

# Meaningless, Meaningless?

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Preacher: Ali Sewell

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] We're going to be looking at this brilliant book of Ecclesiastes for the next few months. This is a book that at times will feel like a bucket of cold water being thrown over us to wake us up on a Sunday morning.
- This is a book to help us face reality rather than try and hide or pretend that things are different from they are. This is a book that helps us approach wisely the reality of living as we do in a fallen world.
- That there is good in what God gives us but also there is sin that mars the world that we live in. This is a book that will at times shock us, at times perhaps confuse us, at times perhaps make us feel slightly uncomfortable.
- In fact the last few verses of Ecclesiastes are kind of like a blurb that you get at the very back of the book. It says there that the words of Ecclesiastes are like goads.
- A goad was basically a stick with pointy things in it that farmers would use to kind of encourage oxen or cattle to go in the right direction. So as you can imagine a goad can be uncomfortable.
- [ 1 : 1 2 ] But this is a book to goad us to a way of living that ultimately offers hope and joy and wisdom.
- A way of living that is in line with going with the grain of our world rather than the frustration of constantly trying to push against that.
- So I think this is going to be a really good time looking at this book together. I've found this book incredibly helpful for me personally and I genuinely mean this. I'm not just trying to kind of hype up the start of a new series.
- I genuinely think that if we really listen and consider and take to heart as a church, as individuals, what God is saying to us in this book, it will give us this radically different lens through which to view the world.
- But a lens that makes far more sense than so many of the messages and approaches to life that we see around us.
- [ 2 : 1 5 ] It's going to give us a way to approach our day-to-day frustrations and disappointments right through to the other end of the scale, to the life-changing news that we receive, whether for better or worse.
- This is a book of the Bible which gives us wisdom, I think, in how we approach the ongoing kind of mundane tasks of life, like trying to keep a tidy house right through to the unavoidable facts of life.
- That one day we are all going to end up in the grave. And it's going to help us deal with everything on that whole spectrum of things that we come up against and deal with in life.
- So this is an incredible book, I think, to help us understand our world better. And so look for hope and meaning and the good life in the right place, rather than the confusion and disappointment and ultimately the emptiness that the world's advice, that the received wisdom of our culture, so often leaves us and those around us with.

So with all that said, let's begin. We're just going to jump straight in. We're looking at the first 11 verses of chapter 1 that Ross just read for us, which are something of an introduction to the book as a whole.

[ 3 : 30 ] And it'd be really good to have those verses, Ecclesiastes 1 to 11, open in front of you as we look through. And the first thing that we're going to see, getting to grips with this, is it's huge for the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole.

This is one of the themes we'll return to again and again. But this is the first thing that we see in this book of Ecclesiastes, and it's this, that life is our breath. Life is our breath.

Verse 1 of chapter 1, we're introduced to the preacher, whose words we're going to be hearing through this book of Ecclesiastes. The preacher is this kind of kingly figure. The preacher is this figure of wisdom.

We'll see even more clearly next week that the preacher is a man who has studied life, and he has recorded his findings for us. Sometimes that's simply observations.

It's what he sees. At other times, it will be his analysis, his wisdom as he charts a path forward. So we're going to be learning from the preacher throughout the whole of our way through Ecclesiastes.

[ 4 : 34 ] So what is the first thing then that the preacher tells us, wants to make us aware of? We'll have a look at verse 2. The preacher's opening words, vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Other translations of the Bible famously put that verse this way, meaningless, meaningless.

Everything is meaningless. It's not the most promising start to a book, is it? It sounds slightly like the kind of exasperated teenager or the first-year philosophy student.

Life is vanity. Life is meaningless. If you're kind of worried by that as a start, let me do something which I'm usually quite keen not to do. But that's this, which is to say that the words that our English Bibles use here to translate the Hebrew language in which Ecclesiastes was originally written, really the words chosen here are not the most helpful translations.

And so rest assured here, the preacher is not saying everything is vain. The preacher is certainly not saying everything is meaningless. In fact, as we've just said, the whole of this book of Ecclesiastes is about searching for meaning, searching for direction in life.

[ 5 : 51 ] So what is the preacher saying? Well, the word that is used there in the Hebrew, translated vain or meaningless, the word, we don't often do Hebrew here, so this is good. The word is hevel.

Well, its most literal translation is a breath or a vapor. It's a word used in different ways in the Bible, a few different ways.

But the main point here is not that everything is meaningless. It's that everything is fleeting. Life is a breath. Life is here and then it is gone.

The picture the preacher is painting is like when you breathe out on a cold morning and for a brief moment you see your breath there and then it's gone. It's no longer.

It's a vapor. It's a mist. It's fleeting. And Psalm 39 uses this word, hevel, in the same way. Psalm 39 we read, That same word, hevel, mankind is here and then it's gone.

[ 7 : 04 ] Life is a breath. So as we said, in Ecclesiastes the preacher is going to tell us some things that might shock us. Here are some of these sharp goads.

He's not kind of easing us in gently. He's hitting us straight away with the headlines. His opening verse, face reality, the preacher says. Life is short. Life is fleeting.

Life is a breath. And in fact, if we were to turn to the very final chapter of the book, the preacher's final words are the same words. Bracketing everything that he said.

Chapter 12, verse 8. Again, using that slightly more literal translation, the preacher says again. A breath, a breath, says the preacher. All is a breath. It is the beginning and the end of everything that the preacher is going to tell us.

And in some ways, that's what the whole of this book is about. The question the whole of Ecclesiastes is looking to deal with is this. That given that life is fleeting. Given that on a universal scale and a universal timeline, all of our lives are just a dot.

[ 8 : 09 ] But how do we live that life well? Where do we find meaning in that fleeting life? The great Russian author Leo Tolstoy, he wrote War and Peace and other kind of unfeasibly long books.

In his autobiography, Confessions, he wrestles. He wrestles with what life is all about. And he puts the question like this. He says, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

Maybe that's the kind of question you're expecting from a kind of a Russian literary author or an academic or a philosopher. Maybe that's the kind of question that sounds like a kind of ivory tower question.

And we don't sit and ponder that too much in the busyness of life. Who's got time to be mulling that kind of thing over when there's jobs to do? But actually the Bible is here to say that is a great question.

Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy? The Bible says that is actually a question that we need to have an answer to.

[ 9 : 20 ] That it's a question that even if we try and just bury it or cover it over with busyness and distraction, that ultimately it's a question that will seep out through angst and anxiety and hopelessness.

In light of the fact then that we are going to die, in light of the fact that our life is our breath and then it's gone, what are we to do with ourselves?

The book of Ecclesiastes brings us face to face with that reality straight off the bat. It startles us as a goad. It brings the biggest of pictures kind of crashing into our comfortable world and our Sunday mornings.

And then throughout the book, the preacher seeks to give us some answers and an approach to life that makes sense of that reality. So there's our starting point through this journey in Ecclesiastes.

And so really I suppose our first application is simple and it is simply to face up to that. To face the facts of that. Life is our breath.

[ 10 : 30 ] And I think this is a particular point here for young people. We're really glad to have young people in our church. We're really glad that the secondary age guys stay with us in this part of the service.

This is actually a book initially written to our youth, initially written to young people. We'll see that as we get further through. It's written to those who are in that stage of life where it feels like our days will just go on and on and on and next month feels like a lifetime away.

But the preacher says actually however young we might be, however young you are this morning and however old, the preacher says now is the time to start thinking about the big questions.

In the breath of life we are given, what is it for and how will we live? So there we go. There's the start. And I appreciate that's kind of raising the question rather than yet giving you the answer.

But that's how the book begins. One of the great foundations of this book that we need to get in place to then build on as we move through. Life is a breath.

[ 11 : 38 ] Okay, let's move on. Just in case you thought that sounded like a bit of a downer. Well, here's our second heading. And a heads up. You can probably add it into the same category as the first one. Life is a breath.

The second point that we see in these introductory verses then the preacher tells us is this. There is no gain. There is no gain. Have a look down at verse 3 where the preacher poses the question, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

The preacher here exposes, gets straight to the heart of how humanity, how all of us so frequently seek to live our life. Which is that we seek day by day to build up some sort of bank of achievements.

We don't want a fleeting life. We don't want a life that is just a breath. We want a life of gain. We want to work so that we have something to hold on to.

Look what I've done. Look what I've made. Look what is mine. We think we can earn something of permanence by toiling away. Something we can keep forever. But again, the preacher is here to burst that bubble.

[ 12 : 50 ] If this life is a breath, he says, then there is no gain. There is nothing we can hold on to. And the preacher kind of answers his question of verse 3 in the negative. What does man gain?

By pointing us in verses 4 to 7 to the universe in which we live, I'm just piling up examples which show us there is no gain. That is not how our world works.

Do have a look down at those verses. Verse 4, generations come and go, but the earth remains the same. Verse 5, the sun rises, the sun sets, and then it races back to do it all again.

Verse 6, the wind blows this way and that way. It goes round and round and we are back where we started. Verse 7, this is probably the best example for us because we've all drawn this in secondary school geography.

We've had our pencil cranes and drawn the mountains and the sea and a few clouds. It's the water cycle. The streams run down into the mountains, into the sea, but the sea never fills up.

[ 13 : 51 ] It goes back to where it started. There is no gain in that process. It never comes to an end. It is a cycle that goes round and round and round. And the preacher is drawing a parallel to that and to our lives.

We try and approach life as if we are, it's like a tower we're building. We're ticking things off and we're moving on. We're completing things that we can build on and that we can bank so that we can move on to the next thing.

And actually the preacher says we are going round and round in a universe that goes round and round. And he kind of underscores that verses 8 to 11 to show that is the story of our human experience.

The eye is never satisfied with seeing. We never think, oh, that's great. I've seen everything I need to see. The ear, nor the ear with hearing. We've never heard enough. We're never complete.

We never get to that point where we think, well, I just don't really need anything else. I've experienced all I require. No. We want more. We desire more. And the cycle goes on.

[ 14 : 54 ] Even when we think what we think is new, here's something we've achieved or here's something we've gained. Verses 9 and 10 are here to tell us we're simply repeating what has gone before.

How does that work? Surely some things are new. In 1969, man landed on the moon. That hadn't happened before. And yet I think the preacher would say it is simply another example of humanity's desire to get further.

To sail across the ocean. To fly to the moon. To get men on Mars. And after that, there will be something else. It's the same principle of wanting to get further and getting further but never reaching a final destination.

There is always more. And this cycle goes round and round. And verse 11 then rounds off what might seem like this fairly downbeat poem.

It is a poem. That's what these verses are. It says this. There is no remembrance of former things. Nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

[16:00] And so here's the sum of it. The preacher says, we think we're going to make a name for ourselves. We think we are going to achieve great things that everyone will talk about.

We think we're going to gain. But actually, each one of us here will die and will be forgotten. Even things that are still to come in the future beyond them will have been forgotten.

And if you want the proof of that, how many of us can name our great-grandparents? I certainly can't. For those of you who can, it wouldn't take many more generations before the family tree would get a bit foggy and start having a few gaps appearing.

But the preacher says, that's just the way the world is. We live. We die. We're forgotten. So that is what this poem in verses 2 to 11 is all about.

There is no gain. Life goes round and around until ultimately we're gone and forgotten. Okay. Well, the good news is no one has left yet at this point.

[17:03] So that's good. My job now, what I'd like to do now, is to try and make you glad that you came to church this morning. Because perhaps it might be fair enough if you've got a kind of question wondering why, in all the challenges, the difficulties, the busyness of my life, why am I turning up at church to be told life is fleeting and there's no gain?

I would love it by the time we got to the end of Ecclesiastes for us to still have a church, rather than everyone had just thought, I'm just going to take these few months off and I'll come back for the nativity stuff in December.

But so here's the first thing. And there is really good news throughout this book. And it kind of, it's difficult. Like we said, it's like a goad. But it is transformative and incredibly good.

And here's the first thing, which I hope is a way this passage brings real encouragement and comfort. And then we're going to zoom out and see an even better thing. But here's the first thing right here in chapter one.

And it's simply this. Does this description of life as a cycle which is so hard to break out from, where we can't hold on to any gain, where we feel like that drop in the ocean just going round and round the water cycle, does that not resonate with how our life so frequently feels?

[18:22] One of the biggest gifts, I think, to us of the book of Ecclesiastes is that it brings us to face facts, the realities of our life and the world we live in.

And it says that's okay. And so you work hard at home and you're tired and constantly busy and yet the house never stays tidy.

Or you try and bring up your kids and teach them well and teach them what they need to know and yet there's always new things and they reach a new stage of development and there's more to be done. Or you work hard at your job, you get everything in by the Friday afternoon deadline, but then it's Monday morning again and there's a whole new list of tasks to make your way through.

Maybe the same tasks, repeated. Or you get your email inbox down to zero or at least approaching single figures and then you turn around and by the time you turn back it's 100, 200, however many.

You get fit and you work hard and yet you can't kind of bank that fitness. As soon as you stop, the fitness starts to fade and you're back where you were before your New Year's resolutions.

[ 19 : 33 ] Our day-to-day life is not made up of triumphant step after triumphant step of unstoppable progress and gain. So often, for all of us, it is made up of these same things again and again and again.

And I just think there's a huge relief for us here this morning to turn to the Bible and hear it say to us, Yeah, that's okay. That doesn't mean that you're doing life wrong.

You're not missing out if your life is going round and round. Productivity is this great buzzword at the moment, isn't it? I don't know if it's something that I once searched for or if everyone gets this, but I'm constantly getting adverts or articles telling me if I would just use the right AI tools in the right combination, my productivity would be through the roof and I would really achieve so much.

I would really gain or we get the same kind of idea if we just had the right morning routine or the right habits or the right diet or whatever the latest thing is. Well, then you would make a real success of your life.

Then I would have something to show for my efforts each day. I'd be somebody. I'd be making progress. My life would look like the life of the kind of internet influences or the successful people and how they're presented.

[ 21 : 00 ] Those are the things that are beamed out to us, and yet those things are exhausting, and those things don't last. And it is no wonder that our world is full of disappointed and exhausted and depressed people because they are being sold and swallowing a lie.

And yet again, there's real wisdom and real rest in embracing what the Bible tells us here about what life is really like, what the world is really like. One author puts it this way, The preacher says, Stop exhausting yourselves, constantly trying to break out of a cycle that even the wind and the water and the sun and the solar system fall in with.

And so I hope as we work through this book of Ecclesiastes, it will give real dignity and value and a better understanding to the mundane and the repetitive of the day-to-day where we live so much of our lives and where so much of our time is spent.

As I said, it helps us align our goals and our expectations with reality and that in that we would start to find rest and a wise way of approaching life.

So life is a breath. There is no gain. I did say at the beginning, Ecclesiastes is kind of stark, isn't it? We did warn you. It brings us face-to-face with these truths that we might like to try and duck away from.

[ 22 : 42 ] We just said, and I hope you're kind of slightly convinced there, there is relief in that, that actually does help us to be living in light of reality rather than a kind of a fantasy world that we're presented with.

I think more and more we're going to see how that gives us a better approach to life. But as we finish, I think it's also important to see and also important for me to say that if that was all there is, if what we've said so far was the sum total of Ecclesiastes and the Bible's message, that maybe that realism would help, but it would be hard to find full satisfaction in that, wouldn't it?

The kind of satisfaction that could sustain us for a lifetime. We'd be realistic about our world. Would we be excited? Would we be joyful?

And so as we close this morning, we're going to look at one final point, just briefly introduced here, almost hinted at here, but which will be opened out more fully as we move through this book. And that's this, that there is more.

There is more. Now do have a look in your Bibles back up to verse 3 of chapter 1. Have a look down there at verse 9 of chapter 1.

[ 23 : 54 ] See that repeated phrase there? And we'll see it repeated again throughout this book of Ecclesiastes, under the sun. Now what does that mean? That the preacher is saying all this stuff is under the sun.

The preacher is simply saying that this is the world as he observes it. This is the world that we live in. This is what life is like under the sun, which is where all of us spend all of our days, whether Christian or not Christian.

And yet the world that we live in, the world the preacher observes, the world under the sun, is a fallen world. The book of Ecclesiastes is explaining how to make sense of and how to live wisely in the world, which ever since Genesis chapter 3 has been marred by sin.

And so frustrates us when we try to find completeness in it. It is a world which is not perfect. A creation which has been subject to frustration.

And yet to really make sense of this world, we need to know, as the preacher knew, that there is more. We live under the sun, but there is a God who is over all things.

[ 25 : 05 ] Our days are of a breath, but he is eternal. The preacher is observing life under the sun, recognizing that even in this observation, he is not seeing the whole picture.

There is more. If this life is all there is, we'll do anything we can to deny or avoid the reality that life is a breath. Because this is all we have.

We want to cling on to it. We'll exhaust ourselves, trying to break out of a cycle, trying to find gain in the present, under the sun, because what else can we do? Where else can we go?

And yet again, the message of the Bible is, there is more. And then the promise of the Bible is that through trusting in Jesus, we are able to share in this more.

that when our breath of a life here is over, that we will receive eternal life in Christ. And there we will find gain and joy and eternal satisfaction.

[ 26 : 07 ] And Jesus himself says these words, for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? That if we strive after everything in this life, not only will it slip through our fingers, we might very well end up losing the most important thing of all, our very souls.

The eternal life with God that Jesus has made possible through his life and death and resurrection, through the forgiveness that he alone offers. And so the book of Ecclesiastes is going to help us face facts about reality by living in light of eternity.

And in fact, the very close of the book, again, chapter 12, verse 13, is going to say this, This is how we live this life, this brief life under the sun, by keeping God in the picture, by recognizing the greatness of God, keeping his commandment, the most important commandment of all, being that call to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that he will bring us home, he will bring us all we need, he will lead us to a place where life is no longer a frustration, a breath, a treadmill, but to an eternity spent with him, enjoying the reality and the relationship we were designed for, where no longer will we observe and live in a fallen world, but we will live in perfection, which we are invited into through the grace of Jesus Christ.

And through that, we will find in him everything that we need. We live now our short days under the sun. There is no gain.

That gives us great dignity in the day-to-day life that we live. But we live it in light of the eternal God, who through Jesus has welcomed us to be with him forever and gives us all that we need.

[ 28 : 18 ] Let's pray together.