

Same Old, Same Old

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Date: 05 June 2022

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[0 : 00] The scripture for today comes from Ecclesiastes chapter 1. Starting from verse 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

A generation goes and a generation comes. But the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.

The wind blows the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind. And on its circuits the wind returns.

All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness.

[1 : 12] A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 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.

This is the word of God. Can you speak to God? Great. Can everyone hear me?

Yeah? I can't hear myself, but... Ah, yes. I don't know why it wasn't mute. Apologies. I haven't preached here in a while.

[2 : 15] But it's great to be with you, and it's a privilege to bring you God's word. But, of course, you don't want to hear from me. We want to hear from God. We want to hear from the Spirit. So why don't we pray together?

Our Father, that is our desire to hear from you, to encounter you. Please speak to us through your word, by your Spirit. That you know our hearts. Pray that you would speak to each one of us the things that we need to hear today to get through this week to live for you.

Father, we know that you're the only one who can change hearts. So would you do that today?

Don't, yeah, please, if my words are not the right words, change them.

Would we hear your words in our hearts today? In Jesus' name. Amen. Great. Well, so I'm a Dutchman, in case you didn't know.

Dutch people, they have certain characteristics. One thing we're famous for is that we're very direct. Right? We tend to tell the truth, and we don't really try to soften it or be gentle about it.

[3 : 21] Trying not to hurt people's feelings and those kind of things. That doesn't help, right? It's just better to just tell the truth. I don't know what you think about it. It's very different here in Asia, so I need to hold back. But, you know, when I see this passage, I mean, this guy does not hold back, right?

I don't know what you thought. Here is a new book, Ecclesiastes. We're going to study that over the next seven weeks. And here is the preacher. And he says, vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Now, I don't know what you think the word vanity means. Usually we use it for someone who only cares about their appearance, right? That's vanity. I think, you know, the words that it's related to, vain.

Everything is in vain. That's what he's saying. Everything is in vain. I don't know. Look at a few other translations. Maybe this will help. Absolutely pointless. Everything is pointless.

Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. Absolutely futile. Everything is futile. Life is useless. All useless. That's a really nice message to hear this Sunday morning, right?

[4 : 26] Everything is useless. What is he really saying? Totally vapor. Everything is just vapor that vanishes. And that's the real word here.

It's vapor. It's this kind of, you know, you go to a cold country and you breathe. And, yeah, you get this little puff of air. I know some of you, you haven't left Hong Kong and so you don't really know what it is.

It's not very cold here. Although, the office air con in a community center, it comes very close. But, you know, vapor. It's there and it's gone.

And you can't get hold of it. It's just here for a little while and then it's gone. And so, it's pretty meaningless. Pretty pointless. That's what he's saying. And that is his conclusion.

That's why he's, everything is meaningless. Here is someone at the end of a lot of work. He is depressed and discouraged. Everything is just pointless. And that's how he starts, right?

[5 : 23] Everything is pointless. It's how he finishes the book in chapter 12. He gives a summary. Okay, everything is meaningless. And in between, about 20 times, this is meaningless. This is meaningless.

This is pointless. Work, pleasure, money, wisdom. It's all meaningless. So, you're here and maybe tomorrow you're starting a new job.

And the preacher says, it's pointless. You got engaged. Congratulations. But, it's useless.

Everything is useless. That's what he says.

I don't know what you feel about that. And maybe some of you, you're having a hard week. You've just had a hard week. You come here on Sunday. And then to hear this message that actually, you know, your whole week that you've just been working is pointless.

It's quite a message, right? And the others of us, actually, we think we had a good week. And we're working well. And we're doing a lot of good stuff. And then this guy says, it's all useless. Well, we're having seven weeks, right?

[6 : 23] I'm not saying that today I'm going to convince you. It's just the introduction. But I hope we will listen. Now, why does he think this is all useless? Well, the big thing he says, there's no gain.

No gain. Verse 3. What does man gain? By all the toil at which he toils under the sun. There's no gain. Gain is like profit.

I want to make a cake. And I sell that cake for \$100. That's great. Except I count up what I spent on the ingredients. And on transport of getting them.

And on transport on delivery. And that's \$100 as well. And I've earned nothing. That's the idea, right? And he says, well, you earn nothing. All the things we do, there's nothing at the end of it.

There's no result. There's nothing left over in the long term. No profit. That's the thing about vapor, right? It's gone. You don't have anything left.

[7 : 21] That puff of smoke is just gone. It's deceptive, empty, and futile. What is... Why do you get no gain? Or how?

Well, by all the toil at which he toils under the sun. What is toil? I mean, certainly we can think of our jobs, right? Many of us here are working. And that work, toil, right?

That describes it as frustrating, hard work. And you have nothing ultimately at the end of it. But it's not just that. I think if you're a student and you're studying for your exams, that's toil.

Maybe you're a stay-at-home mom or dad. And, you know, every day the nappies and, you know, bringing the kids to school and the homework and everything. That's toil.

It's just kind of our life here in this world. Is that really true? Well, there's this phrase at the end that we need to understand if we want to get this book.

[8 : 19] What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Under the sun. Now, partly that sounds just sweaty, right?

Here in Hong Kong, imagine working outside in the sun in the summer the whole day under the sun. It is not great. But what he means with under the sun is here in this world.

All the toil here in this world, in life now, that is the thing that is pointless. And the preacher is a bit unusual because he doesn't think about the big picture.

He just looks at life now. It's like he's got blinkers on. Right? I'm only going to look at life now, what I can see here. So he doesn't really consider the future or eternity. He doesn't look at that.

He just looks at now. And he doesn't even think much about God. I mean, he mentions God, but only what we can see about God right here in life now.

[9:17] Not what he's told us about himself in the Bible. Not what he will do in the future or anything like that. It's just life now. He looks at life now, the life here in this world, and he says, well, that's pointless.

That's all meaningless. It's important to see that because otherwise maybe we want to make sure we read this book rightly. I mean, it's a rather unusual perspective, right?

We know from the rest of the Bible that there is a God and he has revealed himself. And we know that, you know, that there's a future and those kind of things. What are we supposed to do with this book?

I mean, who even wrote it? In a way, we don't know. Many people, they read verse 1, the words of the preacher. The son of David, king in Jerusalem.

They think, oh, that must be Solomon because he wrote so much wisdom. It's probably not Solomon. I mean, he says a few things that's really weird if you're Solomon. Like 1 verse 16.

[10:13] This is one thing he says. Next slide. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me. Well, if he was Solomon, there was only one guy before him, David.

Why doesn't he just say, I've got more wisdom than my father? This doesn't sound as if it was really Solomon. It's just someone pretending to be Solomon.

What if Solomon said this? Now, it's probably just some, it's a wisdom book from hundreds of years later. But why doesn't he consider the rest?

Why do we have this book that almost contradicts some of the rest of the Bible? Well, wisdom literature is sometimes worse that way. It gives us a different point of view.

And it tells us to engage with it. If you've read the book of Job, you probably know Job's friends. They give all these great speeches. And then at the end of the book, it says, well, they were all wrong.

[11:14] Which is really annoying, right? If you didn't know that and you've tried to apply this to your life. No, sometimes it tells you, is this really right? And here we have a preacher.

It's like this guy gets invited. I mean, it feels a bit distant, right? You know, the words of the preacher, vanity of vanities, says the preacher. It's like the writer is distancing himself.

This is what the preacher is saying. But is that really true? And that's what he makes us think.

Looking at life in this world, is that really? Well, what do you think of life in this world? And at the end of the book, he will say, well, in a way, well, that's not quite right, right?

Fear God, keep his commandments. So that's how we need to read this. But why do we have such a book then? Why this book that actually, in some ways, we should not take fully seriously?

Or we need to understand it? Well, I think what God is doing with this, it's like a dead-end street. If that makes sense. You know this sign, if you're driving, you want to find your way home.

[12:18] And you don't really know the way. And then you come to this sign. What do you need to do? Turn around, right? That is not the way. Whatever you're going, this is not the way.

And it's helpful to know sometimes, right? This is not the right way. This is a dead-end street. I think what this book is doing is telling us that if you only look at life now, if you live for this world, if you're trying to find meaning here in this world, that's a dead-end street.

So this book, it is pointing to Jesus, but kind of indirectly. It's pointing to Jesus by telling you, well, don't go there. Go the other way. Run to Jesus.

I think that's very helpful. Maybe if you're a visitor today, right? Maybe you feel that. That's why you're here. Because you feel like your life lacks meaning. And you think maybe Jesus has the answer.

Maybe it's helpful to hear that actually, yeah, the Bible would say, yeah, that life without Jesus is meaningless. But also for us, right? Of course, we were Christians. We know the answer.

[13:22] And yet, we live here in this world, right? 95% of our time, we are doing, well, work and taking care of children and studying and all those things of life and sleeping and showering and shopping and admin, right?

So much of our life is just life here. Apart from maybe your quiet time, Sunday mornings, CG. That's how it often feels like. And it's very easy for that 95% of your life to dominate.

And you want to find your meaning and happiness in that. And the Bible says, no, don't do that. Lift up your eyes to Jesus because this is a dead-end street.

That's where we're going to go over the next few weeks. So I hope you will hear both. I hope we will see that this is pretty depressing life here. But I hope, then again, we turn to Jesus and, like a Coke after a hike, just, all right, that's where we're going to go.

But we've only hardly started. Why does the preacher today in this poem think that there is really no gain? Well, there's no change.

[14 : 32] You live here in the world and there's just no change. We get this lovely poem about the world, but in some ways it's pretty depressing. And here's his point. Verse 4, A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The earth just remains the same. Everything that's happening is not doing anything. The earth just stays the same. I mean, look at nature. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.

The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north. Round and round goes the wind. And on the circus the wind returns. Well, you can hear it. Here's the sun and it rises and it sets and it goes round and it rises and it sets.

That's life, right? Every day the same thing. And nothing changes. The winds, they blow this way and they blow that way. And the world just keeps going.

The rivers, you know, all streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. The water cycle, same thing.

[15 : 40] It's just maintenance, right? It just, these things just go round and round. Now, he's looking at nature, but isn't that our lives? You know, what is your average day, right?

You get up and you have a shower and you have breakfast and you get into the MTR and you go to work and you work and you have the same meetings that you have weekly and at the end you go in the MTR back home and you eat and here you go to bed and the next day the same thing, right? Every day exactly the same thing. What's the profit? What's the gain? Just every day exactly the same thing. I know what you're going to say. I'm earning money, right?

So I can eat and I can pay my rent, right? I need to sleep. True. Be honest. Why do you sleep? I mean, if I go to bed, I think I should get enough sleep so I can work again tomorrow.

I sleep in order to work and then I work so that I can have a place to sleep. And that's my life. I mean, many of us are going on holiday.

[16 : 42] I'm going on holiday. What's the point of the holiday? Many of us, yeah, I need to recharge so that I can work again when I come back. What's the point, right?

What's the point of working if the only thing, right? Earning money from... I hope you get the point, right? Isn't that life? It's just this endless cycle. Students, I guess, you're studying for your exams. Every time there's a new exam. I mean, you have an end point at least. But then, after that comes work. And as you just heard, that's very exciting. Or maybe you're just stay at home. Mom, you've left work.

But, you know, isn't that routines, right? Getting the kids... Okay, getting them up, uniform, breakfast, off to school, and pick up from school, and homework, and violin, and feeding them, and shower, and bringing them to bed.

And the next day, exactly the same thing. Every day, exactly the same. That's life. Isn't that just depressing? There's no progress.

[17 : 42] Nothing's really happening. Now, of course, that's just one day at a time. You need to zoom out. Look at the big picture, right? Look at human history. Look at all the progress we've made.

Well, that's what the teacher says, right? Verse 9, What has been is what will be. What has been done is what will be done. There's 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. He says that nothing really changes. Everything just actually stays the same. Now, of course, hey, look at all the medical progress we've made.

Look at all the technology, right? We didn't have smartphones, like, 20 years ago. If you're my age, I got my first phone at 25. Like, wow. But actually, have things really progressed much?

How long do human beings live? 80, 90 years? Well, back in Moses' day, Psalm 90, it was 70 to 80.

[18 : 48] So in 3,500 years, we only live 10 years longer. And those 10 years is mainly spent in hospital, to be honest. It's not like we're now living hundreds of years or thousands of years, right?

We haven't made much progress. And even technology, yes, technology is different, but so many things still the same. Maybe 100 years earlier, I would write my sermon.

I would have a quill, an ink, and I would write it, right? Something like that. Okay, now I've got a laptop. But I'm still writing. I'm still spending hours every day writing things.

And 100 years ago from now, just at the wrong time, my ink runs out. Or now, just at the wrong time, my battery runs out. Right? What's the difference?

Have we really made much progress? You know, people used to work 60 hours a week. Now we work 60 hours a week. Any progress? To be honest, things haven't really changed, right?

[19 : 46] You know, I was so excited to get this phone that would make life so much better. Well, but I was just as excited four years earlier when I got my previous phone. That didn't make my life any better.

Let's be honest. You know, things don't really change, right? We have the same long hours and the same frustrations as long ago. And ultimately, we're all going to die. That will come in the coming weeks, but, yeah.

So, this is life, right? Endless cycles, no real progress, no real gain, nothing really gets better. And so, the preacher asks, well, it's pointless, right?

There's no point. If it's not going anywhere, if it's not making any difference, there's no point. Some of you maybe are really feeling this at the moment.

You feel like you're stuck in this job and it's always the same and you're not going anywhere. I hope you feel at least God understands you. He knows what you're going through.

[20 : 44] He knows what it's like in this world and He's telling you, I know. And as we'll hear in a moment, I've got an answer for you. But at the same time, many of us are not like that, right?

We live in this world, but we really think we can make it. You know, we can get things under control. I know life isn't great, but if I work harder and if I plan better, then, you know, my life will get better.

Things will be good. Somebody said this morning, Kevin, everyone's hustling around Hong Kong, right? Everyone is trying to make it work. And, well, this guy says, well, give up.

That's not going to work. You're not going to have any gain. Everyone before you has tried. They haven't changed the world. You know, they haven't changed their life. Do you think you can make it?

And sometimes it's not even hard work. Sometimes we think, just change. I know I'm stuck in this job, but I'm going to get a new job and then everything will be great, right?

[21 : 42] Then my life will be good. Or once I get married, then things will be better. Once I get kids, then things will be better. Once the kids leave, then things will be better.

Right? It doesn't. It does not at all. How about the last time you changed jobs? Did that work out? No. That's the thing.

I'm not saying you can't change jobs. Of course, some jobs are worse than others, right? If you have a really terrible boss, he's abusing you, giving you too much work. Hey, try to find a new job. It's a good thing to do. But don't expect things to be perfect. I had a friend of mine. He wasn't a Christian. I would meet him about twice a year. Every time I met him, he had a new job.

Because, yeah, the projects weren't challenging enough. So, it was too boring. And the next time I'd meet him, my colleagues weren't very friendly. And the next time I'd meet him, oh, yeah, change jobs again.

[22 : 42] Yeah. Too much travel. Right? It's always, it never worked. Right? So, yeah, please change your job if you can, but don't expect things to be perfect.

Or, yeah, countries, you know. I often say that to people. Sometimes your country is terrible. Please leave. Those people who are fleeing Ukraine, I can fully understand that.

But, no other place is paradise. Lots of Hong Kongers, they've moved to the UK. So much depression. Because the UK is just not paradise. It's not, I've lived there.

No, no, it's a nice place. It's lovely. We're going back. We have great friends. But it's not paradise. And many people are finding that out. They've put all their hope. I'm going to go to the UK, then I'll be perfectly happy.

No. There's no game. I mean, where does this all come from? Well, the Bible, the New Testament tells us. I mean, it's clear if you read between the lines.

[23 : 45] The New Testament is pretty explicit. In Romans 8, what does Paul say about this whole creation? Well, for the creation was subjected to futility. Not willingly, but because of him who

subjected it.

The world has been subjected to futility. The word futility, the Greek word, is what they also use in the Greek translation of Ecclesiastes. So basically, this vanity, this meaninglessness, this pointlessness, that is what's come over the world.

And what is he talking about? He's talking about the fall. We had God. We had a perfect world. But Adam and Eve, they turned away.

And we left the God of life and love and tried to do it our own way. This is what you get. A world that's cursed with vanity. A world that's cursed with futility so that things just don't work and we don't get anywhere.

That is why life is like it is now. And so, you want to change it? Well, you need to get out of this creation, basically, right? As long as you're here in this world, there will be a curse and you'll be stuck.

[24 : 54] That is what he's saying. I don't know if you feel that. I don't know. Again, this is a hard message. Maybe on some of the ways you spend your time and you just feel, this is really all a waste.

Well, again, I can't leave us here, right? I'm a gospel preacher. No. Ecclesiastes said, yeah, look, the preacher says, the world never changes, right?

It's always the same cycles. The human cycle, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. We live, we were born, we live, we die. We're born, we live, we die.

Except there was this one man, right? We know. He was born, he lived, he died, and he rose again. Jesus broke out of this. Jesus came here, lived a frustrating life, and yet then he rose from the dead.

He broke out of this. The world changed. There was a new creation, a body that has no more futility and no more decay, right?

[26 : 03] Actually, Jesus came out of this creation to the new creation. And that's not just him. He ascended to heaven and he's pouring out his spirit. Today's Pentecost, many churches celebrate that, but yeah, the spirit was poured out.

And the spirit is bringing that resurrection life around the world. Now, we by ourselves, nothing changes. And yet, but Jesus, he broke through that and he poured out the spirit and he's changing the world.

And that is something that will last, right? The thing was always, there's nothing left over in the end. And actually, he says the earth remains forever. Well, as we know, the earth will not remain forever, right?

Heaven and earth will pass away, Jesus said, which makes ultimately everything meaningless, right? If the earth passes away. But, Jesus' words will not pass away. The gospel that he preached, the gospel, the power of salvation, will not pass away.

That is eternal. And if that gospel is at work in you, you will, you will survive the destruction of heaven and earth. You will be there at the end. And suddenly, that changes things, right?

[27 : 12] Now, you last forever. And that means everything we do is different. I mean, our work, now that we live forever, it changes.

And so, Colossians, whatever you do, work heartily. As for the Lord and not for men, knowing that it is from the Lord that you will receive the inheritance as a reward.

What you now do for Jesus is not meaningless. Because one day, you're going to meet him. And he's going to reward you for all the things you've done for him. All the ways you've loved people.

All the ways you've lived and witnessed for him. It's what Jesus refers to as a treasure in heaven, right? Don't work for this world. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, thieves break in and steal.

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, which will last. Here is something that will last forever. If you love people, that love will last forever because Jesus is going to reward you.

[28 : 17] And it's not just for yourselves. Because the gospel brings eternal life to others. And so what happens if you explain the gospel to someone and they repent and they come to Jesus?

Well, their eternal destiny changes, right? No longer the lake of fire, but a new creation. An eternal difference that you can make by spreading the life and love of Jesus through his gospel words.

Doesn't that make suddenly things meaningful? Here is something that you will do that will never last. That a thousand years from now you can see the difference because there will be people

celebrating in God's presence because of what you've done.

What God has done through you. Isn't that amazing? I mean, that's something that motivated me. People often ask me, why did you go into ministry? I used to work for London Underground, making the trains run faster and stuff, technical job behind the scenes.

I mean, it was nice. It was a good job. I wasn't just making shareholders richer. I was really helping people getting to work a bit faster, right, and better. And that's great. But a hundred years from now, do people really care?

[29 : 38] Do people really care a hundred years from now how fast they get to work? No, they don't. But whether they are in heaven or in hell, they will care about. And so, yeah, for me, for me that meant full-time ministry, but why not do something lasting?

Something that makes an eternal, everlasting difference. That's what Paul says. He encourages us to do that at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, a great verse.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, in the work of the gospel, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Not in vain. Everything's vanity, but what you do for Jesus is not in vain. Doesn't that give you hope and meaning?

Right? Actually, yeah, life here can be hard, and it can be frustrating. But here's the difference. Tomorrow you go to work. Why are you going to work? Partly, yeah, you need to stay alive.

[30 : 44] You need to earn money. But can you go to your job for Jesus and live for Him and try to live there with love and with integrity and with justice and compassion and try to share the good news?

And suddenly, what you're doing has eternal value. It has meaning. Or maybe you're a parent. Because most of what you do as a parent is pretty meaningless, right?

You know, the nappies and the food and, you know, the education and the instruments. A hundred years from now, it doesn't really matter whether they can play the violin. But if you're discipling your kids, you're making a difference.

Right? A hundred years from now, your kids will, if they know Jesus rather than have walked away from Him. Isn't that the greatest difference you can make for your child? Isn't, shouldn't that be our priority?

Yeah, of course, all those other things are good. It's nice if you can do those things. And yet, the most important thing for our kids, if we're parents, that they just know Jesus and grow in Him.

[31 : 53] Right? I hope you get the message. Right? Life can have meaning. Without Jesus, if we just try to focus on here, no, yeah, that's meaningless, pointless.

But this is different. And that's great, right? I mean, I see Chris and Fiona at the back, we're going to say goodbye. I mean, they've been here for 11 years. They've done so much. Will Hong Kong notice?

That's the question, right? Will the authorities have noticed? Will it go down in the history books? If you look at this world, maybe not. And yet, think about the spiritual impact they have had.

People here who've come to faith through them. People who are, have grown so much as a Christian because they've been discipled by them and are now living for Jesus here and making a difference here by preaching the gospel, by living for Jesus, doing good.

Isn't that amazing? We're not seeing that now, but we will see it one day. And isn't that worth it? That doesn't mean it's easy. It's still a fallen world.

[33 : 02] Discipleship can be very frustrating, especially with children, right? If they don't listen, whatever. But it matters eternally.

Isn't that something we all want? And isn't that why we want to send Chris and Fiona out? Why don't we pray together? Our Father, we thank you so much for Jesus.

We see life without Him and it's such a dark abyss of things that don't matter, things that make no difference. And yet the things that take up so much of our time. Thank you that you changed the world.

Thank you that you changed us. We didn't deserve that we are sinners. We didn't deserve anything more than this pointless life here. And yet you gave us your spirit.

You gave us your love as you sent forth your Son on the cross. Father, please, would we have this vision? Would we lift our eyes to Jesus and live for Him and do the things that will matter eternally as we live good lives among the pagans, as we share Jesus?

[34 : 20] And would you work through that? Lord, thank you that you are changed in the world. Would you use us to change the world as we fix our eyes on Jesus and He's our vision? In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.