

Pessimist? Cynic? Realist!

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[0 : 00] So we are starting this new series in Ecclesiastes tonight and there are a lot of genres in the Bible. Poetry, history, sort of stuff that's like songs.

This book, Ecclesiastes, is classified as wisdom. But as you've heard, it's not neat and tidy wisdom like you find in Proverbs. It's perplexing. It's, I think, the best word I read this week to describe it was vexing. It's vexing.

It's hard to get your head around. At the start of it, what we just heard, it sort of sounds like somebody's really depressed and they're just making these observations of life. And you may be asking yourself, how is it even in the Bible? It seems really out of sync.

It doesn't have any of the, you know, the like really cool Old Testament stuff like all the great stories or there's no references to Moses or the Exodus or our future hope, the Messiah.

Here's a fun fact. Interestingly though, it was, however, J.I. Packer's favourite book of the Bible, which is actually, is a bit of a homage. One of the reasons we're doing this series.

[1 : 09] And after spending a little bit of time with it this week, I think it is utterly brilliant. Even what we just read, it is utterly brilliant.

The author of Ecclesiastes was not having a really sad period of his life. He was a realist. And his observations are extremely helpful to us.

Now I say he, but we actually don't know who wrote it. The author is concealed. There's a separation.

We don't really know. And I think that separation or that concealment, it's part of the vibe of the book. It's getting us used to the fact that we don't have all the answers in life.

So this anonymous speaker, we will call what the book calls them, the preacher. Okay, now, let's get into the text show. We'll all jump straight to verse two there.

[2 : 07] The vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Now this is a thread throughout the whole book.

All of life is vanity. So vanity, this word here, that's important. We understand what it means because in other versions of the Bible, it says the word meaninglessness, which I don't think is a great, it's not a great translation.

The Hebrew word is hevel. Hevel. Now remember that word, hevel, because I'll use it a bit in this short sermon. But what it literally means is vapor, a puff of wind, like, you know, when you might snuff out a candle and there's that little wispy bit of smoke at the end there for a few seconds.

That's what our life is like. It's temporary, the preacher says. Our life is fragile. And then he drills down in verse three, there. What does man gain from all his toil at which he or she toils under the sun?

Life can feel like this endless cycle of work, work, work, strive, strive, strive, goals, goals, goals.

[3 : 29] I don't know if that resonates with you, but, you know, some of you know the feeling of you basically are just working just to get to the weekend. And then the cycle starts all over again.

Some of you listening here tonight are already stressed out about Monday morning. The preacher gives us these pictures from nature to illustrate this idea that life just feels like this, just like, just you're doing such hard yards and you don't seem to make much gain.

So he gives us these pictures, right? Versus, this is verses five to eight. This talks about the sun. The sun rises just to set again. The sun never seems to be able to break that cycle.

It can never beat the system. It's locked into something it can't escape and sometimes our life can feel like that. The next one is the wind. The wind blows in from the south and it just kind of circles back.

The streams and rivers, it says in verse seven, they run into the sea, they pour into the sea. The streams and the rivers, they work really hard at pouring their contents into the sea.
[4 : 36] And what's the payoff? What's the payoff? What do they get to write home about? Nothing. The sea never gets full, the preacher says. And in our lives, we can work really hard.

It doesn't seem to be a great payoff. The preacher says that there's all this striving and often no meaningful gain. Life is short, life is fragile, and it's hard to get ahead.
And then verse eight, and it's full of weariness. All things are full of weariness. You can't get ahead. It's all striving and all that striving just makes you really tired.
And then verse nine adds the note, there is nothing new under the sun. There is so much of life that is uninspiring repetition. After breakfast this morning, I cleaned the kitchen, and I did a brilliant job of cleaning the kitchen.

I did that three or four times that day. I had to clean the kitchen three or four times again that day. We face the same battles, the same problems constantly.

[5 : 45] Verse 11. Look, it just doesn't get better, all right? I'm just letting you know. We're going to keep chilling down. Verse 11. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among all that come after.

So in summary so far, life is futile, monotonous, it's hard to progress, and on top of that, no one will remember you. No one's going to remember you.

You know your parents' names. You might know most of your grandparents' names, but I am pretty sure very few of you know your great-grandparents' names. In 100 years, no one will know you existed.

That's what the preacher says. So there you go. There are some observations from the teacher in Ecclesiastes. How are they sitting with you? How does that sit with you?

You might ask yourself, is this even Christian? Like, is this even Christian? How did this get in the Bible? Surely life with God means we reject this kind of pessimism.

[6 : 52] You know, I've preached this passage before many years ago, and in that sermon, I took the position that the preacher was presenting us the view of the atheist, and that later on, in the end, he'd, you know, pull God out of a hat and say, look, it's all okay.

You don't have to believe this. But I was wrong. I was wrong. We're not supposed to reject this way of thinking. We're supposed to accept it as reality.

Life is fragile. There is a lot of striving that ends up in nothing. It is hard to get ahead. Lots of life feels absurd.

But the preacher says, this is just the reality of it. Now, how do I know this? Because you might be thinking, yeah, but you know, we're Christians.

We're not supposed to think like this. We can somehow escape this. Look at verse 13. I applied my heart to seek and to search out wisdom, by wisdom, all that is under heaven.

[7 : 54] Now, these concepts of under the sun and under heaven, we'll talk about in later weeks.

But let's just move on there. So this is what he says. So the teacher here, the preacher here, he reflects on these observations of life and his strategy for dealing with what he sees as the sort of the vanity of life is to get really wise, is to get really smart in an attempt to escape the sense of hevel, the sense of futility, the sense of vanity, the sense of being insignificant.

And what does he discover? Verse 13, he does his journey, gets super smart. In verse 13, here's what he discovers. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

I have seen everything that is under the sun and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. Striving after wind. It's a great line. It's like a solid thing trying to grab something that is not solid.

It's impossible. So do you see what he's saying here? His observations of life are true for the non-believer and the believer. It is an unhappy business God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

Just because we trust in God doesn't mean we are exempt from hevel. It doesn't mean we're exempt from a short and unpredictable life. God has placed us under hevel.

[9 : 15] God has placed us under that. We are no longer in Eden. No one is exempt from these observations. Okay, so a summary so far.

Life can feel empty and transitory. You won't make a great stamp on the world. You will be forgotten. By the way, how's everyone doing tonight? Are you glad you tuned in?

I am glad you tuned in. This is the word of God and it's helpful to us. And I know you're thinking this is not helpful to me. This is the last thing. I've been watching the news, what's happening in America.

How can this be helpful to me? Well, here's how. Here's how it can be helpful. We live in such a frantic world and it seems we just want to game the system for more and more and more and we love the illusion that we can get everything in order.

We love the illusion that we can life hack our way to a great marriage or a great single life. House, the kids, dog, the great job that everything will fall into place if we just make the right decisions and everything, like everything will be super meaningful.

[10 : 27] And the teacher debunks this way of thinking. He debunks it with the reality that, with the truth that life is actually, it can be really hard and it goes fast, it's shorter than you think.

There's so much in it that's unpredictable and we are not in as much control as we think. Now again, why is this good news for us? Because when we give up the belief that the world owes us this perfect life, when you give up on trying to always be about the gain, the gain, the gain, when you give up on that, you can be present to the simple gifts of life.

You can be present to the life that God has given you as opposed to the life you think you deserve that you think you should have. And you can find joy in those things. You can find joy in that life.

In chapter two, this is cheating. I'm going to speak more about this next week, but chapter two, let's just go into it for just one moment. Chapter two, verse 24. There is nothing better for a person that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

Isn't that great? Isn't that wonderful? There is nothing better for a person that they should eat and drink. You can't manage your life to a complete state of happiness.

[11 : 46] That's just the reality. There is lots of drudgery. There's lots of cleaning your kitchen.

There's lots of uncertainty. But in the midst of a fragile life, in the midst of a short life, you can enjoy many simple pleasures.

Nice glass of wine. A nice meal. But if you're just focused on curating this perfect future for yourself, you might miss the wonderful life that you have right now, the gift that God has given you of a life. Even though it's short and unpredictable, he's still giving you the gift of this life. If you're always just about, oh, this perfect future, you've got to curate this amazing, meaningful, you know, you'll end up bitter and disappointed.

Now, what about the New Testament, you say? Do we not escape from hevel, vanity, vanity? Do we not escape from a sense of vanity because of Jesus?

Does the New Testament annul this way of thinking? No, it actually, it affirms it. Let me take you to Romans 8. I'm going to pick out a few lines from verses 19 to 24 in Romans 8.

[12 : 54] For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility. Because of him who's subjected to it, God has put us under this.

And then jumping down to verse 22. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning. It's groaning together in 23. There's this inward groaning as we eagerly await for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this, we hope we are saved. So the New Testament doesn't annul hevel, but it does expand it. We live this frustrated experience. We see it everywhere.

But we have hevel. So while we have hevel, we also have hope because of the gospel. So God is the author of hevel in our life.

He is also the author of hope in our life. There is a future where there is no hevel. And that is breaking in now through the kingdom of God. So we get these glimpses of our hevel-free life.

[13 : 56] But right now, we're still under hevel. Okay, I'm going to finish up. I'm finishing up. Some of you might have found this very depressing.

I hope not, though. I hope you found this really liberating. The preacher in Ecclesiastes, he wants to debunk our illusions that the universe is under our control.

It's not under our control. But we have this gift of our life. It might not be the life that you hope for. But it is a life. And even though it's short, embrace it for what it actually is and all its fragility and vulnerability and unpredictability.

Embrace it for what it is and not what you think it should be. Live in it, hopefully, in reverence to God, and you will find places of joy in it.

[15 : 03] Amen.