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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor

**Scripture: Everything is Meaningless –
Ecclesiastes 1 & 2**

Have you ever had a crisis of faith when you seriously questioned what you believe, how you see things and what you have always thought to be true? Now before you panic and think a crisis of faith is a bad thing ... no. It can actually be a good thing. It may not be pleasant when you are going through it. It may even hurt a little, or a lot, but it can strengthen your faith and your resolve.

My most significant crisis of faith as a pastor happened 11 years ago. During the morning worship service at my former church in Waterloo on Sunday January 10, 2010—exactly 11 years ago today—I invited a woman from our congregation to share for a few minutes about a mission opportunity that she was embarking on the next week. She was a nurse and would be doing medical exams and relief work amongst the poor in Haiti.

After she shared, I had everyone in the congregation extend their right hand as a token of blessing and sending then we as a church prayed over her.

We prayed for her safety and God's provision and we blessed her as she went. Two days later, on Tuesday, January 12 at approximately 4:55pm, an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale struck the heart of Haiti and more than 230,000 people were killed.

Around 7:00pm that night, I was pulled out of an elder meeting to take a call from the husband of the woman we had prayed over just two days earlier, the woman who had left for Haiti. He asked me to pray. His wife, Yvonne Martin was missing. So we prayed.

I opened the church all night and we prayed and we prayed and we prayed that Yvonne would be found safe.

Early the next morning, we got confirmation that Yvonne Martin was Canada's first reported fatality of the Haiti earthquake. Less than two hours after landing in Haiti to begin her mission work, she was trapped in the collapsed building she was staying in and killed instantly.

It is hard for me to put into words my thoughts and feelings over the next few days. I knew Yvonne well and personal feelings aside, my responsibility was now to her family and a church. Our faith community was reeling because we had prayed to bless and send this woman out into the world to do the work of Jesus. And she was killed.

Later that same week, we received an email from a missionary our church supported in Africa. In the note, she described how she had been sleeping and suddenly a chunk of the roof above her gave way and toppled down on the bed just barely missing her. She was giving praise for God's protection in that near death experience. As much as I was thankful that this woman was okay, I was confused.

Why did Yvonne Martin die after her church prayed over her and blessed her and sent her to do the work of the Lord with the poor? Why was this missionary in Africa spared? That was my crisis of faith and God and I did some business with each other over the next several weeks and even though my question was never really answered, I came to the conclusion that God is in control.

He knows what is best. He knows way more than I do and sometimes bad things will happen to good people. Sometimes good things happen to bad people, not that that missionary was a bad person, but I am talking about other situations. Here was my "aha" moment through that circumstance 11 years ago. Our lives this side of heaven are an enigma.

Do you know this word, enigma? It means mystery or something that may be difficult or hard to grasp or understand. Have you come to this same conclusion? Life is an enigma. Things you expect to happen in your life, don't. Things you never dreamed of happen. You planned on life taking you in one direction and all of sudden, everything gets sideswiped and you end up going a completely different way.

Have you ever just lain awake at night and pondered the meaning of life? What is this all about? If so,

you have something in common with the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

Are you familiar with Ecclesiastes? It is one of the wisdom books of the Old Testament along with Proverbs and Job. These books tackle specific questions about life and what it means to live well in the world.

Last weekend, Trish Haq gave an excellent message to challenge us as we begin this new year and today, the second Sunday of 2021 we launch into a new message series at North Park, entitled, *Finding Meaning... In a World Chasing the Wind*. It is a message series that is rooted in the book of Ecclesiastes.

The quest for meaning and purpose has perplexed humanity since the beginning of time. The ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, believed life's meaning was found in personal and spiritual growth. In his classic book, *The Meaning of Man* released in 1946, Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl described the atrocities of the German Concentration Camps of World War 2.

He theorized that those who tended to survive that dismal existence generally held to the hope that there was a better future ahead. It was hope that gave meaning to life.

In 1983, even the British comedy troupe, Monty Python entered the fray with the release of their movie, *The Meaning of Life*. The conclusion they came to? The meaning of life? *"Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."*

Today, our culture reads authors such as Eckert Tolle, Simon Sinek and the Dalai Lama to search out true meaning and purpose and most suggest that it is within ourselves that true life meaning is found. But as followers of Jesus, it is the Bible that we need to turn to. Contained in these pages are the answers to life's deepest mysteries. So with that being said let me start by reading the first few verses of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Eccl. 1:1-2

These are the words of the Teacher, King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem. "Everything is meaningless,"

says the Teacher, "completely meaningless!"

So how is that for a pick me up? If you are tuning in this morning for some sage wisdom and advice, this has got to be a brutal disappointment. The author of Ecclesiastes in the Bible says that everything is meaningless. In fact, he says all is *completely meaningless!*

That is maybe not what you needed to hear as many of you continue to battle COVID fatigue, the province-wide lockdown, the exhaustion of home-schooling your children this past week and the mess that is going on in the US. This past Thursday, I received a text that a family member had been given notice that next month, after 32 years with the same company, he will be out of a job. Some of you know what that feels like.

You need to hold out hope that there is some meaning and purpose to it all but even the Bible says, *meaningless, everything is meaningless*. There has to be something deeper going on here. There is.

Let me give you some context of what is happening in Ecclesiastes.

Eccl. 1:1

These are the words of the Teacher, King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem.

This verse leads us to believe that Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, the son of David.

Now something important to remember about Israel during the time of King Solomon's rule—these were the golden years. The nation was finally at peace after being at war with neighbouring nations during much of David's reign. Solomon devoted time and energy to enhancing the culture. He developed international commerce, diplomacy and agriculture. He built cities, fortresses and the temple of the Lord. Times were prosperous and Solomon did a lot of good with his wisdom despite his later failures.

He writes Ecclesiastes towards the end of his life as a bit of a lesson on the things that he has learned. It is his "crisis of faith" moment.

He wanted to know, what is it all about? What is the meaning of life, really? The conclusion he reached was much the same as the conclusion I reached 11 years ago upon the death of Yvonne Martin in the Haiti earthquake. You may be thinking, *but Paul, you didn't say that life was meaningless.* Let me explain.

In the original Hebrew language, the word meaningless in Eccl. 1:2 is *Hevel*. *Hevel, hevel, everything is utterly hevel.* The English word, *meaningless* doesn't quite capture the true essence of *hevel*. In the Hebrew, *hevel* means vapour or smoke. The author uses this word 38 times in the book of Ecclesiastes as a metaphor to describe how:

1. Life is temporary and fleeting like a wisp of smoke
2. Life is an enigma. There's that word again. Life is mysterious and hard to understand at times. Like smoke, it appears solid but when you try to grab onto it, there is nothing there.

There can be so much beauty and goodness in the world but just when you are enjoying it, tragedy strikes and it all seems to blow away. Life seems to be constantly unpredictable and unstable or in the author's words in Ecclesiastes 1:14, it is.... *like chasing the wind.* We are running after something that we think will satisfy us, but it doesn't. We grasp but never seem to latch onto something solid and sustaining. It is like trying to hold onto smoke.

So again, this is a bit of a downer, but the author has a purpose in all of this. His goal is to try and target all the ways that we attempt to build purpose and meaning in our lives apart from God. Solomon knows this from firsthand experience. Later in his life, he turned from God and chased after other things and it left him unsatisfied and unfulfilled. This is the crisis of faith that he is working through in Ecclesiastes.

Put yourself in Solomon's mindset as he goes on a bit of a rant in Eccl. 1.

Eccl. 1: 3-11

What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. The wind

blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full.

Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content.

History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!" But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.

What Solomon is getting at here is that the earth is essentially an unchanging place, unaffected by the generations that come and go. Now all of this was written before the effects of pollution on our planet, but you get the idea. You and I and our ancestors will enter the world at some stage in history but we will also depart. Death will come to us all. It is the great equalizer but time will continue to march on.

The sun will still rise and set as it always does. The wind will still blow and the rivers will still flow. There is nothing new under the sun. The laws of nature will continue with regularity and predictability as they always have. Humanity's participation in the drama of creation is relatively insignificant when considered in this context. That is a little humbling, isn't it?

Have you ever stood on a mountaintop and been left awe-inspired by how small you were compared to the majestic display around you? Have you ever floated in an ocean and realized just how miniscule you were compared to the vast expanse of waters that surrounded you?

There is nothing new under the sun. Human achievements come and go. In fact, even the mark we make on the world—as important as we may think that we are—will one day be erased. No one will remember.

When Forbes Magazine came out with its iconic list of the *400 Richest Americans* for 2020, everyone knew the person at the top of the list. It was Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon. When Forbes started this list 38 years ago in 1982, do you know who was at the top of the list? It was Daniel K Ludwig. Who? Exactly. Does anyone remember Ludwig? He was worth \$2 billion dollars at the time!

Anyone remember Otto Frederick Rohwedder? Come on! One hundred years ago, he was the biggest thing since sliced bread. Why? It was because he invented a machine that sliced bread! An advertisement at the time touted his invention as, the greatest forward step in the baking industry. That is saying a lot. This is the industry that gave us cake! The sliced bread has stayed with us, but good old Otto? He is just a distant memory.

Remember the point that the author is making through this section is all the ways that we try and build purpose and meaning in our lives apart from God. Two of the themes that he will return to often throughout the book of Ecclesiastes are:

1. He emphasizes just how futile human thought and activity is when we are pursuing things apart from God.
2. He urges us to embrace reality as it exists and encourages us to live a contented life in harmony with that reality.

In other words, we are to embrace whatever comes our way, good and bad and trust that God is in control. Life is *hevel*. It is like a vapour. Here today and gone tomorrow. It is an enigma. So are we cherishing each new day, whatever it may bring?

Solomon was renowned for his wisdom. Some even called him the wisest person who ever lived. But he even questioned the futility of his devotion to obtaining wisdom. He says

Ecc. 1:16-18

I said to myself, "Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them." So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind. The greater

my wisdom, the greater my grief. To increase knowledge only increases sorrow.

The irony of this statement is that often it is those who have pursued wisdom and knowledge the most relentlessly who most understand just how much they don't know.

The activity of pursuing knowledge in and of itself, is like chasing after the wind when it does not align with God's wisdom for our lives. Your knowledge of facts and figures may win you the prize at the family trivia pursuit competition but whether or not you know when Nunavut officially became a territory in Canada is really meaningless in the whole scope of things. It was 1999 by the way. Meaningless.

In Chapter 2, Solomon breaks down in a little more detail some of the ways that he, and we, seek to find meaning and purpose apart from God.

It all starts with pleasure.

1. Pleasure.

Ecc. 2:1

I said to myself, "Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the 'good things' in life."

Solomon begins his search for meaning as many of us do; with those things that bring us pleasure. We need to be reminded that Solomon had the time, money and influence to try whatever he liked. Nothing was beyond his reach. He wanted more laughter in his life so he enlists a steady stream of entertainment, singers and dancers that he thought would bring him joy and laughter. Let me be clear that there is nothing wrong with a healthy sense of humour but Solomon found that frivolous amusement didn't bring lasting satisfaction. So when laughter fails, what does he do next? He turns to alcohol.

Solomon did not become the town drunk but he did become a connoisseur of fine wine appreciating the substance for its maximum pleasure, but even that did not bring him the satisfaction he desired.

So he moved on to the creative outlet of working with his hands. He built homes and planted gardens. How satisfying is it to build something with your hands? Honestly, this is an area I don't know a lot about but I did assemble a Hot Wheels track for my grandson over the Christmas holidays. All by myself! I had to follow instructions and everything and it actually works. So I was pretty proud of that accomplishment. That is nothing compared to Solomon. He completed ambitious public works projects. He built parks and pools and homes, but still couldn't find what he was looking for.

So then he pursued sensuality. We are told in scripture that Solomon had over 700 wives and 300 mistresses. Just think about that for a moment. I have enough trouble being the husband that my one wife deserves. Seven hundred wives and 300 mistresses? Rather than exciting and exhilarating, that sounds a little exhausting to me. Solomon had an unlimited amount of sexual opportunities at his disposal but that wasn't the answer either.

Laughter and amusement. Drugs and alcohol. Creative outlets and hobbies. Sex and sensuality. This is the treadmill that too many of us also find ourselves on as we pursue purpose and meaning for our lives. The pursuit of these activities keeps most of us working too hard, living too fast and dying too young. Just as in the time of Solomon, our society is fixated on *whatever feels good, do it*—but as many of us have discovered, these things just don't fill our deepest longing for meaning.

The second area Solomon highlights in which we seek meaning and purpose apart from God is:

2. Wealth.

Eccl 2:8

*I collected great sums of silver and gold,
the treasure of many kings and
provinces.*

Now, we have to understand that Solomon had a great deal of wealth. He could do anything. He could go on vacations and excursions. He could buy homes and cars (well, camels) and not have a fear that the money would run out or that he would get a call from MasterCard telling him that he has reached his limit. Unlike us. Solomon quickly discovered

however, that wealth was not the secret to long term satisfaction. Oh, it maybe brought some short-term pleasure and happiness but in the long haul, it was just another empty pursuit.

Just think of the lengths that our culture goes to acquire wealth. Last year, in Ontario alone, we spend over \$4.2 billion on lottery tickets. Gambling generates about \$13 billion in revenue per year in Canada. The average Canadian household spends \$1,000 a year at casinos. Now for some, this is a harmless hobby but its danger comes when people are spending money that should go for food or rent on a wild dream of striking it rich one day then seeing all their problems go away.

We get lured into get-rich-quick schemes or risky investments, and leverage capital we don't have, and dig a hole for ourselves that leaves us deeper and deeper in debt. The average Canadian now owes over \$73,000 dollars. That is up over 2% from the previous year. It just keeps going up. It is an endless cycle and a 2020 study found that Canadians spend on average 2 hours per day, worrying about finances.

The pursuit of wealth can lead to health problems, addictions and mental health issues, relationship strains and marriage breakups, greed and corruption, and violence and criminality. Read the papers or listen to the news most days and you will see that most of the items that make the headlines revolve around money and our endless pursuit of wealth.

It is all so meaningless. Solomon discovered that truth, three thousand years ago and I wonder if we have found it to be true today.

The third area Solomon highlights where we seek to find meaning and purpose apart from God is:

3. Career / Status

Eccl 2:9-10

*So I became greater than all who had lived in
Jerusalem before me.... I even found great
pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my
labors.*

We all want to believe that our lives matter in some way, don't we? For many of us, our self esteem and

worth comes from our work. That is where we can make our mark on the world. We all want to be remembered for what we have done so we pour a lot of time and energy into our careers. We want to show the boss that we are committed to our jobs—so we arrive early and stay late to try to advance our standing. In the meantime, we are sacrificing time for those things that really matter like our marriage, our children, our friendships and our faith.

Work is important and we should work with excellence and give our employers the best that we have within our job description and expectations but when our worth and value begins to be tied up in our careers at the cost of some of the things that really should matter in our lives, it is all so meaningless. It is a chasing after the wind.

Too many of you have experienced this one first hand. Our priority has been to climb the corporate ladder. We want to make a name for ourselves and unfortunately when we finally reached the top rung, we look back and discover the carnage that we have left in our wake. You may even be watching today alone from a rented one-bedroom apartment, eating cold leftover pizza after writing out another alimony cheque. Or worse, you are now unemployed because you discovered the hard way that your employer was not as committed to you as you were to them. Meaningless.

That is the conclusion Solomon reaches for all of these ways that he and humanity strives to find meaning and purpose for their lives apart from God—and let me just clarify here. The pursuit of a little pleasure, wealth, status and career in our lives is not wrong or sinful. It is great to have goals and dreams. It is the dogged pursuit of these things apart from God's direction and at the sacrifice of everything else that make them so reckless and meaningless. That is why Solomon came to this conclusion about this way of living.

Eccl. 2:17

I came to hate life because everything done here under the sun is so troubling. Everything is meaningless—like chasing the wind.

This is his crisis of faith. Maybe that is where you find yourself today. What is the purpose of

anything? You are seriously questioning what you believe.

I encountered a woman this week who was just so angry about the way her life has turned out. She is angry at COVID and tired of the restrictions that it has placed on her day-to-day activities. She is angry at her husband for his lack of empathy and understanding. She is angry at her situation. They moved from their home where they raised their children to retirement in a small community, hoping to enjoy a more leisurely lifestyle but now she feels stuck and they can't afford to make another move. These are the words she used to sum up her frustration: *This is not what I signed up for.*

Do you ever feel like that when you look around at the life that you are now living? *This is not what I signed up for.* Things that you expected to happen in your life, didn't. You thought by this stage, you would be heading in a certain direction but now you are going a completely different way. Maybe you have laid awake at night and wondered what it is all about. What is the meaning of life?

Maybe like the author of Ecclesiastes, you too have come to the conclusion that life is an enigma. It's mysterious at times. It's unpredictable and difficult to grasp or understand. If we left it there, it would be all so hopeless, wouldn't it? We would be left paralyzed, not knowing how to react or act because we never know what is coming down the pipe. We throw up our arms—*I quit. This is not what I signed up for!*

I got into a conversation with a young guy recently who just began working at a new company in the fall. At first it was invigorating but more recently it has become a grind. Why? It is because his work has become an enigma. He doesn't have a job description so most days he isn't clear what is expected of him. There is no feedback of job performance. The boss makes promises that aren't kept so now whenever the boss says something to this guy, he knows it's just empty words. Meetings are set to clarify the goals of the company but more often than not, they are cancelled at the last minute. This has become such a difficult situation for this young man that he contemplated quitting but then he came to this conclusion. *I can't control all those*

things that are external to me, but what I can control is my reaction and behaviour.

So, he made it his resolve to go into work each day and do the best he can at what he thinks he should do; hoping that if he is off track, someone will correct him. If he doesn't know the answer, he will ask even if it feels like he is bothering the boss. He is going to make the best of what comes his way even when the situation is not ideal.

That is what the author of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is getting at towards the end of chapter 2. How do we live our lives in the midst of all the unpredictability when life is an enigma and it appears meaningless, *hevel*? It is not to say, "Why bother?" and make life one big party. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die. No. Solomon discovers that the true enjoyment of life is in accepting the *hevel*. Accepting that life is unpredictable and it will throw you a curve ball every once in a while. Things won't always go that way you planned or dreamed. There will be good times ... but there may also be some disappointment and pain. There will be things out of our control sometimes and that is hard (especially for control freaks like me)!

But the sooner we realize that, the sooner we find peace and can start living the way that God intends for us. His desire is that we learn to live with open hands because really, the only thing that we can control is our attitude in the present moment. That is what Solomon discovered and he says:

Eccl. 2:24

So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God.

Solomon encourages us to stop worrying and choose to take pleasure in each new day and what it brings ... because it comes from the hand of God. To find enjoyment and satisfaction in simple, good things of life such as friendships and family, a good meal, a stimulating conversation, a solid day's work or a sunny day. We may not be able to control these things, and we are certainly not guaranteed any of them, but that is what makes them all the more special.

When we come to adopt a posture of total trust in God, it frees us to enjoy our life as we actually experience it. Not as we think it ought to be or we think we deserve. The truth is, we don't deserve anything. All that we have is ultimately because of the grace and mercy of our heavenly Father and we are to see each day as a gift from him and live with thankfulness and service to him.

To live this way also prepares us to handle the inevitable difficulties that life will throw our way—with faith that God is with us, growing our character and our resolve.

Whew, I feel like this message today has been pretty heavy. Even preparing it this week was some tough slogging especially with all that has been going on in our world such as COVID cases rising, the civil unrest in the US and the fearmongering. But for me, it just made the text all the more meaningful and freeing.

So can I challenge you today? How are you entering into each day? What is your attitude? Are you fully dependent on God, living in the moment and savouring each thing that comes your way? Do you see life as a gift from God to be enjoyed and cherished?

Every moment you are alive is a gift from God. If that is your attitude, then even when the difficult times come, when life truly is an enigma and you encounter what could be a crisis of faith, you will not be blindsided but will be able to roll with the punches.

If you find yourself consumed with worry and apprehension however, perhaps you are trying to live too much under your own strength and power. You are trying to control too many variables and that is bound to set you up for frustration because there is too much that lies beyond our control. Naturally, when difficult times come for you, it will cause a lot of stress and anxiety because you are doing it alone. Does that describe your situation today?

I encourage you to take the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes to heart. Life is *hevel*. Don't try to do it on your own. Turn to God. See each day as a gift.

Live in the moment. Enjoy the simple things in life and trust that God is with you each step of the way.

Points to Ponder

Finding Meaning ... In a World Chasing the Wind

Sunday January 10, 2021

Everything is Meaningless: Ecclesiastes 1-2

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever had a “crisis of faith”? What did it look like for you? What were the things that prompted the crisis? How did you experience God during this time? In what ways did this situation impact your faith?
2. How have you experienced life as an enigma? Describe some ways that you have experienced life as unpredictable and difficult to grasp. How have you generally dealt with this uncertainty?
3. How have you tried to grapple with the meaning of life over the years? Has this been a source of stress and anxiety for you? What conclusions have you reached for your life?
4. Ponder and discuss the ways that you have sought to build meaning and purpose for your life apart from God through the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, career and status. What were your learnings through these pursuits?
5. What is your attitude as you enter into each day? Discuss the events of a day this week. Describe some of the activities of that day, your attitude towards them and the ways that you did or didn’t lean on God to see you through them.
6. How difficult is it from you to accept the “hevel” (the unpredictability) of life? What role does control play in the way that you manage the unexpected? Where and how do you need to trust God more to live “in the moment”?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Make it a point this week to surrender each day to God and invite him to help you savour even the simple pleasures of life with thankfulness and gratitude.