

Ecclesiastes: Bursting our bubbles

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[0 : 0 0] hey perhaps you can turn with me in your vinyls if you have one your device if you have one to the book of ecclesiastes and this old testament wisdom book we're going to be in this book for the next couple of months there or thereabouts this book which was written either by king solomon or at the very least by someone who's taken lessons from the life of king solomon and looking to give us wisdom uh j.i. akadam's book knowing god is really a helpful picture on how wisdom works in the book of ecclesiastes it says it's like the wisdom you get when you're learning to drive and some of us that's very fresh in our memories when you're learning to drive you don't find the driving instructor giving you information on here's why there's a crossroads here here's why they decided to put that awkward corner in the road rather a driving instructor is looking to give you wisdom to navigate well the various twists and turns and corners and the various obstacles or hazards that might come along the way wisdom for how to live well when sometimes life is complicated confusing and it surprises take us aback that's the wisdom that we'll find in ecclesiastes helping us to know how do we live well under the sun in this life in the way of eternity so let's read together the introduction which we find in the first 11 verses and here we're going to find our teacher here and beginning to burst some of our bubbles a pattern that we'll see repeat so again let's hear the word of the lord the words of the teacher son of david king of jerusalem vanity vanity says the teacher utter vanity everything is vanity what do people gain from all their labors of which they toil under the sun generations come and generations go but the earth remains forever the sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises the wind blows to the south and turns to the north round and round it goes ever returning on its course all streams flow into the sea and the sea is never full to the place the streams come from there they return again all things are weavesome more than more than one can say the eye never has enough of seeing nor the ear is filled with hearing what has been will be again what has been done will be done again there is nothing new under this earth is there anything which one can say look this is something new it was here already long ago it was here before our time no one remembers the former generations and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them amen and let's begin here remembering times when we have played or we've seen children play make believe perhaps you can think about children playing with lego or with dolls and perhaps dressing up and creating a make believe world a world in which they're in total control in which they can control

carefully everything that is going on some of us we probably loved that as children it's a fun activity but it's not real life is it because we don't know that that real life is far more complicated than that it's far more messy than that and we live in a world where one phone call can change our lives forever and there's a danger if we don't recognize that and we try and live in a fantasy land and what happens is we sort of carefully construct our world and it's like creating sandcastles off the beach because we know that one day the waves will come that those carefully made plans will be welcome crashing down at a moment when we do not expect it and that's where the book of ecclesiastes and the teacher here that come to us as a surprising gift because they he prepares us for that and that's the stage in which he's he's bursting those bubbles he's providing a reality check for us to help us here in so many ways you and i we are not in control we are not self-sufficient light does not come with guaranteed certainty this book very much reminds me of uh the the muriel spark book mental glory which some of you may have read there is a theme a recurring theme within that clock where a selection of different elderly folks get an unsettling telephone call they pick up the phone and all they hear is a voice saying remember you will die and then the bone goes silent our teacher here is pushing us and probing us and helping us to examine some of the big questions of life so that we would remember that we would die to live in light of our death and the reality of eternity if we allow him this teacher will will question and will speak and will help each one

of us to reflect perhaps to get a new balance or perspective perhaps we have that tendency to imagine that life was only lived on the horizontal and we lose sight of the reality of god where we're only focused on on the stuff of life whether that's success or whether that's material possessions and we lose sight of the reality of the spiritual and the eternal if we find ourselves pursuing all of our gain placing all our hopes and what does not last and this teacher comes and speaks a word that we need to hear ancient wisdom but hugely relevant for us confronted as we are by a world of marketing and consumerism that's always pushing us to go bigger and to go better whether that's our car or our house or our career or to create a new identity for ourselves but also in this particular time where when we lived well almost lived through global pandemic maybe it's been the one time in our life where we've all remembered that we're not in control that those carefully honed plans are not ascertain and a given when our visual patterns are turned upside down and where we've been able in a sense to hit the pause button here's a chance for us to to reply perhaps to do things differently this is a teacher and his message is a gift to us it's maybe not a gift that we necessarily want but he's going to ask

our questions and he's going to invite us to reflect with him and to face reality with him it's a voice we need in our day in our culture in our life you know we all know that the one thing that's certain for us is our day but we also know that's the great taboo in our culture here in the west we don't talk about it we fight against this if we have the power our day to meet death when we are reminded of our mortality how do we face that we will add in our Trump's actions when they are we shooting pressure ...

is sometimes our response to is to turn up in the volume ... it's really easy for us to try and amuse ourselves to distract ourselves to to hide that a way to squeeze it into a corner Some different wisdom. The wisdom of an Iraq war better.

Having been an active service then coming back home. He said, after you've seen what the world is really like, it's hard to be patient with a shopping center. That's what so many of us, we find ourselves doing, we're trying to amuse ourselves, even as we know death is coming.

[9 : 35] Or we keep on the treadmill, we keep on going, we ignore the warnings, we act like life is just going to grind on forever. And again, what the teacher of Ecclesiastes wants to do is he wants us to recognize the folly of those ways so we would learn to trust God.

To enjoy him, to enjoy his gifts for now and for eternity. So the introduction really helps, I think, to set the tone for where the book ends.

It's going to say to us, life is short, life is elusive, life is repetitive. So seek gain from God.

Not in life, under the sun. Remember, first of all, life is short. Somebody said Ecclesiastes was a Monday morning book.

You can understand why, when the motto is vanity, vanity, utter vanity. It sounds bleak.

[10 : 41] It sounds like the words of a sinner. How is this? The wisdom of God for us. Well, let's think about this word vanity and the picture that goes with it.

This word is used of an early morning mist. Like the county is something to see on the meadows.

Or, perhaps, as it turns chilly again, we walk outside in the morning and we breathe out that cold air and we can see our breath for a few seconds.

So, we happen to have a grandpa who is very adept at blowing smoke rings from a cigar. That's the image.

And what's the point of the image? It's to say that relative to the life of the world and how long the world endures and relative to eternity, you and I are here today and gone tomorrow.

[11 : 54] Our lives are fleeting, breathe, even with all the medical advances that we enjoy. Life is fleeting and breathe.

One of the questions that the teacher is going to consider is what's included in that everything.

Everything is vanity. And we'll see as we go along, there are some things that are excluded from that list.

Knowing God. That's not vanity. Enjoying God and his gifts in the life that he has given us. That's not vanity. But this is his promise.

Vanity, vanity. All is vanity. Like the short. Verse 4. Generations come and generations go and the earth remains. Forever.

Verse 11. No one remembers the former generation. What's he saying? Those things that are so important to us, our tragedies and our trials, our talents, they will be forgotten.

[13:02] And the proof of that, if we need it, is to think on our own family tree. Perhaps we're fortunate to know our grandparents.

Maybe some of us can go back to our great-grandparents. But how much do we know of them? How much is remembered of those previous generations who've lived perhaps really full of lives, full of their own tragedies and trials?

How much do we know of them? Verse 4. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. Our lives are like that mist.

We touch the earth. But we make no lasting impression. We're going to speak today. The earth will outlast us.

What you and I do in light of that reality. And the wisdom of the teacher, we're going to see this again and again.

[14:04] He's going to call us to learn to live backwards. To live with the end in sight. To remember our final destiny. That we will die. And there is an eternity that we are heading to.

So that we would let that shape how we live today. That that would actually simplify how we live today. So much of the stuff that we get so worked up about has no lasting consequence.

And Ecclesiastes helps us to recognize that. Think about this church that we are in. It's a remarkable building.

But its builders, its first minister, that first generation of worshippers, they are gone. And we know very little, if anything, about them.

The stones are here. The wood is here. The plaque is there. Life is short. And the teacher wants us to understand there is no gain in a life that's left only under the sun.

[15:11] Only thinking about time and not eternity. Rather, he pushes us to pursue significance and meaning in life above the sun. The one who rules over the sun.

So remember life is short. He also tells us in this introduction, remember life is elusive. Now what do we mean by that? Look at verse 2 into verse 3.

Having said everything is vanity. He says, what do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? So again, back to the idea of a life being like a mist.

Being like a breath. Have we ever tried to hold it or to control it, to catch it? I mean, we've seen our kids do that across the day. Trying to catch their breath.

Actually, there is a baggage company, a baggage handling company called MyBaggage. To get a little bit of media attention, came up with this perfect gift for homesick Brits abroad.

[16:16] So for £25 a pop, you can buy some bottled air. From Scotland, from Snowdonia, from the London underground, from a fish and chip shop.

So when you feel really far from home, you can take the lid off and you can smell the wonders of home. It's so nice.

It must have been on to something. But when we think about that, you know, it's bonkers, isn't it?

You spend £25, you turn your leg, you get sick, and then it's gone. And the teachers say that's what happens if we try and control and manage life and think we can somehow gain a profit and hold on to it.

Life is elusive. So much of our human quest is we're trying to find this gain, we're trying to find this profit under the sun. But what does the teacher remind us?

Our life is marked by labour and toil. And that toil there, that's a generous extreme word. That's a when sin came into the world and everything began to go wrong word.

[17:24] Reminding us of the futility and the frustration that's attached to work. And we know it in so many ways. We know it in the bumps in the road we never saw coming.

We know it in the redundancy letter. We know it in the rejection letter, the phone call with the bad news. What do people gain? Simon Bolivar.

Some of us will know him far more than I do. In 18th century South American leader, gained independence for what's now the nation of Venezuela. Mancats Herald did in South America for his great achievements.

His last words. Last recorded words. How will I ever get out of this labyrinth? Go, I am escaping me. Here's a man who's got city squares named Antrim, statues in his honour. A mountain in the Andes bears his name. But he is gone. And he left this earth frustrated.

[18:25] The teacher wants us to think about living backwards. So that we would recognise death comes, eternity is real.

So that we would stop toiling on the treadmill and imagine that we can gain something from life. That we can hold on to it in the end. Rather, he tells us life is exhausting. Without God, life is going nowhere without gain. And it's really important for us to be able to ask that question. One of the benefits that some people, anyway, have found from pandemic is the chance to stop and to think, where's my life going?

I have to define your plan. Okay? What? After I move into that new house then? What? Once I get that new career that I always wanted then? What?

So important for us to think and to have others to think. Yeah, but what comes next? So that we would remember that that job that we are placing all our energy, it will come to the end.

[19 : 34] That money that we are gaining for ourselves, it will pass on to somebody else. That holiday that we are banking on to give us, it will come to an end.

The people that are nearest and dearest to us. And two will go and so will we. Life is elusive. And the teacher's voice comes to us saying, remember death.

You cannot hold your grip on life and the stuff of life. Therefore, recognize where a true gain is found. It's found in trusting God and enjoying his gift as gifts.

Not as God's. Not as anything we live for. And then, as if that wasn't enough, he says to us, remember life is repetitive.

The teacher just keeps pressing and he keeps probing. It is their gain in life without God. It is their hope under the sun. And from verse 4 to verse 11, he moves us to this repeating circle of life.

[20 : 53] Vicious circle of life. So he gives us some examples from nature. Verse 5. The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to the way it rises. The sun runs its same course day after day. Century, millennia after century, millennia. Verse 6. The wind blows to the south, turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

The wind, which we think is so wild and free, follows patterns. The sea. All streams flow into the sea. Yet the sea is never full.

No matter how big the river, the sea always demands more. The picture is of a life that's always moving but never arriving.

And our teacher says in verse 8, all things are really so. A life of always working but never arriving is really so.

[21 : 56] And then he moves into the realm of human experience. Verse 8. A verse for us living in the information age.

The eye never has enough of seeing nor the ear it's full of hearing. There's always one more video to watch, one more swipe to make, one more Insta story to follow, one more playlist to get through, one more Netflix series to binge on, one more podcast to catch up on.

And we're never satisfied. And it's never enough. Verse 9. What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again.

You may know the story of Sisyphus. Is that a tricky word to say? Sisyphus. Greek mythology. It's got Sisyphus who tried to cheat death.

And the result was that he was doomed to spend eternity pushing the same old rock up the same old hill. It's a Monday morning feeling, perhaps.

[23 : 10] Perhaps that's how you feel about housework. There's always more laundry to do. There's always more dishes waiting to be done. Perhaps that's how you feel. It's school and university.

There's always one piece more of coursework, one more report to write. When we come to work, there's always one more meeting, one more spreadsheet to compile.

We have that love-hate relationship with repetition. We love it in that sense that we get to a time like January, February, we begin longing for spring.

Maybe we all have that chat. A spring happy two-part one. Because we love knowing winter doesn't last forever or something. How we can create structure for it. But we hate the repetition in the sense when every day feels like groundhog day.

We're in circumstances and we're in the daily grind and we look for something new and it never comes. Verse 10 perhaps surprises us.

[24 : 11] Is there anything in which one can say, look, this is something new. It was here already long ago. It was here before our time. We live in the age of technology. It was bound to be something new in our age and generation.

But the teacher would have us recognize that everything that we say is new is actually variations on the theme. We think about new technology to do with transport, that they drive towards e-cars, finding different ways to fuel our cars.

And we think back in the day people got excited about steam engines. Communications, we had the digital revolution. Well, surely that's what you want. Back in the day it was a revolution to have those Roman roads so you could travel e-c.

And the postal service that allowed you to communicate across the nation. When it comes to entertainment, well, surely we've got previous generations because we've got TV, we've got iPhones, we've got everything.

But when we think about the past, the oldest known cave art is over 64,000 years old. People have been entertaining themselves forever, too.

[25 : 25] In every generation, babies have been born and battles have been fought. Laughter and tears have been shared. Monuments have been built. And the author wants us to know it, to know that there's nothing new under the sun that is repetition.

And the ultimate repetition, we're so like, no one remembers the former generations. And even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow it.

Dead and passing out of memory is the repetition that is ultimate. To read the introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes is to be invited into a conversation that we don't often have, I expect.

To think about those big questions of life and death and mortality and what's the purpose of life. And perhaps you get to the end and you think, oh my goodness, how do I get off this merry-go-round?

Doesn't it create for us a sense of longing? How can I find game? It seems so unrelentingly bleak. And what the book of Ecclesiastes does, it makes us wait until chapter 12 to get this sort of full-blown hope.

[26 : 48] But there are glimpses all the way along of where hope and gain is fighting. And so here as we close, we're invited to see that life finds meaning above the sun.

So that idea of under the sun is speaking to us as if we live as if we're only on the horizontal. And he wants us to lift our eyes.

This word vanity is in the book over 30 times. It's a dominant theme, but so too is God.

God is in this book more than vanity is in this book. This author, like all the wisdom authors, want us to know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The only way to know gain in this life is to know our God. Some ways to think about it. Psalm 19, which we sang earlier.

[27 : 51] And in that psalm, the journey of the sun, remember that repetitive journey of the sun. The sun says, that's still speaking to us. What's that speaking to us about? It's speaking to us about a God who is real, a God who is powerful, a God who controls, a God of glory.

So there's a God who rules above the sun. So there's how to avoid being cynical and dispirited to know our God, to enjoy life as a gift from the one who gave it and who controls all things.

And to go deeper still, we can know gain and we can know meaning when we consider life as the light of the coming of Jesus.

Craig Anderson, who we're going to be supporting as he, Church Plants and Galesheels, was speaking at a missions week for the Drissan Union, at Heddy at Wall this week. And he had a student who came to him after one of his talks and said, Why should I add a Western religion to all the religions of my country?

And don't all paths lead up the same mountain to God? Now maybe you've had that question. I wonder if you had it, how would you respond to what Craig said? Do you remember? In the Bible, God came down and went.

[29 : 05] Jesus has come. Jesus said in John chapter 8, I am from above. You are from below. So here's where hope and meaning comes from.

We have God the Son who has come from above, who has entered into this world, has come to live this life under the Son to save us and to give us eternal life.

Here is God's answer to that sin, to that toil, to that vanity, is the loving sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. He is the someone new. Everything else stays the same, but Jesus gave him.

He is someone new. Do you know what he's promised? He has promised to make all things new. And Jesus, when he gave, he has to say quite as soon as the teacher.

We read in Luke chapter 9, what profit is there? You gave the whole world. That lose your eternal soul. Jesus wants us to know that he is the one who is the game.

[30 : 10] Trust in him is the only way to know game in this life. And when we have Jesus, when we know him, we have this wonderful promise in the first of the verse 15 from Paul.

You can say, your labor in the Lord is not in vain. When we feel that we're toil, here's a wonderful promise. Your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

And so just as this teacher comes to burst those bubbles of our self-reliance and our ability to control our world, so Jesus came as the teacher to pull us away from self-reliance, to pull us away from imagining that we can be our own king and lord and find the game.

And he encourages us to look to him, to make him our solid hope. Let's pray together. Lord, our God, as we have considered, a topic that naturally we would rather avoid in many ways, it is hard for us to think about death and eternity for ourselves and for those that we love.

But Lord, what we know is reality and we ask that you give us the wisdom to consider it well so that we would be ready, so that our hopes would be in the right place and in the right person, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[31 : 48] We thank you that he came from above the sun to live under the sun in order to bring us into life with you, our God, to give the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus.

May he be our source of hope. May he be the one who gives direction to our lives and giving us that sense of security and expectation as we look ahead into eternity.

And so please, may you take these words and use them to our and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, we will close our time this morning singing the hymn in Christ alone we will sing.

Thank you.