

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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- [0 : 00] Hello, my name is Ciarán Kelleher. I serve in Brossy Ferry at the Free Church Congregation here as an assistant pastor. I also study part-time at ECS training to be a Free Church minister.
- Welcome to our office here in the Ferry. It is wonderful to have you with us. It's a shame that we're not able to be with you up in Bonacors this weekend.
- It was a date that Sarah and I had in our diary together that we were really looking forward to. But hopefully, if the Lord wills, there might be another opportunity for us to join with you at another point.
- Thanks to Ivor for reading the passage. We're going to be digging into the opening of Ecclesiastes this morning. Why don't I just pray quickly to ask God to help us as we dig down deep into his word.
- And then we will unpack this passage together. Let's pray. God our Father, I pray that you might speak clearly to us, your people, this morning.
- [1 : 08] We pray knowing that your word is more precious than gold or silver. It is sweeter to the tongue than honey.
- And while this might be a challenging part of Scripture, we pray that it might liberate us. That we might feel the freedom of being your people.
- We know that you are the true, eternal and living God. So would not only the words of my mouth, but the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.
- Our rock and our redeemer. Our strength and our song. And we pray this in Jesus' most holy and precious name. Amen.
- Amen. So I think in this book here and in this passage, the preacher, the writer of this Old Testament book, is seeking to disorient us so that he might reorient us.
- [2 : 11] He's seeking to shake us up to help us to stand fast. This is a sobering message.
- But I think it's one in which God will provide us solace. And the big message that the preacher wants us to know, the big message that God is trying to drive home in this passage, is that knowing our limits liberates us.
- Knowing our limits liberates us. We live in a you-can-be-anything-that-you-want culture. And while that has eliminated some unnecessary shackles, whether that's to do with ethnicity or gender or economic backgrounds, it has added another heavy burden to us.
- But what this book is about is about being truly human. It is about being truly human.
- This book does not allow us to daydream about the world that we want, but shows us how it truly is. It reminds us that we have limitations because we are not God.
- [3 : 47] Ian Proven, a Scotsman who wrote a commentary in this book, he says this about us. Begin quote. End quote.
- You see, those who have grasped their impending and inevitable death will treasure the world for what it is. And see the beauty of the message of Christianity, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So I've got two points this morning. And the first of them is, it is not vanity. It is not vanity. Let me tell you the story of a young boy, a three-year-old. His parents have picked him up from the childminders. And they're driving him home afterwards.

And he knows that he's got a captive audience because his parents can't escape. So he's telling them all about what's happened. He's fallen in love with the childminder's daughter.

[5 : 18] And they've spent the whole day discussing their impending marriage, what the wedding will look like, and how many children they're going to have. Twelve, if you wanted to know. And he's telling his parents about who's going to attend the wedding.

And he says where they're all going to sit. And then he mentions about his dog is going to be in the front row. And the dad, after a long, hard day of work, not thinking, absentmindedly, just says to his child, well, your dog's not going to be around then.

And the child's tone changes quickly. And he says, why, daddy? And the parents realise that the time has come and they explain to their son that doggies don't live forever.

Actually, they live for quite a short time. And the child goes silent for the rest of the journey home. When they get back into the house, he just walks straight to his room.

Ten minutes later, he comes back down into the kitchen after the parents have packed away all the shopping. And he says to them, but does that mean mummies and daddies don't live forever?

[6 : 32] And they look at him and they explain to him that yes, mummies and daddies don't live forever, that they will die. And the child cries and cries and cries because he's confronted with the reality of death for the first time.

Yes, this was how I learnt about death for the first time. My parents told me a couple of months ago when they're coming to meet their first grandson. But what we're going to see here and what the preacher wants all of us to do is to confront that we are all going to die.

Read with me from verse 2 again where it reads, vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

What do people think of when they hear of vanity? Is it like the mother who's feeling that they need to get to know her children decides to watch Love Island to understand them and after watching one episode just says, vanity of vanities.

All is vanity. vanity. Or maybe some of you will have the NIV translation of the Bible which says, all is meaningless.

[7 : 51] Or maybe pointless. This kind of reminds you, doesn't it, of the teenager processing the end of their very first romance. Everything is meaningless. Or the first year student studying philosophy and just thinks that the whole of life is pointless.

But what is in view here is not about a lack of meaning in the world or in life. Actually, it is about a lack of permanence.

The word here is the Hebrew word hevel. And this word is key to understanding what this book is about. This sentence here, verse 2, is repeated in chapter 12, verse 8.

And this word is key to unlocking what this book is trying to teach us. And this word is used elsewhere in Scripture.

Job, that man who went through nearly unbearable suffering. says this, leave me alone, for my days are a breath.

[9 : 05] That's the word for hevel. Or King David, in Psalm 144, says this, man is like a breath. That is the word hevel.

His days are like a passing shadow. So actually, it might be best to translate this, this opening verse here, as, the merest of breaths, says the preacher.

The merest of breaths. Everything is a breath. You see, at its base, it means breath or vapour. So actually, what this is talking about is this, all of life, everything, is fleeting and finite.

It's like walking out on a cold winter's morning. and you can see your breath and for a moment it looks dense but immediately it vanishes.

Many of us have been shielded from death and it knocks us for seven when we first encounter it. And that is what the preacher is telling us here, that everything is fleeting.

[10 : 22] Everything is finite. But also, everything is elusive. I don't know if you, I'm quite fascinated watching how different people respond to bubbles, as in, you know, the bubbles that you blow.

You might see the older generation just staring and marvelling at the beauty and the different colours as they move up into the sky.

But then you see some younger ones like nine and ten year olds who try to pop every single bubble they see. What is interesting is when you see maybe the two, three, four, two and three year olds who try to grab the bubbles and keep it for themselves, not realising that they're fragile, that they are liable to burst at the lightest of touch.

You see, the older you get, the more you come to realise about how fleeting and fragile those bubbles are. And this is the big message that we're seeing here in this text.

Life is a gift but it has an expiration date. This whole section is meant to humble us and to cause us to live within our limits.

[11 : 48] Matthew Cobb, he is a psychology lecturer down in Manchester, does a lot of work on the brain and how it functions and processes information.

And he writes that there has been an avalanche of information about the brain over the last few decades, more than there was in the centuries before.

But all that has done is it has helped to show people how hard and maybe impossible it is to find a unifying theory for how the brain functions.

It is futile to do so. Blaise Pascal was a brilliant mathematician in the 17th century, a Frenchman. he was also a Christian and he was convinced even with all his brilliant intellectual capacity that we could never know everything and we could never and actually that meant we could never find ultimate happiness or fulfilment in the things of this world.

Instead humans will only find ultimate satisfaction within the gospel. And so what this does for us is it tells us that we are to receive the gift of life as it is.

[13 : 23] Just because things don't last forever doesn't mean we turn our backs on them. We are not to ignore the bubbles but we receive them for what they are.

You know what we do our plans for life and our enjoyment of the things of this world should never be enjoyed contrary to what they are and their internal finite nature.

When we do it contrary to that that is when we are led to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. So we are called to receive the gift of life as it has been given.

But this also functions as a caution to us. The apostle James he has a very Ecclesiastes like view on life.

In his letter to the early church he cautions the people he is writing to to hold lightly to their plans.

[14 : 44] We are to hold lightly with open hands our plans for the future and many of us will know this in the current situation. He writes this to the church in James chapter 4 he says come now you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

Yes you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Do you see how similar this is to what we've seen in verse 2 of the first chapter of Ecclesiastes? It is foolish trying to plan for the future when we don't know what the future will look like because everything has an expiry date.

He goes on to write instead you ought to say if the Lord wills we will live and do this or that.

and so we see firstly that it is not vanity.

[15 : 59] The second point which we see in the following verses from 3 to 11 that it is vanity. It is vanity. You see if we don't recognise the fleeting and elusive nature of life then our pursuits will end up being vanity projects meaningless.

Have a look with me at verse 3 where the preacher asks this question what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

His question here I think we can say is what is true vanity? The preacher asks the kind of question here that ends up being so crippling that many don't even end up entertaining it.

When we pause to think about the future the purpose of all that we are doing where does it all end up? Sometimes we realise how futile much of our efforts are.

He is saying that it is true that life will be vanity our efforts will be meaningless if we don't accept our limitations.

[17 : 23] And we see this in two ways that he breaks down for us. And first in verses 4-8 we see the relentless monotony of time.

The preacher points to nature to show the unbreaking cycle of life under the sun. There really is nothing new under the sun.

Everything that has happened has happened in the past. Everything has a precedent. Life goes on and on and on.

There is no breaking through that cycle. This is a reminder that we are not special. Actually, we are susceptible to the vicissitudes of life.

We are under that same circular motion that goes on and on and on. Did you notice the rhythmic cadence as we read through those verses?

[18 : 27] Verse 4 A generation goes and a generation comes. The sun rises and the sun goes down. The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north and round and around goes the wind.

All streams run to the sea but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. That is what the preacher is trying to do for us.

Everything goes over and over again. None of us are not vulnerable to it. You see, no matter how much you see or how much you hear, you will never be fully satisfied with the world and the things in it.

That is built into the structure and the fabric of all creation. Ian Proven, the commentator we spoke about earlier, he suggests in relation to 1-3 that the question the preacher proposes is, why bother with a surplus when nature has not surplus but is cyclical in nature?

You see, why bother with profits when nature doesn't have a profit? Have a look at verses 7-8. All streams run to the sea but the sea is not full.

[20 : 03] To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness, a man cannot usher it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

There is, it is built into the fabric and structure of all creation that there is no ultimate profit. And actually later on in chapter 3, he tells us that eternity is built into man's heart and humanity's heart will never be filled by the things of this world because all things are breath, all things are vapor, all things are mist and that will end up being true vanity if we follow that path.

And this is something that Jesus himself took up when he was teaching the disciples, when he was walking on the earth, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom.

He said to people that it is foolish to store up treasures on this earth because things rust and moths destroy, nothing lasts.

You're looking in the wrong place to see your heart satisfied. And it was a warning that Paul, one of the early Christian leaders, gave to the church.

[21 : 30] Storing up treasures for ourselves is vanity. Let me read to you from 1 Timothy chapter 6 where Paul writes this to his protege.

Now, there is a great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmless desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

The pursuit of wealth will never satisfy. That is what the preacher is saying. That is what Jesus taught and that is what Paul cautions against in his letter to Timothy.

[22 : 44] There was a paper published earlier this year in the Harvard Business Review. A guy called Norton and his collaborators asked more than 2,000 people who have a net worth of at least \$1 million, including many whose wealth far exceeded that threshold.

people who were happy and the question they asked them was how happy were they on a scale of 1 to 10 and then how much more money would they need to get to 10.

This is one of the things that Norton noted. All the way up the income wealth spectrum, basically everyone says they need two or three times as much to be perfectly happy.

So the person who has 1 million would like 3 million and the person with 3 million would like 9 million and the person with 9 million would like 27 million and after that I think you need my wife to do the maths for you.

You see we always look at other people and think we will be happy if we have what they have. But there is no ultimate satisfaction in the things of this world.

[24 : 05] We will never hit the number 10 by gaining everything that this world has to offer because everything is mist and vapour fleeting and finite and elusive.

It would be like building an igloo so imagine it's snowing in Aberdeen and you decide I'm going to build an igloo that even Pingu would be proud of and you decide this is what I'm going to leave as my inheritance for the next generations but you realise that snow never lasts that long on the east coast especially by the sea it always melts and fades away.

Building an igloo is your inheritance is vanity is futility foolishness absurd you see the world is repetitive and as David Gibson one of your neighbouring ministers in Aberdeen says being a Christian doesn't stop this being true rather it should make us the first to stop pretending that isn't true that is the preacher's aim it may not make perfect sense to us yet but he is carefully laying the foundations for the main arguments of his book only preparing to die will teach us how to live and in verses 9 to 11 we see the relentless forgetfulness of time let's have a look at it again verse 9 what has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done and there is nothing new under the sun is there a thing of which it is said see this is new it has been already in the ages before us there is no remembrance of former things nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after these are tough words to hear ultimately there is nothing we can do that will break this cycle nothing we can do has never been seen before it might wear different clothing or be surrounded by different props but there is nothing new under the sun everything has already happened every generation every generation whether it's millennial thinks they will change the world but the preacher tells us no that isn't the case and actually what this does for us is it manages to de-center ourselves from the center of history it weans us off the fact of us trying to be the center of the story actually we are just the next chapter in the book and each chapter has the same structure the language and the names might be different but the world will continue on regardless of us

I don't know if any of you remember 2016 it feels so long ago now with so much happening in between but that was the year known as the year of the death of celebrities those celebrities who were from an era that thought that they were changing the world but ultimately we saw that they were still subject to its cyclical nature remember names like Terry Wogan Muhammad Ali Carrie Fisher David Bowie Johan Cruyff Prince George Michael and seeing all these deaths was particularly hard for a certain generation I remember seeing this on Facebook people asking would 2016 just end because these were the ones who were seen to be breaking the mold they were pushing past the boundaries they were bringing us into a new era but like everyone else they were just like mist just like vapor fleeting and those who were seeing all these deaths were being exposed to that inevitable truth that everything is merest breath and we ultimately don't change anything now this might feel like a bleak point on which to end but that will only be the case if we do not see what the preacher what

God is seeking to break us off from let me read to you this is from Mark chapter 8 this is Jesus speaking to his disciples and he says to them if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul or what shall a man give in return for his soul Jesus words are important here and they build on what the preacher here in Ecclesiastes has been trying to get across there is no profit in the world but if we give ourselves to Jesus if we believe in his death and resurrection if we follow him denying ourselves casting aside the cares and the aspirations of the world and we follow after him wholeheartedly then we have received what is true and what is everlasting and what can ultimately satisfy our souls so yes we are all subject to death but because of

[30 : 36] Jesus our souls can be ultimately and eternally satisfied let's pray together oh god our father we know that this is a hard message it seems one so contrary to everything we see in the world for some it might seem so strange that this is even in the bible yet as we've seen this is so similar to Jesus teaching that we are not to put our trust in the things of this world but solely in him so help us father by your spirit to lean into Jesus to look for him to satisfy our soul we know that he is the one who provides the living waters that will eternally satisfy our thirsty souls so let us come to him humbly and let us live within our limitations seeing the world as it truly is and fixing our eyes on

Jesus Christ the author and perfecter of our faith in Jesus name we pray Amen