

Ecclesiastes

Part 1

Ecclesiastes 1 – Everything is meaningless

¹ *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:*² *“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”*

³ *What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?*

⁴ *Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.*

⁵ *The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.*

⁶ *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.*

⁷ *All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full.*

To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

⁸ *All things are wearisome, more than one can say.*

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

⁹ *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.*

¹⁰ *Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.*

¹¹ *No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.*

Wisdom Is Meaningless

¹² *I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.* ¹³ *I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind!* ¹⁴ *I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.* ¹⁵ *What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.* ¹⁶ *I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.”* ¹⁷ *Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.* ¹⁸ *For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.*

I don't know about you but sometime I read Scripture and I'm just in awe of its beauty. And Ecclesiastes is a beautiful piece of writing.

¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are a Mist, a chasing after the wind.

And we are not even reading in the original language! I have heard the psalms are just amazing for those who speak fluent Hebrew.

We are starting a new series in the evenings called “Ecclesiastes”. As you may have guessed from the title this series will be about looking at the book of Ecclesiastes.

Meaningless – the Hebrew word is *Hebel* which is more accurately translated vapour, breath or mist. But we generally use the phrase meaningless, of no substance, just a vapour on the wind, real enough to be seen but not substantive enough to have any impact.

I think Solomon is trying to communicate the transitory nature of life – that all things are temporary – all will pass, and humanity is no exception.

And Solomon talks about all that happens in the *life under the sun* in verse 3. Life under the sun is his phrase for this world, this life – for what is going on here and now – this is what Solomon is reflecting on.

What can you really say about *life under the sun* – what does it all add up to?

³ *What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?*

All our work all our labour, at the end of the day what does it add up to? This is the question Solomon sets up at the start of the book and he will return to this question.

⁴ *Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.*

Has anyone seen *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* on Netflix? Neil deGrasse Tyson hosts this show about the universe. He talks about the history of everything from big bang until now and he scales it down to a calendar year: January to March the big bang was expanding, all the planets were molten hot. And if the history of everything was a year, all of recorded human history does not start until 14 seconds until midnight - cavemen 60s, Egyptian civilisation 14s, Jesus 5s. So tiny are we grand scheme of history everything we know is 14s in a year!

The generations come and they go, but the world keeps spinning, like it always has. The sun keep rising the rain keeps falling the years keep fading away. When I pass the world won't stop, the sun will rise the next morning and only my family and friends will be any different because of it.

⁵ *The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.*

⁶ *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north;
round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.*

⁷ *All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full.*

To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

⁸ *All things are wearisome, more than one can say.*

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

The world works in repeating patterns – the sun rises then it sets, the seasons come and then go, the winds blow from the south then blow back again. It's all so predictable and repetitive ... and wearisome. Repetition is tiring and can make one weary of life.

Usually the OT uses nature to express the glory of the creator God but without God nature just reflects the weariness of humanity. Just as nature can be cruel and repetitive, so is life for humanity. It's like that story about painting the Harbour Bridge – once they have painted it completely once, then it's time to start painting the next coat! Like cleaning up all the house, doing the floors, cleaning the dishes – only to have people come home and dirty the floors, use all the dishes!

In Greek Mythology, the story of Sisyphus is of a king that is punished by the gods and his punishment is to push a stone up a hill, only to have it roll down the other side – his punishment is labour without meaning.

But how many people feel like this in our lives.. like we are pushing the stone up the hill?

I worked at Maccas for 7 years, 4 of those while I was doing part-time youth work. Maccas was my tent building. And there is an exercise in futility – make burgers, clean, make more, clean more for 8 hours. Then return the next day.

Have you ever seen the same person on the bus, in the same seat at the same time, every day. Doing the same thing, getting on at the same spot and off at the same spot and the only reason you know this is because you do the exact same every day

⁸ All things are wearisome, more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

Even the fun things become wearisome. Amy and I used to love going to the city, having a good time in the pubs and clubs. We used to go into the city after youth group on a Friday night – now I can't think of anything worse!

But if we were still doing that after 15 years we would be tired of it. We have friends that still go out to the city all night on the weekends and it is just wearisome.

If you were going on a roller coaster with no line, and you could go over and over: how long would it take for you to get sick of it? How many times?

⁹ What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

If under the sun, life in this world is all there is – and the world is a closed circuit, nothing new can or will enter – then we are just on this loop, doomed to repeat over and over.

And doesn't this sum up human history? We repeat the same mistakes over and over again. WW1 was the war to end all wars – it was so large and so terrible – surely it could never happen again? 30 years later we did it all over again, but this time bigger and more horrible. We learn nothing, we change nothing then we are doomed to repeat.

Have a look at verse 15 (I love this verse) – this world is askew, it's broken, it's twisted and crooked, it's lacking:

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

The other day we saw how we treat children in detention in our country – putting them in solitary confinement, strapping them down for hours at a time, spraying them with tear gas. This is Australia 2016 – the lucky country – and we torture our children; we have abuse, neglect, racism, sexism, and homophobia. How can we fix these problems? How can we eliminate bigotry? *What's crooked can't be straightened*

We can't escape our violent past. There are constant mass shootings in the USA, Police shooting African Americans; a man got in a truck in France and ran over and killed 84 people; last year in Iraq (the country we liberated) there was almost 9000 terrorist killings. We just circle around in this pattern doomed to repeat past mistakes. *What is lacking cannot be counted.*

This book written thousands of years ago yet it peels back the curtain of our world today... of our life under the sun. Is it all it's made out to be?

Our world has a strong narrative about what life is: work hard at school, get good grades, go to uni, get a good job, buy nice home, go on the occasional overseas trip, save for retirement, then retire.

And we live in a part of the world where life is very good. Yet when you boil it down, if this is IT – it just seems so shallow.

We spend all our time doing a job we don't like, missing out on our family. At school you have 12 week holiday a year, then at uni 5-6 months holiday. Then you get a job and get 4 weeks holiday ... for the next 40 years.

We work hard in the best years of our life, so we can retire when where too old to enjoy it. Solomon asks is this it?

¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Like mist on a breeze scattered and spread. Life under the sun... life in this world ... at its best is meaningless.

If we live our lives with an “under the sun” view of the world then all that is left is exhaustion.

⁴ Christ gives meaning to your life, and when he appears, you will also appear with him in glory. Colossians 3:4

Life without God is meaningless, because in Christ we are meaning. Life is given substance, not only because of heaven and the next life. But in the here and now, our labour is not in vain.

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10b

Now eternal life, not life in the next world, but life in the here and now – life under the sun, life on this world.

In Christ there is connection to real community, there is a common drive – to spread the gospel and grow the church, to look after the widow and the orphan.