

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 Meet the Teacher CCH Sermon 26APR26

- V2
 - Very surprising.
 - Sounds more like something hear in a philosophy class than Bible.
 - Let's pray for God's help, we are going to need it!

PRAY

- I've called this sermon "**meet the teacher**".
 - Not Mrs Smith from Year 9
 - Or me the pastor-teacher
 - We are meeting a Bible writer from roughly 3000 years ago
 - A preacher or teacher
 - (literally gatherer) who has gathered people together to share his wisdom
 - which then got written down by an editor who also made some comments at the start and end of the book.

- The editor introduces us to him in v1 Meet the Teacher.
 - The teacher is called a son of David.
 - While some see the Teacher as a fictional character like in a story
 - He presents like a historical King from the family of David
 - The most likely candidate is Solomon, the next King after David.
 - That would explain the massive wealth described in chapter 2.
 - But we aren't told, and so we don't know for sure.

- What's his message? Well that brings us to v2.
 - Now here's where we need to do a bit of language work.
 - Can everyone say "**Hebel**" Just learned your first Hebrew word!
 - It's this Hebrew word translated here "Meaningless".
 - It's 5 times in this verse and around 38 times in the book.

- The best way to understand Bible words is to see how they are used in the Bible.
 - Hebel or ABEL is the 2nd Son of Adam & Eve who didn't last long.
 - Hebel is used IN Psalms 39 and 144 to speak of mankind like a breath.
 - It can be translated vapour or mist or smoke.
 - So Meaningless (NIV) is OK... hints at the questioning nature of the book
 - But it doesn't quite do it justice, there's more to it
 - After all some things in the book are described as hebel and yet are better than other things
 - So they can't be totally pointless.
 - The ESV and KJV use the word "vanity"
 - And that's the most common translation.
 - Others use "mystery", "smoke", "futility", "vapour", "fleeting".

- But the best way to get your head around this word is one I saw by a preacher in Cambridge and it's this.
 - DEODORANT SPRAY!!!
- Mist. Spray.
 - It's frustrating.
 - And it doesn't last long- it's fleeting
 - And like a mist, it eludes your grasp, it's hard to pin down.
 - A FRUSTRATING, FLEETING, FOG!
- So my main heading is this....

LIFE FEELS FRUSTRATING, FLEETING AND HARD TO GRASP (v1-2)

- Now straight away Ecclesiastes is beginning to feel very contemporary, and yet slightly unbiblical!
- CONTEMPORARY
 - Because how many philosophers and thinkers through the ages have spoken of the elusive and transient nature of life.
 - From Shakespeare: *"Life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound & fury, signifying nothing"*.
 - To Freddie Mercury *"Empty Spaces, what we are we living for, abandoned places, I guess we know the score, on and on, does anybody know what we are living for?"*
 - To Billie Eilish, Winner of Last year's Grammy award for best song who sang *"I'm in their secondhand smoke / Still just drinking canned Coke."*
- YET IT ALL FEELS A BIT UNBIBLICAL.
 - Can the Bible really say *"the day of death is better than the day of birth"* and that we should *"enjoy life because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad"*.
 - Yes it does in this book!
- Surely the Bible has more to say?
 - It does, and we'll get there as we make links to the good news of Jesus in the NT.
 - But we won't do that too quickly, because God wants us to grasp how deeply ungraspable life can be. He wants us to sit for a while with the teacher feeling the frustrations that we feel in our every day life.
- Let's run through the rest of this short section quite quickly to see the Teacher's point made in 4 different ways, and then we'll think about where we go with all this.

LIFE FEELS FRUSTRATING, FLEETING AND HARD TO GRASP....

1) NOTHING'S GAINED (v3-7)

- One writer, David Gibson, who's written a great book¹, and has got some material online (see the Xtra handout) says that the whole book is an answer to this question in v3....
- *"What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun"*.
 - Under the sun isn't so much about space or geography, it's more about the fallenness of the world. It's a key phrase we'll see again and again.
 - And the Teacher asks how much can you achieve in life.
 - And the answer seems to be not very much!
- Now it sounds like the teacher is having a mid-life crisis.
 - Or possibly an old age crisis.
 - And one suggestion is that Solomon wrote
 - Song of Songs when he was young and in love
 - Proverbs when he was mature
 - And Ecclesiastes when he was a grumpy old man!
- But he's onto something isn't he?
 - What do you gain?
 - There's a T shirt that says "Eat, Sleep, Work, Repeat"
 - You go off to work for decades and yes you bring home the dough
 - You might be fortunate enough to pay off a mortgage
 - Does life really gain you much?
 - Do you actually get anywhere?
- Do you ever make inroads
 - We are tidying the garage at the moment.
 - But give it 2 weeks and it will need doing again.
 - One CCH family has the Hebrew word Hebel written on the washing basket!
 - Another nappy. The same washing up as yesterday.
- In v4 he moves onto his family tree.
 - You may be fortunate enough to get married, have 2.4 children.
 - But one day they are going to die and your grandchildren too,
 - While the River Great Ouse goes on flowing for centuries after we're gone.
- In fact that's where he turns next: creation. V5-7.

¹ ["Living Life Backward"](#)- how Ecclesiastes teaches us to live in the light of the end" (Crossway).

- I've had a song going round in my head all week. It's very catchy though it's a bit depressing! I've put it on the Spotify list of Ecclesiastes related songs that I've made.
- It's a folksy protest song² by a Scottish band from the 90s called Del Amitri.
 - The lyrics are a bit dated now, but they sum up this frustrating cyclical nature of life that gets us nowhere.
 - It's called "Nothing ever happens".

*Telephone exchanges click while there's nobody there
 The Martians could land in the car park and no one would care
 Closed-circuit cameras in department stores
 Shoot the same movie every day
 And the stars of these films neither die nor get killed
 Just survive constant action replay*

*And bill hoardings advertise products that nobody needs
 While "Angry from Manchester" writes to complain about
 All the repeats on TV
 Computer terminals report some gains in the values of copper and tin
 While American businessmen snap up Van Goghs
 For the price of a hospital wing*

*And nothing ever happens, nothing happens at all
 The needle returns to the start of the song
 And we all sing along like before*

Nothing's gained.

- And the Bible agrees!
- Life can feel deeply frustrating, even futile, sometimes.

2) NOTHING SATISFIES (v8)

v8

- We can entertain ourselves to death with Netflix, Minecraft,
- But are we ever satisfied.
- The Rower Matthew Pinsent got 4 Olympic Gold Medals in a row, and yet after each one, he kept asking "what's next".
- Nothing satisfies.
- If you've ever felt that, and you are allowed to feel that, even as a Christian,
 - the Teacher knows how you feel,
 - and the fact that it's in the Bible tells you God knows how you feel.

3) NOTHING'S NEW (v9-10)

² <https://genius.com/Del-amitri-nothing-ever-happens-lyrics>

V9-10

- In my preparation for this series I listened to a talk on Ecclesiastes on my bike by US theologian RC Sproul who died a few years ago. The talk was old and it must have been recorded in the mid-80s. But in that talk, he was remarking on how the news hadn't moved on from a newspaper with the date January 1953s.
- He said the names were different, Truman, Eisenhower and in his day Reagan, Thatcher, but the issues were exactly the same. Racism in South Africa, Fallout with the Russians, and a court case about injustice in sport. Well it sounds pretty similar to today. The names may now be Trump or Putin or Okilie (a boxer who's facing a 4 year ban for doping) the details may be different, but...
 - There's nothing new under the sun!
- Now I know that **some** things are new.
- Humanity has never flown so far away from the earth as they did on the Artemis 2 mission 2 ½ weeks ago. But one day that will be superseded.
 - And that's kind of the point. "What has been will be again" v9
 - We are always doing something new, and yet nothing new happens.

4) NOTHING LASTS (v11)

V11

- Do you know much about your 8 great grandparents?
 - I know about one, because a building and a road is named after him in Market Harborough, but I've got only the sketchiest details about the rest.
 - And 100 years from now, it's likely that you and I won't be remembered by anyone.
- Nothing lasts.

Life feels like an ungraspable enigma

Well where do we go with this conclusion?

- We've reached the end of our passage.
- It all feels a bit bleak and a bit depressing.
- What's the right response?
- Where do we go?

DESPAIR?

- In other words should this drive us to deep depression like the existentialist philosophers of the past, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus.
 - Ernest Hemingway was a writer who saw the cyclical repetition of life, he even wrote a book with the title taken from v5. "The Sun also Rises".
 - He thought the only way to cheat death was to take it into your own hands.
 - And he said goodbye to his wife and ended his life.

- No. Ecclesiastes is bleak at times. It's sobering. It describes itself as the pointy stick of a shepherd (12:11) it's going to be hard and painful, because it doesn't want us to wander off into stupid avenues.
- Despair is not where it wants us to go. The message has much more to say, and we'll need to read on to see it.

So is the right response to say that actually this viewpoint is...

"UNBIBLICAL"?

- Should we correct this view.
 - A little bit like the phrase in the Psalms "there is no God"
 - But read it in context and it says "The fool says in his heart 'there is no God'".
 - Or the (bad) advice of the friends of Job- also wisdom literature like this.
- Some writers suggest that what the teacher is doing is deliberately limiting his research to life under the sun in other words life without God, and what he needs to do is raise his eyes up to God and then he'll find meaning and hope. Some say that only in chapter 12 do we get the right perspective (and we'll come to that shortly) and it corrects the broken wisdom in the main part of the book.
- This is similar to the idea that life "under the sun" is terrible without Jesus, but become a Christian and everything will be OK.
- The trouble with this is it's only half true.
 - First there are God bits in the book, but they aren't just in the happy bits, but they are in the bleak bits too- just turn to 2:26 and 6:2. In other words God is in the troubled times too.
 - And also, if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you'll know that Christianity doesn't solve everything. If you come to Jesus you may still be depressed, anxious, single, childless, sick or
 - Don't get me wrong, I genuinely believe that Jesus brings life to the full. And that begins now. There is healing, hope and joy in a relationship with Jesus, and the prospect of forgiveness and being with God forever. Being a Christian is wonderful.
 - I'm just saying that until we are with Jesus in the new creation, there will also be pain, and in some areas life may get harder.

You will need to read on in the book, and see where it's going, and I'm going to give you a little spoiler from chapter 12 in a moment, but I think the take home lessons for now are TWO:

1st) WE SHOULD LIVE WITH REALISM.

- That's what I've titled this series. Life with Realism.
- Ecclesiastes allows us to be realistic about life.
- Not overly **pessimistic**. Not falsely **optimistic** either but **realistic**.
 - It's a book that says
 - You will find work frustrating. We're living in a fallen world.
 - You don't have to put on a fake smile.
 - People in the pews around you are struggling with
 - Ill health
 - Grief
 - Separation from their kids
 - The effects of abuse, divorce, infertility, singleness
 - Why is it that we come to church, and when we're asked how we are, we say "fine".
 - It's OK to say, "battling on"! Or with one or two people we might say "I'm struggling", or "can you pray for me".
 - Life isn't meaningless, but it is "Hebel" frustrating and hard at times.
- And it's good to teach realism to our kids too. I'm glad the children's groups are looking at a few highlights (and lowlights!) from Ecclesiastes too.
 - If you have children, do you say, "I can't wait for the summer holiday, it's going to be amazing. Time on the beach, sunshine, buckets and spades".
 - Or do you say, "I can't wait for the summer holiday, it's going to be amazing. I'm sure there'll be some challenges along the way, because there's always something, insects, traffic, sunburn, but praise God we can have a holiday".
 - It's not being glass half empty, it's just being realistic.
 - We are teaching our kids realism.
 - Realism can build resilience. Life is not always easy.
- Jesus himself, another son of David, was realistic.
 - He knew what it was like to face
 - Homelessness
 - Loss
 - Grief
 - Injustice, even death.
 - He said, "The poor you will always have with you"
 - but he said "You can help them any time you want, and he went on to speak about his death.
 - He said "in this world you will have trouble". But he also said, "take heart, I have overcome the world".
 - Jesus wept over Jerusalem, and then he died for its sins.
- We should Live with realism.

2nd WE SHOULD LIVE WITH REVERENCE.

- Please turn to the conclusion of the book. 12:9-14. P679.
- It's important to see this, because it does give perspective on where the book is going, the big punchline.
- "Fear God and keep his commandments".
 - You will face frustration this week.
 - You may feel like you're getting nowhere.
 - You will face the fleetingness of life-
 - you may brush
 - You will find life a mist that's hard to grasp
- But don't let those things drive you to despair or a fake smile.

- Let them drive you to **God**.
 - Fear Him.
 - Respect him.
 - Find your happiness in his gifts, not your gain.
 - And the pain? He's going to sort it all out one day.
 - His son Jesus who lived on this broken planet and knows what you are going through is the King of Kings who in the new heaven and the new earth will take away the pain, wipe every tear away.
 - And he's going to bring judgement.

- Let **hebel** drive you to fearing God, and to loving your neighbour.
 - This is the whole duty of mankind.

Life does sometimes feel frustrating, fleeting, like you don't get anywhere. But live with realism. Live with reverence. Let's pray for that now.

Time for questions?!