



Living With the End in Mind Part 1 – Life Under the Sun Pastor Ted Cunningham

If you have your Bibles, turn to Ecclesiastes 1. We are going to be in a new series that is going to go for a while. We're going to work through Ecclesiastes, all twelve chapters. We're going to do four weeks, pause for Christmas, and then we're going to do a series called *What Child is This*, pick it back up in January and take it through the end of February. I love this book of the Bible. It deals with the realities of life and how you and I work through them.

Today, we're talking about *Life Under the Sun*. There are two words we want to take with us through this great book throughout all of our time studying it. It's the word, first of all, *pursuit*. What are you pursuing. Everybody in here is pursuing something. Some of you are pursuing a degree right now. Some of you are pursuing that job. Others are pursuing a guy or a girl; you're pursuing marriage. Some are pursuing retirement.

Everybody is pursuing something, but we can't just talk about pursuit; we also have to talk about *purpose*. We're going to see this idea today that everything is meaningless. Welcome to Woodland Hills Family Church; we're glad you're here. You're going to go, "What are we doing? This seems dark, pessimistic, fatalistic." No, this book is about gladness and joy... if you get pursuit and purpose right. If you understand there is nothing wrong with a job, nothing wrong with a degree, nothing wrong with a relationship, nothing wrong with retirement.

But if that is your end in mind, there are big problems. You're going to be completely and totally empty at the end of it. If your end in mind is you, if my end in mind is me, complete and total waste of time. I want Christ to be my pursuit. And when Christ is my pursuit, he brings purpose, meaning, to everything I do in life. Every relationship, every job, the bank account, how I earn money, save money, spend money to how I eat and drink. If Christ is my pursuit and purpose, there is meaning in all of that.

There are three phrases we are going to see repeated in this book. I want us to understand them so when they pop up, we're going to immediately know that context. "**Everything is meaningless.**" The idea here is utter emptiness without God. Not to go to the end of the book, but in Chapter 12... here we go. Fear God and keep his commandments. When he is the source of our worship, the end in mind, we fear and worship him, we rejoice in the good gifts that we have in life and that brings gladness to heart, which you are going to see over a dozen times in this book, and joy.

"**Under the Sun.**" We talk at this church a lot about *around the sun*. When someone celebrates a birthday in our family we always go, "Congratulations on another trip around the sun." Because that's

one year. "Here's to your next trip around the sun." Under the sun in Ecclesiastes means life upon this earth. We're going to see the burden that has been laid upon man with life under the sun.

"Chasing after the wind." I love this. Doesn't it sound like a Garth Brooks album? Chasing after the wind is this idea that we put so much energy into something and at the end of it, it's like, "That's not really what I thought it would be." Can anybody relate to that? "I thought the job... Once I hit that promotion and got there, I was going to be totally fulfilled." You're in it for two weeks and you're like, "Not at all what I thought it was going to be." I hear this a lot from people that retire to Branson. They worked 30 to 40 years, they get here, they're at Treasure Lake having a ball, but after about two months, they're like, "There's more to this." You're like, "Nope, this is it." I've talked to the folks that are like, "I've golfed, I've fished, I've golfed, I've fished... There's got to be something more." Well, golfing and fishing, that's great. It's not an end in mind. We can enjoy that.

Some of you work your whole life and you couldn't wait for the European vacation. Now you finally have the bucks to put it together, you're on a boat in Italy, and this is how you enjoy the entire boat ride – picture of a couple asleep on the boat. It's never quite what you thought it would be.

Or you've saved some money and you're finally able to get that Lamborghini. But now you're at an age you can't get in and out of that Lamborghini. You work so hard to pursue something, you get it, and it's not what you thought it would be.

Here's the reality we are going to start with in Chapter 1. **If a degree, job, house, money, pleasure, or making a name for myself is my end in mind, I am completely wasting my life.** Now, I don't want the students in here to go, "Do you hear that, Mom?" Do you hear that, Dad? That's a lot of money. That's a waste." If that's your end in mind, it's a waste.

I had a friend text me the other day. I thought he was joking, but then I realized he was serious. He texted me, "What's my purpose in life?" "This is a lot for a text. Should we get together for this? How's everything going? What happened?" He goes, "Someone just asked me what's the meaning of life and what's the purpose of life? Can you give it to me in one sentence?"

I quoted the Westminster catechism. Here's my purpose in life. "Man's chief purpose in life is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." When that's your end in mind? Fearing God, keeping his commandments, the worship of our Father in Heaven, brings purpose to the job. Pursuing Christ gives purpose to my education, my job, possessions, accomplishments, and relationships. Listen, money is not evil; it's the love of money, it's the pursuit of money with the end in mind, but when you are a steward of the resources, the possessions, the money that you have... Understand, you are just the manager of what God has given you. They are not for your chief end. They are to glorify God. It changes everything about how you pursue life and how you walk through life.

In Colossians 1: 16, we read, **16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.**

Pastor Rick Warren summarizes and gives his commentary of this verse simply by saying, "You were made by God and for God and until you understand that life will never make sense."

That's why some in here, if you've been pursuing something and you've thrown everything into it, that exerting of energy, that chasing after the wind idea, you've thrown so much into it, you've poured yourself into it to get to it and then be like, "I expected so much more. I expected the feeling would be different or that it would last longer." And you get this word – "fleeting." It's fleeting if that's the end in mind.

We're going to pick up in Ecclesiastes. Today, we are going to go through all 18 verses in Ecclesiastes 1. That's not a promise that we are going to hit every verse on Sunday morning, but I hope that you as an individual, you and your family, maybe you at work, in your small group will dive into this book over the next few months.

Ecclesiastes 1 – **1 The words of the Teacher, son of David...** So, we know this is Solomon. **king in Jerusalem: 2 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."** I have to be honest with you. In the first service... I call the first service the old people service. They were trekking with me in this message. "Yes, this is so good. You give it to the young generation." I'm kind of interested in what the 10:00 service is going to do, but then in our hangover service at 11:30, they are going to read Ecclesiastes 1 and be like, "Man, I wish I would have read that last night. It would have saved me this morning, that's for sure." But we said, this is an empty life apart from God. Apart from a relationship with Him. Utter emptiness.

3 What do people gain... Another way I like to write the word is "advantage." What advantage does a person have **...from all their labors...** From all this that we are doing here under the sun. What's our game, what's our advantage **...at which they toil under the sun?** I love the word toil. The word toil actually means grueling. You're going to see that as a theme throughout this book. Life is challenging under the sun. It can be very grueling, so what's the point here upon this earth. What are we toiling for and what's the advantage we have as we get through it? And then Verse 4 is going to set up the next few verses.

4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. Solomon is going to begin painting this picture of the earth as a grind. We're going to talk about the cycles, the patterns of life. Psalm 90: 10 says we are born into this, **we have 70 years, maybe 80 if your strength endures, but those years are filled with sorrow and anguish. We're gone and the earth remains forever.**

I was invited this week to participate in a small gathering of people passionate about marriage and family. I'm grateful for the Cathy Family of Chick-fil-A, the Lord's chicken, Bubba Cathy has a heart for marriage, and he always has. He invited about 60 – 70 of us together there outside of Atlanta to talk marriage and family. I was there Wednesday and Thursday and on Thursday, I was getting a cup of coffee. As I walked by, there were four old guys sitting there. I walked by, too intimidated to step into the group because, like my son Carson who is a huge NBA fan... So if Giannis and Luka and Michael Jordan were sitting right here, my son would be like, "If I could get in that group right there and talk..." That's what this group was to me: like the marriage and family gurus. I was just going to keep to myself

and walk by and one of the guys said, “Hey Ted, join us.” “I think I will.” So, I sat down at the deal. And because I have a mouth on me, this is my inner voice when I’m in a group that I am intimidated with... I just sat there the whole time going, *shut-up, shut-up, shut-up*. My inner voice was like, *don’t say anything, don’t say anything. Just listen.*

One of the guys was a consultant to Chick-fil-A, helping them transition the company from the second generation to the third generation. I sat there for an hour. I learned so much just keeping my mouth shut, which I think could be a good lesson for all of us as we go through Ecclesiastes. Mouth closed, ears open. At the end, they invited me in, and I go, “I only have one question about this generation two to generation three stuff. Will they be changing the sauce?” That’s all I had to add to the conversation. “Because generations come and generations go, but Chick-fil-A sauce remains forever. Let’s not touch the Chick-fil-A sauce.”

I was studying this whole text of Chapter 1. This movie that has had an impact on my life and I know many others in this room. It’s deep, profound, it’s Iron Man 2. I’m always looking for this theme. I don’t know if you remember this scene in the movie, but I grabbed onto it when Tony was under house arrest. I think it’s house arrest. I don’t know what you call it, but he’s not allowed to leave his home. He starts watching reels of his dad, Howard. His dad is doing commercials on these reels and talking about Stark Industries and all that.

You think the reel is over and then Howard steps back on and says, “Tony...” I get chills thinking about it because I don’t know if you’re doing videos for your kids after you’re gone. I am. I’m going to have a lot of them. I’m going to give them to a close friend who, after my death, is going to release them to my kids every few weeks or every few months. This is my plan. I’m doing it now. I got it from Iron Man 2. My videos, as you can imagine, will have some humor. I’ll whisper “Carson...” He’ll be like, “He’s speaking again from the grave.”

But Tony’s dad says, “I’m limited by the technology of my time, but you are going to learn some things.” What I want you to see is generations come and generations go... technology changes. I’m kind of at that season where I’m going to be an empty nester and then I have my parents. But you know every generation looks at the past generation and they’re like “y’all are ignorant.” Don’t we?

Last night I was at a gathering to show my kids something. I wanted to show them a video I saw. It took me 15 minutes to find it on my phone. My kids are like, “Dad, give me your phone.” But we tend to look at the older generation... The older generations in here have learned some things that I have not experienced yet. And it would do me well to sit around and listen. Because they’ve learned some things I haven’t experienced. But what we are going to see in Chapter 1 is what I experience I might think is brand new or that I’ve come up with something, something brand new. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

Then he jumps into this cycle. He’s going to give three word pictures from nature in Verses 5 – 7.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

You and I are a part of that thinking that we've got something new, we're experiencing something no one else has experienced. Nope.

7 All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. This is a pattern and cycle in life. What is Solomon trying to say? Not much changes. If you think your generation is experiencing something another generation has not, not much changes from generation to generation.

8 All things are wearisome, more than one can say. Solomon is going to give us this idea that this actually becomes a burden to think, *then why are we toiling under the sun?* What is the purpose of all this labor and work if we're not going to make an impact? **The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.** **9 What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.** Here he is speaking of temporal things that we pursue and that appetite we have to go after them. And the older you get, the more you realize there is no meaning and purpose with those if that's the end. And sometimes it takes years to figure that out. Hopefully, we don't have to wait years; we can let the Bible teach us and understand these patterns and cycles in life.

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. 11 No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them. This is a tough teaching. We probably would understand it by buildings and names on buildings. You've walked through buildings with names on them your whole life and you don't have a clue who that person is. At college, I walked through the dining hall. Two names were on it. I didn't know who those people were. We're going to read this again in Ecclesiastes 9. *Even their name is forgotten.* We go to great lengths to remember people's names, but ultimately, they will be forgotten. That is an empty pursuit if that is the end in mind.

Amy and I are on a presidential museum library tour. Last week, we were able to go to George W. Bush's library in Dallas. We walked in and it was a beautiful facility there on the campus of SMU. I was choked up immediately. All the feels going on in that tour. You walk in to 9/11. I just remember all that, but the way it was organized, laid out... Amy and I sat there and watched the movie. And then we moved from there into a perfectly scaled model of the Oval Office, and then you had this feeling of all the power and all that.

It was interesting because I came out to take a picture of the building. The sun was going down behind the building and I stepped back to take a picture of the George W. Bush Museum and Library. When I got back to the hotel that night and was scrolling through the pictures, the picture was so backlit I couldn't read the words on the building. I was like what a reality for all of us. George W. Bush would be a hard name to forget. Any of the presidents in recent history would be hard names to forget. But we're seeing here that if that is ultimately your pursuit, making a name, he says even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. So, most scholars believe this. We would call it a memoir or an autobiography. He's looking back on his life. What he did and what he watched others do.

He's like, "I just saw a lot of meaningless pursuit." I don't want to get to the end of my life and go, *that was meaningless. What I did there, that was for me.* It's not about me. It's not about you. That our pursuit and purpose would be Christ and then bring meaning to everything we do. And bring gratefulness for all the good gifts in life.

What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. So many people putting so much energy into this pursuit to get to the end and go, "This was not it."

And then Verse 15 is this axiom. ***15 What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.*** The idea here is that human effort and action cannot remedy the irregularities of life that we see. It's going to keep on going when I'm gone. So, there is more to this life than what is under the sun. My chief purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

16 I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." 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. No matter how much I study, no matter how much I learn, I'm not going to fix the patterns and irregularities of life. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. And that's why he ends with Verse 18.

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

There are some senior adults in here right now... I hear it from you all the time. You look around at those younger than you, shaking your head going I wish they would just get it. But sometimes we shake our head at them going "I just wish they'd learn this." Here's the reality. There are seniors in here you've experienced and learned, and you want to pass that on. I know I do. "I could save you a lot of heartache right now if you'd just get this." You get this idea of sorrow and grief. "I see the road you're on. I see the way you're pursuing life for you, making a name for you. Make as much money as you can. It's all about you. And this can bring great sadness to the heart."

But the opposite – gladness, joy, which is found throughout this entire book, is when we put our hope in Christ. Fear God, keep his commandments. Our joy comes from the Lord. Now, when I eat or drink in marriage, in relationship – chapter 4 – that we'll get to, whatever the seasons bring us – chapter 3. No matter what I'm going through, no matter who I'm with, no matter what I have, all of it can be enjoyed because ultimately my purposes are found in Christ.

So when I pray tonight and thank the Lord for our meal, it's not just, "Thank you for this food, amen." I quote the scripture – "we receive this with thanksgiving."

This week, as I was studying this on Thursday, I had no idea what was about to hit me. It was a very sacred echo for me. I was studying in my room and then I went back to dinner. After dinner, we went to a chapel. At chapel, we sat around and one of the legends in marriage and family, Bill Lokey. He's a therapist that we all love and God has used to minister to the next generation of marriage and family speakers and authors and all of that.

Bill Lokey came to this gathering. When I saw him in the afternoon, I didn't recognize him. That night, he and his closest friend in life, Bob Goff, sat down and just spent an hour talking about Bill and Bob's Excellent Adventure. The reason I didn't recognize Bill is because that's what four rounds of Chemo therapy will do to you. Bill had come to say goodbye to us. He was diagnosed a couple of years ago and the doctors had given him a couple of months.

I didn't have a tissues on me and I was just a mess. Bill decided that he didn't want his funeral after he died, he wanted to be a part of it, so he had his memorial service. He was there, in person. What a great idea. I'm going to do the same. Again, shows at 3:00 and 7:30. Come and we are going to have a ball.

You can imagine Bill sitting there sharing. No one was asking Bill how many books he sold or Bill, how much money did you make? It's at that moment, sitting there listening to a man at the end of his life, doctors telling him make sure you spend Christmas with his family because that's the last one." Everything in that moment makes sense. The stuff we're pursuing... Here's what I really found funny. The things we were talking about that morning, I couldn't care less what we were all going after. He's at that age where he would pause because of what Chemo does to the mind. He'd go, "Bob, why don't you talk for a little bit while I think about what I want to say next."

Before he left this life under the sun, he wanted to go to Bob's place in British Columbia. Bob has a lodge in British Columbia. I've heard of a lot of men and women who have gone there. When you show up to his lodge, there's a dock. It can be five people showing up at the lodge and Bob Goff has a full-on marching band out there doing their thing for those five people. Its very intimidating when you show up. Bill wanted to get out there to it. He lives on the water in British Columbia. He and Lori are coming across on the ferry and the music is playing. They hear it as they get closer. They were playing, "This is going to be the best day of my life." There's like 20 – 30 people on it. Bob's the first one out front doing all the dancing stuff. Bill steps off the boat onto the dock and whispered in Bob's ear, "This is what I'm preparing for right here," as he was comparing life on earth to life in heaven. He says, "Pretty soon, I'll be stepping off the boat, onto the dock. He says, "That's all this transition is."

And he's telling all these young whippersnappers, going, "What I've learned, now the reality is, life with Jesus and a few close friends, that's it. I wish you guys would learn that now and not at the end. I wish you'd live now with the end in mind rather than get to the end and realize..."

This isn't a series about regret. There's some in here 60, 70, maybe in their 80s who it's been a lot about you. That your end in mind would be exactly what Bill is saying. The joy this man has. I told my buddies as we got in a shuttle to go back to our room, "We just went to the house of mourning." We're going to read this when we get to Ecclesiastes 7, but I want to show it to you now. Ecclesiastes 7: 4 says, ***The heart of the wise is in the house of the mourning.*** When you go to a funeral – all that we're talking about the 12 weeks in this series – you think about all of that as you sit there. As you take to heart the death of a loved one, you're thinking about your life. And we don't want you to wait for the next funeral to think about your life. We want you to think about it right now. What's your end in mind? Is it you? Is it your job? Is it your money? Is it your house? Is it the degree you are pursuing? Don't let it be the

end in mind. It can be part of it, but let your pursuit be Christ and your purpose be Christ and bring meaning to all of that. We do not want you to live a meaningless life.

I go back to my room and I pray, I read over this again, going... My son was going to pick me up at the Kansas City Airport the next day. I was going to have some conversations with him about life. He had no idea what he was getting ready to get as I walked out of that terminal. I was in the house of mourning. But before I got to Carson, you want to talk about how the Lord works.

I shared this story earlier this year, but the gentleman who I was called to ministry under was Dr. James Merritt in Atlanta. I met him for the first time after 25 years. I was called to ministry at Liberty University under his ministry while he was there doing a weekend workshop. I stepped onto an elevator in Charleston, South Carolina, and I saw him for the first time. Again, it would be like my son stepping onto the elevator with Michael Jordan or Giannis or Luka. I stepped on the elevator and I was tongue tied. I couldn't put two sentences together. He was like, "Are you okay? Can We help you?" I said, "Dr. Merritt, I was called to ministry under you. I wrote you once to say thank you and now I get to do a face to face. Thank you." I was getting ready to go do comedy for him and his group. I get up and I'm about to cry and I'm tongue tied. And they are like, "This is the worst comedian ever."

I get to the Atlanta Airport... I'm not exaggerating like some preachers do. There were thousands and thousands of people waiting to go through TSA. It was one of those things where the lines were backed up to a hallway, they break the line and start it again, etc. I go to precheck and the lines are long. I get through and I'm a little exasperated. I'm putting my belt on because you know you get naked before the security thing, and you get dressed on the other side of security.

I'm putting my belt on, I look over and Dr. James Merritt is standing right there. I go, "Dr. Merritt." He goes, "Ted!" I'm like, *he knows my name*. I said, "Yeah, we met in April..." He goes, "Ted, I know. I have you speaking at my mountaintop event." He does an even here in Branson. We're talking and I'm shaking around him. He ends with grabbing my face. We're at the TSA line at the Atlanta Airport. He grabs my face with both hands and I'm sitting there going *okay, here it is; I'm going to get the blessing right here at TSA with my pants...* I don't know if they are fully zipped, but I'm 100% going with this.

Do you know what he says to me with his hands on my face? He says, "Hey Ted, don't die before next year." That's all I got. He's gone and I'm still standing there. Amy's didn't know any of this until after last service. I was just too emotional to talk about all of it because I don't want to wait for a house of mourning to have a heart of wisdom. I want to learn all of this now. I want to live for what really matters. I want to live with the end in mind.

After we said our goodbyes to Bill and gathered around him and prayed over him, we worshiped together. I don't know about you, but I think I've had a hard time praying and worshiping lately; I get pretty emotional. But three rows behind Bill to see him with his palms held upward, worshiping... And then we sing this song that I'm going to try to sing, but then I'm probably going to have to just say it. Bill is standing there soon to step off the boat onto the dock. "*I love you Lord for your mercy never fails me. All my days I've been held in your hands. From the moment that I wake up until I lay my head, oh I will sing of the goodness of God.*"