

It's Life Just as We Know It

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, it's wonderful to see you this morning, folks. Let me encourage you to turn back to that book of Ecclesiastes. Don't feel embarrassed to use the contents page of your Bible, conscious that this is a book that maybe you've never opened a Bible before and you think, what on earth were we reading there? Or maybe this is a book of the Bible where you thought, I've never actually been there before.
- So do whatever you can to get Ecclesiastes chapter 1 open in front of you. I'm going to do two things by way of introducing what we're going to be doing over the next little while.
- The first one is to light this candle, which is very hard to do when everyone's watching, really. But let me give that a shot, okay? And all will become clear in time.
- And as my daughter says, it will begin to smell like birthdays in here, light this candle. And the second one is to put a man's face on the screen. Now, who recognizes this man?
- Spock. It's Spock. That's right. The answer I was looking for was Leonard Nimoy. But he's an iconic figure to all Star Trek fans.
- [1 : 0 6] I don't know if we have any Trekkies here. I think that's what... Yeah, okay. Here we go. Here we go. Right, okay. I'm not a Trekkie, but as I understand it, Spock is the guy who's aboard the Starship Enterprise.
- And he is the kind of philosopher, science guru that's aboard the spaceship. And I don't really watch Star Trek, but even I've heard of the line that he's famous for.
- And I wonder if you've heard it. And I've also used it as well. His line is, It's life, Jim, but not as we know it. Right? It's life, Jim, but not as we know it.
- And that's a really useful line to have in your head as we jump into this book in our Bibles called Ecclesiastes. Because the strap line of this book, the one that's going to help us as we step into it to kind of make sense of it and get our bearings is Spock's line.
- Right? It's life, Jim, but not as we know it. Except what I want to do is I want to take Spock's line. I want to change it ever so slightly.
- [2 : 1 5] Because the book of Ecclesiastes, this is life, Jim, and it's just as we know it. Now, this book of Ecclesiastes is part of what we call the wisdom section of our Bibles.
- These books that God has graciously given us to help us understand life as his created being. So think about it like this. We've got the book of Psalms.
- We love Psalms. It's been the hymn book of the church for generations. Full of words that describe to us the highs and the lows of human emotions. Full of physical language.
- And they reveal to us exactly who our God is. Our unchanging and holy and good God. Despite our ups and downs of our lives, he is unchanging. And we've got the book of Proverbs.
- This book that's full of practical wisdom from a father to a son. Telling them, pleading with him how he should live his life. And it's kind of sealed with that strapline.

[3 : 18] That the fear of the Lord is the beginning of understanding. The fear of the Lord, acknowledging him and living your life in relation to him. That is the beginning of wisdom. And then we get the book of Job.

This book where we see this man who suffered terribly. And this book is his kind of journey. As he kind of comes to grips with what's going on in his life.

And we get words that are spoken by his friends. Full of maybe some truths, but bad words. And we find out how Job makes sense of what is going on in his life. As he suffers terribly.

And then at the end as he acknowledges who God is. This good God. And then we've got the Song of Songs. If I ever get the courage, I'll preach a series on the Song of Songs.

This book, this wonderful book. As we see this man and this woman who are head over heels in love with one another. And they're enjoying God's good gift of sex.

[4 : 18] As they enjoy it within the contours of their marriage. So as we bring those things together. How kind of God to give us these books, these words.

By which we can understand our lives. And what goes on in our lives and in our world. And understand that these things will only make sense. When we live it in relation to him. Acknowledging who he is.

And so here is the book of Ecclesiastes. And as one writer I read this week put it. This book where God offers every single one of us. A dose of realism.

Realism. Okay. Realism. Not pessimism. But realism. As we see that the pains and the tears and the questions.

And the head scratchings. And the inevitabilities that go on in life. And as we see it. It's as if God is holding up to each one of us a mirror. And he holds it up to us.

[5 : 16] And he says would you have a right good look at life. Right. Have a right good look at life. Do you see it. Do you see it. Do you recognize it. Recognize it. Great.

Because that is what life is like. And particularly that is what life is like. When you try and live it. According to your own understanding. And don't live it in relation to me. And so this is a book.

That is going to make each and every one of us here today think. About what. Why and what we are doing. With our lives. And let's be honest.

We are not natural. Stoppers and thinkers. Are we. Not natural stoppers and thinkers. And we live in our world. That doesn't encourage us to stop.

And to think. Okay. I grew up in school. In the 90s. Do you know what this. The soundtrack. The one song. That was kind of the soundtrack.

[6 : 17] Of our generation. Okay. It went like this. Mmm bop. Right. Mmm bop. And I typed it into Google lyrics this week. To see if I could find out the rest of it.

And I didn't even know what to give me. It went. Mmm bop. Daily ad up. Mmm bop. This was the soundtrack. To my childhood. Right. This. This song you know. That encourages us to ask the existential.

Deep questions of life. This is what it. What we were singing. Everyone's running around the playground singing this song. And tell you what. Not once does somebody stop and say. Hang on a minute.

Let's have a time out. What is that mmm bop? Doesn't encourage us to think. We fast forward another generation. You start having reality TV shows.

Don't you? Watching celebrities doing things in the jungle. We have programs that take us inside the houses of the rich and the famous. So we can see how they live their lives. And then we get programs.

- [7 : 12] The reality TV ones. Like that one that's on TV right now. That goes after a bunch of people in London. And it's named after a premiership football team that play in blue. You know the one I'm talking about.
- And if you don't. Just stay in that place. Okay. But what is it we call that friends? What is it we call that? Escapism. Unashamed.
- We call it escapism. And then you fast forward another generation. What do we have? We have social media. Which is the most ironic name ever isn't it? Because we are more disconnected.
- And more shallow in our relationships than we have ever been. As a people. And what do we have? Image. Image. Image. Image. Advert. Advert. Advert. Advert. Opinion. Opinion. Opinion. Opinion.
- Words. Words. Words. Words. And if you could keep them to 140 characters that would be great. Thank you very much. She doesn't encourage us to stop and to think. Our world doesn't encourage us to do that.
- [8 : 11] And here is a book where God says stop and think. About what life is all about. And about what you do with the hours that God has graciously given you in the day.
- To stop and to think. This is a book that is probably easiest to understand. Is written by Solomon. The king of Israel. It's important because this is the guy who is the wisest man around.
- God has been so kind to him. He asked for one thing from God. And he said can you make me a wise ruler. God was pleased with that. Granted him that. Here is the wisest man around at the time. And here is a man who we will see in this book.
- Who was never short of things. Whatever his heart desired. Whatever his eyes fancied. He got it. This is Solomon. And this word ecclesia.
- Just means gathered ones. That's what it means. Just gathered ones. So the picture is of people coming to Solomon. And Solomon says would you have a seat. At the end of his life.
- [9 : 16] Most likely. And saying here is what I have learned in life. Here is what I have learned in life. And the key word in this book. You will see it in verse 2. You have God's word open in front of you there.
- The key word in this book is the word meaningless. Or some of your translations will say vanity. Or vapor. It's this phrase.
- The Hebrew word hevel. Uses it 38 times. 38 times in this book. Probably best translated. Vanity. So here is what he is saying.
- Vanity. Vanity. All is vanity. And fittingly. It's a word that is kind of hard to define. But it means that life is fleeting. Life is here today.
- And gone tomorrow. Life is gone before you know it. Just when you think you have sussed it. When you think you have grasped it. When you think you have understood it. What happens is you try and grasp it. And it evades you.
- [10 : 18] It evades you. And this is where my candle comes in. You were thinking to yourself. When is that candle coming in? Here is when it's coming in. Because this is probably easiest. As well as described. As well as it's easiest to be understood when it's seen.
- So this word is like the smoke that comes out of a candle. When you blow it out. Just watch. Right? It is here one minute.
- And it's gone the next. You try and grasp that. You try and get that. And put it in your back pocket. And what happens? It evades you. And before you know it. Five seconds later. It's gone.

This is what he means. Life is vanity. Life is vapor. And Solomon says. And God says through his word. As we see life.

As we know it. He says friends. What is your life all about? Now very quickly. If you come with me to the text. In the time we have remaining.

[11 : 20] Verses 2 to 11. Let me just give you a few thoughts of what we see here. Because Solomon is going to make some remarks about life. And what he says. If he had to give a soundtrack to this section.

Solomon it would be. There is a circle of life. And it rules us all. Right? But the thing about Solomon's circle. Is that it's not like.

Disney's circle. Disney's circle. Circle of life. That wants us. Wants to make us get out the hankies. And say to ourselves. Isn't that pretty? And go. Oh. Solomon says.

There is a circle of life. But the one I'm telling you about. Wants to pull out your hair. And go. Ah. This is the circle. Of life. Look what he's saying. Verses 3 and 4.

Here is the circle of work. Here's the question for us all to think about. In our vapor, vapor lives. What do you get from all your toil? You see where I'm asking that. What do you get from all your toil?

[12 : 20] Here's his question. You're busting a gut. As my dad would say. Busting a gut. Good West Coast phrase that one. Isn't it? Busting a gut. Day after day. Day after day. Hour after hour. Toil.

Toil. Toil. Do you see he mentions it twice there. He means physical and mental work. Toil. Toil. Where do you get the end of it? You come back to him and you say. Solomon I got a paycheck. Great. But you'll spend it again.

You get a paycheck. You spend it. You go again. You get a paycheck. You spend it. You go again. You get your paycheck. You spend it. You go again. And you try and save enough of it. So that after 40 years of going through this cycle.

You have enough to get by. And make your life a little bit easier. When you're no longer able to physically work. And the thing is friends. We know it's not as simple as that. Right.

I'll give you an example. This is my geography teacher at school. I sat under him for three years. He was an absolute legend. Right. Mr. King. He gave the best bits of his career to our school as a teacher.

[13 : 16] And when he retired we all celebrated. We had a big service. We did it all. And weeks later we heard he was around Scotland sailing in his boat. And before we knew it we heard the report that he was found dead in his boat.

Just drop dead. Right. Just drop dead. And it's an absolute tragedy. And we all know those things in our lives don't we? Just tragedies.

And Solomon is saying what do you get from all your toil? Isn't it interesting that gap years. Right. Try not to say it in that funny voice. Gap years.

It's the done thing now. See if I was to suggest that at school I would have got a laugh down. But gap years is now what people do before they hit work. Have you ever asked yourself why? Why do people go around the world finding themselves for a year?

Well it's one of the reasons. Not because you know that you're about to step on the treadmill in 40 years of treadmill, treadmill, treadmill, treadmill if you're lucky. And you think to yourself well I'm going to have some fun before I do it.

[14 : 19] Isn't it funny that you've heard of the things called a midlife crisis. That this is a real thing. And it is painful. I experienced a bit of this myself. That there is no such thing as a quarter life crisis.

Generally it would not have been funny. There is a thing called a quarter life crisis. I found that I left university and I hit the workplace. And I hit man alive. What is this? Is this me for the next 40 years?

Is this it? Friends we know these questions. We know these pains. We know these struggles. Toil, toil. And there's one song put it.

Eat, sleep, work, repeat. Eat, sleep, work, repeat. And round and round it goes. I remember my first job as a lawyer. I was there for two years. I remember on the last day, the last Friday night.

Clearing out my desk. Very emotional time. You got to know these people for two years in your life. Going for drinks afterwards. Having drinks. Tell you what. See when I cleared that desk. Because I was about to leave.

[15 : 13] As I shook hands and said goodbye. I was so conscious that they were preparing that desk. For the person who was coming in on the Monday morning. Right? There was no plaque that said Graham Shanks used to work here.

Right? They were not retiring that desk. Saying we just can't handle the thought of somebody else sitting there. This is what he means. Do you see what he says?

Verse 4. A generation comes and a generation goes. Person, person, person, person. Revolving door. Person, person. Generation, generation.

And yet, do you see the punchline? The world stays the same. It stays the same. And so Solomon says, What do you get from all your toil under the sun?

And then we see Jesus making the exact same question to his disciples. In Matthew chapter 16. The disciples are wondering, What does it mean to follow him? As Jesus lays out for him, It means you taking up your cross, Denying self and following me.

[16 : 12] He says, What will it benefit somebody if they gain the world? And yet forfeit their soul? Friends, it's the circle of work.

And then he talks about the circle of nature. Do you see? Five to seven. Because he's saying, I'm in this game. But do you know what? When I look up, I see nature in this game as well. The sun. And I don't need to give any illustrations here, because this is so good.

Do you see what he says? The sun, It rises in the east, And then it sets in the west. And I love his image. Do you see the word he uses here? Hastens. So it rises in the east, It sets in the west, And the image is, It legs it back to the east, And it starts again, And it goes round to the west, And then it legs it back to the east again.

And he says, I'm just like the sun. The sun's doing this as well. And then he says, Even the wind is doing this. Verse six, Key phrase, Even it, Around and around and around it goes.

And the streams, Or the rivers, Verse seven, They're continually pouring themselves into the sea, And yet the sea's never full. You ever wondered that?

[17 : 22] When you go to run a bath, You turn it on, You go away and do something else, You're minding something else, And you're completely forgetting your leg it back, Because I've left the bath on. And what happens to the bath? It's overflowing. I remember wondering this when I was a child.

Why doesn't the sea do that? Right? Constantly pouring in rivers into the sea. Why is the river, Sorry, Why is the sea not overflowing? Well the answer is because water goes in, Water goes up, Vaporation, Water comes down.

And water goes in, Water goes up, And water goes down. And the thing about the sun, The wind and the sea, Do you see how he says, They have been doing this, Ever since the creation of the world.

It's the cycle of nature, And then he goes to the cycle of history, To close, That's verse 8 to 11. Because what is living in this world like? Do you see him use the word at verse 8?

And this is so key we see this. He uses the word weari-ness. Okay? Just, It's tiring. Many of us will know that the pain of that right now.

[18:32] You know, It came to Friday night, Alex night, And we were sleeping at 10 o'clock, Could have easily been half past 8. Just shattered. It's just tiring, Isn't it? Living in this world.

How often when people ask you how you are doing, They reply one of three things. Fine, Busy, And what's the third one? I'm tired. And they're not lying. They're tired. It's just tiring living in this world, Running from thing to thing.

I'd used two phrases to describe my week this week, My days. I described one as chasing my tail, And I described one as running around like a headless chicken. But we know the pain of this.

And we know that this is what life is like under the sun. And then the kicker, Is despite all our running around and busyness, Solomon is saying as human beings, We're really not making any progress.

And that's what he means when he says, There's nothing new under the sun. There's nothing new under the sun. I think he's, You know, If he was alive today, And he could see our world, And he could see, You know, The iPhone 8, Or he could see the x-ray machines, Or he could see contactless payments, He would say, Do you know what?

[19:40] Can I take it back? Can I have the original manuscript back in the Hebrew, And I'll change it, Okay? Because there is something new under the sun. He wouldn't say that, Because he's not talking about technology. What he's talking about, I think, Is the matter of the heart, The human heart.

And why is it that some of our greatest inventions, As human beings, Right? Made to be creative, Made in God's image, Why is it some of our greatest inventions, Are also the means of the greatest evil in our world?

Have you thought about it? Let's take the internet, For example, This invention, Right? Still remember, The first time dad came home with a computer, Right?

And we did that, The modern thing, You know the one? Wonderful invention of the internet, Opened up possibilities, Opened up channels of communication, That you could speak to people, The other side of the world, And they will speak back, Pretty much instantly.

Opportunities, Information, What a wonderful invention, But why is it, That the great, One of the greatest inventions, Certainly in my lifetime, Has also seen the rapid rise, Of online pornography, Enslaving people, A platform where people get addicted to gambling, Indecent images of children, Cyber bullying, Financial fraud, And people trafficking, Just to name a few, You know I heard a stat the other day, That said there are more slaves alive today, Than there were, In William Wilberforce's day, And have you ever asked yourself, Why?

[21:18] Why does that happen? And we hear phrases in our world, Like I can't believe this still happens in 2019, And we know what they're saying, Okay? But behind that, Is an idea that as a society, And as human beings, We are progressing, And C.S. Lewis would call that, He uses the phrase, Chronological snobbery, That just because we live in the west, In 2019, That we think we're the most civilised, People who have ever existed, And yet why is it the stats are telling us different?

Solomon's saying, That it is because there is nothing new under the sun, That technology may be advancing, But the human heart, It isn't. That the wrapping may be different, But the problems are fundamentally the same, And then he says, And years from now, No one will remember you.

Right? Isn't that strange in a world that says, And I've been to enough funerals in my time, To have heard it at the occasional one, That we are like a snowflake, That we will never be forgotten, Because our names will be in the stars, And we'll be history makers, And yet, I suspect few of us here today, Would know the names of our great, Great, Great grandparents, Unless they've done something spectacular, In history.

And friends, What does that tell me? It tells me that, Chloe and Grace, My little girls, Give it a few generations after them, No one's going to remember me, No one's going to remember me, And so Solomon says, Stop, And just think about life, What is it you're doing, With your time?

God holds up to us in the mirror, And he says, There's life as you know it. Vanity, Vanity, Says the preacher. And the thing is, Friends, Painfully, Right, We all know the reality, What he's talking about. You know, Leonard Nimoy died back in 2015, At the age of 83, And he tweeted, In the final few days of his life, The guy with millions of fans, The guy who I'm sure, Has lived every, Every actor's dream, To be in something as successful as that, The guy with plenty of money, And contacts, The final tweet that he sent, Days before he died, Went like this, It went, A life is like a garden, Perfect moments can be had, But not preserved, Except in memory, Now cryptic as that is, It seems to me that, This guy is saying, That do you know what, At the end of it all, Life is vapor, I can't preserve it, I can't grasp it, And put it in my pockets, I can't take it with me, It's here today, And gone tomorrow,

[23 : 58] It's, It's something when you think, You've got it grasped, When you've got it figured, It eludes you, You can't catch it, And what he is saying, Is what Solomon is saying here, That there is a circle of life, And it rules us all, And God says, Would you stop and think, Now you say to yourself friends, Where is the hope in this?

I came to church to be cheered up this morning, Where is the hope in this? But the truth is, We need to just sit in this for a minute, Because, And I'm doing this preaching right now, I just want to run out that door, And just talk about the football tomorrow, Yesterday, Okay?

I just want to forget this, But, He is saying, Would you stop, Would you think about life? What are you doing with your hours? But the thing is, There is hope in this passage, There is hope, Because when Solomon says, That this is what life is like, And you'll see it, And use this phrase twice here, In these verses, That this is what life is like, Under the sun, Under the sun, It's implicit, That he's urging us, To look, Above the sun, This is what the book's all about, You live your life without God, Here's what it's like, And being a Christian, Doesn't take us out of this, But I tell you what, It tells us about a saviour, Who came into this, And here is what this tells us, That the answer to our, Hevel, Hevel, Our vanity, Vanity, Is to be found, In looking to our creator, Right, This is what the kids talk, Was about earlier, Wasn't it?

The one who's given us, The instructions, The one who's said, I, I love you, The one who's crafted the sun, The one who controls the seas, The one who, Carved the wind, And makes it function, The one who made us in his image, And the thing is, The one above the sun, Our creator, Doesn't sit there, And look on and mock us, He doesn't laugh at us, Thinking, What on earth are they doing?

The story is, That God the sun, Stepped into our, Under the sun existence, He stepped down, He humbled himself, In the person of, Of Jesus, And what does Jesus say, Of himself, As we read them in the gospels, That one, Greater, Than Solomon, Is here, As if to say, There is a greater, Wisdom here, And it's found, In me, And we see him, And I think this is my, My favourite appeal of Jesus, As we read about him, In the gospels, The one that he makes, And you can't, But picture him here, Doing anything else, But holding his hands, Wide open, To a vanity, Vanity world, Of people running around, Wondering what it's all about, Who are burdened, Who are weary, And who are tired, He says this, In Matthew chapter 11, And here, Hear the appeal, He says, Come to me, All who labour,

[27 : 06] Right, Work, Toil, All who labour, And are heavy laden, And I will give you rest, You see him go on, Take my yoke upon me, And learn from me, It's one of the, Most wonderful pictures, Of what it means, To be a disciple, Of Jesus, It's to be a Christ, Learner, To come to him, And to say, Lord, I do not have the answers, I am a sinful being, I feel the weight, And the pain, Of living in this broken world, And Jesus, Approaches, Full of love, And grace, And says, Child, Would you trust me, And would you let me, Teach you, Teach you about you, And teach you about, Me, Teach you about the world, In which you live, And let me, Tell you, About your purpose in life,

And the promise from Jesus, Do you see, As he ends it here, For I am gentle, And lowly in heart, And what is the promise, And this is a promise, Isn't it, And you will find rest, For your souls, For my yoke is easy, And my burden is light, There is the appeal, From heaven, From above the sun, This morning, And of course, Jesus makes this appeal, As one who rules, And reigns above the sun, Who is at God's right hand, In heaven, Having dealt, With the full weight, Of our sin, On the cross, Making a way, For us to have access, To our holy, Holy, Holy God, And call him what, Call him father, And I'll just call him that, But know him as father, And to find our identity, In him, And one of my favourite hymns, And we'll close with this, Okay, One of my favourite hymns, I remember growing up singing, Was the,

The one written by, Horatius Bonar, And, It went like this, And let's just close with these words, And I haven't got them on the screen, So just listen to them, And I think he's writing from his own experience here, About what he felt when he came to Jesus, He wrote this, I heard the voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest, Lay down thou weary one, Lay down thy head upon my breast, I came to Jesus as I was, Weary and worn and sad, And I found in him a resting place, And he has made me glad, Friends, Why don't we pray, And just before I do that, I just want to give you maybe, A minute or so, Maybe just to gather your thoughts, And maybe to invite you to bring your own prayers, To God this morning, And so Lord,

We want to acknowledge, Father, Just the weight of your word this morning, And we want to ask, Father, That you would help us, In all the busyness of life, To stop and to think, Thank you, Father, That you love us enough, To speak to us, Thank you, That you are not a God, Who stays far away, But you are a God, Who has come near, And revealed yourself, In the Bible as we have it, And perfectly in your son, Jesus, And thank you, That in him, We see one, Who said, Come to me, All you who are weary, And heavy burdened, And Lord, We acknowledge, That many of us here, This morning, Are burdened, And weary, And feeling the weight, Of living, Lord, In this broken world, And so Lord, It's our prayer, Knowing the, Proneness of our own hearts, To wander, And to get distracted, Father, It's our prayer, That you would help us, By your spirit,

To fix our eyes, And find our identity, In your son, Jesus, And so Lord, We make this prayer, In his precious, And worthy name, Amen.