

Life is Vapour

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Preacher: Jon Watson

[0 : 0 0] Amen. So this morning's sermon is perhaps going to be a little bit different. Different from what I tend to want to preach anyway, because to be honest with you, it's just a little bit depressing. It's a little bit honest about some of the difficulties of life. But I think that we need a dose of honesty sometimes, that we shouldn't just whitewash over the frustrations that we encounter. Now, we're going to talk about the purpose behind life, even when it feels purposeless. We're going to talk about meaning and significance, and we're going to talk about Jesus. But Ecclesiastes is not a book of easy, quick answers. It's a book of riddles. It's wisdom literature. So we're going to have to take our time through it to get to something like an answer.

So I ask you to bear with me. We have to go through that process. But it is God's word, and it is good, and it is true. Now, there's a poet that you may know of named John Keats, who died an early death when he was in his 20s. He was a young man. He obviously wrote a lot of poems, but he wrote a particularly beautiful and haunting sonnet called, When I May, When I Fear That I May Cease To Be. And that poem is about the two things that he lives for.

I mean, we all have something that we really live for, something we pursue, that we seek after. John Keats lived for romantic love and fame. He was a romantic, and he wanted to be world famous.

He wanted to make a difference with his poetry in the world. Now, in this poem, When I Fear That I May Cease To Be, obviously, it's a poem about fearing death, he deals with those two things that he lived for, love and fame. And this is the last line of the sonnet.

Then on the shore of the wide world, I stand alone and think, till love and fame to nothingness do sink. Keats knew, even at a young age, that everything he staked his life on, everything that he lived for, would one day count for nothing, because he would die. To nothingness do sink, he said. He constantly sought after this sort of significance. He wanted to matter. You know that feeling, I just want to matter in this world. But he knew that it was all meaningless in the face of time and death. Now, when he died, he left in writing. He knew he was dying, and so he left a request for his friends. His request was that they would engrave something on his tombstone.

[2 : 5 6] Here lies one whose name was writ in water. He knew that time would erase his significance, and he wanted that memorialized on his tombstone. Here lies one whose name is writ in water.

Keats thought of ultimate reality as time and death washing away all beauty and meaning. And Ecclesiastes, the reason I bring Keats up, is Ecclesiastes is a biblical book, the word of God, that deals with that very idea. Does life have any meaning if time and death wash everything away? Now, Ecclesiastes is written by a man, you know, it's implied that he's Solomon. There is some debate on that. But the man calls himself Koheleth in Hebrew, and the NIV translates that as the teacher. So, he calls himself the teacher. Sinclair Ferguson calls him the pundit, because ultimately, this teacher in Ecclesiastes is a public intellectual.

Now, Richard Dawkins is another public intellectual, a more modern one, who happens to be a profound atheist. And what he has to say about ultimate reality is that it's cold and indifferent. Let me read you this kind of dreary quote from him. He said, the total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, others are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

Well, you have to hand it to him. Dawkins is consistent with his worldview. If, as an atheist, he works from the bottom up, if he says there is no God, there is no creator, there is no design, then he has to come to this conclusion, logically, that there's no point in anything. Nothing matters.

So Dawkins starts with the premise that there is no God, and then faces that harsh reality with brutal honesty. The teacher in Ecclesiastes has a similar unflinching honesty, but he starts with a different premise, doesn't he? There is a creator. So Dawkins comes to this conclusion, life is pointless.

[5 : 46] Koheleth, the teacher, comes to this conclusion, life is vapor. That's not the same thing. Now let me read to you Ecclesiastes 1, 1 and 2 again. The words of the teacher are son of David, king of Jerusalem, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless. Now that word meaningless is hevel in Hebrew, and I promise I'm not going to teach too many Hebrew words, but this one's really important. It occurs something like 38 times in this book. If Ecclesiastes has a theme, it's hevel. What does hevel mean? Well, literally, it means vapor. Literally. Now it's used metaphorically 99% of the time in the Bible, and that's why they generally translate it with a more literal meaning. Or a, yeah, you get what I'm saying. So some translations will say vanity, vanity. Some will say meaningless, meaningless. Some will say futility.

None of them have the exact kind of scope of this concept of vapor. So Koheleth, the teacher, says life is vapor, utterly. Everything is a vapor. Now this morning, I was up at a very early hour, way too early, and it was cold outside. And you step outside, and you can see your breath and this great cloud in the early morning light. That's vapor. And it shows you're alive. It might be cold out, but at least you're breathing. But like life's qualities and purpose, your breath on a cold morning fades away and vanishes. Life is vapor. If you blow out a candle, what do you see? A little wisp of smoke, like vapor. And it's here for a moment, and then it vanishes.

It leaves no lasting impression on the world around it. Give five minutes, you'll never know that there was a candle lit in that room. It looks solid. A small child may try to grab it, but it's vapor. It just slips through their fingers, doesn't it? You can't get your hands around it. Life, says Koheleth, is vapor.

It's vapor. And that's such an important concept to the teacher. Now, I mentioned that there were 38 times that word is used. That's a lot in a 12-chapter book. Twice, that word is doubled. Meaningless, meaningless, right? Utterly meaningless. That's a way in the original language of intensifying the emphatic kind of force of that word. It's not something we tend to do in English very much, but it does come through and meaningless. Meaningless. So two times, once at the beginning and once at the very end of the book. They form something like bookends around this. And so we're going to look at those two bookends to the book of Ecclesiastes and try to get our heads around this idea of life as vapor.

Now, I'm going to continue reading verses two and three again in a moment. There's an important phrase we need to get our heads around if we're going to continue.

[9 : 17] Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Under the sun. Life under the sun is a way of referring to this world, this material world. So in the ancient mind, there's life under the sun and there's this God's life and his angels kind of over the sun, right? There's the heavenly, eternal spiritual realities and then there's this earthly reality bound in time. Life under the sun. Ultimately, it's him, it's the teacher, dealing with the question, what if this is all there is? What if this is it?

Surely you've wrestled with that question. Even if you believe in Jesus and believe in the promise of eternal life, sometimes we have to look around and say, what if this is actually it?

That's what this book wrestles with honestly. Or like Dawkins would say, what if at the bottom of this reality? We just find pitiless indifference? Now the teacher observes two hungry monsters in the path of our life. Time and death. Time and death. Let me read again from verse 4 in chapter 1.

Let's read. Let me read. 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 the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. Do you see what he's saying? He pulls out four big ideas here. The generations, right? Where, you know, grown-ups have babies who grow up to become grown-ups and have babies and then they die and then the babies grow up to become grown-ups, etc. For thousands and thousands of years ad nauseum.

[11 : 35] Generations come and generations go and then the cycle starts over again. The sun rises and sets and rises and sets. The wind just whips around the earth in circles, right? Comes and it goes. Water flows into the sea. The sea empties into the streams. The streams flow into the sea. You get the idea. That's life.

And the teacher looks at that and says, I am weary. If we face it honestly, doesn't it make us just tired? If life is just like an hourglass being flipped back and forth, if we're doomed to repeat this history, then what's the purpose behind any of this? What is the purpose? And that's what the first monster makes us face. We think of time in our existence. And it's wearisome. The second monster is death. You might want to look back at chapter 11.

He's talking about aging very honestly. Very honestly. He says, remember the days of darkness for there will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. And then he talks about being happy when you're young. But youth fades. Look at the beginning of chapter 12.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth before the days of trouble come. So in the teacher's mind, there's youthfulness and trouble. Isn't that honest? Before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them. Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, the clouds return after the rain, the keepers of the house tremble, strongmen stoop, grinders cease, those looking out through the windows grow dim. See, he's painting an image of aging and frailty and infirmity and saying that's in all of our futures.

Death is coming for all of us. Now, I told you it would be a little bit depressing at the beginning, didn't I? But it's honest. And isn't it a little refreshing to be really honest about these things?

[13 : 57] No matter how young and fit and strong and healthy you are, we all have to face that monster, as it were. It's coming. And if everything that matters to us then is eventually swallowed up in death, and by time, what on earth is the point?

What is the purpose of this life under the sun? Now, if I asked you to go sit in an empty, you know, let's say I went up to Ian and I said, Ian, I'd like you to go stand on one foot in that room over there for four hours.

A reasonable, sane response would be, why? What's the point of that? Ian would be crazy to go do that without asking, what's the point?

What would I gain from that? Are you going to pay me something to stand on my foot for four hours? The teacher is saying, let's just be honest about reality.

Let's ask these hard questions about a life that can sometimes seem as meaningless as that exercise. We all want to know the purpose of our lives, deep down.

[15 : 14] We want to know what we're living for. We need something to give our lives significance and meaning and value and purpose. And we also want to know, why does life happen the way that it does to us?

Not just why am I here, but then why is it like this, right? Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people? Why does that happen?

Why did I lose my job? Why am I still single after all these years? Why is my marriage not what I thought it would be?

Why did I have to get that disease? Why is there a global pandemic? We want to know why life happens to us the way that it does. Is ultimate reality, after all, cold and indifferent?

The teacher of Ecclesiastes says, no. Life is not indifferent. It's vapor. That, for Koheleth, is life under the sun.

[16 : 17] He's guiding us wisely through riddles and poetry. He's guiding us and leading us past our atheistic instincts to disbelieve God to something way, way better.

There's more to life than what is under the sun. That's the good news of Ecclesiastes. By the end of the book, he stops using that phrase. He says it 12 times, under the sun, life under the sun, 12 times, but by the end of the book, he stops saying it.

Why? Well, in chapter 12, there's a clue. We just read it, but let me read it for you again. Chapter 12, verse 1, there's a key word.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth. Remember your creator. Our creatureliness, the fact that we were created by someone not under the sun, is the key.

Life under the sun is real, and we are created people under the sun, but there is one who is uncreated. who is not under the sun, as it were, which means that life under the sun then isn't random.

[17 : 37] It's not pointless, and it's not indifferent. It's designed, and it has purpose. There's a reason behind it all, but life is still an enigma.

It's still a mystery for us because we're creatures. We're not supposed to know everything. Life is, vapor. You still can't fully wrap your hands around it and understand it.

You can't grip that smoke from the candle you just blew out, and you can't fully wrap your hands around life and understand it and master it because we're creature, not creator.

in chapter 1, Koheleth, the teacher, asks a really serious question. He says, what does man gain by all the toil at which he labors under the sun?

Gain. What does man gain? In other words, when all is said and done, what will last? If we balance the books of life, will there be profit left over at the end?

[18 : 42] Will we be in the red or will we be in the black? What will outlast me? What is the gain? But he redirects our attention from gift or from gain.

What do we gain? To the idea of gift. Those are different. Near the very end of the book, chapter 12, verse 7, he says, the dust returns to the ground it came from and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

God who literally gifted it. Your breath is a gift. Your life is a gift from God.

That's the last word that we're going to think about together. We've thought about life under the sun, we've thought about gain, we've thought about vapor, but now we're going to think about gift. Because by the end of the book, the teacher has brought us to the point to say that life is a vapor and a gift.

Those are not mutually exclusive ideas. More than a dozen times in this book, the teacher unfolds to us the truth that God gives us gifts.

[19 : 52] Here are some of the gifts that he talks about in Ecclesiastes. Food, wine, even toil, work to do, life to live, eternity in our hearts, intimate companions, friends, spouses, and our very breath, our life, and wise words to help us live well under the sun.

That's a gift too. Now at this point, you might think that vapor is this meaningless, or this negative word. It sounds negative, doesn't it?

We read it in the English translations, meaningless, meaningless, vanity, vanity, futility. We might think that it's a negative word and that the teacher has kind of changed his mind by the end and said, well maybe life's not a vapor if it's a gift from God.

But he doesn't. He insists throughout the whole book that even this creaturely gift of life is still vapor.

at the end of chapter 11 he says that we're supposed to rejoice in all of it. All of it. He doesn't say rejoice in the good days, rejoice in the happy years, rejoice in the youthful years, but not the aging years.

[21 : 12] He says rejoice in all of it, all of life. It's ups, downs, hills, valleys is all gift even though it's vapor.

Every ounce of our vaporous lives is a gift from God. Every single ounce of it. So we might say life is pointless, it's cold and indifferent, but the teacher says no, life is a gift from your creator.

And we say sure the rare times that are good, that's an obvious gift, but what about the suffering? What about the stuff I can't make sense of? The teacher says no, all of life is a gift.

All of it. Each day and all the pleasure and pain and ease and frustration in every single day of our lives is a gift from the God who loves you and who's in absolute control.

And yet still, life is an enigma. We just can't wrap our hands around it, we can't make sense of it. But when you accept that life is a gift, you stop needing to make sense of it and start being able to live it.

[22 : 24] That means that the poor person's lot in life is a gift from God. And the rich person's lot in life is a gift from God.

Pleasure is a gift. Suffering is a gift. gift. Even when we can't make sense of it. What a strange book.

What is this book doing in our Bibles? With these sort of modern thinking questions. Well, it is a book of questions, not answers.

Ecclesiastes doesn't get to the end and say, I know I've been speaking in riddles, but let me sum it all up really clearly for you and give you your next steps of how to live a better life. He ends as strangely and mysteriously as he begins, but it's right there in the middle of our Bibles.

It's not going anywhere. The role of the teacher in Ecclesiastes is not to give us these answers, but to help us ask these honest and difficult questions and to push us toward God and into the rest of Scripture.

[23 : 33] He pushes us further. We should finish Ecclesiastes and want to read on to see how this fits with the rest of God's words to us. And ultimately, Ecclesiastes is pushing us to Jesus.

And we've been talking about gift and gain. If you want to see tangibly the best gift of God for you, there was a man who died on a cross 2,000 years ago and that's where you look.

He is the gift of God. And if you want to know what your greatest gain is, when all is said and done in this life, when we lay our weary heads down, we wake and see Jesus.

That's what's at the end of this life. And that is great gain. That is profit. It's Jesus. Jesus teaches us that gain is by loss.

Doesn't he? That life is actually by death. The person who wants to save his life must lose it. That's the way that Jesus taught us. That's how we began to make sense of these mysteries in Ecclesiastes.

[24 : 46] The only greatest gain in life is Jesus and life with him now and forever. So we lay down whatever we have to lay down to get him. That's gain.

In John 12, Jesus says, anyone who loves their life will lose it. While anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am my servant also will be.

My father will honor the one who serves me. So when we follow Jesus we find that gain is loss, loss is gain, and life is through death.

It's all upside down. But Jesus, Jesus with us, Jesus for us, makes every painful and pleasurable moment of our lives buzz with significance.

He makes us come alive. No matter our circumstance, no matter how meaningless our moment in life feels, no matter how pointless the suffering that we're undergoing feels, or no matter how, you know, we're in the midst of a good season and we know it'll end, it doesn't matter.

[26 : 05] We can be with Jesus through it all. It doesn't mean you'll understand it. Life is vapor. But every vaporous breath is a reminder of the gift of God.

That God has given you a complicated, messy, beautiful life to live to his glory and to your joy, which will last forever. So in Jesus, your life is deeply significant.

how could it be otherwise? The Son of God died for you. Good response. Jesus did not die for people that didn't matter to him.

The full tombstone of John Keats reads like this. This grave contains all that was mortal of a young English poet who on his deathbed in the bitterness of his heart and the malicious power of his enemies desired these words to be engraven on his tombstone.

Here lies one whose name was writ in water. A close friend of Keats's was out of town when his other friends commissioned that gravestone to be made.

[27 : 25] And that friend who was out of town came back and read that and thought that is depressing. I do not like how they inscribed that tombstone. He thought it made his friend look bitter and sad.

So he suggested that a new tombstone be erected with this engraving. This short life was so embittered by discouragement and sickness that he desired these words to mark his grave.

Here lies one whose name is written water. Time having reversed this sentence his friends and admirers now inscribe his name in marble. Isn't that lovely? But they did not take his suggestion.

And you can go see Keats's grave today and his name remains written in water. water. We all fear ultimately deep down that our names will be writ in water that we just don't matter and that we don't have any lasting significance but you matter to God.

Every one of you. You matter so much that he coded himself into human DNA. The creator became creaturely. He stepped into his own story.

[28 : 35] He sent Jesus, the son of God, to live with those two monsters that we all have to face, time and death, to live a life under the sun. Jesus entered into time.

Do you ever think about that? The eternal son of God entered into our chronology. and he changed the universe forever.

If there's one pivot moment in time that everything changes out of, it's when the son of God was born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem and eternity broke into time.

And in time and history, Jesus began to make us new creation, resurrection people here and now. We get to live with one foot in eternity.

He changes the way that we interact with time. And Jesus interacts with death. Now, he didn't just die like we all have to die. He died something like a cosmic death.

[29 : 41] We all will have our last breath here, but he was, the son of God was abandoned by the father. For the, I mean, that was the price of our sins.

death. And he took it on himself and went through that kind of death. We can't even imagine. When Matthew's gospel tries to imagine it, or tries to portray what it was like to experience it, it talks about earthquakes and darkness, because it was cosmic.

Jesus dealt with time and death. And if you trust Jesus to save you from your own life under the sun, from your own, you know, this is all there is-ness, if you bring him all your sin and all your confusion about what matters and why, all your brokenness, he'll save you.

He will delight to save you. he'll be your nearest friend, and he will prepare an eternal place for you with him.

And you'll be able to say, for a billion years, here lives one whose name is writ in marble. Let's pray.