

## The Circle Of Life - Ecclesiastes 1:4-11 – 15 Feb 15

We have just completed the book of 1 John and we are now in a series, in the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes is an Old Testament book. It's a book that is found in the first half of your Bible and really the book of Ecclesiastes speaks about a very pertinent theme in modern-day living. What really is the meaning of life?

We studied what Blaise Pascal said last week. Blaise Pascal, a thinker in time past says that humanity is like a disinherited prince. We are all in a sense, princes. We are made to enjoy and to know great and grand things. We are all people who are made to admire grandeur and glory, but somehow, we've lost it. We are disinherited and the whole of humanity now is on the hunt, on the pursuit for satisfaction, for joy, for real meaning. And we look for it in all the places in this earth, under the sun, but it proves to be very elusive indeed.

Now, I've mentioned that this book is very relevant even though it's written thousands of years ago. It's written by Solomon and in his time, he was so discouraged; he was so depressed that he couldn't really find meaning under the sun. But today, life is not much better. We have so much more than what Solomon had during his time, but we're still as empty, if not more. I think Solomon never had an iPhone; Solomon never had a car; Solomon never took a plane ride, a journey on the plane; Solomon never had internet or Google; he had none of these things, he was empty. But today we say we have all these new innovations, did it make us more happy? Or meaningful in our lives? Well, the question still remains - what is the meaning of life? What is this journey, this pursuit for meaning? 02:15.3

Solomon is a man who is eminently suited for this role, to reason with us and to throw the right questions to us, for us to think. See, Solomon is a man who is on top of his game; he is at the pinnacle of success. I mean he is a king of Israel and Judah for...for a very significant period of time, for 40 years. And in those 40 years, he had absolute dominion. There was no fighting; there was no battles; no wars. It was a time of absolute peace. Solomon was not only powerful, he was very wealthy. We looked at it last week, when we were told Solomon had tons of gold in his palace; he had thousands of livestock; he had many servants serve him. And he was so rich that during his time, silver was not deemed as anything precious at all. He had so much gold.

Besides that, Solomon was a man who was extremely intelligent. He knew everything from botany to zoology. Um...from em...theoretical stuff in Maths to...to er...to writing songs and poems. In fact, we read that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs. That's a lot of songs and er...do you know some of the songs' titles he's written? Name me one song. A famous song Solomon wrote. It is the 'Song of Solomon', alright? Very clever, you guys (laughter in the congregation). Um...the song that he wrote is 'Song of Solomon', it's found in the Bible. Do you know that there are other songs that he wrote? I mean there are thousand and 5, so there must be a thousand and four more. Let me suggest to you, there are a few titles that we'll look at today. Tongue-in-cheek, alright? I qualify. There are few other songs that he's

written and one song is so famous, so accepted today, it is a YouTube sensation. Everyone must have heard of it before, even young children must have heard of it. It's so famous, you've got to hear it. So this is one song, beside the 'Song of Solomon' that he wrote.

(Song and video of 'The Wheels on the Bus' played on screen)

Tongue-in-cheek, okay? He inspired 'The Wheels on the Bus' go round and... are you sure? Well, let's look at what he wrote:

“A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.  
The sun rises, and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the place where it rises.  
The wind blows to the south  
and goes around to the north;  
around and around goes the wind,  
and on its circuits the wind returns.  
All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they flow again.”  
(Ecclesiastes 1:4-7 ESV)

So here it is, the...that life in this world goes round and round (Pastor singing to the tune of 'The Wheels on the Bus')...alright? (Laughter in the congregation) Okay, I think what he's saying is that, this world really goes round and round. For example, generations. He says a generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. People are born; they grow up to be children; they meet their dream girl, dream guy; get married; they grow old together; one dies, two die. One generation goes and you know what happens? A generation comes. The cycle of life and the earth remains forever. Nothing seems to change. That's Solomon's reasoning.

He goes on to say, this is what nature tells us as well. It's always in the cycle; things go back to what it was. The sun rises, the sun goes down and then it returns to the place where it rises - goes round and round.

What about the wind? The wind blows to the south, it goes to the north, it goes round and around goes the wind and on its circuits, the wind returns - goes back to the same place. Nothing seems to change. There's this eternal sameness as it were, as he looks at nature.

He talks about the water cycle. All streams run to the sea, but you know what? The sea is never full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. Amazing insight into the water cycle, even in Solomon's time.

So Solomon says the world goes round and round; life goes round and round. You may think that you have done a lot; you may think that you have gone somewhere. But Solomon is saying, "Do you realise that your life goes back the way it was?" 07:18.2

There's a story told about 3 men who were stranded or shipwrecked on an island. And they were sitting by the beach and they watched this lamp washed ashore. So they picked up the lamp and started to rub it, thinking that it's a genie's lamp - Aladdin's lamp. And so they rubbed it and lo and behold, a genie appeared! And the genie said to the 3 men, "There are 3 of you; I'll grant each one of you a wish."

The first man says, "Oh, I miss my girlfriend so much. I wish I'm back with my girlfriend; I'm picking her up for a date for Valentine's Day." And poof! He appears in his car back in his hometown driving towards his girlfriend's house, waiting to pick her up for a date. The second man then says, "I wish...I miss my wife's cooking. I wish I'm back home with my wife and my kids, enjoying a lovely dinner together." And poof! He's back in his home enjoying dinner. The third man then says, "Oh! I'm so glad that my 2 friends are now with their loved ones, but you know what? I miss them so much, I wish they're back here with me." And poof! They're back where they started.

You know life is something like this? Fleeting moments of joy, but poof! You're back where you started. Life in this world goes round and round.

When we are young, we all like the Ferris wheel. I mean we...we love to sit in this and go round and round. It's... it's fun when we are young, but I realise that when you get older, you don't like to go this...Ferris wheel anymore. You think it's a what? Waste of time! That's why our Singapore Flyer didn't do so well (laughter in the congregation). Singaporeans think it's a waste of time, just go round and round and you get to where you started. There's no real meaning, we say. And if life is just a cycle; if life is just an endless cycling getting nowhere, it is very futile, it is very frustrating and that's why Solomon says, "What profit does a man have of all his labour under the sun?" What's the point of working so hard under the sun? It is vanity of vanities. You think about it, it is true. Life is a cycle.

Someone said that life is about being born in a hospital and then you will die in another hospital and in the meantime you try to keep out of the hospital. But that's what life is all about - you get born in a hospital; you died in a hospital. The Bible says from dust we came and to dust we will return.

So this cycle of life: being born; growing up; getting married; having kids; growing old; dying. Next generation comes. Being born; growing up; getting married; having kids; growing old, dying. Waking

up in the morning; having our breakfast; going for our work; toiling all day; coming home; having our dinner; sleep, only to wake up next morning to repeat the cycle again. We go round and round this Ferris wheel of life. And Solomon says, what's the point? Vanity of vanities; emptiness of the highest degree. So Solomon says this is all futile; all the labour and toil of men under the sun ultimately results in nothing. He says it's really pointless. It's really empty.

Solomon not only tells you it's futile, he's going to tell you something else because some of us may say, "No! Pastor, you're not quite right. You see, when I work...yes, I know my work ultimately may not change the world, but at least it gives me enough money. It gives me enough resources so that I can get the things I enjoy in this life. So that I can have some pleasure and satisfaction for this life." Solomon says, yup, you can get what you want, but this is the result: it will be very frustrating for you. You say why? Because Solomon says, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." (Ecclesiastes 1:8 ESV)

Solomon says, I have gotten everything I have, I wanted. I've women; I've horses; I've gold; I've a house; I've a palace; I've everything, but it is full of weariness! It is extremely frustrating. I cannot even begin to utter it. Why? Because I realise the more I have, the more it tells me I'm never going to be satisfied. The eye is not satisfied with seeing; the ear is not filled with hearing. There's always that hunger, that gaping hole that says, "I want more. I want more. I want more."

There's never going to be a BMW that is going to satisfy you. Some of you are thinking about buying a car now and wah, that's my dream car and...you say it to yourself, "Really, if I had that car, I'm going to be happy." But if this is your 3rd or 4th car, you know it will not come true. Some of you are thinking about wow, I have this flat right now and and if...if...if I got my flat, I'll be happy. But after you stay in it for 5 years, you say I want a condo. And after you want this condo for a while, you say I want a landed... and after a while you say I want a good-class bungalow. It never ends! It never ends. Oh! If I have just one more 0 in my bank account, I'll be really satisfied. No, when you got to that number, you say I wish I would just have another 0 behind it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing. This world can never fully satisfy. You get sick of these things very fast.

As you know, I bring my son to Universal Studios, the older one - Shawn, to USS very, very frequently, at least in the last year and the year before. And to me, it is a very good deal to get a one-year pass and go many times, save money, you know? Don't have to go different places, just keep going USS. And I think this is like the super playground of Singapore, you should...you should enjoy it every time, all the time. And I thought I would satisfy my son that way. Until recently, when I tell him, "Let's go Sentosa." He begs me, "Daddy, please don't go USS! I don't want to go USS!" (Laughter in the congregation) I say, "Shawn, please go! Let's go, let's go!" "No! Daddy, don't want to go! I don't want to go!" You see, I want to bring the younger one, Matthias to go USS. I don't want him to miss out. I want Matthias to experience it. But at the same time, I also want Shawn to go, but he begs me not to

go. I can't believe it! I can't believe there's actually someone on earth who doesn't want to go Universal Studios! But he's right there with my family, my son. Because he's gotten there so many times, he is sick of it! The mere phrase 'USS' frustrates him.

You may want to go holidays. You say, "Ah, my life is to earn enough, so that when I retire I can go all the holidays in the world." You will go until you puke! You'll go until you vomit because it's nauseating... okay for me lah, I don't like to travel. But every mountain looks the same; every sea look the same. It's going to be the same! Is that really what you live for in life? By the way, tourism today is never going to be compared to tourism in the future, when there...when God totally delivers this world from sin. So if you think, wah, I want to see all the grandeur in this world, wait till the next one. That's the tour we really want to take. 15:32.4

When people come to my place, whether it's the...our care group or the leader's meetings. Er...this is one of my favourite dishes that I serve (picture shown). Very easy to serve, I love this! It's '紅油抄手' (Hong You chao shou) (Mandarin words meaning chilli oil pork shrimp dumpling); just some dumplings, alright? And basically you...you cook this and then after that, you pour this wonderful sauce that...that just spices this whole thing up. Virtually every one who eats this say...their eyes goes big one you know? Those '眯眯眼' (mi mi yan) one (Mandarin words meaning small eyes), you just come to my house, you eat this, their eyes go real big because wah, they say so nice! And that was exactly how I felt when I first ate this. So nice! A lot of people who come to my place ask me, where you buy ah? Where you buy ah? Don't tell you! (Laughter in the congregation) (Pastor laughing). But it's so nice! But I realise something, yesterday when the adults were at my place, adult leaders were at my place, when this is served, I took zero of it. It has come to a time, and a place where I feel a little bit sick of this already. I never felt that...I never imagined I would be sick of this. I thought this...this is so satisfying, so 'shiok' (Singlish word exclaiming extreme pleasure or satisfaction)! But the satisfaction is going away. Nothing in life really satisfies. That's why restaurants always have to upgrade, change; fashion changes because it's a testimony of the insatiable appetite of man.

What about achievements? You say, alright, I don't want possessions; I don't want things; I don't want food; I don't want travel. What about achievements? I... this is what my life is all about. Yes, I may not change the world but I may achieve something that makes me happy. Sir Edmund Hillary, the man who ascended Mount Everest was once asked, "What did you feel when you got to the summit?" He said, "I had a triumphal ecstasy." I was really happy and excited that I managed to surmount this Everest. But he said, "It was just for a fleeting moment." After the sense of ecstasy came to him for a while, he says what overwhelms him is the sense of desolation. I am lost. Because he asked himself this question: now where do I go from here? What's next? I've conquered Everest. What's next? He felt lost because the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ears filled with hearing.

Now you say it's not about possessions; it's not about achievement; I just want to be entertained in this life. You know, this is what life is all about. Life is about enjoying! Life is about being entertained. And really, we live in a day and age where entertainment is so important right? I mean I don't think there's any century that has the abundance of entertainment like we do today - movies, games, music, MTV, whatever you have. But even though we had the abundance of entertainment, we were never really satisfied.

Today Michael Crichton, in his book 'Timeline' he says, "Today, everybody expects to be entertained," the real...the real need of the day today is not so much food and so on, in at least in our country is this craving, this expectation to be entertained, "...and they expect to be entertained all the time. Everyone must be amused or they will switch: they will switch brands, switch channels, switch parties, switch loyalties and this is the intellectual reality of Western society at the end of the century." This is written of course before this century. "In other centuries, human beings wanted to be saved or improved, or freed, or educated. But in our century, they want to be entertained."

And I tell you, you will never be entertained to satisfaction. You always have a white...black and white TV then now you go to colour TV, then you go to HDTV and now I'm told you have ultra HD curved TV. But are you satisfied? No! Last time you have channel 8 and channel 5, then you add Channel U and Channel NewsAsia and now you have 150 channels on your cable but you are never satisfied. That's the reality of life. 20:18.5

So Solomon says all things are full of weariness. It's so frustrating, can't find satisfaction. So Solomon wrote a few songs, I've said he wrote 'Songs of Solomon', he wrote the 'Wheels of the Bus', okay, the life in the world goes round and round. There's a third song that he inspired. The Rolling Stones sang it. Anyone? The Rolling Stones...(response in the congregation) who said it? Wah... you very carnal but you are right! Hahahaha.... (Pastor laughing) Correct! He is absolutely right! 'I can't get no satisfaction'.

Solomon probably inspired that song. I don't know. Now you say, that's not fair. Maybe there will be something out...something else that comes out later that will really satisfied us? Who's to know? We can create and invent new things. To that Solomon says, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new?"" Solomon says, "It has been already in the ages before us." (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 ESV)

Advertisers want to tell you, you get the next product, you will be happy. You go to this tourist destination, you will be happy. Solomon says, there's nothing new under the sun. He's not denying technological advances. I don't think so, but he's saying the basic human needs are never going to be met by life under the sun.

So Solomon is saying, what's the point? You know, he's not a very...he doesn't give a very happy sermon, I must say. Not a very happy guy to hear from but he is in a sense, demolishing all these philosophies that we believe will bring us satisfaction. Says it's not going to work!

Okay, fourth song. Er...by U2 and Bono. (Pause) Er...the wheels on the bus go round and round; I can get no satisfaction; U2, Bono...(Response in the congregation) Wah, very good. 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for'. And that's exactly I think what Solomon says, I will never find it - what I'm looking for, not under this sun.

So Solomon says, it is all futile. We come back to square one. Nothing really changes, nothing really material takes place. Then he says it is all frustrating. I thought I would get happiness in possessions, in achievements, in entertainment but it never satisfies, and there is nothing new that will come out, that will satisfy. Some of you may say, "Alright, maybe that's not what I will look for. I looked to be remembered for the rest of my life." I want to do something great. I want to build something like the pyramids or the sphinx or the Great Wall of Ch...I want to be remembered for my life. You know what Solomon is going to say to you? It is all forgotten. I mean this guy is really...super depressive right? (Laughter in the congregation) He says there is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. He says it is all going to be forgotten. 24:00.5

Who won the Grammys in 1956? Anyone remembers? No? That's about 50 years ago. Who won best actor for Oscars in 1982? Nobody remembers? That's his point, whether it's sports or music. Who's the president in Singapore in 1982? Anyone? Nobody cares. (Laughter in the congregation) Amazing! Let me ask you a simpler question. What is your great great grandfather's name? You don't know? Okay. How about your great grandfather's name? You don't know? How about your grandfather's name? (Laughter in the congregation) You laughed because you know some don't know. There is no remembrance, not even my own family. You don't even know which part of China you came from right? Ah...I think somewhere Hokkien...but I don't know which town, which...you don't know. No remembrance.

Every day there is an arbitrary in the papers. Does anybody care? Do you remember? How about going to a funeral? You go to a funeral and everybody remembers, eulogises, sing praises to this deceased person for an hour. And you know what happens after that hour is up? Everybody goes to their table and have their dinner and play mah-jong. That's what happens. That's why Mark Twain is right. "The world will lament you for an hour and forget you forever." There is no remembrance. There is no remembrance...okay, maybe you say 5 months time, they will remember me, it's true. Maybe. How about 5 years? Will they still remember you? Mr. so and so, wah, the great... do you think they will remember you? How about 50 years? Will they still remember you? How about 500 years? I will make a name for myself, for all posterity. How about 5000 years? You think anybody cares who you are?

How about 50,000 years? You say, “Pastor, where got so long?” Yes, you have all eternity. There is no remembrance.

Solomon says life is like spinning on the Ferris wheel. Lots of activity; lots of colours; lots of sights and sounds, but it is ultimately futile, frustrating and forgotten. Vanity of vanities, vanity of the highest degree. And this is not just felt by Solomon, throughout history and even today there are people who feel the same way.

Ernest Hemingway is a well-known writer, literary genius in his time. He says, “I live in a vacuum that is as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and there is no current to plug into.” He says: I’m flat; I’m empty. Ernest Hemingway actually believes that there is no meaning in life, except that I can determine the time and the manner in which I die. Meaning in life is found in determining the time and the manner in which I die. And you know what? He absolutely practise what he preached, because one night when his wife is asleep, he got his own rifle, place it on his head and took his own life. Because he’s a man who saw life like this Ferris wheel that Solomon saw - that Solomon saw in nature; that Solomon saw in the generations; that Solomon observed in life under the sun. And he took his own life because he feels this is absolutely meaningless. Before he died, he wrote a book, one of his great works. It’s called ‘The Sun also rises’. Guess where he got the title from? The sun rises and the sun goes down.

My friends, the circle of life; the Ferris wheel of life; the life on this world goes round and round is an extremely frustrating observation King Solomon has made and as the ‘Qoheleth’ (Hebrew word), as the preacher he gathers all of us to hear his experience, to hear his wisdom. What profits you with all your labour under the sun? Don’t you see it is ultimately futile? Don’t you see that it is truly frustrating? Don’t you see that it is eventually all going to be forgotten? What is the point of life under the sun? And that’s why at the very end of his book, he says, you’ve got to look at life from above the sun.

Fear God and keep his commandments. There is no ultimate meaning in life under the sun apart from God. And we are made for God; you are made for God and if you do not know God, all that you do amounts to nothing. What profits a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul? Centuries after Solomon died, a man walked on the face of the earth and promised something astounding. While Solomon asked all the difficult questions, this man answered all those questions and principally, he answered the mystery and the puzzle of life. What is the meaning of life? Where can I get this real life? This man said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10 ESV) Jesus Christ.

Jesus came and said, I am the answer to what Solomon has always been asking. I am the answer to what all of history is searching for. I came that they might have life. I came so that you and I can have



life, not just mere existence but abundant life. A life of deep joy and satisfaction and meaning and significance. A life that is so astounding that even though you go through trials and pains and hardships, there is a joy welling in you. It's a life the world has never seen and it's a life I gave. And this is why Paul says, "For me to live is Christ..." (Philippians 1:21 ESV) He says, I've found life! It's not found in the pubbing; the drinking; the career advancement. It's not found in getting the right spouse; it's not found in having bright kids. These may be all right things in and of itself, but he says that's not real life! Life is Christ!

Because Christ brings me to God who I am made for. Because Christ is the way, the truth and the life. And now in Christ, everything makes sense! The circle of life goes round and round, but if you look towards the center, it is Jesus Christ. And that's why Paul will continue to say. "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work..." (1 Corinthians 15:58 ESV) Didn't Solomon says labour in this world under the sun is vain? Someone changes everything. Your labour in the work of the Lord is not in vain! Jesus makes everything significant and meaningful.

If you're working apart from Jesus; if you're working not for Jesus, it makes ultimately no sense. But Christians, this is the joy when you serve God, when you labour in His power, when you sacrifice yourself for His Kingdom's sake, it will never be in vain! It will never be futile nor frustrating nor forgotten. It will be rich, it will be remembered, it will be deeply satisfying - Jesus Christ. And I say Jesus is the center of it all, not just my life but for this world.

This world is trapped in a meaningless cycle of repetitions. The water, the sun, the wind, the world is in a sense trapped in this bondage. In the words of the Bible, the world is like this creature, this being that longs to be freed from the bondage of sin, that traps us in vanity and he will be delivered. This world will be delivered from vanity when Jesus comes.

See, from the beginning to the end, Jesus is the center of life, of it all. Jesus wants to give you abundant life. A life you've never had and he gives it to you. He's able to give it to you, because he said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11 ESV) This is not for free. He had to pay the price and the price is His own life. You see, what separated us from God is our sin. What disinherited the prince is our sin and this sin is something none of us could deal with until Jesus Christ gave His life to save us from our sins.

My friend, this is the amazing message of the Bible. This is the Gospel, the Good News of the Bible. Man is lost, like a lost sheep but here our good shepherd comes to seek after us, not just to seek after us but to give His life for us, that the lost sheep might return to God's fold and be nourished and be satisfied, and be rejoicing. The sheep lost in the wilderness is a pitiful sheep. The sheep back to the shepherd's fold is a blessed sheep. This is abundant life. Would you today, turn from your sin and

believe in this good shepherd Jesus Christ, who gave his life for you? Let's bow for a word of prayer together. 35:57.8

I preach this morning with the confidence in God's Word that says, my sheep will hear my voice. I picture a sheep out there in the wilderness, out there on a cliff, on a cold dark night. It's bleating away, asking for help, and none could save it. It's alone; it's lost; it's confused. But in the dark night, a cry is heard piercing the sky. The cry of the good Shepherd, calling out to this lost sheep. Will this lost sheep hear the voice of the shepherd? Will you today hear the voice of your shepherd?

Jesus today is reaching out to you through Solomon. Solomon is asking you all these questions, so that you may discover just how lost you are. You certainly don't look lost because you live in a nice house, you have a nice career, you have a nice family. But do you know that eternally and spiritually you are lost? And your good Shepherd is crying out to you: come back home, come back home. I've paid for your sins; I've died on the cross; you can be forgiven; you can be back to this abundant life; you can regain the inheritance that you once lost because of your sin. Would you come back home? My dear friends, this morning I pray you'll come back to Jesus. Come back to God. This is the Good News that I pray you will receive. You will humble yourself and receive.

I speak today as well to brothers and sisters in Christ. You are the sheep, you are God's flock. And you have tasted this abundant life. You have been saved. You know it. But somehow you have also heard the voices of money, possession, status and fame and success. And somehow you have wandered away from that flock. My friends, real life is not found in Jesus plus something else. Real life, abundant life is found in Jesus alone. There is only room in your heart for one. You can't have Jesus plus something else. You cannot serve God and Mammon. Would you today come back to God, to Jesus Christ alone? Is God speaking to you today about your life? About your idolatry? About your adulterous ways, spiritually speaking? Then my dear friends, come home. Talk to God today. Pray, repent and once again obey Him. Walk in His ways and find that new life, that abundant life. He loves you; He gave His life for you. Would you obey?

Father, thank You that You are calling us today. Calling us to come home; calling sinners to come home and even the saints to come home. Thank You there's always grace available for us. So I pray this morning that there will be a true turning and returning back to You. Bless each one here, truly knowing Jesus, knowing You, there is no greater thing. Bless Your church, bless Your people this day. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.