

Life Outside the Garden

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[0 : 00] It would be great if you could grab a Bible, although I've put the text on the screen as well. So hopefully that will help you follow along. Let me begin with a question though, which is, where do we find lasting fulfillment in life?

Where do we find lasting fulfillment in life? I saw this rather depressing cartoon on your screen. You know, birth, some in-between stuff and death.

And the kid asks, is that it? You're born, you do some stuff, you die. Is that it? It's pretty depressing, isn't it? And if that's it, then what's the point of life?

Where do we find lasting fulfillment in life? Well, today is really the introduction to a new series, as I said, which gives a honest look at life in our world and a sometimes brutally honest look.

But the reason we're doing it is because we've been taught by our society to have unrealistic expectations of life in this world, I think. Which often, when those expectations go unmet, creates great grief and disappointment.

[1 : 13] You see, our society, whether through TV or advertising or social media, often bombards us with pictures of the perfect family, the attractive body, the fulfilling career, the better homes and gardens we can all have.

And we're made to think that if we work enough or spend enough to get these things, then we will find lasting fulfillment.

But is that really true? And if not, then where do we find lasting fulfillment in life? And what expectations should we have of this life?

And how are we to live in this world? These are the questions that the book of Ecclesiastes will help us to answer. But it begins by introducing us to our teacher and his summary.

So verse 1 and 2, The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

[2 : 27] Here is our teacher. He's also called a son of David. So a king from David's line. Though as we'll see later, he's no longer king in Jerusalem.

And in verse 2, his summary of life, utterly meaningless. Aren't you glad you tuned in this morning? Utterly meaningless.

But the Hebrew word for meaningless or vanity in some translations is the same word for vapor or breath, as you can see in your screens.

It's like on a cold morning when you see your breath breathed out. And if you try and grab it, you can't. It has no substance.

It's empty or futile. But that breath also doesn't last, does it? It's fleeting. And so the word meaningless refers to something that is both futile and fleeting.

[3 : 26] Oh, sure, it may have some satisfaction for a short while, but like a breath, it doesn't last. And one person said you could translate the word meaningless as soap bubbles, like this kid on his head.

Everything is soap bubbles, utterly soap bubbles. Fun for a while, but they're fleeting because they pop and disappear. And they're futile because they're empty and don't have much substance, which means they don't give lasting fulfillment.

Oh, sure, you know, the kids will enjoy them for a while, but after a while, the bubbles disappear and the kids get frustrated. Or if it's an adult bubble bath, you know, there's we get bored after a while.

There's no substance to keep our attention after a while. Usually by the time our fingers go wrinkly from the water, isn't it? And then we get bored and move on.

Either way, they don't give lasting fulfillment. And this is what is meant by meaningless. And so the narrator continues by asking the key question of the book on verse three.

[4 : 43] What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? You see, he asked, what fulfillment can people really gain from all our work in this world?

Now, by under the sun, he means life in this fallen world, life outside the garden of Eden. You see, the Bible tells us that God created our world, as you can see, very good.

Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with one another and God in a perfect garden of Eden, enjoying life to the full, complete fulfillment.

But then they rejected God's word and sin entered our world. As a consequence, they had to leave the garden and the tree of life, as you can see on your screen.

They had to live outside the garden and face death in a world that is subjected to futility. As Paul writes in Romans 8, the creation was subjected to futility, meaninglessness, and not willingly, but by God who subjected it because of sin.

[6 : 00] This is why our teacher says life is meaningless, you see, futile, fleeting, because we live outside the garden in a fallen world.

And this is true for both Christians and non-Christians alike, isn't it? As some people say, the teacher writes as though he doesn't have God and that's why life is meaningless for him.

And then he thinks of God and it has meaning. But he talks about God all the way through the book. Rather, he's looking as one of God's people who lives in this fallen world, under the sun, outside the garden, and asks what fulfillment can we really gain for all our labor, all our toil.

After all, we don't seem to get anywhere because life just repeats, doesn't it? So verse 4, generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

Yet people are born, generations come, people die, generations go, and click, repeat. It's true for us, isn't it? Life just goes round and round, like nature.

[7 : 15] Verses 5 to 7. The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to it where it rises again. Repeat. 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.

You see, like nature, things just keep going round and round. The sun rises, the sun sets, repeat. Or verse 7 is the water cycle. You know, streams returning to where they came from.

I saw this little kids video, actually, which reminded me of this. Let's have a look at this. Water from a little puddle turns to gas evaporation. The gas forms into puppy clouds and condensation.

The clouds get heavy and the rain pours down. Precipitation and more puddles on the ground.

[8 : 19] Oh, the water cycle round and round. Deeper goes up and the rain comes down. Water in the sky, in the ocean, in the ground.

It's all in a cycle going round and round. It's catchy, isn't it? But that's life, isn't it? And there's also repetition in not just the natural world, but our own world, which makes life worrisome.

So the narrator continues in verse 8. All things are worrisome. More than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

You see, our eyes keep seeing and our ears keep hearing. Life keeps repeating, is the point. I mean, have any of you gained such a sight, whether a landscape or reading a book, that you've said to yourself, I never need to see again?

Of course not. Or have any of you ever heard a sound, whether a hymn or a voice, and said to yourself, I never need to hear again?

[9 : 33] Of course not. Now, we need to keep seeing and keep hearing as best as we can, don't we? Because life keeps repeating. Life goes round and round. We get up, go to work or school or medical appointments, go to bed and get up and repeat all over again.

Which makes life worrisome, the narrator says. By the end of the week, we get tired, don't we? It's why we love our Friday nights or our holidays to break the repetition and weariness.

But life then repeats the next week, doesn't it? It's like that movie that, I don't know if you've seen this one, Groundhog Day, about a man who gets stuck living the same day over and over again.

I'm not recommending the movie, but as his life repeats, he grows weary and starts questioning, what's the point? What do I really gain?

What's more, if life repeats and nothing really changes, then there's nothing really new, verse 9. What has been will be again and what has been done will be done again.

[10 : 42] There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, look, this is something new. It was here already long ago. It was here before our time.

Now, sure, yep, there are new inventions and new medicines all the time. But there's always been new inventions and new medicines.

In fact, always with them, abuse of them too. I mean, the invention of the internet meant an explosion of information and with it, of course, pornography.

But that happened before with the invention of the printing press that came an explosion of information and pornographic magazines.

There may be new inventions. Yes, new expressions. But it's the same old story. History repeats itself, as they say.

[11 : 42] Before COVID pandemic was another pandemic. There's SARS, smallpox, yellow fever. New expressions, but the same old story. There's nothing really new under the sun outside the garden.

And no one is really remembered. Verse 11. No one remembers the former generations and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

I can hardly remember my own grandparents who passed away some years ago, which is terrible. And I certainly don't remember my great grandparents whom I never had the chance to meet.

It's why we have to do those family trees or look at photo albums to remember because we don't remember even our own families. I'm sure we may remember some people who did great things, you know, like the person who invented the printing press.

But after a while, we will forget them too. Actually come to think of it, who did invent the printing press? Do you remember? I don't. And so if nothing really changes, if nothing's really new, if no one is really remembered, then what lasting fulfillment do we really gain?

[13 : 01] It's all fleeting and futile soap bubbles. So where do we find lasting fulfillment in life? And this is what the teacher now searches for.

Point 2, chapter 1, verse 12. I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens.

What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. Here the teacher is going to use wisdom to explore all things under the heavens, that is, under God, to search for lasting fulfillment.

To do this, he'll take on the persona of Solomon, since Solomon was the wisest and wealthiest king of Israel. Although the teacher is probably not Solomon himself, which is why he's always called the teacher.

Either way, he says, this search for lasting fulfillment for true gain is not easy. He said it's a burden God has placed on all people.

[14 : 09] Of course, thinking about the meaning of life is often too big a question, too big a burden for most people to think about, isn't it? And so most people just tune out and ignore it or make themselves so busy they forget it until they have some sort of midlife crisis.

That's when they often ask those big questions, isn't it? Or if they face a significant loss. Or perhaps for this former king of Jerusalem, seeing that his kingdom is not the kingdom God promised.

And so he searches for what can be gained in life, what can give lasting fulfillment. And as he does, he kind of goes round and round himself to reflect the way life goes round and round.

So on your screens, he searches using wisdom and then he turns to happiness and then back to wisdom and then happiness again. But we'll group these topics.

So wisdom, verse 16. I said to myself, look, I've increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge, which kind of sounds like Solomon, doesn't it?

[15 : 24] Although only David ruled before Solomon. So I'm not sure if this is the case. He talks about more than anyone, implying more than David. But either way, he goes on to say, verse 17, then I applied myself to understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly.

But I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief.

Here he says there's no real gain in wisdom because with much wisdom comes sorrow. The more wisdom we have, the more we realize how little we understand in this world.

And the more knowledge we have, the more grief we see. I mean, with global news comes so much more bad news, doesn't it?

So what's the point of wisdom and knowledge? Is fulfillment really found here? I'm sure it's better to be wise than foolish. And so later on, he'll say in chapter 2, verse 12, then I turn my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly.

[16 : 38] What more can the king's successor do than what he's already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in darkness.

You see, it is better to be wise than foolish. It helps us to see where we're going in life and make wise decisions. But then he continues on the next, on your screens there, but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes both the wise and the fool.

Then I said to myself, the fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then can I, what do I gain by being wise? He says. I said to myself, this too is meaningless for the wise like the fool will not long be remembered.

The days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die. You see, he's saying, in the end, wisdom is soap bubbles, fleeting and futile when it comes to finding lasting fulfillment.

Oh, sure, it's better than being a fool, but in the end, the wise also die with the fool and are not long remembered. Albert Einstein on your screens for all his wisdom and very cool hair could not stop death, could he?

[18 : 11] And so he ended up in the same place as the fool. That's hardly a fulfilling prospect, is it? And so what about working for happiness then?

Is this where we'll find lasting fulfillment? Oh, chapter two, verse one, we go back to happiness now. The teacher says to himself, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

Now, the word pleasure here means happiness. The philosopher Aristotle said that happiness is the meaning and purpose of life.

The whole aim and end of human existence. The Dalai Lama said that the meaning of life is happiness and he's got this book, The Art of Happiness. Even the modern day philosophers and stationary store, Kiki K, up at Shopping Town, my daughter got this diary from there, which says, whatever makes you happy.

This is the world's solution to fulfillment, lasting fulfillment. But does happiness bring it? Well, the teacher investigates the things that make people happy, the common things like parties and projects and possessions.

[19 : 32] And so he says, though, on the rest of verse two, sorry, verse one, but that also proved to be meaningless.

Laughter, I said, is madness. And what does pleasure and happiness accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

And notice, by the way, he's not talking about getting drunk since wisdom is still guiding him. Rather, it's a picture of a party, you know, laughter, food, wine, the stereotypical picture of a happy time.

But this too, he says, is meaningless, soap bubbles, for they don't last. Yeah, the fun party ends and then the cleanup begins always, doesn't it?

And so he says in verse three, he will see what else is good or satisfying, what else might bring lasting fulfillment, like projects, verse four. So I undertook great projects.

[20 : 42] I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water grows of flourishing trees.

I mean, that's some pretty amazing projects and achievements, isn't it? Things that would bring anyone happiness. Perhaps this is where lasting fulfillment is found.

But before he answers, he talks about possessions and wealth. He says in verse seven, I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also earned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well. The delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

In all this, my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor and this was the reward for all my toil.

[21 : 51] The teacher says, test the things that bring people happiness to see if his labor in this area can bring fulfillment. Whether it's working for parties, projects and possessions and he says, while these things did give him a reward of joy at the time, yes, but verse 11, the next verse, when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was soap bubbles, a chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. Now at this point, you'd be forgiven for thinking that this guy is just a party pooper, a kind of glass half empty or actually completely empty kind of guy, a pessimist.

And you know what happens when two pessimists meet, don't you? They don't shake hands, they shake heads. Not my joke, don't shoot me. But remember, he's looking, chapter 1, verse 3, for what can be gained, what lasting fulfillment can be gained from our labor in this world.

What's the point of life? And while these things bring delight at the time, they are soap bubbles. Fleeting and futile, buildings are knocked down, great achievements are forgotten, possessions break, and wealth goes much faster out of our bank account than it seems to come in.

Doesn't it? Or is that just me? And even with, when we have possessions and wealth that last, the delight they bring doesn't last.

[23 : 40] I remember hearing a guy at 5pm church share his testimony and he started by observing that his rich auntie in Singapore who owned lots of property and luxury cars, and if you know anything about property in Singapore, you'll know to own any of it means you're rich.

But he said, she has everything she wants, but she is one of the most unhappy and grumpy people I know.

They were his words. It doesn't sound like her wealth continued to bring her delight, does it? Which is why people have to chase after more of it, don't they?

You know, more money, more property, more clothes, more toys, like the latest phone. You see, working for these things brings only momentary happiness and not lasting fulfillment.

What's more like wisdom, death takes them all. And so the teacher's happiness turns to hate. He says, so I hated my life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

[24 : 52] All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish, yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.

This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun for a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it.

This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain.

Even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. You see all the work all the labor the toil the pursuit of happiness whether parties projects or possessions you can't take them with you can you?

Instead death takes them from you then it gives them to someone after you and they may be foolish with them like Solomon's own son was who was an absolute fool or they're given to those who did not earn them so what's the point of toiling for them he says even at night our work can keep us up with worry garnered and so what fulfillment do we really gain from all our labor under the sun well it seems not much because well at least for him because he concludes in verse 24 a person can do nothing better this is it this is as good as it gets nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction from in their own toil this too I see is from the hand of God for without him who can eat or find enjoyment to the person who pleases him God will give wisdom knowledge and happiness but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases

[27 : 08] God this too is meaningless at chasing after the wind the best we can hope for he says well enjoy life and find satisfaction when you can that's it think of it as a gift from God to enjoy because as we'll see particularly next week without God we'll have nothing or is it as our world says just enjoy the journey when you can though even that notice how he ends if you just go back to that last slide the very last line this too he says is meaningless a chasing after the wind for as we've seen whether wisdom he gets whatever happiness he enjoys it will be short-lived death takes it all he won't even be remembered it's not an entirely inspiring book is it and sadly like us he cannot do anything about this fallen world he said earlier that what is crooked cannot be straightened and so he feels that lasting fulfillment is simply out of reach for him even as one of

God's people the best he can hope for is to enjoy the things as gifts from God when they come his way but we have a better hope thank thank God in the truest sense we have Jesus you see God can and has done something about this fallen world he sent Jesus you see although the teacher writes as one of God's people such that we can relate to what he sees and even feel the frustrations he feels he lived BC before Christ we live after Christ and Christ has made all the difference for by his death and resurrection he has conquered death you know death that took all the teacher's work from him and meant no remembrance of him and gave to him the same place as the full but by trusting in

Christ we have the certain hope of life beyond death in a place different to the fool who says there's no God and where we will be remembered by our loved ones in Christ and God himself and where our work for God will last that our labor for God is not pointless not futile not in vain but is real gain as we heard in our second reading God gives us the victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ therefore we are to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord why because you know that your labor our toil our work in the Lord is not futile not in vain so you see there is something where we can have lasting fulfillment even in this life outside the garden but what labor is lasting well it's the work of the

Lord that lasts into eternity like evangelism or praying for people to become Christians that lead to them trusting in Christ and then going into eternity now that work of prayer and evangelism lasts for eternity or like building ourselves and others up in godliness that lasts for eternity as Paul wrote to Timothy on your screens physical training is of some value but godliness has value for all things holding promise for both this life outside the garden and the life to come and godliness with contentment is great gain this is the gain that death cannot take from us and so we're to engage in this lasting labor we're to engage in this type of employment if you like as much as we can with the gifts and opportunities we have things like praying for one another or sharing with one another or helping one another grow as

Christians that work will last for eternity or teaching your kids or grandkids or nieces or nephews this week I was speaking with a grandmother who's been looking after her two grandchildren reading a children's bible with them and she was driving home one night last week I think it was when her four-year-old grandson said nan how do I ask Jesus into my heart he'd been listening to the bible he'd been listening to his grandmother and he wanted to believe in Jesus and so she pulled over the car and prayed with him that night and he asked Jesus into his heart how cool is that that work of the lord is not in vain there is lasting fulfillment and so first we're to engage in lasting employment and second we're to have also realistic expectations with contentment

[32 : 43] I said at the start a lot of disappointment in life comes from unmet or unrealistic expectations you know we expect we should never suffer in this world or that our work should always be a joy or that school will always be fun that's what my kids expect or that our families will never fight or that we should never have to go into another lockdown dare I say but we live outside the garden and while these things are really frustrating and they are we shouldn't be surprised by them but we should take a deep breath and work through them I know for those who have had a pretty good life so far this book will sound utterly depressing but for those who have been through an ordeal it will be oddly comforting I was talking with another person about this book last week who said that when her husband left her for another woman her life kind of imploded as she suddenly had to care for her three kids plus find a job to pay for everything and so on and she said when it happened she actually read through the book of Ecclesiastes and she actually found it comforting she said because it affirmed her experience of life outside the garden well it's an experience we all share one way or another so she's not alone and it reminded her that her complete fulfillment and meaning in life does not depend on the things of this world even on her marriage it depends on

Christ who has given her life eternal and great worth in God's sight and it helped her to realign her expectations and while still heartbreaking and at times upsetting it means she can still enjoy things in life with contentment which as we saw before is great gain engage in lasting employment have realistic expectations to avoid disappointment and wait patiently for complete fulfillment for Christ not only gives us work that is of lasting fulfillment now he has also secured a life for us no longer outside the garden but in the garden the new creation where there'll be complete fulfillment so we saw before that this creation was subjected to futility but notice it was subjected in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and the glory of the children of

God when Christ returns this creation will be liberated from its futility and we will enjoy glory in the garden a new creation where there will be no more soap bubbles nothing fleeting or futile but life to the full complete fulfillment of course hope by its nature is in the future so we must wait for it patiently it said which is sometimes easier said than done isn't it it's like the man who said I used to pray for patience but God was taking too long to answer he missed the point didn't he well I've gone too long let me finish life outside the garden is often fleeting and futile soap bubbles so don't have unrealistic expectations of it but enjoy things as gifts from God with contentment engage in that lasting employment and wait patiently for complete fulfillment let's pray our gracious heavenly father we thank you even for this part of your word which helps us to acknowledge that this world despite what we're told is not perfect that there are frustrations to be expected and so help us we pray father to remember the Lord Jesus and the better hope we have help us to have realistic expectations with contentment in this world help us also to engage in that lasting employment the work of the Lord and help us to wait patiently for complete fulfillment the day Christ returns we ask it in his name amen you