

An Extraordinary, Ordinary Life.

A REALITY CHECK

In 1972 Larry Norman released an album with the title: "Only Visiting this Planet." One track on the album was a song called Reader's Digest. It's a song wrestling with how life is, and how life is without God. Towards the end of the song is this line: "What a mess the world is in, I wonder who began it; don't ask me I'm only visiting this planet."

I doubt very much whether Larry Norman had the book of Ecclesiastes in mind when he wrote the song but I think he's hit upon a deep truth from the book and one that we mostly want to avoid.

It is the truth that we are only "Visiting this planet!" At the end of the song is this line: "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through!" Larry Norman is right – he's absolutely right. This world is not our home; we are just passing through.

Ecclesiastes chapter 1 showed us that life is short, elusive and repetitive. We don't leave anything of lasting value. Life is messy, complex, disappointing and sometimes tragic and we are not in control. The tragedy is that we want to make it our home! We want to settle, achieve, control, gain and find satisfaction.

But friends Ecclesiastes desperately wants you to understand that that is just an illusion. This world is not our home. It desperately wants us to live in the truth that we are "passing through." But friends, we are so slow to learn!

How much do you think about the truth that you are just passing through this world? How much do you live in the reality that you are only visiting this planet? How much do you live your life centred around the truth that this world is not your home?

Why do you think Jesus later said these words: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also?" (Mathew 6 v 19-21)

Jesus desperately doesn't want us to think this world is our home either. The trouble is it seems that we miss the point and strive for gain, for satisfaction. We live as if our greatest treasures are here and now! Our lifestyles reflect our sense of permanence in this world.

The teacher is now going to speak from experience – from his own pursuit of satisfaction in his lifestyle choices and his conclusion will cause us to think about our own lives. But it will also point us to something really, really profound and significant.

The teacher will invite us to think about this life with all its pleasure – all those things we desperately want to bring us satisfaction and happiness. The teacher will again invite us to think about them in the light of the truth that we will one day, die. The teacher will invite us to see the possibility that joy though, is possible in this life, and maybe its death that shows us how!

Wisdom Is Meaningless

¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷ Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

¹⁸ For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

Pleasures Are Meaningless

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. ² "Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?" ³ 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.

⁴ I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

Wisdom and Folly Are Meaningless

¹² Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.

What more can the king's successor do
than what has already been done?

¹³ I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴ The wise have eyes in their heads,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize
that the same fate overtakes them both.

¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ 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!

Toil Is Meaningless

¹⁷ So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun. ²¹ For a person may labour with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²² What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labour under the sun? ²³ All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴ 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, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ 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. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 1 v 12 – 2v26)

In this section of the book, the teacher performs a test. He’s going to test out what he thinks may be true about life under the sun.

Happiness is what we live for! Pretty much everything you’ve already done today, you’ve done because it makes you happy. We live, mostly, to make ourselves feel good. Think about it – all life’s pursuits we follow to bring us happiness: earning a living; finding a spouse; raising good children; having fun; keeping fit.

We want to be happy in everything we do, and we want to shape and control our world so that everything we do brings us the happiness we desire! So the test the teacher takes on is to see if this actually works! It is worth pointing out that what follows, what the teacher does, he does deliberately and thoughtfully. He really wants to know. So the teacher seeks happiness, and he seeks it in the only ways he can – under the sun.

There are ten ways he seeks to find happiness and there are still only ten ways people seek to find happiness, and you probably know them well, because, in truth, you've probably tried them...maybe still are.

In Chapter 1 v 12-18 he tries knowledge and wisdom, he tries to get the best education he can, believing it will bring him happiness.

In chapter 2 v 2, he tries entertainment, laughter, jokes.

In chapter 2 v 3 he goes for alcohol.

In chapter 2 v 4 what he gets into are, designing, building.

In chapter 2 v 5 - 6 he looks to the natural world of nature.

In chapter 2 v 7 - 8 it's money and possessions.

In chapter 2 v 8 he plunges into the world of music.

In chapter 2 v 8 he tries sex to bring him happiness.

In chapter 2 v 9 he seeks affirmation from others – fame we might call it or recognition, which he thinks will satisfy him.

And in chapter 2 v 11 it is all his hand has done – his work in which he seeks his happiness.

What the teacher discovers, what he learns from his test, is that none of these things can bring him what his heart desires – happiness. What he learns is that in any of these things, the pleasure is only ever fleeting – it doesn't last. The man who had everything anyone could ever wish for, looks back on his experiment with life and says he has gained nothing!

His great search for happiness has, in fact, proved that happiness is like a breath, the breeze, the mist, a puff of smoke – it eludes us! To live in pursuit of happiness in this way is, in truth, like chasing after the wind! There is one thing that lurks on the horizon that thwarts all his attempts to find lasting gain and happiness.

What's happening here in Ecclesiastes is like this – the teacher is blowing up balloons, only to have them popped by the spectre of death. We don't want to

think about death, so we plunge into all the distractions we can think of. The teacher says everything we do is like a balloon that will eventually burst.

So how are you doing?

Perhaps a slightly more challenging question: What balloons might you be pursuing, hoping against hope that they will never burst?

Here's a really important point to make: The point the teacher is making is not that any of these things; wisdom, laughter, alcohol, art, nature, money and possessions, music, sex, affirmation or work are wrong in and of themselves. That is not the point at all about what he is trying to say.

The problem with them is that they become, for us, the way to find satisfaction and happiness, and the teacher says they can't do that! Two really important things are coming together here through the teacher.

The first one is what we talked about last week and it strikes us as a bit of an odd thing to say. It is the truth that the beginning of living comes with our acceptance that we will in fact die. That sits uneasily with us doesn't it? On its own it would probably remain so, but we must live in the reality that we are not God, we are not in control and we will die. Anything else is simply an illusion.

The second thing the teacher wants us to see is the limit of wisdom, laughter, alcohol, art, nature, money and possessions, music, sex, affirmation and work. The teacher says the limit is that they were never meant to bring the satisfaction we so desire! Living in the truth about our own death frees us to see the limitations of the things we pursue, and these things together open the possibility of something far better that the teacher is going to hint at right at the end of chapter 2.

At the end of chapter 2 we see for the first time what is possibly the main message of the book: that living in God's world is gift not gain. All these things we've talked about are God's gracious gifts given to us, so we can enjoy life! These gifts are never given to us for our gain! Trouble is that's what we most often do with them. We take God's good gifts and try to use them to secure our ultimate gain...and we get ourselves in an awful mess. God's gifts are just that – gifts. The reality of death puts these gifts in their proper context!

If you look carefully at Ecclesiastes 1 v 12-2 v 23 you will notice that God is absent from them – he is not mentioned. All those verses are about the teacher striving to find the happiness he longs for, and he can't do it – it simply doesn't work.

But in verses 24-26 God is mentioned three times, and the emphasis is on what God gives! Eating and drinking are ordinary things we all do every day. We usually think of this basic thing as a means to go and do other, bigger, better, more important things. Eating and drinking are just the means to an end. But...what if the daily pleasure of food is a gift we ungratefully overlook?

Ordinarily we work not just to earn a living, but to find satisfaction and purpose and to achieve success. But...what if work was never about making us successful? What if it was meant to make us grateful, faithful and generous?

The teacher invites us to a better way to live than to live in an illusion. The teacher invites us to a different way of finding meaning and satisfaction. It is better because it is not a chasing after the wind; it is not like trying to catch your breath or a breeze, or a puff of smoke. It is to live in the truth that we are not God, but that He is the one who gives us gifts to enjoy.

It is both simple and profound.

Real, lasting, deep satisfaction comes from God's giving. When we see ourselves and God's gifts in their true perspective, then we are free to live and to live well. When we see that God's gifts are not meant to be stepping stones to greater things...when we realise we were not meant to rule the world...when we realise we were not meant to achieve ultimate gain or satisfaction from our careers...then we can find joy in the ordinary things God gives us in life.

For God so loved that he gave! Actually he's always giving, every day, gifts for us to enjoy! When we can live in the reality of our certain death; when we see that God is the one who graciously and generously gives; when we accept life and its pleasures as a gift, then the ordinary life we live has the opportunity to become a truly extraordinary life and one that the teacher so longs for us to live.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 29th January 2017, by Rev. Ian Phillips.