

24 April 2022

Jasper de Keizer

## Ecclesiastes 1–2

## “Much Meaninglessness”

Have you ever spoken to someone who truly gets you.

For me this was my experience when I met my wife – finally someone who understood me, that I didn't have to force my personality with, someone that I didn't have to work with to sift through all the misunderstandings.

What a relief to find someone I clicked with.

As we come to Ecclesiastes, this is the experience of many people who read it.

Finally, a book that sees the world as I see it.

A book that speaks honestly.

A book that sets out the plain truth.

A book that understands the world I live in.

That doesn't try to paint the world in a better light than it truly is.

It's a book that establishes universal truths, and therefore has a universal appeal. Christian or not. Those who read Ecclesiastes have a deep resonance with it.

It's a book that feels incredibly modern, as it asks the existential questions of what the meaning and purpose of life is, and digs with a scalpel to the heart of the issue.

And it's unafraid to face the painful answers that lie beneath the surface.

And even though it's a book that so many resonate with, it's a book that is deeply disturbing, and unsettling, and uncomfortable. It's depressing.

But depressing in a good way, that strips away the pretence of airy fairy, happy clappy, rose coloured glasses view of life that that refuses to acknowledge any of the problems that this world has.

Ecclesiastes is a book that reshapes our understanding of reality, in order for our lives to be adjusted accordingly.

Chapter 2:13 says

<sup>13</sup> I saw that wisdom is better than folly,  
just as light is better than darkness.

<sup>14</sup> The wise have eyes in their heads,  
while the fool walks in the darkness;

This is a book that belongs to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, to save you from living a life in the dark, a life that is pointless, a life that leads nowhere, a life without a purpose.

It's an incredibly difficult book to grapple with.

But one that saves us from throwing away our lives to things that do not matter, that are utterly meaningless.

I'm gonna pray as we turn to God's word.

## PRAY

We're gonna charge straight into Ecclesiastes, and as I read the first three verses I want you to hear the first point that God's word makes to us – that everything is meaningless, and the reasons it gives.

And as we do that there are important themes and pieces of context that jump out at us.

Have your Bibles open in front of you, as we begin with Ecclesiastes 1:1

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

<sup>2</sup> "Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

<sup>3</sup> What do people gain from all their labours

at which they toil under the sun?

Pretty strong words right. You can feel the force of it can't you. This is not a half-baked opinion, it's about as absolute as you get.

And we know the implied answer to the question in verse 3 don't we, the answer that the text is looking for. What do people gain? Nothing.

And we're gonna work through why that is in a moment, but first, some themes and context.

The first is, who wrote Ecclesiastes?

Tradition has it that it's Solomon, which you can see from verse 1, [the son of David, King in Jerusalem](#). Elsewhere he speaks of his unparalleled wisdom, his pursuit of pleasure and riches and architecture that all point towards Solomon.

But don't be alarmed if some people think that it's not Solomon. There's enough clues in the text that suggest it's someone else, who merely takes on the persona of Solomon in these opening chapters.

If you're really keen to talk about that I can talk more after the service if you like. But I think there's better things to chew the cud over in Ecclesiastes.

From now on, whenever we speak the author of Ecclesiastes is, we'll just refer to him as the Teacher, because this is how he often refers to himself.

The second thing to pick up on by way of context is the word "meaningless", which is the translation of the Hebrew word "hebel", it appears 38 times in the book, four of which are in the second verse that we just read. It's a major theme of the book.

It's a word that doesn't fit easily into the English language, and that people debate the best translation of.

And the word includes the ideas of vapour, mist, vanity, etherealness, transience, something unable to be grasped.

They're all good ideas to associate with the word hebel.

But meaningless is a good translation that we shouldn't reject.

Most of the time what the teacher is communicating with "hebel" something negative, that mist and vapor don't quite capture. Not all the time, which is why it's helpful that the word has such a broad definition.

Listen to verses two and three again.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

<sup>3</sup> What do people gain from all their labours  
at which they toil under the sun?

Positive or negative?

I'd say negative.

Which brings us to our third piece of context.

<sup>3</sup> What do people gain from all their labours  
at which they toil under the sun?

Under the sun is another major theme in Ecclesiastes.

It's an important phrase to get right.

Does it mean under the sun, everything below heaven? Apart from God, without reference to God?

God is above the Sun, but everything under the sun is meaningless.

I think that's a stretch.

Under the sun is not a reference to life apart from God and his gifts – that’s not really a possibility after all.

God is intimately involved in the world under the sun, and he gives his blessings of common grace to the righteous and the wicked.

I take “under the sun”, to mean “everything”. The Teacher is making a universal claim that applies to everyone. Israelite or not. Jewish or not. Christian or not.

Which brings us back to the point that the first three verses make.

### **Point 1: Everything is meaningless**

We had that question hanging there in verse 3 didn’t we.

<sup>3</sup> What do people gain from all their labours  
at which they toil under the sun?

It’s a rhetorical question isn’t it. The teacher is expecting the answer – “we gain nothing”. Everything is meaningless, because we gain nothing.

He goes on to give three reasons why:

- Because nothing changes
- Because nothing is new
- Because everything is forgotten

**Nothing changes** – have a look from verse 4.

<sup>4</sup> Generations come and generations go,  
but the earth remains forever.

<sup>5</sup> The sun rises and the sun sets,  
and hurries back to where it rises.

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

<sup>7</sup> All streams flow into the sea,  
yet the sea is never full.  
To the place the streams come from,  
there they return again.

<sup>8</sup> All things are wearisome,  
more than one can say.  
The eye never has enough of seeing,  
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

On a cosmic scale, things never change. Baby boomers, Millennials, Gen x,y,z, they all come and go, but the Earth is still here. The sun keeps rising and setting, the wind and the water run their course.

On a personal scale – they eyes and ears are never filled.

I have a friend with a scratchy world map. Like lottery tickets, but a world map.

Every time he visits a country, he scratches the country to show that he's been there. I think he's nearly scratch the whole globe now.

But if you ask him if he feels like he has explored the whole world, I doubt he would say he has. I have a hard enough time exploring all of Sydney!

The eye call always see more, the ear hear more, they will never be filled up.

Our experiences are never filled up, there's always something lacking, still empty, still waiting to be fulfilled. And because that's always the case, nothing changes

**Nothing is new** – have a look from verse 9.

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

<sup>10</sup> 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.

There's nothing new, we still need to eat, drink, work, sleep, have shelter. Humans are not doing anything radically new to what they did from the very beginning.

There might be a few objections to this, but they're weak objections.

We might say, things do change, there are new things, micro evolution, humanity developing, society getting better and better.

But I'd say we all know deep down that human development and progression is a fairy tale that is becoming easier and easier to disbelieve.

The fantasy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was utopia. We dreamed of a society that we were millimetres away from, that we could pull together in one big happy harmony.

But then, 1914, WWI. But even then, people called it the war to end all wars. Utopia, we're on the brink of utopia!

Well 1939 shattered any illusion of no war.

If we thought we were close a year ago, war in Ukraine reminds us of how naive that is, not to mention the many other hundreds of conflicts since WWII that we're just too removed from to care about.

It's not as though War is the only measure of change and development.

What of the riches and comfort we live in now, that our grandparents could only dream of. Hasn't society developed here?

A quick scratch of the surface finds that we may have increased our riches, but we are categorically worse off elsewhere.

We are the most medicated generation for anxiety and depression ever, and record the highest rates of suicide in history.

The adjustments we make that we think are for better end up undermining something somewhere else.

The changes in society are superficial. They're surface level. Fundamentally we haven't changed.

What if someone says "there are new things under the sun!"

We have the internet don't we? Telephones, fast food, internal combustion engine, renewable energy.

But these are all just technologies. And there were technologies back in the day. They don't really change the DNA of human existence.

We have the technology today to get rid of any trace of poverty and starvation on the entire face of the earth. But we don't. Why? Because there's nothing new under the sun. The new things that humans have don't really change human lives.

Our morality, our society, or our mortality.

Which ties to the last reason that everything is meaningless – **everything will be forgotten**

Ultimately the last vestiges of meaning are undermined by any memory of anything being scrubbed away by death – have a look from verse 11.

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

...

Maybe you could say you live on in the memories of others, but not for long, even those who hold memories of you will die.

Sure we know about Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Christopher Columbus. But do you know them? Or just know about them?

There's nothing personal about our relationship to Napoleon. It's entirely based on information, and that information is often more of a reflection of the person who wrote the history, not Napoleon.

Death unravels even the memory of you.

We have a modern poet who's considered these things, listed to what he says:

Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day  
Fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way  
Kicking around on a piece of ground in your hometown  
Waiting for someone or something to show you the way

Tired of lying in the sunshine, staying home to watch the rain  
You are young and life is long, and there is time to kill today  
And then one day you find ten years have got behind you  
No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun

And you run, and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking  
Racing around to come up behind you again  
The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older  
Shorter of breath and one day closer to death

Every year is getting shorter, never seem to find the time  
Plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines  
Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way  
The time is gone, the song is over, thought I'd something more to say

It's chilling isn't it.

It's similarity to Ecclesiastes is chilling.

If you've never heard of Pink Floyd there's some educating left for you.

Turns out not even Pink Floyd is new under the sun.

Nothing changes, nothing is new.

Everything is meaningless.

How uncomfortable.

We're quick to rush to the new testament to say that everything is meaningful. Don't do it! I don't think that's quite right.

That would be a waste of reading Ecclesiastes!

There's wisdom to be gained.  
Which is my next point.

## Point 2: There is wisdom to be gained from meaninglessness

*The first piece of wisdom is – Freedom from fruitless endeavour.*

Chapter 2:

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. <sup>2</sup> “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” <sup>3</sup> I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

<sup>4</sup> I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup> I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. <sup>8</sup> I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. <sup>9</sup> I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

<sup>10</sup> I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my labour,  
and this was the reward for all my toil.

<sup>11</sup> Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done  
and what I had toiled to achieve,  
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;  
nothing was gained under the sun.

One writer calls these chapters a great feather duster to sweep away all our illusions. All the pretences we have to find meaning.

I think it’s more like a battering ram that breaks down every tower that we run to for safety from meaninglessness.

We run to pleasure, but he breaks it down. Pleasure is madness and folly.

We call this hedonism now.

A pursuit of self-indulgent pleasure seeking. I hate to break it to them, but my family is not always pleasurable. Heck, I’m not always pleasurable.

And covid iso puts it to the test. Kids can be a handful. Tempers run short.

If life was just about pleasure seeking, I wouldn’t have a family. And have you noticed, that’s exactly what our culture is doing at the moment. Delaying family because it’s too much of an inconvenience to my lifestyle.

It doesn’t matter where you run, the teacher comes after you with his battering ram.

He even batters down wisdom itself. In verse 15 he says

<sup>15</sup> Then I said to myself,  
“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.  
What then do I gain by being wise?”

I said to myself,  
“This too is meaningless.”

<sup>16</sup> For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;  
the days have already come when both have been forgotten.  
Like the fool, the wise too must die!

Not even wisdom in and of itself is meaningful. The careful, diligent, mindful, controlled person meets the same end as the reckless fool.

Pleasure, projects, wealth, and work, wisdom, he comes at them all with his battering ram and methodically works through everything under the sun, just in case we thought he doesn't really mean everything, and knocks them over,

because they're all ultimately undone by the fact of the first three verses. Nothing gained, because nothing changes, nothing is new, and everything will be forgotten. Everything is meaningless.

And he does this all not so we would learn by imitation, that we'd go try out everything for ourselves, but that we would learn from his experience.

I don't know if your dad ever said something like “the best lesson learnt is somebody else's”

That's what's happening here. The teacher is debunking the meaningfulness of everything to save us from being defined by something meaningless.

He's giving us freedom from fruitless human endeavour that would have our lives chasing after these things for satisfaction and enjoyment. They will all let you down!

I'll give you three examples that I think are common:

**Prestige:** Wealth, property portfolio, career, popularity.

I wonder how far you climb on the corporate/popularity ladder before you realise that the people at the top seem to have all the same problems you have, if not more, and they're still not satisfied.

**Family:** happiness, together, home.

But are families ever entirely functional?

What of the tragedy of broken homes, of parents neglecting children, children rebelling against parents, children leaving home, leaving an empty house, parents dying, or even worse, children dying.

Try telling one of these families that meaning and purpose and significance is found in family.

**Experience:** try new things, see the world, experiment, live your best life.

I know people who've tried this... their freedom ends up looking more like slavery, as their appetite for the exotic and exciting grows and grows, but what they feel becomes duller and duller.

None of these things will satisfy. Give them up. Don't pursue them thinking they will fulfill you.

That's the first piece of wisdom: freedom from fruitless endeavour.

So what does that mean! We all just give up. Keel over, because life is meaningless?? Don't have any expectations so you'll never be let down??

No, because there is enjoyment to be had – but only when human endeavour is given up.

Which is the second piece of wisdom to be gained from meaninglessness. *Empty hands can receive the gifts from God.*

Human endeavour will be fruitless. BUT, if we release our hands from gripping so tightly on to what we think will satisfy us, we'll be able to receive the things that are from the hand of God.

<sup>24</sup>A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup>for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? <sup>26</sup>To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

See that important phrase at the end of verse 24? "this too I see is from the hand of God?" It's an acknowledgement that eating, drinking, satisfaction, wisdom, knowledge, happiness are all gifts from the hand of God.

And I think this speaks to a resistance we have when we hear everything is meaningless.

There's a part of us that doesn't really believe that everything is meaningless, because we can point to things in our lives that we have enjoyed, that do satisfy us, laughter is not always folly, there are moments that it's the best thing to do, as we enjoy life.

There are hobbies I have, like painting, and surfing, and roasting coffee, and playing board games, and riding my bike that I genuinely enjoy. Doesn't that mean they're not meaningless?

But have a look at how the chapter ends. Look at the last sentence.

*This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

Even the gifts God gives are meaningless the teacher says...

...and I take it it's because even the gifts of happiness, enjoyment, and satisfaction are just gifts, not God himself.

You can enjoy these things:

<sup>24</sup> A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

But give up thinking you secure them by human endeavour.

As you enjoy them, acknowledge that they are from the hand of God.

But don't forget, even this is meaningless.

Because we can turn around and say, fine, I can't secure these things myself, but I'll make it my ambition to enjoy the things God gives.

Our lives are not to be obsessed with the gifts God gives, because that would miss the mark of living our lives for God himself!

Regardless of whether you are happy or not,  
the giver is more important than the gifts.

God is not just some sugar daddy that gives us what we want.

I worry because I buy lot's of sugary things for my daughters, and they love it, but I want them to love me, not the things I buy them.

Regardless of whether you're satisfied, happy, or wealthy, or wise  
is your life characterised by living for the things God gives?  
Or by living for God himself?

Or as this book so wonderfully puts it, "to fear God".

Let me pray that this would be the case.

**PRAY**