

# (1) Meaningless or Meaningful?

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[ 0 : 00 ] We're reading from Romans chapter 8, starting at verse 18, which is on page 1137 in the Church Bibles. For I consider that the sufferings at this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

[ 1 : 23 ] And he who searches hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his promise.

For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified. Our second reading today is from Ecclesiastes chapter 1, which can be found on page 667 of your Bibles.

Beginning at verse 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem. 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? A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

[ 2 : 38 ] The sun rises, and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north. Round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.

All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

What has been is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done. And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new?

It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things. Nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

[ 3 : 45 ] I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun. And behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What is crooked cannot be made straight. And what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.

And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceive that this also is but a striving after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. Thanks very much, David, for reading to us.

[ 4 : 53 ] Let me add my welcome to Grace Church this morning. It's very good to have you with us. We're starting a new series of talks looking at the book of Ecclesiastes over the next four weeks. So do please keep your Bibles open on page 665.

Why don't I pray for us, first of all? Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thought earlier about the man who meditates on your law day and night, like a tree planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in its season, not withering, prospering.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for your word, the Bible. Thank you that you speak to us and that you address us and that you address us in the life situations that we are facing at the moment.

And therefore, we pray, Heavenly Father, as we look at Ecclesiastes this morning, please would you open our eyes. Please grant us understanding. Help us to meditate upon your word. And we pray that you would change us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. What is life like? According to Louis Armstrong, it's a wonderful world.

[ 6 : 07 ] There are trees of green, red roses too. They bloom for me and they bloom for you.

Friends shake hands, say, how do you do? What they're really saying is, I love you.

The colours of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky, are also on the faces of people walking by. I spared you singing it.

What a wonderful world. But is it? Louis Armstrong's song was used in the film Good Morning Vietnam, starring Robin Williams as a U.S. Army disc jockey.

At one point in the film, he plays the song. And as he does so, we're showing the world the U.S. soldiers are living in, in war-torn Vietnam.

We see a child in the foreground and a bomb going off in the background. As we hear the words, the colours of the rainbow is so pretty in the sky, are also in the faces of people going by.

[ 7 : 09 ] We see protesters beaten up and three young men dragged away and shot. It's not a wonderful world. What is life like?

That is the question at the heart of Ecclesiastes. Or to put it another way, is there more to life than the endless cycle of birth, youth, work, retirement and death?

A world where so much seems to be governed by mere chance. Well, Ecclesiastes contains the words of King Solomon, who presided over Israel, Jerusalem, at the height of its powers.

We can see that very clearly in the first verse. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem. And again, verse 12. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Now, the book was either written by Solomon himself, or it expresses, or it's written by someone else who's expressing Solomon's own thoughts. He calls himself the teacher or the preacher.

[ 8 : 22 ] So what is it that he has to say to us? Well, you'll see there's an outline on the reverse of the song sheet. And then, as usual, we'll have a question time afterwards.

So do store up questions for then. First of all, everything is vanity. Everything is vanity. Have a look at verses 2 and 3 with me. 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? Here is the teacher's verdict on the world.

It is vanity. In fact, that's the refrain which runs through the whole book. Thirty times, the conclusion he comes to is life is vanity.

All is vanity. The word literally means a breath. It's translated in most Bibles either as vanity or as meaninglessness. Just as on a cold winter morning, you may take in a deep breath, you breathe out, and just for a moment, you see your breath before you.

[ 9 : 32 ] And then it's gone. Well, so life is like that. But you begin to breathe. And before you know it, it's gone. It's a word that's used in other books of the Bible to mean brief, unsubstantial, unreliable, frail, futile.

And the teacher really does mean that everything is vanity. Verse 2, if you look at it, all is vanity.

Over the next four weeks, we'll see that applies to work, wealth, pleasure, laughter, fun, the future, old age, youth, and death itself.

Useless, purposeless. It offers much, but life delivers little. Verse 14, it's like trying to catch the wind. Even on a windy day like today, you try and catch the wind in a jar, and it's gone.

It's no longer wind. There's nothing there. And notice verse 3, it is life under the sun that is vanity. Here's another of the teacher's favorite phrases, life under the sun, by which he means life as we look at it and observe it and experience it before our eyes.

As he looks at the world as a closed system, as he looks at life in terms of what we can see and touch and hear, why it is vanity, it is fleeting.

[11:06] You see, the teacher is nothing with us if he is not brutally honest, as he looks at life at ground level. It's why the title Ecclesiastes, which is a title which is added to the book after it is written, is a most unsuitable title.

You could not find someone who is less ecclesiastical and less churchy than the author of Ecclesiastes. And I imagine as we look at this very honest book over the next four weeks, there will be two reactions.

For some of us, we'll find the book honestly refreshing, as we say, well, yes, actually this does describe my life. Well, I imagine that for others, we'll find it far too honest, as perhaps it tells us of truths which actually we'd rather not hear.

But what is it that makes life vanity? Well, first of all, verses 4 to 7, nothing changes. Nothing changes.

The world is a hub of activity, isn't it? But devoid of progress. At one level, the world's, the creation seems to mock us, verse 4. A generation goes and a generation comes, with all the human activity that is implied in that phrase, and yet the creation stays the same.

[12:30] But at another level, the creation itself is caught up in this same pattern of changelessness. So verse 5 describes the endless pattern of the sun rising and setting. Hastening, we are told.

Literally, panting from sunset to sunrise, from sunset to sunrise, from sunset to sunrise, with no time to rest as it goes through the same pattern again and again and again.

Panting. Or take the wind, verse 6. Busy achieving nothing as it goes round and round. Or the waters, verse 7. Again, they're busy achieving nothing, as the teacher describes what I think at school we're told is the hydrological cycle.

But to what purpose? The rivers are busy, but the sea is never full. The world is a hubbub of activity, but devoid of progress.

It is vanity. Secondly, there's nothing new. Verses 8 to 10. In verse 8, the teacher describes the mind-boggling weariness of life.

[13:36] What we see and hear is never enough, is it? The adverts tell us that if only we were to buy those clothes or have that makeover or earn that bit more money or whatever it is, life would be transformed.

But no, verse 8. They're never satisfied. And of course, we know that is true in our own experience. Think of our ears.

They're always straining, aren't they, to hear the latest news. We want to sit down and watch the news. We're quick to get our newspapers to see what's happening in the world. But there's nothing new.

The wars have simply shifted from one country to another. Power has shifted from one politician to another. However, the bookies have placed their money on a different tennis player this year as opposed to last.

But nothing really changes. History simply repeats itself. Indeed, verse 9, history is going nowhere. What will be is what will be again.

[14:39] Or in the words of verse 10, the more things change, the more they turn out to be the same. Verse 10, is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new. It has been already in the ages before us.

Nothing changes. There's nothing new. But most sobering of all, thirdly, there's no remembrance. Verse 11, there's no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

A half-term, we're up in Scotland, staying with some friends near Loch Ness. One morning, we went to the small town of Fort Augustus, which is at the western end of Loch Ness, and links Loch Ness with the Caledonian Canal, which then goes further west to Fort William.

And the link with the canal happens with a series of locks, a spectacular series of locks, which were built in the 1820s and 1830s.

There's five or six locks or so, which enable, obviously, boats to travel in either direction along the canal. And by the side of the lock, there was a small plaque commemorating of the engineer who built the locks in the 1830s.

[15:58] And I'd never heard of him. And I have to tell you, I've forgotten his name. And, of course, the reason why the plaque was there is because, in popular memory, he's been forgotten.

I imagine everyone reads that and says, I've never heard of him. Well, that was 170 years ago. And in 170 years' time, all of us will have been forgotten.

None of us will be remembered. What's more, verse 11, even the things which at the moment are in the future and hold out so much promise, why they won't be remembered either.

Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity. Meaningless, empty, fleeting. Well, it begs the question, doesn't it, why? Why is the world like this?

And the answer, secondly, is because God has made it vanity. God has made it vanity. You see, look at verse 13.

[17:02] And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

Because although the teacher looks at the world from ground level, he looks at the world in terms of life under the sun, he knows full well that this world is not a closed system.

Like the rest of the Bible, he believes in a God who is God. A God who is sovereign over his world. A God who has ordained the world to be just as he will have it.

In other words, there is more to life than life under the sun. And that is one of the things we'll see over the next few weeks. And here in verse 13, we have the only mention of God in the opening chapter of the book.

And it is to teach us that it is not chance that makes the world the way it is. No, it is God. This is the life God has given to us.

[18:13] It's expressed again in verse 15. What is crooked cannot be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted. In other words, there's something that is fundamentally wrong with our world.

It is crooked. We're unable to straighten it. There's something missing which we cannot make up for. There's nothing we can do about it. It's just the way the world is.

The way God has ordained the world to be. And this isn't just the message of Ecclesiastes. It is the message of the whole Bible. You see, when you stand back and ask the question and look at Ecclesiastes against the backdrop of the whole Bible, why we shouldn't be surprised to hear that God has imposed vanity on his creation.

Because, and here, if you like, is the big message of Ecclesiastes in one sentence. Because Ecclesiastes describes for us life outside the Garden of Eden.

Back at the start of history, God made a perfect world, a world of satisfaction, a world of substance. Adam and Eve rejected God, wanting to be God for themselves.

[19:27] And God's response was to kick them out of the Garden of Eden and to impose vanity on his creation. And Ecclesiastes describes that world.

It is the world we live in. It is how the world will always be until the new creation. Just turn on to that second reading which we had from Romans chapter 8, where we see that the Apostle Paul describes exactly the same thing.

Page 1138. Keep a finger in Ecclesiastes. And turn to page 1138. Actually, it's the end of 1137.

And here the Apostle Paul makes exactly the same point. Let me just read verses 19 to 23 for us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[20:42] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons.

The world has been subjected to vanity, to futility by God. It is part of God's judgment on the world as he hands us over to the consequences of our sin and rebellion against him.

But notice verse 21, it was subjected in hope, in the hope of a new creation, in the hope of the new heavens and the new earth.

And until that new creation, the whole of the present creation, verse 22, is groaning as in childbirth, longing for that day. And it's not only creation that groans, verse 23, but we ourselves groan, longing for that day.

You see, God does not make things meaningless and vanity because he's a grumpy old man. But because he wants us to see there is something desperately wrong with our world, and to long for the new creation, for the new heavens and the new earth.

[ 22 : 03 ] But in the meantime, that is the experience of living in this world. Vanity. A world where the effects of sin are everywhere to be seen.

It's like perhaps when you do some sorting out at home, or in the car, or you clean a cupboard which hasn't been cleaned for some time. And there's dust in the most unlikely places.

And you think to yourself, how did it get even there, and there, and there? And as we look at Ecclesiastes, we may well think to ourselves, well, how did the effects of sin get there and there, and yes, even there?

And Ecclesiastes assures us, as the Apostle Paul does, that this is the world in which we live. The whole of creation has been affected by sin. In every aspect of life, work, wealth, pleasure, laughter, fun, the future, old age, youth, death itself.

You see, who is Ecclesiastes written for? Many, I think, see it as a book which deliberately exposes the worldview of the unbeliever, and pushes them to the limits of their presuppositions about life.

[ 23 : 20 ] If you don't believe in God, if you think that life is simply about what you can see and touch, then understand, says the teacher, that actually your life is meaningless.

And for those of us for whom that is our worldview, and we're always delighted to have a number like that here, week by week at Grace Church on Sunday through the year, then Ecclesiastes is a very important book for us to be looking at, because it will push us to ask those hard questions.

You see, it's so easy to be like the high-flying businessman who jumped into a taxi outside St Pancras International Station and told the cabbie, drive on, drive on. And the cabbie said, where to, Gov?

And he replied, I haven't got time for questions. Drive on, drive on. Perhaps one or two are thinking of people they know at that point, I don't know. But it's so easy to live like that.

Going fast nowhere and never stopping to ask the question, the important question, what's the point? Why am I here? And the teacher will force you to ask those questions, because he longs you to know the answer.

[ 24 : 35 ] But, and this may be a surprise to some of us this morning, Ecclesiastes is written, first and foremost, not for unbelievers, but for believers. It is written first and foremost for Christians.

After all, these are the words of King Solomon. This is a book about his experience of life as a believer. You see, it's not a book where God is absent.

Throughout the book, we see that God is the creator, that God is the judge. And yet, even Solomon, his experience of life is that it is vanity, fleeting, purposeless.

And therefore, just as the book of Job asked the question, in a world where God is in charge, why do believers suffer? Why, Ecclesiastes asked the question, in a world where God is in charge, why do believers find life so perplexing, so puzzling?

Why, at times, does my life feel so unfair? Why are there so many loose ends which I can't understand? Why, even as a Christian, can I feel that actually my life is pointless and without meaning?

[ 25 : 45 ] Well, I want to finish by asking three questions which are there on the outline. First of all, what is the message we believe in as Christians and which we seek to proclaim to others?

You see, the teacher warns us against the sort of message which says, yes, life is vanity, but if only you put Jesus into the equation, everything will be transformed, and vanity will no longer be the experience of your life.

And some of us may well have heard that kind of teaching or been told that kind of thing, that if we follow Jesus, we'll be freed from problems, and life will be one of joy and fulfillment.

Well, Ecclesiastes blows the whistle on that kind of thinking. It is not true, and we need to avoid those churches which teach it. And those of us who aren't yet Christians need to grasp it so that, of course, we're not disappointed when the Christian life turns out still to be a life of frustration and difficulty.

Yes, Christians experience many anticipations of heaven in this life. But both the believer and the unbeliever in this world still live with life under the sun, life that is short-lived and lacking in substance.

[ 27 : 15 ] In other words, those of us who are Christians mustn't give the impression to others that becoming a Christian is the gateway to a problem-free life. It is not.

Second question, which follows on from that, what is our expectation of the Christian life? Well, to clarify the issue, how are you?

I wonder how many people have asked you that question this morning, and I wonder how you replied. Very well, thanks. Fine. All good. Well, I take it that if we asked Solomon that question, he would say, confused, perplexed, my life is vanity.

You see, Ecclesiastes is a book which helps us to be blunt about the painful realities of living in a world which God has subjected to futility. As Robin Williams is told by the woman he loves in Good Morning Vietnam, so many things do not happen the way you want them to.

As Christians, life can seem very unfair, confusing, frustrating, hard, vanity. That may be true for some of you this morning.

[ 28 : 34 ] If it's not true for you, it will certainly be true for others. And therefore, Ecclesiastes raises the question, well, what do we do when that is our experience of life?

Now, one option, of course, is simply to pretend that life is fine when it isn't. Another option is to labor under the guilt of feeling like a second-class Christian.

Why don't I feel as happy and as together as other Christians? Why, there must be something wrong with me, something wrong with my own spiritual life, if I feel like that.

But, of course, the right response, and the response that Ecclesiastes encourages in us, is to face up to life as it is.

And the teacher will help us to do that, to be honest with ourselves, to be honest with others, and most importantly of all, to be honest with God.

[ 29 : 29 ] Third question. Do we long for heaven? Do we long for heaven? Because beneath the surface of every Christian's life is this ache which will not go away.

Yes, it can be ignored, disguised, submerged under a whole torrent of activity, but it will not disappear, and for good reason.

We were created to enjoy a better world than this, and until that world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have.

An aching soul, a groaning in this world, is not evidence of spiritual immaturity, it is evidence of realism. And therefore, as we look at life, and as we look at life under the sun, as we ask the question, is this it?

Ecclesiastes will teach us to prize and value the right things, and above all, to long for the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, where there is no more groaning, and no more vanity.

[ 30 : 43 ] To long for that place where life isn't fleeting, to long for the eternity, where what we do does matter. Well, why don't I pray, and then we can take questions if there are any.

I apply my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done unto heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

Heavenly Father, we want to thank you that you speak words of truth to us. Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you don't sort of airbrush the vanity of this world out of your word.

Thank you that you speak to us as we experience the world you live in. And we pray, therefore, Heavenly Father, you'd help us to meditate on what we've heard from you this morning.

And we pray that you'd help us to live in this world as your people, recognizing this world for what it is, longing for the new creation.

[ 32 : 02 ] and we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.