

What Is The Point?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 January 2024

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Well, I want to start this series in Ecclesiastes by asking you a question that perhaps no one has asked you before. And that is, what is your life ultimately going to have achieved by the end of it?

I mean, sure, that's not a question that you'll get asked in polite company. You know, that's not the way you start a conversation at a dinner party. But it's an important question to ask. Your life on earth, all your efforts that you've spent for years doing what you do in your career or getting sports trophies, whatever you spend your energy in achieving, getting money to get a comfortable retirement, whatever it is, all of that effort, think about it.

When all is said and done and you get to the end of your life, what will all that have been for? What will all that effort have actually counted towards ultimately?

The reason I ask you that question is because that is the main question the book of Ecclesiastes opens with asking us. It wants us to ask that of ourselves, uncomfortable as it is.

It opens with this question here in verse 3 of chapter 1. Let me read it to you. It says, What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?

[1 : 3 7] And it's a good question. It's a good question to ask ourselves. What is it actually all for? Now, you may never have asked that question before. Maybe you're too busy with life.

You're too busy with the day-to-day. Maybe life is exciting at the moment and you're right in the middle of it. And you really have no time to get all philosophical and existential and ask these big questions.

But you will eventually. It's a question that everyone, sooner or later, will wonder. What has it all been for? Maybe you're starting to ask that question. Maybe now at the beginning of 2024, you're getting to that age where you go, Okay, another year.

And you realize, as you look forward into 2024, it's just going to be the same stuff that was in 2023, except now you're a year older and it's going to be a little more difficult than it was before.

And maybe you're starting to ask the question, Why are we going through this all again? Or maybe you've been asking that question for a while.

[2 : 4 7] Maybe it's always been at the back of your mind. Maybe you struggle with depression. I mean, in a crowd this size, statistically, at least two or three people are struggling with some form of depression.

And maybe that's you and maybe you feel every day, but you don't really share it with anyone. What is the point of doing all this? Just going through this again and again?

Well, it should be a comfort for you, especially to know that that question is in the Bible. It's a valid question. You don't have to feel ashamed asking it.

But we are led to wonder why it's in the Bible. Why is this book here, this depressing book? If you read it, you soon start to realize, I mean, if you listened to it earlier when Gene read it for us, it's pretty dreary and depressing.

I mean, this is not a kind of a book that you get verses to stick on your fridge as encouragements. You know, you get those little verses with magnets and flowers on them or little teddy bears or whatever, or clouds.

[4 : 01] Clouds is very popular. And they're all encouraging, boosts for the day, verses from the Bible. You don't get any from Ecclesiastes. You don't see any Ecclesiastes fridge magnets. I mean, look at verse 2.

You don't see this up on a fridge magnet. But absolute futility, absolute futility, everything is futile. Actually, come to think of it, it would make a good magnet for your washing machine.

So why is it here? Why is this book of Ecclesiastes here? Well, as we're going to be going through it over the next few weeks, what we're going to discover is that the point of Ecclesiastes in the Bible is to raise the questions we need to ask if we're truly going to appreciate the answers that the rest of the Bible gives us about life, about existence, about purpose.

All of those. It raises the questions. It causes us to ask the questions that we wouldn't normally ask in the busyness of life so that when we read the rest of the Bible, we start to really appreciate the answers that it gives.

That's the purpose of this book. But we're going to look at chapter 1, or the first half of chapter 1 this morning, and I want to start by asking, well, why does the writer ask the question in the first place?

[5 : 21] What causes him to ask this question, what is the purpose in it all? What is the meaning of it all? That's what we're going to look at. Why does he ask the question? Now, we read verse 1.

It says, The words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. So this is most likely King Solomon, one of the wisest men who's ever lived, whether you read that from the Bible or from other sources of history.

It's well attested that Solomon was a wise and successful king, and he lived a long life, and he observed the world in a unique way. But as he observed life on earth, and as he is a king, and he got to do a lot of stuff that most of us don't get to do.

We're going to read that in the rest of Ecclesiastes. And as a king, he got time to observe and sum up life. He saw the peasants in the fields. He saw the people in the court.

He observed, and he mulled over, and he wrote down his thoughts. And as he did that and observed all the life on earth, he came to realize a startling truth about it, which we see in these opening verses, these verse 1 to 11.

[6 : 26] It's a kind of opening poem. And the startling truth that he realized about life, observing it for so many years, is this. Basically, no matter what you do, you're always just going around in circles, and you're never really getting anywhere.

That's what this poem is about. In fact, he observes that the whole of creation around us seems to be wired in this way. Let me read to you from verse 5.

I'm going to be reading from the NIV. It just, that translation sums it up so well. It says, now he's observing life, and he's observing the cosmos.

And this is how he sums it up. The sun rises, and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and turns again 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 the streams come from, there they return again.

[7 : 29] Okay, so, you know, as you listen to his musings, you realize this is the kind of, this is the guy who's there at the bar, and he's had one too many drinks, and you kind of just want to leave him alone.

He gets to that really cynical, philosophizing stage. But as we read his words, we realize he's making some valid observations.

I mean, especially in Cape Town, we can totally get the thing about the wind, right? I mean, the southeast is blowing, and the point of wind, basically, if you know, is to, is to, is to move air from a high pressure system to a low pressure system.

And then the, so the southeast blows, but then the next day, it's the northwest blowing. And it's like, can't you make up your mind? It's just, that's life in Cape Town. It's just, the wind is constantly blowing, it never seems to be satisfied.

Never seems to achieve its goal. He, he observes in Ecclesiastes, one the same can be said of rivers. That, they keep flowing, but they never manage to fill the sea.

[8 : 35] They, they never achieve their goal. But, the reason that he highlights all of these seemingly repetitive, pointless things in creation, is that, that actually encapsulates our experiences as humans, of life in this world.

In this world, that, that is how we, tend to eventually experience life. Just as, a repeated thing, that never really fulfills its goal. Kind of like, I mean, there's so many, there's so many, examples of how we experience that, in this life, isn't there?

Think of laundry. Okay. I mean, you can, you can spend a day doing laundry, and you get to the end of the day, and there, the laundry basket's full again. It's like, you never get it done.

It's frustrating, isn't it? No matter how much laundry you do, you're, you're already dirtying the clothes, that you're wearing, that you're going to have to put in the next laundry. It never actually gets completed.

And, that is just one example, of so many things in life, where we're never ultimately achieving, the, what we expend our energy and effort on.

[9 : 43] And, it causes our life, in the end, just to be so, wearisome. I wonder if you feel that, right now, where you're at. That, you're just weary of it all.

It's wearisome. That's exactly, what it says in verse 8. Have a look. It says, all things are wearisome, more than anyone can say.

The eye is not satisfied by seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. All things are wearisome, more than anyone can say.

I mean, you, you feel weary, but there's no point even complaining about it, right? Because, what is it going to achieve? More than anyone can say.

And then it says, the eye is not satisfied by seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. And so, just as the sea is never full, so, our lives are never full.

[10 : 45] No matter what we absorb, or no matter what we consume, no matter what we take in, it's just like rivers flowing into the sea that never completes it, it never completes us.

The things we spend our energies and lives in doing never ultimately satisfy us. That's what he means here. I mean, think of it.

Have you ever watched a movie that's been so good that at the end of it, when the credits start rolling, you go, I never have to watch a movie again. I'm satisfied now. I got everything I needed from that movie.

No, you need to watch another one. You need to watch another one. And it needs to be better and better and better. And then sequel needs to come, and that needs to be better than the first one. And we always need more of what we get.

That's what Ecclesiastes here is trying to encapsulate, that weariness of life, where we're always chasing, but never quite achieving it.

[11 : 46] We're constantly chasing, but we never grasp hold of. And there's a Hebrew word that sums up that chasing but never grabbing.

It's the word that is in verse 2, but it's an untranslatable word from the Hebrew. You'll see in various different Bible translations, it's translated in different ways. Futility, or meaningless, or vanity.

But the Hebrew word is the word hevel. And it's a word that literally means vapor or smoke. And it's something you try to grab, but you can never grab hold of.

Or mist. It's a word that encapsulates that idea. That's something that's there, but the moment you try to reach out for it and grab it, you don't have it. And that word hevel is a word that appears in Ecclesiastes quite a lot, and it sums up the experience of this life.

It's kind of, you know, if there's a misty morning outside, maybe over Limply Park, you see the mist settle one morning, and you thought, you know, I really want some of that mist.

[12 : 51] And you take a jar from the kitchen, and you go and you try to grab the mist. But then the moment you close the jar, it's gone. You can't grab it. That's what the word hevel means.

It's something that's unattainable, and that's the summary of the experience of human life. And that's the first reason he asks this question, well, what's the point of all our energies and efforts if we can ever really grasp what we're expending them all for?

But there's another reason he asks that question. And we see it in the next few verses, verse 9 to 11. And that reason is, well, nothing we do actually makes any ultimate lasting difference in the end anyway.

Let me read from verse 9. What has been is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done.

There is nothing new under the sun. Can one say about anything, look, this is new. It has already existed in ages before us.

[13 : 54] There is no remembrance of those who came before. And of those who will come after, there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them. In other words, what this is saying is, there is no possible way that you will make any lasting difference in this world.

You won't do anything that has not been done before. Oh, but, you know, what if you invent a new technology? What if you invent some new fancy, I mean, we live in the age of technology.

So many new things have been invented. Surely Ecclesiastes is wrong to say there is nothing new under the sun. Look, this is new. Look at my fancy phone. This is newer. It's better than the one I had last month.

Well, actually, the fact of what he is trying to say here is even if you invent some new technology, all you are going to do is enable humans to carry on doing what they have always done but just more efficiently. Nothing actually changes in the world.

Nothing makes any real difference. Or maybe you feel that actually you want to spend your life being involved in causes. Maybe that's what really gets your blood flowing. It's very popular today in the millennial culture to be involved in causes, to be Greta Thunberg, you know, and whether it's environmentalism or animal rights or whatever it is.

[15 : 13] And those are all obviously, you know, commendable things to be involved in. But the thought behind, especially in this generation, and this generation's desire so much to be involved in all of the causes that come up is the idea that actually we're going to fix the world that the previous generations broke.

You know, they didn't know what they were doing. We know what we're doing, of course. And so we're going to fix the world. We're going to get involved in all these causes. But the fact is people have tried that before.

Okay? Throughout history, they haven't just been sitting on their backsides. They have been trying to fix the world. And nothing anyone has done throughout history has actually made any difference at the end of the day, any real difference.

It's still the same as it was. And it still will be in the next generation and the next generation. Maybe you want to live a life... Maybe causes aren't your thing. You're not going to invent any new technology.

But you want to live a life that will be remembered. Maybe that's you. At the end of the day, you get to the end of your life and you at least want people to remember you and that you want to have made your mark or affected or improved the lives of people.

[16:37] You want to be remembered. Well, let me ask you, how many of your eight great-grandparents can you name?

Now, if you can't remember them, who else is going to? Verse 11, there is no remembrance of those who came before and of those who will come after, there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them.

So, if you weren't depressed before, you should be by now. And you might, at this point, be wondering, why on earth is this in the Bible?

Why is this book in the Bible? Especially, if you know your Bible, what you'll realize reading Ecclesiastes is that it seems to have a very different view of the world than the rest of the Bible has.

Right? You don't see this kind of really depressing outlook elsewhere. And let me, let me, let's compare some verses from Ecclesiastes with some verses from the rest of the Bible talking about the same thing.

[17:52] And I want you to notice the different view on the same things. So, let's look at some verses that talk about creation from the Psalms and compare it to Ecclesiastes.

So, Ecclesiastes, I'm going to read verse 5 again, listen to what he says in his cynical way, the sun rises and the sun sets, panting, it returns to the place where it rises.

He's just saying, you know, it's pointless. The sun rises, sun sets, sun rises, sun sets, and it just hurries back and rises again and sets. What's the point? That's what he's saying in Ecclesiastes. But listen to, for example, Psalm 19 and what it says.

Psalm 19, I'll just read from verse 4. In the heavens, God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming from his home. It rejoices like an athlete running a course.

It rises from one end of the heavens and circles to the other end. Nothing is hidden from its heat. That's a, you know, much more positive view of the cycle of creation.

[18:53] Psalm 104, verse 19. We read some of Psalm 104 earlier. Let me read to you from verse 19. You know, that wonderful Psalm that looks at all the elements of creation that God has made and it says this.

He made the moon to mark the festivals. The sun knows when to set. You bring darkness and it becomes night when all the forest animals stir.

The young lions roar for their prey and seek food from God. The sun rises, they go back and lie down in their dens. See, that's a positive view of creation, isn't it?

You hear in the rest of the Bible the cycles of the cosmos aren't pointless but they're purposeful but not in Ecclesiastes. Or in Psalm 104, look at what it says in verse 10 or just listen.

Psalm 104, verse 10. He, that's God, causes the springs to gush into the valleys. They flow between the mountains. They supply water for every wild beast.

[19:54] The wild donkeys quench their thirst. Talking about the rivers and their purpose. It's a very different view, isn't it, from what he said in verse 7 of Ecclesiastes.

Well, rivers are pointless because the sea is never full. It's a very different worldview, isn't it? Or, what about Ecclesiastes 1, verse 10?

It says, can one say about anything, look, this is new? It has already existed in the ages before us. Nothing's new under the sun. But let me read to you, for example, from the book of Isaiah, 43.

God's words. He says, look, I am about to do something new. Even now, it is coming. Or, right at the end of the Bible, Revelation 21, verse 5, says, then the one seated on the throne said, look, I am making everything new.

Ecclesiastes 1, so which is it? You know, Ecclesiastes says one thing, the rest of the Bible says another thing.

[21 : 05] Which is it? And that actually has caused many people to think that Ecclesiastes shouldn't have been in the Bible in the first place. Lots of people, lots of scholars, Jewish scholars, as well, throughout history have said that it was a mistake that Ecclesiastes was incorporated into the completed Bible or their Bible, the Old Testament in the case of Jews.

So even they have debates as to whether Ecclesiastes should be in here or not. And lots of people say that this depressing book has no place in the Bible, that it was a mistake, but they were wrong.

They are wrong. God has caused every book that is in here to be inspired and to be brought into Holy Scripture for a reason. But to understand the reason that Ecclesiastes is in the Bible, and this is key for the rest of the series, so pay attention, we need to take note of a key phrase in this book that we see a couple of times already in these first few verses.

It's a phrase that appears over 29 times in Ecclesiastes, more than any other book of the Bible, and it is this. It is the phrase under the sun.

Under the sun. Did you notice that when we were reading it? Let me point out again verse 3. It says, What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at?

[22 : 31] Under the sun. Verse 9. What has been is what will be. What has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun.

Now it's very important we understand what he means. This is a key to unlock the book of Ecclesiastes and to bring out all its treasures.

The phrase under the sun. And what it means is everything that we can see and perceive for ourselves. Everything under the sun is what we can see with our own eyes, perceive with our own senses.

In other words, Ecclesiastes gives us a view of the world from a secular perspective. Secular, I mean, with no reference to anything that's above the sun, anything beyond our own perception like God and his plans for the world that we have to have revealed to us.

But if you look at life without any of that, look at life from just a secular point of view, then Ecclesiastes is where you end up.

[23 : 38] And that is the world view of today. More than ever before, we live in a secular world. In this generation, in this year, more than any time before in history, we live in a world of secularism where we are pressured to concentrate and pour our energies only into the things that are under the sun.

Sure, you can have your religion, you can believe what you want about the unseen things, but don't let it interfere with real life, Monday to Saturday. You know, that's the pressure that we're under.

That is the total accepted worldview that we live in today. It wasn't always that way. But today especially, we live in a secular world.

Have your religion, but don't let it get in the way of what's real and tangible and under the sun. And it programs us without even realizing, even if we're Christians, it programs us when we go to work on Monday, the whole world is pressuring and programming and channeling us to focus our energy into what is under the sun.

My job, my house, my money, my car, my sport, my entertainment, whatever it is. All the things under the sun are the things we spend most of our time thinking about because that's what the world wants us to do.

[25 : 03] the world programs us to focus our energies into the things under the sun. Well, Ecclesiastes, therefore, is a book that is more pertinent today than ever before because it's a book that is here in the Bible to wake us up to the pointlessness of that worldview.

The pointlessness of spending our energies on things under the sun. And this book is here to show you the pointlessness of spending your energies on just the things you can see and focusing just on those things because it says how meaningless that is at the end of the day.

That is what Ecclesiastes is here to do. But Ecclesiastes also is here like every other single book in the Bible. to point us to Jesus Christ.

Because if you didn't know, that is the purpose of every book in the Bible. Every book in some way is here to glorify Jesus Christ and to help us better understand the glory of the gospel of Christ that He came to bring.

Because you see, the gospel, when we read about Jesus and what He did when He came to earth, the gospel is the very thing that enables us to do something we could never do without Him and that is connect our lives to what's above the sun.

[26 : 37] Which we'd never be able to do if Jesus didn't come. If Jesus didn't come, we would be limited to living lives under the sun. That's all. Just concentrating on this life. But Jesus came to connect what is above the sun with what is under the sun.

With this world, with our lives. Listen, for example, again, to what we read earlier in John chapter 1. That's kind of John, the gospel writer's point that he wants to make at the beginning of his gospel is just how Jesus came to connect heaven and earth.

To connect us with something bigger, greater, purposeful, meaningful. Listen to what he says. John 1. I'll read verse 14.

The word. That word, by the way. Word. The word, word. It's a very important word. In the original language, it's the word logos in Greek.

In John, it's a very important word in that chapter. And it doesn't just mean word. It means the order and the meaning of life. Okay? And that was encapsulated in the Son of God who, verse 14, the word became flesh.

[27 : 48] And dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. And then verse 18.

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father's side. He has revealed him. That's what Jesus came to do.

Jesus didn't just come to bring forgiveness of sins, which he did through his death on the cross. Thanks be to God. But he did that for a reason. He didn't just come so that our sins could be forgiven, we could walk away with a guilty conscience and carry on living our lives under the sun.

No. There's a reason Jesus died for the sins of his people. He did that so that our lives could now be connected to something more important than what's going on here.

That our lives could be connected, as verse 18 says, to his Father, to what is above the Son. So that by following Jesus, by turning around from living our pointless lives and following Jesus, which is what the Bible calls us to do, that is, no matter what book in the Bible, it's pointing to Jesus and its call is to you to look at him and turn around, repent, and follow him.

[29 : 07] Why? Well, by following Jesus, you will enter into a life that is not pointless, but a life that is actually going somewhere. It's going to resurrection and a new creation.

And by following Jesus, we can live lives now, even now on earth, where we engage our energies in things that matter.

That's the amazing thing about being a Christian and following Jesus is we get to do stuff that matters eternally. By being involved in God's work, by being involved in God's church, by using our time and our resources and our money and our energies for things that last.

Things that aren't just going to disappear and fade away into pointlessness. And we can even now have conversations as Christians, we can have conversations that have eternal effects.

Think about that. The simple conversation you might have at the water cooler at work about Jesus to your work colleague is a conversation unlike any other conversations you'll have that day.

[30 : 11] Because that's a conversation that matters for eternity. It has eternal effects. It can lead that person to trust in Jesus and be saved eternally. You see, that's the privilege we get.

We get to talk about Jesus. It's not that we have to talk about him. We get to. We get to have conversations that matter. We get to spend our energies and our time in things that matter by being involved in God's church.

Things that make an eternal difference. You see, Jesus came so that you can live a life that isn't pointless. Jesus came so that you can live a life that isn't pointless, a life that isn't going nowhere.

And so, if you're not following him yet, if you haven't repented and trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, what are you doing? I ask with greatest compassion and love, what are you doing?

Where is your life going? Life apart from God, under the sun, will ultimately mean nothing.

[31 : 22] So, stop being apart from him. Stop being rebelliously apart from the creator who made you and wants you to live a life that matters. stop avoiding him.

I also want to talk to you if you're young. If you're young, if maybe you're towards the end of high school or you're at university or college and you've got your whole life ahead of you.

I remember what it was like. You know, in your late teens or early 20s, you've got your whole life ahead of you, you've got all these plans and it's really exciting, isn't it? Well, if that's you now, if you're young and you've got your whole life ahead of you, all the things to look forward to under the sun, your sports, your career, meeting someone, getting married, lovely things, but they're all things under the sun.

And if that's all you're focusing on and looking forward to now in your stage of life, I want to tell you, don't wait until you're old and gray before you realize that it was all wasted effort.

Rather, take the wisdom from this old guy, Ecclesiastes, that the Bible gives you and start focusing even now on things that'll last. Things that'll last beyond this short life.

[32 : 41] And if you are a Christian, then I want you to know that the Bible says just because you're a Christian doesn't mean that you're actually doing that yet.

Seriously, it says that over and over again in the New Testament, it's trying to encourage Christians to get involved in the things that last and to stop being just taken up by the things under the sun.

Even if you're a Christian, even if you believe Jesus, you might still be living a life that is focused primarily on things under the sun. Ask yourself, is that you? You know, in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul, the apostle, says that doing that, he calls it building on the foundation of the gospel with wood, hay, and straw.

You can read it later in your own time, 1 Corinthians chapter 3. He says, you don't have to turn there now, but he says that we've got this foundation of the gospel that gives us hope, gives us life, gives us direction, gives us purpose, meaning.

But we can still build on that foundation things that actually are made of material that fades away and will be burnt up in the judgment. That's what he says. Wood, hay, and straw won't survive moving into the next age.

[34 : 04] It'll just be burnt up. It will mean nothing. And what he's talking about is focusing our energies into just things that matter for this life. He says, rather build on the foundation of the gospel with gold, silver, and precious stones, things that matter for eternity.

That's what he's saying. And I want to say to you, if you're a Christian today, but you're still spending most of your waking hours thinking about things under the sun, your career, your sport, your business, if that's what takes up most of your energy and your time and your thoughts every day, well then you are building on the foundation of the gospel with wood, hay, and straw, things that are just going to be burnt up and don't matter in the end.

They won't last and it is such a waste. When you could be investing your time and energy in things that last. Don't waste your life. But rather as Ephesians 4 verse 17 says, therefore I say this and testify in the Lord, you should no longer live as the Gentiles live in the futility of their thoughts.

That word futility is the Greek translation of the word hevel, the smoke, the vapor of their thoughts. That's what the world is concentrating on, just vapor, just things that will never last.

Don't be like that. If you're a Christian, you have a higher calling, you have much better, more important things to live for. And so as we journey through this book of Ecclesiastes, which I hope now I've sold to you, I hope you see why this book is so important.

[35 : 41] And I hope you're coming back next Sunday. Because as we journey through it, we're going to see how bit by bit, Ecclesiastes expertly breaks down each area of life under the sun that we tend to focus on for our significance and satisfaction, so that by the end of it we are left with nothing but to spend all our energies in really following and focusing on Jesus Christ, who is the only one who can bring any lasting meaning to your life and mine.

Let's pray. Oh Lord, we thank you for every book, every chapter, every verse in the word that you have over the ages inspired for us to know what is true and to be wise.

Lord, we thank you for this book of Ecclesiastes and that as we seek to understand it, it points us to Jesus and it shows us how we can live lives that mean something because of him.

And so we pray, Lord, that as we go through it, you would help us more and more to fix our eyes on Jesus and to not spend our time and energies in the things that at the end of the day won't matter, but to more and more this year, learn to live the lives that you've called us to, the lives that mean something, that count for eternity.

We pray this in his name. Amen.