

Are things going to get any better for my life

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[0 : 00] I'm pretty sure on a day like this, you probably wouldn't feel like that, but maybe earlier in the week, on one of those cold, cold, freezing mornings, you might have had a sense of what I'm about to describe.

The alarm clock rings, you stir, but then you wonder, do I really want to get out of bed? You see, it's not just the cold, is it?

But the dread of facing the daily grind. In the back of your mind, you think, what's really motivating me to drag myself out of bed?

Or am I just waking up to the usual grind of work or school? Or worse, getting up for no good reason at all? And sometimes, even if there might have been something important ahead of you for the day, you might even just wonder, what's the point anyway?

Isn't life just a treadmill? And all this effort does not get me anywhere anyway. But then, you think, oh, except, if I don't tread this mill, I'm actually going to go backwards.

[1 : 22] Incidentally, that's probably me on my bike nowadays. At my age, the aim is not to make much progress, just not to go backwards. Now, if you're here last week, you will recall that we discovered from the Bible the promise that the world as a whole was going to get worse before it gets better.

The glory of this new creation that was described, as Helen said, in Isaiah 65 only arrives when Jesus returns. In the meantime, there'll be wars and famines and earthquakes.

Now, this week, as we look at Ecclesiastes, we add to that sense of things getting worse, that of drudgery in life. Not only are things going to get worse, we also have to then question, what's the point anyway?

And the teacher in Ecclesiastes uses the word meaningless, which carries the sense of life just being a vapor, a puff of smoke. It's the view that nothing lasts forever.

And even if there's progress, it's not permanent. So, let's have a look again at what he says in verse 1, which should be on the screen. Yep.

[2 : 30] The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labors at which they twirl under the sun?

Generations come, generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, it sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. It's all same, same, isn't it?

And as we will read later in verse 9, there is nothing new under the sun. Hence, the teacher concludes with the why bother? What do people gain from all their labors, he asks.

Hence, he concludes with a lament in verse 8. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear is full of hearing.

[3 : 37] What has been will be again, and what has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, look, there is something new. It was here already, long ago.

It was here before our time. I'm not sure if you're familiar with Greek mythology, but it reminds me of the story of Sisyphus. You know, it's the one where he was punished by Zeus and made to roll a boulder up this steep hill.

Except it's too heavy for him to get to the top. And so before it does, it always rolls back down. And so he has to keep doing this over and over and over and over and over again.

It's the whole feeling of déjà vu, or if you've watched the movie, Groundhog Day. And, you know, if we look around at our lives and our world, we see examples of it, don't we?

And particularly of the same mistakes that we as a society make over and over and over again. And so, for example, with World War I, after that ended and the horrific loss of lives, they said, never again, didn't they?

[4 : 46] Lest we forget. That's what we all say every time on ANZAC Day. And yet, little more than two decades later, what do we have? World War II.

Now, thankfully, we haven't had World War III yet. And I use the word yet because, you know, I think perhaps it will come one day. But do you think the world has forgotten the horrors of war?

Probably, haven't they? And so the teacher resigns himself to the conclusion in verse 11. No one remembers the former generations. And even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

And so he's saying that not only do we not learn from the past, but things stay the same, only perhaps in a different guise. But what's more, any good we think we've done would soon be forgotten by those who follow anyway.

Anyway, it's a rather dreary thought, isn't it? And it sort of hurts us as a people of this generation, doesn't it? Because I'm sure at school and then at work, it's been ingrained in us, haven't we, that we need to find our purpose in life, to make a difference.

[6 : 06] And what a rude awakening then it is to be told that what we put our heart into is not going to make a difference. And no one will remember anyway. Why bother?

Because the reality is that apart from our genetic material, we leave very little by way of a mark, don't we? Beyond a few generations of our lives. Now, perhaps if you're a famous philosopher or poet, or you've built something magnificent like the Sydney Harbour Bridge, perhaps people might remember you.

Actually, let me take a straw poll. How many of you know who is the one who designed the Sydney Harbour Bridge? Anyone? Daniel Smith does.

All right. Daniel, what is his name? Brad who? Brad Smith, did you say? Brad Pill. Okay, all right.

Brad Pill, sorry, okay. All right. I'm going to test you again this time next year and see whether you remember his name. But really, except for Daniel Smith, maybe he's got an interest in bridges.

[7 : 17] No one remembers. That's it. Now, even within our own families, okay, let's not talk about all these big achievements, but even within our own family, how many of us really remember our forebears beyond our grandparents or great-grandparents?

Does anyone know the name of their great-grandparents? Stephen does. Chill. Not bad. But again, not many of us, do they?

I mean, we may have a piece of heirloom that's handed down to us or a story, particularly if they're a prominent member of society, but that's about all, isn't it? Such is the reality of what Ecclesiastes is talking about.

And with it comes a resonation, doesn't it, about just how futile all of it is? Now, I'm not saying that there is no sense of accomplishment in the things that we do well.

If we pass an exam or we get a job, these are real moments of joy in our life. So is a new birth in the family or when we have a big celebration of a milestone birthday or something like that.

[8 : 23] Those are real joys in our family. I'm not trying to negate any of that and say, oh, that's all rubbish or whatever. But precious though these moments are, when we pan out and look at the totality of life, they are but flickers of light, aren't they, in an otherwise huge expanse of darkness.

And yet, a bit like last week, we humans insist on finding meaning, don't we? I may have described something really dreary to you tonight, but you will walk out there tonight and tomorrow, you will still insist on living life as though there's purpose and meaning, isn't it?

And you will be depressed if you haven't got a sense of meaning or purpose in your life. Why is that the case? Why do we still have this great sense for meaning when actually, this is all meaningless, relatively?

Well, the teacher says later on in chapter 3, verse 10, I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in His time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.

There you go. Eternity in the human heart. Yet, no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Our deep longing for meaning is the result of God setting eternity in our hearts.

[9 : 42] Now, some people call it the God-shaped hole that only God can fill. I attribute it to the fact that we are made in God's image. Which, if you don't believe in the existence of God, it's probably hard for you to accept.

But then, how else do you explain this sense of eternity in your heart? Is it purely in terms of molecules and atoms and chemical reactions? I mean, if that's really what it is, then you're really just living an illusion, isn't it?

No, I tend to think and I believe that this longing is another piece of evidence that God exists. Now, if you were here last week and Helen sort of recapped some of it, Christians have a way out of this dilemma of meaninglessness.

It's found in Jesus, right? Who has given us the doorway into the new creation. He's come to earth to offer us salvation and then through which, through him, we can then go from this creation into the next.

And when we have that, things will indeed last. There is an eternity that awaits us that brings meaning and purpose. And this is only possible, as I said last week, because Jesus offers us himself as a substitution.

[10 : 58] He takes the penalty of what we've done wrong, dies on the cross for us, and then gives us his righteousness in exchange. Now, if you weren't here last week and you missed that and you want to know more, that's fine.

Don't worry. We're about to start a new course called Christianity Explored where we'll go through this in more detail. So, if you're interested in that, come and talk to me afterwards and, you know, I'll be able to give you details as to how we can explore more about what the Bible talks about as the good news of Jesus.

But for us, when we put our faith in Jesus, then a future does await us, doesn't it? There's nothing like what the teacher describes here in Ecclesiastes. But it still doesn't, I guess, avoid the question of the here and now, does it?

If there is no escaping Ecclesiastes in this life, yeah, how do we face it? Does the Bible help us in any way? Well, you won't be surprised to know that I think that it does.

And we'll go through some of that tonight. Now, again, the Bible has many things to say and I'll just look at three passages for tonight. And they should be in your outline, three New Testament passages.

- [12 : 10] The first one is in Ephesians 2, verse 8 to 10. That's a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus. And it says on the screen, For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourself, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.

Now, here again, we have the Gospel summarized. We are saved by faith in Jesus, not by our own works. But then in verse 10, we're told that those who are saved have in store for them something to do for this life.

It says, For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Now, please take note the important phrase of in Christ Jesus.

For it's only in Christ that God's plan of good works for us finds its purpose. these good works are what God has prepared in advance for us to do in Christ.

Now, you might then think, okay, that's great, but how does that then marry with Ecclesiastes, where we've just been taught that everything we do, which presumably includes our good works, is meaningless.

- [13 : 19] It doesn't last. Well, I think, firstly, we need to just remember, and perhaps divide the good works that we do into two types. the first, or the second, which we'll talk about a bit later, are good works that will indeed last for eternity.

And I'll come back to that in a while when we talk about what it means when we have a relationship with God. But secondly, even the good works now in this life, which may not have eternal value, are still good works that the Bible says here that God has prepared for us to do.

Now, why is that? why is something like cooking and cleaning the toilet, which I'm pretty sure has no eternal value beyond helping us to get there.

But these are still things... Why... Yeah. You don't have to eat? Okay. Anyway. But why are these things still worth doing? They are still worth doing because God has prepared them for us to do.

Why is this? Well, not so much because the good works themselves will last, but because it still matters to God. That is, our relationship with God ensures that it matters.

- [14 : 38] Not so much that the good works itself will last. Now, it's just a piece, a bit like this piece of artwork which has been sitting on my fridge for the last ten years or more. You may not be able to see clearly, so I've put it on the screen there.

Now, I'm not going to say which daughter of mine drew this, okay, and please don't ask them. But if you ask me, I think it looks a bit like a Picasso, very abstract. Now, I do realize that, you know, if we put it up for an auction at Sotheby's or something, it's not going to fetch the price of a Picasso.

But for me, this piece of art is still precious, isn't it? I know I'm biased, and I know it does not reflect the mark of a genius in the making.

Or maybe it does, maybe it does. But the picture matters to me because the artist matters to me.

What's more, what's more, she was thinking of me, wasn't she, when she drew it. She loved me enough to make me the subject of her artwork.

- [15 : 47] And she even told the teacher so. That's why it says there at the bottom, this is my dad. And that is why it's still sitting on my fridge after so many years.

And that's the same with our good works as Christians, isn't it? Our good works matter to God because we're doing it out of love for Him. The outcomes, whether they last or not, doesn't really matter as much as the fact that we're doing it to please Him.

And because of that, it matters to Him. And because of that, He's created for us to do them ahead of time. And that's why I have to say, friends, that without a relationship with God, we've missed a huge opportunity, haven't we?

It's not to say that if we're not a Christian, we can't do any good work. But even if it has value beyond our life, which Ecclesiastes says is limited, we've missed the chance to do them for the One who created us to do.

On the other hand, if you love the Lord Jesus, then everything you do, whether it's large or small, whether it has any impact beyond this life, it still matters because it matters to God.

[17 : 06] Now second, all we do now in this life matters because even as we are doing good work for God, what happens in return is that God is also working in us.

God, in other words, is doing a good work in us as we do good work for Him. You see, as we do good, God is changing us, isn't He? He's using what we do to build our character to make us like His Son and prepare us for eternity when we will be with Him.

So again, we miss this amazing opportunity, don't we, without a relationship with God. Yes, anyone, everyone can grow in character and there are many around the world who may not be Christian and still have integrity and compassion, I'm not denying any of that, but as a Christian, character building is part of our preparation for eternity when we will be like Jesus and we will be with God.

And one of the things that God is building in us is that of faith and that brings us to the second passage in 1 Peter 1, verse 3 to 9. This is another letter written by the Apostle Peter this time and Peter writes, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In His great mercy, He has given us new birth in a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

[18 : 41] In all this you greatly rejoice though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These, these trials, these ecclesiastes-like things that we are going through have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than God which perishes even though refined by fire may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus is revealed.

So Peter speaks here of an inheritance that awaits us in heaven and what qualifies us for this inheritance is our faith. It's not good works but faith.

Only genuine faith qualifies us for this prize and what's occurring in this life is that our faith is being tested to prove that it's genuine. All the trials that we face, all these mundane things that we have to put up with are things to help us to respond by faith.

Hence, Jesus called last week for us to not let our hearts grow cold but rather to fan it into flame with faith. And if you think about it, the various aspects of our character, things like patience, compassion, or joy are really outworkings of that faith, isn't it?

When you have faith, then you will wait upon the Lord, right? That's patience rather than going about things your own way. When you are a person of faith in Jesus, you will respond to others with compassion rather than being selfish because you know the Lord will look after you.

[20 : 24] When you have faith, you respond with joy rather than hopelessness during trials. as Christians, if we believe God's promise to us in the Bible, then our faith translates into character as we go about our life.

And so the life of a Christian isn't just to believe in the new creation that's going to come and then just grin and bear it and hope it comes quickly. Rather, we have a purpose for this life and the purpose is to be going through this process of refinement like gold in a furnace to be purified so as our character can be built up and we are made ready to enter heaven.

It's a stark contrast, isn't it? Because if all we have for this life was this life, then even if what we achieve is impressive, it will soon start to fade away, isn't it?

all the memories of what we've done would just grow dimmer and dimmer with each passing generation. And then when you get to the new creation, it's not going to be remembered anymore.

But if you are a Christian, then every little thing we do, doesn't matter how impressive it is, actually has a purpose because it's building our character, it's building up to something that will last for eternity.

[21 : 48] And so again, I say, if you're not a Christian here today, please let me invite you to check out who Jesus is. Check out the promises about Him in the Bible because if what I say is true, then you don't want to miss out on what is literally the chance of a lifetime.

And that brings us finally to that third passage on the outline. And here Jesus Himself offers us a chance to store up treasures in heaven. So in Matthew 6, verse 19 and 21, He says, Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and vermin destroy and where the thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And that's a very challenging passage, isn't it? Because Jesus is asking us, what are you working for? Just think of all the effort you're putting in now.

Is it to store up things for this life in which case it will be stolen and the vermin will get to it? Or is your heart focused on storing up treasure in heaven where nothing, no thief or vermin or moth can destroy?

Now in many ways all the things that I've been talking about has been alluding to this very point that Jesus is making, is it? But now I guess it's time to answer that earlier question I had. What are the good works?

[23 : 14] What are the treasures that we work on now which will last into eternity? Well, in one sense I've sort of focused a bit on that already by talking about our character and faith.

Those are things that will last. But what else? What else? Or what other things in this creation will actually last into the next? And if you think about it, the answer is actually pretty obvious, isn't it?

It's people. Human souls. We are the only ones with the chance of spending eternity with God, isn't it? So how do we go about storing up treasures in heaven?

Well, by gathering people, isn't it, into God's kingdom. People are the treasures that we can store up for heaven. Now, we can of course just apply it to ourselves individually, that is we grow in faith and character and yes, we will bring these as treasures into the new creation.

Even though we're not perfect now, we will get a growing perfection by God's help until we get there. But then, we can also help others to do the same thing, can't we?

[24 : 25] Help them to believe in Jesus. Help them to grow in faith and Christ-like character so that they are the treasures that will join us in the new creation. And so, if you've been invited to come today, please know that the person who invited you did it because they cared about you and their desires for you to be part of that treasure that is in the new creation.

So yes, there is a sort of inescapable drudgery to life at times and it's hard not to be overwhelmed and to think why bother? But, if we believe in Jesus, then it's absolutely worth bothering, isn't it?

Because everything we do, as I said earlier, whether large or small, whatever the outcome, matters to God. It matters because it's building our faith and character for us to take into heaven as disciples of Jesus.

And it matters because we are also helping others, whether it's people in the church or our family, to become mature as followers of Jesus. And I say this last bit of helping others is particularly satisfying because we will see the fruit of the caring and the love and the building each other up in word and prayer.

We will see the fruit of this all the way into eternity. None of that work will be lost. Cleaning the toilet, cooking, you might feel like when you get there, that will not be remembered.

[25 : 59] But the work that you do to help others grow as Christians, that will be remembered. You will see that forever when you have that brother or sister next to you.

That will not fade away. Many things in life will pass and fade away and nobody else will remember it. But when we get to heaven, when we get to eternity, we will see all those things that we've done to store up treasures in heaven there for the rest of our lives.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for giving us the hope of eternity through your son Jesus. Give us the faith to believe in your promises in the Bible and to live our lives out in light of them.

May the good work that we do be pleasing to you and lead to the storing up of treasures. Lead to more and more brothers and sisters in Christ joining us in heaven in the new creation.

In Jesus' name we pray.