

Ecclesiastes 12

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you. Please have a seat. If you have a Bible, please could you turn it to Ecclesiastes chapter 11. It should be on page 6, 7, 8 of the church Bibles. Ecclesiastes chapter 11.

We're going to read through to chapter 12, verse 8. And I'm aware that we're kind of just like diving into the end of a book. And usually on Sundays you would maybe look through a book systematically. So let me just give you a little bit of context and a little bit of the flavor of Ecclesiastes. It's very much the, from my experience, Ecclesiastes is very much the kind of Marmite book of the Bible. And people either love it or, well, they wouldn't say they hate it, but they find it very confusing and very difficult to follow. But it is a wisdom book in the Bible.

And it records for us the words of this guy who, like I said to the kids, has this slightly cool and enigmatic name of the teacher. And in Ecclesiastes, what the teacher wants to do is he wants to use wisdom to teach us to make the most of life, but to do so in a way that does not run away from the frustrations and the dark realities of living in a broken world. So how can we make the most of life, but in a way that we're getting real about the fact that we live in a world that's under the curse of sin? And he does so because he knows that we have a tendency to make too much of ourselves and to make too much of this world. Now, here's something that's very important to bear in mind when reading Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is written primarily to Christians. And that doesn't mean if you're here today and you're not a Christian that there's nothing for you from this. I hope you'll get a lot from the wisdom of what the teacher says. But its audience is primarily those who are in the covenant community. That is those who are Christians. And there is a kind of what we could call a

Christian form of escapism, a way in which we look at the world and yet we secretly think we can control the outcome of our lives. There is the subtle yet sinful tendency we have in which we can put our hope too much on the things of this world and put them in the place of God. And so the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is there to remind the Christian that this world is not your home. Yes, it is good and there's lots of good stuff that we can enjoy, but this is not your home. Ecclesiastes is there to remind you that if you are a follower of Jesus, you are an exile. Jesus has saved you to be with him in the new creation.

And so the way that the teacher reminds us of that is to hammer home one truth again and again throughout this book. And the truth is that all of us are going to die.

[3 : 1 3] And because that is true, this is his evaluation. Actually, just have a look at chapter 12, verse 8. Check this out. If you're new to the Bible, right, this may kind of freak you out that this is in the Bible. Chapter 12, verse 8. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Everything is meaningless.

Now, that's a surprising thing to read, but it's what the teacher will say throughout Ecclesiastes. Now, we do have a bit of a problem here because I think it's actually an unhelpful translation.

It's never a good idea to have a go at Bible translators, but I'm going to have a go at them for this. I think this is pretty unhelpful. This guy, the teacher, he is not some moody, existentialist philosopher. And that word that's translated there as meaningless is the Hebrew word *hevel*. And it's translated elsewhere in the Bible as breath. So, for example, in Psalm 144, verse 4, the psalmist says that man is but a breath. He is *hevel*. His days are fleeting like a shadow.

And so, *hevel* means something that is transitory. It's something that's brief. It's not about a lack of value, but it's about a lack of permanence. A breath, after all, is very valuable to the person who breathes it. And so, the point the teacher is making, though, is that it doesn't last. Life is just a breath. Our lives, all your achievements, all that you've been working towards, would be like if you were to step outside on a cold day, and just for a brief moment, you see your breath in the icy air. That's your life. And so, I actually think a helpful way to retranslate verse 8 would be to say, a breath, a breath, says the teacher. Everything is just a breath. Now, he's not been negative.

The purpose of Ecclesiastes, like I said, is to get real. Not so that we will despair, but so that we will learn to put all our trust on the one who is not temporal. Embrace your frailty. Embrace your mortality. Embrace the fact that you are a sinner, and that you have a limited capacity for understanding, so that you can be freed to place all your trust, and all your hope on the majestic, immortal, good, and infinitely great God. Or to sum it up, as a minister called Vaughn Roberts sums it up helpfully, Ecclesiastes is about this. Face facts and fear God. It's the whole book. Face facts, fear God.

[5 : 58] So, let's read then the teacher's closing words, his closing words of wisdom. Chapter 11, verse 1. Ship your grain across the sea. After many days, you may receive a return. Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight. You do not know what disaster may come upon the land. If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, they will lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the cloud will not reap.

As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle. For you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all, but let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. Everything to come is just a breath. You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart, and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

So then, banish anxiety from your heart, and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are just a breath. Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them. For the sun and the light, and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain. When the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop. When the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim. When the doors to the street are closed, and the sound of grinding fades. When people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint. When people are afraid of heights, and of danger in the streets. When the almond tree blossoms, and the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home, and mourners go about the streets. Remember him, before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken. Before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. A breath, a breath, says the teacher. Everything's just a breath. Let me pray and look at this. Father, we need your help. We want to be wise. Wisdom is so precious. Help us please then to be wise, and help us to see Jesus in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Teach us this morning from your word, we pray. Amen.

Those are the words of the wise teacher. Let me begin then by quoting to you from another wise teacher, probably my favorite teacher, Gandalf the Grey. In the Lord of the Rings films, if you've seen them, Frodo is speaking to Gandalf about how he wished this task of having to destroy this evil ring had never come to him. And Gandalf responds by saying, so do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you. You have no control over what will befall you, but what are you going to do with the time that has been given to you? It's wise, and in many ways, that's the message of Ecclesiastes 11 and 12. What will you do with the time that God has given you?

[10:00] In light of all that the teacher has taught in Ecclesiastes about life's limitations and about God's sovereignty, how should we live? Well, I think we see three things here about life and God and how that affects how we live. Three things. First thing, life is unpredictable, so take risks remembering God's in control. Life is unpredictable, so take wise risks remembering that God is in control. So he begins in verse 1, ship your grain across the sea. After many days you may receive a return. Invest in seven ventures, yes and eight. You do not know what disaster may come upon the land. It's confusing, isn't it? A lot of wisdom literature is kind of written like this, and it can seem quite confusing, but even if you can't understand the details, you can probably get the gist of what he is saying.

He is saying, make risky investments. So he's saying, send your grain out and put, it's probably a reference to the maritime trade of his time, put all your investments on a ship and send it out, a risky thing to do back then. In fact, don't just give a portion to one risky endeavor, give to seven or eight. You don't know what will happen. Verse 2, it's probably similar to a proverb we have in English, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Don't make one investment, make several risky investments.

Why? Because you have no control over life. You have no control over life just as you have no control over nature. Verse 3, if clouds are full of water, they rain on the earth. If a tree falls, it falls. Things happen that you can't predict. So don't be the kind of person in life who is overly cautious all the time and always waiting for the right time to do something. And I love verse 4 through 6 here. Honestly, this has helped me so much in my ministry, the wisdom of these verses.

Look at verse 4. Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the cloud will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning and at evening, let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

So a good farmer is not going to spend all his time just waiting for the right time to plant his seed. He's just going to get on and do it and accept the fact that he has no control over the weather.

[12 : 45] And there are things in life that we have no control over. There are things in life that we can't understand. And so the teacher uses the example of how a baby is formed in his mother's womb.

And it's an amazing, miraculous event. And he says it's not our doing, it's God who does that, who creates that child. God, the maker of all things. This is God the maker's work. He dictates when the rain will pour, when the trees will fall, how children are made. Life is unpredictable.

And so there are some decisions in life that we need to get on and take risks with, rather than constantly waiting for the opportune time.

stop staring at the clouds and crack on. And it's actually an important application of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes because there are some big decisions that many of us here can be sinfully cautious about. And what I mean by that is that our caution is caused not by wisdom, but by a desire for us to try and control the outcome. Now don't mishear this, because I can see all the planners start to freak out when they read verses like this. Don't mishear this. There is loads in wisdom literature about the importance of patience and the importance of planning and the importance of being careful with the decisions you make. Loads. In fact, if you're not a planner, then a lot of the wisdom literature would call you a sluggard, which is not a good thing.

So planning is very important. You're a fool if you don't plan. It's godly. It's wise. But at the same time, remember Proverbs 19.22, many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it's the purpose of the Lord that stands. So we need to plan, yes, but we also need to take wise risks. Risks that acknowledge God is in control, and I'm submitting this, God, into your hands. So decisions like, should I marry this person? It's great to hear about Samuel's wedding. Thankfully, he made that decision. Or maybe even just before that, should I go out with them? Maybe you just need to stop faffing about and speak and ask them. God's the boss. You keep waiting for the right time, you'll miss it.

[15 : 11] Or think about how we use our money. Beware the sin of greed. Jesus does warn so much about that. Beware of being like the rich fool who hoards all his money for himself. Hang loose to your possessions, to your money. Make wise risks. Give it away. Give it to the work of Jesus' kingdom. Maybe we need to give more. Are we hoarding money as a means to try and control and secure our life rather than trusting it to the maker of all things? See, godly wisdom means being godly risk-takers.

And so the best way, I think, though, the best way to apply this wisdom is to think about evangelism and the work that we do for the kingdom of Jesus. That's the labor that endures for eternity.

We had read to us the parable of the bags of gold, and in that parable, the good servants are those who have invested their lives into working for the king. And it's really interesting that when Jesus talks about the work of the kingdom, he says this in Mark 4, 26, the kingdom of God is like if a man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. It's quite similar to Ecclesiastes 11, 4 to 6. And it's the same principle.

When we tell others about Jesus, it works, even if we don't know how. Sometimes it produces a harvest that's plentiful. Sometimes it produces hostility. But at the end of the day, it's not down to you.

It's down to God, the maker. It's down to his sovereignty. And so whilst we need to be wise, and thinking about how we engage others with the gospel, we need to recognize that we can spend so much time waiting for the perfect moment to talk about Jesus that we never actually talk about Jesus.

[17 : 16] Sometimes we just need to just get on and sow the gospel seed. That's what Jesus calls us to do. We're sowers, not growers. So let me ask you, as I ask myself, what wise risks are we taking for Jesus?

Are you willing to take that risk and speak to your colleagues about Jesus or his reputation too important? Are you willing to maybe take that risk and maybe move house to an area that's not as nice as you would like to go or is comfort too precious to you? Are you willing to not get that job promotion so you can spend more time serving in the church or is career what defines you?

You know, often answers to these things, it's not a clear, that's a good choice, that's a bad choice, but wisdom is knowing what the right choice is to make in these situations. The motivation is always, what can I do for Jesus? What risks can I take for him? Don't make decisions on life primarily on what's good for you or where's nice to live or what's a good school for your kids, and those are really good things. Those are really good things, but the main thing is how can I serve Jesus? There is no such thing as safe, comfortable Christianity.

We're invested and working for a king who was crucified, and so life is too short and too frustrating to be standing, watching, staring at the clouds. Step out and take risks for Jesus.

First point, life is unpredictable, so take risks remembering God's in control. Second point from the teacher, life is good, so enjoy it when you can, remembering God is your judge.

[19 : 10] Life is good, so enjoy it when you can, remembering God is your judge. Teacher goes on to say in verse 7, light is sweet and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

So that's what life is like for the teacher. It's like a warm basket in the sun. It's good, it's a gift from God. That's why I get frustrated when people always think the teacher's this really downbeat, moody guy. He loves life. And he's saying, don't be blind to the goodness of this world when it's in front of you. However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all, but let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. Everything to come is just a breath.

You see, life for the preacher is a gift that has been given to us by God that we are to enjoy. And we are to enjoy it, always mindful that we are finite and our achievements are finite.

And so when life is good, if you're in a good season in life just now, he's saying enjoy it. There's nothing wrong with enjoying it. God loves joy. You who are young, be happy while you are young.

And let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see. When life feels good, enjoy it, make the most of it. And if you have a good understanding of who the God of the Bible is, then you'll be able to enjoy the good that God gives.

[20 : 45] Because everything that is good is a gift from him. And the way a Christian should enjoy life is different. It means, if anything, if anything, we should be enjoying life more because we know that it's transient. Our hope is not in the things of this world, but in the God who saved us. And therefore, we can enjoy them more because we don't make too much of them, but nor do we make too little of them.

You find that kind of balance when Jesus is our chief joy. As Peter says in 1 Peter 1 verse 8, though you have not seen Jesus, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with a joy that's inexpressible. And so, when Jesus is the chief joy, we can enjoy the good of this world without putting them in his place. So, it's good to gaze out in the beauty of creation, just as I was driving up in the sunshine, just praising God. Wow, it's wonderful.

Getting to enjoy looking at that. It's great to see his masterpiece. It's good to go for walks and to marvel at what God has made. It's good to enjoy good music, like Iron Maiden, or whatever tickles your fancy. It's good to enjoy good food. Honestly, praise God for barbecue ribs. Honestly, just for any pig-related food, I'm so glad we live in the new covenant. It's good to praise him for sports that we enjoy, for toffee fudgy-wudgy ice cream. And I'm not being irreverent. God is wonderfully, vibrant, kind, kind creator. He is not gray. He is not flat. He made the diversity and the beauty of creation.

We enjoy it, but we do so in a way that doesn't praise the created things, but gives praise to the creator. That's the difference in a Christian who enjoys this world and someone who's not a Christian who enjoys this world. And a monk who just locks himself away from the world is not being spiritual, but unbiblical. We pray and we give thanks to God for our family and for fun and food and friends. We give him all the glory. We don't give the things themselves the glory. We keep him as our priority and we follow the ways of our heart. Sports, music, these are ice cream. These are gifts that are to be enjoyed. And verse 10 says, the teacher says, get rid of your anxiety. Jesus tells us, don't worry about tomorrow, about what you will eat or drink, but seek first the kingdom of God and these things will be sorted. Don't spend your life constantly worrying so you just miss out on all the good that God has placed in front of you. Notice what he says in verse 9. Pursue joy, enjoy your life, but always do so mindful of the fact God is your judge.

The teacher in Ecclesiastes is always reminding us in his wisdom that we are creatures who are held to account by our creator. We are creatures and we are held to account by our creator. And so the good life must be lived mindful of the two fixed realities that every single one of us will face, death and judgment. Actually, some of us might not even die, but the one thing we will definitely face is judgment. And that doesn't squander enjoyment. Rather, that helps it, that directs it, because God knows what's best for us. And you know, I think the preacher is saying here, and I kind of had to get my head around this, I think the teacher is saying that if you fail to enjoy the good in life, then that's wrong and God will judge you on it, because he wants you to enjoy the good that he has given to you. David Gibson, who's a native here, I believe, has wrote an amazing book on Ecclesiastes. So there's one book on Ecclesiastes I would recommend. It's David Gibson's book,

[24 : 59] Living Life Backwards. But in that book, he writes about this verse and he states this, that no parent who buys their kid a toy wants to see it in a box hidden under the bed.

Real relationship involves another person taking pleasure in the gifts given. God is a good father. He enjoys giving gifts and he gives outrageous rewards to us who deserve nothing but judgment. Joy belongs to God, not to the devil. And look, this is not some selfish command of hedonism. This is not the teacher just saying, you do what's right for you, because when you enjoy life under God's rule, you share in God's joy. And that means, yes, we enjoy creation, but do you know what delighted Jesus more than anything else?

See, when we live under his rule, we share his joy. And do you know what Jesus enjoyed more than anything else when the lost were found? In fact, I think the only times in the gospels that talks about Jesus' joy is when it talks about salvation. And so it really ties into the first point, taking risks for Jesus and evangelism is actually part of how we enjoy life.

Christian joy is outward focused. And look, the teacher knows not every day is going to be great, not every day is going to be full of joy. Some of us are just maybe not in that place right now.

And he knows that. He says that the days of darkness will be many. But if the days are good, give thanks to him. When the dark days come, you will see that you have a good God who not only leads you to green pastures, but walks with you through Death's Dark Valley.

[26 : 49] So life is good. Enjoy it when you can. Remembering God is your judge. Third point, final point. Life is brief. So accept your mortality, remembering God your creator.

Life is brief. So accept your mortality, remembering God your creator. This is the final words of wisdom to the young Christian that the teacher writes to. Remember your creator.

Saying, don't be deluded, young people. Quite a lot of young people here this morning. Don't be deluded. Don't think you're going to live forever. Don't be a fool. You're not the king of the world. You're not the master of your own fate.

Don't be deluded, isn't it? And the teacher, the reason he uses the word creator rather than saying, remember God. He says creator because he's reminding you that you're a creation.

And he is the creator. And he is the one that we answer to. Remember your creator before it's too late. Remember who he is and who you are in relation to him. it's a message really to all but it's especially to the young honestly if you're a young person here today stick with Jesus now remember him and that is what will prepare you for what could happen later on in life my biggest regret in my teenage years was that I did not know Jesus and there's a tendency if you're young to think you're invincible and that you have your whole life ahead of you to do what you want but remember you have been made by God and for God you must remember it now because the days of trouble are on the horizon and if God grants that you should live long enough you will see them and there will come a time where it'll just seem too late honestly I found this that the hardest people in terms of age brackets to reach with the gospel are older people you'd think that if you were old and on death's door you'd be more open to discussing eternity it's not the case I had a 93 year old man in Charleston who wanted to have a square meal with me just because he found out I was a minister and he was 93 but he was big he could have taken me um now it's not always the case that's not always the case God's grace is so great that even the hardest heart can be transformed by it and maybe some of you here became a Christian later on in life but I guarantee that if that was you don't you wish that you'd remembered your creator in the days of your youth and what the teacher does now in in verse two to six as he closes with a beautiful poem to remind us of what's coming remember Jesus now remember him now because before you know it your body will one day deteriorate and then you will die just look at the poem right it's a poem about a house that kind of slowly gets more and more decrepit but it's also a metaphor to describe the aging process and so have a look see if you can work out what he's trying to say verse three the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop that's your knees giving way and your posture starts to bend over the grinder cease your teeth the windows growing dim it's your eyes verse four it's all about going death you get up early your voice starts to go verse five you start to become more afraid especially the frailer you get the almond tree blossoms you think that is it's your hair growing going gray those of you who are lucky enough to have hair when you're older you drag yourself along and then all your desires start to go and then you go to your eternal home and the people will mourn at your funeral and that is what will happen some of us here maybe can testify to that that is what's happening and the folly of our culture is that we try and ignore that because we're afraid of death because we have no answer to it and so it's the great taboo and we pretend that we don't age that's why we've got anti-aging cream and botox and just for men to try and undo what's inevitable and it seems so sad you can't stop the house getting run down by putting up some new curtains the teacher wants us to know every day we breathe is a gift from God life is precious that's why in verse six the teacher uses the metaphor of being like a silver cord or a golden bowl a precious thing that is so fragile and so easily broken

[31 : 55] it's a gift that God gives and death well according to verse seven death is when God takes that gift back he takes us back to him a breath says the teacher everything's just a breath look we're out of time but I just want to close by reminding you that of the two things that are going to happen to you in life you will die and you will be judged by your creator think back to what Jesus said in Matthew 25 that's where we had that parable read in the parable of the bags of gold he is the king who is coming back and he will judge us on how we have lived this mere breath of life that we have been given the good servants are those who use the gifts that God has given to them for him and for his kingdom the wicked servant is the one who uses these gifts to serve himself maybe the big risk that some of you need to take today is you need to follow Jesus you know you could have the perfect lifestyle you can have that perfect job you can get the kids you can get all the promotions you can have the perfect family it doesn't exist you can grow old and retire and have everything on that bucket list achieved but for what?

so that you can die and stand before the God who made you and be judged by him and cast away for all eternity come to Jesus and not only will he forgive you of all the wrong that you have done but he brings you into God's family and God is a wonderfully good and kind father and so if you do follow Jesus make your life an investment for him don't waste the time that God has given to you take risks for his kingdom enjoy his goodness and remember him and look towards that new creation that he has purchased for us to that time when the dark days will be gone forever when our foolish sinfulness will all be removed when death is gone and when the master will say well done good and faithful servant you have been faithful with a few things I will put you in charge of many things come now and share your master's happiness let's pray

Father our lives are just a breath we think we're going to live forever we want to achieve things that are just temporal and fleeting and yet in you there is substance and joy you are not some cold dictator you are the creator you are good and all joy and all goodness and all love flows from you yet Father we need to ask you for forgiveness because we are so daft that sometimes we just put all our hope on the things of this world and neglect the one who made it forgive us for when we enjoy the gifts more than the giver and help us to have you as our ultimate in life to invest our lives for you and for your kingdom to give our lives fully over to you Jesus may we forsake everything may we deny ourselves may we pick up our cross and may we follow this crucified king forgive us for our pursuit of this comfortable comfortable christianity that does not exist it's costly and it's hard but it's good and it's filled with joy help us please to make the best use of the time that we have help us to remember you our maker our judge our creator help us to remember that we are exiles this world's not home there is good stuff here but home is with you father I pray that we would just all work hard at doing what we can for you with the gift and with the time that you have given to us so we can hear those wonderful words that the master are to his servant that we have been given little we will be given much and we will share in his joy and happiness keep us as your vision as our vision we pray in Jesus name

Amen God bless ■ quero