

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 | “The Cycle of Futility”
Preached on March 1, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 today. *[pause]*

Last week, I gave an introductory sermon that helped us to get an overview of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Now today, we will get into more of the content of what’s written. *[pauseeee]*

Every generation that comes along seems to say the same thing...

They say, “We are going to make our mark on the world.” Or, “We are going to change the world!” *[pause]*

You will probably hear this type of thing at your typical graduation speech. *[pause]*

The speaker seeks to motivate the graduates to go out and make this huge difference in the world that is going to radically change everything.

And the graduates get infused with passion and excitement, only to find themselves trudging along in unexciting, mundane life a year later. *[pause]*

I’m sure each of us, who has been young and naive, has had this idea that it’s *our* generation who is going to ‘set the world on fire.’ *[pauseeee]*

If you think about it, a certain pridefulness is displayed in that thinking.

We think that we are so much better than the generations that went before us, who we consider “failed” at setting things right.

But now that *we* are on the scene—look out! *[pauseee]*

Realize that this type of thinking is not new.

Most generations have thought that they would be the “world-changers”...

But as time goes on, they realize that they are in a long line of generations, who didn’t actually transform the world in some monumental way. *[pauseee]*

In Ecclesiastes 1:3–11, the author reminds us that in ourselves and in our own efforts, we are not world-changers in any lasting sense. *[pause]*

Listen to what he says in verse 3. *[READ VS. 3]*

Looking at this text, a central idea that comes forth is that...

For all of man’s efforts, there is no lasting gain made. (3)

I would suggest that verse 3 is the main thesis of the entire book, which Solomon will then explore and test through different avenues. *[pause]*

He says, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” *[pausee]*

That word translated as ‘gain’ is vital, and he will return to it again and again. *[pause]*

Now there is some gain in toil in that you may pay some bills or complete a project that needed to be done, but he’s not talking about temporary gain, but *lasting* gain.

So he’s saying, “When all is said and done, what enduring gain, profit, advantage, or benefit does all of our toil bring?” *[pause]*

What will endure even after our death?

What will not be affected by changing circumstances? *[pausee]*

Essentially, he’s asking this—what can we do that has *permanent value*? *[pauseeee]*

Remember that the author is viewing things “under the sun.”

That is, he is looking at human effort, apart from God.

So, if you took God out of the picture, what things of enduring value do people accomplish? *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever tried to build a sandcastle on the beach? Talk about toiling under the sun! *[pause]*

You start building your sandcastle, and you think that it’s going to be this “masterpiece.” *[pause]*

You have the walls just right, you created little windows and doors, and it’s really turning into something special. *[pause]*

Your kids are excited about what you are creating, and the little kids nearby are even marveling at your work-of-art. *[pausee]*

You think ahead and build a moat to prevent water from getting to the castle, but what happens?

Eventually, a wave makes its way up the shore and wipes out your perfectly-crafted castle. *[pausee]*

That sandcastle brought temporary gain in that you could bring a smile to your child’s face for a little bit, or see a ‘job well done,’ but there was no lasting gain from it.

It is gone, forgotten, and the effects of it are no longer present. *[pause]*

All of your toil on that castle ended up being in vain, for your accomplishment didn’t last. *[pause]*

That's what life is like when it comes to our efforts, if you take God out of the picture.
[pauseeee]

Think of all the activity and effort that goes on in the world 24/7, 365 days a year.

That's a lot of effort, isn't it? *[pause]*

Billions of people active, working, and toiling. *[pauseeee]*

Now think of all of the toil that has happened throughout the history of the world—it's really mind-boggling.

Yet the author of Ecclesiastes will show us that amidst all of that toil, what have we done that has truly changed the world in a radical way?

What have we done, without God, to bring some enduring good that isn't wrecked by time, circumstance, or death? *[pauseeee]*

Now maybe you are someone who is hesitant to believe such a statement.

You are thinking, "Really? I don't know about all that. There are things that we do that last."
[pause]

Well the author has a pile of evidence that he would like for you to consider. *[pause]*

First, he will show you...

I. Evidence from nature. (4–8)

Let's READ verses 4–8. *[READ 4–8]*

Solomon proves his point by first calling us to look around at nature—generations come and go, but the earth remains the same. *[pauseeee]*

Consider how many generations of people have come and gone throughout history.

It's really a lot, and the generations have been very different from each other, but amidst those ever-changing generations, the earth is the same. *[pauseee]*

No generation can say that they are the ones who utterly transformed the world because the world is the same in many regards as it was thousands of years before. *[pause]*

We think that our generation will be different—that it will break the cycle, but it doesn't.
[pauseeee]

Now certainly there are some changes, but Solomon isn't talking about mere changes, but something big and monumental that fixes the weariness of the world. *[pause]*

Work is still grueling, grief is still around, war hasn't been eradicated, pain is still present.
[pauseeee]

Have we 'progressed' to the point of conquering death? Nope. [pause]

Have we found a way to fix the toilsome nature of work? No. [pause]

Have we cured the deepest ills of humanity? No way.

The earth remains the same—we are still faced with a fallen world that is 'full of weariness.'
[pauseeee]

The cycles of life continue...

The sun rises and sets, and then it does it all over again, each and every day.

The wind goes around and around, and the water cycle continues, as well.

The streams flow into the sea, but the sea isn't full, yet they just keep flowing. [pauseee]

As our generations come and go, so the world continues its cycles of movement, without change.

And these repeated, unending cycles give us the feeling of going nowhere. [pauseee]

Like the world's cycles continue the same, so there is no ultimate progress made by mankind in the world. [pause]

Like the sea isn't ever full from the streams that flow into it, so mankind never "arrives" or is "satisfied" in this life through their own efforts. [pauseee]

One commentator put it this way, "This text depicts the human environment as a monotonous prison."¹ [pauseeee]

Haven't you ever felt that before? [pause]

You feel the monotony of life because it's the same thing every single day.

And you need to realize that there's nothing wrong with you, if you feel the monotony of life because the cycles of life *are* monotonous. [pauseee]

The sun rises and sets, the wind blows once again, and the streams continue all the same. [pause]

We get up when the alarm clock goes off to face the same sorts of things that we faced the day before. [pause]

¹ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 284.

We get changed, eat, go to work, come back, eat, go to sleep—and then do the same thing over again the next day.

Life is monotonous, so no wonder we seek out *novelty*. [pause]

We always want to see the next new thing, experience that new adventure, have that new job.

We are novelty-seekers bound in a monotonous world. [pauseeee]

People get frustrated with the monotony of life, and are always striving to find a way out of it. [pause]

They think that that new job or life situation will change it all, and they won't feel the monotony of life, but it fails. [pause]

After a while, that new job's thrill wears away, and they are faced with mundane life once again. [pause]

That new car's appeal goes away, and now they are looking for a new one. [pause]

That vacation is over, and now they are back to the grind, feeling all of the same things over again. [pauseeee]

Weeks ago, we had that really big snowstorm. [pause]

I went out halfway through and shoveled, but once I was done, I looked out and it looked like I didn't even shovel anything.

That's what life is like—it feels like a cycle of futility. [pauseeee]

This is why in verse 8 he says, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." [pauseee]

Life is monotonous and unsatisfying, so it becomes unspeakably wearisome. [pause]

We must be honest with reality—this is what life often feels like! [pause]

Solomon isn't afraid to tell it like it is, but are we going to be honest with it, too? [pauseeee]

All things are *full* of weariness.

It's not like you can go over here to this portion of life and escape the weariness, but it's found throughout all of life. [pause]

This is why we feel weary and exhausted in every portion of our lives...

The workplace becomes wearisome, parenting becomes tiresome, marriage feels hard.

We are exhausted, tired people, weary from life as a whole. [pauseee]

Let's be honest with life, for Solomon accurately describes the feeling that life is frustratingly wearisome.

We feel the mundane, monotonous, unremarkable, humdrum of life and can't break free from it. *[pauseeee]*

No wonder we get bored so easily!

No wonder we feel burnt out, and say, "I need a vacation!"

No wonder there's widespread anxiety, depression, stress, and restlessness. *[pauseeeee]*

Solomon says, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it." *[pause]*

What he's saying is that you can't adequately or fully describe this weariness, nor solve it.

What can we say? We can't solve these feelings in ourselves. *[pauseeee]*

Life under the sun, devoid of God, feels like you are the wind, constantly going and never arriving at a goal.

Like the waters, always being filled, but never being satisfied. *[pause]*

Mankind feels the cycle of futility, and knows that there must be more.

But all of mankind's efforts have never been able to free us from this weariness, nor alter the world in some big way to change it all. *[pause]*

Nothing that we do can break us free from this fallen condition, and Solomon wants us to feel this—*really feel it!*

It does no good rejecting reality, but we must face it. *[pauseeee]*

So evidence from nature proves that our efforts have not transformed the world in any radical way, but so does...

II. Evidence from history. (9–11)

Let's READ verses 9–11. *[READ]*

Is there anyone here that would say that 'History' was your favorite class in school? *[pause]*

I know that it was mine.

Yet even if history wasn't your favorite class, we need to pay attention and think through what history teaches us, for that's where Solomon takes us. *[pause]*

He considers all of history and he thinks through the question, "Is there anything new?"

And his answer—“There is nothing new under the sun.” *[pauseeee]*

Things done before are done again, and once again it’s a cycle of futility that we are trapped in. *[pauseeee]*

Our age is a prideful age because we look at all of our advancements and boast of our greatness. *[pause]*

We have medical advancements that previous generations would marvel at.

We have amazing technology, like artificial intelligence now.

We have self-driving cars, video calls, where we can communicate with each other at lightning speed, and so much more. *[pause]*

But our generation needs to hear what the Bible says, “There is nothing new under the sun.” *[pauseeee]*

We need to be humbled down from our prideful pedestal. *[pause]*

We need to realize that all of our new things are *not* actually new. *[pauseeee]*

Now at first, this doesn’t sound right.

We think about all of the “new” things that we have, and we say, “Solomon, are you really sure about that?” *[pause]*

We’ll realize that Solomon doesn’t mean that there aren’t advancements, new editions of things, or some progress made. *[pause]*

He could easily look back on history, even at his time, and see that that was the case. *[pause]*

By the time Solomon was on the scene, there were certainly advancements in weaponry, buildings, and things like that.

So he’s not neglecting the truth that there are new advancements, but he’s saying that there’s not something truly new-new. *[pauseee]*

The truth is that all of our innovations are actually just new versions of old things. *[pauseeee]*

Take anything and if you boil it down, it’s just a new version of something old. *[pause]*

You say, “We have cell phones now!”

OK? That’s just a new version of talking to each other.

History is replete with updated versions of communication. *[pauseee]*

You say, “Look at our airplanes!” *[pause]*

Yes, that's a new version of travel—people have been making new versions of travel all the time.
[pause]

Even the smartphone is just a combination of prior things that have been brought together into one thing...

It's a GPS, phone, calendar, calculator, to-do list, and internet all brought together into one gadget. [pauseeee]

One commentator said this...

“The Teacher probably has in mind any invention that enables man to break out of nature and the succession of history into meaning which transcends the sense of futility.

Man has not found it; and each generation, regarding itself as the greatest, still reaches no conclusion.”² [pauseeee]

There is nothing truly new that has altered the way that life is in its weariness.

We are still bound to the cycles of futility, to the weariness of life—to life in this fallen world.
[pauseeee]

With all of our technological progress, you would think that we would never be bored, weary, worn out, frustrated, or exhausted, but just look around!

We still complain of the mundane, monotony of life, as we are surrounded by a million things.
[pauseeee]

Some people think that we can progress so far until we reach utopia, but they are ignorant of history. [pause]

In their ignorance, they think that we will be the world-changers, only to be disappointed.
[pauseee]

We are searching for something new, lasting, and satisfying to break us free from this world's futility. [pauseeee]

We are trying to gain it through new medical advancements, but we are still in pain, suffering, and we die. [pause]

We try to find it through technology, but the technology breaks, is limited, and fails to bring us any lasting satisfaction or utopia. [pause]

We try to find it in comfort creations, but we are still unsatisfied and exhausted. [pauseeee]

² J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1154.

As author Tony Reinke puts it, “We are circling around in a loop of nothing-new-ness that cannot redeem us...

All our innovations are ultimately headed to a recycling center or a landfill. They cannot serve as objects of our heart’s enduring hope.”³ [pauseeee]

We may balk at the statement that there is nothing new under the sun, but the problem is that we don’t remember what happened before us. [pause]

As he says in verse 11, “There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.” [pauseeee]

If we were able to talk to generations that went before, they would say, “What are you doing? We tried that before, and it failed.” [pause]

But in the haughtiness of our age, we look back at them with disgust, thinking that we are so much more “advanced” than them.

And this is what C.S. Lewis calls, “chronological snobbery.”⁴ [pause]

We assume that prior generations were just ignorant and backward, and that we have now “progressed.” [pauseee]

We think we are wiser and smarter, and so we attempt to make advancements, only to realize that we came up empty, just like the generations before. [pauseeee]

History shows us that for all of man’s efforts, there is no lasting gain made. [pause]

No new innovation, advancement, or progress will solve humanity’s feeling of futility. [pause]

Nothing that we have done throughout time has brought us some ultimate gain or satisfaction. [pause]

We are just repeating the cycle of what others have tried before, merely doing a different version of it.

Truly, “there is nothing new under the sun.” [pauseeee]

This passage teaches us that...

Human effort will never break you free from the cycle of futility.

People feel the cycle of futility in this world.

They feel the monotonous prison-like existence that we are in. [pause]

³ Tony Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 130.

⁴ <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/c-s-lewis-on-chronological-snobbery/>.

The days and generations come and go.

The sun rises and sets the same, the winds blow around and around, and the rivers flow into the sea that never gets full. *[pause]*

New-looking things aren't truly new, and do not solve the deep problems of life. *[pause]*

We keep repeating the same mistakes of others who went before us, and others who will follow will repeat *our* mistakes. *[pause]*

Mankind puts so much time, effort, and toil into producing something to break us free from this cycle of futility...

Something to bring lasting gain that won't be wiped away with time or circumstance. *[pause]*

We seek to be the world-changers, who will once-and-for-all provide the solution to the frustration and weariness of life.

Yet amidst all of this effort, there is no lasting gain secured. *[pause]*

Billions upon billions of people have been born, lived, and died attempting to do something to reverse the weariness, but have come up short. *[pause]*

Needless to say, mankind is weary from trying to break from the weariness, for all of our efforts have been in vain. *[pause]*

This passage pushes us to see that no ultimate gain or satisfaction can be found through our human efforts alone. *[pause]*

The answer then isn't in our human work "under the sun," but through God's redemptive work that came *down* to us through the person of Jesus Christ. *[pause]*

The weight of this passage ought to push us to the Lord—He is the true world-changer and curse-reverser. *[pause]*

Christ came into our monotonous world to bring about a monumental change in the world that lasts into eternity. *[pause]*

He entered our world of futility to secure for us life and meaning that lasts forever.

And in a life full of weariness, we can go to Him and find rest.⁵ *[pause]*

He broke the bondage of sin and death over us through His death and resurrection.

Now through faith in Him, we are free from that bondage, and can have life anew. *[pause]*

⁵ A reference to Matthew 11:28.

Though *we* cannot do anything new, it's *He* who brought something actually new. *[pause]*

He brought about a New Covenant that changed our relationship with Him into one of closeness, forgiveness, and life.⁶ *[pause]*

He made us new creations,⁷ who are able to live for Him.

And someday He will create a new heavens and a new earth, no longer bound by the cycle of futility, nor encompassed by weariness.⁸ *[pauseeee]*

The author stated at the beginning of this passage, “What does man *gain* by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” *[pause]*

The truth is that it's not through our own man-driven efforts that we gain something lasting, but we (like Paul) confess that we count it all as loss in order that we may gain Christ.⁹ *[pause]*

To gain Christ is not the result of our toil or effort, but of faith in *His work*.

He has gained for us salvation through His perfect life, death, and resurrection on our behalf. *[pauseeee]*

Yes, generations come and go. *[pause]*

This life feels full of weariness, and there is nothing new under the sun that *we* create.

So it causes us to look to the One who remains the same, who provides rest, and who has done a “new thing”¹⁰ through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. *[pauseeee]*

So what do we gain by all our toil in ourselves? Nothing. *[pause]*

It's Christ who has secured for us salvation through His efforts.

So we cling to Him, and now through His work *in us*, our Spirit-empowered toil leads to fruit that lasts into eternity.¹¹

⁶ A reference to Jeremiah 31:31–34.

⁷ A reference to 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁸ A reference to Revelation 21:1–4.

⁹ A reference to Philippians 3:8.

¹⁰ A phrase from Isaiah 43:19.

¹¹ A reference to John 15:16.