

What's New?

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, my old headmaster at high school used to say this time of year, it's great in the school year. We get two new years, he said. One just after the summer, one in January. Two fresh chances, he said. Two chances to start again. I guess if you follow the logic of that, those of us who have left school, haven't gone back to teach, get one new year, one fresh start, and this is it. Or is it? Do we get a new year?
- Now, before you worry, I do know, okay, this is the first of January. The year stretches out ahead of us, doesn't it? Full of excitement and freshness and hope, perhaps worry for some of us. Perhaps you feel there are things that have got a lot closer, even in the last few hours, than they felt just a few days ago since the turn of the year. There are, for me, things we hope for, things we dread, or perhaps even the biggest category of all, the things that we just have no idea that are coming. Maybe we fear that. But whatever's coming, it will bring change, won't it? Surely it is a new year for us, isn't it? Well, this morning, we have a guest preacher. Okay, you won't have seen him when you came in, but you have heard him already. See there in Ecclesiastes 1 verse 1, the words of the teacher or preacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. And this guest preacher this morning wants to ask us at the start of a new year, what's really new about it? What's really new about the new year? Now,
- I'll hold my hands up and say, the book of Ecclesiastes is not the easiest book. In fact, I want to shamelessly recommend you your first new year reading, okay, from our neighbor down the road, David Gibson at Trinity Church. You cannot get a better start on the book of Ecclesiastes than this, his book, *Destiny*. I read it a couple of years ago. It's brilliant, okay? So I'd recommend that to you if you want to read more this year. Because although Ecclesiastes is not maybe the simplest book, it is one of the most straight talking books. Okay, here's a preacher who tells it like it is. Wisdom writing in the Bible, Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book, and it is about how to live faithfully here and now in the world as it is today. That's what he means when he says under the sun. This world here and now, how do we live in it? And while it's hard for us to get our heads around sometimes, it's not hard for us to get our hearts around what he has to say.
- Because he's speaking to a sort of common sense that we've all had, or have maybe, that the world is not enough. It doesn't taste as good as we were told. It's not as full as we once imagined.
- [3 : 3 5] And there is not so much new as we want there to be. And friends, we need to know that at the start of another year. Okay, this morning, the teacher tells us one big fact that leads to three expectations that in turn give us two resolutions. Okay, one fact, three expectations, two resolutions.
- So what do we need to know at the start of this year? Well, the fact is there for us in verse two. Do you see that? Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless. What a way to begin the year, huh? Now, to get this point, we need to see what he's saying, what he's not saying. Okay, so some would say this whole book is a kind of thought experiment, as if the teacher's saying, okay, pretend that there's no God. And then take that to its kind of logical conclusion. And you find at the end, there's no meaning, no purpose, no value in life.

And so these people would say the point of this book is, well, look where atheism gets you. And that is true. But is that what this book is here to tell us? Because if that's the teacher's point, okay, we need to read the whole thing a little bit tongue in cheek. He's not really saying what he's saying. The problem with that, though, is that that's not how the teacher presents himself.

Okay, read on and you'll find that this is not a kind of playful thought experiment. It's not the work of a philosopher sitting in his study surrounded by books. No, this is the weary groan of a tired man who has really lived his life. You read on and see that he set out to try and squeeze every last drop out of his youth, his studies, his work, his social life, his wealth, his power, his power, his power, his position. He is the embodiment of the phrase, you only live once, or seize the day. Well, he seized the day, or at least he tried. But for all of his clutching at life, he found it to be hevel. Hevel, that is breath, smoke, vapor. That is the word he repeats in verse 2, so that verse 2 could be read more woodenly. The merest of breaths, the merest of breaths. Everything is a breath. He grasped at life with both hands, but life slipped through his fingers. He ran harder and faster than everybody, but life still got away.

And the wisdom that taught him is that what he was chasing after is something that can't be caught. You try it when you get outside, breathe, and see if you can catch the smoke that comes from your mouth.

[6 : 51] It can't be done, can it? Well, that is life in this world, says the teacher. It is light. It is brief, elusive, unpredictable. And isn't that it? Don't we know that? Friends, how much closer are you to nailing down life than you were this time last year? Have you got life yet? Well, no, maybe we say, but in our hearts we tell ourselves this could be the year. This could be the year it all comes together, don't we? We play this trick on ourselves every year. We imagine a new year like a blank sheet of paper. We can write out all our great plans, our grand designs, as if life were ours for the planning.

You know, we might be hoping for the right kind of things this year, but picture for a moment where you were this time last year, okay. Did 2022 bring what you hoped for? And if it did, does it not leave you wanting more still? Did it really satisfy? Did it give us what we were looking for?

What about the year before 2021? Was that the year you got life? You know that 2020 wasn't. What about 2019? 1923, speed up the time machine. 1843, 1647, pick a year. In which year have we ever pinned down life and said, this is it now? We want for nothing. This is it. All our hopes are answered.

Which year did that happen? Not in the history of humanity, not in the history of this world. And so why would we think that this year is going to be any different? They say one of the signs of madness is trying the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. Well, friends, how many new years will it take for us to work out that no new year will give us life in all of its full notes? That life is not ours for the planning. It's not ours for the taking any more than last year or the year before that. We tell ourselves, don't we? We stand at the start of a new year.

But the teacher wants to ask us, what's new? What's new? Everything is still slipping through our fingers as it ever has. There is nothing new under the sun, he says. This year holds nothing new.

[9 : 43] Now, of course, life can change. New things happen to us, don't they? But zoom out, he's saying, zoom out far enough so that you can see that it's not new. It's new to you, but it's not new to life in this world, the course of history. Now, I think it's only Susie who actually knows this story.

But here's how this truth hit home to me recently. It's a weird story, I'll say that from the start, but it's a completely true story. And it's the day when our son Caleb was delivered that morning.

I had to go out early to take the dog for his walk. And I thought to myself, well, it doesn't get much more significant than this, does it? The morning your first son is born, brilliant. In a few hours, I'm going to be a new dad, and life is going to change forever. And so I wanted to just drink in and remember everything about that morning. I had my eyes wide open as I went on this walk. It was a really fresh, clear day, a few clouds in the sky, a really beautiful sunrise. It was chilly, it was frost on the ground. I was just trying to drink it all in. And then I came around the corner, okay, and stopped.

Because near our house, there's this massive kind of mound of rocks. And if any of you have walked past it, it's a cairn, okay, and it is a burial mound. And there's a sign that says you can't take rocks away because it's been here for 4,000 years, a 4,000 year burial mound. And even though I see that nearly every day, that morning, it was as if somebody had just picked up this cairn and dropped it on me. Because in that moment, it was as if I heard the voice of the generations of men buried under it for 4,000 years saying, today, it's your turn. Today, it's your turn to be a new dad.

But don't forget, that was us once. We were new dads. We stood where you're standing. We felt like you feel the morning our babies came into the world. Okay, then it was our turn. And now we're under here.

[12 : 04] And today, it's your turn. And that's great. But don't forget, one day soon, ye and your son will be buried too. And then who will remember all that you have seen this morning? Who will that matter to you? Okay, that's a bit more articulate than it was at the time. I've just tried to put into words the sense that somebody had kind of rolled out the timeline of history, okay, as long as it could go on that spot and said, look, you are this little tiny dot here. Today, you're a new dad, but you're not nearly the first and you're not nearly the last. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. What has been will be again. And 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. No one remembers the former generations, not even those yet to come will be remembered by those who follow them.

And that all brings us back around to verse two. What was that day really, says the teacher? It was special to me, but to life in this world, it was a breath, a breath. Now that's not the same as meaningless, but a less poetic way to put it would be relatively insignificant, relatively insignificant. Okay, nothing in this world has ultimate significance. It's not lasting, he says. Life has meaning, but only for a heartbeat, only for a breath.

And now you won't find that this morning, your motivational Pinterest board or your kind of pick me up Instagram page. The Bible's wisdom is real about life in this world. It sets our perspective up right to prepare us to real life. And it's out of that truth that the teacher gives us three realistic expectations and two realistic resolutions this coming year. If that sounds a lot, we're going to move quickly. Okay, don't worry. Three expectations for 2023. Okay, first, life is repetitive, so expect more of the same. I don't know about you, I'm a creature of habits. I thrive on routine, but even for me, I get to the point where I need a break. It was too much repetition, but not as far as the planet is concerned. The same things happen day in, day out. The sun rises and the sun sets. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north. The streams flow into the sea and they return to where they came from.

So he's saying that the water system, the weather system, the solar system do the rounds over and over, don't they? They never pause for breath. It's relentless. And he's kind of pointing to that vast system of nature as a macrocosm for what life is like under the sun. Okay, that repetition, he says, filters down into every minute of every day. We all pass through, don't we? The same 24 hours each and every day. And to be honest, most days, for most of us, there's not that much variation, is there?

Get up, eat, work, sleep. Get up, eat, work, sleep. Whatever it is for ye, they come and go, don't they? And you can expand that to the world in general, he says. That's the point of chapter 3, verses 1 to 8. There's a time for everything. These are some of the best-known verses in the whole Bible.

[16 : 09] And at first glance, the pairs of opposites, they sound wonderfully varied, don't they? What a rich life. But their point is not to say, this is for you to go out personally and do each and every one of these things. He's not inviting us, is he, to hate or kill or wage war. His point is much bigger than that, but life under the sun has a way of swinging like a pendulum between these pairs of opposites. Births are followed by deaths, are followed by births, are followed by deaths.

Peace is followed by war, is followed by peace, is followed by war. And each pair, there's one that we really hope for, isn't there? It's one that we would love to happen, but he's saying both are realities in this world. Don't forget, says the teacher, they are both on repeat. Both on repeat. So application, do not expect the pendulum to stop for you in 2023. Prepare yourself for more of the same, perhaps in different quantities, perhaps in different forms, but don't expect the basics of life to take a break. Some of us will be hoping for change this year. Some of us will be hoping that things don't change. But you know, one of the best ways you could prepare yourself for this year is, okay, later on, just take a quiet moment and read back through those verses in chapter three and remind yourself that those pairs of opposites will only be separated once and for all when Christ returns.

Okay, write down the half that you hope for and then tell yourself that is the new creation. Then put in the half that you don't hope for and tell yourself that is life under the sun.

Prepare yourself for more of the same. Second expectation, life goes fast, so expect to say, I don't know where the time went. Perhaps you know the musical Fiddler on the Roof. I know there are a couple of people who know it well. My parents are here today. It's a classic this time of year.

And in it, there's a wedding and the parents of the bride sing this song, okay, that captures this. They say, is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play? I don't remember growing older. When did they? Sunrise, sunset. Sunrise, sunset. Swiftly fly the years. That's where it went.

[19 : 02] That's how it happened. Sunrise, sunset. The years fly by a day at a time, don't they? 365 is not that many. It'll be gone in a flash. Sounds a lot like chapter one, verse five, doesn't it? The sun rises, the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. Time-lapse photography didn't exist, of course, back then. But if it did, you can imagine that the teacher taking this, can't you?

The sun flying through its arc over the sky, the stars spinning, and the sun in its arc, and the stars spinning, and the sun again, and there goes the year. The days slip through our fingers, don't they? And we will say, where did the time go? Well, brothers and sisters, expect to say that.

Okay, remember that this year will fly by a day at a time. And in that knowledge, pray then, pray with Moses, the prayer that we sang from Psalm 90. Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may get a heart of wisdom. Take the days in hand, use them well, redeem the time, and do not pretend the year will last forever. Because at the end of the year, you will say, I don't know where the time went.

Third expectation, this life isn't enough, so expect to be dissatisfied. Now, I wonder if you see the twist here. If this is kind of simply how life works in the world, then why would we expect anything different? If we just kind of crawl dust and atoms out of this closed system of life, well, shouldn't we be quite comfortable in our natural habitat? Shouldn't we be at home under the sun? But we're not, are we? We ask questions. Life grates against us at times. Look what the teacher says in 1 verse 8, all things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. He's describing, isn't he, just common garden variety boredom. I can't see enough, I can't hear enough. Seeing and hearing the same stuff never fills us up, does it? However good it is, well, the goodness wears off. And these are the words, remember, of a man who's seen and heard and done it all. He says, chapter 2, I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

I refused my heart no pleasure, only to discover that in his words it is all unspeakably wearisome. Because, 3 verse 11, what has God done? God has also set eternity in the human heart.

[21 : 49] We are not satisfied with life in this world because, friends, we were not made for life under the sun. We were not made for this world, a world broken and scarred by sin in which the good and the bad swing nauseatingly back and forth. A world separated by sin from our Creator. We know we are made for something better than this because life as it is, doesn't satisfy. It grates against us. We crave eternity. But that longing cannot be met in this world, however hard we try to find it. So do not expect life under the sun to be enough. Prepare to be dissatisfied. And let that dissatisfaction lead ye to your Creator. Let it remind you what it is you were made for, eternal life with God.

Do not rest your hope on this world. Okay, one fact, three expectations. So lastly, that brings us to two resolutions to live by this year, two resolutions. And these are the two conclusions, okay, that the preacher reaches in this whole book. Here's a shortcut, okay, to the book of Ecclesiastes. They both begin there, I know, in chapter 3, verses 12 to 14. Can you see them? I know. What does he know?

Firstly, resolve to enjoy what you can under the sun. What does he say? I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil. This is the gift of God. Okay, perhaps it's felt this morning like the preacher's coming with a pin and burst your bubble on the first day of the new year.

Okay, but he is not anti-life, is he? Have you ever read the resolutions of Jonathan Edwards? See, 70 resolutions, he wrote down. He said, I'm going to read them once every week. They're hard resolutions to live by. Impossible, I imagine. Well, maybe we're expecting something a bit like that, an impossible resolution. Strict, hard to keep. But this is not like that, is it?

I guess the closest to the teacher's resolutions is Edwards' first resolution. He says, resolved that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory and my own good profit and pleasure in the whole of my life without consideration of time. You know, hasn't the teacher been telling us life in this world is futile? Well, no, only that it doesn't carry ultimate meaning. And that is freeing because it frees us then, doesn't it, from needing to find ultimate meaning in anything that this world offers. So that then we can take life as it comes, enjoy what we can and give thanks to God for it, for what it is a gift. You know, this wisdom takes the pressure off of us, doesn't it, to get the lasting satisfaction for our lives that this world can't possibly deliver? When we see that our work is not the be-all and end-all of life, what does it mean?

[25 : 26] Well, it means we can go home at the end of the day and forget about it and enjoy other things and be satisfied with our work as it gives satisfaction. Or marriage, family life, if we know that these things are a breath, that they are here and gone again, what does it mean? Well, it means that we can enjoy it for what it is while it lasts, knowing that it is broken. It doesn't have to be the perfect family, the perfect marriage, but we give thanks to God for it. Or food and drink, friends, parties, coffee, simple things. It doesn't have to carry the weight of the world, does it?

It just gives us what it can for a time. And we give thanks to God for the happiness, the pleasure, the enjoyment that we derive from it while it's here. A life under the sun cannot give us everything.

So resolve not to ask it to you. Recognize your life for what it is and let life and work and relationships under the sun be what they are. Brief and broken and breath-like. And then, says the teacher, you will find a happiness, a satisfaction in them that you will not get otherwise. Okay, friends, the Bible is not down on life, is it? It gives life. And the teacher is telling us that life can be good when we accept that it cannot give us ultimate significance, satisfaction. But that doesn't mean, does it, that it can't give us any significance or any satisfaction.

Knowing that life is a breath means that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil.

This is the gift of God. So, brothers and sisters, make a resolution this year to stop seeking your ultimate significance in this world and start enjoying just what life can offer here and now, thanking God for that gift. And secondly, resolve to worship God. See that second I know?

[27 : 49] There in verse 14, he says, I know that everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it, nothing taken from it. God does it so people will fear him. Life is as brief as a breath, he says, but God's work is not. And so, our ultimate significance and satisfaction must lie then with him, not in the closed system of this world under the sun, but in God, our creator, in his sovereign plans and purposes and not our own, in his great and glorious work, not ours, in his eternal power and divine nature, not in our own strength or being. He has put eternity in our hearts to crave something more than life in a fallen world could give. And that is himself. And he has worked in our world, says the teacher, so that we will know and worship him with awe and wonder, our transcendent and eternal God.

That is the sense of that word, fear, to worship him, to treat him as one who is not of this world, but holy and glorious and unlike us, one who overflows with life and blessing and glory and goodness in and of himself.

He is not fragile or brief or changing. He is not ever dissatisfied or foolish or sinful.

He has worked in and through his son, Jesus Christ, and supremely through his death to save us from our foolishness, our sin, our brevity, our mortality. He came down, he took our humanity to himself. His life became a passing breath.

He lived under the sun. He lived under the sun. He died under the sun and he did it so that we might find our ultimate satisfaction, our ultimate meaning in him, indeed eternal life in him. He is true wisdom from God. He is the life that we crave under the sun.

[30 : 18] And so in the darkness of our own hearts and minds, in the shadows of our world, he shines and sheds light and beauty, meaning, significance, purpose, satisfaction for all who trust in him.

And so resolve this year to worship him. Perhaps that really would be new for you this year, to put your trust in this Savior, to worship him, recognize him for who he is, to find your life in him.

Well, what better way to start than to put your trust in the Lord Jesus, to rest the weight of your whole life upon him. And for all of us, there can be no better start, can there, than to resolve to worship God, to give him our highest thanks, to find our true meaning, life, happiness, satisfaction, in the one who has loved us, and who gave his son for us.

Let's pray and ask God for that gift together. Amen. God, our Father, how we thank you that you have set eternity in our hearts.

Lord, we know that we were made for more than this. And so we pray, our Father, by your Spirit, that you would guide the longing of our hearts to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[31 : 54] Lord, we acknowledge that you are the only one who can give us what we crave, our ultimate significance, lasting satisfaction, eternal life.

And so we pray, Father, that we would have that gift. Lord, we pray for those who as yet have not received it, even here, that you would grant it this year. Lead them to the Lord Jesus, we pray.

And Father, for those of us who know him, that we would come back daily. Lord, again and again, as we live out life under the sun, that we would find our life in Christ, a life that never stops giving, a life that is overflowing and abundant, and that we would have life in all of its fullness, for we have Christ Jesus.

Lord, this we pray and ask in his name. Amen.