

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 - Meaningless

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[0:00] Let me pray for us as we come to God's word. Let me pray. Father, we've thought of many great things already this evening. And we do, even as we look at your word, we want to remain in Jesus. We want his word to rule in our hearts. We want to learn from you.

We want to think seriously and carefully. We know we need your help. We know we need your strength. And we know we need the power of the Spirit to apply what we learn to our lives and our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Let me read Ecclesiastes 1, and I'm going to read the first 11 verses. The words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem.

Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?

Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north.

[1:15] Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again.

What has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, look, this is something new. It was already here, long ago.

It was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations. And even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

I think there's an alluring half-truth that goes around the world, and it even goes around in Christian circles. It goes something like this. If you do good things, then good things will follow.

[2:15] If you do good, good things will happen to you. Now, it's not without reason, is it, that people think like that. We live in a world we know has been made by a just and a holy God.

And so it seems right that what he loves would happen for those who obey him, and what he hates would not happen for those who love him. You know, if you do what is right, then surely good things will follow.

And actually, you can even find Bible passages which seem to say that very thing. So the book of Proverbs says it over and over. The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. There you go. There in black and white. The Lord looks after the righteous. He brings them good things.

For the wicked, they receive bad things. Carries on. From the fruit of their lips, people enjoy good things, but the unfaithful have an appetite for violence. Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.

[3:18] A sluggard's appetite is never filled, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied. The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked make themselves a stench and bring shame on themselves.

There you go. Good things come to good people. Bad things come to bad people. Even Paul in the New Testament seems to hint at something like that. He says in Galatians 6 verse 7, Now, what happens is you stuff that kind of half-truth somewhere in your pocket, and you get on with life, don't you?

You think this is kind of how the world works. I will do good stuff, and good things will happen to me. I will be righteous, and God is righteous, so righteous things will happen to me. And then we get on with life, and then strange things happen, don't they?

We do the right thing, and good things don't always follow. It might happen early in your life, so you might get to school, and you realize that actually sometimes people cheat, and they get away with it, and they get better grades than you when you did all the work.

Hard work is not always rewarded. Maybe in your job, you're diligent, you turn up on time, you do an honest, hard day's work, only to find that the incompetent, dishonest colleague is the one who gets promoted and not you.

[4:44] It even happens in church as well, in church life, doesn't it? A young, gifted man at the start of his ministry is forced out of his church by unsupportive leaders, while an incompetent pastor is unchallenged, holds on to power, and slowly drains the church of life and people.

You know those cases, don't you? It happens in homes. A young woman gives up her career to get married and raise children, and finds her husband has squandered all their money gambling online, while the wife who shows very little concern for her children or her husband turns out to be married to a man who is devoted and sacrificial.

The ultimate crash-out, though, for the half-truth is death, isn't it? Death comes to everybody. And it doesn't wait to be invited. Death, it turns out, doesn't come just to the wicked and the deserving, or even to just the old.

It comes to the young. It comes to the kind. It comes to the good. It comes to the undeserving.

David Gibson has written a book on Ecclesiastes, which used to be called *Destiny*.

It's now called *Living Life Backwards*, I think. It is a brilliant book. If you read one Christian book this term, make it this one. It is really, really helpful. People get put off it because its opening line goes like this.

[6:04] It says this. I'm going to die. By the time you read these lines, I might even be dead. It's not that I have a disease or a terminal illness.

A doctor has not pronounced on how long I'm going to live. I don't know when I'm going to die. I just know I will. I'm going to die, and so are you. Matthew McCulloch has written a book called *Remember Death*, which again is a really brilliant book, and don't be put off by the title.

He says this. Death makes a statement about who we are. We are not too important to die. We will all die by all those who have gone before us, and the world will keep on moving just as it always has.

No one is indispensable. It's a harsh, even terrifying statement. And because that's true, right, because death really undermines everything, it robs us of what we've spent our lives building, relationships, careers, money, and homes.

Because that's true, it means, doesn't it, that that opening statement of good things happen to good people isn't the whole story, is it? The world is not perfectly just.

[7:14] And life is cut short. And that means, doesn't it, that there is a kind of futility to life that we need to engage with. And that's why the book of Ecclesiastes is in your Bible.

The writer of the Ecclesiastes wants you to know that life is not always that simple, and it's not always that good, and it's not always that fair. And this is the key.

The writer of the Ecclesiastes thinks that it's possible to learn that, to learn about the futility and the injustice of life, and to face that injustice and futility square in the eyes.

And here's the key, and still live joyfully in this world. More than that, I think it says, ultimately, until you have come to terms with the futility of life, until you've really looked at the injustice and the temporary nature of your life, until you have understood that you will die, you cannot enjoy life properly.

That's why I think Dave Gibson retitled his book in the second edition, *living life backwards*, because the premise of Ecclesiastes is that you need to start with the fact that you will die, that the fact that life is futile and unjust, and you need to work backwards from that in order to understand the best way to live.

[8:30] If you live forwards from where you are now, in the hope and expectation that that will not come, you will live an unrealistic, unfulfilled, unsatisfying, ultimately miserable life.

So, if you've not considered the futility of working hard, only to retire and hand over your job to a loser who bankrupts the business, or if you've never thought that you could be wrongly accused and forced out of relationships and friendships, or if you've thought that if you're the most gifted and competent person in the office, you will always receive promotions, if you've not understood that those things don't always happen in the way they should, you are not yet ready to live.

And so, what we're going to do over the next few weeks is going to try and work our way through the book of Ecclesiastes and learn these lessons together. And what I want to do tonight, just in the interest of time and depth, is just try and look at one word from the book of Ecclesiastes.

It's a word which I think will help unlock the book for us. And it comes a number of times on the way through, but it's there in chapter 1, verse 2. So, have a look down at chapter 1, verse 2.

The words of the teacher, the son of David, the king of Jerusalem, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

[9 : 50] Now, that word, meaningless, is key to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer uses the word 37 times. Now, maybe some of you are going to go through Ecclesiastes and count it up, and you'll arrive at 35, I think, probably, in your NIV translation.

But, that's because our NIVs twice translate it slightly differently. But it does appear 37 times. It's a key to understanding the book. And I want us just tonight to try and work out its meaning.

And let me start by saying what it doesn't mean. Meaningless here doesn't mean sort of without any significance or pointless. David Gibson, in his book, points out that the writer is not a first-year philosophy student who's been on to a few lectures and come to the conclusion that life is a waste of time.

He's not a nihilist, if that word means anything to you. Instead, the word, really, is from the Hebrew word hebel, which means something nearer to breath or breeze or mist, which is why I've entitled the series Life in the Mist.

So, perhaps you could say it means something like without solid substance. It has no weight. It doesn't last for long. It's impossible to sort of grab it and take hold of it. It's used a number of times in the Old Testament.

[11 : 04] It comes in the book of Job. Job accuses his counselors, the people who are giving him advice in the midst of his suffering, he accused them of speaking in this breathy, misty, meaningless way.

He says that you can't sort of grab a hold of it. There's nothing to what you're saying. Just wind. It's used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe idols.

They're just a breath. They're just mist. They're nothing. Or even, at times, human activity. Now, helpfully, the writer of Ecclesiastes gives us some clues about what he means by the word because he accompanies the word meaningless with either another word or another couple of words to help explain the meaning.

And what I want you to do is to look up some of those references together and see whether we can come up with a definition of the word from that. Now, I'll warn you that lots of these are a repetition, right?

So, I think there are two or three different ideas in here, but there are a lot of repetition. So, with the person next to you or persons next to you, have a look at those references for the word meaningless and look at how it's expanded on and see the words that are attached.

[12 : 14] And how does that help you understand the word? Just go for that for a few minutes. So, the references are written down there. Go for it with the person or persons next to you. Okay, let me get you back together.

So, hopefully, you found a lot of chasing after the wind. What else did you find? A miserable business.

A miserable business. Yeah. And grievous evil. Sorry? Yeah, we don't profit. A grievous evil. Yeah. Sorry?

Transient. Yes. What do we think that – I mean, what do we think that – how does that help us understand the word? Jamal says it doesn't. In the sense that it doesn't expand, it just talks about. Yes. Yes. So, I think it – yeah, go on. Okay. It doesn't expand on the word. Anyone else? If it's a person, when there's a person, you're well-possessed on, then you're like something, the blood's not ground, but you can build them.

[13 : 31] So, it's having – in the words, it's about the toil, you achieve something, that means it's not about what you have, what you do, it's the fortune. Right. Okay. Yeah. So, it's not – So, with the possessions, you can have a lot of possessions and not enjoy them, so that there's a sort of meaninglessness about the possessions, because it doesn't actually give you what you were looking for.

Yeah. Go on, Zain. Go away. Yes, yes, yes.

Yes. Perfect sense, yes. So two things that Zane said that are really helpful. One is that there's a temporariness to it.

The wind doesn't last very long. You can't get hold of it. It doesn't last. And there's just nothing solid there. There's nothing to build on. There's no foundation. It just kind of diffuses.

And I think the other words, the miserable business, it's not just that life is very short. It's that actually there's sort of a futility to it.

[15 : 11] There's a misery to it. Things aren't always happy. Good things don't always happen. So in chapter 4, verse 8, where he says the miserable business, there was a man all alone.

He had neither a son nor a brother. There was no end to his toil, and his eyes were not content with his wealth. For whom I am toiling, he asked. And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless.

A miserable business. Life is just at times really sad, right? It's really miserable. And then in chapter 6, verse 2, when you get this idea of a grievous evil, God gives some people wealth, possessions, and honor so that they lack nothing and that their hearts desire.

But God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil. Here, you know, someone rich, famous, they've got loads of money, they've got a really big house, they've got loads of nice cars, they've got all that they could want, and the only people who are really enjoying it are the people around them who just didn't earn any of it.

And they're miserable. That's meaningless. It's also kind of unjust. It's an evil, isn't it? And so I think the point is that this meaningless word is grasping after, if you like, the idea that life is very short and temporary, you can't really kind of gather it together, it runs out, and also that it is kind of sad and unjust at times.

[16 : 30] And that is the world in which we live. Interesting, the book of Ecclesiastes begins and ends with the idea that everything is meaningless. So, chapter 1, verse 2, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless.

And then again, in chapter 12, verse 8, you get the idea that meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, everything is meaningless. And in between, the teacher references all sorts of different things which come under that category.

So having said that everything is meaningless, he wants to land it in a more concrete way in our lives. So you get this whole idea that lots of different things.

So pleasure is meaningless, wealth, work, wisdom, being the king, words, being righteous, the future, youth.

None of those things, says the teacher, provide a solid basis for life. None of them are enough.

They all very quickly slip through our fingers and are gone. Now, we're going to unpack some of those things in the weeks to come as we work our way through the book.

[17 : 38] But let's come back to chapter 1, and I want us to see something else about what this mist of life is like. And perhaps this is hard for us to see or certainly to agree with because I think in our particular moment in time, we are indoctrinated with the idea that we are making progress.

We believe, don't we, and we are taught that we are making progress all the time. Things are moving forward, things are improving, and things are getting better. And the book of Ecclesiastes wants you to question that idea.

It's not going to deny that things change or that new things get invented or that technological progress is made, but it wants to ask you the question of whether that is really progress, whether really actually we are getting better and better and making progress.

I don't know whether you followed the news this week with Jacob Coxon, who was interviewed by the BBC. He worked for Anthropic, you know, the AI company behind Claude.

Do you hear his interview? He said this, I think it's on your handout. I believe, this is terrifying, isn't it? I believe that if we don't slow down at the current rate of progress, there is a strong chance that we could all die in the immediate future.

[18 : 52] I mean, so I don't know whether you think that's true or not, but I mean, he is true. We are all going to die in the future at some point, but he seems to think that that's linked to this progress with AI.

We're not actually making progress, he's saying. This is technological advancement, but it doesn't mean humanity or human nature is advancing. In fact, actually, it's been taken hold of and used in

wicked ways.

Mary Harrington is a feminist and not a Christian as far as I know, but she wrote a book back in 2023, which is called *Feminism Against Progress*. It caused a bit of a storm at the time.

And she has come to this realization that what she thought was progress, as in advancing towards a just end, was actually not self-evidently true.

So she says, it is not self-evident that humans have progressed in some absolute sense. That doesn't mean that everything was perfect once and we're all going to hell in a handbasket, but pick a subject and you'll find some things are better while other things have become worse.

[19:54] If you're going to believe in progress, you have to define what you mean by progress. More stuff, more freedom, less disease. Pick any subject and you'll find that what looks from one vantage point like progress mostly seems that way because you're ignoring the costs.

We've grown immeasurably richer and more comfortable in the last 300 years, for example, but we did so on the backs of plundered, colonized and enslaved peoples and at the cost of incalculable environmental degradation.

Gosh, that's difficult to say. Meanwhile, torture in warfare hasn't gone away, warfare hasn't gone away, nor has hunger, misery, want or human degradation. I feel like Mary Harrington had stumbled onto Ecclesiastes 1 and never realized it.

So have a look at Ecclesiastes 1, verse 4. What is life in this world like? Well, people come and go, but the earth remains forever. Generations come, generations go.

We're here for a time and then we're gone. We don't make progress. We don't get anywhere. Verse 5. Verse 5. The sun rises and sets again. And then rises and sets.

[21:05] It's not progressing anywhere or achieving anything. It's just rising and setting. It's the same with the wind in verse 6. The wind blows to the south, turns to the north.

Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. It's not making any progress. It's just going round and round. The streams never fill the sea. They flow into it day and night, day and night, and the sea is never full.

And they return to where they've come from. So much so, the writer concludes in verse 9, What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again.

There is nothing new under the sun. And that, he says, is life. We need to come to terms with that is what life is like. There is a sort of cyclical nature.

It doesn't make any progress. It's not going anywhere. We're not achieving anything. We're not building anything. We're like the wind which just blows round and round and round and round. It's a mist.

[22:06] You can't grab a hold of it. Okay, with the person next to you, I then want you to ask this question. How does this lack of progress make you feel? Is life meant to be like this, do you think?

Have a talk to the person next to you. And then we'll finish off after that. Okay, we don't have a huge amount of time.

So, does anyone want to feedback any of the most useful and insightful things said in your groups? Yes.

Please. Please. Please. may may may may This book is a It's a It's a Life is a Life is a But the critical thing is that What do we do today The government is to Where people do our It's still Where are we going to Which is not That's when you have to Actually Move the system of the As So that When it happens to us We are Yeah Yeah See I think the point is that it's important That we keep in view eternity And that there is a place that We're going to where treasure really Will last Yeah That's helpful We were saying It's both liberating and frustrating It's like Whilst we are like We know that in this world we'll always be sinning We still want to be Striving for like Bringing God glory But we're in the cycle Being knocked around Feeling the pains of Hard days and sad things But yeah also being like Oh but it's a thing We're in this broken world And we can never reach This point that we have in our minds See it is both liberating and frustrating Just in the interest of time Let me try and wrap some of this up I think we need to try and distinguish that There is a part of this which is the brokenness of the world Which is the injustice and the pain But also there is the fact that we were made as creatures Finite creatures And so that there actually is a sense in which

[24:50] If you spend your energy, your time, your dreams Trying to undo your creatureliness It will ultimately be frustrating to you If you try and do everything and be everywhere In order to build something that will last You are denying the very creaturely existence that you have been given by

God Regardless of sin and injustice in the world And that will be frustrating to you Because actually God is the only one with a plan that's making progress And getting somewhere and doing something And actually it's only really in Him that we get to be part of that And so we live these lives as creatures And there's a, I can't, I don't have time to read it But there's a really helpful bit in Dave Gibson's book About where he talks about we live in this sort of let's pretend world So we imagine, don't we Oh, if only I have that Or if only I work really hard this week and achieve that Then the week after will be much better And I will have less to do then

If only I move to this place Then life will be way more comfortable and way easier And I think our city is full of that, right? Because everybody is kind of trying to get a little bit further ahead Aren't they? That's why they're here And so if you pretend, you can play that let's pretend game You're not living in the real world that God has made And you're not living in the real life that He has given you And the writer of Ecclesiastes says until you've come to terms with that That actually there is a sort of temporary futility to our existence here Until we've come to terms with that we won't really enjoy life Let me give you an example which I think might come from the book But it's been mulling around in my mind So it might not have done it, I can't remember, right?

Who's the most miserable person on a holiday? The most miserable person on... Sorry? Did you... Did he say... Did he name somebody?

Yes! Okay Geoff, that wasn't the purpose of this Let me tell you, the most miserable person on holiday Is the person who's always talking about the day they go home Yeah?

Just go, oh yeah, yeah And they get frustrated, don't they? Because they're like, oh, you know, I just wish... Oh, but we're leaving soon, we're going home soon Actually, the way to enjoy a holiday is just to enjoy each day as it comes As a gift, isn't it?

[27:20] And in a sense, that's how we're to live our life, isn't it? Each day is a gift to us from God If we're trying to build something or achieve something And we're frustrated by the end of it We won't really enjoy it as it is We're creatures We've been given these lives by God We've been placed in His will We find our joy in Him Ultimately, the answer to meaninglessness is in chapter 5, verse 7 And the answer is fear the Lord Fear the Lord That's the answer More of that to come Let me close in prayer for us Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the uncreated creator The Lord of Lords, the King of Kings Who is progressing towards your ultimate goal and promise of bringing all things under Christ's feet And bringing great glory to your name as every knee will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord And in the great sweep of all that you're achieving, Lord, we live very short lives

We go round and round in circles We don't really achieve very much at all And so, Lord, if we imagine that the purpose of our lives is to try and make them long And try and achieve our own goals We will never find what our lives are about So help us to find our meaning in you In fearing you In trusting you And enjoying every day that you've given to us As a gift from you To be used for your glory As we pray in Jesus' name Amen