

Same As It Ever Was

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- [0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.
- ! Vanities, says the preacher.
- Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
- A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.
- The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
- [1 : 23] All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.
- All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
- What has been is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done.
- And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new? It has been already in the ages before us.
- There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of latter things, yet to be among those who come after.
- [2 : 29] Jesus said, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. May God bless the hearing and preaching of his word.
- You know, one of the most insightful questions to ask of history is what if. Numerous books have been written asking these what if questions.
- What if Alexander the Great didn't die at 32? What if the South had won the war? What if John Lennon and Paul McCartney had never met?
- These questions are insightful because they push us to ponder what might have been and often help us to realize the effect of seemingly small events on history as we know it.
- Well, one of the most interesting what if stories involves Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last king of Prussia. In 1889, when he'd been king for just over a year, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show came to town, came to Berlin.
- [3 : 39] At one point in the show, Annie Oakley announces, like she does every other night, that she's going to shoot off the ashes of someone's cigar with her Colt .45. Then she asks if anyone wants to come forward and volunteer their cigar and perhaps their head.
- It's a joke. It's all part of the stick. No one volunteers night after night after night. And so Miss Oakley's husband steps forward, holds the cigar while she shoots off the ash.

But after Annie extends the invitation on this evening, Kaiser Wilhelm II steps forward. The German policeman tried to stop him from going forward, but he waves him off, and Annie Oakley can't back down.

The stage is set. She walks out her paces. And you're all wondering what happened. Well, according to one author, and I quote, sweating profusely under her buckskin and regretful that she had consumed more than her usual amount of whiskey the night before, Annie raised her Colt, took aim, and blew away Wilhelm's ash.

What would have happened if she had missed the ash and struck his head? Perhaps the world never would have gone to war in 1914. Years later, after World War I began, Annie Oakley wrote to Wilhelm again and said she would like a second shot.

[5 : 10] But he never replied. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher asks many insightful questions as well. In fact, the preacher asks 32 questions.

12% of the book are questions that the preacher is asking. Like these what-if questions, the preacher's questions are very purposeful. Most of them are rhetorical.

They're not questions you're meant to answer, but questions you're meant to ponder. Really, the preacher's questions are designed to bring you into his quest to find meaning under the sun.

So, after announcing all this vanity, which we studied very carefully last week, he says, What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sand?

What does man gain? The preacher's not asking, What do the rich and famous gain? What are the important gain? The preacher's asking, What does anyone gain?

[6 : 09] What does anyone, having created and being stuck underneath the sun, gain? What does anyone gain?

Letting us ponder the question, the preacher shares a poem. In a word, where we're going is, You cannot get whatever you want out of life, but you can live every day with purpose because of Christ.

You cannot get whatever you want out of life. Life's not a slot machine. But you can live with purpose, as we're going to see in a very Ecclesiastes way.

The first point, I'm going to break this out in three. The first is, Nothing you do will be remembered. Nothing you do will be remembered.

In verses 4 through 11, the preacher includes this poem. So it begins with that overarching statement, which we talked about last week.

[7 : 32] And it includes this question. Then there's a poem before he kind of begins to describe his own search for meaning in verse 12. And the poem is carefully structured. It is, and this is a word I've never used on a Sunday morning, it is a chiasm.

In which the central point in verse 8, you kind of get to, and it's structured in such a way that the corresponding verses underline the point.

I think we have an outline of the structure, if you're interested in that sort of thing. The A part of the structure is people come and go, but the earth remains fixed.

Verse 4. The B. Nature repeats the same things over and over. Verses 7 through 8. C. The mouth, the eye, and the ear are not satisfied. Verse 8. And then you see B apostrophe, and that's referencing back to B, which you're going to see as we work through this.

There's nothing new under the sun. And then A, which references back to A and explains A, there's no remembrance of people. Now you're not going to be tested on the chiasm after the service.

[8 : 39] But I think, and I hope, it helps you see the structure. So he begins in verse 4 talking about people. He's already told us what does man gain.

And so he lifts his eyes to all mankind, humankind, throughout the world. Look at verse 4. He says, a generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

Now what's a generation? You know, what's in a generation? You know, a generation is just a cycle of persons and events that happen during a certain period of time. And so the idea is that everything that happens to us, everything between our birth and our death is our life.

But it also, our life also ties to everything else going on. To people that are listening to the same music. Reading the same news.

Experiencing the same events. For me, my generation are the ones who witnessed the challenger in elementary school. Cut our teeth on nirvana in middle school.

[9 : 42] We're worn by dare the whole way through. And watch flannel come in and out about five times. And it's back in. So give it up. Don't throw that away.

But even though we may take a little pride in our generation. Even though we may push back when people try to put our generation down. When people start talking about our generation.

The preacher warns your generation. Your generation is passing away. Do you see the way it's worded? Look down there with me again.

He says a generation goes and a generation comes. Now, when we use goes and comes. We do it in reverse order. We say comes and goes. But why is the preacher saying it?

They go and come. Well, he's emphasizing this continuous cycle. You're just caught in the middle of this cycle that is continued. That began before you and will continue long after you.

[10 : 39] This continuous cycle. One generation comes. One generation goes. Another comes. And regardless of how important and immortal that generation seems. It will soon go. And another one will come.

The greatest generation goes. The baby boomers come. The baby boomers go. The generation Xers come. The generation Xers go. The millennials come. And it keeps going.

And going. And going. And going. And it never stops. But the earth remains forever.

The same hills. The same sky. The same sun are what Abraham, David, Plato, Augustine, Galileo, Jonathan, Edwards, and Winston Churchill saw.

The only thing different is they don't see it anymore. So what's the point? You know, this is more bad news from the preacher.

[11 : 45] Nothing. The point is nothing you do will be remembered. Look down there in verse 11, which is a corresponding chiasmic structure verse. Look in verse 11. There's no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things, yet to be among those who come after.

There's no remembrance. Now, sure, we might enjoy the history channel. We may read books. We may throw up a statue or at least a plaque. We may even put pictures of family members along the hallways or the walls of our house and even tell stories that we know about them.

But at some point, every person and every story will be completely forgotten. As one author says, the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.

We cannot learn from history. You know, in 1966, at the height of the Beatles' fame, John Lennon famously said, Christianity will go.

It will vanish and shrink. I need not argue with that. I am right and will be proved right. We right now, the Beatles, we're more popular than Jesus. Unfortunately, though, just a few years ago, Sir Paul McCartney performed at the Grammys, and there was quite a stir on social media when people said, who in the world is Paul McCartney?

[13 : 10] And if you don't know who Paul McCartney is, I can meet you after the service and educate you. Well, why? Why do they remember Paul McCartney? Because they'd forgotten the Beatles.

Because very few remember. Then that's the way it goes. One generation goes, another comes. One generation goes, another comes. So what do we gain from all the toil?

A few minutes of fame? A burst of light? A flash in the pan? That's it. It's over.

And no one remembers. Yet, one of the greatest temptations under the sun is to constantly angle our lives for split seconds of standing.

Split seconds of renown. I remember several years ago reading about an Australian Instagram model and influencer.

[14 : 18] Lord help me. Who says she spent 50 plus hours a week organizing her feed because of how much she craved the approval of others. She had 580,000 followers on Instagram.

Then she deleted many of her photos and went back and edited the captions. I don't encourage you to go back and look at these photos. I read an article about it.

But she goes back and puts new captions in. So captions underneath her wearing something. She says, not real life. All caps. Not real life.

Underneath one picture in a formal dress. She edited, I took countless photos trying to look hot for Instagram. All of it made me feel incredibly alone.

This model, this implode, woke up to the reality that it is all fake. It's all a show. It's all a charade. But the preacher wants us to wake up to another reality that it's all fading away.

[15 : 26] That today's celebrities are tomorrow's obituaries. Today's famous are tomorrow's unknowns. That today's hot takes are tomorrow's old news. Today's likes are tomorrow's unheard of.

The preacher is pushing us. Is there anything to gain underneath the sun? Douglas O'Donnell says it like this. Just think about it. Think seriously, soberly, and realistically about it.

What good is work? What good is ambition? What good is fame? We must admit that the history of the world appears to be a mass of men and women living and working and dying.

Punching in and out of this life. Each weekday as the sun lifts its head over the horizon, we peek out over our bedsheets, hit the alarm, wash and feed our bodies, and then spend the remainder of the day working.

But working for what? Working for what? Point two.

[16 : 39] Nothing you do will be new. So cheer up. Nothing you do will be remembered. But nothing you do will be new anyway.

Unlike the earth, it remains forever. There's a lot of things going on in nature, is what the preacher says.

Look in verse 5. He begins with the sun. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. You know, Psalm 19, you remember famously, talks about the sun rising and joyfully kind marching through the world like a bride marches down the aisle to her groom.

But here the sun is just doing its job. The sun is just like a worker that clocks in, clocks out, goes back home to wait until he clocks back in again.

The sun's just hastening back quickly to the place from which it will come back out. So too, the wind, the wind blows, look in verse 6, blows to south, goes around the north, around and around goes the wind.

[17 : 48] And on its circuit, the wind returns. The psalmist says, Psalm 104, the Lord rides on the wind. But here the wind is just blowing around and around for no apparent reason.

The wording emphasizes the point, actually. In the original language, the subject comes much later. So it just says, around and around and around and around and around the wind goes.

So that even the reading of it captures the futility of it for us. I mean, what's up with the wind? The wind is much ado about nothing. Like a young kid, you ever seen a young kid learn to swim?

It's a whole lot of splashing and a whole lot of movement, but not, I mean a whole lot of action, but not a lot of movement. And that's what the wind is. Makes a lot of noise, but really doesn't do anything.

Verse 7, he continues, all streams run down to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, and there they flow again. Psalm 104 rejoices in the way the streams flow down between the hills and give drink to every animal in the field, quenching their thirst.

[18 : 59] But not here. The streams run down. The sea's not full. And so the streams keep running down from the place from which they came.

Again and again. And the sea never fulfilled. I mean, what's he saying? The world is broken. This is the definition of vanity. There's no payoff, no payout, no reward.

The world, this world, just a laugh track. It's just the same background music playing over and over and over again.

Now what's the point? He's saying nothing you do will be new. Look in verse 9. He says what has been is what will be. What has been done is nothing new under the sun.

Someone says this is new. It has been already in the ages before us. You wash the dishes only to wash them again tomorrow.

[19 : 56] You cut the grass only to cut it again next week. You change the oil only to change it again if you do. In a few months, life is filled with doing the same old things again and again and again and again.

Now, don't get me wrong and don't get the preacher wrong. Life is not just the same old things. In one sense, there are different seasons of life. That's what I love about Tennessee.

You get all four seasons. They each bring something amazing. They're a season you've been in before and yet it comes at you new every time. There's different seasons of the year.

There's also different seasons of life. That's why we celebrate the graduates and all that's going on. It's a wonderful season change for them and for us who get to watch it.

There's also different opportunities that come along. We're not just stuck in Groundhog's Day. Life is different opportunities that come along. So the preacher is not saying don't expect nothing to ever be different.

[21 : 01] He's not saying that. Rather, the preacher is warning about hoping in the next new thing. The preacher is warning about hoping in the next new thing.

We're so vulnerable to believing this new thing will finally change us. It's the reason why so many people anxiously await the release of the next new iPhone.

It's the reason why there were so many Broncos sold in the first year. The new Broncos last year, they had to pause orders to catch up. But it's the reason why buying something new feels good.

And guys, don't point at the ladies. Whether it's a gun or a bobcat or a mirror or an outfit or whatever, there's that feeling. And the preacher says, don't fall for it.

Don't fall for it. It won't change you. It won't change your life. A new job won't bring you peace. A new spouse won't bring you contentment.

[22 : 04] A new vacation won't bring you joy. A new body won't change your confidence. A new house won't bring you stability. A new town won't bring you security. Now we must admit, we hate hearing this.

C.S. Lewis in his book, *Screwtape Letters*. These letters between Screwtape and Wormwood.

Kind of a head demon. It's a fictional book. A head demon writing to a servant demon. And one of them, he talks about cultivating in Christians the horror of the same old thing.

He said, we can get all sorts of things to happen if we just get the Christians to be scared of the same old thing. Isn't that the way our lives are?

Scared about the same old thing. A couple years ago, I read an article in *The Onion*. Not a Christian publication. A satire newspaper that captures this fear very well.

[23 : 16] The title of the article is, *Unambitious Loser with Happy, Fulfilling Life Still Lives in Hometown*. Got to admit, that's a killer title.

He says, Long-time acquaintances confirmed to reporters this week that local man Michael Husmer, an unambitious 29-year-old loser who leads an enjoyable and fulfilling life, still lives in his hometown and has no desire to leave.

Claiming that the aimless slouch who has never resided more than two hours from his parents and still hangs out with friends from high school, sources close to Kumsmer reported that the man who has a meaningful, lasting, personal relationships and a healthy work-life balance is an unmotivated washout who's perfectly comfortable being a nobody for the rest of his life.

One childhood friend, David Gorman, said, I've known Mike my whole life. He's a good guy, but it's pretty pathetic that he's still living on the same street he grew up on, experiencing a deep sense of personal satisfaction.

As soon as Mike graduated from college, he moved back home, started working at the local insurance firm. Now he's 30 years old, living in the exact same town he was born in, working in the same small-time job, and he's extremely contented in all aspects of his home and personal lives.

[24 : 34] It's really sad. Another one said, I don't know how anyone could let themselves end up like that, but he seems perfectly fine, being nothing more than a genuinely happy deadbeat for the rest of his life.

Another friend, or a cousin, concludes, I'm just glad I got out of there and didn't end up like Mike. An attorney at a large law firm said, The last thing I'd ever want is to have a loving family nearby.

Feel a sense of pleasure when reflecting on my life and be the big failure that everyone runs into at Christmas. Just look at that loser with his contented grin and positive outlook each day.

The poor guy doesn't even know how bad he has it. Give it up for the onion. Even a blind squirrel.

It identifies very well the folly of believing and chasing for meaning of life in something new.

- [25 : 38] It illustrates it. So what the preacher is saying, Slow down. Look at the sun. Look at the wind.
- Look at the streams. And listen to what they're trying to teach you. Point three. Nothing you do will satisfy.
- Nothing you do will satisfy. While there's so much activity on the earth, and so much activity among the people of the earth, none of it satisfies.
- Remember our structure. None of it satisfies. Look in verse 8. It says, All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it.
- Mouth cannot say it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear is it filled with hearing. So that's the center of what he's trying to say.
- [26 : 39] So no one will remember you. Nothing you do is new, and nothing will satisfy. That's the heart. In the same way that the streams continue to flow down, and the sea is never full, so too the mouth continues to speak, and is not filled.
- The eye continues to see, and is not satisfied. The ear continues to hear, and is not happy. Nothing satisfies. What he's saying? All things are full, not of fruitfulness, completeness, or satisfaction.
- All things are full of weariness. Frustration. Proverbs 27, 20 says it well.
- Sheol and Abandon are never satisfied, and never satisfied are the eyes of man. What's the preacher trying to say? Nothing you do will satisfy.
- Nothing. Nothing will make you happy. Nothing will make you feel fulfilled. Nothing will drive your troubles completely away.
- [27 : 47] Underneath the sun, the mantra of every person under heaven is the one made famous by Mick Jagger, I can't get no satisfaction. That's the mantra of every person.
- They're saying it a different way. They're using different words. They've had different experiences, but they're all saying, I can't get any satisfaction. Just like Buddy read from Augustine, our hearts are restless.
- They find their rest in you. Nothing under the sun. So try all you want. This is where the preacher's so helpful. He's telling us after the fact, after he's found satisfaction, which we're going to discover as we continue marching through this book, but he's saying, try all you want.
- Chase your dreams. Move across the world. Buy the car. Buy the house. Buy the boat. Get the trophy wife. Do it. But you're going to come back.
- Empty hand. Every time. 100% unsatisfaction guaranteed. Years ago, I read the artist Madonna express this reality in an incredibly provoking way.
- [28 : 55] Madonna, who some of you have never heard of, is one of the most successful recording artists of the last whatever, 40 years. Yet she says, all the success she's ever had is not enough.
- She says like this, again and again, this is Madonna. Again and again, my drive in life is to conquer this horrible feeling of inadequacy.
- and this fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become somebody, I still have to prove that I am somebody.
- my struggle has never ended and it probably never will. So what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
- Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. So what do we do?
- [30 : 16] The way I see it, we have a few choices. The first is we try to escape it.

Like we try to escape what the guy's saying here, what the preacher's saying here. We try it for ourselves. Gosh knows, we're all spending gobs of money trying it for themselves.

We chase the lights, we chase the new things. Try to fill up our hearts and our lives with those things. So we try to escape. escape. In any number of things.

Or, we can try to deny it. It's actually kind of a form of escaping as well. But it's a denial. Like this is just bogus.

Nihilism. You know, I believe in nothing. It kind of sounds like the preacher believes in nothing. So maybe we should just take that cue. I don't think that's what he wants us to do.

[31 : 16] But, or, we can face it. Face it. And we face it, I think, in two ways.

By realizing all the brokenness of the world points to the brokenness of our hearts. That's the first way we face what the preacher's saying. We realize that the brokenness of this world points to the brokenness of our hearts.

It wasn't meant to be this way. It was supposed to be all Genesis 1 and 2. All joy.

All contentment. All true freedom. All satisfaction. Walking in the cool of the day with the Lord. But sin entered the world in Genesis 3.

And after sin came the curse. And the ground is cursed. Genesis 3 tells us, the ground brings forth pain. The fruit the ground brings up is thorns and thistles all day long.

[32 : 20] The ground, the world, that we're stuck in, the world underneath the sun only produces brokenness. But we must not miss the deeper problem.

Romans 8 says it like this. We have it for you. It says, For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

So He's helping us understand what all this vanity is all about. Is it? The creation was subjected by God to futility as a part of the curse.

To brokenness, to emptiness, to unfruitfulness. That's what the world is. And then He continues, And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

I think, putting these passages together, that all the emptiness, all the brokenness, all the suffering is underlining a deeper problem, our sin against God. All of that is underlining a deeper problem, our sin against God.

[33 : 40] The meaning of all this futility, corruption, and decay is that sin is horrific. Sin is disastrous. Sin brought this world into brokenness.

The reason there's no meaning in life under the sun is not because the world is broken. The reason there's no meaning in life under the sun is because our hearts are broken.

And all the brokenness of the world is trying to make that clear to us. There is brokenness under the brokenness, and it is our sin. And our broken relationship with God because of it.

And so, whatever you try to do, when you come home, the Lord's saying, I want you to come home to me.

Now, we read that scripture a little bit ago, return to me with all your heart. And I don't care how much you know about these spiritual things.

[34 : 55] That's an invitation from the Lord Himself saying, you can stop the charade and you can come home right now to me.

You can have a relationship with me through our Lord Jesus Christ. Just like Jesus said, come to me, all you are weary and heavy laden, I will give you rest. There's no rest for the weary, people say, because there's no rest in this weary world.

But the Lord says there's a way of rest in Him. So we face it by realizing all the brokenness of the world points to the brokenness of our hearts, but we also face it by realizing all the brokenness of this world will soon give way to a new world.

The preacher says, is there anything new? Not in the sun, but God's doing a new thing.

That's the most wonderful word. God, Jesus came to bring a new covenant. Jesus came to give us a new heart and new life. It's so new. We're made so new that the Bible calls us new creations.

[36 : 06] More wonderful than the first creation. Jesus promises to come again to bring about a new heavens and a new earth and when that day arrives, we'll be completely satisfied.

It'll be Genesis 1, 2.0, even better. Be completely set free from sin and free from the ability to sin.

But now, we can live with purpose under the sun because all that is true.

When I came to Christ, everything changed. I don't mean I got some fire insurance.

I mean, I got some glasses. The whole world opened up. I remember countless nights in my warped thinking, like planning a perfect drinking binge down on the campus at University of Tennessee.

[37 : 21] A perfect night. Perfect friends. Perfect drinks that I wanted. And just kind of, it was just this, this cycle that happened. Every night, I'd go and I felt these things.

I wanted to be with people and, you know, go out and party and I would come home completely empty. I remember in the spring of 2001, crying to sleep.

Now, some of the crying doesn't surprise you, but crying to sleep because what is this? Is this what life is? Then have it back.

Now, I remember coming to Christ in the summer of 2001 and I know, yes, I received forgiveness of sins. Praise be to God. But suddenly, I also received a meaning for my life, a reason to live.

And that's what God wants for you. That's what's yours. Free. 100% satisfaction guaranteed.

[38 : 31] And it'll follow you throughout the rest of your life. You cannot get whatever you want out of life.

whatever you want out of life. But you can live every day with purpose because of Jesus. There is meaning under the sun.

In Jesus Christ. May God help us. Father in heaven, thank you for the privilege of sitting underneath the preacher.

Sitting underneath Solomon. We pray, God, in this world with so much chaos and noise and activity that we would be a people that quietly live with purpose because of Jesus Christ.

We pray that we would not be like children tossed to and fro by the ways. We'd be like those who've been built up the word of truth stable and steadfast not shifting from the hope of the gospel.

[40 : 06] The hope of our calling. The hope of our Savior. Thank you. We praise you. In Jesus' name. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.
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