

6. Man in the dock: What is your life's work worth?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes. And our question today comes from Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 3.

We're doing a series in the questions that God asks to men and women through his word in the Bible. We often think we're asking God the questions, but in reality, when we open his word, we find that God himself is asking us many questions.

Now, this ought to be familiar to most of us, because, of course, we spent many weeks studying this book in the spring of this year. But I thought it wouldn't be a bad thing to revisit our old friend the preacher for old times' sake.

It's, well, I've rather missed him. I think some of you have too. But sometimes it is helpful, isn't it, to revisit very familiar ground in Scripture.

And just to get something of a bird's eye view of the message into our minds once again. And this question in verse 3 of chapter 1 is a very big question, isn't it?

[1 : 0 3] It's one that recurs again and again throughout the book, throughout the preacher's ruminations about life. What does man gain by all his toil?

That is, what is the point of his life? What's the meaning of it all? Our work, our toil, our worries about family, about relationships, about possessions.

And at the end of it all, what is it all worth? What is our life's worth, work worth? In other words, what lasting profit is there to show for the lives that we live on this earth?

What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? And I was preparing, I was listening to some of the tributes being paid to Luciano Pavarotti who died this week.

He left a great legacy of music, of course, hasn't he? Well, nobody will ever quite sing Nessun Dorma just the same way, will they? I'm not sure that his life was always as sweet as his music, was it?

[2 : 0 7] Not sure he was such a happy man. He certainly didn't make his wife of, what was it, 36 years happy when he kicked her out and shackled up with his young assistant. And in the end, despite his voice, which of course will live on for many decades, many centuries perhaps on the airwaves, what lasting profit did he gain from all his toil?

He won't take any more bows, will he? No more curtain calls, no more encores. He'll never hear any more applause. No more composing. Just decomposing for that matter.

So what is your life's worth, work, sorry, what is your life's work worth to you at the end of the day? Where is the gain that you personally will get?

What's the point of everything you do? Well, people have been asking that question from the dawn of time, but they're still asking it today because it's a real question. And it's a realistic question.

In fact, it's a very scary question. That's why people hide from it. That's why people joke about it. Which is just the same thing as hiding from it. I took up my dictionary of quotations and looked up life.

[3 : 23] Almost all of them were rather humorous. So we had R.D. Lane, that idiosyncratic Scottish psychiatrist, who quipped that life is a sexually transmitted disease.

Somebody else who says that the purpose of life is to fight maturity. Well, I've known some grown men who seem to have taken that very seriously. Or then there's Woody Allen.

He's always good for one of these, isn't he? Life is full of misery, loneliness and suffering, he says. And it's all over much too soon. You see, that's the kind of quotations you get.

All very amusing. But actually, they're hiding, aren't they? They're hiding from the big questions. From the scary questions. Remember I quoted just a few weeks ago from an article by Matthew Paris, where he describes waking up in the night and suddenly he's acutely conscious of his body and everything so magnificent.

About the human organism. And he's so conscious of the great issues of life. And it becomes so overwhelming for him. He has to banish it by switching on the light immediately to bury all those horrible thoughts again.

[4 : 30] Yes, we hide as human beings from the big questions. And yet, we can't stop asking them either, can we? You go across the Borders bookshop and look at the books there, the novels, the non-fiction things.

You will find that novelists and other writers alike are asking these big questions. Here's something I looked at just on the back of one of the books I bought there recently by Douglas Copeland, a modern novelist.

A quote on the back from one of the newspapers said, It addresses the big issues. God, suffering, miracles, family life, why bad things happen to good people. And it goes on to say, seeking such questions is a necessary part of our humanity.

We just have to do it. And that's been true all through human history. If you go back to Socrates, the great Greek thinker who lived 400 BC, he said the unexamined life is not worth living for man.

And we all sense that, don't we? We sense that we must be living for something. What is it? Or what should it be if we want to find the satisfaction and the peace that deep down we sense must somewhere be out there?

[5 : 49] So where is the profit in life? Where is the lasting gain? Can we find it in this world? In the world of our experience? What does an examination of the world that we see around us tell us?

What are the answers of history and of science and of sociology and plain common sense? What does the world of cumulative human experience tell us about the real profit in life?

Well, that's the question that the teacher in Ecclesiastes is setting out to explore. He seeks to search for significance. As he examines life in this world of ours.

Life under the sun is what he calls it. And in doing so, all the way through the book, he's really just asking us to do two things. If you want to consider this question seriously and realistically, you've got to do two things.

First, you've got to take an honest look at the world as we really know it. And secondly, if you really want to find the answers, you've then got to give an honest hearing to God.

[6 : 58] And his message is simple. If we're really honest about life, as we do experience it in this world under the sun, if we don't hide, if we don't pretend to ourselves, then we will realize that the answers that we seek simply cannot come from this world alone.

It must come from beyond, from above the sun, from God himself. Well, let's first then join the preacher in having an honest look at life.

The reality, according to the preacher, is that despite all of our search for meaning and value and purpose and profit, in the end, we simply have to conclude with him that it's all vanity.

The word he uses to introduce the book there in verse 2 several times. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Some translations have meaningless.

Do you remember we said when we studied it, really it's a word that means vapor, it's a word that means breath, it means fleeting and passing, like breath on a cold morning when you go out first thing.

[8 : 07] Like froth on the top of beer. A minute or two, it's just gone flat. It's disappeared. And that, says the preacher, is our lives.

Well, it sounds pretty depressing. Does he need a course of Prozac? Well, some people have thought that he does, that he's very depressed. But actually, no. All the way through his book, the preacher is telling us that it's not despair about life that gets him.

It's a sense of dissatisfaction. It's a sense of dissatisfaction about life in this world that he's talking about. He's not saying that everything in this world is bad and evil. We'll look at it soon in chapter 3, verse 11.

He says, God has made everything beautiful. But rather, what he's saying is that even things that are beautiful and good and wonderful in their time, nevertheless, cannot offer ultimate satisfaction.

Precisely because they're time-bound. You see, that's the paradox at the heart of our human experience. We can't reconcile the world as it is and as we experience it to be with a sense deep down that we all have as human beings of what it should be and what it could be but just can't ever seem to be.

[9 : 29] Now, of course, the Bible's explanation of that tension within us in this book of Ecclesiastes and in every book of the Bible is the same. It's because this world is not as it's meant to be.

It's a vitiated image of what it ought to be and human beings also are a spoiled and vitiated image of what we ought to be. According to the Bible and this book of Ecclesiastes, God has given us an instinct for more.

For what God wants us to be and for what God made us to be. Listen to how C.S. Lewis expresses this. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality is part of our inconsolable secret.

Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we've always seen from the outside is no mere neurotic fantasy, but it's the truest index of our real situation.

That's the way we're made. But he goes on to say in another place, if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

[10 : 57] And you see, at the same time though as human beings, we don't want to accept that, do we? We want the world to be without God under the sun.

That's all. Because we don't want the challenge and the implication of anything above the sun and the claim that that might make on our freedom. That's the reality of most human beings today.

But that's why we feel this tension, this frustration in the world. Even the good things, even the best things in this world still frustrate us.

Because we want to find in them the very purpose and the profit in life. But we never will. because they were never meant ever to bring us that kind of ultimate satisfaction.

No, only God, our creator, could ever give us that. But you see, we don't want to believe that. So, we want to overcome this sense of vanity, this sense of frustration in all sorts of different ways.

[12 : 01] That's what the people of the world are engaged in doing. Well, can we succeed? Many people want to think that they can. Many have devoted their lives to it. But the teacher says to us, come on, be honest.

Have an honest look at life. And see what we can conclude. Now, there are many ways that people seek to overcome this sense of a need for meaning.

But let's just look at four things that the preacher highlights. They're all very common, all very contemporary. Pleasure, possessions, power, and philosophy or learning.

First of all, pleasure, hedonism, enjoyment, leisure. Well, we read that in the beginning of chapter two, didn't we? I said to my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure.

Enjoy yourself. Well, as we read on, we saw the length to which he went to seek pleasure. He had plenty of money, he built fine houses, he had gardens, he had pools.

[13 : 04] Well, people do that, don't they? Holiday villas, private jets, all sorts of singers and entertainers, every pleasure that you can imagine. And ours is a very pleasure-seeking society, isn't it?

Not many of us, I guess, would be going quite the lengths of the preacher here. But we often read in the paper, don't we, about the rich and the famous indulging themselves for their birthday parties, flying a jumbo jet out to some exotic island and hiring some singer.

Get a very lucrative source of income from fading rock stars, isn't it? Go and play a night's concert for some billionaire and get half a million pounds. But pleasure didn't seem to satisfy the teacher.

Look at verse 10. Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from. I kept my heart from no pleasure. But look at verse 11.

It's all vanity, he says. A striving after wind. You see, if we take an honest look at life, I'm afraid that rings true, doesn't it? Ours is a society of unprecedented opportunity for pleasure, isn't it?

[14 : 16] We have holidays, we have amenities, we have sports, we have all sorts of things, but are we happy? Are we satisfied? Are we content as a society? I was reading in the newspaper just the other week that apparently we're working harder, we're more miserable, we're burning out more, and our health is worse than ever before.

I said before, the two fastest selling drugs in the history of the world are Viagra and Prozac. One for pleasure and one for pain. Well, that's where seeking meaning in pleasure has got us.

There's nothing wrong in pleasures. God made pleasures. He made them for us. But mere pleasure is not the purpose of life. And therefore, it can't possibly be the answer to the tensions in our hearts.

Well, what about possessions? We are an ever-increasingly wealthy society and culture, aren't we? And our wealth is increasing. I read in the paper last week that women in this country are spending twice as much money on clothes as they were ten years ago.

I don't know if that's true. I know there are some women who think their men could do with spending a lot more on clothes than they do. But is it giving us satisfaction, ladies, if that's true?

[15 : 39] You tell me. Jane Austen that said down Mansfield Park, a large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of. Well, is that true?

I often think I'd be happy to give it a jolly good try for a while, but the reality is that the evidence is in fact against it, isn't it? For one thing, have you ever met anybody who thinks actually they've got enough income?

Do you remember that verse in chapter 5, verse 10? He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, says the preacher, nor he who loves wealth with his income. This also is vanity.

He goes on to say in the next verse, doesn't he? Verse 11 of chapter 5, when goods increase, they increase who eat them. Well, one thing our wealth has brought us in our society is an epidemic of obesity, isn't it?

Killing us. Starvation in some countries, but not here. Not a problem in Sudan and in Bangladesh, is it?

[16 : 41] But you see, the preacher says another thing about wealth is you can't keep it. Look back at chapter 2, verse 18. One of the most galling verses in the whole book. I've got to leave it to the man who comes after me, he says.

All my wealth. And who knows whether he's wise or a fool. So maybe the business that you've invested your life in and you're toil in, is it going to survive?

If you hand it on to the next generation? Think about poor Ken Morrison of Morrison's supermarket.

His life's work reached the pinnacle, didn't it, when he gobbled up Safeway. But how long was it before he was booted out and had to retire out of his own business? I think he's quite a disillusioned man, don't you?

Wonder what the Sainsbury's are thinking now as the Qatari royal family are gobbling up their supermarket, their family dynasty. And then, of course, there's another man who's always coming after you and that's the Chancellor, isn't it?

[17 : 43] He'll get you with inheritance tax, he'll get you with every other kind of tax. You'd have thought our English friends would have learned by now, wouldn't they, that putting a Scotsman in charge of raising taxes for the English would be a bad thing for them.

But they don't seem to have learned if they've chosen another one. No wonder he says in chapter 2, verse 23, all of this is vanity. Well, so much for possessions.

There's no lasting gain in that any more than there is in pleasure. Well, what about power? That's a great pursuit of meaning and significance for some people, isn't it?

The papers are always full of political intrigues and power games, leadership contests. Remember the endless stuff we had about Tony Blair and Gordon Brown? And people desire power, don't they?

They must do. They want to leave a legacy. They want to make a mark. They want to make a name for themselves. But does it satisfy? And does it last? It's extraordinary, isn't it?

[18 : 48] How quickly the name of Mr. Anthony Blair has just evaporated out of the public consciousness. Don't you think? I saw it one place in my paper yesterday, only one, after looking very carefully.

It just disappears. And there's nothing so has been, is there, as a has been. And everybody goes that way. Remember what the preacher said in chapter 4, verses 13 to 16, all that about the poor and the wise youth.

Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. He went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he'd been born poor.

I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him.

Surely this also is vanity and a striving after the wind. You can have all the power and fame that you like, but it's amazing how quickly you'll be forgotten by the world.

[19 : 56] No wonder the preacher says power doesn't seem to do it for us. Well, perhaps we need to be a bit more highbrow. What about knowledge? What about philosophy?

Great learning and education. That's another thing that we exalt today in our culture, don't we? Our focus on education is in one sense admirable, in another sense a little bit laughable.

Our exam passes seem to go up and up and up and soon, I guess, we'll be the most educated generation in the entire history of the world because everybody will be top at everything. I remember hearing a government minister on the radio, I kid you not, saying, we will not stop until every single child in this country is above average.

I'm not sure if even he would have passed his arithmetic level. Well, the teacher went that way too, the way of education.

Look at chapter 2 verses 12 and 13. So I turn to consider wisdom and madness and folly. What can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has been done before.

[21 : 04] Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. You see, there is more gain in wisdom than in folly and being educated and being foolish.

But, look at verse 14. The wise person has his eyes in his head but the fool works in darkness and yet I perceive that the same event happens to all of them.

And I said in my heart, what happens to the fool will happen to me also. At the end of the day, the grave will take the wise man and the foolish man just the same way.

And that's the honest truth, isn't it, when we look at it? Whether our life is a life filled with pleasure or with pain, with possessions or with poverty, with power or powerlessness or with wisdom or if it's folly.

As the teacher says in chapter 8, verse 8, no man has the power to retain the spirit or power over the day of death. So, what is the answer?

[22 : 13] Is there only despair? Well, the answer to that is yes if you insist on only looking at life under the sun. Either you'll have to close your eyes, you'll have to go gaily on pretending, blanking out these tough questions.

Or, if you have open eyes and are honest in looking at the world, like, for example, the existentialist philosophers, then you will have to conclude that life is absurd.

Life is empty. It's full of nothingness. That's where an honest look at life will get you and must get you if you really will take it all in but you keep your horizon only to this world.

But there is an alternative and that is if having had an honest look at life you will give an honest hearing also to God. Look at chapter 3, verse 11.

It's a key verse. It helps to explain the tension that we know is there in our human hearts. God, says the preacher, has made everything beautiful in its time.

[23 : 23] also, he has put eternity into man's heart. Yes, God has invested this world with beauty and meaning and knowledge and possession and pleasure and power.

And it's good, says God, but only in its time because it's all transient. These are all things created good by God and created by God for men and women but never created as a substitute for God.

Never created to be ultimate. And God has also set the ultimate eternity into our hearts. And that means that only in the eternal will we ever, ever be satisfied.

Only there we'll be free from this bondage to vanity. So the preacher's answer is, yes, you can find joy and satisfaction in abundance in this world and moreover, that is what God wants for you.

Look at verse 12. Take it seriously. There is nothing better than to have joy as long as they live, he says. To take joy in our eating and drinking, to take pleasure in our toil.

[24 : 34] This is God's gift to man. But it will only be a true gift to you if you've learned the difference between time and eternity.

You'll never, ever find satisfaction in this life if you confuse the gifts with the giver. Gifts are things God gives us under the sun.

They're beautiful in their time. But only in their time. Because they're transient. But the giver of verse 14 is the one who lasts forever.

What he does endures forever. And only what he does endures forever. And that's why the ultimate answer given us at the very, very end of the book of Ecclesiastes in chapter 12 verse 13 is so clear.

You might just like to turn it up and look. Ecclesiastes 12 verse 13. What is our life and our life's work really all about?

[25 : 33] Where will we find the satisfying answer to what it means to be human, to what it means to be man? The answer is we find the answer only in God.

The end of the matter all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is literally this is the whole of man.

In other words this is what it means to be human. To have life that isn't profitless. That isn't just vanity and loss. because that inconsolable longing within each of us for more for solid satisfaction for lasting joy it's real and it's true.

Life is not just an experience for under the sun. The more that we instinctively sense must be there is there. An eternal world that God has set in our hearts to make us dissatisfied to make us uncomfortable in this world so that we seek for more.

And the reality of that world is coming. It's coming to break into time and space and it's coming to break into the personal lives of every single one of us every single human being.

[26 : 53] For as the very last verse of the book says God will verse 14 bring every deed to judgment with every secret thing whether good or evil. So you see friends it's not just that we want to find the answer to the great question we must find the answer mustn't we?

Because God will bring every deed to judgment. Where do I find profit and gain and meaning and purpose in life that isn't just fleeting that isn't just ephemeral and passing and vain?

The Bible's answer is clear only in fearing God and keeping his commandments that is in listening to his word of life that's the Bible's answer.

Well what does that mean for you and me today? Well let me end by rephrasing this question today in the words of Jesus Christ himself. The same question that God has always been asking but it's put his way for our time now that God in Christ has ultimately revealed himself and his commandment to us in Jesus.

Listen to Jesus. He puts it this way in Mark 8 verse 36 What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? His answer is this If anyone would come after me that is if anyone would fear God keep his commandments he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever would save his life that is by seeking satisfaction in this world merely under the sun whoever would save his life that way will lose it whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels he will save it that is the answer to life fear God and keep his commandments according to Jesus it means take up your cross and follow me because he is the way and the truth and the life that doesn't mean of course an end to all the frustrations of this passing world in anything if anything it actually increases the tensions it heightens it because as a Christian believer you come to know more and more of what we're really made for and as the hymn says that we sang when we know that we are loved with an everlasting love our eyes are open to see much more heaven above is softer blue earth beneath is richer green because we long for more but having had our eyes open we long for even more and more passionately don't we

[29 : 43] C.S. Lewis again he says it was when I was happiest that I longed most the sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from when our eyes are open to the truth of a world above the sun in some ways the tension just gets greater to know the answer to the great questions of life won't won't dissolve the tension the perplexities the struggles of life under the sun the gospel of Jesus Christ is not some kind of fantasy not something about instant satisfaction don't believe anyone who tells you that kind of thing no but it does lift your eyes to see more to see above the sun to see the one enthroned with power to save to see the one who will judge the world in authority and in righteousness and to see the one who has promised that he shall come at last promise to bring an end to all the frustration to all the sorrows to all the griefs to bring an end to everything that's merely passing and fading and ephemeral vanity what is your life's work and your life itself really worth no friends without him without Jesus

Christ the Lord of time and eternity it's nothing just vanity chasing after the wind but with him with Jesus Christ oh how different it is how vastly different how eternally different and that's why the apostle Paul ends his great resurrection chapter with these words to those who are in Jesus Christ and with these I close for the imperishable body must put on the perishable body must put on the imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality when the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality then shall come to pass the saying that is written death is swallowed up in victory thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ that's our hope and therefore says Paul for this world my beloved brothers be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the

Lord knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain when you've seen the truth and the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ yes your heart will be full of attention because you desire to be with him but at the same time you know that vanity is banished perplexity of this life is put in perspective and nothing of your labors for him could ever be in vain that's the solid joy and the lasting treasure that none but the children of Zion God's city know my prayer is that every one of us this morning would know that peace and that joy