

Ecclesiastes 12

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[0 : 00] The old story goes of a monk and a student, and the student asked his master for advice on! And the older monk said to the student, go and sit in your cell and let your cell teach! In a way that's been the job of the preacher in Ecclesiastes this book. And as we come to the conclusion of his tour that he's taken us on around the world, the realistic world tour, and if you're joining us today you're here for the climax, it's a good day to join us. The message that if you sit and if you look, and if you look hard enough and long enough at this world in which we live, at the limits of this life, at the four walls of the humanity that we live within, the cell, the world, will teach us. Perhaps not everything, but it can teach us an awful lot about how to live in the world. And if we've been here over the last few weeks, we know that the preacher has bombarded us with the real world. The world where there is grievous evil under the sun, anomalies and injustices and frustration. And just as he began the book in chapter 1, he ends it with his famous one-line sermon. It's there in verse 8.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. Life, with all of its questions still hanging, is a life in a place where our perspective alone cannot make sense of it all. So we're at the end of the tour, aren't we? And he gets us off the bus and he asks us one more question. Are you now ready to submit? Are you ready to hand over your little human, flawed, limited, earthly perspective of life in this world? Are you ready to hand that over to God? And are you ready to worship God?

If we're not ready to do that, if we're not ready to submit, there is one last chance this afternoon. There's one last chance as he closes the book. In our passage we hear two voices. And first of all we hear the voice of the future speaking to us. We hear the voice of the future. Reality is calling us to our senses again here. And like many other times we've heard before in this book, it says to us, let the impending things invigorate and change the present things. Let your tomorrows shape your todays.

The danger for some is that they think they've got all the time in the world. The danger for some is a misspent youth. A wasted youth. You were here last week and he began speaking to a young person at the end of chapter 11 and he carries on speaking to that same young person. And as we hear the voice of the future, the voice of the future describes the young person or it describes you as you get older, we go to the Christmas future. It's like one of those apps that you can get where it takes a photo of you and it shows you what you will look like in 40, 50, 60 years time. Youngster, can you imagine yourself then, he says, when there will come a time, as he says in verse 1, when the days of your life will be evil.

When the years of your life are years when you'll say, I've no pleasure in them. See the picture that he paints of you years down the track. The picture of impending things coming towards you. Now, don't just feel the analogies of the poetry here. Feel the picture.

[4 : 45] See yourself here. Feel the cold. Feel the chill in the air. As faculties fade. As the sun and the moon and the stars dim. Feel the darkness as the lights go out one by one. When ambitions that you hold on to in your youth are let go of and parted with. When resilience fades. When time is no longer a healer, but a killer. The older ones amongst us hear this voice, don't we? And we sit with a wry smile on our face.

And maybe we look at the young and we say, if only you knew what I know. Let your tomorrows shape your todays. He pictures these future days, doesn't he, like an old abandoned house that shows signs of a past glory. Emma and I, my wife, we're quite sad with the TV programmes that we watch and we're years behind anyone else. But we just started watching *Escape to the Chateau*. And it's a programme where a couple from England leave everything, leave their life behind and go and live in France. And this couple, they sell a one-bedroom flat in London and buy a 45-bedroom chateau in rural France for £200,000. And it's the bargain of a century. They fall in love with the charms of this grand building.

And it's full of details of its medieval glory and its past. Little cast-iron figures are on the banisters. A priceless French hand-painted wallpaper adorns le salon. Windows crafted from the oak on the estate. But when they buy it, they're given by the estate agent a lever arch file with 430 problems with the house.

[7 : 05] No running water, no electricity, no sewage. He gives them 430 reasons not to buy it. It's pretty much derelict. And this life he describes here was once magnificent.

Windows filled with light, in verse 3, now dim. Verse 4, doors that once swung open and welcomed guests in.

A life of hospitality are now shut to the streets outside. As you, in the future, slowly recede away from society.

The palsy. The fault of forgetfulness. The popping joints. The grinding bones. Your aching muscles. Your descending mist. And the singing stops. And those sounds which said to you, you are part of this world. And you belong here.

[8 : 11] And you have a place here. Slowly fade. And you're on your way out. Dylan Thomas closes that poem that people always quote.

He ends it, Grave men near death who see with blinding sight. Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. But the real voice of the future won't have any of that.

It says, get real. Because when those days come, there won't be any rage left. The images in verse 6 are so powerful, aren't they?

Like a silver cord. A golden bowl. A pot. Or a wheel. Once so beautiful. Your life. And useful. And worthy. Now absolutely shattered. And there is no more rage. There is no more fight in you. And when those days come, we will realise that it was all so fragile.

[9 : 16] And it was all so light. And life was not mine to take. It was never all me. And you were put here for a reason.

To remember, verse 1, your creator. To live for him. And life is not yours to take and eke out however you want it to.

But to receive and enjoy from God's hand as a gift. The faculties of your mind and body in your youth.

They may last long into old age. They are all from him and for him. This passage, I think, is much harder for the young person to hear, isn't it?

Because we can't imagine it. The arrogance of youth. And Mark Twain said that when I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant, I could barely have the old man, to send to have the old man around.

[10 : 20] But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years. It's hard for the young to appreciate the old. To appreciate the future and to listen to the future.

Youth is wasted so often on the young. So youngster, whoever you are, let this image make you wise.

That your tomorrows should form your todays. Youngster, remember that now while you can. And don't waste life, don't waste your youth on the endless pursuit of earthly pleasure.

Don't waste your life on vanity. Preacher says, I've been there, done that. Let the cell of your future teach you everything.

Let your tomorrows shape your today. And grab life and do it with all of your might. Go for it and live for God. Live for him.

[11 : 26] Live your life for God. Because God gave your life to you. And in the end, verse 7, he's going to take it back. The voice of the future. Secondly and lastly, the voice of the preacher.

The voice of the preacher. Who have we been listening to now and over the last few weeks on Tuesday lunchtimes. I think it's great that at the end we get a little biographical note about him, don't we, of the preacher.

The man that we've listened to and gained wisdom from. And verse 10 is the key, if you look there. Here's his remit. The preacher sought to find words of delight. And uprightly, he wrote words of truth.

You see his two aims there throughout the book. But to give you two things, he speaks into you delight and truth. I hope we've seen how those two things are bound together.

The truth can often hurt, can't it? And often the most true things about us are the things that we don't want to hear. They're the most painful things to hear. And these words in Ecclesiastes 12 are painful, aren't they?

[12 : 39] That tell us of our future. And in all of that pain and truth, he's held a mirror up to our lives. He's held our prognosis up to us.

And he's held our prospects up to us. And he shows us our ridiculous pursuit of pleasure and our materialism.

And our absurd expectations of life are shattered. He's been doing that throughout. And they are like goads. Verse 11. Like spikes in a beast's leg.

He spikes our stubborn view of the world and of ourselves. And his final word is, the truth is, there in verse 13, fear God and keep his commandments.

Fear God, keep his commandments. Life, that's all there is to it, really. In all of the madness, there is this one answer that he gives.

[13 : 44] You might be a person, actually, who with a real answer to the question of the meaning of life, if that answer came to you, actually it would spoil all of your fun.

Maybe you've enjoyed the preacher circling the world as he has done, examining everything, asking all the great questions that he's asked. But the question is, do you really want the answer?

The truth. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, pictures this conversation about heaven and about God's wisdom. You've probably heard it before.

One character says, ah, but we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way. For me, there's no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not?

To travel, hopefully, is better than to arrive. The response comes, there was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and you were glad when you found them.

[14 : 56] Become that child again, even now. Ah, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. And the voice of the preacher again says, get real.

Get real with your questions. Because if there is no answer, then there is no hope in the pursuit of it. All of the questions that we ask are just part of, in that case, an endless, pitiless road of pure speculation, of uncertainty and vagueness, of hopelessness.

If you'd rather just speculate about the meaning of life, he says here, my son, beware of that. Beware of going beyond the simple answer that I'm giving here.

Beware of going beyond the fixed sayings of the wise, beyond my words. Yes, out there, there is a whole world of study and of making many, many books.

A whole world of opinion, knock yourself out if you want. A whole world of endless opinions, diverse ideas, explanations, conflicting purposes.

[16 : 14] But you, my son, I will not have you thinking that the number of ideas out there means that none of them is true and not one of them is the answer.

The voice of the preacher is authoritative, isn't it? It's final. All has been heard. He says, this is the end of it. Fear God. It's all about him.

This preacher, he's been so helpful. But in closing, I think we see behind his voice is another. And as we hear him, I certainly feel like I'm not sure how to take him.

I'm not sure how to relate to the preacher. He sounds godly and he sounds really wise, but we know that he isn't God himself.

If he is Solomon, he is a very, very wise man, but he is not God. And it's right that we recognise that. Because not even the wisest men, not even the best preachers, can save you.

[17 : 26] They can't even save themselves. And he wants to remind you that, doesn't he? All of these sayings I've given you, verse 11, are given by one shepherd.

That word is loaded. Behind his sayings and behind his voice, we hear the echoes of the shepherd's voice.

God, who speaks to us in a man's accent and in a man's voice. A voice who knows what it is like to live in this mad world.

And he knows our needs. And he knows what the four walls of the cell are like. Truly, he does. We hear a shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures.

Who leads us beside still waters. Who is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. who restores your soul, your failing, derelict, ageing body and soul.

[18 : 35] The one who prepares a place for you in the presence of your enemies, who brings you home. We hear the Lord Jesus Christ, our God.

I think Ecclesiastes is a bit like spiritual acupuncture. And acupuncture works when someone sticks a needle into you and it creates a small wound in the problem area.

They purposely, the doctor purposely wounds your muscle and as that muscle heals, it kind of resets itself and it releases and it relieves tension.

And God has stuck his needle into our hearts to reset, as it were, our heart muscle memory. To make us understand that when we live life our way, all is vanity.

That this world will send us absolutely mad without him. But that there is much to live for with him. There is much to enjoy.

[19 : 44] And relish and receive as a gift from him in life. There is much to waste if we don't. The tour is over for now.

We go off the bus and say, don't we, enough, enough. I've heard enough. And I submit, I submit. and I worship, and I live for God.

Let's do that as we pray now. Let's pray.