

1. The brevity of life

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn, shall we, to the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, page 553, if you have one of the church Bibles.

I'm calling this brief series, Finding Joy in Life's Journey. And that is what this book is all about. It's wisdom from an ancient preacher who has upon his heart the desire to teach us how to do that.

As I said, some years ago we had a detailed study of the book, and I think many of us found it an extremely helpful study. Perhaps we were surprised because it is an unusual book, and yet, in many ways, we find it so penetrating in its critique of life as we know it to be, but in its encouragement of living life in the world as we know it to be, without pretense.

And surely that is what life is all about for the Christian, living without pretense. As I said, the wisdom books often are neglected in the teaching of the church today, and I think that is a great mistake.

I wonder whether that's one of the reasons why so many Christians seem to get in such a tangle, a lot of the time, about decision-making, about guidance for their life.

[1 : 26] Especially young Christians. I find it's one of the biggest problems that people have. Well, one of the answers to get out of all of those tangles is to go digging in the wisdom literature of the Bible.

That's why God has put them here. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Lamentations. These books that teach us how to think, how to puzzle, how to weep, how to live life in this real world.

But Ecclesiastes, I think, in particular, has often been neglected. It's been rather a black sheep of biblical books. Somebody put it this way, it's the delight of skeptics and the despair of saints.

That's not very optimistic, is it? Because at first sight, the truth is that it feels like it's a book full of a great deal of pessimism and cynicism and even nihilism.

And, I guess, with some reason, it opens with these words, doesn't it, in verse 2. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. That doesn't seem a very hopeful beginning. It's said, I don't know if this is true or not, it's said that Ecclesiastes was the favorite book of the Bible of Kaiser Wilhelm, who started the First World War.

[2 : 38] That's not a great accolade either. It's not really a ringing endorsement. So, everything seems to be stacked against this particular book of the Bible. It's not just the skeptics either.

If you read what people write about Ecclesiastes, you'll find that there are many Christians, many writers, many preachers, who don't really think that we can take the words of Ecclesiastes as God's inspired word, at least not at face value.

Because so many of the things seem to be so negative. It seems so unchristian. And so many, many Christians assume that this is a book which is written solely from the point of view of the skeptic, the secular pundit.

Except for that is just the very last few verses of the book, where at the end of chapter 12 we revert to what the Bible really normally teaches. And at last we get sense where it tells us to fear God and keep his commands.

I'd just like to look at the end of chapter 12 there, just to see what I'm talking about. People tend to take this last little paragraph beginning at verse 9, and they say, well here at last we get back to reality.

[3 : 54] Everything else in this book so far has been confused and wrong. It's looking at everything from a purely secular worldly point of view. It's false teaching put by the preacher to show us how false the world's view is.

And then at last we get to what the real Christian perspective is. The problem with that is that verse 9 comes right after verse 8. Verse 8 sums up eventually the preacher's whole conclusion on things, just as he began.

It's all vanity. But then verse 9 tells us that besides being wise, the preacher taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

The preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. So that theory doesn't really work too well, does it? On the other hand, there are some people who have noticed that through Ecclesiastes, as well as the pessimism and the apparent cynicism, there are some very positive parts of the book.

The trouble is these parts are a bit too positive, a bit too hedonistic, for some rather pious evangelical Christians. So they come to chapter 2, verse 24, look back, which tells us to eat and drink and find enjoyment in our toil, because there's nothing better in life.

[5 : 17] And the very pious Christian thinks, well, that can't be right, I feel very awkward about that. What do we do with that? Surely Christians are not to be as hedonistic as all of that, are we?

It can't be right. Aren't we all meant to be miserable? No. Just because some Christians are miserable all the time doesn't mean everybody has to be, or that we ought to be.

But that's what some people think of this book. Probably the commonest way that people tend to take it, if you read books about Ecclesiastes, is that it's a book which critiques secularism.

In other words, it shows up the emptiness of life without God and the futility of the way of life that leaves God out of the equation. And so the Christian answer to such a person is, well, what you need, Mr. Secularist, or Miss Secularist, is to understand God like we Christians do.

And if only you understand God as we do, then all your problems of life will be sorted out. All the riddles that so trouble you in life will be solved. All your problems will evaporate.

[6 : 32] And all the vexation that you come across in life, it'll just be washed away in a tide of the Holy Spirit. Well, some Christians do talk like that, but if that is what we think, if that's how we think this book is really written, then what we will find is that we, Christians who think like that, are exactly the people that the preacher has in view.

He has exactly that simplistic and trite view of the life of faith in his sights, and he's going to shoot it right out of the water.

That's what he does all the way through this book. It's not skeptical secularists who are primarily in the preacher's mind here, but it's simplistic, superficial Christians whose idea of faith and whose ideas about God are very flawed indeed.

If you think about it, really, it's quite anachronistic to think that this book was written for secularists. There were no secularists in ancient Israel.

Everybody believed in God, or else they believed in idols or other gods, but there was nobody like a modern secularist today who rejects any of that idea and talks about being an atheist. So, that's not who the preacher is getting at.

[7 : 56] He is getting at the kind of people who are saying, yes, faith solves every conundrum. And our language, come to Jesus, and everything will be lovely. It will be trouble-free for the rest of your life.

Everything will make sense. Everything will be fulfilled in your life. And you'll never struggle. You'll never puzzle. You'll never weep again. If only you understand what we Christians understand. Now, friends, that idea, although very common in modern-day Christianity, Christianity, is absolutely foreign to the whole of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament.

It's exactly that kind of triumphalism that the preacher is going to puncture and cut down to size with his relentless blast of cold realism.

He's talking to people who are prone to wishing that these things were true. the wishing that life was other than it really is.

And because of that, there are people who never really come to terms with life as it actually is. Life in a fallen world. And what life is always going to be like.

[9 : 12] And what we Christians, as faithful believers, have got to learn that life is truly going to be like all the days of our lives. if we're going to be wise. And if we're going to be truly godly and serve God.

Now, what that means is that, in fact, there's a message here for absolutely everybody. Yes, there is a message for you if you're an atheist, if you're a secularist, if you reject God and faith altogether.

Well, the preacher is here to make you think. He is here to question your assumptions about life. I hope that that's you tonight, and we welcome all such who are here, I hope you'll be open-minded enough to engage with the questions, the very searching questions that this teacher, this apologist, does put to those people who perhaps reject God.

But there is also plenty to challenge the life of every Christian believer. Because this preacher is not going to let us get away with anything naive, with anything trite at all in our understanding of the life of faith.

Now, this preacher is here to make sure that Christians also are made to think and question their assumptions and ask whether their view of life and their view of God are really the view of life and the view of God that God himself gives to us in Scripture.

[10 : 37] Or a very different construct that we have painted with all the language of evangelical Christianity, but in fact is in the end very, very different from it indeed.

So, Kohelet, or the preacher, whatever we call him, he exposes false optimism of all kinds. He forces us to face up to the very real vexations, the perplexities, the pain, the paradoxes that we must face and that we will face in a world that remains in bondage to decay until the Lord Jesus comes.

And if you're tempted to think, well, this is very Old Testament, this is very sub-Christian, what about our new Christian hope in the Lord Jesus Christ? Then I suggest when you go home, you put this book alongside Romans chapter 8 that we began to study last week and we'll come back to again next Sunday morning.

And you see just how similar are the views of this world and the Apostle Paul in the New Testament and Kohelet, the preacher here in ancient Israel.

But just as Paul writes to be realistic but not to drive us into despair, so also the preacher here is writing to save us from despair.

- [12 : 00] Because friends, we know, don't we, that the truth is that when you live a lie, when you live in pretense, in the end, that's what drives people to despair, isn't it?
- That's what drives Christians to despair. That's the iniquity of the prosperity gospel which has got a hold of so much of world Christianity today, especially in the developing world, but not only there.
- A gospel that promises health and wealth and ease and healing and so on. In the end, that kind of gospel always will drive people to despair. Because if these things are not forthcoming in your life, you will say to yourself, well, there must be something wrong with me.
- If this is God's truth and this is what he promises and I don't have it, then there's something wrong with my faith. I'm not praying hard enough. I'm not living godly enough. I'm not claiming enough from God, whatever it might be.
- In the end, it leads you to crushing, crushing despair. Or indeed, ultimately, for many, to complete disillusion. This God that I have believed in for so long and been told about, this God is just not true.
- [13 : 13] He's not there. None of these things are real. By contrast, living with reality, living with truth, truth is what liberates people for real joy.
- Truth is always the thing that will set us free. That's what the Lord Jesus himself said. So, these four Sunday evenings, I want to concentrate on four themes, four things that the preachers in Ecclesiastes tells us very plainly that we, as believers, we must come to terms with if we are going to find a way of joy, a real venturesome joy, throughout this vexed journey of our lives.
- Three themes that run through the book and that we have to get a hold of if we are going to understand life as it's meant to be and as it truly can be.
- And the first theme is this, it's the brevity of life. Here's the truth, says the preacher, and you must come to terms with this if you are going to find joy on life's journey.
- Life, he says, will be passing for every one of us. And therefore, the only way to real joy in your life is to learn to live with mortality that you cannot control.
- [14 : 38] live with a mortality that we cannot control. Look at the motto that tops and tails this whole book, the whole of the preacher's message.
- There in chapter 1, verse 2. Vanity. Vanity of vanity, says the preacher. All is vanity. Now that is what we have to face up to.
- Says Kohelet. We ourselves, he is saying, and the whole realm of our existence is, well, it's almost impossible to translate this word.
- Your version may say something else. It may say meaningless. The ESV has vanity. There are all kinds of different translations. It's very, very hard to just put your finger on something that expresses that word properly.
- Vain, or vanity is as good as most. As long as we don't understand it in terms of how we often think of vanity, in terms of pride. It's not being vain that he's speaking about.
- [15 : 48] It's life that is in vain. Futile. The Greek translation of that word here in Ecclesiastes is exactly the word that Paul uses in Romans 8, chapter 8, verse 20 that we'll see next Sunday morning when he talks about the whole of creation being given over to futility by God.
- It really means bubbles or vapour or breath. It's something that is ephemeral, something that is incomprehensible. You can't grasp.

You can't grasp bubbles. You can't grasp vapour. It's there, but you just can't contain it. You can't get your hands on it. And that's the word that the preacher finds, this extraordinary word that you can't quite put your finger on but is just vapour and bubbles and disappearing in the mist.

That's the word he chooses to explain our mortal life. He sums up the whole of human experience in that word.

Hevel is the Hebrew word. In vain. And in doing so, every bubble of our human pride, every fantasy of our human folly is deflated just by that one little word.

[17 : 09] It's gone. Your life is just vapour. It's a puff of wind. That injects harsh reality, doesn't it, into our world of human life, into our world of let's pretend.

It's rather like the little boy who shouts out in among the crowd of adulating people. The emperor has got no clothes on. That's what he's doing with this word.

It's like a cartoonist who just with a simple little drawing pricks a bubble of pomposity, just puts his hand and exposes the ridiculous. That's what he's doing here.

I've said that this word has various shades of meaning and in the first half of the book it especially seems to focus on this sense of life as ephemeral, as impermanent, as fleeting, uncontrollable.

Control of our lives, he says, control of our lives ultimately will totally elude us. We can't control a life that's passing us by like the wind, can we?

[18 : 14] A life that's leaving us behind every moment that we live. Verse 3, what does man gain, he says, by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

What gain, what permanent profit is what he means there? What permanent profit can there ever be from our toil when in fact our life is just ebbing away?

It's going to disappear in the end. The answer, well in the end there can be no permanent gain. That's what verses 1 to 12 tell us in this opening poem that speaks of life's ebb and flow and everything never changing but things just going on and forgetting those of us who have lived through it.

In verse 13 he sums it all up. It's an unhappy business, he says. I've seen it all and do you know what? It's all vanity. It's all meaningless. It's fleeting.

It's ephemeral. It's a striving after wind, he says. Have you ever tried chasing the wind? We have plenty of chance here in Scotland, don't we? I can tell you I was driving up the M6 this morning and there was plenty of wind to be chasing.

[19 : 28] But that's how futile your life is, says the preacher. If you think that you can have permanent gain in a fleeting ephemeral world, in a fleeting ephemeral life, it's like trying to chase the wind and grab it in your hand and put it in a bottle and say, here I've captured the wind.

It's ridiculous. But chasing after the wind is what your life is in this world. If you think you can get permanent gain from it.

He sings that refrain again and again all through this book. Look at chapter 2. I've tried pleasure, he says, chapter 2, verse 1.

Testing you with pleasure, but you know what? It's vanity. Verse 11. It's vanity. It's a striving after wind. There's nothing to be gained under the sun.

Or chapter 2, verse 17. After striving for wisdom. What's done under the sun is grievous to me. It's all vanity. It's a striving after the wind.

[20 : 35] Or verse 22. Just the same again. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart? With which he toils beneath the sun. Verse 26 at the end.

It's vanity. It's a striving after the wind. Again in chapter 4 and verse 4 and verse 6. All the way through to chapter 6, verse 9. This also is vanity.

The striving after the wind. That's the exact halfway point in the book. Here's a useless fact. There's 111 verses before that verse and 111 verses after that verse.

Is that significant? There may be a PhD in that for somebody. Maybe. Who knows? But it's the end of that first whole part of the book and the summing up is just where it began.

It's vanity. It's striving after the wind. What he's saying to us in plain English in all these repetitive things and these images again and again is this. you can't ever beat your mortality.

[21 : 37] You can't. You're mortal. Your life is draining away from the moment it begins. And you won't ever beat your mortality if you spend your life trying to.

And if you spend your life trying to do that you're as mad as a march hare. That's what the teacher is telling us. And worse, your self-delusions he says will actually ruin the life that God has given you to live to the full in this earth under the sun for this life.

Time like an ever-rolling stream will bear us all away. That's what we sang earlier. It comes from Psalm 90. And that's the message of this opening poem of Ecclesiastes.

Look again at chapter 1 and these evocative verses 3 to 11. We could give it the title of past generations verse 4 A generation goes a generation comes sunrise and sunset winds in the north and the south and back again nothing new nothing changes he says time like an ever-rolling stream till he gets to verse 11 and there's no remembrance he says of former things I think it should read with a footnote former people no one no one remembers ultimately those who have gone before and no one in the end will remember you or me how many of you know your great grandfather's name see it's all it's all fleeting isn't it it's ephemeral it's on the way out and that's the reality about life on earth that we have to come to terms with and stop running away from and stop pretending

I guess that's why some of us try and keep our birthdays very quiet when we reach significant birthdays I remember when I turned 35 I thought to myself three score years and 10 I'm halfway there felt a bit depressed then I thought well no if perchance four scores so I was happy again for another few years when I turned 40 I thought that I'm definitely halfway it'll be 44 this year and by any counts I'm definitely in the second half although I did read in the paper yesterday that 2 million people are expected to live to the age of 100 by the end of the next two or three decades so I've maybe got a few more yet but when I get to 50 well it's really all finished at least in the past I used to think well at least you're getting near your pension so that seems less and less hopeful these days too doesn't it alas I'm too late to be part of the baby boomer generation well there we are you boomers enjoy it while it lasts won't be any for us but it makes you think doesn't it when you look back on anniversaries birthdays significant things just a month or two ago we had a young student for lunch and I remembered starting university with her mother and I thought

[24 : 58] I'm getting old don't feel that old actually I do feel that old but maybe I'll have another 30 years of work maybe I will amass my fortune and retire in wealth and comfort you never know maybe at least I can hope that I'll amass a little bit more wisdom and learning but even if that is the case friends what is the lasting worth for all of my toil and for your toil what is it look over at chapter 2 and verse 14 the wise person has his eyes in his head but the fool walks 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 why then have I been so very wise and I said in my heart that this also is vanity for 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 that's true isn't it wise and the fool will go the same way into the grave in the end as verse 17 says all are striving for gain whether it's for wealth whether it's for wisdom whatever it's for it's just a chasing after the wind here's the harsh fact my bones my ashes will be just as useless as anybody that I consider to be a complete fool that's pretty useless isn't it although again

I read this week about a council down south that was going to use the crematorium to heat the local swimming pool so perhaps there'll be some use out of our ashes not very encouraging is it some people may try to beat their mortality and friends many of us live our lives trying to do exactly that that is what makes the world go round and the preacher if you read chapters 2 and 3 he explores many of these things people chase wealth and wealth can buy you health there's no doubt about that at least to some extent that's why if you live in Bears then you probably will live quite a bit longer than if you live in Park Head that's the truth isn't it it's just statistics I remember reading just not long after I moved to Glasgow from the south of England that in Surrey I lived just on the edge of Surrey in Wimbledon the life expectancy for a man was 84 whereas in Glasgow it was 61 so I thought I really cut myself short by moving north I'm not sure if it works if you move back south at 60 it kind of equalises our data but you can't you wealthy people by and large will live longer you can buy health you can buy longevity to a certain extent and people chase education people chase political causes or whatever it is but friends whatever it is that you can amass and accumulate through your brains or your brawn or your bank account it's only ever for a time in the end what happens to the fool will happen to me also so what is the point of all that wisdom all that toil all that education all that achievement the question to ask isn't it on Monday morning what's it all for it was

Woody Allen who said I don't want to achieve immortality through my work I want to achieve it through not dying but that's the one thing that Woody Allen can't do and neither can you or I and that is because he and I and you and everybody are living with mortality that we simply cannot control and the preacher says face reality you're transient you're havel you're vapor your life is ephemeral and and so the kind of control on your life that you are striving for that you want that kind of control is always always going to be elusive in the end and what's more you see the preacher is telling us that the chief obstacle to us living well in this life in the time that we do have from God the chief obstacle is our very refusal to accept our mortality and our transience our refusal to accept that in fact we're not in control of all of these things we'd like to be

I remember reading a very striking article that quoted Steve Jobs who is the CEO of Apple Apple Computers a brilliant man who has made that company absolutely outstanding he was asked to go and speak at a graduation ceremony in one of the Ivy League universities in the United States he was the third speaker two of the speakers before him were both religious speakers and they'd given a lot of usual waffle and flattery to the students about how much limitless potential they had and go out and take on the world and give yourself and all that kind of nonsense Steve Jobs got up and he said this quote remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've encountered to help me make the big choices in life remembering I'll be dead soon is the best tool that I've found for helping me make the big choices in life isn't that something it went on like this 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 I don't think Steve Jobs has got the whole story I don't know whether he is a Christian or not but what those words capture is a lot like what the preacher is saying in this first half of the book of Ecclesiastes about our mortality because that is the focus facing the reality of the brevity of our lives here on earth so that we are able to rise above it and find the truly meaningful path through the many vexations that we will face in our mortal lives here on earth so there is a real challenge for the secularist in these verses what are you striving for that's his question look at your life you're chasing this you're chasing that you're running after the next thing what is the next achievement for you and why face the facts he says to you in a generation or two perhaps if you're lucky three or four no one will remember who you are if you live long enough here's the irony your funeral will be a rather miserable time won't it because all those that have deceased you beforehand will not be there the longer you live the fewer of your friends are even there to pay tribute to you when you die it's one of the great ironies of life isn't it but if you're a

[32 : 41] Christian believer you also have to face reality it's eminently possible isn't it for Christians to have their lives also described by these verses in chapter 2 verses 21 to 23 verse 21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it this also is vanity and a great evil what has a man from all the toil and striving of his heart with which he toils beneath the sun for all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation even in the night his heart does not rest this also is vanity a lot of Christians are pretty bitter about life aren't they feel very hard done to very under appreciated maybe toiling away but life just seems to be full of vexations full of sleepless nights about this and that and in the end what happens well the benefit goes to somebody else who hasn't toiled as we have hasn't taken life nearly as seriously well it's the point it's pointless it's in vain why do we feel like that so often

I know the dark winter nights at this time of year don't help we'd love to have more light to cheer us up we need something more than just natural light don't we to get that proper perspective on our life we need the light of God's realism shined into our lives and that is what the preacher is doing even though he's doing it a rather strange way a rather sardonic way life in this age life on this earth life under the sun to use his catchphrase life is fleeting he says it's mortal it's only for a time and until you grasp that truth and you stop pretending and stop struggling against it although it wasn't true you will never find joy he says not even the joy that can be found in this life and the joy that God wants you to find in this life and has given you to enjoy in this mortal life until you come to terms with that you will only be able to have vexation until you really grasp that and are happy with it you will feel that life is always just getting away from you chasing the wind and that's not how

God wants your life to be friends it's not how your life has to be submit to the truth submit to reality as God's word tells us and there can be a very different way there can be a road to real joy in amongst all of the vexation of life's trek to the grave grasp the bare fact that's what the preacher wants us to do the fact that every human being since Adam has resisted the fact that we are not gods that we are not in control of our own destiny that we are not the masters of our own soul as that poem says but we must submit to the limitations of our mortality and our sinful mortality at that and therein friends grasping that lies the road to liberation that's the road to real joy in the midst of this vain world look at verses 24 to 26 of chapter 2 what a contrast they are with verse 23 for the one man as verse 23 says it's all a vexation everything is just in vain incomprehensible miserable but what a difference verse 24 this other view there's nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment or make his soul see the good is the idiom of the original in his toil this also

God to be God as he truly is that your whole perspective on this life changes and we see the joy and we are able to have hearts filled with thankfulness to know that every hour lived on this earth is given by the king and for our joy so as we close listen to another preacher to the Lord Jesus Christ listen to how he puts it don't be anxious about food and drink and clothes the pagans seek after these things he says your father knows that you need them but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you you'll see the joy in them or as Eugene Peterson's translation of Matthew 6 there says give your entire attention to what God is doing right now don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow live in the world of biblical reality that trusts

I saw is from the hand of God for apart from him who can eat or who can find enjoyment you can't without him but in the midst of the muck of life with him you can and you will right till life's end let's pray Lord our heavenly father how we thank you that your word is real that rather than hiding the harsh realities of life in this world of futility you flag them up for us and use them to drive us to seek you in whose hands alone is the control not only of our own lives but of this whole universe what a joy to know that you have a whole world in your hands so help us we pray to live our lives with our eyes rising above the sun that our feet on this earth may walk the path of joy even in the midst of the perplexities of life we ask it in Jesus name

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