

Ecclesiastes: The Mid-Life Crisis

TEXT: 1:1-18

- v. 1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:
- v. 2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”
- v. 3 What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?
- v. 4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.
- v. 5 The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.
- v. 6 The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.
- v. 7 All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.
- v. 8 All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.
- v. 9 What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.
- v.10 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.
- v.11 There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.
- v.12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.
- v.13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!
- v.14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.
- v.15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.
- v.16 I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.”
- v.17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.
- v.18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDIES:

Lord, thou knowest better than I myself that I am growing older and will someday be old. Keep me from that fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everyone's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody. Helpful but not bossy. With my vast

store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all but thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details. Give me wings to get to the point. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of others' pains but help me to endure them with patience. I dare not ask for improved memory but for a growing humility and a lessening cock-sureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken. Keep me reasonable, sweet. I do not want to be a saint. Some of them are so hard to live with but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. Give me the grace to tell them so.

Middle age is that perplexing time of life when we hear two voices calling us. One is saying: Why not? And the other: Why bother?

Our generation never got a break. When we were young, they taught us to respect our elders. And now that we are older, they tell us to listen to the youth.

When I was a boy, I used to do what my father wanted. Now I have to do what my boy wants. My problem is: When am I going to get to do what I want?

Dobson, in describing mid-life, says, "Someone with a great sense of humor described a few of those circumstances that let us know that it is going to be a bad day when:

1. You wake up face-down on the pavement.
2. You call suicide prevention and they put you on hold.
3. You see a 60 Minutes news team waiting in your office.
4. Your birthday cake collapses from the weight of the candles.
5. You turn on the news and they are displaying emergency routes out of your city.
6. Your twin sister forgets your birthday.
7. You wake up to discover that your water bed broke and then you realize that you don't have a water bed.
8. You're following a group of Hell's Angels down the freeway when suddenly your horn goes off and remains stuck.

It was Billy Kyser who said, "I finally made my playing weight and now I don't have anything to play."

He could hear them yelling, "slide! slide!" Home plate was only a few feet away. So what if he hadn't played softball since college 20 years ago? So what if he now weighed 275 pounds? He could do it. He knew he could. He slid . . . They carried him off the field.

“In the 20’s we acquire a family; in our 30’s we acquire things; in our 40’s we acquire anxieties,” observed Lucille Morrison of the American Institute of Family Relations. All of us measure our march through life with birthdays, and no birthdays thrill us or threaten us more than those with a zero attached to them. Ten, twenty, thirty come as stepping stones toward maturity; 70, 80, 90 stand as milestones to the triumphant old age; but 40, 50, 60 hang like millstones around our necks.

Dobson, in his definition of a mid-life crisis, raises the question, “What is a mid-life crisis? It is a time of intense personal evaluation, when frightening and disturbing thoughts surge through the mind, posing questions about who I am and why I am here and what it all matters. It is a period of self-doubt, and disenchantment with everything familiar and stable. It represents terrifying thoughts that can't be admitted or revealed even to those closest to us. These anxieties often produce an uncomfortable separation between loved ones at a time when support and understanding are desperately needed.”

When a man is twenty he thinks he can save the world. By the time he is fifty he'd be happy to save a small piece of his salary.

What men give themselves to in their thirties they find in their forties and often throw away in their fifties.

The young are slaves to dreams; the old servants to regret; only the middle aged have all of their five senses in the keeping of their wits.

Jim Conway in his book, *Men in Mid-Life Crisis*, points out, “The man in mid-life has now identified four major enemies in his life:

Enemy #1:

The first foe is his body. It is aging, slowing down, and losing youthful appeal. When he was younger and women looked admiringly at him, it gave him a sense of pride, but now they don't even look anymore. If only he could do something about his body to change it in some way! He is aggravated that he does not have the energy and stamina of his earlier days. He has trouble accepting the fact that his muscles are getting flabby and it is easier to gain weight.

Enemy #2:

The enemy is his work. How in the world did he ever get trapped into this job? Why would anyone in his right mind want to be president of Amalgamated Chemical? What is this going to mean in the long run of life anyway? Yes, he wants to be famous, but not for this. He wants to do something significant for the world, to bring peace and happiness and hope to people. Or it may be that he has not made it to the presidency, and he sees how that he is never going to. He is on a treadmill, grinding through the boring daily routine in order to meet his heavy financial obligations. Instead of an enjoyable challenge, work has become oppressive.

Enemy #3:

The third enemy is his wife and family. You see, if it weren't for his massive domestic responsibilities, he'd give up his job immediately. He's hated it for years anyway, but it provides the \$70,000 a year he needs for his house, three cars, and cottage on the lake, not to mention keeping the kids in college and taking vacations to various parts of the world. If he didn't have all of these family responsibilities, he could give up his job and do something more simple. He could live off the land. If he weren't married, he could know around like some young people are doing. He could simply get on a motorcycle with a couple of sleeping bags, a tent, and a young woman and start roaming the country.

The Ultimate Enemy:

The fourth enemy is God. The mid-life man pictures God leaning over the banister of Heaven, grinning friendishly and pointing a long, bony finger as he says, "You despicable, disgraceful Christian! You are the worst possible example of a mature man. You are selfish. You are filled with lust. You are lazy. You are so disgusting that I want to spew you out of my mouth!" The man in mid-life views God not only as an enemy but as an unfair enemy. He says to God, "You made me this way. You gave me these drives and interests. You knew all about the change that would be coming in my life. You are the one who allowed the human body to age and finally die. You are the one who is really, ultimately, to blame for the mess I'm in now!"

In middlescence we cross a similar bridge located in a different territory of life. For the man in his forties, like young people in their teens, everything seems to go wrong physically. Your children start beating you at tennis and you decide that tennis is a game for doubles. Print grows smaller in newspapers and rooms lack light enough so that a normal person can read. While not splotched with acne, the skin loses its elasticity so wrinkles, bulges, and sagging threaten figures and well-formed physiques. Men lose hair they want to keep; women grow hair they want to lose. The body gives off signals warning that decay is winning the battle over youth. Age proves particularly bothersome for inhabitants of a society which constantly reminds us that young is beautiful. Something close to terror strikes many who leave the Pepsi generation for the Geritol set.

Scarf quotes a man who is struggling with the pressures of life and who accurately expresses the fatigue that many men feel: "I feel a weakening of the need to be a great man and an increasing feeling of let's just get through this the best way we can. Never mind hitting any home runs. Let's just get through the ballgame without getting beamed."

Dobson points out, "The straight life for a working man is not much simpler. It is pulling your tired frame out of bed five days a week, 50 weeks out of the year. It is earning a two-week vacation in August and choosing a trip that will please the kids. The straight life is spending your money wisely when you would rather indulge in a new whatever. IT is taking your son bike riding on Saturday when you want so badly to watch the baseball game. It is cleaning out the garage on your day off after

working 60 hours the prior week. The straight life is coping with head colds and engine tune-ups and crab grass and income tax forms. It is taking your family to church on Sunday when you have heard every idea the minister has to offer. It is giving a portion of your income to God's work when you already wonder how ends will meet. The straight life for the ordinary garden variety husband father is everything I have listed and more, much more."

My point is that the straight life eventually gets heavy. For all of us who are walking that line there are times when we ask, What am I doing here? Is this all there is to life? Am I destined to plod through my remaining years with this never-ending responsibility? Until 30 years ago, only one sociably acceptable answer was offered in response to those weary questions. Keep plugging. You have mouths to feed. Backs to clothe. A boss to please and a home to maintain. Clench your fists and get back to work. It may not have been a comforting conclusion but it produced stability in families and in society. Today a new answer is being offered. It says, I won't take it anymore. You are a dope for being everyone's grubby slave, why don't you chuck it all and start a new life. The kids will adjust somehow. They don't appreciate you anyway. Maybe you can find a new lover—someone who really cares. Come on baby, grab all the gusto you can get, 'cause you only go round once in life.

Conway points out, "I said to Sally at one point, 'I feel like a vending machine, dispensing products. Someone pushes a button, and out comes a sermon. Someone pushes another button for a solution to a personal or administrative problem. The family pushes buttons, and out come dollars or time involvement. The community pushes other buttons, and I shop up at meetings, sign petitions, and take stands.' It's easy for a man in mid-life to feel he is trapped with obligations to everyone, and the frustration is that he can't get out. In my twenties, however, these demands were all handled with enthusiasm."

Robert Raines describes this feeling of being caught in the middle:

"Middle-agers are beautiful!
aren't we, Lord?
I feel for us
too radical for our parents
too reactionary for our kids

supposedly in the prime of life
like prime ribs
everybody eating off me, devouring me
nobody thanking me, appreciating me

but still hanging in there communicating with my parents
 in touch with my kids
 and getting more in touch with myself
 and that's all good
 thanks for making it good, and
 could you make it a little better?

The following letter well describes a man in mid-life crisis:

John and I were deeply in love when we got married. We struggled during the first two or three years, especially with financial problems. But I knew he loved me and he knew I loved him. But then something began to change. I am not sure how to describe it. He received a promotion about five years ago and that required him to work longer hours. We needed the money so we didn't mind the extra time he was putting in. But it never stopped. Now he comes home late every evening. He is so tired I can actually hear his feet dragging as he approaches the porch. I look forward to his coming home all day because I have so much to tell him but he doesn't feel much like talking. So I fix his dinner and he eats it alone. I usually eat with the kids earlier in the evening. After dinner John makes a few phone calls and works at his desk. Frankly, I like for him to talk on the telephone just so I can hear his voice. Then he watches television for a couple of hours and goes to bed. Except on Tuesday nights he plays basketball and sometimes he has a meeting at the office. Every Saturday morning he plays golf with three of his friends. Then on Sunday we are in church most of the day. Believe me, there are times when we go for a month or two without having a real in-depth conversation. You know what I mean? And I get so lonely in that house with three kids climbing all over me. There aren't even any women in our neighborhood I can talk to because most of them have gone back to work. But there are other irritations about John. He rarely takes me out to dinner and he forgot our anniversary last month. And I honestly don't believe he has ever had a romantic thought. He wouldn't know a rose from a carnation and his Christmas cards are signed just "John." There is no closeness or warmth between us yet he wants to have sex with me at the end of the day. There we are lying in bed, having had no communication between us in weeks. He hasn't tried to be sweet or understanding or tender, yet he expects me to become passionate and responsive to him. I'll tell you, I can't do it! Sure I go along with my duties as a wife but I sure don't get anything out of it. And after the two-minute trip is over and John is asleep, I lie there resenting him and feeling like a cheap prostitute. Can you believe that? I feel used for having sex with my own husband. Boy does that depress me! In fact, I have been awfully depressed lately. My self-esteem is rock bottom right now. I feel like nobody loves me. I am a lousy mother and a terrible wife. Sometimes I think that God probably doesn't love me either. Well, now I had better tell you what has been going on between John and me more recently. We have been arguing a lot, I mean really fighting. The only way I can get

his attention, I guess. We had an incredible battle in front of the kids last week. It was awful. Tears, screaming, insults, everything. I spent two things at my mother's house. Now all I can think about is getting a divorce so I can escape. John doesn't love me anyway so what difference would it make. I guess that is why I came to see you. I want to know if I will be doing the right thing to call it quits.

It is said of men who are experiencing the mid-life, they have become selfish servants, weary in well-doing, experiencing sorry sex, communication that is crummy, and love that has grown cold.

What are some of the traumas of mid-life?:

1. Old age and wanting to avoid it
2. 20-25 years of marriage
3. Kids are grown
4. Job security—the possibility of being replaced by a machine or by a younger man
5. Success
6. A need for new challenges and experiences
7. Facing failure and unrealized goals
8. Physical health
9. Finding meaning and purpose
10. Weary of responsibility
11. Tired of all the hassles
12. Desire to be free of gnawing problems
13. Desire to start over again in all areas of life
14. Futility of present activity
15. Frustration of getting older and not having made a million by this time.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES:

King Solomon is the author of the book of Ecclesiastes. He is also the writer of the book of Proverbs and Song of Solomon.

It is my thesis that Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon in his early years. IT is the depiction of early love. It is the picture of his first love between the country girl from Lebanon and the king in the palace. Solomon and Shulamith depict for us true human love and the right kind of marriage relationship.

I believe that Solomon writes the book of Ecclesiastes when he is in the midst of all of the things that are breaking in upon him in mid-life. it is the story of a man who is experiencing the sheer futility in trying to find significance in life.

When Solomon sits down to write the book of Proverbs, he is writing a book filled with words of wisdom and instruction as a result of what he has learned through the process of living his life.

Veldey in his book on Ecclesiastes says, "There are many problems which cannot be comprehended by the human mind. Since Ecclesiastes or Koheleth speaks from experience, we prefer to call him the Counselor and his book a book of counsels for man surrounded by difficulties. The Counselor affirms that we may be sure that the mighty sovereign God governs His creation according to a certain plan, although man may not be able to understand His ways."

Isaiah 55:8, 9

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," saith the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Oswald Chambers points out, "In the Psalms wisdom is applied to things as they are and to prayer. The book of Proverbs applies wisdom to the practical relationships of life. And in Ecclesiastes wisdom is applied to the enjoyment of things as they actually are. There is no phase of life missed out. And it is shown that enjoyment is only possible by being related to God. The record of the whirl of things as they are is marvelously stated in these books of wisdom. Job—how to suffer; Psalms—how to pray; Proverbs—how to act; Ecclesiastes—how to enjoy; Song of Solomon—how to love."

Charles Bridges points out, "It may be stated simply: To solve the problem which, from the day when Adam fell, has been the great inquiry among men, and on which philosophy could throw no light—Who will show us any good? (Psalm 4:6) It is to bring out in clear view the chief good, the true happiness of man in what it does not consist—not in the wisdom, pleasures, honors and riches of this world; in what it

does consist—the enjoyment and service of God. Beggars we are with all the riches of the Indies without Him. He is the substitute for everything. Nothing can be substitute for Him. The world is full of gaspers. And alas, hey gasp in vain. They only draw in air. They know not where the true substance lies, in Him the supreme good and satisfying portion, in His service no hard and gloomy exercise but full of liberty and joy.

J. Vernon McGee points out, “The key word is vanity, which occurs 37 times. The key phrase is under the sun, which occurs 29 times. Another phrase which recurs is I said in my heart. In other words, this book contains the cogitations of man’s heart. These are conclusions which men have reached through their own intelligence, their own experiments. Although the conclusions Solomon came to are not inspired, the scripture that tells us about them is inspired. This is the reason for the explanatory, ‘I said in my heart,’ ‘under the sun,’ and ‘vanity’.”

This is not a book without rhyme or reason—not just a bunch of verses stuck together. It begins with the problem stated, ‘All is vanity in this world.’ Then we will find that the experiments are made. Solomon will seek satisfaction through many different avenues, in many different fields. He will try science, the laws of nature, wisdom and philosophy. He will try pleasure and materialism, living for the now. He will explore fatalism, egoism, religion, wealth and morality. Then in the final verses of the book, he will give us the result of his experiments.

Samuel Cox points out about the author Solomon: “He walks with us in the common round to the daily task and talks to us of that which lies before and around us in our daily life. Nor does he speak as one raised high above the folly and weaknesses by which we are constantly betrayed. He has trodden the very paths we tread. He shares our craving and has pursued our quest after that which is good. He has been misled by the illusions by which we are being beguiled, and whose aim is to save us from fruitless researches and defeated hopes by placing his experience at our command. He speaks, therefore, to our real need and speaks with a cordial sympathy which renders his counsel very welcome.”

J. Sidlow Baxter points out, “Ecclesiastes is an inspired confession of failure and pessimism when God is excluded, when man lives under the sun and forgets the larger part, which is always over the sun, the eternal and abiding things. If you want to know what a man of great privilege and of great learning and great wisdom can come to, read this record of a man who has put God out of count in his actual life.”

George has pointed out in his work, “Kohleth has been called a skeptic, a cynic and a pessimist. He is skeptical of all that is vain but he is neither cynical nor pessimistic. In search of the truth of life he dealt with many questions that are constantly asked by men of rank and file. A thorough search of all things under the sun, both intellectually and spiritually, led the Preacher to the staggering conclusion that everything is futile and meaningless. Man’s effort is a striving after

the wind. Those who are trying to find happiness in things of this world will end up in frustration and despair. Solomon's own testimony serves as a warning against materialism and love of riches. Solomon is not asking people to lead to enjoy the gift of God in the right perspective. As is demonstrated in the argument of the book, the purpose of the author is to show that it is utterly futile to assimilate the riddles and paradoxes of life, for God has not revealed to man the answers to all of life's inconsistencies. God has, however, given man faith to believe that God has a complete plan in which everything fits together beautifully. Man must respond to life by enjoying its pleasures to the fullest as a gift of God while living a life of obedience to God, regulated by an awareness of future judgment."

Baxter points out, "The Preacher's text is 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' And the question which he propounds is: What profit has man of all his labor which he takes under the sun? This question suggests at the outset that the sermon is to be the expounding of a quest and such it proves to be when we read through it. Ecclesiastes is the quest of the natural man for the chief good."

When then all the lines of pessimism in the Preacher's review? There are three causes:

1. First he views life selfishly rather than socially. He has lived to get instead of to give and he has found what all such persons find; namely, that the more one lives for self the less do earthly things satisfy. When one lives just to get, the more one gets, the less one really has. It is a true paradox that the more one gives, the more one gets. And those who do most for others, do most for themselves. Preacher has been a great social mixer but only outwardly. Inwardly he has been an isolationist. He has been wrapped up in his own selfishness, viewing all others simply in relation to his own self-gratification. To live so, whatever our social status may be, sooner or later brings an ironic sense of having had no real joys at all and makes the late Lord Beaconsfield's famous words seem all too true: 'Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; and old age regret.'

2. But second, Preacher views life as apart from God rather than as controlled by Him. God is scarcely mentioned, and even then, only distantly. All seems in the hands of men. One of the main reasons for the pessimism about human life in history which is so prevalent in our times is that God is pushed more and more away from it by our 20th century industrialization and urbanization and by popular science with its evolutionary jargon about the origin of species and the survival of the fittest and the region of natural law and the impossibility of miracles and the rejection of everything supernatural. "When the universe becomes," as William T. Stead put it, "the empty eye socket of a dead deity, it is never long before pessimism rules human philosophy."

3. And third, Preacher views human life as bounded by the grave rather than as having destiny beyond. Man dies as the best, he says, and this is his greatest problem of all.

William MacDonald in his book Chasing the Wind says, Solomon's search for meaning ended with the dismal conclusion that life is vanity and vexation of spirit;

or better-, a striving after wind. As far as was able to determine, life under the sun simply wasn't worth the effort. He wasn't able to find fulfillment or lasting satisfaction, in spite of all his wealth and wisdom he failed to discover the good life. And, of course, his conclusion was right. If one never gets above the sun, life is an exercise in futility. It is meaningless. Everything that the world has to offer, put together, cannot satisfy the heart of man. It was Pascal who said, 'There is a God-shaped vacuum in the human heart.' And Augustine observed, 'Thou hast made us, O Lord, for thyself and our hearts shall find no rest 'til it rests in Thee.'

Richard Foster in his book Celebration of Discipline says, "Our world is hungry for genuinely changed people. Leo Tolstoy observed, 'Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.' Let us be among those who believe that the inner transformation of our lives is a goal worthy of our best effort."

Swindoll in his book Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back points out, "Competition requires high level performance. People demands add to the pressure. Tempers flare; stomachs turn; ulcers bleed; hearts break; nerves unravel; minds blow. Some drop out, most tighten their grip and try to cope. And financial strain, inflation, traffic jams, unemployment, unplanned pregnancies, failure at school, obesity, smog, surgery, loneliness, alcoholism, drugs and death. Subtract and support of the family unit, divide by dozens of different opinions, and you come up with a formula that has the making of madness. Block all avenues of escape and you have an enormous powder keg with a terribly short fuse, even if you are a Christian and love God intensely and believe the Bible and genuinely wait to walk in obedience."

Frankl, in stating his basic philosophy of life, said something like this, "The reason so many people are unhappy today and seeking help to cope with life is that they fail to understand what human existence is all about." Until we recognize that life is not just something to be enjoyed but rather is a task that each of us is assigned, will never find meaning in our lives and will never be truly happy. That may not fit in with what you have been fed since you became a Christian. In fact, it probably doesn't. It certainly doesn't square with the little motto I learned as a child, 'A smile a day keeps the devil away.' Nonsense! Frankl was right. Life is a task, a tough one. Sometimes it is absolutely unbearable. Some days we do well just to survive, to say nothing of excelling. Therefore, persevering becomes essential to living. The only key that unlocks the door of hope through perseverance, character is built, strong and solid. Character that brings about hope. Frankl didn't say that but another Jew, from another era, did. His name was Paul. We also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Dobson reflects on the feelings of futility when he is called upon to hear a five-minute eulogy and a period of silence for one of the medical profession who had just died: "I was thinking, Lord, is this what it all comes down to? We sweat and worry and labor to achieve a place in life, to impress our fellow men with our competence. We take ourselves so seriously, over-reacting to the insignificant events of each

passing day. Then finally, even for the brightest among us, all these experiences fade into history and our lives are summarized with a five-minute eulogy and 760 seconds of silence. It hardly seems worth the effort, Lord. But I was also struck by the collective inadequacy of that faculty to deal with the questions raised by our friend's death. Where had he gone? Would he live again? Will we see him on the other side? Why was he born? Were his deeds observed and recorded by a loving God? Is that God interested in me? Is there meaning to life beyond investigative research and professorships and expensive automobiles? The silent response by 250 learned men and women seemed to symbolize our inability to cope with these issues."

Jeff Wells and John Lodwick were Dallas Seminary's Olympic hopefuls. Both Jeff and John had done exceptionally well this year in pre-Olympic races, nationally and abroad. But their plans for the Moscow Olympics ended with the U.S. boycott of the Olympic Games. However, their spirits were high even when the final decision was reached by the Olympic Committee in April. "Jeff and I were the only two out of Athletic West's 28 athletes who supported the move. Of course, we wondered why not a technological and business boycott as well, but we don't think that President Carter is using the Olympic athletes as pawns." Together Jeff and John put years of work into preparation for the 1980 Olympics. In spite of their disappointment John says they have learned an invaluable truth. "This has shown us the futility of putting all your eggs in a basket that won't last. We have friends who are totally crushed because they put their whole lives into the Olympics."

Dobson continues in his book Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives by saying, "I find the need to stress what I consider to be the fundamental cause of the mid-life crisis. It results from what the Bible refers to as building your house upon the sand. It is possible to be a follower of Jesus Christ and accept his forgiveness from sin yet still be deeply influenced by the values and attitudes of one's surrounding culture. Thus a young Christian husband and father may become a workaholic, a hoarder of money, a status seeker, a worshiper of youth and a lover of pleasure. These tendencies may not reflect his conscious choices and desires. They merely represent the stamp of society's godless values on his life and times. Despite his un-Christian attitudes, the man may appear to have it altogether. In his first 15 years as an adult, especially if he is successful in early business pursuits, but he is in considerable danger. Whenever we build our lives on values and principles that contradict the time-honored wisdom of God's word, we are laying a foundation on the sand. Sooner or later, the storms will howl and the structure we have laboriously constructed will collapse with a mighty crash. Stated succinctly, a mid-life crisis is more likely to be severe for those whose values reflect the temporal perspectives of this world. A man does not mourn the loss of his youth, for example, if he honestly believes that his life is merely a preparation for a better one to follow. And God does not become the enemy of a man who has walked and talked with Him in daily communion and love. And the relationship between a man and his wife is less strained in the mid-life years if they have protected and maintained their friendship since they were newlyweds. In short the mid-life crisis represents a day

of reckoning for a lifetime of wrong values, unworthy goals, and ungodly attitudes. Perhaps this explains my observation that most men in the throes of a mid-life crisis are long-term workaholics. They have build their mighty castles on the sandy beach of materialism, depending on money and status and advancement and success to meet all their needs. They reserve no time for wife, children, friends or God. Drive, push, hustle, scheme, invest, prepare, anticipate, work. Fourteen hour days were followed by weekends at the office and forfeited vacations, in midnight oil. And then after 20 years of this distorted existence, they suddenly have cause to question the value of it all. Is this really what I want to do with my life? they ask. They realize too late that they have frantically climbed the ladder of success only to discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall.”

STUDY NUMBER ONE

Is That All There Is? – Foundation for Mid-Life 1:1-18

INTRODUCTION:

We come now to a verse by verse study of the book of Ecclesiastes. The man who is sharing the concepts and principles that we are considering is a man who held the reigns of the kingship over the nation Israel at the time of its zenith.

v. 1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem

In this first verse we have three things:

1. His title
2. His family
3. His position

His title – He is the Teacher

His family – He is the son of David

He is king in Jerusalem

All three of these things point to one personality: Solomon

v. 2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Bridges points out, “This verse appears to have been intended to be a the compendium of the whole treatise. The subject opens upon us abruptly and no wonder. The preacher’s heart is so filled with it, He longs to make a forcible impression. His text is the whole world with all the pleasures and profits and honors and endeavors and business and events that are under the sun. He brings out his subject with a vast variety of illustration and then closes with emphatically repeating his judgment. He seems as if he could not give full expression to his convictions. It is not only vain, but vanity itself. He redoubles his assertion to show the certainty of it and that all is unmixed vanity in its highest degree: “Vanity of vanities!” Nor does this belong only to a part. Everything severally, all things collectively, all is one expanse, one vast heap of numberless perishing vanities. I affirm again and again that there is nothing in this world for the great end of man’s true happiness. It only enlarges his desires in the endeavor to gratify them. But it leaves behind an aching void, a blank that it cannot fill up.”

David Hubbard points out, “Strong language the Preacher used. Everything is empty, hollow, futile. Life is not what it seems, not what we want it to be. Not only is everything vanity but it is the vainest kind of vanity, the most futile brand of futility. The expression conveys a superlative quality. A Song of Songs means the

finest song and as King of Kings points to the greatest kings, so vanity of vanities means that life is as empty as possible. It is marked by the worst sort of futility.

Derek Kidner points out, “A wisp of vapor, a puff of wind, a mere breath, nothing you could get your hands on, the nearest thing to zero: that is the vanity this book is about. What makes this reading of life disturbing is that this airy nothingness is not seen as a mere flicker on the surface of things, where it might even have had a certain charm. It is the sum total. If that is really so and the rest of the book will be arguing that it is, it makes vanity a desperate word. It will no longer mean simply what is slight and passing but more ominously, what is pointless. The author doubles and redoubles this bitter word, using twice-over a phrase which might be a parody of that other superlative ‘Holy of Holies’. Utter emptiness stands here in mute contrast to utter holiness, that potent reality which gave shape and point to the traditional piety of Israel. Finally, he clenches it with the terse dismissal, ‘All is vanity’. In the terms we use today, the summing up could be, ‘Utter futility! Utter futility! The whole thing is futile.’”

J. Vernon McGee points out, “Vanity here speaks of emptiness. It is to waste life without any purpose or any goal. It means to live like an animal or a bird lives. There are a great many people who live like that.

Without God and without a relationship to the person of Jesus Christ this is truly a summary of life. It is sort of like eating cotton candy. When you put it in your mouth, it just sort of disappears.

v. 3 What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?

Here we have a key question and also another of the key phrases which occurs throughout the letter; and this is, “life under the sun.” What does a man gain?

Luke 12:19, 20 And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come. Take your ease. Eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool. This very night your soul is required of you. And now, who will own what you have prepared?’”

v. 4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

The first proof that everything in life is stamped with vanity is seen in these phrases “What does a man gain by all of his toil?” and “A generation goes and a generation comes but the earth remains forever.” Work does not really make a difference in life. We do not fully subdue the earth, despite all of our trying. We till and rake and plant and water. We build our dams, develop our lakes, reshape and contours of our land, but in the long run the earth wins the struggle. It wears us down, generation after generation, while we rarely improve it and sometimes despoil it.

Life is like mowing the lawn; You do it over and over and over again.

Hubbard points out, “And we can see why. Much of our toil is all monotonous, routine, never really accomplished. You think you have all the dishes washed and from a bedroom or a bathroom there appears, as from a ghost, another dirty glass. And even when all the dishes are washed, it is only a few hours until they demand washing again. So much of our work is cyclical and so much of it futile. We shape plans that collapse. We pinch our savings that shrink. We toil for promotions that others get. We leave our goods to governments or heirs that squander them. Yet we have to go on working. Even the disgraced professor, as we might call the Preacher, did not advocate giving up work and waiting for death to come. But how can we move beyond its apparent futility? How can we find true lasting profit in our labors?”

The little phrase “under the sun” will become something of a keynote to the book. We will see it nearly 30 times in the 12 short chapters. The scene in mind is exclusively the world we can observe and that our observation point is at ground level.

v. 5 The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

Here we have an illustration now from nature itself that the earth remains forever.

v. 6 The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

Just like the wind blows, so life is like a giant merry-go-round, constantly returning on its course.

All things are full of weariness. Man cannot utter it. The world both of nature and of human nature is, as it were, on a treadmill. The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. There is indeed plenty to see and plenty to hear but the eye and the ear are wearied rather than satisfied. For it is the same thing over and over again. Human words cannot utter the inexpressible weariness of the everlasting monotony.

v. 7 All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

He has used the sun and the wind, and now he speaks of the streams that flow into the sea.

v. 8 All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, or the ear its fill of hearing.

Now he turns from nature to the body, to point up the fact that the eye and the ear are never really satisfied with what is seen by the eye and what is heard by the ear.

Cox points out, “The burden of all this unintelligible world lies heavily on the Preacher’s soul. He is weary of the world’s everlasting sameness, the miseries and confusions of the human lot and baffle and oppress his thoughts. Above all, the contrast between nature and man, between its massive and stately permanence and the frailty and brevity of our existence breeds in him the despairing mood of which we have the keynote in his cry, ‘Vanity of vanities! Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’”

McDonald points out, “Solomon observed that frail man’s life is filled with labor and activity but where does it get him when all is said and done. He is on a treadmill, a tiresome round of motion without progress. You ask him why he works and he replied, ‘To get money, of course.’ But why does he want money? To buy food. And why does he want food? To maintain his strength. Yes, but why does he want strength? He wants strength so he can work. And so there he is right back where he began. He works to get money to buy food to give strength to work to get money to buy food to get strength and so on, ad infinitum. He lives a life of quiet desperation.”

v. 9 What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Again we have the little phrase, “under the sun”. And as the writer has raised the question, What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?, now he says, There is nothing new under the sun.

When you are going around in circles as he has described and used nature as an illustration, you make no gain. And now, he points up the fact that there is nothing new.

v. 10 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.

One is reminded of the question so often raised, “So what else is new?”

Why is everything meaningless? Simply because there is no gain from all of man’s work. There is nothing new. And thirdly, there is no remembrance of the man of old.

No gain
Nothing new
No remembrance

v. 12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Solomon, gain, takes the phrase from the first verse, calling himself the Teacher, and he is the king over Israel, residing in Jerusalem.

v. 13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!

Solomon here tells us that he devoted himself to this study of seeing what has gone on under the sun. And he comes to a conclusion in the statement, “What a heavy burden God has laid on men.”

v. 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

In this 14th verse we have somewhat of a summary. You have the phrase “under the sun”, you have the word “meaningless” and you have another key phrase “a chasing after the wind.”

Hubbard points out, “Futile days and futile weeks we may have where life loses its glue and turns leaky at the seams. But a futile life will not be our lot. Christ’s news is too good to let that happen. Life is filled with meaning because he is making all things new, beginning with us.”

Richard DeHaan points out, “The failure of man’s wisdom is vividly expressed by Solomon in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes. After unsuccessful attempts to find God and spiritual satisfaction in a stud of nature and history, he turned to the literature of his day. Again he was frustrated. ‘I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven. This severe travail hath God given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold all is vanity and vexation of spirit. For in such wisdom is much grief. And he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow.’”

What we have here is the disturbing realization that man’s wisdom is incomplete and misleading. It has always failed but thank God we need not depend upon our own meager philosophical system. God has spoken to His Son and we have in His word a reliable record of His provision for our salvation.

v. 15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

v. 16 I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced such a wisdom and knowledge.

v. 17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

v. 18 JFor with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

J. I. Packer in his book Knowing God says, “Whence comes wisdom? What steps must a man take to lay hold of this gift of wisdom? There are two prerequisites according to scripture. First, one must learn to reverence God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Not til we have become humble and teachable, standing in awe of God’s holiness and sovereignty, acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts and willing to have our minds turned upside down, can divine wisdom become ours. It is to be feared that many Christians spend all their lives in too unhumbled and conceited a frame of mind ever to gain wisdom from all at all. Not for nothing does the scripture say, With the lowly is wisdom. Then second, one must learn to receive God’s word. Wisdom is divinely wrought and those only who apply themselves to God’s revelation. ‘Thou through thy commandments hath made me wiser than mine enemies’ declares the Psalmist. I have more understanding than all my teachers. Why? For thy testimonies are my meditation. So Paul admonishes the Colossians. ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.’ How are we men of the 20th century to do this? By soaking ourselves in the scripture which, as Paul told Timothy, and he had in mind the Old Testament alone, which are able to make thee wisdom unto salvation through faith in Christ and to perfect the man of God for all good works.’ Again, it is to be feared that many today who profess to be Christ’s never learn wisdom through failure to attend sufficiently to God’s written word.”

Here in this first chapter we asked the question, Is that all there is? This forms the foundation for the mid-life crisis. Making the statement of verse 2 is a man who is experiencing this frustration. That is, the utterly meaningless found of activity. As the giant merry-go-round of life goes round and round, the man faces the question, What am I gaining from all of my labor?

Is there anything that really is new?

Who is going to remember anything about me in the next generation?

CONCLUSION:

What are some of the lessons that we can gain from this first study?

LESSON #1: Everything is meaningless without Him.

LESSON #2: A man receives no gain for his labor when it is for selfish ends.

LESSON #3: There is nothing new under the sun but coming to know the Son makes us a new creation in Christ Jesus. “Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” And we look forward with great anticipation to a new heaven and a new earth.

LESSON #4: Though man does not remember us, God never forgets.

II Corinthians 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that everyone may receive the things done in his body according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

LESSON #5: Life is one gigantic frustration filled with futility without a relationship to Jesus Christ.

Two men on the Radio Bible Class staff, Henry Bosch and Clair Hess, expressed the Christian’s response to the Lord’s self-revelation in nature through a song entitled “God’s Autograph”:

I saw God write His autograph upon a moving stream
 While I a creature of His hand sat idly by to dream.
 I saw Him write His powerful name across a stormy sky
 The pen He used was dipped in fire
 I do not question why.
 But when I saw His mighty hand, the plainest on my part
 Was when He autographed His name with love across my heart.
 I saw God write His autograph upon the sacred page
 Sweet message of redeeming grace for every race and age.
 Amazed, I saw Him write again upon the cross of shame
 With pen divine, all dipped in blood, forgiven in Jesus’ name
 ‘Twas then I saw His mighty hand, by faith I did my part
 And by His grace He wrote His name, with love across my heart.