

2. Where is the profit in life?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 February 2007

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, if you turn with me to the book of Ecclesiastes and at the beginning, that'll be a great help as we seek to understand it together.

Where is the prophet in life? Or put it another way, what does it mean, excuse me, what does it mean to be human?

That's a great question that has exercised the great minds all down the ages. And it does so still. The great thinkers, the great philosophers, the poets, the artists, whether highbrow or lowbrow, that's the question that they grapple with.

And they do it in a multitude of ways, from the great works of literature to, well, the most mundane songs of our pop culture. Man, said Plato, is a being in search of meaning.

Now, this quest for meaning and the questions that human beings ask is, it seems, a source of irritation to some people. People, for example, like Richard Dawkins, the Oxford scientist.

[1 : 13] I'm reading his latest book. It's called The Delusional God. I regret, really, adding to his royalties by buying it, but I felt I should read it.

Actually, I've stalled about two-thirds of the way through because I'm so bored of his circular arguments and it's just invective anti-religious rhetoric.

It really is a tedious book. If you want to read it, don't buy it. You can borrow it from me. But one of his favourite mantras that he goes on about again and again in this book and all the others is to try and debunk the coherence of even asking these questions about life, about meaning, about what it means to be human, why we're here, and why we feel what we feel, and so on.

We shouldn't ask these questions at all, he says. We should stop asking them because they're all meaningless. They're all pointless questions. Ever since Darwin, he'll tell us, we know that everything is just a means to DNA propagation.

That's all. Any greater sense of meaning in the world is just an illusion. And therefore, he says, all but those he calls, quotes, the scientifically illiterate have long since abandoned asking the why question about all living creatures and especially about human beings and purpose and so on.

[2 : 39] Well, I find that breathtaking arrogance, don't you? Especially when he has to admit immediately after having said that that what he calls the unpalatable truth that those people that he brands scientifically illiterate are still the vast majority of people, not just in the world, but in the educated, developed, western world too.

I don't know about you, but I don't like to be patronized like that as being called scientifically illiterate. I don't consider myself scientifically illiterate. I don't expect you do either.

Most of us have studied science at school, haven't we? A great many of us have probably studied science at university and have degrees in science. But few of us, I would think, would be so cocksure as Professor Dawkins to feel that we're even fools to think about or ask the questions about the great mysteries of life.

As though even to ponder the meaning of life or the value of life or the purpose of life was just evidence of our complete misguided folly. How foolish of me! Is that what I'm to say to myself when these sort of thoughts come to me?

Remember what Professor Dawkins says, DNA neither knows nor cares, DNA just is, and we dance to its music. Is that what I'm to think?

[4 : 00] Well, why do I ask those questions then? Well, another scientific observer of the human life, the psychologist Eric Fromm, put it this way, man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve.

And that's true, isn't it? That's right. Professor Dawkins might tell us that your DNA and mine is 97.9% the same as that of a chicken or whatever it is.

But when you look at you and when you look at a chicken, you find that there are some fairly major differences. At least I hope so. Last Saturday I spent a day with Edward Logg, with the director of our Cornhill training course.

He took me on an educational trip and I learned at his feet for the whole of the day. I wasn't studying the Bible or theology. I went with him to the Scottish Poultry Championships in Perth.

And there were over 2,000 birds of every conceivable size and shape. Wild fowls, water fowls, hens, chickens, you name it, they were there. Well-summers, that's Edward's favourite breed.

[5 : 12] Leghorns, arachanas, brahmas, goodness knows, hundreds of other different types of chicken. And Edward was there actually as the judge of all the eggs. Not the judge of all the earth, but the judge of all the eggs.

And I watched him in his white coat, actually one of my old white coats, taking it very seriously, judging plates and plates and plates of eggs of every conceivable colour and size and shape and everything else.

A fascinating experience. But actually, I was there, I was there to support my namesake, because Edward has got a very, very fine cockerel named Willie Phillip.

And I travelled all the way to Perth to watch my namesake win the prize of champion cockerel in his class. And the person who was judging was an utterly perverse creature.

And he gave the first prize to a grossly inferior bird. It really was an absolute travesty of justice. And WJUP II only got second prize. I was deeply disappointed.

[6 : 17] Edward got lots of other prizes, by the way, including lots of first prizes, but that was the one that mattered to me. But as I thought about that, it just struck me that my namesake, Willie Phillip the Cockerel, didn't seem to care a hoot.

He just sat in his cage and went cock-a-doodle-doo and was utterly indifferent to the whole proceedings. Same DNA, apparently, but his really didn't seem to care, didn't seem to know.

But mine did. And just like all the other human beings who were mad enough to spend their Saturday looking at birds in cages in the Perth show, they too also seemed to care.

Well, none of their birds did. Willie Phillip the Cockerel didn't stand up and ask, why didn't I get first prize? But I did.

And the reason for that is that there's a difference between a cockerel and a human being. Man is a being in search of meaning. And none of the other animals are.

[7 : 29] And you see, the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes knows that. And he's an honest, down-to-earth man. He takes honest, down-to-earth people very seriously. And he takes their questions seriously.

And he doesn't patronize them or dismiss them, as Professor Dawkins seems to want to do. No, but he does want to challenge them to think much more than we do.

And like Professor Dawkins, in a way, he recognizes that human beings do tend to delude themselves. And they do often seem to seek to live in an illusion.

But it's not the illusion that we reject materialism and become religious. No. Our real self-delusion is that most of the time we live as though it were true that there was nothing more than just this material world.

We do tend to bury the big questions in life underneath all sorts of the busy humdrum noise in our daily lives, don't we? Our real problem isn't that we ask these questions.

[8 : 39] Our real problem is we don't ask these questions nearly often enough. Isn't that true? I think it is true. We avoid the big questions of life because the answers so often are so scary, aren't they?

But there are times when we do have to face up to them. When a tragic event happens on the national or the international scene, the newspaper headlines ask that question, don't they?

Why? When a busload of school children goes off a cliff or something like that. Or in a personal crisis, we have to ask that question ourselves. Or when we face the inevitability of death, there's nothing so focusing to the mind, is there, as staring down into an open grave.

And that's when we do ask these questions. What's the point? What's the purpose of it all? And the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher as he calls himself, he wants to force us to confront reality, to confront the hard truth about our mortality, but not to drive us to despair, but rather to drive us to liberation, to freedom from the burden that would otherwise crush us as we look at our mortal life, unless we pretend it away.

But you see, we'll only begin to see that the answers must lie beyond mere mortality if first we stare our mortality full in the face, and that's what he wants us to do.

[10 : 15] That's what he forces us to do with his little broom, hevel, vanity, this word that comes up again and again. He sweeps away all the illusions that we hide behind in life, and he faces us with the down-to-earth facts that we have to take seriously.

And that's got to be the starting place for any kind of realistic assessment of life, or of the universe, or of anything at all. And so with his motto in verse 2, do you see, vanity, hevel, in vain, that's a little motto that begins his words and ends it, in fact, at the end of chapter 12, verse 8.

He brings us to the beginning of his way of addressing this reality of life. And he begins in verse 3, do you see, with a down-to-earth question about life. And he goes on to give us, all through the book, but here in chapter 1 as well, a down-to-earth assessment of life.

And as we'll also see, he points us to a down-to-earth answer. But let's look at this down-to-earth question, verse 3. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

That is, in this material world. It's a very realistic down-to-earth question. It's a word that comes from business. What profit is there? What's the dividend? Dividends. I'm told that dividends are the really important part of a long-term investment solution.

[11 : 39] It tells you if a company is real, if it's making profits, if it's generating cash, not just some sort of speculative fancy. Well, never mind the bubble of fantasy, says the preacher.

Prick the bubble of that. Get rid of the grandiose ideas that we might have of life and its existence and all the rest of it. Let's get down to the bottom line, the profit. The real, bankable, exchangeable, spendable thing.

What is there in our human existence that is real profit? That's what you want your pension fund manager to be focusing on, isn't it? Never mind your flight of fancy, your speculative bets, all these short-term things that'll earn you a million-pound Christmas bonus.

What I want to know is, where's the gain? Where's the profit? Where's the profit for me to live on in my retirement? Will there be something to show for me to take with me into my retirement from all this investment in my pension fund?

That's the issue. And that's the issue in life, isn't it? Where is the long-term gain? You toil away under the sun or under the clouds, I suppose, if you live here.

[12 : 49] And what do you get from it? Well, it's a big question, isn't it? It's quite an unnerving question. And so it's a question that we often hide from, but the preacher won't let us hide from it.

And it recurs repeatedly in these first four chapters of Ecclesiastes, chapters where he bombards us mercilessly with the facts of our mortality.

Life is ephemeral. Life is impermanent. It's fading. So what profit is there in life? There again in chapter 2, verse 22. What has a man from the toil and the striving of heat?

Chapter 3, verse 9. What gain has the worker from his toil? If the whole of life is a fleeting breath, if we can't control life any more than we can chase and capture the wind, then chapter 5, verse 19.

What gain is there to him who toils for the wind? It's a real down-to-earth question, isn't it? Plenty of people, I guess, will be thinking that when the alarm goes up tomorrow morning at 7 o'clock.

[13 : 55] What's the point of all this labour? I bet you anything, all those workers who lost their life savings and their pension funds when their companies went under, I bet they're asking exactly that question.

Why did I toil and contribute to that fund over all these years and now there's nothing? But if that's important, how much more important must we ask that question of our lives?

In the place of the fact that the whole of our life is but a vapour, a mist, a passing shadow, Hevel, in vain. In one sense, of course, in the ultimate sense, the verdict is so absolutely clear we can't avoid it, can we?

It's verse 2, isn't it? It's in vain, the whole thing. It's transient, it's evaporating, it's void. So if that is so obvious to us that every one of us is going to die, then how are we to make sense of our lives?

Well, the preacher won't let us away with self-delusion, either the delusion of hiding from the question itself or the equally foolish delusion of pretending the question shouldn't be asked in the first place like Dr. Dawkins wants us to do.

[15 : 13] Now, this preacher is a true scientist. He examines the evidence. He examines all the evidence. And so having asked his down-to-earth question, he takes us to a down-to-earth assessment of life as we really know it.

Now, that goes on all the way through the book, but it begins here in verses 4 to 11 in a poem. A poem about life. There's a poem at the beginning and a balancing poem in chapter 12 at the end of this book.

It's interesting, actually, that often it is in poetry, isn't it, that great truths about life are explored. I remember my father used to go on and on about this and say that the Greek philosophers never really understood or plumbed the depths of the meaning of life or the mystery of evil, but the Greek dramatists, the poets, they did, people like Sophocles and Euripides.

My father always considered anybody utterly uneducated who hadn't studied the classics and I feel completely, I can't tell the difference between a Euripides and a Eureka.

But at any rate, the poets very often do explore the deep things of life, don't they? And in this poem, the preacher faces us squarely with life.

[16 : 28] He faces us plainly with hard facts that we can't run from, we can't hide. There's no fantasy in this poem. I'm going to call it the passing generations. And it's very clear, isn't it, when we read it, what the message is.

Be serious, says the preacher, about the hard facts of life. Like many Hebrew poems, it seems to be symmetrical. It has a pattern, the beginning and the end match and the focus is right there in the middle.

So he teaches us three three unavoidable realities about life that we can't avoid when we face up to the evidence. First of all, in this poem, in verses 4 to 11 of chapter 1, he teaches us that there is no real significance to be found in our passing lives.

Look at verse 4. A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. Well, that's the truth, isn't it?

It's what human life is. Coming and going of generations that appear and, well, then are forgotten. You don't think of your life like that with all its richness, with all its relationships, with all the experience.

[17 : 42] You don't think of your life as less significant than some of the rocks in your rockery in your garden. But here's the reality. There'll come a time when you are dust and those rocks are still there.

The earth remains. We all think that our generation is the generation, don't we? The music of our time is the real music. None of this newfangled modern stuff.

The fashion of our day, well, that's the fashion. That's why I suppose as we get older we become such an embarrassment to our children. But we think like that, don't we?

We use that expression, oh, in my day it wasn't like that. But the truth is, you see, says the preacher, our day is soon forgotten. Its significance is evaporating, fading with every single breath.

Soon it'll all be forgotten. Look at verse 11 that balances this. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of the later things yet to be among those who come after.

[18 : 43] If you've got an NIV, it's not later things, but people. The Hebrew word just says the former. And I think it really means both. The New Living Translation puts it this way. We don't remember what happened in those former times.

In future generations, no one remember what we're doing now. That's absolutely true, isn't it? We're always hearing complaints these days that nobody learns about history.

But even if we do, at best, the doings of each generation are just one little paragraph in a massive history tome. Isn't that right? Think of the great leaders who seemed to rule the world even just one generation ago or less.

Think about Ronald Reagan, for example, who oversaw the end of the Cold War, the biggest shifts in history of the whole of the 20th century. Do you know, I couldn't even remember if he was still alive or dead.

He is dead, by the way. But who can remember much more than that today? Who can remember Margaret Thatcher, Mr. Gorbachev, all of these? Far less those who went before them.

[19 : 48] How many 19th century prime ministers of this country can you name? I bet you can't name a single one from the 18th century. Well, maybe some smart aleck will, but most of us would.

Think of all the parliamentary speeches that they made, every single one a headline in the newspapers. Where are they now? Well, they'll be there in the dusty old copies of Hansard, but who on earth is reading them?

And if we are, who cares? No one remembers the past generations. They have no significance anymore. What gain and profit was there in all their toil?

Well, of course, no doubt there was some to society in those who come after, but what to them? Oh, they've long since been dust, haven't they? And so it will be for us as the preacher, you and me and our generation.

That's a thought, isn't it? We'll fade away. And what will they say of us? I came upon this by Albert Camus, the French existentialist and pessimist.

[20 : 57] This is what he said. I sometimes think of what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for modern man, he says. They fornicated and read the papers.

Well, it's maybe not so far from the truth, is it? No, our mortality means that for us there is no real significance to be gained in our passing lives.

And we know it deep down. That's why we fantasize. That's why we like stories like Peter Pan. We love to live in Never Never Land. We sometimes try to live as though Never Never Land was really true.

But it's not, the preacher says. It's vanity. Heaven. It's bubbles. It's disappearing. Get real. There's no significance. Second, he tells us in his poem that there's no real progress in this passing world of mortality.

As for the passing generations, so for the world and so for society. Look at verses five to seven. It shows the repetitiveness, the monotony of nature. It's just going round and round in circles.

[22 : 03] The sun, up it goes and down it goes. And up it goes again. The wind, it's just the same. It goes round and around and around. And the streams, they flow to the sea, but the sea's never full.

The water keeps on coming down again and again and again. You see, no progress. Weerisome circularity. And as it is in nature, so it is in human history and society.

Verses nine and ten. That's his point. What has been will be. There's nothing new under the sun. We often use that expression, don't we?

It pricks the bubbles of our delusions of grandeur. We like to think that we're a generation making progress, but is there anything really new? Of course not. Not really.

It's all been done before. It's what the preacher says. History is just one great story of repetition, the same things going round and round in circles, different guises, different clothes, but just the same.

[23 : 02] Empires rise, empires fall. Who do you think had the largest landmass empire in history? I heard it on the radio this week from Melvin Bragg.

It wasn't the British Empire, it wasn't the Americans, it wasn't the Soviets, it was Genghis Khan in the 12th century. Empires come, empires go, same old thing. We like to think that our civilization is advancing.

We look back to former days and we say, oh, well, how we've moved on. And yes, we have, of course. And yet, we haven't really, have we? Think of medicine, all the great advances.

We've got antibiotics. We don't die of the things that our great-grandfathers used to die of. We just die of other things. And once we learn how to treat these, heart disease and cancer and all the rest of it, well, that just means that we live long enough to have chronic diseases to cripple us and make us miserable and eventually kill us.

The more wealth we have, the more food that we have, well, we don't die of starvation anymore. What happens now is that a mark of poverty is not that you're going to be thin and starving, it's probably that you're going to be obese and killing yourself that way.

[24 : 18] That's the reality. Plus a chance, plus a même chance, that's what the French say. The more we change, the more things are different, the more it's just the same. There's no progress.

Are our lives really so much better because of the progress of our technology? We've got the internet. There's so many things at our fingertips, so much that we can do. And so now we sit enslaved to our keyboards and our screens for hours and hours doing all the things that once upon a time somebody else used to do for you.

It takes you ages to flick through all the things and book your flights when in the past you used to go into a shop and some nice girl did it all for you. But now we're so progressed we can do it ourselves and drive ourselves nuts when our computers crash.

We're all liberated today, aren't we? We can go shopping 24 hours a day. I can go to Asda at midnight. Isn't that wonderful? My mother couldn't do that. And my poor mother has to just do something interesting like go to bed and enjoy being asleep at midnight.

Progress? Progress? So much progress but so little progress. We just find different ways of enslaving ourselves in life.

[25 : 31] No wonder at the very heart of his poem in verse 8 the preacher hits on the very heart of our frustrated experience in life. There's no satisfaction, is there, in these passing lives of ours.

All things are full of weariness. A man can't utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing. We live, don't we, in a consumer society.

Indeed, the quest for satisfaction has become so essential to the whole of our world economy that the papers now are full of scare stories about the impending crash and crisis that's going to be if the American consumer, especially, but all the rest of us, if we stop consuming.

There's going to be a huge recession if we stop consuming our way to prosperity. Back in the 1980s, a man called Neil Postman wrote a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

It was about how society is descending into trivia as we ditch the aureal medium for the visual in all our television news and that sort of thing. It's a very important book, actually, for the church today because increasingly we say, well, we're moving away from an aureal culture.

[26 : 40] Stop this speaking the word and let's have pictures instead. But I reckon if he was around today he'd be writing a book *Consuming Ourselves to Death* because that's what we're doing. Because we're certainly not consuming ourselves towards satisfaction, are we?

We're never satisfied. The eye or the ear. It's never satisfied. It's an addiction. Isn't that true? That's how addicts think.

One more fix and I'll be great. Then I'll turn the corner. Well, that's how we think. If I get this job, if I get that house, if I get this new relationship. We see it so clearly, don't we, in our children at Christmas time when they have all their new toys and things and the great novelty on Christmas Day within a couple of weeks.

Well, it's just old hat. But that's our lives too, isn't it? So little satisfaction, even from those who seem to think that they have so much.

I can't get no satisfaction, sang Mick Jagger. Hardly high prose. When I'm driving in my car and a man comes on the radio, he's telling me more and more about some useless information supposed to fire my imagination.

[27 : 54] I can't get no, no, no, no. I can't get no satisfaction. Well, it's hardly Shakespeare or Euripides. But it's true, isn't it?

All the same. And that's simply something that we have to face up to in life if we're going to be truly honest in our assessment of human existence.

As merely human life, as life here on Earth under the sun, it doesn't fully satisfy. Where is the ultimate profit in any of it?

When you face up to the facts of our mortality, that there really is no lasting significance to be found, that there is no real progress, there is no satisfying satisfaction.

A realistic assessment of the evidence forces us to the conclusion that there is no profit for all of our toil under the sun. That's a lesson that we can't help but observe from a truly honest and down-to-earth assessment of life.

[29 : 03] And that's why so many of the great thinkers of the world have been such pessimists. Saying things like the best thing in life is never to be born and the next best thing is to die.

That's why so many people who really do think about life end up committing suicide. Did you know that the commonest cause of death in young men in this country at the age of 16 to 35 is suicide?

Did you know that? The commonest thing that's likely to kill you if you're under 35. Suicide. I'm not sure, by the way, what solution the great Professor Dawkins might have for that.

I'm sure he does deplore suicide. I'm sure he'd want to stop it. But given his beliefs, I'm not sure why he would want to stop it. His answer to life's meaning doesn't seem to offer very much hope.

Listen, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replications, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky. And you won't find any rhyme or reason in it nor any justice.

[30 : 04] No design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.

That might rather seem at first to support the preacher's verdict of no profit, that everything's in vain. But no, that's not so.

Because though the preacher will not deal in fantasy, he does force us to have a realistic assessment of life, to reckon with the facts of mortality. Nevertheless, he's clear that that is not all the data.

It's not the whole story. No, not at all. The preacher also wants to give us clearly a down-to-earth answer for this passing mortal life. And it begins with a hint in verses 13 to 15.

I wonder if you can see. Again, there's no fantasy, is there? There's no pretense that the world's wisdom and its wise men, its professors, its philosophers can solve the perplexity and the fruitlessness of a life.

[31 : 14] That must in the end be pointless. No. Look at verse 15. It's very clear. What is crooked cannot be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted. Not even the greatest minds can help us.

Not even Solomon with all his wisdom. Verse 16 and following. In fact, if you look at verse 18, it's clear. The more wisdom, the more your head hurts. In much wisdom, much vexation.

He who increases knowledge increases sorrow. That's so true, isn't it? You read the biographies of these great thinkers. So often, their lives are just marked by twistedness and unhappiness. No, there's no answer in fantasy, the fantasy of man's exalted mind.

But there is answer in fact, in the fact of the God of heaven. Do you see verse 13? Do you see that little phrase, under heaven? That's so important, isn't it?

See, that tells us that the preacher isn't just a secularist. He's not an atheist. He's not just an observer of the facts of life under the sun or on earth. He is, but he's also a man who doesn't rule out the possibility that there are more facts, that there's more data to consider.

[32 : 30] Facts and data about a realm that is above the sun, the realm of heaven, the realm of God. In fact, he knows that unless we view our human world as being under heaven, then we'll never really understand anything about this life and this mortal world that we live in.

Because, unless you consider that, you've left out key data from your equation. But bring in the key data, bring in the key fact of heaven and of God, well then your data begins to make sense.

Do you see the second half of verse 13? It's God, he says, who gives this unhappy business to men, the life that we know. He has imposed upon us a life of no ultimate earthly significance, of frustrated circularity and no real progress, of constant seeking for satisfaction and never finding it.

God has done it. What? Is God utterly perverse? Why on earth would he do that if there is a God? Surely we couldn't conceive of him as being like that.

Well, God has done exactly that, says the preacher. In fact, that's the message of the whole Bible. God hasn't done it because he's perverse, he's done it because we're perverse.

[33 : 55] In fact, we're so perverse that in our rejection of him and the realm of his heaven, we don't even care that we've rejected him. We don't even care that we've ignored our creator.

We blithely live in a fantasy world that we try to keep him out of altogether. We exclude him totally from our thinking so that we never even seek him out, even if God would have us back.

And so God has laid upon humankind the burden of a fruitless and futile mortality to make us take him seriously. Remember, C.S. Lewis writes about pain.

He calls it God's megaphone to alert us to reality while so perplexity. God wants us to be more and more vexed and perplexed as we look at this world under the sun because he wants us to look up above the sun.

He wants us to look to heaven. He wants us to look to God himself. And he wants us to find the answer. An answer that must come down to earth from heaven.

[35 : 06] Just look on over the page to chapter 3, verse 10. You'll see that almost the same phraseology of verse 13 of chapter 1 is repeated but we get an explanation. Chapter 3, verse 10.

I've seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

You see, everything is beautiful in its time but that's the whole problem. Time is passing always and yet God has put eternity into our hearts as well and because of that there's bound to be tension, there's bound to be conflict, there's bound to be confusion, there's bound to be perplexity.

We are in time but we're made for eternity. And you see, the vexation that we experience as human beings, that is key evidence that the Bible's understanding and explanation of reality is true.

How could we ever feel otherwise but vexed and perplexed and dissatisfied if we're made for eternity and yet we find ourselves cursed with mortality?

[36 : 25] That's the reality that you know, you know that in your bones, you know it in your life. Look at verse 14 of chapter 3, whatever God does endures forever, it's eternal, it's complete, there's no frustration.

And God has done it, do you see? Why? Frustrated us in a mortal world? So that people fear him. He just does pain as God's megaphone to our emotions, so perplexity and vexation as God's megaphone to our intellects as we wrestle to try and understand life.

He shouts, look up! Look up! Above the sun, beyond the mere facts of our mortality, which you must be serious about, of course, but look up to the facts that these facts of our vexation and confusion about life, that they themselves point to, that there is an answer, but it must lie above, above the sun, above heaven, with God.

And that's the only place where this question, what does it mean to be human, can be answered. For the question, where's the prophet in life?

It's an answer that comes down to earth from heaven. And the preacher's answer about our vexations in life on earth is really the message of the Christian gospel.

[37 : 54] It's a message that comes down to earth from heaven. That's the whole Bible's message. That's why in chapter 12 when the preacher ends, as we said to the children, this final hymn, it's not about the passing generations, it's a challenge to the present generation.

Remember, therefore, your creator in the days of your youth. The answer, you see, when you've been serious about the facts of life, about the brief life that we have on earth, the answer is be serious about faith before your life runs out.

God has done it. He's made our lives this way so that people will fear him, so they'll search for him and bow down to him. So remember your creator in the days of your youth.

That's the message of the Christian gospel. That's how the book of Hebrews opens. In many ways, in the past times, God spoke to us through the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us through his son through whom he created the world.

Remember, you're a creator. You see, God not only points us above to the answer, he comes down from heaven to the earth to be the answer.

[39 : 11] Jesus said, I have come that they might have life, life in all its fullness, not life in its emptiness and vanity. It can only describe life without him.

It's not that he's come to give us a magic pill that everything on earth will suddenly be fine. No, Jesus was clear. In the world you will have tribulation. But he comes to bring us the joy of the life from above the sun, from heaven itself, eternal life, the life of the world to come.

He comes that we might know that life now. You see, true humanity, friends, can never be found this side of the sun. Must come down to earth from the God of heaven.

But the message of the gospel is that true humanity and true life can be entered this side of the sun. Because in him, in Jesus Christ, the eternal son, through whom all things were created, in him was life.

The life of the world to come. And he came down into our world of toil and of vanity that we might find that life from above and find it in him.

[40 : 33] And you remember, the Lord Jesus spoke exactly the same words as the preacher, didn't he? What is it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his life?

that life that is in Jesus alone? Well, the answer is, he profits not at all, not one whit.

It's all vanity. It's vain. It's striving after the wind. There is no profit outside of that life of Jesus Christ, the life from heaven.

What you gain if you haven't found life in Jesus Christ is but a vapor. a shadow, a wisp, a disappearing thing, no matter what you think you have.

But what you will lose if you haven't found the life of heaven that's come to earth in Jesus Christ, that is immeasurable, it is incalculable, because it's life eternal.

[41 : 39] so the preacher says, you must ask honest down to earth questions about life, but make sure in your assessment of life that you take into account all the data, so that you will find the answer that comes down from heaven to earth, and not block off from yourself even that possibility, because you fail even to look up, you fail even to take notice of the evidence that God has put into your struggling, vexed, confused spirit that tells you the answer can't be found there alone.

look up to heaven, and see the answer that comes from heaven to earth in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in him there is gain, and there is profit, but without him there is none, ever, vanishing, it's gone.

Let's pray. Lord, your word searches us and tries us. It teaches us that we are so often blind to the realities of life, we do not even ask the question.

But we thank you, Lord, your word is honest and real, and it points us to the realities that if we are honest and real, must point us to you. We thank you that you not only point us to the truth, but you are the truth, and the way, and the life, and you have come to us in this vain world, this passing world, that we may know life eternal.

Help us, we pray, to find that life, to rejoice in it, to live in it, and to proclaim it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[43 : 58] Amen.