

Men *of the* **Word**

Searching for Significance

A Study in
Ecclesiastes

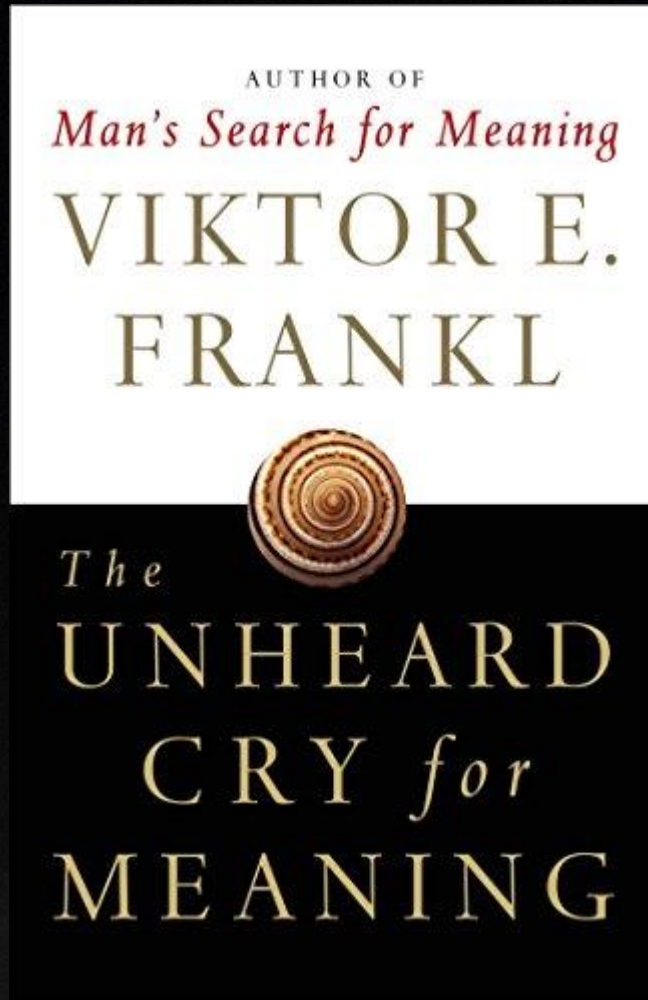
Wednesdays, 7–9 pm
Worship Center

Life outside the Garden

Ecclesiastes 1:2–11

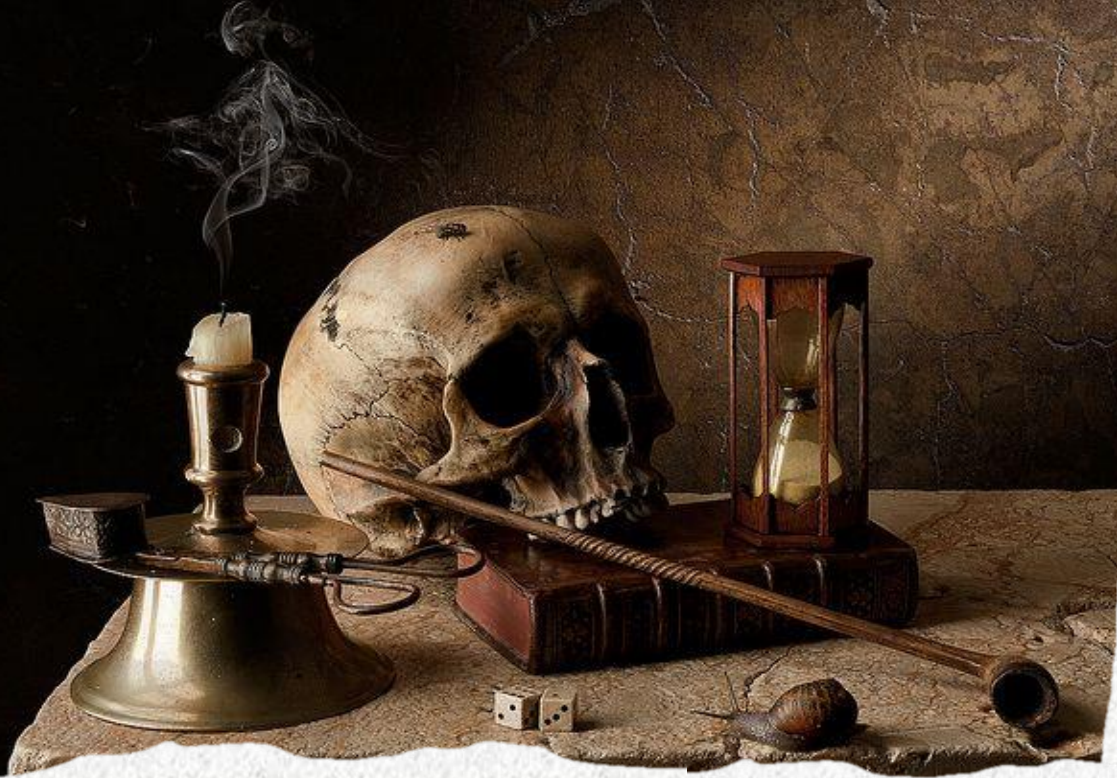
“At an American university, 60 students who had attempted suicide were screened afterward, and 85 percent said the reason had been that ‘life seemed meaningless.’ Most important, however, 93 percent of these students suffering from the apparent meaningless of life ‘were actively engaged socially, were performing well academically, and were on good terms with their family groups.’ What we have here, I would say, is an unheard cry for meaning, and it certainly is not limited to only one university. Consider the staggering suicide rates among American college students, second only to traffic accidents as the most frequent cause of death. Suicide *attempts* might be fifteen times more frequent.

—Viktor Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, 20–21



“This happens in the midst of affluent societies and in the midst of welfare states! For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the *struggle for survival* has subsided, the question has emerged: *survival for what?* Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.”

—Viktor Frankl, *Unheard Cry for Meaning*, 21



I. The Transience of Human Endeavor Asserted

Ecclesiastes 1:2

*"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,
"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."*

- Solomon delivers an immediate and shocking declaration.
- The meaning of the assertion rests on the definition of the Hebrew term הֶבֶל (*hebel*), “vanity,” which is found 5 times in a sentence of 8 Hebrew words (1:2).
- The term is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes, and only 35 times in the rest of the Old Testament.
- How one understands this term largely determines how one understands the tone of Ecclesiastes.
- Our English translation of *hebel* as “vanity” is largely due to the influence of Jerome (c. 342–420), who translated the term in the Latin Vulgate as *vanitas*, meaning “worthless” or “futile.”

Vanitas painting



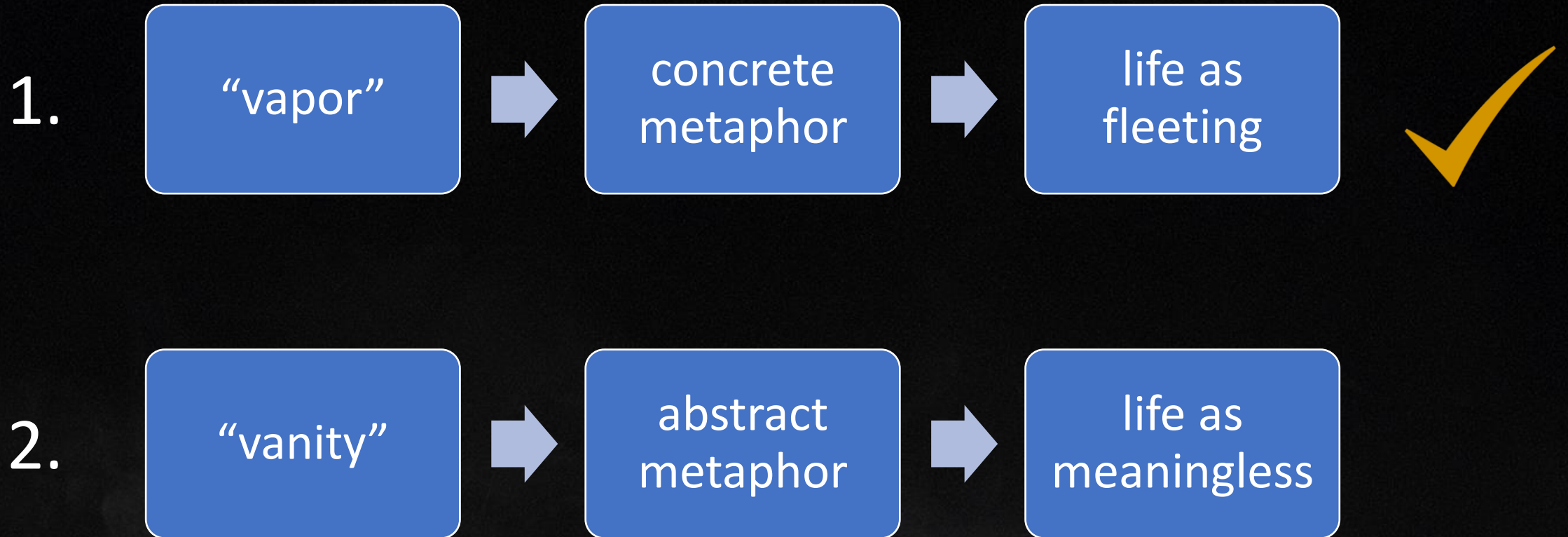
- The basic meaning of the term הֶבֶל (*hebel*) is *a puff of air, a breath, a vapor, a mist.*



- **Job 7:16** – “I waste away; I will not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are *but a breath.*”
- **Psalm 39:5** – “Behold, You have made my days *as* handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; surely every man at his best is a mere breath.”
- **Psalm 144:4** – “Man is like a mere breath; his days are like a passing shadow.”

- The term הֶבֶל (*hebel*) can possess more of a *moral* connotation (“vain,” “futile,” “absurd”), but that occurs when supplied by the surrounding context.
- **2 Kings 17:15** – “They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain, and *went* after the nations which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD had commanded them not to do like them.”
- **Jeremiah 10:8, 15** – “But they are altogether stupid and foolish *in their* discipline of delusion—their idol is wood! . . . They are worthless, a work of mockery; in the time of their punishment they will perish.”

Hebel definition

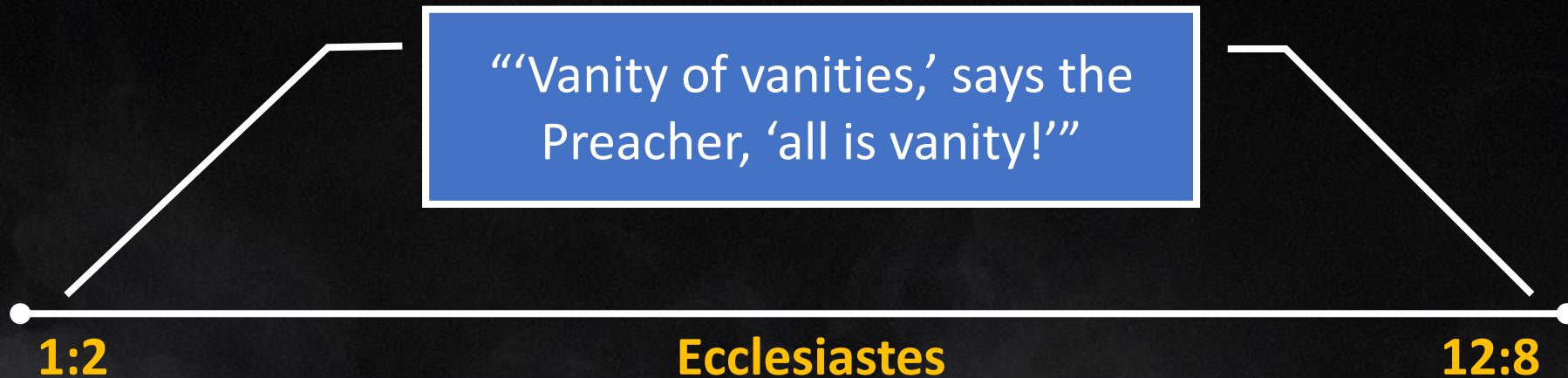



- **Proverbs 31:30** – “Charm is deceitful and beauty is *hebel*, fleeting.”
- **Ecclesiastes 9:9** – “Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.”
- **Ecclesiastes 11:10** – “So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.”
- Understanding הֶבֶל (*hebel*) as a concrete metaphor (“vapor”) best harmonizes with the metaphor “under the sun” (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11; etc.).
- Understanding הֶבֶל (*hebel*) as “vapor” (i.e., “fleeting”) best harmonizes with the “Seize the day!” texts (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 8:15; 9:7–9).

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”

—James 4:13–14

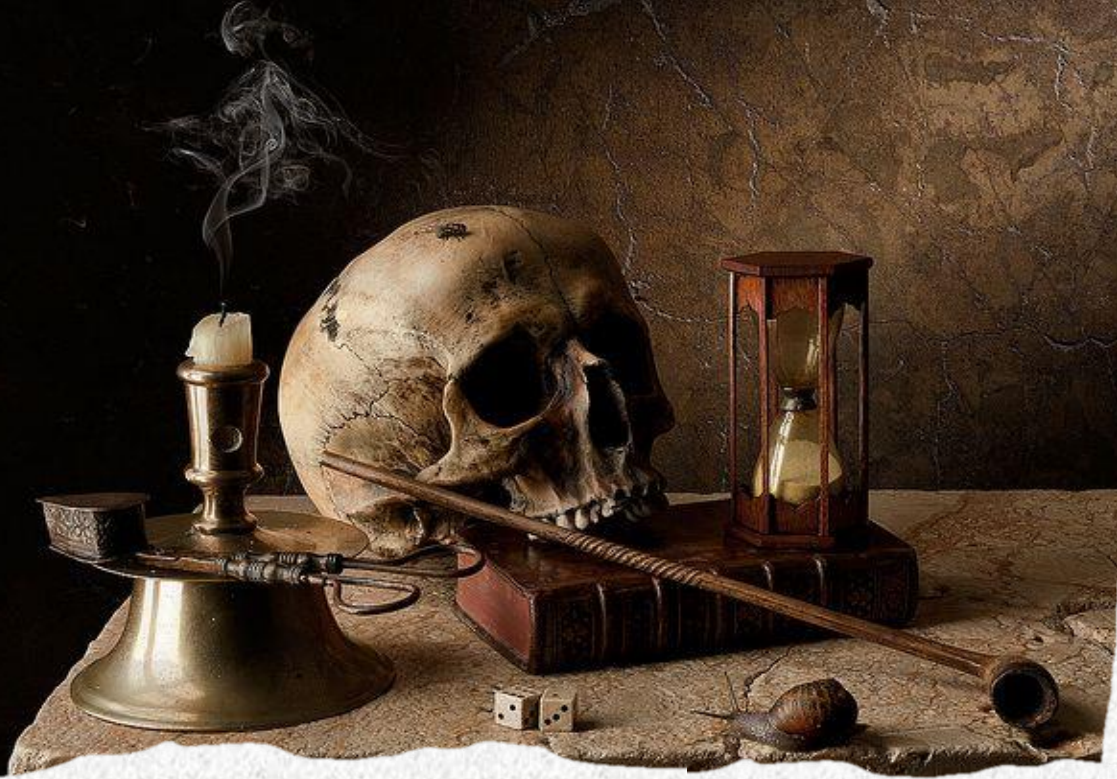
- In the most intense, captivating language possible, Solomon asserts that all human life and endeavor is *but a vapor*.
- **“Vanity of vanities . . . Vanity of vanities”** – “utterly transitory . . . the merest of breaths!”
- **“All is vanity”** – “exhaustively transitory . . . everything is a breath!”





“Deeply impressed with the brevity of
man’s life, and with the conviction that
no human effort can protract man’s
existence here, Coheleth denounces, in
the most intense language imaginable,
all undue exertions to satisfy the
cravings of the soul.”

—C. D. Ginsberg, *Coheleth*, 259



II. The Transience of Human Endeavor Illustrated

Ecclesiastes 1:3–8

*"What advantage does man have in all his work
which he does under the sun?*

A generation goes and a generation comes"

- Solomon restates the assertion of v. 2 as a rhetorical question.
- **Ecclesiastes 1:3** – “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?”
- **“Advantage”** – “net gain, surplus, profit,” that which is acquired over a set duration of time (used 14 times in Ecclesiastes).
- **“All his work”** – all of man’s *endeavors and pursuits* in life – the definition of “all” in v. 2 (“All is a vapor!”—i.e., “all his work”).
- **“Under the sun”** – the period of time *from birth to death* (used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else).
- Man does not enjoy endless pursuits; there comes a time of reckoning—of reconciling accounts: *death*.

“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

—Genesis 3:17–19



“Death confiscates everything we have
ever gained in this world.”

—Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 18

- **Ecclesiastes 1:4** – “A generation goes and a generation comes, but . . .



- “Man, with all his ploddings, cannot protract his short continuance; generation after generation drops off the tree of life” (Ginsberg, *Coheleth*, 260).
- To illustrate the transience of life, Solomon contrasts man’s life with the most basic elements of creation.
- Solomon chooses four: *earth, sun, wind, and water*.

1. **The earth:** “A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (1:4).

- Man’s transience is contrasted with the *permanence* of his own abode.
- That over which man was to have dominion is now that which outlasts man by far.

2. **The sun:** “Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there again” (1:5).

- Man’s transience is contrasted with the *repetitiveness* and *predictability* of the sun under which he lives.
- Man lives and dies—he never returns for a repeat.

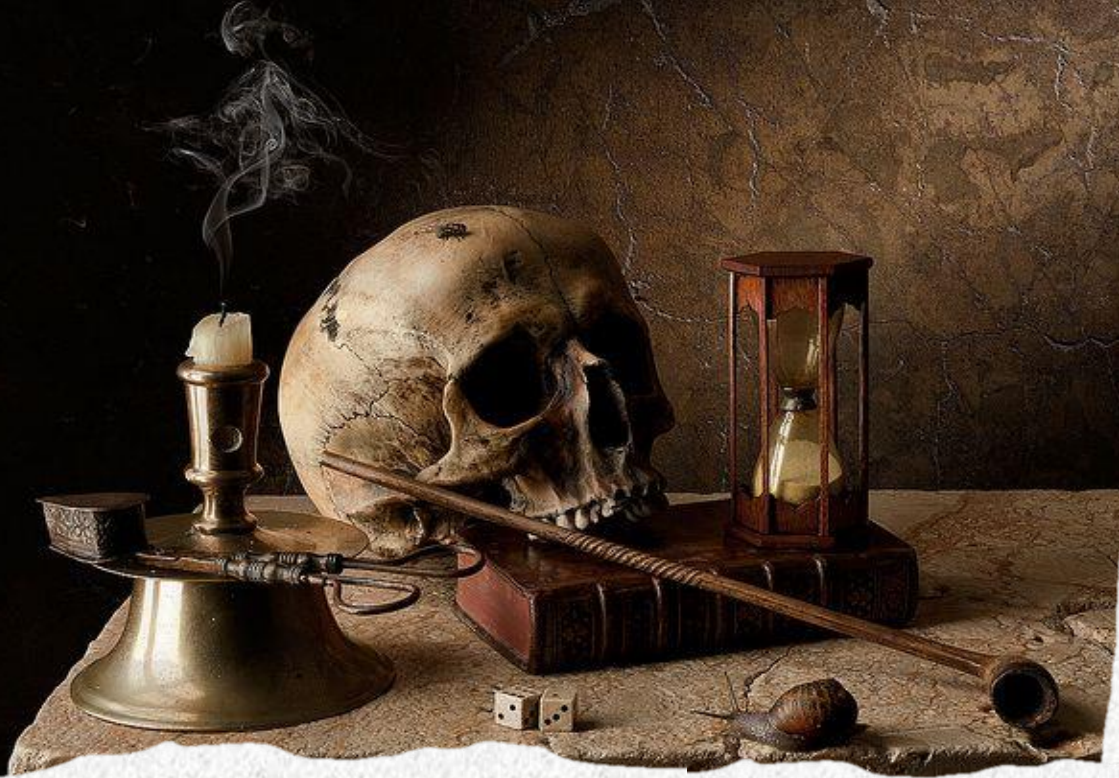
3. The wind: “Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; and on its circular courses the wind returns” (1:6).

- Man’s transience is contrasted with the wind’s *unimpeded continuity*.
- The winds always prevail; it blows the same dust to which man returns.

4. The water: “All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again” (1:7).

- Man’s transience is contrasted with the constant *cycle of hydrology*.
- Man never steps in the same river twice—because he changes.

- **Ecclesiastes 1:8** – “All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.”
- Man is never able to get to the end of these constant cycles of creation—he is wearied trying to grasp them, and in the end loses whatever grip he had.
- “Telling . . . seeing . . . hearing” over and over never brings the teller, seer, or hearer final satisfaction.
- “The pleasure of these senses is so blunted by the same objects constantly presented, that they are prickled with further desire of new objects of delight” (Ginsberg, *Coheleth*, 264).
- The sun will go on to shine another day; we return to dust.



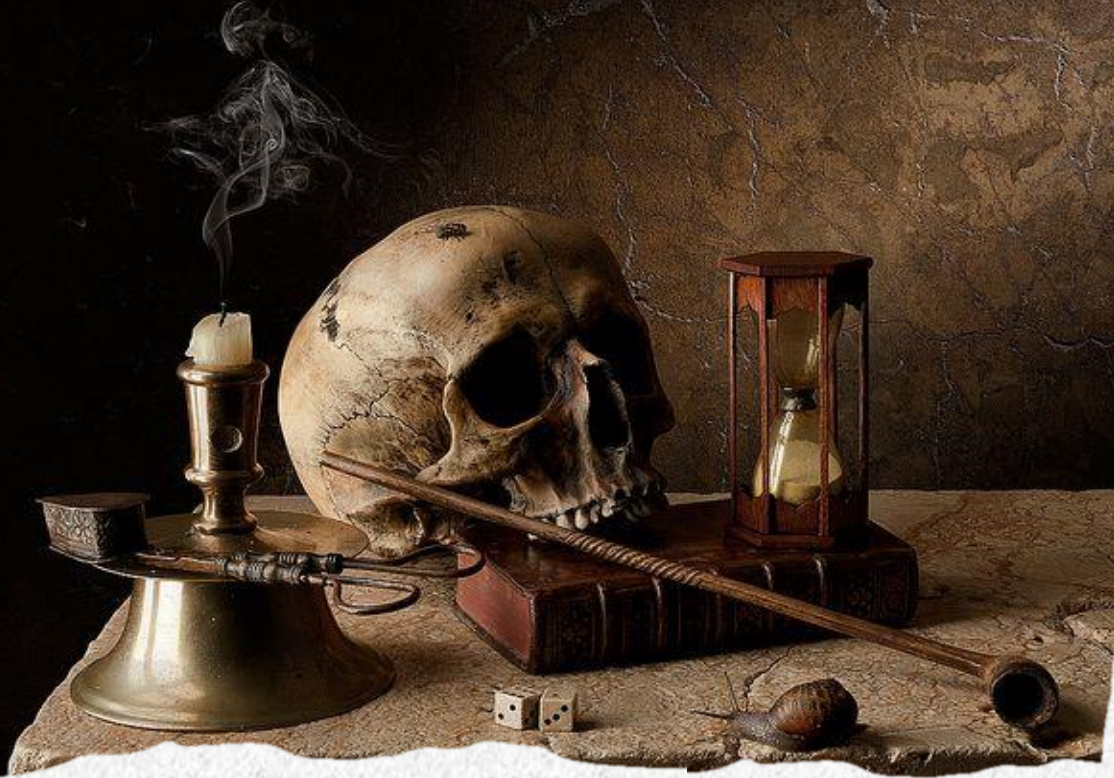
III. The Transience of Human Endeavor Defended

Ecclesiastes 1:9–11

*“That which has been is that which will be,
and that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun”*

- Solomon anticipates objections to his assertion and illustrations, and so provides three answers:
- *Objection 1*: “Doesn’t each generation bring progress?”
- *Answer*: **Ecclesiastes 1:9** – “That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun.”
- *History does repeat itself*. The same fundamental experiences continue to be shared by each generation.

- *Objection 2:* “Don’t new inventions mean this transience will change?”
- *Answer:* **Ecclesiastes 1:10** – “Is there anything of which one might say, ‘See this, it is new’? Already it has existed for ages which were before us.”
- We’re just rearranging the same building blocks. Innovation cannot change man’s basic problems.
- *Objection 3:* “Doesn’t man live on in the memories of his descendants?”
- *Answer:* **Ecclesiastes 1:11** – “There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur, there will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.”
- Every man is forgotten.



Hear the Preacher!

1. **Prepare:** Get ready to die; death will come sooner than you think.
2. **Learn:** Draw the right lessons; your life is not over yet.
3. **Live:** Live for that which lasts, not for that which death destroys.

“Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done
when I come to die.”

—Jonathan Edwards, Resolution #17

A black and white photograph of an open book with a hand turning a page. The background is dark, and the text is overlaid in white. The book is open, showing the pages, and a hand is visible on the left side, turning a page. The text "Men of the Word" is overlaid in the center.

Men *of the* Word

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm | gracechurch.org/motw