

A Search For The Meaning Of Life(2) - Endless Cycles

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] Verse 4 through to the end of verse 11. In a previous study, verses 1 to 3, we compared the writer in these three verses to someone setting a loom before he started weaving, setting the thread, setting the loom, and then the pattern as you begin to weave actually begins to appear.

And we looked at that in terms of the way in which the preacher, we take it as Solomon, set out to actually look for meaning to human life especially and taking account of everything that he saw and observed in human life.

But we note the importance of the words under the sun. In other words, he's setting out to find purpose, meaning in life without taking God into account.

He's looking at it simply in human terms. Because he's not taking God into the picture for the sake of argument, although as we'll see, that of course is what he leads to at the end of the book especially.

But we'll come to bring God into the picture today as well and in the studies as we go through this book. So there's the statement and the question in the first three verses, the statement, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

[1 : 19] Everything under the sun, everything simply looked at in human terms doesn't seem to have a pattern or to make sense. And then the question, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

What is to be gained from it? Is there any fruit of this? Is there any result, lasting result or benefit? And he begins then to answer that question in verse 4 onwards through the book.

And he does this by a series, first of all, of repetitive, endless cycles in these verses 4 to 11. That's what we're calling our study, endless cycles.

Just looking at it again under the sun without taking account of God at all for the moment, for argument's sake. What is it that you see in the world around you?

What is it you see in human life and the patterns of human life? Well, the cycles, first of all, are cycles of creation in verses 4 to 7. And then there's cycles of human experience in verses 8 to 11.

[2 : 22] Cycles of creation, cycles in human experience. Let's look at these briefly because we need to look at them because that's how he's building up his pattern. And that's how he's building up this cloth, this tapestry that he's giving us to look.

So each of the threads are actually important. Verse 4, first of all, you can see he talks there about generation or generation cycles. A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

In other words, as one generation is fading out, there's another generation ready to replace it. And that cycle goes on all the time. One comes and one goes. It's not permanent.

No generation lasts forever. As one generation begins, as one generation goes, another one comes in. As one rises, another ends. And you see the same things in these repeated cycles of generations of human beings.

When I was a teenager, I thought 40 was very old. I thought 60 was ancient. And I was quite persuaded, as teenagers still are today, that those who are over 40 can't possibly understand their world.

[3 : 31] Maybe to an extent that's true, if you take technology and everything into it. But that's what's been true in every single successive generation. Younger ones think, older ones don't understand them.

Older ones complain about how the young ones are today. And ancient records show that that has always been the case. Whatever is the case today, as this passage tells us, has been there before us.

These generations and how they see each other, or if you like to use a common term, the generation gap. The generation gap has always been there. And it's never been filled in properly.

And that's what he's saying here. A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The earth remains as the place where these cycles of generations take place.

What is the purpose of it all? What's achieved by it all? And really looking at it under the sun, you might be tempted to say, or indeed you would be persuaded to say, without taking God into the picture, it doesn't make sense.

[4 : 35] What is the fruit? What is the benefit? One generation comes and the other one goes. One goes, another one comes. What's achieved? And he moves on then to sun cycles.

The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. Now, of course, in the Old Testament, you find that the writers take account of the world from the knowledge they then had.

We now know that the sun actually does not go around the earth. It's not actually the sun that rises and the sun that sets.

It's the earth that goes around the sun. It's the earth that moves and spins on its own axis. And all of that has come from scientific and astronomical knowledge that has been gained by human beings long since Ecclesiastes was written.

This is the world observed as then they were able to observe it. And that's why you have it here as the sun rising and the sun goes down. And, of course, that's how we still speak about it, isn't it?

[5 : 42] We speak about a beautiful sunrise this morning. Well, the sun hasn't risen. The earth has moved so that the sun appears then in our part of the world. And then it goes back down.

And what he's saying here is, look, the sun rises and the sun goes down. What does it do? It goes back to the place it began. What's the purpose for it? If you look at it, he says, as you see the sun disappearing over the horizon at sunset, where does it go?

It goes back to its place where it began on the other horizon next morning. It doesn't seem to have anything really of any benefit in that pattern itself.

It's simply just an endless cycle. A repetitive cycle. Then he goes to the wind. And he says something similar about the wind. 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. And even to this day, when you have weather forecast, the wind can sometimes be unpredictable.

[6 : 44] But mostly nowadays it can be predicted as to which direction the wind is going to come from. How strong it's going to blow. And you can see the swirls, of course, of weather systems.

As you see the weather maps and as the weather forecast nowadays can give you. But what he's saying here is it goes round to the north and then blows to the south. Round to the north.

Round and round goes the wind. And on its circuit returns. It's back again at its starting point. That's the experience he's saying you have of the creation, the generations, the sun rising, the sun going down, the wind blowing.

And then he finishes by saying all streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. He knows that there's such a thing as evaporation that the moisture in the sea is heated up and rises and forms moisture in the atmosphere, which falls again as rain and comes to fill the streams.

Where do they go? They go back into the sea. What's the point of it all? What's it achieving? It's just another endless cycle. Of course, this was very meaningful in his part of the world, especially when you think of the Dead Sea.

[7 : 58] The Dead Sea does not have an outlet. Water runs into it, but it doesn't have an outlet. There's no outlet at the other end. That's why it's the Dead Sea.

It's sterile. There's nothing really much that grows there or lives there. It's toxic. What he's saying makes sense when you think about that Dead Sea.

The streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. It's never actually come to overflow its edges, has it? Even though there might be fluctuation in the height of the water, this is basically what he's saying.

It's just another endless cycle. And when you apply that to human life, as he's then going on to do in a minute, isn't that really, he says, a pattern? And that's why he's taking this up, so that we can see this fits the pattern of human life.

I'm sure there's some men here that do the washing and the ironing as well, as some of the women. But mostly, I suspect, like in our house, it'll be the women who do it. But tomorrow there's going to be another bundle of washing, another bundle of ironing to do.

[9 : 02] It's the same as there was last week, the same as, God willing, there will be next week. The pattern of human life. Again, there's endless circle, isn't it? What is it achieving? You've done it all last week, but you still have to do it again this week.

It's just an ongoing, endless cycle, repetitive cycle of activity. The cycles of creation. He's building up this pattern for us.

It's getting pretty boring, really, isn't it? As you see the pattern emerging, it's pretty dark. There aren't many bright threads in it at all. It's a very dark and dull pattern. But that's all part of the purpose of Ecclesiastes.

Making us face reality without God. And what is as dull and lifeless as a pattern without God? A pattern of creation without God?

A pattern of human life without God? That's what he's building up to. So let's look at, secondly, the cycles of human experience in verses 8 to 11. Look at verse 8.

[10 : 04] All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

In other words, there is nothing that satisfies lastingly, he's saying, under the sun. You don't find lasting satisfaction amongst human beings under the sun without taking God into account.

I hate to mention the word Christmas, but it's around the corner. And as you look at Christmas presents being opened, and the excitement, especially of children, adults too, opening Christmas presents is great for a few hours, for a few days, maybe even a few weeks.

But then, it doesn't satisfy anymore. It needs something else in its place. Something new, something to replace it. And it's put on the shelf. And there's a build-up of stuff that's been gathered over the years, isn't it?

Well, it's the same with adults as well. When you get the latest smartphone, it's great for a while, isn't it? But then, of course, you realize, through the adverts especially, there's actually a newer version.

[11 : 09] There's an update. And your heart really says, well, yeah, it is getting a bit old. It's getting a bit slow. So, I'll need to replace it. I'll need to get this newer version of it. And that's really the same with our lives.

We are filled in our lives daily with certain video images that you see either on television or the internet. You have audios. You have text. You have social media.

But do you stop doing it tomorrow just because you've had so much of it today? No. You go back to it. You still keep doing it. It's a cycle of endless activity. And what is it achieving at the end of the day is the Ecclesiastes writer's question.

That's what you find with the way in which there's nothing lastingly satisfying in human life so that you say, right, that's it.

I don't need anything in advance of that anymore. That's going to satisfy me for the rest of your life, the rest of my life. And that's the question.

[12 : 12] Well, what does a man gain by all the toil with which he toils under the sun? Nothing satisfies. Secondly, there's nothing new.

What has been, verse 9, is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. Now, verse 10, is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new.

And you might expect, well, maybe he's going to come up with something that's actually new. Surely he's going to say, there is actually something new. Here it is. But no, he says, it has been already in the ages before us.

Now, that really seems a little bit negative over much, doesn't it? That absolutely nothing new under the sun, what has been, what is, just now has been before.

Whether it's in human experience itself or in things you possess, they've always been, they've all been there before. There is nothing new under the sun.

[13 : 15] But what about inventions? What about the way technological advance obviously marks every generation, every successive generation? What about advances, for example, in cancer treatment?

Surely there are things there which are new. Surely there are things there which are beneficial. Well, of course there are. He's not arguing against that sort of thing being the case.

And how much we benefit from these advances. And we do and we pray that God will give people skills to advance things further in those regards. But what he's saying is, actually what you have today in all of these so-called advances is something built on previous advances.

And previous advances before that. And previous advances before that. Every generation comes up with discoveries, if you like. But they're all based on previous discoveries.

They're all based on previous achievements. It's this cycle of human experience where you can say in that sense, there's nothing new. It's the same with theology. Don't expect any new theology from this pulpit.

[14 : 26] Because I'm just basing my sermons, my studies of the Bible, on what people have done before me. And you go back to the famous times of theological emphases, like the Reformation, for example.

And what do you find in the Reformation? You have somebody like John Calvin, one of the greatest theologians and Bible expositors who ever lived. And you might say, well, that's surely new after hundreds and hundreds of years of darkness in Europe, under the influence of such a wrong view of the Bible, under the Roman Catholicism, of the time that actually held the people under its sway.

And here comes the Reformation and Luther and Calvin bursting out from that darkness. Surely that's new. Well, if you look at their works, they'll find they're actually not new.

They're perhaps put in a new fashion, put into a new form. But they were building on previous theologians like Augustine, and way back, indeed, right through to the days of the New Testament.

It's a cycle of one achievement building on another. One discovery building on a previous. That's why he's saying there is nothing new under the sun.

[15 : 48] And, you know, you find the same with history, with human history. Because history really, in many ways, is just a series of cycles repeated down through the experience of human beings.

And one of the problems, as we'll see in the next verse, is that people don't learn from history. It's a fact of life. We keep making the same mistakes as people before us made.

Why? Because we didn't learn from them. And if you look at the history of wars and invasions and empires, what do you find? You find a cyclical, endless series of circles.

One people come to dominate, and they're replaced by another people. All the way through the Old Testament, you see it. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, British, Europeans, the Americans.

That's how the world has been. That's how history unfolds. And that's why he's saying there's nothing new under the sun. Why? Because, he says, there is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

[17 : 05] That's one of the problems. Why does it seem that something is actually 100% new? Because we haven't known and haven't studied the past. We haven't actually reckoned with what the past has contained.

We don't know our history. That's true in terms of the gospel as well, isn't it? One of the essential things for us is to know something of the history of Christianity, not just from the Bible, but from church history, from beginning with the Book of Acts.

If you want to begin with the New Testament, though it's in the Old as well. But you begin with that, and you move into the various cycles through which gospel, church, history has developed down through to the present day.

And you will find that it's a series of cycles like this in human experience and church history as well. And that's why we need to know our church history.

A lot of people you'll find in the world, and it's through of every generation as well, but they'll say, well, that's actually far, far too old-fashioned. It's no longer fit for the present generation.

[18 : 14] You surely don't expect, I keep saying this so often, but it's so important, people will say, you shouldn't expect me to believe the Bible literally, to actually take what's there at face value.

Come on, look at how things have advanced since then. And you know, if it's something new instead of the Bible, or if it's something new alongside of the Bible, the reason we're saying it's new is because we don't know our history, why the Bible came to be what it is in the first place.

And there are so many important procedures or principles in human life that people want to sweep out of the way. Why? Because they don't know why they're there in the first place.

They haven't understood why these things were put in place. Whether safety regulations, theological conclusions, practice of how you go about doing things.

You need to know why they exist, why they're there. Otherwise, you've no protection about them being swept away. And that's important when it comes to ethics, and human behavior, and human relationships.

[19 : 29] So, he says there's nothing remembered. No remembrance of former things. So, there you have the cycles. There you have the pattern emerging, the cycles of creation, the cycles of human experience, and all the way through there, it's a pretty dull pattern.

Under the sun, you don't find much. In fact, you hardly find anything of any color at all to give you any sense of hope, anything to build your life upon permanently.

Anything that will really give you a sense of true, satisfying achievement. This is what he says. The cycles, the endless cycles, that where nothing's satisfied, where there's nothing new, and where there's nothing much remembered.

That's life under the sun. That's his observance, his observation, without God, without taking account of what's above the sun, without taking God into the picture.

So, let's take God into the picture. Before we move on to another passage next time. Let's take God into the picture in regard to these endless cycles of creation and human experience.

[20 : 44] What do you find? Well, you find three things about God that we are actually drawn towards as we think of the dull pattern of life and creation without God.

First of all, let me take you back to Genesis and chapter 8, verses 20 to 22. This is Noah after actually coming through the flood and coming to build an altar to the Lord, taking burnt offerings and offering that to the Lord.

This is chapter 8 and at verse 21, The Lord smelt a pleasing aroma. The Lord said in his heart, I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.

Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. And notice this, While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

Now, if you took Ecclesiastes' approach, to that verse without God, all you have is an endless cycle of seasons, of cold and heat, of different aspects to the creation and human experience in it.

[21 : 59] And you end up with a dull pattern. But this is God establishing this pattern in his goodness for human beings. I will never again curse the earth because of man, for the intention of his heart is evil from his youth.

God is saying, Not all the judgment that I can bring in itself is going to deal with the problem of man's heart. Something else needs to deal with that.

And so God is giving us these seasons, these passing patterns and cycles of the season. You go through to chapter 9 as well, verses 11 to 17 of Genesis.

And you'll find something just added to that. I establish my covenant with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood.

Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. God said, This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature. I have set my bow in the cloud.

[23 : 03] That's the rainbow. And it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh.

In other words, when you see the rainbow, which of course has been taken and misused as an emblem of what is not acceptable to God, you know that very well. Here is the rainbow as God's covenant sign.

And what is he saying? When you come to see the passing seasons, when you come to see the clouds coming with the rain after a period of sunshine, when you come to see that cycle in the creation, when you take God into the picture, when you lift your mind above the sun, then you see the brilliance of that pattern.

You see a God who is committed to his covenant, to his promises, to life. You see a God who looks after his people. You see one who fills this creation with his purpose.

And even though there are times when we cannot understand his dealings with us, when we wish things were other than they are, when we wish that providence was different to what we've experienced it, lift your eyes above the sun.

[24 : 20] Because that's what you'll find. The goodness of God. Imagine life on earth without that pattern of the seasons established and continuing as it's mentioned there.

Seed time and harvest, summer and winter, cold and heat. Imagine how impossible it would be for farmers throughout the world to actually sow their crops without being sure that the seasons were regular, that the seasons were going to keep passing as they are in a cycle from winter to spring to summer to autumn.

God in his goodness is seen in these cycles of creation. You don't see it under the sun. You don't see it if you leave him out of the picture.

But when you take account of him as the creator and his purpose, that's what you get. And secondly, you see the unchangeable God.

However much there is change in the creation itself as these cycles actually show and change in human experience as well and change in the sense that nothing under the sun itself will actually last in a satisfactory way for us and bring us satisfaction.

[25 : 40] Well, Malachi chapter 3 verse 6 has a great text which says, I am the Lord. I am Yahweh. I am Jehovah. I do not change.

Therefore, you sons of Jacob are not consumed. You know, when you go to pray and you come into the presence of God to pray, one thing you need to be persuaded of is that God is always unchangeably true to himself.

You need to be absolutely sure and you can be absolutely sure that when you go to pray to God, he is not suddenly going to turn into someone different to what you find and described as in his word.

He is not going to tell you, sorry, I do not want to listen to you anymore. I have no time for you anymore. Your life is just too shabby and you have come too many times previously and you have not learned from what you have actually been taught before and what you have learned from my word before.

So that is it. The relationship has ended. That is never going to be the case. I am the Lord. I do not change.

[26 : 59] One generation goes, replaced by another generation. The cycles of creation, the cycles of human experience just go on one after another.

And we are part of that cycle because we belong to the creation, albeit that we are made in the image of God. But we too will pass away and the cycle of our life will come to an end.

But God will still be there and he will still be there as he is now and as he has always been. Absolutely faithful, unchangeably committed to his people, dependable, not like the gods of the heathen that you find described in parts of the Bible, who are regarded as very fickle, unpredictable, couldn't be trusted, wouldn't be the same tomorrow as they are today.

Of course, they weren't real, but that's what the mind in that idolatrous system of paganism thinks about. They are not steady, these gods. They are not the same today as they might have been a hundred years ago, whatever.

I am the Lord. I do not change. Today, you can build your eternity on that fact.

[28 : 28] That is a fact that will never be replaced. The goodness of God, looking above the sun, you can see the unchangeable God.

God. And thirdly, as you look above the sun, you can see the life-changing God. Let me take you to John chapter 11. There you find Jesus coming to visit Mary and Martha.

Her brother has just recently died, but he has been dead four days. His remains are in the sepulcher. Jesus goes to speak to Martha. Martha says to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

In other words, she is saying, if only you had been here, this would not have happened. But Jesus did not actually answer that directly because he knew very well this is his purpose.

This is why it had to happen and be this way. Your brother, he said, shall rise again. And she responded, yes, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

[29 : 30] What did Jesus say? I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

Do you believe this? You see, the question begins here with a question, vanity of vanities. What does a man gain by all the toil with which he toils under the sun?

Is it not just endless cycles? Is it not just the same one generation after another? Is it not true that there is nothing new? Lazarus, come forth.

earth. That's new. That's absolutely new. Because that's God rupturing the grip of death, the cycle of death in human experience.

Lazarus comes out alive, no longer dead. there is something new.

[30 : 35] Thank God there is something new. New in Jesus Christ. New birth. New life. New in the sense of a hope that you didn't have before and couldn't have before.

Because until you're in Christ and until you appreciate what life is like in Christ, you're living it under the sun. It's a dull pattern. But when you come to the newness that Jesus brings, all of a sudden, these brilliant golden threads of life appear in the pattern because you're looking above the sun.

You're looking beyond something merely human. You're looking to God, creator, unchangeable, life-giving. And that's why we'll finish with Revelation chapter 21.

That's why you have that description the way you have it. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

[31 : 59] He will dwell with them and they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

That's new. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore. That's new. For the former things are passed away. And then notice, and he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.

There is nothing new under the sun, but above the sun, everything is new. Everything in Christ.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Oh Lord our God, we give thanks as you show us the patterns of human life from your word.

As we look out upon our world and into our own hearts and find our own aspirations and our plans and our ideas when they are lived under the sun, when we don't take you into our account or into reckoning, Lord, we come up with such futility and hopelessness.

[33 : 18] But we bless you for the hope that you give through new life, through being born again, hope that you express in your word that's held out for us in the gospel. We pray today, O Lord, that you would fill us with that hope. Draw us to you, we pray, so that in a living relationship with you, we may indeed know that newness of life and look forward to that newness of life in heaven at last, where you make all things new. Bless us throughout this day, we pray, and graciously receive our worship now at this time.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we're going to conclude our service now by singing in Psalm 102. Psalm 102, that's from the Scottish Psalter. The second version on page 368, singing to the tune, Rockingham.

From verse 23, My strength he weakened in the way, my days of life he shortened. My God, O take me not away in midtime of my days, I said. And then it moves on to speak about God establishing the earth's foundations firm.

Yet they shall perish as garments do, but thou shalt evermore endure. As best yourself shall change them so, but from all changes thou art free.

Thy endless years do last. For there is life above the Son and God, and our hopes for eternity are our hopes in God and the unchangeable God himself.

[34 : 58] Let's sing these verses 23 to 28, My strength he weakened in the way. My strength he weakened in the way, my days of life he shortened.

My strength he weakened in the way, my days of life he shortened. My God, O take me not away in midtime of my days, I said.

Thy years throughout all ages last. Of old thou hast established shed.

Thy earth's foundation, the earth's foundation, thy mighty heart the hems have made.

They perish shall as God went to, but so shall evermore endure.

[36 : 36] As pastures thou shalt change them so, and they shall all be changes sure.

But from all changes thou art thee, thy endless years do last for a.

Thy seven sons, their seed to be established shall before thee stay.

I open the door to my left after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen.