

# The cycles & limits of life

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Preacher: Daniel Chapallaz

[ 0 : 00 ] You have Ecclesiastes open in front of you. Book of Ecclesiastes, as I said at the beginning, is a weird old book.

and perhaps you got the sense of that as we began reading it just a few minutes ago. It opens with these words, the words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. It is debated exactly whether Solomon actually wrote this book of Ecclesiastes, but I very much take it that he did write it.

I think those opening words give it away already. The words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. And then in verse 12, I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

I applied my mind to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. Remember, Solomon was asked by God, what do you want at the beginning of his reign?

[ 1 : 07 ] And he asked for wisdom. And we see his wisdom being on display in the book of Ecclesiastes, as well as in the book of Proverbs, don't we, particularly?

So Solomon, the sort of wisest and also richest in many ways, one of those powerful men who ever ruled Jerusalem.

We saw at some prayer meetings a few weeks ago, how Solomon was king in the heights of Israel, in the glory days of Israel. It was full of great splendor.

People from all over the world were coming in to Israel during Solomon's reign. He was the man who built the temple, as David was promised by the Lord in 2 Samuel 7.

We're looking forward to getting into 2 Samuel 7 in just a few weeks' time. And he was also a man who was a sinner, a sinner like us.

[ 2 : 15 ] We saw in our prayer meeting a few weeks ago his fall. He had far too many wives, 700 wives, 300 concubines.

By the world's standards, he had it all, didn't he? Masses and masses of wealth, a huge palace, wives beyond number. And he sits down and writes, meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless.

Everything is meaningless. What does he mean by that? A few weeks ago, as a family, we went to a bubble show.

It was part of the Brighton Fringe Festival. Here's the bubble man with lots of bubbles around him. It was a fantastic show. The thing about bubbles is they are there for a moment, aren't they?

And then they disappear. And Micah was having his first interaction with bubbles. He was completely transfixed. And at the end, they let off a bubble machine. And we went and took him up to it.

[ 3 : 26 ] And he sort of tried to reach out his hand and pop. I think he was a bit bemused by it. They didn't last. They were amazing. But touch them and it's gone.

And that's how Solomon is describing life. In this word, meaningless. Perhaps it's translated something like vanity or something in your Bible.

The Hebrew word, I believe, is hevel. Literal meaning is vapor, breath, a bit of air, blink and you miss it.

A bit like a bubble. Hence, in the sermon series title, we've got bubbles in the background.

That's how life, according to Solomon, feels in this world. A bubble. Full of air.

[ 4 : 24 ] It's here and then it's gone. So, so quickly. We're going to see three things in this passage this evening. The plan is I'll preach the passage.

We'll sing a song. And then there's a couple of discussion questions we can chat about if we've got a bit of time towards the end. So, three things to see. Firstly, the question of life.

The question of life. Here's his big question after saying everything's meaningless. This is what he wants to explore. This is his search. Begins his search for meaning in this world.

Verse two. What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? What do we gain from our toil?

What advantage is there, he's saying? Or what profit? What do we gain? We work our socks off and what's the result at the end of the day? And that was striking to me as I was working hard on this sermon in the last couple of weeks.

[ 5 : 38 ] Thinking, ultimately, as I work hard on this, in a week's time, will we have remembered it? Probably not. In a year's time?

Probably not for most of us. 50 years' time, will it matter that we've sat in this sermon? I'm not sure any of us will remember it in 50 years' time. Many other sermons will have come and gone.

What do we gain from it all? In terms of our own toil at home, what do we gain from it all? We trim back a hedge, but at some point we've got to trim it back again.

And then in a few years' time, in 50 years' time, will that have mattered that we trim the hedge?

What's the point? What's the point of being together this evening?

What's the point of trimming your hedge? What's the point of going out to work tomorrow? What's the point in our students' sitting exams over these last few weeks? What's the point of it all? That that's what Solomon's questioning.

[ 6 : 41 ] And he just feels it's all a burden. Everything's meaningless, and God has placed a burden on everyone. Verse 13, what a heavy burden God has laid on all mankind.

I've seen all the things done under the sun. All of them are meaningless. They're chasing after the winds. So what's the point? Solomon's going to spend 12 chapters chasing that question.

And we're going to try and follow it with him. And I think certainly in chapter 1, his honest answer at what's the point is, I don't quite know yet. But it is clear that he knows the advantage or profit, what we gain in life from our toil is not in the meaningless bubbles of life that are here for a moment and vanish.

We move on. Secondly, see the circle of life. That's what he wants us to feel as we follow these early verses in chapter 1.

Life just sort of keeps on going round and round and round. Firstly, in terms of people. Verse 4, generations come and generations go.

[ 8 : 10 ] But the earth remains forever. We are here for our 70, 80, 90 years, if God blesses us with that.

And then we go. And though our passing will be significant for some, life will keep going on without us. The statistics, I thought I had them on the screen.

They're not. For the next 10 years in life in the country, from the ONS, Office of National Statistics, it says there will be 6.4 million people born and 6.9 million people will die.

A few more people will die than being born, but the numbers are a million. Life will keep going on over these next 10 years, according to those stats.

For us as a church, if Calvary Church is to remain in another generation or two, say in 50 years' time, a whole new generation at least will have been raised up at Calvary Church, and perhaps some will speak of Phil still, or Mark, or Megan, or Osama.

[ 9 : 33 ] But most of us won't be remembered at all. Perhaps like the anniversary service we had a few weeks ago, people will be looking at us thinking, who are those funny people?

Generations come and generations go. Nature. Verse 5. The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises.

The sun goes round and round and round. Or at least, actually, the earth goes round and round the sun, I want to say to Solomon. But the point is, we see the sun rise each morning, we see the sun set each day.

Happens every day, has done since the beginning of this creation. and will continue to go on until the world comes to some kind of end.

Here it feels to Solomon, the earth remains forever. It just keeps going on and on and on. Same pattern, same routine. Verse 6. The wind goes round and round.

[ 10 : 43 ] The wind blows to the south and turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. The streams, they flow into the sea, but the seas never fall. To the place where the streams come from, there they return again.

It just sort of goes round and round and round. It's the same old thing. And that's the state of the world that Solomon wants us to feel.

And if you feel weary by this, verse 8, all things are wearisome. It's kind of the Lion King view of the world, isn't it?

The Lion King begins with the song, The Circle of Life. Here's some lyrics from it. From the day we arrive on the planet and blinking, step into the sun, there's more to see that can never be seen, more to do that can never be done.

There's far too much to take in here, more to find that we can ever find, that can never be found. But the sun is rolling up high through the sapphire sky. It keeps great and small on the endless round and round and round.

[ 11 : 52 ] It's the circle of life. It's the kind of thing I feel when I put the bin out every week.

No matter how much we try and recycle and use our new food waste bin and take soft plastics to the supermarket, there's still a bin bag at the end of every week and it goes out on a Tuesday. Same old, same old, every week. It's the kind of feeling my wife feels when she's doing the laundry. Everything seems to be done and then the next day or two the washing basket's full again. Same old, same old. It feels weary. Day by day, year after year.

We're in June. We're enjoying lovely, long days of daylight, aren't we? It's nearly the longest day of the year. But as soon as we hit that, it will soon be the shortest day of the year again.

[ 12 : 55 ] And then in a year's time we'll be like, oh, it's nearly the longest day of the year again. It happens year after year, doesn't it? Yet is there anything new? Anything to look forward to?

Anything different? Well, Solomon says, no, apparently not. There in verse 10, is there anything for which one can say, look, this is something new.

It was here already long ago. It was here before our time. Nothing new under the sun. That's a phrase Solomon likes to use in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes. If you read a book, there's probably a book, something like it, somewhere else, written in the world or in history.

If you hear a sermon on Ecclesiastes 1, there's probably a better sermon you can listen to somewhere else. But what about new, exciting things like technology and space travel and AI?

[ 13 : 58 ] Well, to a certain extent, not even that's very new, is it? Humans first went into space over 50 years ago. AI research goes back to something like the Second World War, chapter Steve or Mercy, if you want more details on that.

But actually, the human spirit behind it isn't new at all. The desire to sort of escape the round and round, the same old, same old. That's not new.

So if nothing is new, and if life is this sort of wearying circle full of bubbles that are here and gone again, what do we do with that?

What do we gain? That's what Solomon's asking. Well, I think we need to see the limits of life and actually even embrace the limits of life.

Ecclesiastes is clearly pointing out to us the limits there are to life. The writer is stuck in them. He's finding no meaning as he's surveying the world that just goes round and round and round.

[ 15 : 17 ] The limits to the day, the sun rises, the sun sets. The limits to the stream, they flow into streams, they flow into the sea and they go no further. A limit to us, we are born, we live, we die.

And another generation will take our place and who will remember us? These limits show us something about us.

They show us that we are human beings who are creatures. creatures. And as creatures, we're limited because we are not the creator.

And that's good news which can free us to embrace our limits. Ecclesiastes, as I said, is in the genre of wisdom books.

So, other wisdom books, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, I would dare to add James to that, some psalms. And I don't think you should read the wisdom books in isolation.

[ 16 : 23 ] And so, in that spirit of thinking, I think we should turn to Proverbs chapter 3 and just read a couple of verses from there. Proverbs chapter 3. I'm going to read verse 19 to 20 which reveals something to us about the creation that we are in.

Proverbs chapter 3 verse 19. By wisdom, the Lord laid the earth's foundations. By understanding, he set the heavens in place.

By his knowledge, the watery depths were divided and the clouds let drop the dew. By wisdom, the Lord created this world.

By his wisdom, the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. By his wisdom, the wind blows to the south and turns to the north.

By the wisdom of the Lord, the streams flow into the sea and the sea is never full. By the Lord's wisdom, generations come and generations go whilst the world remains.

[ 17 : 49 ] lives. And so the conclusion is that it's by the Lord's wisdom that he has created this world to be like this.

In his wisdom, we live in a world created by him and we find ourselves as creatures within it. And so, I think we can embrace the limits that he sets in our lives.

it's also important with Ecclesiastes to remember where it ends. Just fast forward to chapter 12.

If we don't remember where it ends, we will probably be driven to despair to be completely honest with you.

Ecclesiastes chapter 12 verse 13. Now all has been heard.

[ 19 : 03 ] Here's the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the duty of all mankind for God will bring every deed into judgment including every hidden thing whether it is good or evil.

After his long quest to find meaning in life, to find what advantage is there, he concludes that there is a God who has created this world and there is a judgment to come, there is eternity to come.

this world isn't just going to keep on going round and round and round. The apparent circle of life that we kind of read about in Ecclesiastes 1!

will have an end. He's not just made us to be here for a little bit and then go and sort of disappear into the ground.

No, he's made us for more and the end of Ecclesiastes shows us that. And it all kind of reminds me a little bit of verses we read in 2 Peter.

[ 20 : 22 ] Say we shouldn't read Ecclesiastes in isolation from wisdom books, we shouldn't read Ecclesiastes in isolation from the rest of the Bible. So 2 Peter chapter 3 I'm going the wrong way.

2 Peter chapter 3 verse 3 to 4 initially.

Above all you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come scoffing and following their own evil desires.

They will say where is this coming he promised? Ever since our ancestors died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.

That sounds a bit like Ecclesiastes 1. It just keeps going on and on and on. Scoffers will say where is this end that you Christians talk about?

[ 21 : 38 ] Where is this judgment to come that Ecclesiastes concludes with? We don't see it coming. verse 10 the Lord has appointed a day but the day of the Lord will come and it will come like a feast.

The heavens will disappear with a roar the elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. there is a day when human history will come to an end.

The Bible is very clear about that. And so Solomon is very right to conclude fear God remember there is a judgment to come but don't fear God you don't need to fear God with a cowering fear and terror without hope rather fear God as we saw this morning with reverence and awe a fear that says you are God and I am not I'm a creature and you are the great creator you have made me with and this world with limits and life is best found when it's lived under you and your rule if life was just found under the sun then Solomon would be absolutely right to say it's meaningless it's just bubbles that come and disappear but knowing our creator

God brings great meaning to the daily lives that we live knowing!

knowing God the great creator brings meaning to our lives that we live day by day particularly as we see that our great creator God has stepped down into this world in the person of his son the Lord Jesus Christ and Jesus himself has experienced the limitations of life limitations of living in a human body limitations of just having a day of 12 hours of daylight or whatever it is Jesus Christ has experienced that and he understands that because of what he has done he gives us great hope before our great creator God he gives us a right standing before him in the judgment that will come when this seemingly circle never ending circle of life ends and so

[ 24 : 36 ] Solomon is right isn't he to say fear the one who has made you fear the all wise creator who set the sun on its course and the streams on their path fear the one who through his son can raise the dead and make all things new and as we fear him we can embrace the limits that he in his wisdom has set for us we're free to enjoy the gifts that he gives us in creation the things that are here for a moment and then gone again we can take satisfaction when we trim a hedge we can I can enjoy the moment when the bins are empty and things feel fresh we can delight in the evening when the laundry is all folded away and it feels good we know they won't last but they're given to us by the Lord in a creation which he has given to us to enjoy and to live in they are good gifts from our good creator gods but remember better is yet to come because we will still feel the frustration

I will still feel the frustration of having to put the bins out we will still feel the frustration of the never ending pile of laundry the better is yet to come this isn't all there is can we respond firstly by singing and then as mentioned after we've sung we'll chat about a couple of questions together Thank you.