

## Ecclesiastes 1: 1-18: New Year... But What's New?

Normally I would have left the start of a new sermon series to next week, when our regular services start up again, but I couldn't resist starting today. After all what better day is there to think about the meaning of life than New Year's Day; a day of new starts, when the past is literally behind and the future lies ahead. So turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 1, on page 670 of your Bibles, and we will begin.

Now for many years it was thought that the book of Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon and it's easy to see why. But most commentators now think that it was written a few centuries after King Solomon by someone who we will call the Teacher. Through the book, the Teacher clearly reflects on Solomon's life, as well as on the lives of other kings, as he grapples with the biggest questions we have as human beings: why am I here and how do I make the most of life? And so like a scientist, the Teacher examines issues around pleasure, money, time, suffering and injustice before arriving at his final conclusions. It's a great book, and I hope you'll enjoy the next eight weeks as we look through it together.

And in chapter 1 the Teacher launches into his research by forcing us to recognise two harsh realities about life 'under the sun', as the Teacher puts it. 1: However hopeful we might be about 2017, it's largely going to be the same as 2016! And 2: However optimistic we are that we can make a lasting difference to this world, ultimately everything is meaningless.

Now if that doesn't fill you with gloom on New Year's Day – nothing will! But let's press on – because believe it or not, there is real hope here for us if we can learn the lessons the Teacher has for us.

But before we do, we need to understand what the Teacher means by "meaningless." The Hebrew words in the original are hard to translate, but meaningless isn't quite right. In English meaningless suggests something without value or purpose, and that's part of it, but the best image is one of foggy vapour. We've seen a fair bit of fog this week, but whilst we can see it, we can't grab hold of it. It's insubstantial, ephemeral and that's what the Teacher says about life lived under the sun. He wants us to see that the end result of a person's life lived 'under the sun' is ultimately insignificant and unsubstantial. Rather like a foggy vapour or a passing mist, we can see it, we know it's there; but try and grab hold and it simply slips through your fingers.

That's why the Teacher can say that however optimistic we are about 2017, when it comes to human life...

### **1: Nothing really changes**

You see in the grand scheme of things people are like foggy vapour. Verse 4: *generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever*. Hatches, matches, and dispatches – part of the job of a vicar - and very much part of life. It's the start of the Lion King isn't it: the circle of life going round and around.

And it's not just with human life that there is a cyclical pattern, verses 5 and 6 remind us how the sun repeatedly rises and sets and how the wind never stops blowing. These things are part of the fabric of life on earth, a never ending cycle that keeps on rolling no matter where we are or who is in charge!

And it's even clearer when we think about the water cycle. The rain falls from the sky and eventually makes its way back down to the sea where it evaporates, condenses as clouds, and falls from the sky starting the whole process again. The water cycle continues on and on and on. There is no endpoint, no final goal, nothing is achieved; it just keeps on going from age to age. And his point is this: why should we think we are any different?

You see human nature won't be any different in 2017 than in 2016. There will still be villains and warmongers and self interested politicians and egotistical sports or pop stars filling the newspapers. People will still be selfish and unkind and hurtful. What's more we will still be struggling with the affects of the fall: sin, disease, suffering and death. However optimistic we might feel right now, nothing much is going to change in 2017- life, with all its up and downs, will go on as it always has.

For life lived under the sun nothing really changes; that's lesson one. His second is just as cheerful

## **2: Nothing really lasts**

This week we have seen the death of at least four famous people, and as usual many comments will be made that their legacies will last forever; that they achieved something great; and that they made a real difference to the world. And we like to think that will be true for ourselves too don't we.

But the Teacher wants us to see that when we think we have done something unique or something memorable or world-changing, or we think we have discovered something that no one else has discovered ever before, we will be wrong in every single case.

Now of course there were many impressive things last year: There were new world records set at the Olympics and lots of scientific and technological advances– and the Teacher wouldn't deny that. But his point is that those new world records will soon be broken and that new knowledge will be superseded. He even suggests that much of that new knowledge isn't really new anyway– it's just that we have rediscovered things that previous generations knew and that were forgotten over time. Verses 9 and 10: *“What has been will be again, 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’? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time!”*

In verse 3 he asked the question, *“What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?”* And his answer? Nothing! Nothing we do will last. The hope of a lasting legacy for any of us, either as a hero or a villain, is just a foggy vapour. Our work or reputation might hang around for a little while but in a few years when those who applaud us are dead and gone no one will remember us and our accomplishments, and our achievements will be consigned to history. Take a walk around Westminster Abbey, or even in the church here, and you'll see tombstones of the great and the good from ages past whose fame and successes are now long forgotten and whose names are nothing more than lines on a ledger. Verse 11, *“no one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.”* “A foggy vapour! A foggy vapour!” Says the Teacher. “Our legacy in this world is ultimately insubstantial and elusive, nothing more than a foggy vapour.”

Well I hope that has encouraged you this morning! I hope that after hearing the words from the Teacher you're ready to suit up, to strive to achieve great things and make the most of the year to come! It doesn't exactly do that does it! If Winston Churchill had given this address on the eve of the Battle of Britain I'm not sure he would have inspired anyone to pick up a rifle or get into a cockpit, let alone risk everything for their King and country.

So what are we to make of Ecclesiastes 1? Should we all simply go home, close the door, turn on the TV or the laptop and give up? It all sounds rather like that doesn't it - except that isn't the point of the book of Ecclesiastes. The Teacher hasn't written a book to leave us feeling depressed, helpless and inactive because everything we do is nothing more than a foggy vapour; he has written a book to make sure that we put our efforts into something that has real significance and that will last forever.

And if you are busy looking through chapter 1 and trying to find it, the clue is in the phrase *'under the sun'*. You'll find it in verses 3, 9 and 14 and it is meant to highlight the fact that there are two ways to live.

You see we can live a life solely *'under the sun'*, living as this world and this life is all there is but ultimately it is futile and empty; as insignificant and elusive as foggy vapour. Whatever we chase after we won't catch; whatever we build will come tumbling down either in our lifetime or shortly afterwards.

Or we can lift our eyes to see the one who made the sun and this world and everything in it, and live a life not just *'under the sun'* but with eternity in view and with the Lord of the universe, whom the Bible describes as our rock, the eternal, the unchanging one, the creator, the sustainer of all things, directing our steps and walking with us every step of the way. This is the good news Jesus came to bring: eternal life for all who repent and believe; a life with lasting joy, perfect peace, real purpose and eternal significance. And the great news is that this life starts now.

Outside of God everything we do is just foggy vapour, temporary, elusive and unsubstantial. That is the heavy burden God has laid on mankind but it is not a burden we were meant to carry.

You see you and I were created to live alongside God with eternity not just in view, but shaping and directing everything we do. And if we are to make the most of 2017 and however many years the Lord gives us to live, we need to learn the lesson the Teacher has for us. We need to live our lives with the right perspective, recognising the things that are temporary and enjoying them for what they are, but concentrating our efforts, our desires, our ambitions, and basing our meaning and value on things that are eternal, not on the foggy vapour of a life *'under the sun'*.

And this isn't just a one-off choice when we become a Christian: this is a choice we need to make every day, and sometimes many times a day. It's not about living a solely spiritual life with no material pleasures, it's about making sure that the good things God gives us to enjoy, whether sport or work or food or possessions or relationships, don't become little gods that take our gaze away from Jesus. Having the right perspective on life and putting our energies and passions into things that will last forever, that's the lessons the Teacher wants us to learn from chapter 1. And it's exactly the same message that Jesus taught in Mark 8 verse 36: *"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and yet loses his soul?"*

So if you want to look back a year from now, or ten or fifty years from now with real pride, confident that you have accomplished something of eternal significance in your life, then live this coming year, and every year, with Jesus in charge. Let Jesus and his life and teaching direct the way you think about your future and your ambitions. Let Jesus direct the way you think about your neighbours, your friends, yourself. Let Jesus, because of his death on the cross in your place, be the one you turn to with your failures and mistakes, your doubts and your fears. Centre your life on him, fix your gaze not on the temporary, the foggy vapour of this world, but on Jesus and his eternal glory and you'll find that your path through life is built on a solid rock; that your feelings of self-worth will not diminish no matter what happens to your career or your finances or your house; and that no matter what 2017 brings your Jesus-based hope, joy and peace – though they may take a battering along the way - will last your whole life through.

Friends, in a life under the sun and outside of God, everything is foggy vapour; nothing lasts or brings us any final dividend. But in Christ we have an internal inheritance that can never fade or be destroyed. May that be our focus in 2017 – for our joy and God's great glory. Amen.