

## (2) Meaningless or Meaningful? (2)

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[ 0 : 00 ] First reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 50 to 58, on page 1158 of the Bibles. 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 the perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 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.

[ 1 : 27 ] Amen. Our second reading is from Ecclesiastes chapter 2, which can be found on page 668 of the Church Bibles.

That's Ecclesiastes chapter 2, verses 1 to 26. I said in my heart, 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 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.

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 from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house.

[ 2 : 40 ] I had 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 treasure 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, and 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, And 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.

[ 3 : 55 ] 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 to 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, as 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.

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.

[ 5 : 03 ] 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 labours 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 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 one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

[ 6 : 23 ] Thanks, Rachel, very much for reading to us. Please keep the Bibles open. It's Ecclesiastes chapter 2, page 668.

Why don't we pray together? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the fact that you are a generous God. And thank you that part of your generosity to us is that you speak to us.

And we pray that would be our experience now as we look at your word together. We pray that you would teach us how to live rightly in this world. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. What are you living for? What would your honest answer be this morning to that question? Perhaps your job, if you have one. Your family. If you have one. Perhaps your holiday, if you have one that is planned. Always living for the next break.

[ 7 : 29 ] Or perhaps you simply feel that you're living to pay off your mortgage. Or perhaps to live the lifestyle that is expected of you at your particular stage of life. And of course, those of us who are following Jesus, why in our heart of hearts we can find ourselves living for all those things as well.

For our work perhaps. And the status and security and recognition that comes with it. Or for our children if we have them. We may of course not admit that in church on Sunday.

But it's so often what we live for during the week. What is it that you are living for? Well, last week we started this series of talks in Ecclesiastes.

A book which contains the words of King Solomon who presided over Israel at the height of its powers. The book was either written by Solomon himself or by someone expressing Solomon's thoughts.

He calls himself the teacher or preacher. And we saw that if you simply look at life in its own terms. At life under the sun as the teacher calls it.

[ 8 : 38 ] Then it doesn't make sense. It is vanity. Lacking in substance. A mere breath. And it's gone. One Hollywood producer is on record as saying that people want good endings in films.

Because they want to be reassured that the world makes sense. Which I suggest is why Ecclesiastes can be such a disturbing book.

Because it's repeated message to us. Is that life does not make sense. Turn back to chapter 1 verses 2 and 3. Which we looked at last week.

Vanity of vanities says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

It is vanity. Fleeting. Empty. Purposeless. Meaningless. Now I imagine that some of us here last week we recognized the teacher's world immediately.

[ 9 : 37 ] And we said yes that does describe my life. It describes my life as a Christian believer. Remember Solomon writes as a believer. But I guess others were saying well no actually my life is pretty good.

My job. My family. My spare time. Things are okay. They satisfy me. Well today we're going to see how the teacher came to his conclusions.

Have a look back to chapter 1 verse 13. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom. All that is done under heaven.

In other words Solomon says look this is what I've done. With all the resources available to me in the kingdom. With all those resources at my disposal. I've set out to make a study of everything that people do in life.

To find out what it is that really makes life worth living. And the point is this is King Solomon's search for what makes life worth living.

[10:39] Solomon the king of Israel. Who was the king when Israel was at the height of its power as a nation. You see Solomon could do what we cannot do.

Simply because he had the resources to do it. You see we can think to ourselves well if only I had a million pounds. Then life would be wonderful. Or if only I lived in that particular place.

Then life would be great. If only if only if only if only. You'll know exactly what your if only's are this morning. But of course for us they are only if only's. But not for Solomon.

He can do the things which we only dream about. In fact he does do the things we dream about. And what is his conclusion?

That life is great? That this is it? That I'm satisfied? No he says. Spare yourself the effort. It is vanity. Have a look again at chapter 1 verse 13.

[11:42] It is an unhappy business. That God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I've seen everything there is to be done under the sun.

And behold all is vanity. And a striving after the wind. So take the outline if you will on the back of the service sheet. And you'll see our first heading.

All is vanity. All is vanity. vanity. Because in the chapter we're looking at today. In chapter 2 verses 1 to 23. Solomon gives himself in turn to pleasure.

Wisdom and work. Either paid work or unpaid work. And so we're going to look at each one in turn. First of all pleasure. Is vanity.

Chapter 2 verse 1. I said in my heart come now. I'll test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. Now in a world which says that materialism and pleasure. Are the key to finding satisfaction and meaning.

[12:40] These verses of course are timeless. So in verse 3 he gives himself to partying. To having a good time. I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine.

My heart still guiding me with wisdom. And how to lay hold on folly. So I might see what was good for the children of man. To do under heaven. During the few days of their life.

But as we read on. He discovers that it is vanity. It is of course why Christmas Day. Is one of the most stressful days of the year.

For most families isn't it? It's a day which promises to. To deliver so much. So much excitement. And expectation. Far more in fact. Than a single day.

Can ever deliver. And it leaves a bitter taste. So Solomon gives himself to great projects. Verse 4. I made great works.

[13:36] I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks. And I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools. From which to water the forest of growing trees.

He built houses. Palaces. Wonderful parks. And gardens. And then in verses 7 and 8. We see his staggering wealth and prosperity. Verse 7.

More than any other. Who had been king in Jerusalem before him. Verse 8. He gathered silver. Gold. The treasure of kings and provinces. And then the sexual pleasure.

Verse 8. The delight of the children of man. It's a wonderfully evocative phrase that isn't it? Of all the things I guess. Which perhaps promise to capture. Our hearts.

Perhaps it is sex which holds out. The most. And remember this was King Solomon. When the Queen of Sheba. Came to visit him.

[14:34] And saw the splendor. Of his kingdom. We are told it took her breath away. It was staggering. Because unlike us who.

So often long for these things. But cannot have them. Why Solomon denied himself nothing. Verse 10. Whatever my eyes desired. I did not keep from them. And my heart from no pleasure.

For my heart found pleasure in all my toil. And this was the reward. For all my toil. Yet what is his verdict? Verse 11. Vanity.

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. And there was nothing to be gained.

Under the sun. That word considered. At the beginning of verse 11. Literally means faced. In other words. This is the point. At which Solomon faces reality.

[15:32] And what does he say of his achievements? It's all been like striving after the wind. A totally pointless exercise. For those who know their opera.

It's the experience of the figure of Violetta. In Verdi's La Traviata. As she says. Always free. I must rush from pleasure to pleasure. I must look for new excitement.

To make my spirit soar. Soar. Paul Getty III. One of the world's richest men. Yet in his biography. It was said of his wealth.

That it afforded him no joy. Through five marriages. Five divorces. Two miserable deaths. And an unforgiving. And unrelenting. Miserliness.

The biography goes on. He is a legend. Of luxury. Lust. And loneliness. One recent survey.

[16:32] Across the cross section of people in this country. Suggests that 10% of us believe we'd be better off dead. 25% of us see no hope in the future. A third of us. A third of us apparently consider ourselves to be downright miserable.

It's extraordinary isn't it? We're wealthier. Healthier. We have everything. That our grandparents generation could ever have dreamt of having. Yet we are miserable.

Pleasure. Is vanity. But secondly. Wisdom is vanity. Have a look at verse 12. So I turn to consider wisdom.

And madness. And folly. Now the wisdom we're talking about here. Is the. The best thinking. That mankind can do. On his own.

In other places. The Bible does talk about a godly wisdom. A wisdom which starts off with God. But that is not what Solomon has in view here. Instead the teacher seems to go after the best thinking.

[17:38] That man can do on his own. Trying to find. Satisfaction. Through. Human wisdom. And not just. The wisdom of the academic ivory tower. But the all pervasive idea.

That through knowledge. We can come up with the answers. That actually we can think our way. To satisfaction. After all.

In the 21st century. We have more information. And more knowledge. At our fingertips. Than anyone else. Than any other people. Who have ever lived. Before us. Advances in every field.

Of knowledge and learning. Mean that I can have. Virtually anything I want. In terms of wisdom. And understanding. The assumption being. Of course. That it will give me the edge. Briefings.

To help me. In my work. Relationship manuals. To help me. In my relationships. Travel books. To enhance my leisure. And holiday time. We live very much.

[18:34] In a culture. Where knowledge. Rules. And yes. Verse 13. There is a gain of sorts. In wisdom. Wisdom. Is better than folly. Just as.

Light. Is better than dark. Knowledge. Is interesting. It's stimulating. While you do it. But at the end of the day. Does it leave you. Any more.

Fulfilled. Deep down. Am I any more. Satisfied. No. The result. Of an increasing. Knowledge. Is not. Satisfaction.

Or meaning. It is. As the teacher says. Vexation. It is sorrow. Now. Many people. Throughout history. Have realized. That truth. In terms of. Human wisdom.

There are probably. No. Two bigger brains. To have existed. In the last hundred years. And Albert Einstein. And Bertrand Russell. Together. They. They got together once. And wrote a booklet. And their booklet.

[19:28] Their joint booklet. Includes this line. We found that the men. Who know the most. Are the most. Gloomy. It's a wonderful line. Isn't it. From Albert Einstein.

And Bertrand Russell. And here is why. Because verse 14. Reminds us. That death. Comes to everyone. It renders wisdom. Pointless. Verse 15. Vanity. Verse 16.

It 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 have been.

Long forgotten. How the wise dies. Just like. The fool. I was reading recently. Of the Oxford historian. John Green.

Who lived in the 19th century. He gave his whole life. To the study. Of history. And on his gravestone. It is written. He died.

[ 20 : 24 ] Learning. Because the road to enlightenment. Doesn't get you anywhere. You die. Learning. Death. Death. Renders. Death.

Renders. Wisdom. Vanity. Pleasure. Is vanity. Wisdom. Is vanity. Thirdly. Work. Is vanity. Or toil. Not necessarily.

Paid work. Obviously. But surely. Here. Of all places. We might think. We will. Here. In toil. In work. I will find. Satisfaction.

And meaning. Something that isn't vanity. After all. That is what our culture. Shouts at us. Isn't it? Loud and clear. Fed up with commuting. Work at home. Life will be wonderful.

Fed up with looking after the kids. Go back to work. Your life will be fulfilled. Not reaching your potential. Not satisfied in your job. Look for another. You'll find everything you wanted.

[ 21 : 21 ] There. Now. Now. Clearly. At one level. Solomon's achievements. Are brilliant. But again. His point is very simple. It is that death.

Renders everything. He has worked for. 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 wise. Or a fool. Yet he'll be master. Of all for which I toiled. And use my wisdom. Under the sun. This also.

Is vanity. Who knows. Whether the fruits of our toil. Will be inherited. By someone who is wise. Or foolish. And Solomon's fears.

Of course. Were not misplaced. After. His death. His son became king. His kingdom was divided. Its splendor. And greatness. Lost.

[ 22 : 18 ] Forever. Certainly blows your inheritance planning. Out of the water. Doesn't it? Even if your kids do manage to. Avoid paying inheritance tax. Will they live forever? Will they treasure.

And value. What you have toiled for. As you have. There is no guarantee. That they will. Howard Hughes. Was one of the wealthiest.

Men. Ever to have lived. A complete workaholic. Played by Leonardo DiCaprio. In the film. The Aviator. He lived. A life of fear.

Terrified. Of losing everything. But of course. That is precisely. What happens? He lost. Everything. As we all do. And notice.

It's not just that death renders work and toil vanity. It is also simply that it is. It's just not worth the effort. Verse 22. What is a man from all the toil and striving of heart.

[ 23 : 17 ] 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.

Sorrow. Restlessness. A troubled mind. He can't sleep. All the symptoms aren't they. Of work. Related stress. And that's on the assumption that Solomon didn't have a blackberry to contend with either.

Pleasure. Pleasure. Wisdom. Work. All is vanity. By which the teacher doesn't mean there's no pleasure and reward at all.

After all look at verse 10. My heart found pleasure in all my toil. And this was my reward for my toil. Or verse 13. There's a gain of sorts in wisdom.

Better to be wise than foolish. The piece of work that's done well. The beautiful God that's been created. The holiday. Of course they bring pleasure. For a moment. But you step back from the detail of life.

[ 24 : 22 ] You look at the big picture. And the point is. It is vanity. A few years ago I was on holiday in Normandy with some friends.

We went to see the Bayer Tapestry. And if you've been there you'll know that there are two parts to the exhibition. One is the tapestry itself. But the other which you see first.

Is a life size print of the tapestry. With lots of explanatory comments around it. So you know there's the French fleet over here. There's King Harold with an arrow in his eye.

Over there. And everything is kind of explained for you. The point being of course. That when you then see the real thing. You don't simply see a kind of whole group of ships over there.

And some soldiers there. And can't quite work out what's going on. Rather when you see the real thing. You can step back from all the details. And it makes sense. Now the shock of Ecclesiastes.

[ 25 : 22 ] Is that life is not like that. Now I guess the teacher's conclusions may shock some of us. But God has given us the book of Ecclesiastes.

Not to spoil our fun. But as an act of kindness. Because you see God wants to spare us the misery of Solomon. The misery of looking back on our lives.

And saying that actually I invested myself in things which were only vanity. So what are you living for?

That's the question we started with. A promotion. That dream job. Just getting a job. Your social life. Knowledge. Qualifications. Retirements. They're all vanity.

We're to learn from Solomon. Don't go through life. Chasing after the wind. Our culture says very powerfully doesn't it? There is fulfillment in work.

[ 26 : 24 ] Satisfaction in relationships. Identity in image. A sense of worth in possessions. Ecclesiastes exposes the emptiness of thinking. That life is all about work.

Knowledge. Pleasure. And the things we have. Stuff. And remember what we saw last week. That the writer of Ecclesiastes writes as a believer. Ecclesiastes is written for Christians first and foremost.

Because of course for us too it's all too easy isn't it? To drift. And to fall for these things. Hard to resist it. When that is precisely the road that everyone else is on.

It's a wonderful kindness of God that he tells us. So that we don't waste our lives. On things. Which are vanity. All is vanity. All is vanity.

Secondly that of course begs the question. Well how then do I live in a world of vanity? How do I live in a fallen world. Where we are waiting for the new creation?

[ 27 : 29 ] Well we'll see more of the answer to that question over the next couple of weeks. But a couple of headline things just for now. First of all. Enjoy God's good gifts. Verses 24 to 26.

There is nothing better for a person 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 wind. Now there's a wonderful contrast in verse 26 isn't there? Between the believer. Between the follower of Jesus. Who accepts the generous gifts of God.

And the unbeliever whose life is one of constantly acquiring and collecting things. That they cannot keep anyway. And one of the hallmarks of Ecclesiastes is that God is a generous God.

[ 28 : 30 ] That's what we've been thinking about this morning isn't it? In our singing together. And therefore we are to enjoy his good gifts. Verse 24. If God has given you food and drink. If he's given you work that you enjoy.

Not necessarily paid work of course. Then thank him for it. And enjoy the good things he's given to you. We live in a world where plenty of people don't have those things. And don't enjoy those things.

So if God has given you those things. Then be grateful. And rejoice in God's generosity. But you say, well hang on a moment. Hasn't the teacher just said that these things are vanity?

Well yes. But they are still good things. What spoils them. What makes them vanity. Is when we expect them to provide meaning and satisfaction.

Because at that point we are asking them to bear a weight. Which they simply are not designed to bear. Food, drink, work you enjoy.

[ 29 : 31 ] They are good things. But they cannot in themselves deliver meaning, satisfaction, fulfillment. Enjoy God's good gifts.

But secondly, how do I live in a world of vanity? Give yourself to what is not in vain. And can we turn on to that other reading we had from 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

1 Corinthians chapter 15. It's on page 1158. 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians 15. Page 1158.

Now we said a number of times both this week and last week. That Ecclesiastes looks at life under the sun. The world as a closed system.

As we see it. And as we touch it. But of course that is not a complete picture of the world in which we live. The resurrection of Jesus changes everything.

[ 30 : 34 ] 1 Corinthians 15 is a chapter about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. You might like to read the whole chapter later on today. That would be a good thing to do. As the Apostle Paul writes, his point is that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the demonstration that others too will be raised.

that those who put their trust in Jesus will be raised from the dead on the final day. What will that look like? Verse 52.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable. And we shall be changed. What's more, verse 54, death itself will be swallowed up and no more.

So 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.

How do you finish? Give yourself to the Lord's work. The work that is not in vain. You see, we read through Ecclesiastes, we hear that, we, the constant refrain of vanity.

[ 31 : 54 ] Pleasure is vanity. Parties are vanity. Projects are vanity. Relationships are vanity. Wisdom is vanity. Knowledge is vanity. Work and toil. It's all vanity. And here is the one thing that isn't in vain, that isn't vanity, the work of the Lord.

Because, of course, it lasts beyond death and therefore is of eternal significance. You see, think about it this way.

What will people be talking about in heaven over coffee? Wasn't that holiday we had 20 years ago wonderful? Do you remember the lovely house we lived in?

I'm so proud of all my achievements in that particular job I had before I retired. No, of course not. They won't be talking about those things. And the conversations we'll hear will surely be these, won't they?

I'm so thankful for those Sunday school leaders who prayed for me and grounded me in the gospel. I'm so grateful for the Bible study leaders who prepared so faithfully each week, so often after a busy day when they were dog-tired.

[ 33 : 13 ] I'm so grateful for that Christian colleague whose life was so different, whose life was so distinctive, that actually I wanted to know what made them tick, and I wanted to know about Jesus.

I'm so thankful for my Christian parents who taught the Bible, who prayed and who showed me what it was to follow Jesus. For the friends who challenged me to investigate the claims of Jesus seriously.

For the neighbor who invited me along to that dialogue supper. For those who welcomed me into the church family. For those who used their money so wisely. That a church could be planted.

That Christian leaders could be trained. Why that someone could come and proclaim the gospel to me. In my own language. In my own country. Conversations, in other words, about things which are not in vain.

Well, let's pray together. There is nothing better for a person that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

[ 34 : 19 ] This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for your immense kindness to us. In helping us to see how to live in this world.

And we're so conscious of the many things the world says are fulfilling. Which bring meaning. And which we should live for. Thank you for helping, for exposing those things to us.

For helping us to see that actually they are all vanity. Thank you that in your kindness you don't want us to get to the end of our lives. And say it's all been a waste of time. Thank you too, Father, for the generous things you do give to us.

We pray that we would be those who are grateful. And we pray too, Heavenly Father, that we would heed this terrific encouragement. To give ourselves to the work of the Lord.

That does last. And is not vanity. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.