

Life Outside the Garden

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[0 : 0 0] Well, welcome back. Hopefully you've got a Bible, although I'm going to put the verses on the screen as well for you. And I hope you've got your coffee. As I said, it's a bit of a philosophical book and this first one to introduce it will be a long one.

So let me start, though, with that question that we had on the screen. Where do you find lasting fulfillment in life? I saw this rather depressing card on the next slide. I think we've got some problems with the noise, but it says birth, in between stuff, death, that's it? Question mark. Is that all life is?

You know, you're born, you do some stuff and then you die. And if that's it, where do we find lasting fulfillment in life? Well, today is really the introduction, as I said, to this new series in Ecclesiastes, and it takes an honest look at life in this world, sometimes a brutally honest look, actually.

But the reason we're doing it is because we've, I think, been taught by our society to have, well, unrealistic expectations of life in this world. And when expectations aren't met, that's what often causes us grief and disappointment in life, isn't it?

You see, our society, whether through TV or advertising or social media like Facebook, often bombards us with pictures of the perfect family. In fact, that's what often people post, they only post the perfect pictures of their kids and so on, don't they?

[1 : 3 0] Or pictures of the attractive body, the fulfilling career, the better homes and gardens we can have. And we're made to think that if we work enough or spend enough to get these things, then we'll have lasting fulfillment in life. But is that really true?

And if not, then where do we find lasting fulfillment? And what expectations should we have about this life? And what is some wisdom to help us live in this life?

And those are the sorts of questions that the book of Ecclesiastes will help us to think about over the coming weeks. But it begins by introducing us to our teacher and his summary.

So on your screens, verse 1 and 2, the words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, utterly meaningless.

Everything is meaningless. So here is our teacher. We're told he's a son of David, a king in Jerusalem. Though as we'll see later on, it's probably not Solomon.

[2 : 4 4] But anyway, in verse 2, his summary of life is meaningless, utterly meaningless. Aren't you glad you tuned in this morning?

But the Hebrew word for meaningless on your screens or vanity in some translations just means vapor or breath. And just like our breath that you breathe out on a cold morning, it doesn't last, does it?

It disappears. It's fleeting. But like our breath on a cold morning, it's also futile. That is, it's empty. You can't grab it. It's vain.

And that's what this word meaningless means. It's both fleeting and futile. It cannot give lasting fulfillment. I'm sure it might give us some satisfaction for a short while, but like a breath, it doesn't last.

One person said you could actually translate it as soap bubbles. We're like this kid on your screens. Everything is soap bubbles, utterly soap bubbles.

[3 : 50] Fun for a while, but they're fleeting because they pop and disappear, don't they? And they're futile because they're empty, which means they don't give lasting fulfillment, do they?

I mean, a kid in a bubble bath? I mean, they get frustrated after a while when the bubbles disappear, when they're fleeting, don't they? Or an adult in a bubble bath? I mean, there's no substance to keep our attention and provide for us.

We get bored of them after a while, usually after our fingers go all wrinkly from the water, of course. Either way, they don't give lasting fulfillment, and that's what the author means by meaningless.

And so the narrator continues by asking the key question for the book. Verse 3, You see, he's asking, The phrase under the sun means in this fallen world, like outside the garden, the garden of Eden, that is.

You see, the Bible tells us that God created the world, and on your screens, it was very good. You know, Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with each other and with God, and they're in the perfect garden of Eden, enjoying life to the full, complete fulfillment.

[5 : 21] But then they rejected God's word, sin entered the world, and God had to banish them from the garden to face death in a world that has been subjected to futility.

So on your screens from Genesis 3, they had to leave the tree in life and move outside the garden. And in this creation, in life outside the garden, well, it's been subjected to futility, meaninglessness, and not willingly, but by God, who subjected it because of sin.

This is why life is futile, because we live outside the garden in a fallen world. And this is true for both Christians and non-Christians, isn't it?

Some people say that the teacher writes as though he doesn't have God. God, that's why life is meaningless. And then he gets God, and it becomes meaningful. But the problem is, he talks about God all the way through the book, doesn't he?

Well, we will see it. Rather, he's actually speaking as one of God's people who lives in this fallen world under the sun outside the garden, and he's asking, well, the narrator's question, what fulfillment can we really gain from all our labor?

[6 : 46] After all, our lives don't seem to really go anywhere. They're just repeats, verse 4. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

In other words, people are born, people die, and then hit repeat. This is true for us too, isn't it? Life goes round and round. And like in nature, verse 5 to 7, the sun rises, the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south, it returns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from, there they return again. Do you see the repetition, the cycling around and around? Sun rises, sunset, hit repeat.

Well, the verse 7, with the streams returning, it's the water cycle, isn't it? I saw this little catchy video about the water cycle. Take a look. Water from a little puddle turns to gas evaporation.

[7 : 47] The gas forms into puppy clouds. Condensation. The clouds get heavy and the rain pours down.

Precipitation and more puddles on the ground. Oh, the water cycle round and around. Deeper goes up and the rain comes down.

Water in the sky, in the ocean, in the ground. It's all in a cycle going round and round. Going round and round.

It's a catchy little song, isn't it? But that's life, isn't it? Which can make it wearisome, can't it? Verse 8, all things are wearisome, more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. You see, our eyes keep seeing and our ears keep hearing.

[8 : 52] Keeps repeating. I mean, have you ever gained such a sight, whether seeing a landscape or reading a book, that you've said to yourselves, I don't ever need to see again.

Of course not. Or have you heard a sound, whether a song or a voice, and thought to yourself, I never need to hear again. Of course not. Now, we need to keep hearing and seeing as best we can, don't we?

Life goes round and round. We get up, go to work or school or medical appointments, go to bed and then get up again and repeat. Which makes life wearisome sometimes.

By the end of the week, don't you get tired? It's why we love our Friday nights or our holidays to break the repetition and the weariness. But life then repeats the next week, doesn't it?

It reminds me of that movie, that old movie called Groundhog Day. I don't know if you've seen it. I'm not recommending it. But it's about a man who gets stuck living the same day over and over again.

[9 : 58] And he grows weary and starts questioning, what's the point? What do I really gain? What's more if life repeats and nothing really changes, then there's nothing really new.

Verse 9. What has been will be again and what has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, look, this is something new?

Well, it was here already long ago. It was here before our time. Oh, sure. Yes, there are new inventions and medicines and technology.

But there's always been new inventions, medicines and technology. And with them, always abuse of them. You know, the invention of the internet meant an explosion of information.

And with it, an explosion of pornography. But that has happened before. This is nothing new because with the invention of the printing press came an explosion of information and explosion of Playboy magazines too.

[11 : 04] New expressions of the same old story. Yes, new inventions, but nothing is new under the sun.

History repeats itself, as they say. Before COVID pandemic, there was SARS, smallpox, yellow fever. Yes, there may be new expressions of it, but it's the same old story.

There's nothing really new under the sun outside the garden. And no one has really remembered verse 11. No one remembers the former generations. And even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

I can barely remember my grandparents who passed away some years ago. And I don't remember at all my great grandparents whom I didn't meet.

That's why we have to do those family trees or look at those photo albums to remember. Because we don't, even with our own families. I'm sure we may remember some people, those who did great things, like the person who invented the printing press.

[12 : 12] But after a while, we forget, don't we? I mean, come to think of it, who did invent the printing press? Do you remember? No, I don't. So if nothing really changes, if there's nothing really new, and if no one is really remembered, then what lasting fulfillment can we really gain?

It's all fleeting, futile, soap bubbles. So where do we find lasting fulfillment in life?

That's what the teacher now searches for, point two. And he says, chapter 1, verse 12, You see, he's going to explore by wisdom all the things under the heavens, under God, to search for lasting fulfillment.

And to do this, he's actually going to take on the persona of Solomon, since Solomon was the wisest and wealthiest king of Israel. Although for various reasons, I don't think it's Solomon himself.

Either way, he says, this search for lasting fulfillment, for true gain, is a burden for all people. Of course, thinking about the meaning of life is often too big a question, isn't it?

[13 : 40] It is too big a burden for most people to think about. And so most people just tune out, don't they? And forget it. Or they make themselves so busy, they don't have time to look at it.

Until they have a midlife crisis or a significant loss. And then they start asking those big questions of life. Or perhaps for this former king of Jerusalem, it's seeing that his kingdom is not the kingdom God promised.

So he searches for what can be gained in life, what can give lasting fulfillment. And as he does, he kind of goes round and round himself, just like life goes round and round.

And so on your screens, he looks at wisdom, then happiness, then back to wisdom and working for happiness again. We're going to group the topics. So verse 16.

He said to himself, look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly.

[14 : 51] But I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief.

He's saying there's no real gain in wisdom. Because with much wisdom comes sorrow. The more wisdom we have, the more we realize how little we actually know of this world and how it works.

And the more knowledge we have, the more grief we see. I mean, with global news has come more bad news, hasn't it?

More grief. So what's the point of wisdom and knowledge? Is fulfillment really found here? Oh, sure. It's better to be wise than foolish.

And so later on, he says this on your screen. Chapter 2, verse 12. Then I turn my thoughts to consider wisdom again and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what he's already done?

[15 : 53] Notice, I saw that wisdom is better than folly. Just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in the darkness.

Yes, wisdom is better. It helps us to see how to live in this world. And yet, look at how he continues. But I came to realize that the same fate overtakes both the wise and the fool.

Then I said to myself, the fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? What gain is there? I said to myself, this too is soap bubbles.

For the wise, like the fool, will not long be remembered. And the days have already come when both have been forgotten. For like the fool, the wise too must die.

You see, being wise is meaningless, soap bubbles. It's fleeting and futile when it comes to finding lasting fulfillment.

[17 : 02] Oh, sure, it's better than being a fool. But in the end, the wise die and are not long remembered either. Albert Einstein on your screens for all his wisdom and pretty cool looking hair could not stop death, could he?

And so he ended up in the same place as the fool. It's hardly a fulfilling prospect, is it?

So what about working for happiness then? Is this where we'll find lasting fulfillment? On your screen, chapter 2, verse 1, the teacher said to himself, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

The word pleasure here means happiness. Happiness. The philosopher Aristotle said on your screens, happiness is the meaning and purpose of life.

The whole aim and end of human existence. A bit more recently, the Dalai Lama talked about happiness being the meaning of life. And he wrote this book, The Art of Happiness.

[18 : 08] And even the modern day philosophers, the stationery store Kiki K, where my daughter got this diary, says, do whatever makes you happy.

That's the sum of life. But does happiness bring lasting fulfillment? Really? Well, the teacher investigates the things that generally make people happy.

Things like parties, projects and possessions. And he writes on your screens. Continuing verse 1. Notice, by the way, he's not saying, saying that he's getting drunk.

He says wisdom is still guiding him. Rather, it's a picture of a party. You know, laughter, food, wine. The stereotypical picture of a good time.

But this too, he says, is meaningless. Soap bubbles, for they don't last. You know, the party always ends. And the not-so-fun cleaning always follows, doesn't it?

[19 : 36] And so he says in verse 3, he will see what else is good or satisfying. What else might bring lasting fulfillment, like projects.

So verse 4. I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. Some pretty amazing projects and achievements, aren't there? Things that would make anyone happy.

I go, this is my project for this morning. This is my great achievement, my tower, which I'll just put here for later. But before he answers whether that's where fulfillment is found, he continues with possessions or wealth.

So verse 7. 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. I massed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces.

[20 : 39] I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well, the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this, though, my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor. And this was the reward for all my toil.

Here, the teacher tests things that bring people happiness to see if his labor in getting them provides lasting fulfillment, whether it's working for parties, projects or possessions.

And he admits that while he was laboring for them, there was a delight in the moment. But that was all his reward was.

Momentary. Because verse 11 on your screens, yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless.

[21 : 43] A chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. You'd be forgiven for thinking this guy is just a party pooper.

You know, a glass half empty or maybe even completely empty kind of guy. A pessimist. You know what happens when two pessimists greet one another, don't you?

They don't shake hands. They shake heads. Not my joke. Don't shoot me. But remember, he's looking, chapter 1, verse 3, for what lasting fulfillment can be gained from their labor outside the garden.

What is the point of life? And while these things bring delight at the time, they are in the end soap bubbles, fleeting, futile.

The great projects that he built, well, one day they're knocked down. They're destroyed. The great achievements are forgotten.

[22 : 46] The possessions break or deteriorate and wealth goes much faster out of the bank account than it comes in. Doesn't it? Or is that just me? I remember hearing a guy at 5pm church share their story of becoming a Christian and it started by observing his auntie who lives in Singapore and who owned lots of property and luxury cars.

Now, the cars aside, if you know anything about the Singapore property market, you'll know to own even a little bit of property means you're rich. And she owned lots.

But then he said this. He said, She has everything she wants, but she is one of the most unhappy and grumpy people I know.

You see, even if we have great wealth and possessions, it doesn't bring lasting fulfillment, delight, does it? It's momentary, which is why people have to keep pursuing more money, more property, more clothes, more toys, like the latest iPhone or whatever.

You see, working for these things brings momentary happiness, but not lasting fulfillment. And what's more, like wisdom, death takes it all.

[24 : 08] So the teacher's happiness very quickly turns to hate. Verse 17. So I hated my life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

All of it meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them because of death to the one who comes after me.

And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish, yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.

This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then they must leave it all they own to another who has not toiled for it.

This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?

[25 : 10] All their days their work is grief and pain. Even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. You see, he says all the work and toil to pursue happiness, whether parties, projects, or possessions, you can't take them with you.

Instead, death takes them from you, then gives them to someone after you. And they may be foolish with them, like Solomon's own son was, who, well, he was an absolute idiot actually.

Or they're given to those who did not earn them. So what's the point of toiling for them? What do we really gain? What fulfillment is there to be had?

Well, it seems not a huge amount, because he concludes by saying, a person can do nothing better. This is it. There's nothing better than this, than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

This too I see is from the hand of God. For without him who can eat or find enjoyment. The best we can hope for, he says, is to enjoy life and find satisfaction in our work, as gifts from God.

[26 : 32] And there is wisdom and truth in that. He'll explore more of this next week. But notice how he ends back on your screens. He ends that this too is soap bubbles, futile and fleeting, like a chasing after the wind.

For as we're seeing, whatever wisdom he gets, whatever happiness he works for, it's all short-lived. Death takes it all. And he won't even be remembered.

It's not entirely inspiring, is it? What's more, he cannot do anything about this fallen world. As he said earlier, what is crooked cannot be straightened.

And so he feels that lasting fulfillment is simply out of his reach, even as one of God's people. Instead, the best he can hope for is to enjoy things as gifts from God with contentment.

But we have a better hope, don't we? For God can and has done something about the life outside the garden, hasn't he?

[27 : 45] He sent Jesus. You see, although the teacher writes as one of God's people, such that we can relate to what he sees and even feel the frustrations he feels, he writes BC, before Christ.

But we live after Christ and Christ has made all the difference, hasn't he? For by his death and resurrection, he has conquered death. A death that took the teacher's work from him and meant no remembrance of him and gave to him the same place as the fool.

But by trusting in Christ, we can have the certain hope of life beyond death. In a different place to the fool who says there's no God. And where we will be remembered by our loved ones in Christ and God himself.

And where our work for God will last such that it's not futile or vain even now. And this is the first application for us. We are to engage in this lasting employment, if you like.

As we heard in our second reading, God has given us the victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

[29 : 01] Why? Well, because of Christ's death and resurrection, you know that your labor, your toil in the Lord is not futile, not in vain.

In other words, it will last. And so what is this labor that lasts? What's this employment we're to engage in? Well, it's the work of the Lord. It's, you know, proclaiming the gospel or praying for people to be saved because as people become Christians, they live for eternity.

And so that work we've been part of under God will last. Or it's the work of building ourselves and others up in godliness because that will last for eternity.

As we read on your screens from 1 Timothy, physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things. Notice, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Or godliness with contentment is great, notice, gain. That's what he was looking for. What is great gain for all our labor? Well, godliness is.

[30 : 11] This is the gain that death cannot take. This is the work we're to engage in, to labor in as much as we can with the opportunities we have.

Things like praying for one another or sharing with one another or helping one another grow as Christians. Things like reading the Bible yourselves during the week and praying to grow yourself in godliness.

Teaching your kids or grandkids about Jesus. I heard last week when I was speaking to a grandmother who has basically effectively adopted two grandchildren and she was saying that she was driving them home one night when her four-year-old grandson said, how do I ask Jesus into my heart?

She'd been reading the children's Bible with him and his sister each night before bed and talking to him just very simply and now he wanted to believe in Jesus.

And so she said, she pulled over the car, talked with him and prayed with him right there and then. That four-year-old grandson became a Christian.

[31 : 22] How cool is that? That's work that will last. That's not in vain or futile. And so firstly, we're to engage in this lasting employment.

Second, we're to have realistic expectations with contentment. As I said at the start, a lot of disappointment in life comes from unmet expectations, unrealistic ones.

You know, we expect that we should never suffer or that our work should always be a joy or that school should always be fun or that our families will never fight or that we should never have to go into another lockdown.

But we live outside the garden, don't we? And while these things are really frustrating, we shouldn't be surprised by them. Just take a deep breath and work through them and enjoy the things that God gives us with contentment.

I know for those who've had a pretty good life so far, this whole book will sound utterly depressing. But for those who've been through an ordeal, it will sound oddly comforting.

[32 : 37] I was talking with someone this past week as well about this book. Her husband left her for another woman and her life kind of imploded. She suddenly had to take care of her kids and find a job and so on.

But when that happened, she said she read the book of Ecclesiastes and she found it comforting. Why? Because it affirmed her experience of life outside the garden.

That it is sadly no bed of roses for any of us. And so we're not alone in this experience. And it reminded her that her complete fulfillment does not depend on her marriage.

It depends on Christ who has given her eternal life and great worth in God's sight. It helped her to realign her expectations.

And while it's still heartbreaking and no doubt at times still upsetting, it means she can still enjoy things with contentment.

[33 : 37] which as we saw is also great gain. Engage in lasting employment, have realistic expectations with contentment and finally wait patiently for complete fulfillment.

For Christ not only gives us work that is of lasting fulfillment, but he also has secured life for us inside the garden. A new creation where it will be complete fulfillment.

We saw before that the creation was subjected to futility but notice it was done so in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

This is life inside the garden, the new creation where there will be no more soap bubbles, nothing fleeting or futile but life to the full, complete fulfillment.

Of course, hope by its nature is in the future which is why it says on your screens there that in the end we must wait for it patiently. But sometimes patience is easier said than done, isn't it?

[34 : 52] It's like that man who said, I used to pray for patience but God was taking too long to answer. He missed the point. Well, I've gone way over time, let me finish.

Life outside the garden is often fleeting and futile, soap bubbles. So don't have unrealistic expectations of it but do enjoy things as God's gifts with contentment.

Engage in that lasting employment fulfillment and wait patiently for our complete fulfillment. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you even for this book of the Bible which acknowledges the realities of life in this world outside the garden but also drives us and points us to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom we have a certain hope and work which will be of lasting fulfillment.

So help us we pray to have realistic expectations of life in this world. Help us as we can to engage in that lasting employment the labor of the Lord and help us to wait patiently for that day when Christ returns and we'll enjoy life inside the garden our complete fulfillment.

We ask it in Jesus name Amen.