

# Why is life as it is?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our first reading this morning is on page 667 of the Church Bibles. We'll be reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verses 1 to 18.

That's page 667. 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.

[ 1 : 10 ] 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. 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 already been 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. 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.

[ 2 : 16 ] 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. The second reading is from the Book of Romans, chapter 8, starting at verse 18.

That's on page 1137. So that's Romans chapter 8, starting at verse 18, on page 1137.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

[ 3 : 24 ] 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 corruption, 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 first roots of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we were 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.

And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know for those who love God, all things work together for good.

[ 4 : 40 ] For those who are called according to his purpose. 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.

Tim, thanks so much indeed for reading. Let me add my welcome to you. And perhaps you could turn back to Ecclesiastes chapter 1, that first reading, page 667, as we start a new series of talks this morning in this little book in the middle of the Old Testament.

And then I'm going to pray and ask for God's help as we look at his word this morning. Let's pray together. Amen. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much that the Lord Jesus stands amongst his churches.

Thank you for his presence with us today. Thank you that he is unchanging, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

[ 6 : 15 ] And we pray, therefore, please would you help us to listen to his voice this morning and take it to heart. And we ask it in his name. Amen.

Well, I wonder what you made of that opening chapter of Ecclesiastes. It might make fairly gloomy reading. Well, it does make fairly gloomy reading. Have a look again at chapter 1, verses 1 and 2. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

And yet what we're going to discover over these next few weeks or so is that rather than being written by a sort of glass half-empty misery guts, it is actually a book which is given to us by God in his great kindness in order to help us to understand the world we live in and why the world is as it is. It's why I've called this series, if you look to the term card, Making the Most of Life, because that is precisely what this book will help us to do.

[ 7 : 31 ] Just as one of the things that small children learn to do as they explore the world, as they play, don't they let pretend? So as the living room or the garden becomes a zoo or a hospital or a battlefield or a palace or a tea party.

And if you're ever sort of eavesdropping on an occasion like that, then you hear all sorts of conversations as the toddler scolds and pleads and says sorry and thank you to a whole host of imaginary friends.

But as we grow up, of course, we have to learn the difference between the let's pretend world and the real world. In the real world, you can't go into a shop and buy everything or anything.

In the real world, tears take longer to dry. In the real world, not everyone always gets better in hospital. And Ecclesiastes is one of God's great gifts to help us to live in the real world.

It does so by exploding the make-believe world that so often as adults we can find ourselves living in.

[ 8 : 48 ] It's just worth saying as we start this book that it is a book very much written for everyone. I think one common view of Ecclesiastes is that it's basically a book addressing those who have no Christian belief whatsoever or who have no belief whatsoever.

That it's saying that if you don't believe in God, then this is where it gets you. And yes, if you're looking on the Christian faith or if you're skeptical about the Christian faith, then this book, I think we'll see over the next few weeks, it does get us asking the big questions of life.

So if that's you, then do please keep coming. But it is primarily written for believers, for Christian believers, to help us to live in the real world.

I think that's clear just in the very first verse where you'll see there's a footnote explaining that the preacher is the convener or leader of the congregation or as we might say, he's a pastor.

So then, what is life in the real world like? Well, you'll see on the outline on the back of the service sheet, everything is vanity.

[ 10 : 08 ] Everything is vanity. Verse 2 again, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Here is the preacher's verdict on our world, vanity.

That is the refrain that goes all the way through the book. It's worth reading the whole book, by the way, in one sitting, probably only take you an hour or so. And that is the refrain of the book, 30 times or more, vanity of vanities.

Now, some Bibles translate the word as meaningless, which I think is not so helpful because the word literally means breath. So imagine a cold winter's day. You take a deep breath in. You breathe out. And for a moment, it's there. You can see your breath. But then it's gone.

And life is like that. You begin to breathe and it's gone. Life is short, insubstantial, frail, futile.

[11:13] It's what the Old Testament says elsewhere. I put Psalm 39, verse 5 on the outline. Behold, you have made my days a few hand breaths and my lifetime is as nothing before you.

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath. And verse 3 then gives us the question that the rest of chapter 1 answers.

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? What do I gain? What do I leave behind that will count as a lasting monument to my life and my efforts?

What will I have to show for my life? What will I have achieved? What will I have gained? And the answer is nothing. After all, just look at the world of nature.

Verse 4, a generation goes and a generation comes but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north.

[12:18] 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.

The world is a hubbub of activity and yet devoid of progress. Verse 5 describes the endless pattern of the sun rising and setting hastening, literally panting from sunrise to sunset like an exhausted runner setting in the west and then rushing back to the east again to rise exhausted.

Or think of the wind. Verse 6, busy achieving nothing, going round and round and round. all the waters verse 7 as the preacher describes what I think we are told at school is the hydrological cycle.

But to what purpose? The rivers are busy, the waters flowing and yet the sea never gets any fuller. But here is the point I think.

If that is what it's like for the natural world, why on earth would I expect my little life to be any different? Do I really think that I am so significant that in some way I am the exception?

[13:47] Which is why suddenly we go from talking about the natural world to verse 8 the preacher is talking about mankind. All things are full of weariness.

A man cannot utter it. The eyes not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. We travel to and from work, we spend our days sitting in front of a screen and by the end of the week we're too exhausted to do anything else than sit in front of another screen.

And then the same thing happens again and again next week and the week after. Like the sun, like the wind, like the water, we go round and round.

What's more, we're never satisfied. If only I got that job we think life would be different. If only we could afford that house. If only I was married. If only I was married to someone different.

If only I had children. If only I had a bit more money or the latest gadget. Just as our ears are never satisfied with hearing. We always want, don't we, to catch the latest bit of news, the latest bit of gossip or the latest developments at work or the latest fitness plan.

[14:58] But does it really change anything? Just look at the way life repeats itself. Verse 9. What has been is what will be.

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's been already in the ages before us.

It was the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge who once said, all new news is old news happening to new people.

So the media tells us about yet another war, another natural disaster, another celebrity scandal. It tells us about the latest fashions, which of course were fashionable 30 years ago.

They just come again round and round and round. Keep your clothes, they'll be in fashion again in 30 years time. Or at work, there is yet another structural reorganization.

[15:59] Does anything really change? By which he doesn't mean no new things are invented, but do any new things change the fundamental nature of life as the writer of Ecclesiastes is describing it?

Do any of them make life anything other than a brief breath? You breathe in, you breathe out, you see it, and it's gone.

Most sobering of all, there is no remembrance, verse 11, there is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be amongst those who come after.

I've got a series of photographs at home of some of my Victorian ancestors, all sitting down in a terribly formal pose, wearing their Sunday best, and I've had to write their names on the back, and a little kind of family tree just to remind me of who is who and who is related to who, because without that I would be completely clueless.

the Victorians, of course, thought of themselves as being progressive and liberal. They were the future ones, and yet in 150 years' time, we'll have been forgotten as well.

[17:32] Generations come, generations go, and no one remembers. I take it it's why we are prone at a certain age to have midlife crises, because we look back on our lives, we look at the lives that we have created for ourselves, and it just doesn't amount to very much.

It's so here today and gone tomorrow. We're born, we live, we die, it all happens so quickly. I take it these pictures in Ecclesiastes one, I take it they hit home, don't they?

Because when we consider the brevity of life set against the millennia of the earth, we know that actually what the preacher says is true. He's nothing if not brutally honest.

Now I imagine as we look at this book over the next couple of months or so, I imagine that we all have one of two responses. Some, I think, we will find this book wonderfully refreshing and wonderfully liberating, and we'll be saying to ourselves and to each other, yes, this does describe my life.

And I'm so glad the Bible describes the real world that I experience, and you'll go away rejoicing in Ecclesiastes. Others, I suspect, will find it too honest as it tells us truths we'd rather not hear and haven't yet confronted.

[19:06] But of course, it begs the question, doesn't it, why? Why is the world like this? And the surprising answer is because God has made it like this.

God has made it vanity. Have a look at verse 13. 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. Now, this is the only mention of God in chapter one of the book, and the point is it's not chance that makes the world the way it is, but God.

It's not chance, it's God. This is the way life in the real world is. It's expressed again in verse 15. What is crooked cannot be made straight, what is lacking cannot be counted, but something is fundamentally wrong with our world, something crooked which you can't straighten out, something missing which we can't make up for.

And yet, of course, this isn't simply the message of Ecclesiastes, it is the message of the whole Bible. You see, when we stand back and ask the question and look at Ecclesiastes against the backdrop of the whole Bible, we shouldn't be shocked to hear that God has imposed vanity on his world.

[20:41] Because, and here if you like, is Ecclesiastes in just a few words, Ecclesiastes describes life outside the Garden of Eden.

Back at the start of history, God made a perfect world, a world of substance, a world of satisfaction. redemption. And yet, Adam and Eve rejected God.

They would decide how to live their lives rather than God. And God's response is one of judgment, ultimately death, but in this life to experience his curse and to experience the removal of his blessing, to remove them from the Garden of Eden, or to use the language of Ecclesiastes to impose vanity on the world.

It's the world, of course, that we still live in, and it's the world as it will be until the new creation. Just keep a finger in Ecclesiastes chapter 1 and turn to that second reading, if you will, from Romans 8. Romans chapter 8, page 1137, or thereabouts. And here the Apostle Paul makes exactly the same point.

[22:09] Let me read Romans 8, verses 19 to 23, and see if you can note as I read it the parallels with what Ecclesiastes is saying. Romans chapter 8, verse 19.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subject 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 first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Do you see the world has been subject to vanity, to futility, verse 20, by God. It's part of God's judgment on the world as he hands us over to the consequences of our sin and rebellion against him.

Notice verse 21, it was subjected to futility in hope. In other words, in the hope of the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth.

[ 23 : 31 ] But until that new creation, the whole of this present creation, verse 22, is groaning, longing for that day. And not just creation that groans, verse 23, we ourselves groan.

You see, God does not make the world as it is because he's a grumpy old man, but because he's desperately wanting us to understand there's something wrong with our world and to long for the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth.

So come back to Ecclesiastes. Perhaps now we can see what is meant by vanity. vanity. That's what our writer is describing.

The effects of sin, the effects of God removing his blessing, of his judgment on the world, are everywhere. It's like when you do some sorting out at home or you do some spring cleaning and there's just dust, isn't there, in the most unlikely places.

So in little nooks and crannies, it's on every shelf, behind every cupboard, dust just gets everywhere. In the same way, the whole of creation has been affected by sin, every aspect of life.

[ 24 : 49 ] As we go through Ecclesiastes over these next few weeks, we'll see how it affects work, wealth, pleasure, laughter, the future, youth, old age, and death.

Every aspect of life. You see, who is Ecclesiastes written for? Everyone. Because it describes the world everyone lives in.

And it's only by asking the hard questions that will make the most of life. It's all too easy to be like the high-flying businessman who jumped into a taxi outside a central London station and said to the cabbie, drive on, drive on, and the cabbie turned around and said, where to, Gov?

I haven't got time for questions, drive on, drive on, and just to go through life, never asking the questions. What's the point? Why am I here?

How do I really make the most of my life? And Ecclesiastes is one of God's great gifts which will enable us to do that. There was an article in the Washington Post last year with a heading, Our Culture Assumes Happiness is the Normal Human Condition.

[ 26 : 10 ] Why? I thought it was a very arresting headline. Because we do, don't we? Don't we assume, basically, that happiness is the normal human condition?

That if my life is on track, then I'll be happy, and especially those of us who are children, we want them to be happy, and so on. The article went on to argue that we have created a culture where happiness is assumed to be normal, where it's assumed to be the normal, healthy condition, and anything else, whether it's sadness, or stress, or anxiety, or disappointments, anything else should be treated as a disease which needs a cure.

Perhaps that's why there's such an epidemic of people using antidepressants. Perhaps it's why suicide rates are rising, because of course the burden of living in a world where I'm told I ought to be happy the whole time is simply unsustainable in the face of real life.

As I read the article I thought well that is a reminder that actually if followers of Jesus Christ we have a wonderful message to proclaim. We understand why the world is as it is. We know there is a new creation to come.

So what I want to do is to finish just by asking together those three questions which you'll see on the bottom of the outline and then we can carry on chatting through some of the implications at the end over coffee.

[ 27 : 41 ] But first of all what is the gospel we believe and proclaim to others? Because the preacher warns us against the sort of message that says yes life is vanity but if you put your trust in Jesus then life will be brilliant and everything will be transformed.

Some of us will have been on the receiving end of that kind of teaching. If you follow Jesus you'll be free from all the problems of life. You'll live a wonderful life of joy and fulfillment.

Well Ecclesiastes I think blows the whistle on that kind of thinking. It's simply not true. And those of us who are not yet followers of Jesus Christ please will you grasp that so that you're not

disappointed when the Christian life turns out to be perplexing and fraught with difficulties. as it is for our preacher in Ecclesiastes. Yes Christians know the joy of sins forgiven. We experience many anticipations of the new creation to come.

But both believer and unbeliever alike live life under the sun. The effects of sin, the effects of God's curse are everywhere. So we mustn't give the impression that becoming a Christian is the kind of gateway pathway to a problem free life.

[ 29 : 05 ] Next question, what is our expectation of the Christian life? Or perhaps to clarify the issue, how are you? Very well thanks. Good.

Just fine. I take it that if we asked our preacher that question, he would come up with a rather different answer. Actually life is perplexing.

Life is short, confusing. Ecclesiastes in other words is a book which helps us to be blunt about the painful reality of living outside the Garden of Eden.

Life can seem unfair, confusing, frustrating, hard, vanity. I guess there will be some of us here this morning and you're thinking to yourself, yes that is exactly how my life feels at the moment. But all of us experience that to different degrees all the time.

What do we do when life is like that? I guess one option is simply to pretend that life is fine when it isn't. I guess another option is to labour under the guilt of feeling I'm a bit of a second class Christian.

[ 30 : 12 ] Why don't I feel as happy and together as everyone else does? There must be something wrong with my spiritual life. But I take it the right response is to do what our preacher does in Ecclesiastes and he faces up to life as it is.

He stops pretending and Ecclesiastes will help us to do just that. To be honest with ourselves, to be honest with each other and to be honest with God.

The alternative of course is that when life doesn't work out, as we hope for, we end up being crushed by disappointment or angry with others or frightened about all sorts of things or bitter towards God.

What is the gospel we believe and proclaim to others? What is our expectation of Christian life?

Thirdly, do we long for heaven? Here's a quote from one Christian author.

Beneath the surface of everyone's life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear, and for good reason.

[ 31 : 36 ] We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. The promise of one day being with Jesus in a perfect world is the Christian's only hope for complete relief.

Until then, we either groan or we pretend that we don't. An aching soul is evidence not of spiritual immaturity, but of realism.

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

Let's spend some moments in quiet, for reflection, and then I shall lead us in prayer. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that in your great kindness, you not only show us the world we live in, but you explain to us why it is as it is. Thank you for reminding us of the seriousness of human sin and rebellion, that we live in a world experiencing your curse and judgment.

[ 33 : 09 ] Thank you for the new creation to come. And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you teach us to long for that future day and to live our lives rightly in this world.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.