time they were considered the greatest thing since sliced bread. But they are forgotten.

You know, in fundraising we have a joke. After I’ve finished a major fund drive, at the victory celebration people, the various leaders in that campaign, will get up and talk about and say, “Ted, we couldn’t have done this without you.”

Fast forward six months after the campaign. “How did Ted do?” “Yeah, he was helpful.” *(Laughter)*

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I’m not lying. These are true incidents. A year after that, “Hey, what was the name of that consultant that came in?” (*Laughter*) You know, when I look back, it wasn’t worth the fundraising. We could have done this ourselves. (*Laughter*) Gone, forgotten, as if you never existed.

Ecclesiastes 9 says, “*There was a little city with a few men in it. And a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege walls against it. But there was found in the city a poor wise man. And he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembers who he is.*”

The third takeaway. *When I was without hope and without God in the world, this life’s pursuits and pleasures, even those that are God-given, were as a speck of nothing.* And we think that the pleasures and the pursuits that we have today, even ones that are God-given, have great meaning.

Work is God-given, says the Preacher. And he says, “*I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful, and to do good as long as they live, and that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God’s gift to man.*”

So you’ve got a job to do. You’ve got meals to eat, fellowship to have. This is the gift. But the gift ends up having no substance or meaning.

And he says this in Ecclesiastes 2. “*Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that 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.*”

So you say, “I’ve been given a job to do by God. He’s given me a task.” And yet, unless God is the One that carries that on beyond you, he says it is all a striving after wind, and that there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

There is always momentary pleasure in our work, always momentary pleasure. But then I find that once you finish the dishes, there are more dishes to do. And when the grass has been cut, there’s more grass to be cut. And when the leaves come down, I’ve got to rake them up, and now there are even more. In fact, this morning I found in my driveway this morning two major limbs that had fallen in the driveway. So I have to worry about that. Things are never done.

Ecclesiastes also tells us that wealth and possessions are God-given. In Ecclesiastes 5 it says, “*Everyone to whom God has given wealth and possessions, and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is a gift of God.*”

But what is the outcome of enjoying wealth and possessions and toil? Ecclesiastes 2 tells us what the Preacher said. “*I made great works. I had also great possessions. I also gathered silver and gold. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil that 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.*”

Toil, work—God-given. Possessions, wealth—God-given. But if God does not guarantee that beyond this life, there is no meaning to it at all.

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The fourth takeaway. *When I was without hope and without God in the world, more wisdom and knowledge added nothing to my eternal life.* He writes in the first chapter. *“I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. For with much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”*

You know, I have a friend who is always very keen on self-help books. They’re reading self-help books all the time. They read them so assiduously that they actually sit down and not only underline and highlight sections in those books, but they also have a notebook that they keep notes from those self-help books. So the book is there on one side and the notes are on the other, seeking to apply and make a difference in their lives. I will tell you that that person is no happier than the day he started reading them, and just as frustrated and angry about life as that person ever was prior. So all those self-help books don’t do any good.

Not only is seeking after wisdom vexing and sorrowful, but it makes no difference in the end. He writes in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes. *“I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.”* Okay, that’s good; more gain in wisdom than in folly. *“Then I said to my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will also happen to me. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is a vanity.”*

The fifth takeaway. *When I was without hope and without God in the world, I could get no satisfaction.* I have desires. *“The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income. This also is a vanity. All the toil of man is for his mouth, but his appetite is never satisfied.”*

In this life you will work and strive. And if that’s all there is, there’s going to be no satisfaction at all. I believe that those folks, and maybe yourself to a certain extent, who don’t think about how vain and passing life is, fool themselves. They’re deceived in thinking that the momentary satisfactions are going to be eternal. And they aren’t.

And here’s another one, too, that you get no satisfaction in: *justice*. I believe that the desire for justice and fairness is one of the great psychological forces. You hear it in the political world quite a bit—equal pay, these kinds of things. We’re looking for fairness, we’re looking for justice. And some of us would say that those political issues, those who agitate for equality and this kind of thing, that they’re down the wrong track.

But just try to take away from our own personal lives some of the things we think we’re due. You know, it came to a place in my life where I always wanted to be affirmed by my mother. I finally decided that was never going to happen. My mother was never going to be satisfied with my performance. It was always not enough. And so I actually said, “I have to give her up. I have to let her go. I can’t look to her to give me what I want.” That was an injustice in my life, and I had to give it up in order to move on.

So actually, (and at one time I was embarrassed to say this), when she died it was a relief, because that meant that I didn’t have to look anymore for her to satisfy what I wanted from her that I was never going to get.

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And then, after she died, I got to appreciate her more, because I could never worry about her trying to satisfy me, because she couldn't at that point. And I had to actually take her on as she was.

“The righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.” Ecclesiastes, the eighth chapter. Are you all kind of feeling good about things now? Are you happy? *(Laughter)*

Okay. What is the Preacher's advice in a life of vanity, vapor, mist and a breath? Well, first of all, *God has the final say no matter what man does. “I perceive that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it so that people fear before Him.”* God endures, I don't. That's the first point. *“The LORD gives and the LORD takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”* It's just the way it is according to His will.

It's interesting. I got into a conversation the other day with a woman who is a Christian. And I respect her. She comes from the South. She's an African-American woman. She's the first person in her family to get out of high school and go to college.

And we were talking about abortion. And she says, “Well, I wouldn't do it. But I can't tell others what to do.” You've heard this before.

And we pressed that hard. I pressed that hard with her. In the end she said, “Well, we'll just have to agree to disagree.”

And I said, “No, Mary. We've got to keep going with this conversation.”

And in the end she said, “Well, you know what? It just seems unfair that women were made to bear children.” *(Laughter)*

And I said, “Well then, you've got a problem with God or Mother Nature, or wherever it comes from. You've got a problem with the way you are.” And she understood that this was a foolish thing for her to say, because she kind of chuckled when she said it. But I think a lot of folks say, “It's not fair. I'm the one who has to bear children.” Well, you know, men, it's not fair that we all get killed in wars.

So it was interesting, this thing about fairness. We just want it in the worst way and we never get it, except in Christ. So that's the first thing with the Preacher's advice. God has the final say, no matter what man does.

The second thing is that *God will judge you for your sins*. This is another very happy thought. *“God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”*

The third thing is *do the best you can with what you've got in the time you've got*. That's the third piece of advice. Do the best you can in the time you've got with what you've got. *“I perceive that there is nothing better for men but to be joyful and to do good as long as they live, also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man. Also everyone to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the joy in his heart.”*

That's an interesting statement. He will not much remember all the things he takes pleasure in the toil he's done because God keeps him busy, which is an interesting

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thought. It’s almost like a curse. It’s almost like saying, “Well, you really need to use all your striving to really think about life and its meaning and its purpose, and where it’s going. But I’m going to keep you so busy that you won’t be able to think about it.” *(Laughter)*

I’m not too sure that’s what it means, but I think God has these cosmic jokes. It’s like when you finally get it, you know, you die. *(Laughter)* It’s kind of like that. *(Laughter)* I think that in the last couple years I finally got it about how everything fits together in life, and then I’m going to die. Hey, I got it! Gone! *(Laughter)* It’s kind of like God’s cosmic joke to say, “Okay, you think you got it. You don’t have it.” It’s awful! It’s all gone away.

And the fourth thing he says, the point he wants to make and his advice is this. He says, “*The end of the matter is this: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*” That kind of goes along with the Proverbs. “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*” But that’s all that fear does. It only gets us so far. It only gets us to the beginning. And he says, “Keep God’s commandments and fear Him, and that’s what you can expect out of life.”

So wrapping up the Preacher says, “Take your best shot. Enjoy as much of life as you can. Be a moral and ethical person and fear God because it’s a short ride. And when the curtain comes down after the last act, the lights go out and you’re all done.”

“The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge. But time and chance happen to all of them. For a man does not know his time. So the children of men are snared in an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.”

So make the best out of what you’ve got now. That’s the best you can do without a God who keeps you and identifies you, and keeps your identity and person into eternity.

So based on human understanding, no matter how wise, knowledgeable and moral, I have no certainty where I will end up—my destiny. I have no eternal security. I have no guarantee that my life has any value or meaning.

Now it’s interesting. In some ways this almost sounds like the Amish position about eternal security. The Amish do not believe in eternal security, that you can know that you have a place with God, and that He’s going to make right the wrongs into the future. They practice what’s called *orthopraxy*. *Orthodoxy* is correct beliefs. We use that term. But *orthopraxy* is correct practice. If you try to talk to an Amish man about theology, you’re not going to get into a conversation, because it’s really about doing everything right and then hoping it all works out. So the best an Amish man can hope for is just hope. He has no certainty about where he’s going.

Participant: Do they ignore grace?

Ted: They understand grace as God’s kindness to them and His mercy. But they have no confidence of where they’re going to end up. And you have to do the best you can while you can.

Participant: Works.

Ted: Works. It’s ultimately a works basis, yes.

Participant: They read James’ letter. That’s all they read.

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Ted: Well, they read it. We could go on a side track. They’re still using Luther’s translation of the Bible. That’s the Bible translation that they use. Correct me if I’m wrong, our German scholar Bishop Rodgers. Is Luther’s translation in German understandable today? It is. But it’s awkward for them, and so when they do long readings, they just stick with it. And they call their preachers or pastors bishops of each congregation. They’re chosen by lot, so often you get an awful preacher, and you’re stuck with him for a long time. And you sit in a three-hour service on a bench and listen. That’s part of the suffering.

Participant: That too is a vanity.

Ted: That too is a vanity, right. (*Laughter*) Almost all of their sermons have to do with performance, being a better person, being a better Amish man.

The Preacher understands the terrible condition he is in. He says in Ecclesiastes 7, “*Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.*”

Now listen to that. “*Wisdom is good with an inheritance.*” But the Preacher has no hope of an inheritance beyond this life, and he doesn’t see the sun.

“*Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that He has given you, because that is your portion in life. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol*”—that is the place of the dead—“*to which you are going.*”

Now that’s a very happy thought, you know? (*Laughter*) You’ve got a wife; you love her. Enjoy her because after all is said and done, there’s no thought or might or knowledge or work or wisdom that you find in Sheol, when you go to the place of the dead, to which you are going. That’s where you’re going, the Preacher says. Yes, Don?

Don: How do we reconcile that with the clear teaching of the New Testament and even parts of the Old Testament, and even the end of the book of Ecclesiastes?

Ted: Yes, but even the end of the book of Ecclesiastes is not encouraging.

Don: Right. But there’s a judgment, and so there’s consciousness.

Ted: Yes. I found only one verse where he actually says that the spirit of the dead goes back to God. That’s the only reference I could find in those twelve chapters. But I’m not there yet, I’m getting there. I’m not going to leave you in the hole.

Don: All right.

Ted: And I’m going to give you a reason why it’s important to think about these things. And I’m driving them home. The Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes does not have the confidence that Job had. Remember? “*Behold, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has thus been destroyed, yet in my flesh will I see God.*” You don’t get that kind of confidence in Ecclesiastes. “*Yet in my flesh I will see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*” “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last day He will stand. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh will I see God.*”

Paul clearly identifies with the Preacher’s problem, and with Job nails down God’s solution. And he writes in 1 Corinthians, “*If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*” So this is what the Preacher is saying. He says that our hope is in this life. There’s nothing beyond it that guarantees us or gives us any

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satisfaction. And Paul says that’s true. *“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”*

He goes on. *“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. ... For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”*

So why meditate on this vain, disturbing book, this Debbie Downer of the 66 books in the Bible? I used to be part of a Good Friday service, and we would have the seven last words of Christ. And I would encourage the other preachers not to rush from Good Friday into Easter Sunday. We’re here to talk about what it’s like when all is lost. And you have to be able to sit with that and be able to wrestle with that before you get on to the Resurrection.

There is a rush for the empty tomb. And in fact some of the preachers could not help themselves. They couldn’t help themselves preaching on Good Friday but ending up on Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday was two days away. They could have waited. But we want the good news right away. We want the solution to our problem. We’re not willing to sit and really saturate in the hopelessness of life without Christ. We live in a culture that wants fast and instantaneous solutions and answers. And that has become the culture in the church, sadly. *“Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.”*

“I can’t wait till tomorrow morning. I need that resolution now.”

So take time to meditate on life without hope and without God in the world. Take time to remember to think soberly and meditate on what life would be like with no purpose, no value, no eternity, or no more importance than cosmic dust.

Peter tells us in his first letter, *“The end of all things is at hand. Prepare your minds for action. And being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”* That concludes my comments. Yes? Rich held his hand up first.

Rich: Just one comment. That helps us understand why you have the prominent sect of the Sadducees, who didn’t believe in the resurrection. They apparently didn’t believe in life after death.

Ted: Do the best you can.

Rich: That was in the Old Testament.

Ted: You second, Dale. Somebody else. Jim Fitzgerald.

Jim: I think that his view also misses out on the fact that there’s a judgment after this life. In other words, it isn’t just that you’re stardust and you go away, though it’s convenient to think that way. But there will be a judgment, even if you’re not saved.

Ted: Right.

Jim: And the other part of your last quote is at the end of that passage. *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”* Where would we be without Christ?

Ted: That’s correct, without Christ. Yes, Dale?

Dale: Human strength and human greatness
Spring not from life’s lighter side.
Heroes must be more than driftwood,
Floating on a waveless tide.

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I didn't make that up. I copied it out of a devotional book by L. V. Cohen.

Ted: Good. Thank you. You know, it's interesting. At church a couple Sundays ago the pastor from this church went to the service they had at the Jewish synagogue on Thompson Run Road. That would have been McCannles Township or something. I was just going to say that I was very interested, because it was a reverent observation of the massacre of the eleven Jews in the synagogue in Squirrel Hill. And that pastor said something very interesting. He said that it was tremendous. There were five- or six hundred people in the synagogue. It was standing room only. He said that he didn't know how many people were in the sanctuary.

Did you know this, that they invited the community to come to the Shabbat service that Friday afterward? And he said that there were five- to six hundred people in the fellowship hall underneath the church. He didn't know how many were in the sanctuary. People were standing on the stairways and everything, so it was crowded.

And he said that it was a very moving service. But he said that he left feeling empty, because the resolution to the tragedy, the injustice, the horror of it all, was that we need more tranquility in our lives. And the pastor is a very humble fellow. He said, "I will tell you that that left me cold. I left that service without any sense that there was any hope, except let's just be more tranquil."

And the folks that I deal with at my work, we talk about these things. I find that nobody wants to think about what Ecclesiastes says. And all of the striving and all of the efforts to get ahead and get this new position, and more salary and more status and a new car, and whatever else, it's nothing. It really is nothing outside of Christ, because when I've been put into Christ, where He goes I go too. And that's my only hope, not in anything I've achieved in this life. Yes, Sig?

Sig: I talked to a couple Jewish friends. I don't know whether they were Orthodox or Reformed, but they look at life as a wave. And when it hits the shore, it's over.

Ted: Yes, that's right.

Sig: And they're fine with that. And I talked to them about Christ and eternal life. And they say, "It doesn't matter to us. We enjoy this life." And that's the secular humanist view.

Ted: And that is the essence of the purpose of life. And this goes back to the Greek philosophers. Outside of an eternal God and your eternal destiny, the purpose of life is pleasure, whether you find it in doing good things or bad things. So in fact you want to say, "But in fact, how do you justify your existence now? I mean, your life has no purpose at all. All you are is stardust." And that's why it's critical for me to be born again and in Christ and in union with Him, because wherever He goes, "*there you will be with Me also. I'm going to prepare a place for you.*" I'm going with Him. That's where my eternity lies. It doesn't compare to anything I have in this life.

And so the Preacher is exactly right when he refers to this vanity and worthlessness and the emptiness of life outside of being in Christ. I'm starting to preach now.

Participant: Preach it! Preach it, brother!

Ted: Yes, Dale? Not another verse. *(Laughter)*

Dale: No, this one's very short. *(Laughter)*

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I walked a cow with happiness.
She chattered all the way.
But nary a thing I learned from her
In spite of all she had to say.
I walked a mile with sorrow,
And nary a word said she.
But oh, the things that I learned from her
When sorrow walked with me.

I'll let Sig play with that mic for a while. *(Laughter)*

Ted: Now how are you all—Sig, are you still—

Sig: Well see, I didn't think you were on. Could you guys hear Ted okay?

Men: Yes.

Sig: It's too late now.

Participant: Get away from there!

Sig: Yeah, right. *(Laughter)*

Ted: I mean, how do you all feel about what I've presented today? I really was engaged in those two months I was reading through Ecclesiastes. And since I read that, I said to myself, “This is true! This is absolutely the truth about life.” I just wish those that I work with and know and love, I wish they got this, and understood that it's like a vapor. You're gone in an instant. And you have no long-term identity. You're going to be like 107 billion people who have lived on this earth. How many of those do you know? They're all gone. A billion is a thousand times a thousand times a thousand. It's a huge number. And unless we have some reality or identity of who we are in Christ, there's nothing for us, and in fact that's true. We're nothing but stardust. Don, you've already asked your questions. Stop, Don. You've already asked two questions.

Don: I know, I know. *(Laughter)*

Ted: Wait a second. Bill's coming with the microphone.

Participant: Don, you don't need a microphone.

Don: Ted, I think you're right on. And I think that your teaching today was very, very valuable. And Dale, not to disagree with the poem you just quoted, but outside of Christ it's not true. The tragedy in Squirrel Hill, for example, or whatever, I mean, all they could come up with was that we need to be more tranquil--,

Ted: Tranquil, yes.

Don: Suffering doesn't teach me anything if I'm not in Christ. It just makes me more bitter.

Participant: Right.

Sig: On the flip side of that, Don, at Rodef Shalom, when I attended a service after the tragedy, it was all about praise and thankfulness to God. And their big arch over the main structure, where the Torah is, this big arch says, “Our God is One, our eternal God is One.” So that was their hope, that God is eternal, and they praised Him.

Ted: But what was the thanks for? What was the thanksgiving for?

Sig: It was all Old Testament Scriptures.

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Ted: But I mean, was it thanking God for the massacre? Or was it thanking God for those people’s lives? Well, that’s a nice thought. You hear it at every funeral. But I’m telling you that for all those people who were massacred it makes no difference.

Participant: Right.

Ted: *“Time like an ever-rolling stream takes all its sons away. They fly forgotten.”* ... Oh, I’m trying to do Isaac Watts.

Participant: Well, he starts out by saying, *“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”* Is he not implying that his own teaching is vanity?

Ted: Right. It would have to be. His own teaching would have to be vanity in the end. That’s why we’re so insistent in our message and in the preaching of the gospel that this is about being brought into union with Christ, because only in that union do I have any significance or any identity. And that is the great joy.

So do you know what the good news is? You can screw up royally and you can make huge mistakes, and everything else. But if you’re in Christ, God works it out for your good and for His glory, as Bruce would say.

Participant: Amen.

Ted: So that’s the great confidence we have. But you don’t get that confidence unless you get up to your elbows in this meaninglessness outside of Him. No quick run to Easter Sunday. I’ve got Bill back there. He would like to say something.

Bill: When you first started out, I couldn’t help but think of what I heard from one person, that if you think you’re important, the day they have your funeral, none of the people who attend will be more influenced by the weather than you are. *(Laughter)*

Participant: You mean, like this morning?

Bill: Yes. But the other thing I thought about when you asked what we get out of this, Paul says, “My desire for the church is to present every man mature in Christ.” And the problem in the church is that what you’re teaching comes from maturity. And people in the church do not want to grow up.

Ted: Right.

Bill: Look at our services. What are they geared to? The things of the world, what the young people desire, stuff like that. A lot of what you said comes from your own maturity. We all get old and we look back on our lives and say, “What’s it all about? What do we strive so hard for? And what’s it worth now? If I have \$100 or if I have \$1 million, what difference does it make? I’m going to die.”

Ted: Right. We’re soon forgotten. Except that you finally get mature and then you die. You see, that’s God’s cosmic joke. One more.

Participant: I just want to come back to the issue of the fear of the Lord. It’s the beginning of wisdom. And Sig was saying that people said that this life is all there is and that we should just enjoy it. The heart of that is a lack of fear of the Lord, because even if they didn’t believe in heaven, they will be accountable for their lives here. And it’s very convenient to want to forget that.

Ted: Right. And you know, it’s not only that there will be a judgment, and that there will be an accountability and a prospect of hell, though that’s true. But take that away. If that wasn’t part of the equation, to say, you know what? The life you’re living right now,

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it’s absolutely meaningless. There’s no meaning to your life at all. I mean, that by itself is an unnerving thought. So all the things that you’re running around and doing, they have no meaning at all outside of Christ. We add to that; you’re going to hell. *(Unclear)*

Dale: I have another poem.

Ted: No, no more poems. Yes?

Participant: I know the Scripture makes the comment that man names cities after himself, and things of that nature. They do prolong their legacy.

Ted: Well I was just reading about the great Pharaoh, the greatest monument builder in Egypt. And right after he died, his successor came and knocked all his pictures out.

(Unclear) (Laughter) So when you do Egyptian archaeology, every successor says, “Okay.” Every guy chisels out his own image. It’s true. We all think we’re special.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, in You we live and move and have our being. For us to live is Christ and to die is gain. We thank You that You have so elected us out of all humanity, to have this marvelous identity and relationship in You so that, in fact, we are of great significance because of You. And in fact we have an eternal life with you. And we pray this in Your name. Amen.

Men: Amen. *(Applause)*