

The glory of God in the face of illness

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Preacher: Michael Lin

[0 : 00] The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in 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 and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. 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.

[1 : 06] It has already been done 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.

The big introductory question in Ecclesiastes is in verse 3. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

Now the question of gain comes up nearly a dozen times in Ecclesiastes. It is a question that is foundational and a thread that runs all the way through the rest of the book.

What does it mean by gain? Well, gain is the surplus or profit left over after all the expenses have been paid. The return or reward for one's hard work.

Fine to work hard, but is it worth it? What am I going to get out of it? If I put more in, will I get more out? How much will I gain?

[2 : 06] That is the question. But before we unpack this question any further, we need some context to this strange book in the middle of the Bible's wisdom literature.

So look with me at verse 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. The words in this book are written by someone described as a preacher and a king and the son of David.

Now the most obvious person who springs to mind is Solomon. He was the son of David. And the descriptions of the king in Ecclesiastes certainly remind us of him.

We haven't got time to look it up, but if you looked up 1 Kings 4, 20-34, you'd find a very clear picture of Solomon. He was a wise and powerful man who ruled in Israel at a very high point in Israel's history.

God's people were in God's land with God dwelling with them in the temple. They were prospering. They were blessed. And Solomon had it all.

[3 : 17] Wealth, wives, women, power, privilege, position, everything a man could want and more. He was living the dream.

Now there are different views, but whether the teacher is Solomon or a Solomon lookalike, either way, he is someone who has gained it all. What you and I long for, the teacher has.

He has pursued it and gained it. He's been there and done that. He's tried and tested it all. So he speaks both from his personal experience and he also speaks wisdom directly from God.

So who is this book for? Well, the odd book title, Ecclesiastes, is a word that refers to a gathering of God's people, a congregation gathered to be taught.

Ecclesia, church. So King Solomon is a preacher who is teaching God's word to God's people. Now this is important because people often think that Ecclesiastes is a book written from the world's perspective with unbelievers in mind.

[4 : 37] A worldly book for pagans. Well, this is unhelpful and not true. Solomon is a teacher to the people of God. A people who were most likely living in the high point in Israel's history, when they were materially blessed and prospering under a great and wise King Solomon.

But Ecclesiastes is not only for blessed Israel. Ecclesiastes is God's timeless wisdom for all of God's people. So these words are important for us and relevant for all time.

They're relevant for us. So that's your background. Back to the big question. What is the big question in Ecclesiastes? No, not what is the big question.

What is Solomon's theory of everything? Because he's got lots of questions, but he has a theory.

And his theory of everything is in verse 2. We're going to get back to the question. Before we get to the question, look at verse 2.

Here's his theory of everything. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Now in the NIV, some of you might have the NIV, the vanity word is translated meaningless.

[5 : 55] And that's really unhelpful as well. We've got to unpack all the unhelpful things before we can get to the helpful stuff. So often Ecclesiastes is misread as a very cynical or depressing book because it's all meaningless.

But that's not what the original word meant. Vanity is the Hebrew word hevel. H-E-V-E-L. Obviously, I didn't know this because I don't know Hebrew.

I had to look this up. We'll be told. Both. Hevel literally means breath, vapour, or smoke.

Elusive, ephemeral, and enigmatic. Smoke or vape. It's all vapour. I've got a candle here. Here we go. First block. You see that?

See that smoke? Smoke is something flimsy. When you try and get your hands on it, it just slips straight through your fingers.

[6 : 58] It's transitory, it's fleeting, and it's gone. You can't grab onto smoke. And conceptually, there are things in life that don't make sense.

You can't get your hands on them. Things that defy logic and reason. Things that are unfathomable and beyond our understanding. No matter how nerdy you are, some things you just cannot know.

So this is the preacher's, the teacher's theory of life. Smoke or vape. It's all vapour. That's honestly what life is like. This shouldn't be depressing, but comforting.

This really is what life is like. And you and I know this is true. Don't we? We know the Facebook status is not real.

Don't we? We know the Sunday outfit is just a facade. Don't we? We know what lies beneath the make-up and the nice clothes.

[8 : 04] Don't we? Of course we do. We do know. But do we really know? Do we know enough to stop us short and question why we are toiling at what we toil?

Do we really believe that all and everything is vanity smoke? Well, I can't speak for you, but I don't think I really get this.

And I think that's why there's 12 chapters in this book, repeating the same refrain 42 times.

Because we're really thick skulls.

We just don't get it. Vanity of vanities. It's all vanity. Each chapter is filled with the most beautiful, enigmatic poetry and prose.

Observations of life under the sun. Packed with vivid imagery and unnerving realism. Realism to be reveled in and relished.

[9 : 12] Honesty to be taken to heart and heeded. Stop pretending you're fine. Stop pretending life is rosy.

Stop trying to be impressive. Be real. Be honest. Be wise. Because that is what life under the sun is like.

And that's the other favourite catchphrase of the teacher. Life under the sun, verse 3. He uses this phrase to describe our earthbound existence.

Life beginning with birth and ending in death. Life that we live outside of the Garden of Eden. This side of Genesis 3.

And this side of Revelation 21. This side of heaven. The new heaven and the new earth. The in-between Eden and heaven life. Life here and now. Life where we see, hear, taste, smell, feel, yearn, live, work, hope, love, dream.

[10 : 19] But a life which is tainted, fallen, broken, disappointing, painful. And we all end up dead. Sorry. That's what the teacher says. I know it's blunt.

But that's what the teacher says. That is life under the sun. Short and ending in death. Take off your rose-coloured spectacles. Stop dreaming. And take an honest look at life under the sun.

We are not in the Garden of Eden. And we're not in heaven yet. So don't be surprised when you bite into a juicy red apple. And you find a worm-filled rotten centre.

You all do look depressed now. The teacher is on a systematic quest.

A quest to find significance and meaning in life under the sun. Something that he can get hold of.

Something which doesn't evaporate. And he takes the stuff of life and he dissects it.

[11:21] What really matters in life under the sun? What lies beneath the futility and the frustration? How should we live wisely knowing that life is fleeting and death is imminent?

How can we make sense of the problems, the injustices and the limitations of our fleeting lives on a broken earth? And how can we enjoy God's good gifts?

Gifts of family, holidays, leisure, health, happiness. Without making them the goal of our existence?

These are the teacher's questions. And here's the big question that underlines all the others. Verse 3. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

What am I going to get out of what I put in? How much will I profit? If I do more, will I get more? How much will I gain? This is the question. If I throw myself into my career, will the promotion be worth it?

[12:26] If I devote my whole life to investing in my children, will they look after me in old age? If I spend hours at the gym and achieve that marathon goal, will I be fitter and happier?

What will I gain? Well, the teacher's answer, so the whole rest of the book is really the answer to this question, but in our little section, 1 to 11, the teacher's answer takes us to two spheres of life.

He takes us to the natural world in verses 4 to 7. And then he takes us to human experience in verses 8 to 11. So let's look at the first answer.

I think I put it on your sheet. So the natural world, verses 4 to 7. So he's basically saying, look at, observe, look at the way the world works. Verse 4.

A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. Which generation were you born in? Born before 1945, anyone?

[13:27] Oh, that was my grandmother's era. There's probably no one here that generation. She was the silent generation. You're born between 46 and 64?

Yay! That's my parents, and a lot more. They are the baby boomers. Between 65 and 76?

Generation X. And that's me, too. Born between 77 and 2000-ish? Oh, a few youngsters.

You are Generation Y. No, Generation... You are the millennials. That's what you are. I've lost my place.

You are millennials, whatever that means. And if you're born since 2000, you are Generation Y, and you're also known as the snowflakes. Not very flattering.

[14:23] So what do we learn when we look at each generation? Can any generation claim to have added to, or changed, or improved the world?

What does verse 4 say? No. The earth remains. For all the toil of our parents and grandparents, all the wars lost and won, businesses grown and bust, none have significantly impacted the world.

None have changed the core of the earth. God's world. His good creation. The earth remains seemingly forever. What does man profit or gain by his toil?

What of lasting significance do people add to this world? Nothing. No generation can take any credit for the earth remaining. The earth remains not because of us, but in spite of us.

No generation has changed that. And neither will you, and neither will I. Be honest. You and I are not going to change the world. Verse 5.

[15:33] The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises. Look at the sun. The biggest and most significant light in our visible world.

What does the sun teach us about what we can gain from our toil? It is on a predictable, repetitive cycle. Rising and setting, and hurrying back to repeat the same cycle over and over again.

An uninterrupted cycle that we set our watches and calendars and age by. Do we set the sun on its course? No.

You can interact if you like. I'm quite used to that. You'll get the idea soon enough. No. We don't set the sun on its course.

Rather, our lives are governed by the sun. When to rise for work. When to plant. When to harvest. When to rest. The sun's job is to govern the day and the night.

[16:33] And that was a day not by us, but by the creator God. The sun is there not to remind us of how big and significant we are, but how small and dependent we are.

What does man gain by all his toil? Nothing. Nothing. The sun rises not because of us, but in spite of us. It doesn't matter who you think you are.

Nothing you do will change the world. Verse 6. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind. And on its circuits, the wind returns.

The wind is as cyclical as the sun, blowing round and round. Never reaching a destination in spite of its constant movement. From violent storms that wreak havoc on small islands to motionless doldrums that frustrate sailors at sea.

The wind keeps on around and around. Uncontrollable, unpredictable, an unending cycle. Can I stop the wind? Can I make it blow?

[17:39] No. No. Thank you. No. Does anything I do add to or change this? No. Is there any profit in trying?

No. The wind blows not because of us, but in spite of us. Verse 7. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.

Consider the sea. It never fills up. In spite of the continuous flow of rivers into it, somehow the water ends up back in the rivers and then another cycle.

The water cycle. The forces of nature continue by a power and a rule that is way beyond ours. I can't even stop a bathroom flooding with a toddler switching the taps on continuously.

Do I really think I can stop the oceans from flooding the earth? No. Is there anything I can do to make the rains come during a drought? No.

[18:44] The sun, the wind, the sea, the essential elements in our world held in fine and intricate balance, enabling us to live and breathe, all unaltered by our futile efforts.

Nothing we do as or improves on God's creation. God's natural world keeps on going, not because of us, but in spite of us. So what does man gain by all his toil at which he toils?

This could go horribly, horribly wrong. Candles and balloons. For all the extra hours in the office. Don't go very far.

The extra miles that you go on that little project of yours. It's really not going to work. The endless cycle of feeding kids, packing them off to school, helping them with homework, nagging them to do their music practice.

The menial, repetitive cooking, laundry, cleaning. The never-ending, thankless cycle. It's going to pop, isn't it? It's quite a small balloon, sorry.

[19:57] The weekly workouts at the gym, the running, the rowing, the pilateing. What do I gain? What am I adding to this world?

Honestly, nothing. The sun will still rise, the wind will still blow, and the sea will remain full. No matter how hard I work, or what I seek to gain, God's natural world keeps going.

Not because of you or I, but in spite of us. Well, how does this make you feel? You depressed? Well, we should be feeling pretty small and weak.

Maybe tired and frustrated. It's a point. All this hard work, my whole life. And it's not what I want to hear. I want to make a difference. I want my efforts to be significant.

I want to see some profit for my labour. But instead, verse 8. All things are wearisome. More than one can say.

[21:07] He's honest, isn't he? And this statement finds itself at the heart of the preacher's poem. Life is wearisome, tiring, tedious, repetitive, futile, smoke.

And this is the lesson of the natural world. Know your place in the world. God has set this world in motion. He has ordained the cycles of the sun, the wind, and the waters.

He is not restrained or limited by life under the sun. But we are. We profit from God's good gifts of sunshine and rain.

But we can't add significance to God's world by our efforts. We are takers from this world and not changers of this world.

We are not so great and significant as perhaps we think we are. The world will not fall apart if we leave work on time.

[22:10] If we miss a deadline. The world will not fall apart if our children don't get into the best school. It really won't. And the world will not fall apart if we eat fish, fingers and beans instead of organic, homemade, whatever.

It really won't. God's world remains. Those are the ridiculous things we toil after, aren't they? I mean, duh. I do it every day. The question was, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

And the answer the teacher gives as he observes God's world is nothing. Hard to swallow. And this is God's wisdom. Well, next the teacher turns to human experience.

So how does human experience answer the question of what can man gain from all his toiling toil? Let's have a look. So look at, we're now in section 8 to 11.

Look at the human problem. And the human problem is that more is never enough. Verse 8. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

[23 : 22] We can never get enough of the endless procession of sounds and images that flood our eyes and ears. Like the sea that is never full, the eyes and ears are never satisfied.

We always want more. The insatiable appetite of the eyes and ears are a picture of what lies in the insatiable human heart.

Whatever we gain or think will bring profit is never enough. We always want more. So the best of God's good gifts are selfishly, greedily and indulgently consumed.

One more hour in the office. One more promotion at work. One more home improvement. One more foreign holiday.

One more donut. One more glass of wine. One more episode on Netflix. One more click on Amazon. One more like on Facebook. One more chapter in my book.

[24 : 29] One more hour staying up late. One more press of the snooze button. One more quiet time skips. Just one more. We consume more and more and more to our own detriment and destruction.

Our hearts are insatiable. Does more mean gain? No. No. More does not mean gain. The more we seek to take, take, take for our own profit, the emptier we feel.

Feeding the insatiable appetites of our hearts brings no profit, no gain and no satisfaction. None. Because more is never enough. What about the good old days?

The more days I hear you say. Surely life was better then. Cleaner, healthier, less busy, less polluted. Who are you trying to kid?

Says the teacher. Verse 9. What does human history teach us? What has been is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done.

[25 : 36] And there is nothing new under the sun. This is the same old, same old historic problem. While nations rise and nations fall, human nature remains the same.

The patterns of the human heart are recurring ones. Examples of greed, murder, theft, violence and selfish gain litter the history books.

As do remarkable examples of love and kindness, generosity and self-sacrifice. But even at its very, very best, humanity is limited and restrained.

We have a common ancestor. We're all made in God's image. But we're all fallen like Adam. We're all remarkably God-like in our creativity, our intellect, our morality, our relationships.

But we're all painfully broken and corrupted. Living for ourselves and our own gain rather than the glory of the creator.

[26 : 46] It is inescapable. We are all born in Adam. We sin like Adam. And we die like Adam. We are all destined to die.

And after that, face judgment. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Nothing. There is no escape from our old, repetitive nature.

There is no escape from our selfishness. And no escape from death. Well, perhaps in the back of our minds we may be thinking, surely there's some exception to this.

Surely I'm different. Surely British is better. Well, the teacher anticipates this, verse 10. Is there a thing of which it could be said, this is new?

Just as quickly he denies it. Whatever seems new has already been in the ages before us. There is no exception. There is nothing new. Whatever new invention or innovation humanity has come up with around the world, none have really brought lasting change or improvement.

[27 : 57] Some will argue otherwise. They'll say, what about the wonderful World Wide Web? That's new. Facebook, Twitter, Google. Surely this is new, progressive.

And it might seem so. But no. Coupled with every progressive discovery, there is often some kind of decline or loss. One click to pornography.

Internet fraud. Cyber bullying. We have new ways of communicating, but we always had ways of communicating before. We've got new ways of sinning, but they're the same old sins of the past. There really is nothing new under the sun. History repeats itself again. And you may still question it. Really, are you sure? Maybe you are still feeling a bit doubtful, someone out there. Well, the teacher does anticipate this. He knows there's going to be arguments. Not everyone's going to agree with him.

[28 : 58] Verse 11, he explains why we might think otherwise. There's no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

All is forgotten and cut short. The problem, if we think things were better or we think things are new, is that we have historical amnesia.

We are plain and simple, forgetful. We don't remember our ancestors, and our descendants will not remember us. Death cuts short the memory.

Whatever we have accumulated during our lives will be lost or thrown away when we die. Whatever we have achieved will be forgotten when we die.

And this is true at a worldwide and an individual level. I'll give you an example. Put your hands up if you can remember the name of your great-grandmother.

[30 : 03] Your great-grandmother. Who can remember the name of their great-grandmother? Find it, find it. It's in there somewhere. You know it. It's on the tip of your brain. Yes, we've got one or two.

Strongly put those hands up. You're absolutely sure. Her whole name. Her beginning name, her last name. Okay, I'm impressed. Great-great-grandmother. Anyone remember their great-great-grandmother?

This is where the family tree thing is really useful. Wow. That great-great-grandmother of yours was really significant in bringing you into this world.

But you have forgotten her. She is forgotten by her very own family. You should be ashamed of yourselves. And I can't remember mine either. Because we are forgetful.

And we will be forgotten. So the conclusion. What can man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

[31 : 08] And the answer is nothing. Nothing we do changes the world. Our selfish hearts will never be satisfied. And this is the historic problem of the human race.

There are no exceptions. And we will not be remembered. Why do we need to know this? You want to know why we need to know this now, don't you? What is the lesson that the teacher is teaching? Nice poetry. So what? Well, I think we need to stop and review our expectations in life. We need to understand that life under the sun is limited.

What can I gain in my toil under the sun? Nothing. And that is the hard, honest truth. For all my efforts, my intellect, creativity, attractiveness, qualifications, status, whatever, I cannot alter or improve God's world.

Nothing in this world can satisfy my heart. And I certainly will not be remembered. Now, we are going to look at some of the implications of this. But I want this to sit with you for a little while before we bring some of these things together and look at how there are implications for this.

[32 : 19] But before we do that, I want you to just go back into groups and reflect on some of that and look at those discussion questions. In the green. In the green. Five minutes. Just five minutes.

And then we will draw some conclusions. So, conclusion. What can man gain by all the toil at which he feels under the sun? And the answer we've had is? Nothing. Nothing. Why do we need to know this?

That is the question. And like I said, the teacher does have a lot more to say about this. Twelve chapters, in fact. And I would encourage you to keep reading.

And if you want help reading the rest of the twelve chapters, this little book is absolutely fantastic. It's not a commentary, but he has written a commentary on Ecclesiastes.

It's David Gibson, Living Life Backwards. And it is really an easy read. And it goes through not every one of the twelve chapters, but most of it.

[33 : 17] Really recommend that book. But we are going to cheat and skip all the way to chapter 12, 13, which says, you've got it?

Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Spoiler alert. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Well, that leaves some questions anyway. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

One day, everything will be brought before God for judgment. Every hidden thing.

Every desire of our heart, good or bad. That should prompt us to fear and follow the Lord God.

[34 : 25] The Lord God set this world in motion, and he will bring things to a close. The Lord God has promised to fulfill the desires of those who fear him.

He hears their cry and saves them. That's Psalm 145, 19. It is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.

And we're in wisdom literature, so that's really important. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We are called to fear and follow our great God.

Fear of the Lord acknowledges our smallness, our weakness, our limitations. And fear of the Lord acknowledges God's greatness, his superiority, his power.

Fear of the Lord recognizes the need for God to step in, where we are too weak and useless. Fast forward 700 years.

[35 : 46] This same Lord God does intervene in history. He sent one man who did change this world and the course of history forever.

A much better Adam. A son of David. A preacher king. The son of God. Jesus Christ. And he did not come into this world asking, What can I gain?

Instead, he came to give. God's own son gave up his own life to give us unlimited life forever.

In him we are promised a new life. In a new heaven and a new earth. A life free from the old, frustrating, repetitive cycles of life under the sun.

A life free from the insatiable appetites of the heart. A life free from death forever. A life that is truly gain.

[37 : 04] What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined. I wonder where Paul got that language.

This is what God has prepared for those who love him. The desires of our hearts will never be satisfied by anything in this world.

They really, really won't. They really, really, really, really won't. That's why he says it over and over again for 12 chapters.

Because really, really, really won't. True gain is found in Jesus, who gives us eternal life.

Eternal life. Satisfying eternal life. And what a privileged position we live in this side of history.

Great, we're Christians.

[38 : 05] We're looking forward to heaven. Rest from toil. But how does that change our view of gain and what we invest in now? We've still got to live here, haven't we? Well, Jesus said it should totally transform our view.

He was the greatest and most powerful ruler in history, but he left his eternal throne to live 36 years under the sun. He is perfectly placed to compare his heavenly home with all that this world has to offer.

He's the best one to do that, isn't he? He knows what heaven is like, and he knows what it's like to live here. And this is what he says in Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, 36.

And this is when he is anticipating his imminent death. And he asks this question, What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

And Jesus' conclusion is, nothing. There is nothing to gain when you forfeit your soul. Not even the whole world is a worthy exchange for one perished life.

[39 : 26] Do not give up on eternal life for the sake of anything in this world. It is not worth it. The career is not worth it.

That relationship is not worth it. That self-indulgent habit is not worth it. Don't cling on to any of that stuff.

It is smoke. It's not satisfying. It doesn't last. And it's not worth it. Learn from the teacher. He had it all. And he discovered that the stuff of this world is smoke.

Disappointing and empty. And this should make us groan. God's perfect creation is not how it should be. It is frustrating knowing that we have eternal life in Jesus.

But we're stuck here now. Caught up in this world. In this treadmill. And this wise book gives expression to that. It gives expression to our groaning and frustration.

[40 : 33] Because life under the sun is frustrating. So if you need to have a rant, have a rant through Ecclesiastes. Groan with the teacher who's frustrated.

But, and here's a really, really, really big but. Groaning is not an excuse for moaning. Moaning is the symptom of a selfish, game-seeking heart that wants more and is unsatisfied.

We moan because we don't get what we want, when we want, how we want. The job is not profitable enough. The husband's not loving enough. Our children are not obedient enough. Our church is not perfect enough. Our fellowship group is not caring enough. Our women's ministry is not relevant enough. Moan, moan, moan. I catch myself moaning every day.

Rotten, game-seeking heart. Of course the stuff of this life is not good enough. Of course it's not good enough. This is not Eden.

[41 : 46] It's not perfect people in your women's ministry, in your church. This is not heaven. We're in the mess of life. We're not in a perfect world.

This is life under the sun. How forgetful we are. How quickly we forget God's good gifts. God's gift of sunshine, wind and rain.

Gifts of food, water, shelter. Gifts of friendship, family, neighbours. Gift of church family. Look around you. These are the women that you are going to spend eternity with.

Sisters forever. What a gift. Thank God for one another. It's not a competition. It's not a comparison. Don't need to moan about each other.

Malign one another. We need to thank God for one another. Don't need to be impressive. Just need to be honest and repentant and grateful for God's gifts.

[42 : 51] If we belong to our great God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we have the gift of eternal life. Praise God. We have eternal significance, eternal security, eternal happiness gained through the gift of God's eternal son.

Life is short. Death is imminent. But let's not sell out to life under the sun and forfeit life beyond the grave.

Whoever loses his life for Jesus and for the gospel will save it. It is worth living for Jesus. We can set our hearts on him.