

Is this it?

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

- [0 : 0 0] Our first reading this morning is Ecclesiastes chapter 2 verses 1 to 26. That can be found on page 668 of the Bibles in your chairs.
- Ecclesiastes 2, 1 to 26. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure, enjoy yourself.
- But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter it is mad and of pleasure what use is it. I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine.
- My heart still guided me with wisdom and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.
- I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.
- [1 : 0 9] I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house. I also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.
- I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasures of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man.
- So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also, my wisdom remained with me.
- But whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.
- Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind.
- [2 : 1 4] There was nothing to be gained under the sun. So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king?
- Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.
- And yet I perceived that the same event happens in all of them. Then I said in my heart, What happens to the fool will happen to me also.
- Why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten.
- How the wise dies just like the fool. So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.
- [3 : 2 9] I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool.

Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.

This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?

For all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I say, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment.

[4 : 47] For to the one who pleases God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. Our second reading is found on page 1158, and we're reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, beginning at verse 50 through to 58.

I tell you this, brothers, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

[6 : 07] When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

Charles, thanks very much for reading. Do please turn back to that first reading we had from Ecclesiastes chapter 2 as we continue our series in Ecclesiastes that we started last week.

And let me pray for us. Let's pray. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

[7 : 33] Heavenly Father, we thank you for the enormous privilege we have of hearing your word read and proclaimed to us. And we pray that you'd help us to be attentive to it, conscious that this world is not all that there is, conscious that there is another world to come.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our aim this morning as we look at Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is that we invest our lives, our energy, our talents, our ambitions, and our resources in the right things.

In things that are of real, lasting significance and substance rather than in things which are simply here today and gone tomorrow.

After all, it would be a terrible thing, wouldn't it, perhaps to get to the end of your life and look back or even to get halfway through your life and look around and to realize you are on the wrong track.

It's why I've called this series of talks Making the Most of Life because in his great kindness God has given us the book of Ecclesiastes to enable us to do just that.

[8 : 51] It may be that you are starting out in life, asking, what am I going to do with my life? It may be that you're in midlife and you are able to survey, if you like, the life that you have built around you.

Or it may be that you are towards the end of life. It may be that you're here this morning as a Christian believer. It may be that you're an inquirer. It may be that you're a skeptic.

Because remember what we saw last week, Ecclesiastes describes the world that we all live in. It's how the book starts. Just flip back to chapter 1, verse 2.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. Life is like taking a deep breath on a cold day. You breathe in, you breathe out, you see the breath for a moment, and then it's gone.

So brief, so short. Ecclesiastes describes a world, our world, under the wrath of God. It describes what it's like to live outside the Garden of Eden.

[10 : 01] A world in which everything has been caught up and swept away by this tsunami of sin. Everything is spoilt. Everything is perishing. Everything is distorted.

If you missed last week's talk, do catch up online. Now, I imagine perhaps some of us looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 1, we might have thought, yes, immediately I recognize this is the world in which I live.

But perhaps others, if we are honest with ourselves, were struggling. Perhaps you're thinking to yourself, well, hang on a moment, surely the things I invest myself in, surely they are substantial, surely they are significant and lasting and worthwhile.

And that, I think, is why we need to listen to chapter 2 to persuade us that they are not. Because Ecclesiastes was written either by King Solomon, King Solomon himself, or by someone expressing Solomon's thoughts.

Solomon, king of Israel, when the nation was at the height of its power. Just look at chapter 1, verse 13. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

[11 : 20] It's as if Solomon says, with all the resources of my kingdom at my disposal, I set out to make a study of what people do to find out what's really worth living for.

Is there anything in life that isn't like a breath, a mist, here today, gone tomorrow? And of course, Solomon can do what we can't do simply because he had the resources.

We can only think to ourselves, can't we, well, if only I had a million, life would be great. If only I could live there, life would be wonderful. If only, if only, and for most of us at least, it remains an if only.

But not for Solomon. He could do the things that we can only dream about. And yet, what is his conclusion?

Spare yourself the effort. It is all vanity. You'll see on the outline on the back of the service sheet, there are two headings.

[12 : 28] First of all, all is vanity. Verses 1 to 23 of chapter 2, as Solomon in turn gives himself to pleasure, wisdom, and work.

Let's look at each in turn. Firstly, pleasure is vanity. Verse 1, I said in my heart, come now, I'll test you with pleasure, enjoy yourself, but behold, this also was vanity.

In our world, which says that materialism and pleasure are the key to the good life, I take it these verses are timeless. What about laughter? Verse 2, it's mad.

It's striking how many famous comedians have battled with depression. The comic actor Robin Williams, who died in 2014, said, you're only given a little spark of madness, and if you lose that, you are nothing.

What about pleasure? Freddie Mercury singing, don't stop me now because I'm having a good time, and the conclusion, verse 2, what use is it?

[13 : 43] So in verse 3, he gives himself to partying. I search with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

But that too is vanity. I take it it's why Christmas Day can so often be one of the most stressful days of the year, because there's so much expectation. Expectation is riding high.

Too much expectation for a single day to possibly deliver, and it can leave a frustrating or bitter taste. So Solomon gives himself to great projects.

Verse 4, I made great works, I built houses, and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools with which to water the forest of growing trees.

he builds houses, palaces, gardens, parks, grand designs, house and gardens magazine has nothing on him. Then in verses 7 and 8, we see something of his staggering wealth, his prosperity, his possessions.

[14 : 58] Verse 4, more than any other person who had been king in Jerusalem before him. In verse 8, he gathers silver, gold, the treasures of kings and provinces. And then verse 8 as well, there is sexual pleasure, the delight of the children of man.

Such an evocative phrase. Perhaps of all the things that promise to capture our hearts, sex holds out the most. And remember of course, this was King Solomon.

When the Queen of Sheba came to visit and saw the splendor of his kingdom, we're told it took her breath away. Unlike us who so often long for these things and yet we can't have them.

Solomon denied himself nothing. Verse 10, whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. Yet what is his verdict?

Verse 11, then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I'd expended in doing it and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

[16 : 09] That word considered literally means faced. In other words, this is the point where Solomon faces reality. And what does he say of his achievements?

Just like striving after the wind. Have you ever caught the wind? A pointless exercise. exercise. The actor Jim Carrey said in an interview recently, I wish everyone could get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamt of so that they can see it is not the answer.

Pleasure is vanity. Secondly, wisdom is vanity. Verses 12 to 17. Verse 12, so I turn to consider wisdom and madness and folly.

Wisdom, or as we might say, learning. Education. Not simply the wisdom of the academic or the ivory tower but the all-pervasive idea that through knowledge and education I can come up with the answers.

That we can kind of think our way to satisfaction. After all, in the 21st century we have more knowledge at our fingertips than any previous generation.

[17 : 30] If we don't have the answers then Google and Alexa do. The assumption that knowledge will give me the edge briefings to help me with my business or whatever it is travel books to enhance my leisure and holiday time knowledge rules.

And yes, there's a gain of sorts in knowledge. Verse 13, wisdom is better than folly just as light is better than darkness. Yes, wisdom enables you to negotiate life better.

A good education enables you to negotiate life better. Knowledge is interesting. It's stimulating while you do it. But at the end of the day, am I any more fulfilled?

Deep down, am I any more satisfied? No, it is still vexation. it is still sorrow. Many people down the years have realized that.

In terms of human wisdom, there were probably no two bigger brains than Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. They got together once and they wrote a booklet.

[18 : 40] It includes the line, we found the people who know the most are the most gloomy. I don't know what the rest of the booklet was, whether it is a cheerful booklet or not, but it doesn't sound very cheerful, does it?

And here's why, because you see, verse 14 reminds us that death comes to everyone. The same event happens to them all. It renders wisdom pointless, verse 15.

What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Ultimately, it too is vanity and will be forgotten. Verse 16, for of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will be long forgotten.

How the wise dies just like the fool. And his conclusion again, verse 17, all is vanity and a striving after the wind.

Pleasure is vanity, wisdom is vanity, work is vanity, verses 18 to 23. Because surely here of all places, at least this is what our culture says to us, surely here of all places in work we'll find meaning and satisfaction and something that isn't vanity.

[20 : 00] It's what we're told all the time, isn't it? Fed up with commuting, work at home, life will be wonderful. Fed up with the kids, go back to work, life will be fulfilling.

Not yet reach your potential, not satisfied in your job, get another one. Or if you are at school, where you're encouraged to look for and to strive for that dream career, which is going to be everything you ever wanted.

it. Now Solomon's achievements were brilliant, but again, death renders work complete vanity.

Verse 18, I hated all my toil, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he'll be a wise or a fool, yet he'll be master of all for which he toiled, and I used my wisdom under the sun.

This also is vanity. Who knows whether the fruits of our toil and labor and hard work will be inherited by someone who is wise or foolish.

[21 : 15] And Solomon's fears were not misplaced. After his death, his son became the ruler of his kingdom, and the kingdom was divided, its greatness and splendor gone forever.

It blows your inheritance planning, doesn't it, completely out of the water. Verse 21, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.

This also is vanity and great evil. Even if your kids do manage to avoid paying inheritance tax, will they live forever? No. Will they treasure and value the toil and everything you have built up the fruit of your labor?

Not necessarily. Might they use your money and everything you leave to them foolishly? Quite possibly. Everything you do at work will ultimately fail.

Verse 22, what is a man from all the toil and striving of heart for which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation.

[22 : 30] Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. But notice it's not just that death renders work and toil vanity, it's the effort and energy that's involved in trying to hold on to everything in the meantime.

Verse 23, even in the night his heart doesn't rest. Sorrow, anxiety, worry. It's estimated that Simon Cowell is worth over 300 million pounds thanks to the success of the X Factor and Britain's Got Talent franchises.

And yet there's a very revealing line in his biography that simply reads, he can never relax for fear that his power will ebb.

Pleasure, wisdom, work, it's all vanity. By which of course the preacher doesn't mean that there's no pleasure and no reward in anything.

We'll see that in a moment and we'll see it again next week. So you know, the piece of work that's done well, the beautiful garden that's been created, the sporting event that's been attended, of course there is pleasure in all of those things for a moment.

[23 : 50] But you step back from the detail, you look at the big picture and it is still vanity. It's here today and it's gone tomorrow.

So let me ask all of us, whoever we are, have you got to the point in your life that Solomon got to? I take it, it's not a comfortable place to be, but I also take it, it's a very healthy place to be.

Because it's about living with reality in a world of sin and the consequences of sin. Too often we avoid reality.

we play let's pretend. Let's pretend that if we excel academically or at sport, all will be well.

Let's pretend if we get that promotion or bring up children who get good jobs and do well in life, that we'll feel significant and leave a lasting legacy behind us.

[25 : 05] Let's pretend that if we emigrate or change jobs, we won't experience the tedium and ordinariness of life that we do now.

Let's pretend that if we move house, we'll be happy and we'll never want to move house again. Let's pretend that if we end one relationship and start a new one, we won't ever feel trapped.

Let's pretend that if we got married or if we married someone else, we'd be content. Let's pretend that if we had more money, just that amount of money, we'd be satisfied.

Let's pretend that one day we'll have all the time we need to sort everything out and to be the kind of person I want to be. Let's pretend that we can break the cycle of repetition and finally arrive in a world that is free from weariness and free from vanity.

The teacher's conclusions may shock us. Remember that God has given us the book of Ecclesiastes not because he wants to spoil our fun, but as an act of kindness.

[26 : 20] He wants to spare us that the misery, the constant search of Solomon, of looking back on our lives and saying, all the things I've invested in and spent my time and energy on, it's all vanity.

So what are you living for? A promotion? That dream job? Your social life? Knowledge?

Qualifications? Retirement? They're all vanity. We are to learn from Solomon as he takes a pin to each of those balloons and pops them.

there's nothing there. Don't chase after them. Don't waste your life investing in things that are vanity. They'll soon be gone. Don't waste your life chasing after the wind.

Well, that begs the question, doesn't it? How then do I live in a world of vanity? If this is what the world is like, how should I live my life? Well, two things.

[27 : 28] Firstly, enjoy God's good gifts. Verses 24 to 26. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

This also I saw is from the hand of God. For apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

But to the sinner, he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind. I wonder if you noticed that so far in Ecclesiastes chapter 2, there has been no mention of God whatsoever.

Whereas now in these three verses, he is mentioned three times. The point being, I take it, that we cannot fix life and we cannot fix the world in which we live on our own.

We live in a world that's groaning. We live in a world where sin and the effects of sin have gone everywhere like dust. The good life will never come.

[28 : 34] We need to repent of thinking that it will or that somehow we can create it ourselves either through pleasure or wisdom or education or work and so on. Because of course the truth is that only God can fix our world.

Indeed he will. Wonderfully when the Lord Jesus returns at the end of history, when he comes to bring in his new heavens and the new earth, he will fix life.

And in the meantime, because God is a generous God, we are to enjoy his good gifts. Verse 24, if he's given you food and drink, if he's given you work to enjoy, I take it, not necessarily paid work, then enjoy these things.

Thank God for them. Plenty of people in the world don't have those things. What do you say, hasn't the teacher just said that these things are vanity? Well, yes, but there are still things that we can enjoy in life.

What spoils them is our hunger to get far more out of them than they can give. When we expect them to provide meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment, when we expect them to be substantial and lasting, in other words, when we forget that they are simply vanity here today and gone tomorrow.

[29 : 58] Enjoy God's good gifts. And we'll think more about that next week, because we see the same refrain running through chapter three.

But before we close, there's a second way in which we are to live in a world of vanity, and I'd like us to turn to that second reading which we had from 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

Because the New Testament gives us a very powerful counterpart to the vanity that pervades Ecclesiastes. And that is because the resurrection of Jesus Christ changes everything.

1 Corinthians 15 is all about the resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As the Apostle Paul writes, his point is the resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that all those who belong to him will be raised like him on the final day in the new creation.

What do you say, what's that going to look like? Well, verse 52, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

[31 : 21] What's more, verse 54, death itself will be swallowed up in victory and no more. So then, how does the chapter end? Verse 58, therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Give yourself to the Lord's work. Give yourself to the work of the gospel. You see, we read, don't we, throughout Ecclesiastes, everything is vanity, the constant refrain, vanity, vanity, vanity, pleasure, laughter, projects, relationships, wisdom, knowledge, work, and toil.

And here is the one thing that is lasting. It is significant. It is substantial. It is of eternal significance. The one thing that is really worth investing your time and energy in, the work of the Lord.

You see, what will people be talking about in the new creation? Wasn't that holiday we had 20 years ago wonderful? Do you remember the lovely house we lived in?

I'm so glad I achieved so much at school or at work all those years ago? Of course not. No, the conversations in the new creation will be these kinds of conversations.

[32 : 59] I'm so thankful for those Sunday club leaders who prayed for me and grounded me in the gospel. I'm so grateful for the Bible study leaders who prepared week by week, often at the end of a busy day.

I'm so grateful for that Christian colleague whose life was so different and so distinctive and who had the courage and confidence to tell me about the Lord Jesus.

I'm grateful for those Christian parents who read the Bible with me, who prayed for me, who modeled a Jesus-centered life to me. for the friends who challenged me to investigate the claims of Jesus seriously, for the neighbor who invited me to that church event, for those who welcomed me into the church family, for those who used their money so wisely, perhaps to get a new church plant up and running, or to pay so that the Bible could be translated into my own language.

In other words, conversations about things that are not in vain, conversations that are permanent and lasting into eternity.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

[34 : 30] Let's have a few moments for reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer. Everything is vanity, a striving after the wind.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for the great gift that Ecclesiastes is to us. Thank you for the way in which you help us to see so clearly the nature of the world in which we live, where everything is wracked by sin and the consequences of sin.

And we thank you, Heavenly Father, in this world where everything is so short and brief and so fleeting. Thank you for this glorious reminder that the work of the Lord Jesus, the work of the gospel, is significant and substantial and wonderfully lasting into eternity.

eternity. And we pray therefore for your mercy on us. Please would you convict us of wrong attitudes where we live as if fleeting things are permanent things.

And we pray for all of us individually and as a church family. Please would you help us to give ourselves to the work of the gospel, the work of the Lord Jesus.

[35 : 48] And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.