

## Introduction

Let me start this morning with some big questions: "what is life all about", "what's the point of it all", "why are we here"? Surely as followers of Jesus we all know the answers to these questions? ...Well possibly - but even the most committed follower of Jesus will sometimes have doubts because at the end of the day we are all human, we are all fallible, we are all fallen. Consider then how those who don't know Jesus must feel about this deeper meaning of life?

I have a good friend who I've known for well over 20 years - he is not a follower of Jesus but he is one of the nicest people you could chose to meet, when I first met him he lived in a small maisonette and earned a moderate amount of money.

He has always worked really hard and today he runs his own business and to put it bluntly his loaded. He has a beautiful wife and two lovely children, a fabulous home - he even has a new Aston Martin motor car which I have to tell you he's let me drive! He's success has not changed him and he is still a really nice guy who seems to basically have it all. Yet just over a year ago (at my surprise 49<sup>th</sup> birthday party) he said to Ruth - "What's life all about", "what are we here for", "what's the point of it all"?

Now also consider how the Teacher of Ecclesiastes would have felt. There's no doubt he believed in God but unlike God's children today he did not share in that special blessing of following and knowing Jesus. His relationship with God (just like others in the Old Testament) was distant particularly compared to the potentially deep and personal relationship that Jesus has made possible for us today.

So as we examine our reading and it's relevance for us please recognise the context in which it was written. At that time God had not yet revealed Himself through the person of Jesus Christ here on earth. As such the teacher would have felt a huge separation between himself and God as highlighted in chapter 5:2 where he writes "God is in heaven and you are on Earth". This Teacher is a God fearing man who frustratingly realises he doesn't have all the answers.

We on the other hand have the potential to see a fuller picture in Jesus Christ. However, if we are unable to have a full understanding of God (of what Jesus has done for us) we potentially find ourselves slipping into the same doubts that troubled the Teacher of Ecclesiastes - doom and gloom and everything is meaningless. So keep in mind that the Teacher did not know Jesus. Also consider - if we did not have Jesus how would we view our life on this planet? Probably in a similar or even gloomier way.

So let's unpack our reading. There are two points I hope will emerge:

1. Living in a circle of time without Jesus
2. Living in eternity with Jesus

### 1. Living in a circle of time without Jesus

One word dominates the first 8 verses - "time". But what is time? Time exercises a curious hold over us. It's shrouded in mystery. What exactly is it? Can we beat it? Why can't we travel backwards or project ourselves into the future?

Recently I took my son, John back to University. As a dropped him off three attractive young girls came running over and excitedly proclaimed how much they had missed him. They then literally carried him off as if he was some long lost trophy they had suddenly found. I was left standing at the car feeling rather jealous wishing I could turn the clock back and be 18 again. But of course time is not like that.

Some say time is like money - we can spend it any way we want but we can only spend it once. It never comes back again though we sometimes wish it would. And yet time is full of potential. Indeed nothing is more even-handed than time.

Barak Obama and Gordon Brown have no more time than you and I. All of us have exactly the same amount of time in a day.

As we read these first eight verses its is clear there is a right time for everything but the frustration remains that we don't know when that time is - and we don't have any control over it? For example in verse 2 it says: "a time to be born and a time to die" - but we don't know when that will happen. Even when we think we are in control of our time something comes along and our plans have to suddenly change.

A few weeks ago I was invited together with a colleague to deliver a presentation lasting one hour to about 40 people in Winchester. I spent quite a bit of time preparing it, I made sure it included audience involvement and designed some good supporting literature. I had two meetings with my colleague to make sure we'd got it right and I practiced what I was going to say. On the day I was confident and looking forward to what I thought would be a good evening's work that would really help people. We were the main item on the agenda. The meeting started at 7:30pm and we were due on at 8:30pm. The meeting had to finish at 9:30pm. Timing was crucial. Imagine then how I felt when at 9:15 pm they finally got to our presentation and then announced they had run out of time and asked if we could come back on another occasion (and this after they'd argued with each other for 45 minutes over whether they should have 6 or 7 people on a proposed committee).

Having told you that unfortunate little story now look at verses 9 & 10? "What does the worker gain from his toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the burden God has laid on men". It's as if the Teacher is saying - "where does time get you"? Not it would seem where you want to go. My son John is 18 and full of hopes, dreams and ambitions and over time I hope he gets to where he wants to be. But as time passes and he gets to wherever that place is - what then? Just like my friend I mentioned earlier - even if we get to where we think we want to be it can feel like an empty achievement. What the Teacher of Ecclesiastes seems to be saying is that "it's not fair" and he holds God responsible!

Then in verse 11 it gets worse as the teacher writes: 'God has made everything beautiful in its time' - in saying this he is linking back to the very first verse: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven". What he is saying is "things often look great in the here and now but everything is transient - for that which looks good today - a flower, a sunset, the wife - may not look so good tomorrow." He then continues in verse 11 and says 'God has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. You can sense his frustration. The teacher knows there's more to life than appears on the surface but had the frustration of not knowing what that was. "It is as if God is baiting or toying with his human creatures, giving them a desire for something that is well beyond their reach."

Perhaps this resonates with you today. If we are honest we all share a degree of this same dissatisfaction that the Teacher writes about. Indeed St Augustine wrote - "You have made us for yourself (God), and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

So by now I would guess you are all feeling a bit depressed. But here is the crunch...

## **2. Living in eternity with Jesus**

I would hope that in all of this we recognize that we are not God and we will never have all the answers but we are made in his image...Genesis 1:16...Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness"

He is eternal and that image is deeply implanted within us. So we shall never find fulfillment except in a relationship with God. All other routes will ultimately leave us restless and unsatisfied. God is eternal, vast, infinite and without beginning or end. We are all finite, tiny, flimsy and puny. Yet there is within all of us an eternal ache which we long to satisfy.

C.S. Lewis said this: God made us; invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other.

You see we are created in God's image and as such have a spiritual thirst, we have eternal value, and nothing but the eternal God can truly satisfy us. He has built in us a restless yearning for the kind of perfect world that can only be found in his perfect rule. Yet we cannot see into the future or comprehend everything. However, unlike the Teacher we are in a much more advantageous position because we are blessed to live as New Testament Christians. We live with the knowledge and opportunity of a potentially growing understanding and growing relationship in Jesus. This enables and allows us to become more and more Christlike as we move forward in our journey of discipleship.

So the upshot of this is that we can and must trust Jesus in the here and now and do his work here on earth. The more we do this, and grow in his likeness, the more our frustration evaporates and we move ever closer to true fulfillment in him.

## **1. Living in a circle of time without Jesus**

So where does the Teacher go from here. Well look at verse 12: I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. As you read this verse again remember to realise where the teacher is coming from. Verse 12 is a statement of resignation, not enthusiasm. Basically the teacher is telling his readers to give up trying to fathom God's way in the world and instead simply enjoy the present. So he goes on in verse 13 and writes: That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil - this is the gift of God. The teacher is resigned to the awareness that life's enjoyment will only come from small sensual pleasures (eating, drinking & find satisfaction in our work), rather than an understanding of the grander scheme of things. In other words - we live in a fallen world and this is therefore the best we can do under the circumstances.

It's interesting that the teacher then finishes verse 13 with the words - "this is the gift of God". In other words that none of us can even take these small, temporal enjoyments for granted as its God who permits them to happen. And then we read verse 14: "everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it". Again recognise the negative nature in which this passage is written. The teacher continues to moan saying that whatever God does endures and no one can change God's plan. No matter how frustrating God's world is, we must learn to put up with it. He then finishes the verse by saying "God does it so that men will revere him". He moans again that God's purpose behind his actions is to strike fear in the hearts of all of us. The Teacher seems to believe that God acts the way that he does to frighten people into submission and not it would seem to arouse a sense of respectful awe of his power and might.

And so to the last verse from this potential depressing reading that we've heard this morning: "Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before and God will call the past to account". This verse states that nothing new ever happens or will happen. God just repeats himself through time, and humans cannot make things better. The teachers point is that - past, present, future - there is nothing new under the sun. Basically God makes the same things happen over and over again. It is simply a circle of time.

So as we think about our reading this morning where has it taken us? Well it tells us there are proper times and season. But because we cannot know when these times will happen we feel frustration. Because we are incapable of discovering the larger picture or significance of God's creation we have to settle for the lesser pleasures of life (food, drink and satisfaction from work). Even then not everyone can avail themselves of these simple pleasures only those whom God so blesses. And so we are left struggling with the depressing reality - what's life all about?

## 2. Living in eternity with Jesus

I said at the start to remember the context of the time when this scripture was written. It was before Jesus. We must see this therefore as part of the unfolding revelation of scripture. The Teachers view of God and the world reflects what he sees and his experiences but he does it in a pre-Christ era. So the writer although a believer in God is nevertheless unable to draw on the reality and meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. He is quite naturally a bit of a sceptic.

Now jump forward to today...we are blessed to live in the knowledge of Jesus and by embracing him the doubt and uncertainty that plagues the Teacher of Ecclesiastes can evaporate.

In Matthew 24:42 Jesus says Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. Jesus is coming back! Yes - we have to accept that we don't know when but Jesus asks us to spend the time waiting by taking care of his people and doing his work here on earth, both within the church and outside it. We are not to live irresponsibly - sitting and waiting, doing nothing; seeking self-serving pleasure - we are to do God's work of building his kingdom.

So as we reflect on eternal life and the return of Christ let me point further to Jesus by taking you to 1 Corinthians 2:9-12 where Paul writes "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"- <sup>10</sup>but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup>For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup>We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

Yes - please accept that we cannot imagine all that God has in store for us, both in this life and for eternity. But - He will create a new heaven and a new earth and we will live with him forever (we can't exactly picture what that will be like other than it will be beyond our wildest expectations). Until then, his Holy Spirit comforts and guides us. Knowing the wonderful and eternal future that awaits us gives us hope and courage to press on in this life, to endure hardship, and to avoid giving in to temptation. This world is not all there is. The best is yet to come.

Verse 10 of this chapter from 1 Corinthians speaks of the "deep things of God" which points to God's unfathomable nature and his wonderful plan - Jesus' death and resurrection - and to the promise of salvation, revealed only to those who believe that what God says is true. If you believe in Christ's death and resurrection and put your faith in him that is all you need to know to be saved. And of course what God has done for us in Jesus then allows us to see things very differently from someone like my very nice but unbelieving friend who I mentioned earlier. As such our time here on this planet can be viewed with the perspective of hope and eternity. So instead of being like the teacher in Ecclesiastes and complaining about God we can see that sometimes he withholds enjoyment so that we can find our true centre in him. We recognize that contentment can only be found when we ask God for it. That God is unchanging and that in God's time all will be judged. We realise that God loves us so much that he sacrificed his one and only Son that we might be forgiven and restored in relationship to him. We are his children, top of his creation and very special to him.

I really hope that is how you feel - if you don't then please talk to someone who does and ask them how they know Jesus and what he has done for them. Because if you are a follower of Jesus Christ then you are well placed to eat, drink and enjoy your work and discover that life is actually preparing us for the world to come and as such it is not a burden but a blessing under the care of a loving and generous heavenly Father.

Heavenly Father as we reflect on the book of Ecclesiastes and look towards Jesus please reshape us. May we in your strength grow in generosity, in faith, and in expectation that the best is yet to come when we are truly Christ-like. Make us passionate followers of Jesus, rather than passive supporters. Please make us individually and collectively together a place of radical discipleship, may we be signposts to heaven, so that in us, through us, and - if need be - despite us your kingdom will come. We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.