

# Where is the Profit in Life?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's turn to God's Word this morning, shall we? And we are in the book of Ecclesiastes. I'm reading chapter 1. So please do find that in your Bibles.

Ecclesiastes, we had an introduction to the book last week. And we're looking at the first chapter, particularly this morning. Ecclesiastes, I'm reading chapter 1.

The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes.

A generation comes. But the earth remains forever. The sun rises. And the sun goes down. And hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south.

[ 1 : 08 ] And goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind. And on its circuits, the wind returns. All streams run to the sea.

But the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow. There they flow again. All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing. Nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done.

And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new. It has been already in the ages before us.

There is no remembrance of the former things. Nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem.

[ 2 : 10 ] And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

I have seen everything that is done under the sun. And behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight.

And what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who are over Jerusalem before me.

And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceive that this also is but a striving after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. Amen.

[ 3 : 11 ] Well, may the Lord bless his word to us this morning. Amen. Well, it would help if you opened your Bibles at the passage that Paul read to us there from chapter one of Ecclesiastes.

And we're going to look at most of that chapter together this morning. But I want to start with a question. What does it mean to be alive?

What does it mean to be human? I think that's a question that in the last 18 months or so has certainly rekindled for many people.

All the extraordinarily life crippling measures that we've seen around us and had imposed upon us. All in aims, in the aim of saving lives.

But that question about what it means to be alive, it's exercised great minds all through history and philosophy and poetry and the arts. From the greatest works of literature right through to, I suppose, what you would call the most mundane works of popular culture.

[ 4 : 18 ] Man, said Plato, is a being in search of meaning. But to some today, like Richard Dawkins, the Oxford scientist, this quest for meaning is just an irritation.

One of his favorite attacks as a militant atheist is to say that even to ask those kind of questions is meaningless. Because he says that everything is simply a means to the propagation of DNA.

Nothing more than that. So any sense that there's a meaning and a purpose in life is just an illusion. It's the sort of thing that's held, he says, only by those who are scientifically illiterate.

Which, of course, he means everybody who's not committed to atheistic materialism as he is. It's quite a breathtaking arrogance, really, because, of course, he's writing off virtually the whole of the human race in that way.

And to assume that people who ponder these questions about the meaning of life, the value of life, to assume that that was just the evidence of misguided folly rather than actually the lifeblood of higher consciousness.

[ 5 : 33 ] But with great confidence, he proclaims, no, DNA, he says, neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music. No meaning, no purpose.

I don't even question it. One not-so-fast professor. The equally erudite scientific observer, Eric Fromm, the psychologist, rightly observed that man is the only animal for whom his existence is a problem which he has to solve.

And we know that's true, don't we? Your DNA might well be 99.9% the same as a chicken under the microscope. But when you step back from the microscope and have a look at the bigger picture, there really are some quite major differences, aren't there?

You could ask Edward Lobb about that. He's our resident expert on all things poultry. He was once the president of the British Well Summer Club, which is apparently one of the finest breeds of fowls. And actually, he often will go to the fowl shows and act as a judge. I've often enjoyed quite an educational day out with Edward at the Scottish Poultry Show. I recommend it.

[ 6 : 44 ] Your eyes will be opened to the sheer cornucopia of varieties of hens that there are in this world. It is quite staggering. Well, Edward usually comes away from these shows with a clutch of prizes and rosettes for his birds.

And he's prone to giving interesting names to his birds. I remember a Mr. Nasty. You can probably guess what kind of a chap he was. There was a Bob File once who, I think, won a first prize.

There was also a Tony Blair at one time. And Tony Blair had his neck wrung and was roasted and eaten with great glee. A great celebration that was. I think Gordon Brown went the same way, actually.

But there was once a very fine cock, a very, very fine cock, whose name was the Reverend Dr. W.J.U. Philip. And I went along once to support him at the Royal Scottish Poultry Show.

He was an extremely fine bird, and he should have won first prize. But the judge was corrupt and incompetent. And my namesake only came second, and I was deeply disappointed.

[ 7 : 52 ] But the thing was, my namesake didn't seem to care. He didn't jump up and say, why didn't I win? The judge is rotten. He just wandered around his cage going cock-a-doodle-doo.

Utterly insouciant. His DNA, 99% the same as mine. And his DNA did not care. It just was. But mine did care.

I asked, why? Because I knew that there was meaning and there was purpose to the whole event. Because I'm not just a bird.

I'm a human being. In search of meaning. And so it is for all human life, isn't it? We all ask, why? And we do it all the time.

Whatever Dr. Dawkins might say. And the preacher here in Ecclesiastes, he knows that. And he takes honest people, down to earth, real people seriously.

[ 8 : 55 ] And he takes that question seriously. Doesn't dismiss them. Doesn't patronize them like some pompous academics tend to do. But he does challenge us. Because many people do seek to delude themselves.

They do want to live in an illusion. But the real illusion is not that we might reject mere materialism. The real illusion is that we might delude ourselves into thinking it's actually true.

That there's nothing more. And that's why so often I think people do bury the big questions in life. We bury them amid all the noise of our everyday lives.

So that our real problem is that we just don't face up to these really vital questions nearly often enough. And I think that's because very often the answers are perhaps too scary for us to contemplate.

But there are times, aren't there, when we do have to face up to these things. Maybe in the face of tragic events. That's when the paper headlines are asking that question, aren't they?

[10:01] Why? Or in the face of a personal crisis. Or especially when we face the reality of death. Nothing focuses the mind quite so much, does it?

As looking down into an empty grave. And that's when we do ask, what's the point? What is the purpose of it all? And the preacher here in Ecclesiastes forces us to confront reality. The hard truth about our mortality. But not to drive us to despair about our vain lives in this passing world. But rather to help us find liberation from the life that otherwise would crush us. If we didn't pretend all these things away so much. But he teaches us that we will only begin to see the answers, the real answers. When we see that they lie beyond our mere mortality. And we will only find those answers when we've actually stared our mortality full in the face. And that's what Ecclesiastes forces us to do. There's a little catch word there in verse 2.

[11:14] Or verse 2. Vanity. In vain. It's like a broom that sweeps away all the illusions that we hide behind in life.

Says Eugene Peterson. And it leaves us facing up to down to earth hard fact. Utter realism. And that has to be the starting point. For any assessment of life.

Any assessment of the universe. And everything. And so his motto there in verse 2. Which he repeats relentlessly. It brings us to the beginning of his address to us.

Here in the rest of chapter 1. It begins with a down to earth and very realistic question about life in verse 3. And he gives us a very down to earth assessment of life.

But also as we'll see. He points us to a very down to earth answer. Let's start there with verse 3. With real inquiry. Down to earth. Question. What does a man gain from all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

[12:16] That is in this material world. Literally what profit is there in human life? It's the language of business. The language of investment. What's the real return on this investment?

I read this week that the real return on your bank savings is now minus 4.7%. Because rates are about 0.1% and inflation is 4.8%.

So that means that your savings are ebbing away. In less than 10 years you'll have half of what you've got now. In a few more years it'll be almost worthless. There's not much profit there, is there?

Well, prick the bubble of our fantasies about our own mortal lives. And we will see that they too are ebbing away just like that, aren't they?

For all our experience. For all our learning. When you get down to the bottom line about life. What is the real bankable, spendable profit in all our cumulative investment across our life?

[13:25] In terms of long-term, lasting gain. What is there? Long-term is what you hope your pension manager is focused on, isn't it?

Never mind the short-term boost that might give him a whopping great Christmas bonus. Before the fund maybe crashes next year. No, what you want to know is, what's the bankable long-term gain for me to live on in the future?

Will there be something to show? Will there be something to take with you out of your working life and into your retirement? When for some of you, you'll be about 97, I suspect. But that's the issue, isn't it?

And so it is in life. What is the long-term gain? You toil away in this life under the sun. Or under the clouds, I suppose, here in Scotland. And where does it get you in the end?

Where does it end up? It's an unnerving question, isn't it? That's why we hide from it. But the preacher forces it on us repeatedly in these first few chapters.

[14:26] He bombards us with the facts about our mortality. Life is ephemeral. Life is impermanent. It's fading. So what profit can there possibly be?

Chapter 2, verse 22. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart? Chapter 3, verse 9.

What gain has the worker from his toil? If all of life is just a fleeting breath, if you can't control it anymore, then you can chase the wind, then what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?

Chapter 5, verse 16. It's a very down-to-earth, real question. Plenty of people, I suspect, will be thinking that question when the alarm goes off.

It's 7 o'clock tomorrow morning. What's the point of this? And in a very real sense, we should all be asking that question of our lives. Because we know they're just a breath.

They're a vapor. They're just a passing shadow, as Shakespeare put it. In vain, says the preacher. And we can't avoid that ultimate fact, can we, about our mortality.

[15:32] Can't deny that our life is transient, that it's evaporating, that it's ebbing away, like savings in a world of negative interest rates. How can we make sense of our life in this passing world?

Well, a preacher will not let us get away with pretending and deluding ourselves, either in the delusion of hiding from the real question, or the equally foolish delusion of pretending the question away, as if the question shouldn't be asked, as Richard Dawkins wants us to believe.

Or shutting down and doing away with all such awkward questions, as seems so normal now, doesn't it, in our world? Bowing down to what Google or Twitter or Facebook allows you to believe and dogmatically tells you is the truth, no matter what evidence might be to the contrary.

Now, the preacher, by contrast, is a real scientist. That is, he actually examines evidence in the real world. Not in the concocted models of fantasy worlds, with all sorts of absurd ideologies driving those models.

No, the real world that we actually live in. So he turns to assess life as we really actually knew it to be. His real inquiry leads him to real evidence, and that's the second thing.

[16:52] A down-to-earth assessment of real life. That's what we see in verses 4 to 11 here. That assessment fills the book, but it begins here with this poem.

And it's balanced, as I said last week, with a closing poem, chapter 12, verses 1 to 7, where, again, the motto of verse 2 is repeated. And it begins with this poem, and often it is poetry, isn't it, where the really great truths about life can be explored.

My father was a classicist, and he used to say that the Greek philosophers never really plumbed the depths of the mystery of evil in the way that the Greek dramatists and the poets did, like Sophocles and Euripides and so on.

My father actually considered nobody properly educated unless they'd studied classics. I learned that very badly. I can't really tell my Euripides from my Eureka's, but his granddaughter has redeemed him because she studied classics.

In fact, won the medal for classics, by the way, at Glasgow University. She'll be cross at me for saying that, but father's allowed to be a little bit proud at times. But at any rate, in my ignorance, I look to her.

[18:05] And in this poem here, the preacher does face us, doesn't he, with the really hard realities of life. I call this poem, The Passing Generations.

And the message is absolutely clear. The message says to us, be serious about the facts of life. Like many Hebrew poems, it's symmetrical in its shape, pivots around a central point there in verse 8.

So the beginning and the end, verses 4 and 11, they match each other. They have the same focus. And then verses 5 to 7 and verses 9 and 10 match each other. Verse 8 is right at the heart. And the poem, it points up to us three unavoidable realities about life when we face up to the real evidence. And the first is there in verse 4 and verse 11. It tells us there is no lasting significance to be found in our passing lives. Verse 4, a generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. Well, that's the truth, isn't it? What is human life? But the coming and the going of generations who appear and very soon are just forgotten. You don't think that your life, with all its riches, with all its relationships, with all its cumulative experience, you don't think of your life as of less enduring significance than the stones in your garden.

[19:30] But there will come a time all too soon when you and I have disappeared into a little pile of ash. And those rocks in our garden will still be there, just the same.

We all think our generation is the generation, don't we? The music of our time is the real music. The fashion of our time is the real fashion and so on. The songs that I used to listen to when I was young on Radio 1, those are the real hits.

You only get them now on smooth radio. I'm glad it's not called saga radio anymore, but that's what it is. Geriatric groove. That's why when we get older, we just become an embarrassment to our children.

And those of you who've just had babies, just you wait, it's going to happen to you as well. But we think that, don't we? We think our generation is the one. And we use expressions like that. Well, in my day. Didn't happen in my day, says the grumpy old man.

But here's the truth, friends. Our day, it will soon be forgotten. It's significant. It's just evaporating with every breath that we take. And soon it will all be forgotten.

[ 20 : 41 ] Look at verse 11. There's no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things, things yet to be among those who come after. The NIV has former people instead of former things.

But the Hebrew actually just says the former. So it actually includes both, things and people. Here's the New Living Translation. We don't remember what happened in those former times, and in future generations, no one will remember what we're doing now.

And that's true. I don't know if much history is really taught today. But what we do know is so truncated, isn't it? The doings of each generation are just squeezed into a couple of paragraphs in your history books.

Think of the leaders of just a few decades ago, like Reagan and Thatcher, for example, who oversaw just the seismic changes of the ends of the Cold War, the biggest shifts in a whole century. But who today even remembers very much about them? How many folk in their 20s today have even heard the name Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin or Helmut Kohl who once straddled the world stage?

[ 22 : 00 ] Far less those who come before us. How many 20th century British Prime Ministers could you name? Well, I know Tom McGill will probably name them all, so you can ask him.

But most of us, can you name a single 19th century Prime Minister? They give the speeches that they made. Think of them, every single one of them a headline in the newspapers.

Who remembers them now? It's all there, I'm sure, in dusty copies of Hansard and the House of Commons Library. But whoever reads them, who cares? There's no remembrance of past generations.

No lasting significance at all. What gain was there? What profit for them in all their toil? Yes, of course, no doubt, some of them did leave gain to society, to those who come after them.

But what about them themselves? They're just dust. And so it will be for every one of us as the preacher. For you and me, for our generation.

[ 23 : 04 ] We too shall fade away. And what will they say of us? Albert Camus, the French existentialist philosopher, captured it rather darkly.

I sometimes think, he says, what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for modern man. He fornicated and read the papers.

That's pretty dismissive, isn't it? No lasting significance. Well, maybe it's no bad thing because he's probably quite close to the bone there, isn't he? But we're mortal. We're fading. We're passing. We're fading into oblivion. And we know that deep down. That's why we love, that's why we love fantasy stories, isn't it? Like Peter Pan and all these similar virtual worlds.

We like to think that we can live in Neverland. Like poor Michael Jackson. As if it was true. But it isn't true, is it? Now the preacher says that our passing life is vain.

[ 24 : 06 ] It's heavy. It's nothing but vapor. So get real. There's no lasting significance in our passing lives. And secondly, he says there's no lasting progress in this passing world either.

As it was for past generations, so it is for society and for our world. Look at verses 5 to 7. Just the repetitive monotony of nature.

It's just going round and round in circles. The sun goes up. The sun goes down. The sun goes up again. Verse 5. The wind, verse 6, just the same. Around and around it goes.

Verse 7. The streams flow to the sea, but the seas never full. The water just keeps on coming down and down again. No progress, just wearisome regularity and circularity.

And as it is in nature, so it is also in human society. Look at verses 9 and 10. It's just the same. What has been, will be. There's nothing new under the sun.

[ 25 : 12 ] We often use that expression, don't we, to prick the bubble of delusions of grandeur. We like to think, don't we, that we are progressive. We are the progressing generation making real advances.

But is anything really all that new, verse 10? No. It's already been seen in the ages before.

And history does just repeat and chime the same things again and again in different guises.

Empires rise and empires fall. Who do you think had the largest landmass empire in history?

British Empire? No. Soviet Empire? No. It was Genghis Khan in the 12th century. The 12th century.

We like to think that our civilization is advancing. And we look to the past, don't we, and we think, oh goodness, how far we've moved on from there. And of course, in many ways, we have. And yet in the fundamentals, we really haven't moved on at all.

[ 26 : 21 ] Think of medicine. Think of all the huge advances in the last hundred years. Antibiotics, perhaps one of the biggest ones. So we don't die of the things that killed our forefathers of bacterial infections.

We just die of other things. And as we make advances in treating those other things, like cancer and heart attacks and so on, well, we just find chronic diseases to suffer from and to die from, like dementia.

Well, is that really progress? We still die. Well, think of nutrition. More wealth has given us more food. So we don't die of starvation.

Now we die of diseases related to overconsumption. It used to be poverty that made you die of starvation. Now poverty very likely means you've got a problem of obesity with all of its consequences.

Plus a chance, plus some men shows. The more the same, the more different. There's no real lasting progress in the realm of our fleeting mortality.

[ 27 : 25 ] There isn't. Are our lives really so much better for our progress in technology and so on? Oh yes, wonderful.

There's so many things I can now do for myself on the internet. But now I spend hours and hours and hours trying to book a flight ticket which once I used to walk into a travel agent somebody else did for me in five minutes.

Is that progress? Now I spend hours clearing email and spam from my computer from companies that seem to know everything I do and want to profit from me.

Is that progress? Of course, now I'm liberated so I can do 24-hour shopping. I can go to Asda at 2 o'clock in the morning if I want to. Isn't that wonderful? My poor mother couldn't do that.

But she didn't have to do that. She could go to bed and sleep at night instead of going to Asda. And she can get wakened up at 3 o'clock in the morning from somebody in America sending her a text message. So much progress.

[ 28 : 23 ] There's a little real progress. No wonder at the very heart of his poem the preacher hits the heart of our frustrated experience of life.

Verse 8. There's no real and lasting satisfaction found in our passing life is there? All things are full of weariness.

A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. Well, we live today in a consumer society don't we?

In fact, the quest for satisfaction has become so essential to the whole world economy that disaster strikes if we stop consuming. Especially if the American consumer stops spending and consuming. That will plunge the whole world into a depression, won't it? Some of you might remember the book I think it was in the 1980s by Neil Postman called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

[ 29 : 21 ] It's about how our society was descending into trivia. Replacing all that's oral with visual and so on. But if he was writing today his book would have to be called *consuming ourselves to death*.

Because we're certainly not consuming our way to satisfaction, are we? We're never satisfied, just as verse 8 says, our eyes, our ears, or our mouth. It's an addiction, isn't it?

It's how addicts think. Just one more fix, it'll be great, we'll turn the corner then. Just one more thing. Just this new job, just this new house, just this new relationship, whatever it is.

But the reality is much more like a child a few days after Christmas. That new toy has very quickly become just old hat and boring.

And that's our life so often, isn't it? So little satisfaction. Even for those that seem to have access to so much, I can't get no satisfaction, sang Mick Jagger despite all his millions, all his women, all his drugs, everything else.

[ 30 : 26 ] And 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. But I can't get no satisfaction.

Well, it's not really Shakespeare or Euripides, but it's true nonetheless, isn't it? And it's something we just have to face up to if we're going to have a fully honest assessment of human life.

merely human life under the sun. It doesn't satisfy fully. Where's the ultimate profit in any of it?

That's the question. When we face up to the facts of our mortality. But there's no real and lasting significance to be found in a life which is passing.

And there's no real progress to be found in this passing world either. There's no really satisfying satisfaction. A down-to-earth assessment of the real evidence forces us to the conclusion that there is indeed no enduring profit for all our toil under the sun.

[ 31 : 42 ] That's why I think so many of history's great thinkers were such pessimists. Embracing the words of Silenus, the companion of Dionysius.

Best of all he said is not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But second best is to die soon. That's ancient tragic nihilism but it's still very much alive today isn't it?

It's a salutary fact that the commonest cause of death in young men today is suicide.

But does that really matter? Does it? I'm sure that people like Richard Dawkins do deplore suicide and want to prevent it but I'm not sure why he should given his beliefs, given his answer to life's meaning which doesn't give much hope, does it?

In fact, quite the contrary. Listen to what he says in his book *River Out of Eden*. In a universe of blind forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt. Other people are going to get lucky.

[ 33 : 02 ] And you won't find rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. No design, no purpose, no evil and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.

DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music. Well, it might seem at first that the preacher's verdict here of no profit and everything in vain is just nihilistic like that.

But that is not so. Because though the preacher does brush aside all fantasy and insist on utter realism about the facts of our mortality, he makes real inquiry and he faces the real evidence about life under the sun.

Yes, he does, but he is also clear that under the sun does not provide us with all the data. And so that inquiry is not the whole story.

Because he knows, thirdly, that there is real eternity. And that therefore there is quite literally a down-to-earth answer to our passing and mortal life.

[ 34 : 25 ] life. And he just begins to hint at that if you look at verses 13 to 15. Again, there's no fantasy there, no pretense that the world's wisdom and philosophy and science can solve all of our perplexity and all of our frustration at a life that must in the end be pointless.

Look at verse 15. What's crooked cannot be made straight. What's lacking cannot be counted. So now even the greatest minds on earth can't help us.

Verse 16, not even the wisdom of Solomon, not even his surpassing wisdom can solve this for us.

In fact, if you look at verse 18, the more you think and understand, the more your head aches.

Very much wisdom is much vexation. He increases knowledge, increases sorrow. But isn't that true to life? If you read some of the biographies of some of the great minds of the world, so often what's revealed in them is that they had terribly unhappy twisted personal lives.

Isn't that so? But the point is there is no answer to life to be found in the fantasy of man's exalted mind, however wise he may be.

[ 35 : 46 ] No answer in fantasy, but there is an answer in fact. And in the fact of the God of heaven. Look at verse 13.

Do you see that little phrase there, under heaven? It's so important. That tells us that the preacher here is not a secularist, he's not an atheist, he's not just observing the facts of life on earth under the sun, he is looking at that, but he is a man who does not rule out of court the possibility that there is more data to consider, that there are facts to consider about a realm above the sun, the realm of God.

In fact, he knows that unless you examine our material world as being under heaven, you'll never understand anything really true about this earth and this mortal existence, because you've left out the absolutely key data from your equation.

We've all learned, haven't we, that if you make wrong assumptions and if you omit key data, then all your modeling, no matter how clever your academics are, they can be completely wrong and they can be completely misleading, and in fact, they can lead you into all sorts of grim consequences, because your assumptions are wrong.

well, so it is if you're trying to understand this whole world. But if you bring in the key fact, then you will find your real world data starts to make sense.

[ 37 : 34 ] You see the end of verse 13 there. It is God who has given man the unhappy business of life as we know it to be.

He has imposed upon us this life of no ultimate earthly significance. He has imposed upon us the frustrated circularity of life instead of lasting progress.

He has imposed upon us this constant seeking for satisfaction that constantly eludes us. Why has God done that?

Is God perverse? Why would He do that? If there is a God, if God is real, why on earth would He be like that? Well, the Bible tells us God has done exactly that.

That's the message Genesis 3 onwards tells us very plainly, God has cursed this whole world to futility and frustration. But not because He's perverse, but because we are.

[ 38 : 42 ] in fact, we're so perverse that in our rejection of God, we don't even care that we've rejected our Creator.

And we blithely go on living in a fantasy world that excludes Him completely from our thinking most of the time, so that people don't even seek Him, even if He would invite us back into His presence and His life.

And so God has laid the heavy burdens of mortality upon us, of profitless, futile mortality, so that we will take Him seriously.

C.S. Lewis famously called pain God's megaphone to alert us to reality. Well, perplexity is also a megaphone of God. God wants us to be more and more vexed as we examine life under the sun, so that we will look up above the sun and seek our answers in the only place where they can be truly found, in heaven and in God Himself.

He wants us to find the answer, but it's an answer which must come and can only come down to earth from heaven.

[ 39 : 58 ] Just look over to chapter 3 and verse 10. You'll find the same phrase there as in verse 13 here in chapter 1 and it's repeated, but an explanation is given. I've seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

He's made everything beautiful in His time. Also, also, He has put eternity into man's heart and yet, so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end.

You see, everything beautiful in its time. But that's the whole problem, isn't it? Because time is always passing by. And God has put eternity also into our hearts.

And because of that, there must always be tension, wasn't there? There must always be confusion and perplexity because we're in time. That's the life that we know. It's ebbing away. It's mortal. But we are made for eternity.

You see, the vexed frustration of the human spirit about our lives, that is key evidence that the Bible's explanation of reality is true.

[ 41 : 11 ] How could we ever feel anything other than utterly frustrated if we're made for eternity, but we find ourselves cursed with mortality? That's a reality, isn't it? You know that in your bones.

Look at chapter 3, verse 14. Whatever God does endures forever. It's eternal. It's complete. There's no frustration. Nothing added, he says, nothing subtracted.

And God has done it. He has frustrated this whole mortal world. Look, do you see? So that people fear before him.

just as pain is a megaphone to our emotions, well, so perplexity and vexation is a megaphone to our intellect as we wrestle with life, as we try and understand life.

And it shouts to us, you have to look up. You have to look above the sun. You have to look beyond the mere effects of your mortality, which, yes, you must be serious about.

[ 42 : 18 ] But, and you need to look up to the facts that they themselves point to unmistakably. That's the answer.

The answer can only lie above the sun with God himself. The only answer to the great question of what does it mean to be human, where is the lasting profit in our lives, the only answer is one that comes down to us from heaven to earth.

And the preacher's answer to the real vexations of life on earth is the message of the Christian gospel. It's the revelation that comes down from heaven in the message of the whole Bible.

And that's why his words conclude in the poem in chapter 12, which is a poem not about past generations, but one that addresses the present generation. And it cries out, remember your creator in the days of your youth.

Now, before your life passes you by, it's too late. And of course, the message of the New Testament is just the same. But of course, it tells us even more, because our creator, through

whom the whole world was created, God the Son, as the book of Hebrews tells us, in these last days, has come down to earth from heaven to reveal his answer, ultimately, and to himself be the answer.

[ 43 : 44 ] to all of our vexation and frustration and perplexity, that is, mortal life lived under the curse. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came and he said, I am come that they might have life in abundance.

Not a magic pill to stop all our earthly troubles and make them cease. No, Jesus said, in this world you will have tribulation. salvation. But he came to bring the joy of the true life from above, from above the Son, from heaven itself.

Eternal life. The life of the world to come. The life that we were really made for. So that we can find that life, so that we can enter into that life, even now.

You see, true humanity can never be sourced. This side of the Son, merely under heaven in this material world, has to come down to earth from heaven.

But it can be entered into under the Son, because in him, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, through whom all things were created, because in him was life.

[ 45 : 01 ] As the beginning of John's Gospel tells us so wonderfully. The only life that is truly eternal, that is not passing, and that can be profitable, gain, forever and ever.

And he came down into this dark world under the sun, a world of toil, a world of vanity, so that we might find him, and find in him and through him that life from above.

Jesus Christ spoke just like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, didn't he? About those same ultimate questions. What does it profit a man, he said, if he gains the whole wide world under the sun, but forfeits his life, that true life, that eternal life, that life from above that is in Jesus alone?

Well, it profits him not one whit, because this life is but a vapor, vain, passing. But what do you gain if you haven't found that life that Jesus brings?

Well, it is all in vain. It's passing. It will disappear to dust and ashes. But what you will lose if you haven't found that life from above is immeasurable, incalculable, because it is eternal.

[ 46 : 38 ] So how can you better ensure that in your assessment of life, you take into account all the facts, so that you do find that down-to- earth heavenly answer to the great questions of our humanity?

What does it really mean to be alive and to be human? well, there's something to ponder hard in these days.

Let's pray together. Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised, great in thy power, and thy wisdom is infinite.

In thee we would praise without ceasing. I callst us to delight in thy praise. For thou hast made us for thyself.

In our hearts find no rest until we rest in thee, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit all glory and praise and honor be ascribed, both now and forevermore.

[ 47 : 49 ] Amen.