

Life Without God is Meaningless

We come to song #3, and the midpoint in our Rockin' the Gospel series. We've been to the late 60s. Last week we were in the 2020s, but now we are jumping back to 1977 to what is in my opinion one of the most beautiful songs ever written, and it almost didn't happen.

The song was written by one of the band's guitarists who was practicing a fingerpicking exercise to become a better guitarist. He'd set up a makeshift studio in the kitchen and His wife walked through and heard what he was doing and thought it was a beautiful melody. She encouraged him to write some lyrics to go along with it. He was reluctant at first, because the song was such a departure from his band's signature sound. After some cajoling, however, he recorded a rough demo.

He was still hesitant to play the song for the band, but when he did, they sat in stunned silence. They finally asked him, "Kerry, where has this been?" Even in its rawest form, the whole band knew this was their next hit song. It was a late addition to their newest album. The label however had other plans and released the album's title track instead which underperformed the band's previous hit, and quickly dropped out of the top 40.

However, Kerry Livgren's song was so powerful and moving, DJs around the country began playing it even without a formal release. The label rushed *Dust in the Wind* out as the next single and it became Kansas' greatest hit. The song peaked at number 6 in April of 1978 and remained on the charts for several weeks. However, the song's staying power has a legacy that far outreaches its initial chart success. It is perhaps the most famous acoustic rock song ever recorded.

(Play song snippet)

Dust in the Wind is a beautiful lament. Kansas had achieved both fame and fortune, but the song's writer, Kerry Livgren, felt a hole in his life that no amount of success or money could fill. He realized that in the end his achievements would get him nothing. He would still die like everyone else.

Kerry says he was a classic religious seeker calling himself "a charter member of the religion of the month club." He had been searching for spiritual meaning ever since losing his grandmother and a best friend at the age of nine.

In Kansas' early years, Livgren explored eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. He devoured a bizarre assortment of books on spirituality, including the Chinese Book of Changes and the rather bizarre Urantia book. If you listen to the band's lyrics, Livgren's spiritual seeking is clearly evident. Around the time of writing *Dust in the Wind*, Livgren had been reading a book of Native American spirituality which had the line, "All we are is dust in the wind."

Everything is Dust – The Wisdom (and foolishness) of King Solomon

This idea resonated with him. It was later when he realized the song's meaning was the same as the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. Eccl. 3:20 declares, *"All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return."* An oft repeated refrain in Ecclesiastes is *"Everything is meaningless. A chasing after the wind."* Same basic idea as, *"All we are is dust in the wind."*

It's discovering the same truth that King Solomon had discovered 3,000 years earlier – that life without God is meaningless, no matter where you search for significance. Ten centuries before Jesus, King Solomon reigned as Israel's 3rd king. He inherited the throne from his father, David. Initially, Solomon built on the faith of his Father and Israel grew in both wealth and power.

Solomon's success came from his God-given wisdom. God had offered Solomon anything he asked for, but instead of wealth or honor, Solomon simply asked God for a "discerning heart" to rule over God's people. Because of his humble request, God granted Solomon not only a great wisdom that surpassed all others, but also all of the other things he could have asked for.

Israel became a superpower in the Middle East. The kingdom abounded in wealth. Nobody opposed them politically or militarily. Solomon's influence spread to the furthest reaches of the known world as other rulers sought out his unparalleled insight.

With his God-given success, Solomon became arrogant. Despite his great wisdom, Solomon became a great fool. He had a weakness for women. He took many wives and concubines. Many of these were political and diplomatic arrangements as it was common in that era to use political marriages to secure alliances and trade deals. Most of these marriages went against God's commands, as they were outside of the Jewish faith. Solomon may have had great wisdom, but he wasn't above God's law.

1 Kings 11:4 says, *"As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been."*

This led to a time of wandering for Solomon where he chased after all of these other pursuits. He approached all of this foolishness with his divine discernment still intact. He applied it with a studied analysis. He evaluated, he measured, he charted just how much happiness and meaning each activity added to his life.

He pursued work and professional accomplishment. He filled his mind with education and knowledge. He poured his life into the pursuit of excessive pleasure. He lost himself in drink and revelry. He achieved great things – things that would impress, wealth and possessions that would be the envy of everyone.

Eventually though, each and every pursuit left Solomon feeling empty. It didn't matter which ladder he chose to climb, they all seemed to be leaning against nothing. He realized how meaningless every pursuit was without putting God first. Finally, Solomon repented of his sin, renounced his idols, and returned to his relationship with God.

The book of Ecclesiastes is his memoir of his wandering years.

Message of Ecclesiastes

The book opens with his big idea, *“Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”* Doesn’t exactly sound like a positive pick-me-up and yet people dealing with the blues have had an affinity for this book for 3,000 years. Sad people sing sad songs, and Ecclesiastes strikes that chord in the human heart.

The first several chapters of Ecclesiastes are an unfolding of this idea that all of life’s pursuits are a meaningless chasing after the wind.

Education is Meaningless

Maybe meaning is to be found in education and acquiring of knowledge. What does Solomon say?

I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens...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.’

What is his conclusion, *“For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”* He concludes that by itself education is nothing more than a chasing after the wind. Later, he declares, *“Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.”* All of the kids doing too much homework declare...Amen!

Pleasure is Meaningless

Next, Solomon turns his eye toward pleasure. Maybe the meaning of life is having a good time. He went after every hedonistic delight. *“I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless.”* He indulged the finest wines the world had to offer. He partied with everyone who really knew how to have a good time. He took for himself every woman he found desirable.

Solomon writes in Eccl. 2,

*10I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my labor,
and this was the reward for all my toil.
11Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.*

Career is Meaningless

Many think life’s fulfillment is to be found in a successful career. If you work hard enough, long

enough and accomplish enough, then life will mean something then, right? Again, Solomon says, No. it doesn't. He tried that too. He says,

“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

You can't take it with you. Later, Solomon observes, *“I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”* How much of our lives are wasted trying to compete with and keep up with someone else?

Money is Meaningless

Of wealth Solomon says, *“Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them.”* You can be rich, but to be truly wealthy you need the things money can't buy. It is never worth it to make lots of money at the expense of things that are priceless.

Solomon isn't the Only One

Solomon was the first to figure out the truth of what Kerry Livgren would learn in the late 70s. It's the same lesson many others have learned too. I remember writing down this quote from Tom Brady years ago. He was being interviewed by Steve Croft on 60 Minutes. This is when he was only 3 Super Bowl rings into his unequalled 7. I've thought a lot about this quote over the last couple of years when Brady retired, then unretired, even when it could cost him his marriage, and then he retired again.

Here's what Brady said, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what it is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think, ‘God, it's got to be more than this.’ I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be.” Here is a man who achieved everything he ever wanted and it wasn't what he wanted.

Eric Pierce spent 15 years of his life climbing the career ladder of business success. He went from programmer to consultant to management. He had larger and larger teams under his direction. He got bigger raises, higher bonuses, and generous stock options. Listen to what Eric writes,

I was being groomed for bigger and therefore better things. I was in million-dollar negotiations and had the skinny on sensitive information. I was on the inside...The higher I climbed, the more I realized there was nothing waiting at the top but more responsibility and less interesting work. And worse, I'd betrayed my true self in pursuit of something impossible to catch.

Dr. Suzanne Gelb recalls a time when she was 16 she achieved something she had devoted

years to accomplish. She won both the Ballet and Modern Dance Championships. Her huge win was celebrated by a half-page picture in her hometown paper. She was celebrated with cheers, compliments and flowers. She describes it as a total blur.

With so much adoration, Suzanne said she felt like a champion “for about an hour.” But listen to this.

But what I remember most about that night was the way I felt after all the hysteria had died down. How I felt at bedtime, after my family had gone to sleep. Alone in my room. So lonely, anxious . . . and empty.

I spent hours lying there alone in the dark, until the emptiness became unbearable...So that’s how I celebrated my incredible, history-making double-victory: bingeing alone in my room, soothing myself with food.

Here’s how Solomon put it. *“It’s all meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”* Here’s how Kerry Livgren put it, *“All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see. Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind.”* Here’s how our Lord’s half-brother puts it in James 4:14, *“What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”*

How many people spend so much of their lives to reach some place in their career, in their education, in their accomplishments, in their recognition, in their financial stability, only to realize once they get there, that it’s not really where they wanted to be? They finally get that corner office and that plaque on their desk, they get that MBA or that PhD. They get that million dollar portfolio. They get that title. They win that award, and their heart is still empty.

Solomon’s Practical Life Wisdom

Solomon does discover some practical life lessons along the way. These are life lessons that are as true today as they were 3,000 years ago. He recommends that we should work hard and enjoy what we can while we can in whatever lot in life God has given us.

This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. 19Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.

Solomon concludes that it is good to obey the king, to show respect for those in authority, and stand up for what is just. We should treat all people fairly because death is the common destiny for all of us. He tells us that wisdom is to be treasured more than strength or power. Might does not make right in Solomon’s book.

Solomon also offers sound investment advice. He encourages a diversified portfolio - *“invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.”* He’s saying don’t put all your eggs in one basket. He recommends patience as you grow your money

- *“ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.”* I’ve read the exact same investment advice from Warren Buffett.

He also challenges not to forget God in our younger days. He reminds us that we will be judged for all the wild oats we may sow in our youth. Instead, Solomon says, *“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them.’”* Young people, now is the time to love God, don’t wait until later. That’s not something to put off until you are older. You will regret it.

The Bottom Line

Here’s how Solomon sums it all up, *“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.”*

All of life’s pursuits apart from God are meaningless, nothing more than dust in the wind. But if you put God first, then there is meaning and joy to be found in all of life. Work and all its rewards are a blessing. Marriage and the pleasure of your lover becomes a lasting joy. True accomplishment takes on eternal significance. The Gospel multiplies life.

I think too often too many people look at the decision to follow Jesus as a choice between enjoying this life and putting all your hope in the next life. But that’s misses the point. Following Jesus isn’t just about the next life. It isn’t pie-in-the-sky, bury your head in the sand, I’m just in heaven’s waiting room. Faith in Christ is the key to unlocking this life.

Jesus is good news for not just for the next world, but also for this world.

The Rest of Kerry’s Story

Following the success of Dust in the Wind, Kansas became one of the top rock and roll acts in the country right up there with the likes of Led Zepplin and Pink Floyd. They were selling out arenas around the country. And yet Livgren’s search continued, even as his emptiness deepened.

In 1979, Kansas was touring their new album Monolith. Kansas was touring with a band called LeRoux. Their lead singer was a guy by the name of Jeff Pollard who was a Christian. They would visit about Jesus and the Bible for hours on the tour bus after shows. Jeff Pollard agreed to read one of Livgren’s spiritual books if Livgren would read the Bible. The door to Kerry’s heart began to open.

On July 25, 1979 Kansas played a show in Indianapolis. Things began to boil over for Kerry Livgren that night. During the early morning hours, in his hotel room, Livgren sat there with all his spiritual books and the Bible all open before him. With tears flowing, he prayed, “Lord, if Jesus Christ is your Son, then I want to know Him. If He really is the living God, my Redeemer and my Lord, then I want to serve Him with all my heart.”

At that very moment, Livgren says, “the Holy Spirit overcame me, and I was laughing and crying and felt that the huge weight on my shoulders was suddenly taken away forever.” Livgren points to that moment as the pivotal point in his life “I’ve been a Christian since July 25, 1979 at 3 am.”

About a year later, Kerry Livgren made an appearance at a Christian radio station where he met a Christian fan who still had his ticket stub to that July 1979 show in Indianapolis. He explained to Kerry how that night he felt compelled to pray for him during the show and that he had prayed so hard that he left the concert in tears. When this fan later found out that this was the night that Kerry surrendered his life to Jesus, he had carried the ticket around in his pocket ever since and continued praying for him.

Kerry Livgren found that over years, many of Kansas’ Christian fans could tell from his lyrics that he was spiritually searching. These devoted Kansas fans had been fervently praying for Kerry and that he would truly find Jesus.

Kerry Livgren’s life was forever changed for the better. That doesn’t mean that suddenly Kansas had a string of number one songs. In fact, life in Kansas became a lot more difficult. In all of his religious dalliances, the band had no problem with Kerry’s spiritual pursuits, but things changed when he found Jesus. Livgren states,

When I was a Buddhist they didn't care, and with Hinduism there was really no friction. But the minute there was the faintest aroma of Jesus, I began to see fireworks. At first they thought it was another phase I would go through, but it wasn't. I came on hard and fast right out of the box. I might have handled it differently, but in any case it was a point of division. A lot of people think I left because of my faith, which is not really true. By the time I left, Steve [Walsh], our singer, had left because he could no longer handle the lyrics. Shortly thereafter the violinist was gone, and it was time for me to move on.

The ironic thing is that even after both singer Steve Walsh and Kerry Livgren left the band over matters of faith, he was replaced by singer John Elefante, who was also a Christian.

Kerry Livgren went on to pursue artistic endeavors that allowed him to serve Jesus. He has, on occasion, rejoined his former bandmates to play, write and perform. However, he still follows Jesus as His Lord and Savior and the Gospel of Jesus Christ still takes center stage in his life.

For those of you who are classic and prog-rock fans can check out what Kerry Livgren did after becoming a Christian by searching for his solo works.

Let me close with this thought. In digging into Kerry Livgren’s story and reading and watching interviews, I was really struck by this idea of all these Christian fans of Kansas praying for their favorite songwriter. The Holy Spirit brought this question to my mind – How often do you pray for artists you enjoy? Some of my favorite artists are already believers, but many are not. For

example, I love the music of The Smashing Pumpkins. I know from interviews that their primary songwriter, Billy Corgan, is spiritually searching, but how often have I prayed for the salvation of his soul? Tom Petty, one of my all-time favorites died a few years ago. I'm pretty sure he didn't know Jesus. I never prayed for him.

How about you? How often do you pray for the artists whose work you enjoy— actors, authors, singers? What if we prayed for Tom Cruise and he met Jesus and left Scientology behind? What if we prayed for Stephen King and Jesus came into his life in a most unexpected way. Then he could write a book where the Christian character wasn't complete looney tunes?

What if Christian fans prayed for the Weeknd, for Billie Eilish, for Ed Sheeran so that they would have life changing encounters with their Creator and Ed Sheeran could write a love song different than any he's ever written before- about the lover of his soul.

Close the sermon by having people praying for a favorite artist.

I close my eyes

Only for a moment and the moment's gone

All my dreams

Pass before my eyes, a curiosity

[Chorus]

Dust in the wind

All they are is dust in the wind

[Verse 2]

Same old song

Just a drop of water in an endless sea

All we do

Crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see

[Chorus]

Dust in the wind

All we are is dust in the wind

[Verse 3]

Now, don't hang on

Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky

It slips away

And all your money won't another minute buy

[Chorus]

Dust in the wind

All we are is dust in the wind (All we are is dust in the wind)

Dust in the wind (Everything is dust in the wind)

Everything is dust in the wind

The song actually comes from a Biblical reference in the book of Ecclesiastes "Everything is meaningless – like a chasing after the wind." It also recalls Genesis 3:19 "for you are from dust and to dust you shall return."

Kerry Livgren devised the guitar line from a finger picking exercise he was practicing to become a better guitarist. His wife heard what he was doing and thought it was a beautiful melody, and encouraged him to write lyrics to go with it. Livgren was uncertain about introducing the song to the rest of the band since it was such a departure from the band's signature sound.

When he finally played the song for them, they sat in stunned silence. They finally asked "Kerry, where has this been?" Even in its barest, rawest form, the whole band knew this was their next single. The label however had other ideas and release their new album's title track "Point of Know Return."

The song was so powerful, however, that DJs across the country began playing the track even without a formal release. When Point of Know Return quickly dropped out of the top 40, they rush-released "Dust in the Wind" which hit number 6 and remained in the top 10 for seven weeks.