

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] You may have seen the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* in that the character George Bailey struggles to believe that his hometown of Bedford Falls can give him the wonder that he desires in life.

The same enemies causes George Bailey to fidget with the mundane. He is restless to leave it all behind him. And he feels that he must travel to some other patch of this world, somewhere else, to do something worthwhile.

He's ruled by those two words, if only. He says in the film, he says, I couldn't face being cooped up for the rest of my life in this shabby office. I wanted to do something big, something important. Satisfaction is never quite now, is it? It's never quite here in this moment.

We are a society obsessed with the new. We are a people obsessed with change, with invention, with the novel.

[1 : 33] As someone once said, somewhere else, doing something else, is the model of our advancement. If only I could get there, somewhere over the rainbow, my life will be alright.

If only these things could change, I would finally be happy. Somewhere else, doing something else, being someone else.

As we open up the book of Ecclesiastes, we're going to go through it over the next few Tuesdays. We'll probably take a break, and then maybe come back to it next year.

But what we find in this book is a teaching of a wise, godly man who is about to burst our bubble. He's about to take us on a grand tour of the world, to make us face things that perhaps we don't want to about the world.

That there is no yellow brick road. That there is no end of the rainbow somewhere else. There is no shortcut to a wonderful life in this world.

[2 : 52] But he also holds the keys for showing us the enjoyment and satisfaction in this world as a gift from God.

For where you are, whenever you are, and whoever you are, right now. It's a grand world tour of realism, but also of rejoicing in this life.

So firstly, listen to the words of this tour guide. The words of the tour guide. Now the name Ecclesiastes, it's not a word we use often, is it?

It's a word that is from a Greek word that is used to translate a Hebrew word. Meaning a collector, or a compiler, or a preacher, or a teacher.

It's named after the preacher who is featured in the book. And we're introduced to him in verse 1, aren't we? The words of the preacher.

[4 : 02] The son of David, king in Jerusalem. Now we're going to learn more about this preacher as time goes by. But right from the beginning we are given his sermon text.

The words of this preacher's sermon. And it's probably one of the shortest sermons that I've ever seen. It's just three words long. In verse 2.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. That's his text. A very, very short lunchtime talk. He is going to unpack those three words over the whole book.

But that's his sermon. Vanity of vanities. Now again, vanity is not a word we use often, is it? Some English translations of the original word there use the word meaningless.

You might find that in your Bible at home. Others use the word breath. Breath of breath. That is helpful. Anyway, vanity stands for something that is vaporous.

[5 : 12] Like a breath. Something that is futile. Gone at their one minute, gone the next. Something that is ephemeral and vacuous.

Something that is pointless and meaningless. This preacher's text sounds odd, doesn't it? All is vanity, he says.

As we begin on this tour, with this tour guide, we might think somehow we have bumped into a madman who is shouting out crazy things on the street.

He is shouting out nonsense here, isn't he? All is vanity. Really? Marriage is meaningless.

Friendship is pointless and vacuous.

Really, preacher? Is all vanity? Come on. He takes us on this tour, though. And we realise as he does that, he is not the madman, but he is the wise man.

[6 : 23] And he is going to show us a world that we know, deep down at heart, is a complex place to live in. It is a world full of loose ends.

Where there are rules, but there are exceptions to the rule. Where things that should not happen, happen. A maddening world.

A frustrating world. Where all, at one level, is vanity. And he is going to peel back the curtains, as it were, to help us to see what is going on backstage in the world.

To see the true reality. It's like our tour guide, the preacher, he is like one of those magicians who gets kicked out of the magic circle for revealing all of the secrets.

Now, you hear those stories, don't you? A magician who has learnt all of the arts and the tricks.

He's learnt the sleight of hand and the distraction.

[7 : 25] He is in the know about how all of the tricks work, but he breaks away from the system and he reveals all. He tells the audience the secrets of all the tricks.

Where does the hat actually come from when it comes out of the hat? The rabbit. How do they saw the person in two? He gives us a revelation of the world.

Behind all of the smoke and all of the mirrors. Behind the party line of materialism and consumerism and atheism. And he gives it us straight, undiluted, honestly.

And we will see that he is a brilliant, brilliant preacher as he does this. Because he is like a magician who gets off the stage and sits with the audience.

He is a preacher who gets down and sits with the congregation and asks the questions about the world that they are asking.

[8 : 34] He will avoid the trite and sentimental, standard preacher's answers and the dishonest answers to bring us a healthy dose of realism.

So he says, on my tour of the world I am going to give you two things. The first thing I am going to give you is the genuine story.

I am going to give you the genuine story. Now in our little section on our sheets this afternoon, verse 3 to 11, we see that the story begins showing a world of inscrutable repetition.

A world that goes round and around and around as if it's stuck on repeat. Now throughout the book of Ecclesiastes there are two refrains that the preacher uses for his two main messages.

And the first refrain we see in the title for his genuine story of the world in verse 3. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils?

[9 : 51] Under the sun. Under the sun. That's shorthand for life in this world as it really is. Everything that is from a human perspective.

And life under the sun he says is fundamentally repetitive. It is ultimately fading and futile.

Look at verse 9 there. 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.

It is a world where people and their achievements are endlessly being rehashed and re-photocopied over and over again.

In the film Edge of Tomorrow Tom Cruise plays the character of an army officer who is captured by a strange alien power. I don't know if you like sci-fi.

[10 : 55] But it forces him to relive the same day over and over again. And it is the day when humans plunge themselves into a war with another race.

Now at first Cruise tries to fight. He uses this day to try and learn and train. He uses this one day to advance his combat skills.

One day to defeat his enemy to develop. only to wake up and have to do it all over again the next morning. The catchphrase, the catchline of the film is live, die, repeat.

He is living and dying and repeating. And in the film it's a harrowing and weary experience that he has to find a way to escape. Now spoiler alert, he does find a way.

So it's a good ending. But the preacher shows us here that there is only escape from the living, the dying and the repeating in a Hollywood film.

[12:03] Because that is exactly how this world is under the sun. Listen to him in verse 4. A generation goes and another comes but the earth remains forever.

Lifetime after lifetime we live, we die and we are forgotten. Think about that. The vast majority of people who have ever lived in this world we have never known one single one of them.

How many of us know our grandparents by name or our grandparents? And the few people that we have known are soon forgotten. In a clever use of language the preacher shows our transience in comparison with the earth that we live on, doesn't he?

In verse 4, the earth remains forever. The constancy of the earth shows our repetitive life. The same earth lived on by generation after generation swept away by the tides of time.

the same earth that Socrates walked on. Constantine has been here. Shakespeare and Leonardo da Vinci.

[13:25] Michael Jackson. The earth has seen them all come and go. They've all walked on the same earth and they've all seen the same sun that we see that rises and goes down and hastens to the place where it rises in verse 5.

We see that sun every day don't we? But the sun won't necessarily see us every day. We will die and the whole thing will start all over again.

Moses writes in the Psalms we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy or even by reason of strength eighty yet their span is but toil and trouble they are soon gone and we fly away.

The preacher tells us that even inanimate nature itself feels the futility of this repetition in verse 7. All streams run to the sea but the sea is not full.

To the place where the streams flow there they flow again. Even the sea is constantly being filled but is never full it's never satisfied.

[14:48] Round and round and round emptying and filling emptying and filling and we know this is real don't we?

We feel this inscrutable repetition in all that we do. Just think of the events that have shaped our lives the events that we remember events that children now can only learn about in a textbook the flight of the Concord the handing over of Hong Kong back to China September the 11th and those children will have the same conversations and the same elections and the same constant debating and the same problems to solve over and over.

The constant search for the new is itself an ancient and much repeated search. Verse 10 Is there a thing of which it is said see this is new it has been already in the ages before us.

Now don't get the preacher wrong here he is not wearing Nike trainers is he and he has not written this on an iPad he is not saying that there will never be any inventions or technological advances but he is highlighting the absence of any real game that these inventions provide us.

We often hear those words quoted in verse 10 don't we? See this is new we hear those words all the time every day a new car a new phone a new way of travel travel but the very repetition of that statement every day proves that even new things are not really new they are just updated versions of things that we already have looking for the genuinely new under the sun is an old mistake the man who thinks he has found something new is actually being something very old making the same old mistake of using the new to validate our repetitive existence people do that don't they I do that

[17:22] I love the pleasure of opening a new box of something that I've just bought even if it's just a table a table from Ikea last Friday and I love that feeling of opening the new smelling that fresh pine smell people record videos on YouTube of unboxing stuff don't they have you seen that the thrill of the new because somehow the new validates my existence it helps me feel like I'm breaking the repetition a new table but the preacher says Chris give me a break are you serious ideas technology fashions ways of ways of thinking the bad and the good will eventually disappear and reappear and disappear and reappear and the new things of today will be the forgotten things of tomorrow and they will be the hand-me-downs of another generation he says in verse 11 there is no remembrance of former things nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after amazingly the Bible tells us that even the works of God in this world can be forgotten by the next generation even the miracles of the plagues you know that famous story and the rescue of the

Israelites those things were forgotten just a few generations later by a new pharaoh and a new generation of Egyptians because this world under the sun is simply an endless cycle of same old same old and so the preacher asks therefore what is the point what is the point really in verse three what's the point of toiling and achieving and developing in a repeated world with a fading people full of repeated things now do you see what the preacher is doing here as he shows us the reality of the world he is beginning to convince us that our love for change and the novel and the new is not the answer to our satisfaction problem we need to understand that there is no yellow brick road there is no end of the rainbow there is no somewhere else doing something else being something else there is no something truly new that is going to make you or me happy under the sun this is the genuine story of the world he says so stop believing and trusting in that old saying the old old thing see something new don't believe that don't trust in that to make you happy now we could be left thinking that our tour guide is just a depressive we've gone on around the world tour with

Leonard Cohen but in his realism the preacher actually is the ultimate optimist about life because secondly and more briefly the second thing he says is listen to the joyful story there's a genuine story about the world but there is also joy in the world and this part of his message comes in another refrain that comes through ecclesiastes from time to time there is this life under the sun idea but there is also enjoyment under the sun which is a gift from God later in chapter 3 verse 13 he says everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil this is God's gift to man seems contradictory doesn't it he's just said there is nothing to be gained from all of our toil under the sun and now he's saying actually the wise person can live under the sun and enjoy themselves this is a gift from

God and the truth is that if we are constantly looking for change if we think that we can break from this repetition in the world and in our lives if we think that we can gain something by our changes whatever it is that we think we've gained will soon disappear and we will disappear along with it as well but the preacher wants us to see that part of real living in the world is seeing that and understanding the true limitations of this life seeing that one day we will be forgotten might actually put a wry smile on our face if the genuine truth is that we live in a repetitive world there in lies the key to enjoying that world he tells you that you will never find true gain under the sun so that you won't have to to enjoy this life because he wants us to desire something bigger and truer and deeper those enslaved to finding gain under the sun will never find it but enjoyment comes under the sun when we know we don't have to find it and be enslaved to it when we know that we can't do that on our own the preacher gives us reality so we can really rejoice and this we will see as we go through

Ecclesiastes is a gift from God not something that we can strive to get the preacher gives us reality so that in the end we can really rejoice this is a gift from God at times it's going to be a painful journey maybe it's felt like that this afternoon it's going to be hard work this tour of the world is not going to be easy and it may take a while for us to understand and take the fruit from it but he is going to jar us into seeing reality so that we might receive the gift of God not somewhere else doing something else but here today right here in this world right here under the sun let's pray together