

1. Baffled, Believing and Blessed

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[0 : 00] that discovered Google Earth. I'm sure most of you have discovered that already. But I find it fascinating to look down from space and then to gradually home in and come right down and look at the detail of something.

It's amazing if you look at this church from Google Earth, you come right down from a satellite and you can see everything round about it. But of course, when you do that, you need to know where it is you are.

You can home right down on this church, but if you just look at that, you could be in any city, in any country of the world. And what you need to do first is come out a bit and get a sense of where we are, which country we're in, which city, which part.

And that's what we're going to do this morning with this book of Ecclesiastes. Before we dive right in and start looking at the detail, I want us to just zoom back a little bit and get some landmarks.

I want to look at four threads, if you like, which weave together in the teaching of the preacher throughout this book, which unless we really get clear in our minds at the beginning, as we come into the detail of this book, we're not going to understand it.

[1 : 08] And so it means that this morning we'll dot around a little bit, but I want you to get these four threads of his thinking and his teaching clear in your mind. And I think when you do, you'll be able to read the book much more easily yourself, and hopefully together we'll understand it better as we study it in these coming Sundays.

So four threads then. The first is this. The teacher, the preacher, wants us to get dimmed into our heads very clearly the transience of man.

We must come to terms with and face up to our mortality if we're going to understand anything about life. We are transient. We ourselves, and the whole world that we live in, says the preacher, is verse 2 of chapter 1.

Well, vanity is our translation. Hevel is the Hebrew word. It's repeated five times there in that verse. It's 38 times as a refrain all the way through this book.

It's almost untranslatable. If you have an NIV, it's translated meaningless. Our ESV translates it vanity, which I think is probably better, as long as we don't think of vanity in the sense of pride, being vain, but rather in the sense of futility.

[2 : 26] Something is in vain. You could almost change the translation to in vain. In vain.

Everything is in vain. Literally, the word means bubbles, or vapor, or breath, and therefore something that is ephemeral, something that is incomprehensible.

It just can't be grasped. You can't grasp a bubble, can you? It disappears. And all of human life and human experience is summed up by the preacher in that word, Hevel, in vain.

He exposes everything to scrutiny, and he pricks every bubble and deflates every fantasy with what Eugene Peterson calls his little broom, Hevel.

It sweeps the place clean. It brings reality to earth with a thump. And in so many areas of life, the preacher subjects his final verdict.

Hevel, vanity, it's in vain. And in the first half of the book of Ecclesiastes, this word Hevel seems to have a particular emphasis on life as being ephemeral, impermanent, fleeting, and therefore uncontrollable.

[3 : 42] The control of our lives eludes us. We can't get control of a life that's passing us by that ultimately will leave us behind. So verse 3 of chapter 1, he says, what gain, what profit can there be from all our toil?

Well, in the end, there is none. Verse 14, it's Hevel, it's in vain, because, well, life is ephemeral, it's passing us by. So to chase all your life after the gain of this passing world, of this impermanent

world, well, that is just like a chasing after the wind.

That's how futile your life is if you think you can have permanent gain in a passing world, in a fleeting world. And the preacher sings that refrain again and again, vanity, chasing after the wind, all the way up to chapter 6, verse 9.

This also is vanity, he says, ephemeral, a striving after the wind. Now that's the last occurrence of the phrase in the book in chapter 6, verse 9.

And it does seem to divide the book in half. There are exactly 111 verses before and after that phrase in chapter 6, verse 9. Exactly 1,491 words before and after that phrase.

[4 : 58] Now, I don't know, that may or may not be significant in terms of the book's structure. Every single commentary I have divides it up differently, so that tells me that it's not entirely obvious. But it does seem that in the first half of the book, there is a particular focus on life as hevel, as ephemeral, as impermanent, passing.

And therefore, on the folly of ever thinking that you can ever beat mortality in that sense. just as we sung from Psalm 90, time like an ever-rolling stream will bear us all away.

I can state that confidently this morning about every one of us in this church. And that's the clear message, isn't it, of the opening passage in chapter 1 that we read, this opening poem in verses 3 to 11.

As a poem, it could have the title, The Past Generations. In the end, verse 11, no one remembers the former things or the former people.

And no one will remember us either in the future. How many of you could tell me the first name or even the middle names of your great-great-grandfather? I bet you can't.

[6 : 12] So the preacher is saying, be serious about the facts of life. It's hevel, it's fleeting, it's ephemeral, it's on the way out. I'm trying to steel myself up for having my 40th birthday in a few months' time.

And I remember when I turned 35 thinking to myself, you're in the second half now of your three-score years and ten. Then I thought, well, perhaps per chance four-score, so I've got a bit to go.

But not now. Definitely in the second half. And I read in the paper on Saturday once again that the life expectancy in Glasgow is lower than it is in Iraq, well below 69. It's slipping away.

A few weeks ago when I was at the Durham University House Party, it hit home to me in a very, well, a nasty way really that it was more than 20 years since I was organising student house parties. And most of the people there weren't born then. And what profit is there? What lasting worth is there from this toil and this life that's slipping away?

[7 : 20] Well, look at chapter 2, verse 15. I said in my heart, what happens to the fool will happen to me also.

Why then have I been so very wise? I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten how the wise dies just like the fool.

Well, that fairly cuts you down to size, doesn't it? In the end, it's all just a chasing after the wind.

Now, many people, of course, try to beat mortality.

Our whole world is out to beat mortality. And the preacher is going to look at all these strategies that people use in chapters 1 to 3. People chase wealth and it's true that wealth can beat mortality for a time.

Wealth can buy you health. That's why in certain parts of the country you live 12 years longer than in other parts of the country. People chase education. They chase politics as a way of beating mortality, whatever it is.

[8 : 34] But whatever it is, friends, it's only ever for a time. In the end, what happens to the fool will happen to you too. So what's the point of wisdom and toil and education and achievement?

Well, we might ask. I remember reading Woody Allen saying this, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying. Well, that's what you can't do.

Isn't that right? No, says the preacher, you can't because you are Hevel. You're transient. Life is ephemeral and so all control of life, all profit in life, in the end, it will utterly elude you, foolish or wise.

And the chief obstacle, friends, the chief obstacle to living well in this life is the refusal to accept our mortality, our transience. I read this quote from Steve Jobs who's the CEO of Apple Computers in

an article that quoted him, an article about Ecclesiastes.

Listen, I don't know if Steve Jobs is a Christian or not. There's many people who think he's a saint. I'm certainly a fan of his computers. But listen to what he said to graduating students at Stanford University in the United States on their graduation after apparently two rather obsequious religious speakers had flattered the students with all sorts of flannel about their limitless potential and all that sort of nonsense you get at these graduation times.

[10:11] This is what Steve Jobs said. Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Wouldn't that prick the bubble of Ivy League fantasy at their big razzmatazz celebration of graduation?

He went on. Remembering you're going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You're already naked. There's no reason not to follow your heart. Well, that is not the whole story, of course. But it does sound an awful lot like the message of the first half of the book of Ecclesiastes. The focus is on facing the reality of the brevity of our life. And on learning to cope with our brief life and to live with our mortality so that we can rise above it and so that we can, in fact, have a meaningful existence for the days of our brief life here on earth. And so all the way through the book of Ecclesiastes, we have the preacher's observations about life interspersed with his instructions about life. And as you get towards chapter 5, from there on to the end of chapter 6, really, there's increasing recognition of the fact that there is joy and gladness before God despite our mortality.

[11:40] That is a real challenge, isn't it, then, to the secularists? Right enough. What are you striving for? What are you engaged in as you chase after the wind?

Why are you giving your life to things which ultimately will slip away? You need to face the facts of your passing generations. In the end, everything is hevel.

It's ephemeral. The wise and the foolish go the same way. But it also is a challenge to the believer, isn't it? Because we also have to live with our mortality.

Life is riddled with mystery. It's riddled with enigmas. We know, for example, chapter 3, verse 11. You know that verse very well, don't you?

God has set eternity in the hearts of man. Now, we believe that as Christians. But we can't deny the second half of the verse. Do you see it? Chapter 3, verse 11.

[12:39] God has put eternity into man's heart yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. You see, we know a lot as Christians. If we believe the Bible and take it seriously, we know the eternal future of all things.

That's a great hope. But we don't know what next week's going to bring, do we? You don't know if next week you're going to discover that you've got cancer or that your wife's got cancer or that some other disaster is going to befall you.

You don't know, neither do I. We are transient and we need to learn to live with that. That's the preacher's message first of all.

Hevel. Everything is in vain. But also, says the preacher, we need to grasp not only are we transient, but that God is transcendent.

This word Hevel also has the nuance of meaning enigmatic and incomprehensible and that emphasis seems to be particularly there in the second half of the book, although it's a very slippery word.

[13:52] It has nuances all the way through the book and we can't be dogmatic, but certainly as you go on in the book of Ecclesiastes, there is more and more of the enigmatic about life. It's just beyond our comprehension, so many things.

Just because we are transient and passing, just because we are earthly, just because there's a whole realm above and beyond and beyond the sun that we're so ignorant of.

Chapter 5, verse 1, God is in heaven and you are on earth. Don't ever forget it. Let your words be few for that reason. You're just a puff of wind by comparison, but there is a transcendent eternal God.

There's a whole realm that's bound to be beyond you, a transient mortal. So no wonder life is an enigma. Now there's another key phrase that runs through the book of Ecclesiastes that reminds us of this again and again.

It's the phrase, under the sun. You see it there three times in the passage that we read in chapter 1. Under the sun. Look at verse 14 in the end. Everything is under the sun. Everything that's under the

sun, behold, all is vanity, a striving after the wind.

[15:05] Now again, that's not just the wrong view of the secularist. Although if the secularist looks at life as being only as far as this world is concerned, then of course he's wrong. But you see in verse 13 of chapter 1, the preacher uses a slight variation.

He doesn't say under the sun, he says under heaven. And that phrase also appears a few times. In other words, what he's saying is that even from the standpoint of belief, of faith, we must also recognize that there will be huge mysteries in life, just because we are not God, and God is God. There's always going to be far, far more in life than we can ever compute and capture and understand. Life is hevel, it's an enigma, it's incomprehensible because God is transcendent and his ways transcend our ways.

The Bible's full of that, Isaiah 55, 9, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts, says the Lord.

And that means that our wisdom is always going to be limited. Even though our wisdom grows, we're never going to understand all things. Look, look to chapter 7 and verse 19.

[16:27] It's not that wisdom has no value, wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. So yes, we can learn a lot of things. But just look back to verse 15.

The righteous often perish while the wicked prolong their life in evil doing, he says. There are so many things in life like that that just are beyond us, aren't they?

We can't understand them. Why is it that the righteous often perish and the most wicked of people seem to be the most successful? I was getting a lift home from the prayer meeting one night just not all that long ago and one of you said to me, they were just baffled by the mystery because their brother had been in a car accident absolutely innocent in it.

Somebody else, a hit-and-run driver, had banged into them and gone away and what was the result? They, as the innocent person, were taken to court and fined and had points on their license. It's a mystery. There are many things in life we just can't fathom under the sun. Look at chapter 8 verse 17. Even though a wise man claims to know it, he just cannot find it all.

[17:48] That's life, isn't it? No use pretending. Look at chapter 9 verses 15 and 16. He speaks of a poor man who is very wise and who saves the city, but nobody remembers that poor man.

Well, that's true of our world, isn't it? And yet a celebrity, all they have to do is nothing at all. And they're on the front pages of the newspaper all the time, parading their inanity. Where's the sense in that?

Or look at chapter 10 verse 6 and 7. Folly is set in many high places and the rich sit in the low place. I've seen slaves on horses but princes walking on the ground like slaves.

Some of the brightest, the most able, the most productive people in our world, they're utterly unknown, you've never heard their names, they're unrecognized in life. But so often, the people who are in the news and running our countries, it's hard not to think they're fools.

Even through the eye of faith, even with God's revelation to us, the world is full of enigmas, full of incomprehensible things, things utterly inexplicable to us, because God is transcendent and He alone is above the sun, He alone can understand and know these things.

[19:10] He is in heaven and we are on earth. That means we have to learn to shut up sometimes, says the preacher.

Let your words be few, stand in awe of God. It's so important for us to be humbled like that, isn't it? Even in solid belief we have to recognize that there is much, much bafflement in life, we just don't have all the answers.

And when we don't understand, it's so much better to hold our tongue. Let your words be few, don't let your mouth lead you into sin, says chapter five. It's so easy for us as Christians to be trite and to be superficial, to think that we understand everything just because we know the gospel, we know where it's all going.

We sometimes are guilty of that, aren't we, when some disaster happens or somebody has a personal tragedy. We tritely trot out texts as though that would be a comfort. Romans 8, 28, all things work together for good to those who love God.

Of course that's true, ultimately. But please don't come and try and comfort me with that text when I'm weeping or mourning the loss of a loved one or a tragedy in my life or something like that.

[20:37] Because the truth is that nothing good may ever come of such a thing in this world, in my life now, in the world of Hevel, in the world of elusive enigmas. It's just not true.

They'll listen to the preacher. They must hold their tongues. Another writer sums up the book and says, a crashing destruction of the idols of easy answers to the questions of life's meaning, including religious answers, sounds throughout this book because God is in heaven and we are on earth.

We are transient. God alone is transcendent. But there's more to this vexation of life than just the fact that God is the creator and we are created finite beings.

The world that we know, the world that we live in under the sun is not the world that God made it to be either, is it? And so to understand life on this earth we also have to come to terms with the third thread, the tragedy of sin.

That's another thread in everything that the preacher teaches that he's so aware of. He knows the truth. Chapter 7 verse 29, God made man upright but they have sought out many schemes.

[21 : 59] That's why in chapter 5 verse 18 he says if you see the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice, don't be amazed. Or in chapter 3 verse 16, in the place of justice he says even there is wickedness.

In the place of righteousness even there is unrighteousness. Don't be naive he says. Don't be shocked, this is a fallen world. Christian people should be the most unshockable people on this planet.

We shouldn't be shocked should we to discover that even on the bench of the judges there's going to be corruption. Even in the place of righteousness, even among the clergy or the church there's going to be hotbeds of unrighteousness and sin.

Because this is a fallen world. Every part of it is touched by the tragedy of sin. And this world and our human lives are not just subject to finitude because we're part of God's creation.

We're not infinite like our creator. It's subject to futility and frustration because of the curse of sin. And the preacher is just expressing through this book in his earthly observations about life the Bible's constant teaching about a fallen world and therefore a world that is confused, that's corrupted, that is confusing.

[23 : 26] And it always will be. Always will be. And even as believers, as faithful people, there's going to be vexation all along life's journey right to the end.

Genesis 1 and 2 tells us that God made an ordered world, a physically ordered world, a morally ordered world. And many of these things are of course remaining in our world.

That's why we can learn so much wisdom from the scripture, from the natural sciences, from our world round about us. We can learn so much in moral terms. God's moral substructure of the world still holds true in so many ways.

That's why if we live our lives in line with God's created order as individuals and as a society, we will in general find ourselves prospering much more than if we don't.

That's why the wisdom literature like the Proverbs has so much wisdom to offer us in life. But of course Genesis 3 also tells us that there's been a huge earthquake right through the middle of the world, morally as well as naturally.

[24 : 34] And that means that even man's best wisdom, even the wisdom that we have that comes from God himself, still leaves us with pain and with perplexity in life. Even for the righteous, even for believers.

That's just what the New Testament affirms, isn't it? Romans chapter 8, the great victory chapter about the spirit. What's the great sign of those who are filled with the spirit? we groan, says Paul, as we wait for the resurrection of our bodies, for the redemption of the universe.

The whole universe groans waiting for that day. And just so, here in Ecclesiastes, just as Job reminded us when we studied it, remember, that there are many mysteries in life.

There will still be pain, even for the righteous. well, so says the preacher. There will always be perplexity in your life, even as you follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because we live in a life under the sun. The world of Hevel, the world that is ephemeral and passing, we can't control it. The world that is enigmatic and futile, we can't get clarity in it.

[25 : 49] And you know that, we all know that, don't we? So often we're baffled at the world, we're baffled at God. Why? Why does a loved one of ours who's a doctor in a hospital in Thailand suddenly discover they have cancer that could kill them in their 30s?

Why does a hospital that served the Lord for 50 years and a mission there in Manoram, why does it suddenly seem to be closing down? Why do I face struggles in my marriage or in my life or in any

other sort of ways?

Why do I who so long to have children seem to be unable to have children when all around babies are being aborted, children are being unwanted?

That's our question, isn't it? But at root we have to remember the tragedy of sin, the creation, the whole creation has been subjected to Hevel.

That's what Romans 8 says, to futility, to frustration, the same word. And we live not only in our creatureliness, in our transience, and with God's creatorhood and His transcendence, but we live in the aftermath of the tragedy of sin.

[27 : 09] And that's why all is vain, vain, a vapor that disappears. That's the preacher's message. Well, in the end, is it all despair?

Is it all nihilism? Well, no, it's not. Not if we listen to the preacher's final thread of great importance. And that is this, that the tragedy of sin is greatly overshadowed by the triumph of the gospel. Even here, in the realism of this book, deep in the heart of the Old Testament, there is a platform of hope, there's a springboard of joy.

There's no hope of seeking relief from vexation through the ephemeral things of life. That is vanity, that is a chasing after the wind. It's impossible and it's foolish, but there is a way of true wisdom and true faith.

looks to God and finds joy even in the vexation because we see this transient life in the light of the transcendent glory of God.

[28 : 21] We see sin in the light of the hope of righteousness and God's intervention at the end of life that will change everything and get rid of futility forever. You know, chapter three of Ecclesiastes, the famous chapter that tells us it's a time for everything.

But look at chapter three, verse 17. There's a time also for judgment, isn't there? God will judge the righteous and the wicked for there is a time for every matter and every work.

It's just not so that what has always been will be. God will at last intervene in his world. That's the promise that the preacher is sure of. It comes back again and again throughout the book.

It's the message of the very last verse of the book, isn't it? Chapter 12, verse 14. God will bring every deed to judgment, even the secret thing, whether good or evil. And that means that in the end, this vain world, this passing and fleeting world will itself be havel.

It too will be forgotten. And in its place will come the real world, the lasting world where nothing is in vain. And that, you see, makes the difference.

[29 : 38] That transforms everything in our thinking. It doesn't take us out of this vexing world yet, of course not. But it does bring us liberation in this world because we live in the light of that world, of the solid joy, the lasting treasure that is certainly to come on the judgment day of God.

It leads us to the way of joy in the midst of the vexations of life, of fruitfulness amid the futility of life. There really can be such things. And the preacher's answer, as we'll see again and again throughout this book, is joy.

Chapter 2, verse 24, is right. Eat, drink, find enjoyment in your life, for that is the gift of God. Seize the day, carpe diem. It's the great call to live for now in the light of God's future.

Accept your lot. Accept your life. It's God's gift to you. That's the way to a life that transcends vanity. God keeps you occupied with the joy of your heart if you live like that, he says.

In chapter 5, that's the gospel message. It's just what Jesus said so many thousands of years later in a similar way, isn't it? Matthew chapter 6, don't be weighed down by the anxieties of life, what you'll eat, what you'll wear, what you can accumulate for the future.

[31 : 05] Seek first the kingdom of God. And all these blessings will be added to you. You'll have joy in your daily life. That's the way of blessing. That's the only way of blessing amid the bafflement of this world.

But it begins with faith, with belief. with the God whose words the preachers bring to us. Words that he says in chapter 10 are words of delight and of truth.

Words that are given by the one shepherd. And to hear and to respond to his words, says chapter 12, verse 13, is to discover what it really means to be human.

This is the whole duty of man. It's the whole of humanity to understand how to live in this passing world. The preacher points us to the one shepherd and to his words.

These are the words of the one shepherd. Don't look anywhere else. Of course, we as New Testament Christians know even more than the preacher, don't we?

[32 : 11] We know his name. I am the good shepherd, said Jesus, our Lord Jesus Christ. I lay down my life for the sheep so that there might be the great day of reversal, of transformation, of judgment and righteousness.

When all the confusion and the corruption of this world will at last be taken away forever. I am the good shepherd. I have come that they might have life in all its fullness.

The very reversal of hevel and vanity and passing futility. And Jesus Christ came and he's done it. The gospel of Jesus fulfills every hope of the preacher that he points us to. That's what we have now already in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what you can have if you've never yet believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not some sort of fantasy or crutch that will banish pain and perplexity in this life. No, not that yet. We're saved in hope.

[33 : 21] The end is not yet. In the world you shall have tribulation, said Jesus. But it is a sure and certain hope. It is a message of victory that gives joy even in the midst of this vexed world.

Jesus said, In the world you will have tribulation, but I have overcome the world. Rejoice. Be of good cheer. Find joy in your life. In the truth of the gospel, friends, there is blessing amidst the bafflement of this life.

There can be venturesome joy in the midst of life's vexed journey. There is gain in all of our toil that is in the Lord.

That's what Paul says to the Corinthians, because none of your labor in the Lord is in vain, is hevel. And that's why the preacher can tell us, rejoice, be joyful, enjoy the days of your life on this earth. Seize every moment. Be liberated from the words and the worries and the boundaries of this world's blessings. be liberated to live for what really matters.

[34 : 38] But friends, that liberation comes only when your search for happiness and fulfillment in this world, this world of passing vanity, when that search comes to an end forever and you realize that we are mortal, that this world is passing, and that no profit can be gained from your toil in it.

Nothing of ultimate worth. That liberation comes only when you listen to the words of the one shepherd. The shepherd who says, no man comes to the Father but by me.

That means that without him, your life is forever vain, empty, passing, vapors. But he also said, whoever comes to me, I will never under any circumstances cast out.

Belief in him, in the one shepherd, in the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only way to the beginning of a life of blessing in the midst of the bafflement of this world.

It's the way to a life of venturesome joy on life's vexed journey. It's the only way that transcends the vanity that is our mortal frame.

[36 : 09] We are transient. God alone is transcendent. This world is in a state of tragedy because of sin.

But there is triumph through the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in his gospel, and in his gospel alone, is the blessing that transcends even the bafflement of this life.

So heed the words of the preacher, the one shepherd, the king in Jerusalem, and let him point you to the great king, the true shepherd, whose words alone can transcend the darkness of these mortal lives of ours.

And you will have joy in this life. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, we thank you for your word which brings light in the darkness and the mystery of our existence.

Humble us, we pray, and turn us to you that we might be preoccupied with joy in our hearts as we serve you in this dark veil for the glory that is lasting, the glory of our Savior Jesus.

[37 : 34] Amen.