

LIFE MATTERS 1: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
ECCLESIASTES 1:1-11
JANUARY 3, 2016

There is nothing more sensible and easy to understand than a piece of white paper, the boundaries are clear, the properties are obvious. For the most part, what you do with this plain piece of paper is obvious. There are some options but not a ton. You can draw on it or decorate it so that you can get some pleasure out of it. You can fold it into something interesting to show how wise you are. Potentially you could sell it to someone else and make a little profit with it. Have fun with it, become wise with it or make some thing with it. You can wrap your brain around the simplicity of it.

Here's the thing, one twist turns the basic white blank piece of paper into something entirely new (twist and tape edges together). This is now a Mobius strip. Discovered by August Ferdinand Mobius during the middle 19th century. That which was simple is simple no longer. There are a lot of options, and it is much harder to wrap your brain around. The Mobius strip doesn't really have a top or a bottom, a left or a right. It is a geometric shape that only has one boundary. You can travel it over and over again and never quite understand it.

The white sheet of paper has very clear applications in the real world. It is a commodity to be used for fun, for wisdom or for profit. You can hold it in your hands and wrap your brain around it. The Mobius strip, not so much. Its design has been used to help conveyor belts be more useful, but other than that, it's more theoretical. Something you discuss. All it took was a twist.

Life is kind of like that. In your early days, life is pretty simple. You see the blank page in front of you and you know what to do with it. You go to school so you can get a job. You get a job so you can have a family and be happy, and being happy is the most important thing in the world.

Inevitably, somewhere in there, the twist happens. School didn't work out the way you were hoping, so you didn't get the job you wanted. You didn't get the job you wanted, so you didn't get the family you wanted, and you didn't get the life you wanted. Those twists are somewhat easy to spot, a sickness, a setback, a financial loss, an unexpected death. Any of those twists can change our whole trajectory. The life that seemed so simple has now become quite a bit more difficult to comprehend.

Some twists are even harder to put your finger on because sometimes you go to the school you were hoping for and get the job you dreamed of which led to the family of your dreams and the life you always wanted, and then the twist. There is still an ache. Something still doesn't quite line up.

Oscar Wilde said there are two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, the other is getting it.

He's saying, the twist is going to happen one way or another, either you won't get what you hoped for out of this life and you will be disappointed, or you will get what you hoped for out of this life, and strangely you will still be disappointed.

One little twist can make something so simple into something infinitely complex. All of this can lead you to conclude that life is absurd. Meaningless. Futile. Empty. Which then leads you to one of the most common and yet maddening human endeavors, that big question, "What does it all mean?" If life didn't go how I expected, then I am confused and I want to make sense of it. If life went exactly how I expected, then I am still confused and I want to make sense of it. I think a joke might help here.

There was a man who was planning to build a new mailbox in his front yard because the neighborhood kids were always smashing it with a bat. Long story short, he hadn't given them good candy one year at Halloween, so ever since, they have been smashing his mailbox up with a bat. He's an actuary by profession, so he has a thing for numbers. He has figured out that he needs 99 bricks to build this mailbox perfectly. He goes to Home Depot

for those 99 bricks, all the while thinking about the look on those teenagers' faces when they see his new reinforced mailbox. He goes to the construction area in search of bricks, and he finds them. He asks for 99 bricks, but they only sell them in pallets of 100. The actuary is mad, but he needs the bricks to stick it to the teenagers. He buys the bricks, but he puts one in the front seat with him. That extra brick was driving him nuts. He had a mission and that extra brick was going to drive him bonkers, so he opened up the car window and threw it out the window while he crossed the street.

That, my friends, was a joke without a punch line. That was also a solid 3 minutes of your life that you will never get back. How much worse than 30 or 40 years to feel like you are in the middle of a long joke with God and there is no punch line? No meaning in the midst of the mess? Before bad jokes said this, before Oscar Wilde said this, the writer of Ecclesiastes said this:

Ecclesiastes 3:11

God has placed eternity in our hearts, but we cannot grasp it. Lest you think that is a one off statement in this book, it is chock-full of them. The recurring word in this relatively short book is Hebel. Hebel can mean many things. All separate strings pulled from the same sweater. It can mean vanity. It can mean futility. It can mean empty. It can be translated absurd. Of the 62 times this word occurs in the Old Testament, 30 times are in the book of Ecclesiastes. He keeps looking at life and saying, "This is absurd. There is no punch line. This blank page in front of me is actually a complicated Mobius strip, and I don't know which way is up and which is way down." Some of you can identify.

For the next seven weeks, we will be studying Ecclesiastes for our annual Life Matters series. In this series, we study a book of the Bible and focus on our discipleship path at SFC. We know life is complicated, so we try to keep it simple here at our church. Not simplistic. Not trite, but simple. To follow Jesus, we think you should be practicing three things: Life in God - intentional Christ-centered worship, Life with Others - practicing your faith in Christian community and Life for Others - serving and sharing in the name of Jesus. There

might be more you can do, but there isn't less. These are essential steps. These are things that Jesus did and commanded us to do. With different appetites and availability, you can pursue extra things, but we want to focus on essentials.

We spend two weeks on each of these life goals and today we introduce the series. Now, usually, sermon series in January have a specific vibe. Smart preachers know that what sells in church in January is what sells on newspaper shelves in January, self-help and achieving goals, five tips to looking better in 2016, four habits for feeling fitter in 2016, seventeen ways to ignite your relationship in 2016. And churches have co-opted this. I think there are Christian principles that can be applied to help do well in this life, but I also believe that many churches are overpromising and under-delivering when it comes to faith. Besides the fact that following Jesus and understanding him more won't be a key to help improve your career, your bank account and your sex life. The more insidious promise is offering of certitude without exploration, the offer of propositional truths without any mystery. The promise that if you do A, B and C, you will understand what God is doing and it will all make sense.

The author of Ecclesiastes disagrees, and he doesn't go out of his way to put everything in its place. The author never names himself, except for calling himself Qoheleth and the Son of David. Qoheleth means the convener or implicitly the teacher or preacher. The name ecclesiastes is simply the Greek rendering of a gathered group. That's where you have heard the Greek word for church that simply means called out ones. Qoheleth could be Solomon but probably was not. However, the author is writing from Solomon's vantage point, from the point of a person at the end of their life, who has wisdom, money and pleasure. From a person of faith, who has been shaken and strengthened depending on the day.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

What do you do with a book like this? This is one of the most confusing and conflicted books in the Bible. It seems to have little perspective beyond this life. The author seems to have participated in some less than godly behavior. The author doesn't really talk about

God in a personal way. Choosing to refer to him as Elohim and not Yaweh. For the majority of the book, Qoheleth seems to be content to try and understand the joke. He is going back and pouring over all the bricks and all of the elements of the set up, and he can't quite figure it out.

There are a couple of interesting things to consider for this book. It is a book that early Christians did not want to include in the Bible. On top of that, several atheists love the book of Ecclesiastes and have had it read at their funeral. What do you do with this book? It doesn't make things easier; in fact, it makes them more confusing. Christians struggle with this book. Atheists like this book. What do you do with this book?

We could bail ourselves out and say this book was written before Christ and thus didn't know about eternal hope. But David and Moses had the same vantage point and they didn't say hebel over and over again. Meaningless. Meaningless. Vanity. Vanity. Absurd. Absurd. We could also bail ourselves out and focus only on eternity and say we know what matters now. But life matters. We discuss this each year. Many churches focus so much on life beyond this world that they miss life in this world. They are so focused on getting to heaven or pointing other people to heaven that they endeavor to make it on earth as it is in heaven.

God has plans for us to experience eternal life, but also abundant life. He has plans for you in the here and now, and that is what Qoheleth is wrestling with. Assume he knows God loves him and assume he knows eternal life is offered. Assume he knows God has a plan. Yet, he still wrestles like many of you do in your quieter moments, and when the twists come, it makes you wrestle.

I want to show you a man who experienced the twist. A man whose life got more complicated. A man who I think could have written Ecclesiastes.

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/02/18/tending-the-garden-one-person-at-a-time/>

Ed Dobson died last week after 15 years with ALS. He went home, but before he went, he was given a twist that allowed him to know God like never before.

By the end of Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, you can see the set up for the book. Qoheleth has come to a major realization. He is coming to the end of his life and the world around is going to keep going. He has learned the dual nature that he matters so much to God and yet he also is rather inconsequential. What do you do with this absurd/beautiful life? What do you do when everything makes sense and then when nothing does?

You know, this is heavy stuff. I want to try another joke to lighten the mood. Don't worry, this time, it is much shorter.

Why did the chicken cross the road? He didn't, he never made it across because a brick flew by and hit him in the head.

As turns out, my first joke had a punch line. You just had to wait for it. You had to find it in a place you weren't looking. In fact, you didn't find it. It found you. You couldn't make sense of it because you didn't even have the full story. Life makes perfect sense. Life is absurd. Both of those phrases are true. Let's hold these in tension together because Life Matters.