

# Apart from Christ, there's no Gain!

Eccl 1:1-11 (text)

6 January 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen)<sup>1</sup>

## Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Here's a story – a story which will give me quite a measure of pain to tell, because it's the story of my friend who recently passed away; a friend for whom I had a big soft spot. I'm also aware that, if my friend was still alive, he'd say that the picture I'm sketching here for you, is a very simplified version of his life – for, let's face it, things *are* usually way more complex than what they seem for an outsider who's trying to look in.

Well, my friend was a businessman and a real money-maker. During his life, he was a successful dealer in tyres. He also wrote radio soapies, compiled TV ads, and was hired by credit-recovery agencies to fight their cases in law courts. Lastly, he was also hired by an overseas group for the very honourable task of making a series of TV programmes on opera music. They paid to get him and his team to opera houses around the world – in Eastern Europe, in Austria, Germany, England, USA, Japan and Australia. About a year before his death, while he was on one such tour, he purchased several second-hand cars in Japan and shipped them to New Zealand to be sold here.

No doubt, my friend knew how to make money, and, so it seems, he also had the passion for it.

Sadly, about a decade ago, he rejected Christ and became an agnostic – if not an atheist. Then, another sad thing happened. You see, as my friend was lying for about a month on his deathbed, neither his first wife, nor his second wife, nor any of his children from both marriages came to visit – just some business friends. And it's not as if my friend was harsh or unkind – a bully. No, anything but that! Overall, he was a very kind and compassionate man.

But, now, my question is the same as that of the Ecclesiast: What did this dear friend gain? Yes, for all his earthly toil, what lasting gain does he now have?

Here's another question: Could you & I fall into the same trap – the trap of seeking to accumulate wealth yet losing all else that's dear?

Granted, you & I might not be gambling addicts or enslaved to buying lottery tickets in the hope of striking the jackpot; you & I might not go on “Who wants to be a millionaire.” But do we really escape society's constant drive for ever higher wages, ever bigger/smarter cars, and larger houses...? Could it be that we, too, have bought into the “bigger-is-better” syndrome of our society...? Are you & I immune to the rampant materialism of our culture – an attitude that could cost us all our vital relationships – i.e. losing our Lord Jesus as well as our spouses and children?

Well, led by the Holy Spirit, the teacher (the author of Ecclesiastes) wrote our text at a time when many Israelites were no longer shepherds or farmers who were daily looking to the LORD for their food. No, many were businessmen who tried to make money from the

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<sup>1</sup> I'm greatly indebted to the wonderful exegetical work and great guidance provided by GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2010. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : William B Eerdmans. pp. 30-47

booming international trade between Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Asians who had to travel through Israel or its harbours.<sup>2</sup>

Well, the teacher warns them, *and you & me*, to not simply live our lives in an “under-the-sun” way; yes, not in a secular way, i.e. as if God does not exist!

So, here is the central message of our text: **Don’t live your life apart from God, for, apart from God, people gain nothing from all their toil!**

What a message – and right here at the beginning of a new year!

Well, our sermon has three points, i.e. that, without a personal relationship with God, your/my life will be part of a mere...

- Fleeting Cycle
- Toilsome Cycle
- No-Gain Cycle

### Fleeting Cycle

Imagine a cold winter’s morning... You’re waiting at a bus stop. You can see your breath when you exhale. But have you noticed how long your breath stay? Only a second!

Well, that’s actually the meaning of the Hebrew word which most English versions have translated as *vanity*! It’s better translated as *breath*!

So, here’s then actually the meaning of verse 2, “*Breath of breaths,*” says the Preacher, “*Breath of breath! All is a mere breath!*”

Ps 39 (verse 5) uses the same Hebrew word when it says, “... *each man’s life is but a breath,*”<sup>3</sup> which means man’s life is *fleeting* (short-lived)!

But look, verse 2 even repeats the word “vanity” – it says “*Vanity of vanities!*” Well, this repetition thing – that’s the Hebrew way of putting it in the superlative! Look, it’s the same as when Hebrew says “holy of holies” – which actually means, “*most holy!*”

So, what does “Vanity of vanity” or “breath of breath” or “fleeting of fleeting” mean? Well, it means “*Utterly fleeting!*” So, v.2 then means, “*Utterly fleeting,*” says the Preacher, “*Utterly fleeting*” “*All is fleeting!*”

Do you remember that James, the brother of our Lord, says the same thing (in Js 4:14) “... *What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes*”<sup>4</sup>

And, young people, although your life, too, goes fast forward, it’s not until you’re older and looking back at your life, that you will absolutely agree that time flies!

I’m sure, all our senior members will agree that life is but a breath!

What’s more, everything comes in cycles – as v. 4 says, “*One generation goes, and another one comes. But the earth remains forever.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Greidanus (ibid:41)

<sup>3</sup> Ps 39:5 **You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath.** (*hevel* = **הֶבֶל**, same word as in Ecclesiastes).

<sup>4</sup> Js 4:14 “...**yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.**” The Greek word for “mist” here is *atmis* **ἀτμίς, ἴδος** *f*: a hot steamy vapor—‘steam.’ **σημεῖα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς κάτω, αἷμα καὶ ἀτμίδα καπνοῦ** ‘signs on the earth below; there will be blood and fire and steam’ Ac 2:19. *ἀτμίς* is also used figuratively: *ἀτμίς γάρ ἐστε ἢ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη* ‘for you are a vapor which appears for a moment’ Jas 4:14.

An important connotation in the use of the term *ἀτμίς* is the fact that it disappears so readily. This is a particularly significant element in Jas 4:14. The closest equivalent of *ἀτμίς* is normally a term which refers to the steam rising from a boiling pot or cauldron (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 8). New York: United Bible Societies).

I find it quite insightful that the German word for “breath” is “Atem;” and “to breathe” is “atmen.”

<sup>5</sup> Eccl 1:4 **A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever** (NASB).

Yes, before you know it, your children have left your house! Then the chances you had to train them in the Lord and for life are over.

Next, before you know it, your life on earth is over!

So, seeing that life is so fleeting, what's the best thing man could do?

Well, is it not, as Psalm 90 says, "...to *number our days aright so that we may get a heart of wisdom!*"<sup>6</sup> – in other words, to receive God through Jesus Christ before it's too late!?

But if you live without God, your life is *just* one small cog lost within a wheel of millions and millions of cycles!

Indeed, *one generation goes, and another one comes* – a cycle!

And the teacher explains this vividly with three illustrations....

- with the sun that rises & sets, rises & sets, rises & sets – all just one fleeting cycle after another!
- with the wind that blows. And although the wind's path allows for it more freedom – not just a straight path like that of the sun – it, too, just blows & blows & blows again – one fleeting cycle after another!
- And then there's the water which gets sucked up from the sea to form clouds to make rain that comes off the mountains into the rivers & streams just to end up again in the sea. So, it goes on & on & on – one fleeting cycle after another!

So, the point is made – one human being's life forms a tiny part within millions & millions of fleeting cycles. And, if you're not right with God, well then that's all that there is for you!

The second point is.... it's a...

### Toilsome Cycle

In v.3 the teacher asks, "**What does man gain by all the toil<sup>7</sup> at which he toils<sup>8</sup> under the sun?**" (ESV).

And is *that* not right?

I mean, is that not part of the curse man earned for himself after the Fall – "**Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil<sup>9</sup> you will eat of it all the days of your life**"?

How many times have we heard a father or mother sigh at the end of a hard day's work, saying, "Oh, I'm so tired!" "I'm totally knackered!"

And more often than not, this work pressure just goes on and on and on – and you feel like a hamster in a wheel! See, the toilsome cycle!?

Says the teacher, "Also the *sun* toils on its journey through the sky!" "And when you think the sun rests when it sets in the west, well that's not so, for, says v. 5, even during the night, the sun "*hastens (actually gasps & pants)*<sup>10</sup> to the place of its rising!"

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<sup>6</sup> Ps 90:12 **So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.**

<sup>7</sup> `āmāl (אָמַל) trouble, labour, toil

<sup>8</sup> ya`āmol (אָמַל) Qal Imperfect 3<sup>rd</sup> Masculine Singular of `āmāl (אָמַל) to labour or to toil

<sup>9</sup> Gn 3:17 in which the noun `iṣṣābōn (אִצְבֹּן) "pain, toil" is used.

<sup>10</sup> שָׁאָף Qal Participle Masculine Singular of שָׁאָף gasp, pant, pant after, long for (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 983). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

No wonder then that verse 8 reminds us that all things – the sun, the wind, the water rushing to the sea, and one generation after another<sup>11</sup> – these all find themselves as parts of continuously wearisome cycles; too toilsome to describe in human language!<sup>12</sup>

My brother & sister (and dear young people & children), if you're not living on God's terms and for His glory, then, at the end of your life, that's all there was for your life on earth – you were just a tiny part of millions of 1) fleeting, 2) toilsome cycles – nothing more!

But wait! There's more to say, for here is point 3...

### No-Gain Cycle

My brother & sister, let's look again at what happens to our breath on a winter's morning. The one thing which is sure – and which we have already seen – is that our breath is fleeting! It lasts only for a second!

But, look, what else do we notice about our winter's-morning breath?

Well, is it not the fact that there's no hold on it – you can't grasp your breath and then keep it!

So, what do we see?

Well, don't we see that, if life is but a breath, then verse 3 is absolutely correct in asking, "**What does man gain/profit**<sup>13</sup> (what can he grasp and hold onto) **by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**"?

Remember, it says, "**What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**" In other words, "**What does the man without God (i.e. the secular man; the man who looks at life from ground zero only)<sup>14</sup> gain from all his toil under the sun?**"

Well, there's a man who sometimes walks his dog at the same time that I walk our dog! Now, this man has often confessed that he is "not religious."

So, how does he describe life?

Well, he says exactly what verse 3 says. You see, this is what he told me the other day: "Pieter, life is pointless!" "There's no gain." "The best thing that could happen to us is that we should die." "Death will free us from this toilsome, no-gain life...!"

Sadly, this man is very kind, yet nevertheless a man who is hard to believe in God!

Well, if you don't live with God, then, on top of your life being *fleeting* and *toilsome*, it will also be a life of *no gain* – no *lasting* gain; yes, no gain that rises above the ever-repetitive cycles of this world!

Then your life will be just like that of the sea which doesn't get fuller (i.e. which gains nothing) despite all the water which flows into it (v.7).<sup>15</sup>

I mean, what lasting gain can this world offer you?

For, as v.11 says, after a while, most things & most people are not even remembered...

- The clothes we wear will eventually get thrown away

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<sup>11</sup> Yes, "all things" in v.8 refer back to the four things listed in verses 4-7, i.e. generations, sun, wind, and rivers.

<sup>12</sup> Verse 8 **All things toil continuously; no one can ever finish describing this. The eye is never satisfied with seeing, and the ear is never filled with hearing** (LEB, i.e. Lexham English Bible).

<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew word for *gain* used in v.3 is *yitrōn*, a word which comes from the root-word *yeter* (יָתַר), which means *remainder* or *rest* – in other words, that which *remains* after a businessman has taken off all his overhead costs – i.e. his *profit*.

<sup>14</sup> The expression "under the Sun" is only found in Ecclesiastes' and 29 times in its 12 chapters.

<sup>15</sup> Eccl 1:7 **All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.**

- The cars we get so attached to will in the end be crushed. Did you know that, every year, car recycling in the USA and Canada provides enough steel to make roughly 13 million new vehicles? And in the USA, nearly 12 million cars are recycled every year.<sup>16</sup>
- Then the books we've read & loved will be replaced by others!
- And the houses we live in? Well, these will eventually no longer be ours. Once at a wedding, the groom thanked his parents: "Mum & Dad, thank you that, during all my lifetime up until now, you have never moved house, for that has allowed for me to always have that emotionally secure feeling when I come to visit you!" Well, that's wonderful, but let's remember that many a parental home has been sold – some even been demolished and replaced by newer, smarter buildings!
- Well, then, some people might think, "Oh, I *will* gain something from living without God!" "Yes, my name has been given to streets, neighbourhoods, and buildings!"
- Ha! Don't count on that! Have you not seen how often street & building names – and even those of cities & countries – have been changed? Rhodesia becomes Zimbabwe; Kruger Street becomes Mandela Street; St Petersburg becomes Leningrad, and so on... So, eventually even people's names are recycled!

So, if you live without God, then there's no lasting gain – or as v.9 & 10 say, "There's nothing new!"

Granted, we now have new modes of transport – cars, trains, & planes, which did not exist in Bible times, but, as for man's basic needs & sins, these have remained unchanged: people still need work; they still desire to get married; they still have children; they still bring their children to school – just by car and not by horse carriage anymore; people still make war albeit with different weapons. So, re man's basic needs & sins – these are still the same! There's nothing new – and that's just another way of saying "no gain."<sup>17</sup>

My brother & sister, please think with me! Let's make sure!

Are you & I perhaps saying with our *mouths* that we love the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, yet, when it comes to *practically planning & living* our work lives, family lives and relaxation lives, we're no different to the atheists? I mean, my friend, the businessman, grew up in the church, but gave his life to money-making until he finally lost all those close to him – his whole family and... Christ!

Look! Christ says (in Mt 16:26), ***For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?***

Forfeiting means "no gain;" yes, "no profit!"

Then, there's our Lord's parable of the rich fool who thought he could relax and be merry for he had enough earthly riches to last him a lifetime! (Lk 12:16-20)

*But, big surprise: when that rich man died, he had no part of what he thought was his gain/profit for all his toil!*

What did Jesus then say?

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Auto or Car Recycling Facts and Figures, at <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/auto-recycling-facts-and-figures-2877933>

<sup>17</sup> I agree with Greidanus (ibid:46)

*“So it is with all who have stored up treasures for themselves, but are not rich toward God.”<sup>18</sup>*

See?

Christ’s message is the same as that of our text – *“Apart from God, you gain nothing from all your toil.”*

Is there then nothing to be gained when we die – no lasting gain?

Jesus says, “Yes, there is!” “But only if you store up for yourself treasures in heaven!” (Mt 6:19-21).

Look, here is Christ’s exhortation to you & me (Jn 6:27), *“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you . . . .”*<sup>19</sup>

If you don’t have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, your life won’t have any lasting profit/gain!

My brother & sister (young people & children), *“...you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).”<sup>20</sup>*

My prayer for you & me for 2019 comes in the exhortation of the Apostle Paul (in 1 Cor 15:58), *“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain”<sup>21</sup>*

AMEN (2,587 words excluding footnotes)

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<sup>18</sup> Lk 12:21 *“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

<sup>19</sup> Jn 6:27 *“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”*

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis mine

<sup>21</sup> Emphasis mine