

Here One Moment, Gone the Next

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[0 : 0 0] For those of you who were here yesterday, you will have heard Joe mention that he had the privilege of sharing a desk with me for a couple of years at ETS, the Free Church of Seminary.

And it reminded me, when he said that, of an occasion. I've not verified this with him, but I'm fairly sure it was him. When he picked off a dusty book from one of the shelves in the Old Testament classroom, it had been printed in something like 1960, but when he went to find out more, it turned out the pages of the book hadn't even been cut yet.

Some poor soul put a lot of work into that book, and 60 years of ETS students had been gone, and not even bothered to find out what was inside.

I wonder, if the pages of Ecclesiastes in your Bible at home had not yet been cut, if you couldn't open them, would you have noticed by now?

You might be sitting there thinking, I would have noticed, thank you very much. But if that's the case, I'm betting it's because, like me, after three years of trying, three years of failed attempts, you finally got to the point in your Bible in a Year reading program, when you finally had to delve into this unfamiliar corner of the Old Testament, and you dutifully read it through, didn't really understand it, and moved quickly on to the next book.

[1 : 3 7] It's not one of our go-to books of the Bible, is it? If you're looking for a pick-me-up verse on a bad day, and you open Ecclesiastes, and it's meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.

Think out. I had a quick look through the archives of Border Chord sermons on the new website. It's an amazing resource if you're not already aware of it.

There have been nine sermons on Ecclesiastes here in Bon Accord since the day I was born. I won't give too much away about my age, although if you judge it by my hairline, you'll expect me to be more mature than I am.

But even then, that's not a lot of sermons, is it? When we reach verse 12 of chapter 1 next week, we will be looking at a part of the Bible that hasn't been from this pulpit since those records began.

That is, I think, a fair representation of how familiar most of us are with the book of Ecclesiastes. And I think that's probably because it's a bit different, isn't it?

[2 : 5 5] You don't need to be a linguist to recognize that this book is written in a very different style and with a completely different tone to pretty much every other part of the Bible.

So if we want to get the most out of this book, we need to start by making sure that our ears are tuned correctly. We need to know what we are listening out for, and we can learn in part how to do that by just taking our time in verse 1.

Just look there again at that verse with me. The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

A teacher, literally the leader of the assembly, has some words he wants to share. It's a sermon, right?

And it's a sermon coming from someone with authority to preach. He is a son of David, a king in Jerusalem. Here is a sermon coming from an important preacher, a man very much worth listening to.

[4 : 11] I think historically, some commentators have suggested that Ecclesiastes is sort of the presentation of a life without God, and then the punchline comes at the end and says, but look how much better things are with God.

Now, while the sentiment there is absolutely true, that is not what is going on in Ecclesiastes. This sermon is coming from the son of David, the king of Jerusalem.

He is head over God's people. He is in a line of royal rulers that God promised would watch over his people forever. He is a God-fearer.

And I hope will become quite obvious as we go through the book together. So here is a sermon from a preacher well worth listening to. But in order to make sense of his words, we need to make sure we know what we're listening out for first.

Because if you expect a theological treatise like Romans or a gospel account like Matthew, it's no wonder when you end up completely bewildered by the way the teacher starts speaking.

[5 : 20] But there is another clue in this opening verse about how we should read this book. You don't have to do it now, but if you were to flick back to the start of the previous book, the book of Proverbs, you would find the opening verse is nearly identical.

And as you read through Proverbs, it's quite obviously teaching you all about wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's all about wanting you to live wisely in God's world. And so when Ecclesiastes starts in pretty much exactly the same way, that's a pretty good clue to us that we're still in the same genre of book.

The same thing is going on here. We are still being taught wisdom. That there are four books in the Old Testament that we know as the wisdom books.

Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. All these books want to teach us how to live well, live wisely in God's world.

[6 : 34] And in the Bible, unsurprisingly, wise living is godly living. And the key, every single time, in every one of these books, to living well in God's world is to fear the Lord.

Fear the Lord. If you want to live well in this life, you need to fear God.

That is the aim of every one of these books. But each of them shapes our understanding of the fear of the Lord in slightly different ways. They come at it from different angles.

And I think it's fair to say Ecclesiastes comes at it from the most surprising angle of all. It sort of shows us the dark side of the moon. Because what we will see in this book is that instead of showing us the right way to live, the teacher often shows us that we're currently living the wrong way.

He wants to undo much of our thinking before he presents us with a better way. He's undoing our worldview.

[7 : 46] But it's always with the ultimate purpose of showing us a better way. So get ready to hear a sermon from a teacher worth listening to.

And get ready to learn how to fear the Lord. And why you need to fear the Lord. And so if we want to try and understand Ecclesiastes, and I hope we will understand Ecclesiastes by the end of this series, that's the question we want to ask at the end of every passage.

How does what the teacher has just said to me teach me to fear the Lord? How does what the teacher has just said to me teach me to fear the Lord?

And I hope as we go through this book together, we will learn exactly what it means to fear the Lord. So here we are.

The assembly before the teacher. Let's sit down and listen as he reads his sermon text. What are the words that he's going to preach to us from? Look down at verse 2 with me.

[9 : 01] Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. It's a pretty stark start, isn't it?

But this word meaningless is going to be absolutely crucial to our understanding of this book. Joe reminded us of two Hebrew words this morning.

Chesed, which is God's steadfast love. And emet, which is God's faithfulness. Here's your third Hebrew word of the day. And it is hevel.

Hevel. The word that is translated meaningless here in verse 2. It's not as important throughout the Bible as Chesed and emet, but it is absolutely crucial to our understanding of Ecclesiastes.

Because we'll see repeatedly as the teacher shows us what he has learned about life, that everything is hevel. As we go through the chapters, let me just run through quickly some of the teacher's conclusions.

[10 : 16] Chapter 2. All that is done under the sun is hevel. Pleasure is hevel. Work is hevel.

As it goes through the book, wisdom is hevel. Laboring night and day, hevel. Money, hevel. Wealth, possessions, and honor are hevel. The day of a man's life, hevel.

All that is hevel. Youth and vigor are hevel. He'll end his book where he began. Everything is hevel. So if we want to learn from the teacher, we need to know what hevel is.

But it does not really mean meaningless. That's not, I want to be absolutely clear, coming from my own expert knowledge of Hebrew at all. But from every single one of the commentators that I've read over the last few weeks.

Translators have a hard job trying to capture the meaning and nuance of one language and transporting it to another. And 99.99% of the time, they do an incredible job. But it would appear that here, the NIV has slightly missed the mark.

[11 : 27] David Gibson, our brother who's the minister in Trinity Church here in Aberdeen. He's written a really excellent commentary on Ecclesiastes called Destiny.

I strongly recommend it. But he says, at the start of his book, he puts it this way. He says, He says, Just turn with me to Psalm 39.

Keep a finger in Ecclesiastes 1. We'll be back there very soon. Page 566 in the Church Bibles. If you want a sneak peek of where Ecclesiastes is going, I'd strongly recommend Psalm 39.

I'm sure we'll sing it together in the coming weeks. But for the moment, just look at verse 5 of this psalm. David writes, Everyone is, Everyone is, and the word there is, Everyone is but a breath.

Even those who seem secure. Look down to verse 11. The end of verse 11. Surely everyone is, and the word again, Hevel. A breath.

[13 : 21] Everyone is not meaningless. Everyone is a breath. So come back to Ecclesiastes chapter 1. What's the teacher saying?

A breath. A breath. Everything is a breath. I think that there are two things the teacher is wanting us to pick up from this analogy.

That everything is fleeting, and everything is elusive. Everything is fleeting, and everything is elusive.

Everything is fleeting because, like a breath, it comes and goes so quickly. How many times have you breathed since coming in here this night, and not even noticed?

It comes and it goes, and it comes and it goes, and it comes and it goes. It is here one moment, and it is gone the next.

[14 : 30] Everything is fleeting, and it is elusive. It is there for the briefest of moments, isn't it? But if you try to snatch at it while it is there, you are going to find yourself empty-handed.

Just picture a cold day, a little later in the year, when you can see your breath as you breathe out. It has definitely not been this week, has it? It is a nice surprise. But when you can see your breath as you breathe out, what would happen if you tried to grab hold of it?

What would happen if you tried to bottle it up? You'd have nothing. And when it's gone, what would it look like if you were to go and try and get it back?

It's there one moment. You can see it. It's very real. It's important. I'd strongly recommend breathing.

But as quickly as it has come, so quickly it goes. And there's no holding on to it. So the teacher begins by telling us that everything is fleeting.

[15 : 44] It is transient. It is elusive. If you try and grab hold of it, if you try and build something out of it, you're going to find yourself with nothing. A breath comes and goes.

The next one comes and goes. And the next one. And the next one. A breath. A breath. Everything is a breath.

That is what everything in this world is. That's the teacher's foundational starting point as he begins this sermon to us. And that is what he's going to defend and explain.

And then through that, show us how to fear the Lord. It's surprising, but the surprises don't stop there because the teacher digs in in verses 3 to 11.

He doesn't get apologetic for starting on a rather somber tone. He hammers the truth home so that we can all hear him loud and clear. Verse 3.

[16 : 49] What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? What do you think the answer is? You might have guessed already, but the teacher is going to make absolutely sure over the next couple of chapters that you know the answer is nothing.

You can toil day and night every waking moment of your life. You can acquire possessions. You can build relationships, plant gardens, make money, learn all that you can, but in the end, when it comes to it, you'll be exactly the same as the person in the plot next to yours under the headstones.

Whoever you are buried next to, you will have as much as they have. And what you will have then is absolutely nothing. One day, you will lose everything you've tried to gain under the sun.

Everything you try to gain in this short life. That day might come sooner or later, but it will come for every single one of us.

I wonder if the teacher's got you on board yet. Are you enjoying his message? I'll strap in because he keeps going by taking us on a tour of nature.

[18 : 25] Verse 4. 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. 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 where the streams come from.

There they return again. How many generations have there been? How many have come and gone? What mark have they left?

Look at the world from the heavens and what will you see? I want you to imagine someone sitting on the moon, watching the world for the last 2,000 years of human history.

As they sat there in their lunar landscape and you asked them what they had seen. Billions and billions of human lives lived.

[19 : 28] Surely it's amounted to something impressive. I suppose 50 years ago some bloke showed up with a flag. What else have you seen?

2,000 years of combined human effort. Surely you've been blown away by what they've done. What have you seen in the world that you look down onto? That's the point the teacher's making here.

The sun rises, the sun sets, the sun rises again. The wind blows the clouds round and round and round and round without ever stopping to catch a breath.

Speaking of clouds, the rain falls, the rivers flow into the sea, the water evaporates, the rain falls, the rivers flow into the sea, the water evaporates, the rain falls again and again and again and again.

How do you fit into the picture? Where's my life in all of that? And the answer is that my life and your life is the merest of breaths.

[20 : 43] It is here one moment and gone the next and the world will keep on going round all the same. Round and round and round and round the sun sets and rises, the wind blows here and there, the rain falls and the sea never fills up.

Take a step back, look at the big picture, look at the cosmic reality and realize how brief and futile your life under the sun is.

If you're looking to change the world, it's time for a reality check. Verse 9, 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? And again, the answer is no. It was all here already long ago.

It was here before our time. There is nothing new under the sun. There is nothing the world hasn't seen before and won't see again. Verse 11, no one remembers the former generations and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

[21 : 52] It's not exactly a pick-me-up message the preacher starts with, is it? Your life probably won't be remembered for long.

Maybe by your own grandchildren, but apart from them and after that, who is actually going to be aware of your existence? That's what you gain from all your toil under the sun.

If you strive to build your identity on what you gain in this life, you will end up with nothing. Likely not even a footnote in the history books.

That's where the teacher's introductory thoughts end. That's the thought he wants ringing in our heads as we go through the rest of the book together.

So what do we do with Ecclesiastes chapter 1? Where do we go from here? Well, let's ask the question we want to ask at the end of every passage.

[23 : 05] How does the teacher's teaching help us to fear the Lord? How is the teacher teaching us to fear the Lord?

I'm sure you've picked up now on what I was saying at the start about his style of teaching being slightly different. Not quite what we're used to. He doesn't show us what is right. He shows us where we are going wrong.

So here's what I think he wants us to take into the rest of the book. How should we fear the Lord? Well, first of all, we fear the Lord by realizing that the world won't remember you.

The world won't remember you. but God will. The world won't remember you.

But God will. We make so many of our decisions based on fear, don't we?

[24 : 18] It's not always a terrified trembling that when we fear people, when we fear the world, we do things to earn their respect, the world's approval.

We want people to like us, to respect what we think. But when we fear people, we will do things to earn their respect.

When we fear the world, what the world thinks of us, we will start saying what they want us to say. When we fear the world, we will ease ourselves away from the truth of God's word and align ourselves with the doctrine of our time.

but the teacher wants to make sure you know that the world won't remember you. But God will.

He says, no, no, no, no. Don't fear the world because the world is going to forget about you. You are but a breath. And in a generation from now, no one will remember you even existed but God.

[25 : 32] God will. So fear him by living for him. That's not just some Old Testament message that the New Testament comes and dispels with.

Jesus says exactly the same thing in Matthew 10. He says, do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. If you live in the world and for the world, you will find yourself empty-handed and forgotten.

But while this world won't remember you, God will. So look to her in his favor, his respect, his pleasure. That is the way the teacher begins his sermon.

Let me just, with the final few minutes, give you a teaser, a foretaste of what is to come so you can start to understand why the teacher begins this way.

[26 : 43] Why he starts with such a heavy message. And what we'll see in the coming weeks and months as we go through this book together, just quickly, three ways that the teacher teaches what it looks like to fear God and live wisely in this world.

First, as we have just touched on, fear God by living with eternity in mind. Fear God by living with eternity in mind.

When we remember our lives here are but the merest of breaths, we will make sure to live in the big picture. the teacher wants us to fear God by remembering there is more to everything than this short life.

And he'll show us that by taking us on a journey through all the ways that people live as if under the sun is all there is. But by the very phrase he is teasing our minds towards something else, isn't he?

There is something above the sun. There is something beyond the here and now. So he takes us on a tour under the sun.

[27 : 58] That is this life we are living now and shows us the emptiness of pouring all your effort into gaining something from it. And so then says, well instead of that, live for something bigger.

Wait on the justice to come under the judgment of God and then enjoy what you can during these short stays of this life. That is the second lesson we're going to learn as we go through this book.

Fear God by enjoying his good gifts. I wonder if you were familiar with it at all, if you would have described Ecclesiastes as a book about joy and rejoicing.

My hope is that in 13 weeks time that is exactly how you might describe it. Just listen to a few of the many conclusions that the teacher will reach throughout this book. chapter 3, I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and do good while they live.

Again, chapter 3, so I saw there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work. Chapter 5, when God gives someone wealth and possessions and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil, this is a gift of God.

[29 : 21] Chapter 8, so I commend the enjoyment of life because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad.

Then joy will accompany them in their toil the days of the life God has given them under the sun. Chapter 11, however many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.

when we accept our life here on earth as the merest of breaths and we realize that it is a gift from God, we will be freed to enjoy what we can instead of trying to squeeze something out of it that isn't meant to be gained at all.

As one commentator brilliantly puts that the teacher wants to show us that life is gift not gain.

Life is gift not gain. Stop trying to get something out of this short life when you're going to lose it all one day anyway and the world will forget all about you and start enjoying the good gifts God has given you to enjoy.

[30 : 41] but the teacher isn't naive about life. Enjoy the good times he says but thirdly and finally that doesn't mean ignoring the way the world really is.

Fear God by lamenting the brokenness of this world. Because while the teacher wants us to enjoy what we can in this short life he is very aware that we are living in a cursed world.

It is still a good world full of God's good gift but it is cursed. And I think the beginning of chapter 1 quite cleverly sends us back to the root of the problem.

I think it's quite deliberate on the teacher's part that the word for man in verse 3 is Adam Adam Hevel that we've been thinking about already is the same root as Abel.

And so to someone reading this in the Hebrew in verse 2 and 3 they're met with Adam and Abel in the opening verses.

[31 : 49] He's teasing our minds isn't he? Back to the beginning of Genesis. It is a good world but it is one ruined by sin and by death.

life is futile because life is short. Life is short because we live in a broken world.

Sin is the problem here. And part of the lesson we'll learn is that if we want to live well in this world we have to be honest about just how broken this world is.

that is the view the teacher wants to share with us. And although it might be shocking at points it is something worth listening very carefully to.

Because that is exactly how Jesus lived in this world too, isn't it? The teacher the son of David the king of kings kings. He came into a cursed world that is groaning under the strain of sin.

[33 : 01] We read a little bit about that in Romans 8 earlier in the service. But he was open and honest about his brokenness wasn't he? He didn't try and explain everything away with Christian cliches.

He sighed deeply when he met a man afflicted with blindness. He groaned at the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees.

He wept at the tomb of his friends. That's the way the teacher here in Ecclesiastes sees the world too.

Broken. It can still be enjoyed in the right seasons. Jesus went to weddings and he enjoyed meals with his friends. He brought joy to people as he restored what is good and right.

And he did it all because he is building a new kingdom with his own blood. Where the curse of Adam that struck short the life of Abel.

[34 : 09] Where that curse has been undone. The teacher will bring us through a world ruined by a curse. That is our world but we look forward with an even clearer picture than the teacher of what is to become because the curse that means life is so messy in Ecclesiastes.

That curse has been broken. Its effects are being undone. The short years of this life will give way to an eternity under God's good and just rule.

Life is a breath. We are here one moment and we will all be gone the next. life is a breath worth enjoying when we can because there are good gifts given by a good God but life most importantly is a breath not worth trying to grab hold of because for those of us in Christ and that offer is open to all there is an assurance of something far greater over the horizon.

That is the hope the teacher wants you to hold on to. That is the way he will teach us to live. Be honest about life's brokenness but fear the Lord. Fear the Lord by enjoying what he has given to you enjoy and holding on to the hope he has given you for the future.

So as we go forward from here and as we begin this series in this book remember to fear the Lord because the world won't remember you but he will.

[36 : 07] Let me pray as we close. Father we thank you that your word sometimes uncovers in us what is uncomfortable we often like to think we will live forever that we can build mighty empires in this life that will last into eternity.

You uncover and expose the folly of our pride but we praise you that you do so so you can show us a better way. Lord help us to live in the fear of you looking to please and honour you in everything we do.

Forgive us for the times when we fear the world or those around us. But we pray Lord that you would help us as we hear from this wonderful book to enjoy what we can from life to lament the brokenness in this world but most of all to look forward and hold on to the hope that you have made sure for us with the blood of your son in whose wonderful name we pray.

Amen.