

Making sense of Life

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[0 : 00] Well, I invite you to turn to the passage of Scripture in Ecclesiastes 12 that was read for us. And as you're turning there, may I say again, but with greater vehemence, what I said this morning that I counted a privilege to be invited to come here to this place at this time and to this church and to this pulpit and to be welcomed so warmly and so generously by the leadership here and by the minister's family and particularly his wife and her cooking.

I will certainly be taking away something of Stornoway with me on the plane tomorrow, carrying it concealed, but nevertheless the beneficiary of it.

And I'm very, very thrilled and delighted. Before we turn to the Bible, we turn to God and we pause and ask for his help as we study it. Make the book live to me, O Lord.

Show me yourself within your word. Show me myself and show me my Savior. And make the book live to me.

For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen. We're going to think for our time together this evening in light of Ecclesiastes 12 here, quite simply about making sense of life.

[1 : 35] Making sense of life. Every person on this island, indeed every person in the world, has a view of life. Whether they articulate it or not.

Whether they are able to ponder it fully. Nevertheless, at some point in their day, and often in the middle of the night, they will be up against foundational questions.

Such as, where did I come from? What am I doing? Where am I going? And does any of it matter? The notion that is abroad is that somehow or another, people who believe Jesus, who love the Bible, who are committed to its truth, have somehow come to this position as a result of removing their heads, putting them under the pew, and then taking some blind leap into oblivion, which now secures them in the journey of their lives.

Many people have rejected Christianity, not as a result of having considered the claims of Christianity and found them wanting, but have rejected Christianity without ever considering its claims.

[3 : 01] And an increasing number of those people do not wander the corridors of our churches, but they rub shoulders with us every day we live our lives.

They are, in short, our friends, our neighbors, and in certain cases they are our family members. And it is therefore incumbent upon us, if we are to seek, to be ready to give an answer to us who ask a reason for the hope that we have, to be able ourselves to go to the Bible and from the Bible to say, here is the view of the world which the Bible provides for us.

It's C.S. Lewis who said, I believe in Christianity as I believe in the rising of the sun, not simply because I can see it, but because by it I can see everything else.

In other words, this experience of being in Christ changes absolutely everything. My view of life itself, my anticipation of death, human relationships, the execution of business, the pursuit of leisure time, everything is covered by that.

And the Bible is comprehensive in its treatment of these things. In contrast to C.S. Lewis, Einstein in his credo in 1932, wrote as follows, Our situation on this earth seems strange.

[4 : 31] Every one of us appears here involuntarily and uninvited for a short stay without knowing the whys and the wherefores.

That's a fairly distinct contrast between Einstein on the one hand. Einstein incidentally who said, I've discovered that the men who know the most are the most gloomy because they are clever enough to see to the end of their position.

And if they do not have an answer for the end of the journey, then they know that their journey is tenuous. And some of you are here tonight and you may well be included in that group.

You may be the product of a university education where despite your upbringing, grounded in the truths of the gospel, instructed in the verities of the Bible, you succumbed to the views of people like Bertrand Russell who suggested that it is only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair that the soul's habitation can be built.

And for whatever reason, you may have said, now there is a good motto for my life. And out you've gone from there. But if you've brushed up against the gospel lately, if your grandchildren have been singing songs from Sunday school, if you've stood at the graveside of a friend, if you have confronted your own mortality as a result of a diagnosis, then you may well be saying to yourself, I wonder, do I really have an answer to these questions of life?

[6 : 08] There are four that are before us in the chapter and I'm going to address them. I'm not going to do so exhaustively, but selectively. The non-exhaustive element of it, I hope, will be an encouragement to the young people and the selective nature of it will be sufficient for those of you who are deep students to go back and fill in the blanks for yourself.

But first of all, the issue is the issue of origins or personal identity. Origins or personal identity. One of the questions that confronts us all is the question of who we are.

And people answer that in different ways. The writer here in Ecclesiastes, in the early chapters, has gone down various dead-end streets. He's gone down the street of unabandoned pleasure.

He's gone down the street of intellectual acumen. He's gone down the street of acquisitiveness and so on. And in it all, he's asking the question, is it down this road that I'm able to explain who I am?

And so people think of themselves in that way. I am what I believe. I am what I possess. I am where I live. I am where I have been schooled, or whatever it might be.

[7 : 27] And as a result, we have bred an entire generation, at least one, who have grown up believing that they are simply a collection of molecules held in suspension.

That they are a product of time plus chance. And if they are pressed concerning where they came from and whether it has significance, they have virtually nowhere to go.

The writer of Ecclesiastes challenges this and takes it head on. Notice what he says. I'm in calling you, he says, to remember also your creator in the days of your youth.

He's unashamed. He knows that the whole origin of things begins as our Bible gives it to us, in the beginning, God. He's already said in chapter 3 and verse 11 that God has set eternity in the hearts of men and women so that they might know the things that God has done.

He has already suggested that it would be far better to go to a funeral than to go to a party because, he says, death is the destiny of every man and therefore the living must take this to heart.

[8 : 39] He's laying out his case in the same way, interestingly, that you have the Apostle Paul doing when he's invited to address the intelligent people in Athens.

And on that occasion when they summon him and give him an opportunity to address them concerning his own beliefs which they regarded as being strange, they said, what is this babbling trying to say?

He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities. This was because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection and they thought that this was a male and a female deity and so they said, well, why don't we get him up and let him speak for himself and when he gets the opportunity to speak, remember, he's not rude, he's not bombastic, he identifies with the people in terms of their religious roots and their interest in idols and so on and he says, I notice that you have an altar with this inscription to the unknown God, what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

And then where does he go? Immediately to the doctrine of creation. The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in temples made by hands, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And when a man or a woman starts to ask the foundational questions of life, it behoves us as Bible-believing people to tell them that they were personally created, to tell them that God has fashioned them in their mother's womb, to tell them that before there was time, before there was anything, there was God, to challenge the presuppositions of the early 21st century in Western culture and to do so in a way that is both unashamed and is kind and is sensitive and is authentic.

[10 : 44] Much of the problem lies in the lack of conviction in the hearts and minds of those who profess to be the Bible students, who profess to be the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

No, you need to know this. If I am not a moral being made in the image of God to whom I am accountable, then who am I?

And of course that is the question. The creation into which we have been set is flawed. Life is unsatisfactory because we have this strange paradox where we have all of the dignity as being made in the image of God and all of the flawedness as a result of our human depravity.

And I don't know about you, but when I talk with people, I find that if you are sensitive at all, if you're engaging, if you are able to employ humor, you may be able to get them to think along these lines in terms of who and what they are.

and the questions of human identity and the sense of alienation that marks so much of our culture are represented in contemporary song, in contemporary literature, in contemporary film.

[12 : 08] And those of us who were born in a certain era haven't quoted a contemporary song for a long time, but we still believe that the work of Paul Simon in the 60s was some good work.

And so when he spoke of alienation, he spoke to the issues of the day. And he describes them, remember, in one famous song, all going off looking for America. Kathy, I'm lost, he said, though I knew she was sleeping.

I'm empty and aching and I don't know why. Counting the cars on the New Jersey turnpike, we've all gone to look for America.

And when they found it, it wasn't really there. Well, they're all on the M8 in Glasgow. They're all on the M74 heading south. They pass us in the car every day.

And they're asking the question when they ask it, what am I doing and where did I come from? Well, the answer is unequivocal. Secondly, it addresses the question not only of our human identity, but the question, the fact of life's brevity or human frailty.

[13 : 22] And this comes out here in a wonderful way in what is essentially a poem and it is expressive of our creatureliness. Nothing confronts us with our creatureliness more than the watch on your wrist.

This is the indication to us that we are creatures more than anything else. The first time I came here it was in 1983. 1983 is quite a long time ago now.

If in 1983 I was 31, then I must be 58. Did the time pass so quickly? When I get older losing my hair many years from now, would you still send me a Valentine?

That was Paul McCartney. Well, he knows the answer to that now, doesn't he? Because he's passed his number. And the frailty of life is something that men and women don't want to face.

That's why the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Herald and all of the rest of them are all full of information about how you can live forever. How you can look like you're going to live forever even if you're not going to live forever.

[14 : 35] Why are people so interested in this? because our human frame confronts us with the reality that we are on the way out. Human frailty. Look at the pictures that are given.

You don't need me to work through them all. You're a good group. You're a sensible group. But they're addressing the very fact of the ephemeral nature of our lives. The purpose of our existence. Our longings for things.

Remember your Creator before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say I have no pleasure in them. In other words when you can no longer do what you once loved to do even though you would still like to do it.

When the gap between your head and your feet is so significant that you still think you're a great football player but you can't even keep up with yourself. And you realize when you get out of your car that you'd never once got out of your car like that before.

What happened to my knees? Or when you jump down from a two foot wall and you find that your shock absorbers have gone in your knees and you say to yourself how did this happen? And what's the future going to hold?

[15 : 41] And why am I now in the chemist shop going up aisles that I never ever considered that were of significance to me? When you're young and you go in the chemists there's nothing in there you really want.

There's nothing in there you really need. But then the day comes when you're going up there asking for things you're embarrassed even to ask for. Why? Because of what he tells us here.

He says you better get this sorted out before these days come. And what he's giving to us in verses 3 and 4 and 5 is a picture of decay. He's giving us a foretaste of our future.

Young people are here tonight and they're saying oh that will never happen to me and I understand that perfectly but I'm going to tell you it will. It will and it'll happen sooner than you know. The

dawning realization that the keepers our hands are no longer as strong and as firm as they once were.

They begin to shake when the keepers of the house tremble. I always remember my grandmother gave her a cup of tea it was a very tenuous moment. Whether how much of the tea she would actually consume and how much of the tea would end up in the saucer.

[16:51] Why? Simply because her hand trembled. I remember in the Sunday night services holding my father's Bible with him or holding the hymn book with him and not being able to hold the hymn book steady and wondering what is it that makes your hand tremble like that?

Will my hand ever tremble like that? Before your hands begin to tremble. Before your strong men are bent. Before your legs begin to stoop.

Before your grinders cease. Some of you might be dentists here. This is a description of inadequate occlusion. When you have got less on the top than you have on the bottom. And therefore you have to start eating things a little differently than you did before.

When the doors are closed. When those looking through the windows are dim. When you're going there saying to yourself can somebody read this or where did I leave my glasses? When you're saying pardon all the time and your grandson says well why don't you get a hearing aid?

And you say because I don't need one. When you're fearful of heights which came on you out of the blue. When suddenly you don't like to go to Ibrox because you get jostled in the crowd.

[17:59] You never worried about being jostled in the crowd before. When you've grown white haired and people saw you looking walking along in Stornoway and they thought you looked like a grasshopper.

It's not very nice is it? But that's the picture here. When the almond tree blossom and the grasshopper drives itself along and desire fails. Why? Notice because man is going to his eternal home and the mourners go about in the streets.

Now you notice the absolute straightforward acknowledgement of the author here. In contrast to the attempts in contemporary culture to manipulate and control time.

I don't know how many of the dreadful American television programs make it here in Scotland.

Hopefully not too many of them. But I would imagine that programs like Lost or 24 Hours cross the Atlantic.

And if you've given attention to either of those programs then you know that one of the preoccupations is a preoccupation with time itself. and an attempt at least in an artistic framework to control time or to suggest that we may be able to manipulate time to our own benefit.

[19:21] This must inevitably come from a world view that starts without a God who created time. Time is not a human invention. Time God created.

He stands outside of time. Man in his creatureliness rejects the authority of a God who controls time. Therefore one of the ways we try and deal with it is our attempts to control time.

And most classically in the last few years you have it in the film Avatar which was set in 2154. And the whole fundamental ethos of it is that we as human beings if we just do certain things we will be able to create the wonderful world of Louis Armstrong the peculiar togetherness of Michael Jackson a paradise Pandora in the film.

What is it about? It's about men and women's rejection of God's analysis of their circumstances and humanity's attempt to play the place of divinity.

humanity. That's why people long to be able to turn back time. If I could only turn back time. If I could only have a second chance.

[20:45] If I could only have a new beginning. But time and tide waits for no man. And it is highly unlikely if 27 more years were to elapse before I should ever be given the opportunity to return to this island.

It's highly unlikely that I would be around to accept the invitation. And highly unlikely that a significant number of those who listen to me now would ever be present to experience that night. The Bible doesn't address this out of a sense of morbidity. The Bible does not confront us with this in order to unsettle us except to unsettle us enough to turn us to the God who made us who has revealed himself in his world who has established his truth in his word who has given to us in the person of his son the Lord Jesus Christ the atoning answer for all of our rebellion and for all of our inferior gods and for all our attempts to control our existence.

And the writer here makes it absolutely clear not only the matter of our beginnings and our identity not only the question of frailty but also thirdly and in a way that our generation doesn't like to think about it also he confronts us with the reality of death with the reality of death before the silver cord is snapped I spoke with one of my friends just this week he said his dad had had a fall he was 83 years old his dad had fallen I spoke to him on Friday and his dad had gone home and what had happened was his spinal cord had been severed in the fall and he was immediately finished that's the picture there before the silver cord is snapped or the golden bowl is broken or the picture is shattered at the fountain or the wheel is broken at the cistern and the dust returns to earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who made it men and women do not want to face the fact that we are as fragile as earthenware that we're just absolutely transient that our lives are so quickly done away they're faster than a weaver's shuttle they're like the morning mist that you can see over the water here and then suddenly it's gone gone in a moment men and women don't want to face this why because they have no answer because they don't know where they came from and they have no clue where they're going and they ride on the bus with you so if we don't tell them if we don't explain what the bible says we at least have an opportunity to give an answer for this people say well I don't even know how this comes about why is it that life is the way that it is well then we'll just read to them from genesis 2 you must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat of it you will surely die and just a sin enter the world through one man

Romans 5 and death by sin in this way death came to all men because all have sinned death but America better than any place I've ever visited has become masterful at covering up death the way in which death is dealt with in America is bizarre to say the least and it is essentially one gigantic cover up one massive attempt to deny the reality of it but death is the destiny of everyone and therefore says the writer I want to remind you of it now while you're still alive so that you do something about it have you done something about it are you ready to face God I am old enough now to remember when in Glasgow they changed the intersections at the traffic lines and they came up with a plan to paint a large cross sectioned yellow box at the crossroad intersections in the traffic lines because of the way in which the traffic was moving through

[25 : 27] Glasgow all of the intersections were getting jammed up and so they put this box and they put signs at each corner and the sign said do not enter the box until your exit is clear this is a preacher's gem isn't it one day they're going to put you in a box do not enter the box until your exit is clear that's what the writers say we have trivialized the gospel message appealing to people's felt needs saying to them you know if you want purpose in your life or if you want joy in your life or if whatever it is you want in your life and many of our friends have got about as much purpose and joy as you could ever hope for would you like fulfillment they say bringing out their diary I'll show you fulfillment and after we finished all of those attempts at the felt need we're left just simply sucking our thumbs because we don't know what to say that's why we have to say what the

Bible says here's the story God has made you you are fearfully and wonderfully made you are possessed of a dignity made in the image of God but you're depraved because you've turned your back on God you fill your life with substitute gods that can never satisfy stuff sex significance and so on they will always leave you empty God in his mercy has you winding down your shelf life is limited like a bottle of milk in the co-op you can't drink it forever and you won't be around forever too the Bible says this and you should be able to know this because if you looked yourself in the mirror recently you might say to one of your friends not to his wife but just to him you could say and he would be honest enough to tell you yes he wears a t-shirt when he shaves because he has a furniture problem because his chest has dropped down into his drawers and he just cannot he cannot abide the fact that he faces this well we can speak to him concerning that there's a reason for this we're not spinning helplessly in space this is what God has planned and this is what he's done he's entered into time in the person of his son who has taken the burden of all of our sins who has died in our place who didn't come as an example he didn't come as a martyr he came as a substitute he came to take into himself all that mars our lives and puts us in the wrong with God and if you will come and trust in this Christ then you too placed into him will enjoy life that is truly life and on the day that you die you will be more alive than you were ever in your entire life and on the cross of Christ

God has manifested this truth to us in a way that is unassailable and our friends will say I never heard anything as ridiculous in all of my life are you asking me to believe that the death of a Galilean carpenter sometime 2000 years ago is not simply a significant theological notion but it's

the pivotal event of human history and the answer is yes I am that's exactly what I'm asking you to believe but the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those who are being saved it is the power of God well you say it's a lovely evening and it's been a beautiful day and we brought you all the way here and now on the sabbath day evening you're telling us about the certainty of judgment yes I am telling you about the certainty of judgment when I went to school and I went in the class there was only one question I had when I went in the class you might know it excuse me miss is there an exam at the end of this because that made all the difference in the world if she said no there's no exam then it entirely changed the way I did the class now I'm sure that's not true of you because you would be a good student maybe even a scholar but for someone like me oh it was liberation there's nothing that comes at the end therefore it doesn't matter is there something that comes at the end yes there is an appointment with God the God who made us the end of the matter has all been heard fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man for God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing whether good or evil this answers the question of futility if God cares this much about putting things to right nothing can be pointless this also tells us the nature of what it means to fear God it's a call that puts us in our place says

Derek Kidner and all of our hopes and all of our fears and all of our admirations in their place it's what Jesus said in Luke chapter 12 it's recorded to the large crowd that was present I tell you friends do not be afraid of those who kill the body but be afraid of the one who can cast your soul into hell what a striking thing to say and on that occasion there was a large large crowd gathered they're not identified we're just told that it would be made up of all the people that you would find in that kind of framework lovers and friends and parents and children and crooks and vagabonds and people working deals on the side and just all of humanity and they would be listening and watching and listening and perhaps just picking up this notion don't be afraid of him who kills the body and some of them would be very afraid of someone who would kill their body but be afraid of him who when you have died may cast your soul into hell now I wonder and I cannot verify this and we will settle it some other day but I have often wondered to myself whether one particular criminal was there to hear that statement made by Jesus that day don't be afraid do not fear those who kill the body but fear him and you know the criminal to whom I refer for when

Jesus hangs upon the cross in between two criminals one assails him and the other one finally says to his friend don't you fear God don't you fear God we are getting justly what we deserve but this man has done nothing wrong and somehow in the mystery of God's providence and grace the lights were turned on for that chap and he turned to Christ and said Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom and Jesus said today you will be with me in paradise the hymn writer put it the dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day and there may I though vile as he wash all my sins away you see to fear

[32 : 56] God is a fear which emerges from the love of God have you thought that out that you fear God when you discover God's love for you in all of your sin and your weakness you fear God when you realize that he knows me thoroughly that he means to destroy everything that is sinful in me and yet he does so because he loves me with an intensely faithful love and when Paul articulates this in 2 Corinthians 5 he says that he who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him he was not counting their sins against them he doesn't say he was not counting their sins you read it for yourself in 2 Corinthians 5 he was not counting their sins against them why because he was counting their sins against him and so he said we beseech you on Christ's behalf be reconciled to God the fear that the writer here addresses is a fear that is only known by

God's children it's a fear again in Newton's hymn it was grace that taught my heart of fear and grace my fear relieved how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed let me finish in this way first of all with a word to those of us who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who are if you like terminology here communicant members of the church I have a word of exhortation for you that is to be bold to be kind to be diligently looking for opportunities to say to your friends and neighbors I beseech you I entreat you on Christ's behalf look to him and receive the reconciliation he has provided in the cross the world the media has us on our back foot

God has pressed in a corner university students frightened to articulate the doctrine of creation businessmen unprepared to risk the implications of being known as one of these sold out followers of Jesus Christ ladies in everyday conversation hiding their light under a bushel contenting

themselves with going through their own religious exercises important and vital as they are but if the gospel is to pulse through Lewis in the way that it has done in years past it will not happen in a vacuum the means that God chooses to use is his people people who are able to say I would love to talk with you about making sense of life here are the facts our beginnings the transient nature of our lives the certainty of death and the reality of judgment that makes the discussion far more serious far more significant far less trivial

I commend you to this and finally I want to say a word to some who are here tonight and as I said this morning you have never put on you have never put on Christ you may be here with your folks with a loved one with your spouse and you're as well versed in these things as anybody on the island and I'll tell you what you are you're an unconverted believer you believe but you're not converted you're not adopted into God's family the spirit of God does not dwell in you and I want to say to you tonight that today is a day of salvation and tonight is the best night in your entire life to this point for you to lay down the arm of your rebellion and lay hold of the gracious gift of salvation in the person of

Jesus Christ Christ James and I were reminiscing over the couple of days we've enjoyed together telling stories about different folks that we know and anecdotes and I was trying to tell him that I knew a few free church ministers and we fastened on one who would be known here and I was saying that he had given me some of my best illustrations over time and that we started on one or two and this came from him and with this I finish and the scene is the funeral procession of Dr. David Livingston the missionary explorer from Blantyre just outside of Glanscow he's buried in Westminster Abbey as you will know and on the occasion of his funeral it was a state occasion and he was taken down the mall in London and finally to his resting place the vast crowd gathered on the day it's reported various people were standing because of the significance of the man and one gentleman found himself standing next to a very disheveled fellow someone who had actually been living on the street and as the funeral procession came by this man this street dweller took off his hat and held it across his chest and as the coffin went by he said you were right

[39 : 28] Davy you were right and as it moved away he said it again you were right Davy you were right and as the crowd began to break up and part the gentleman who'd been standing in proximity to this man and heard him said excuse me he said I couldn't help but overhear what you were saying why did you say that well he said David Livingston and I grew up in Blantyre together we went to the same Sunday school we heard the same story about Jesus and on a Sunday afternoon our Sunday school teacher confronted us with the claims of Jesus set before us a crossroads told us about the difference and urged us to embrace Christ David knelt down and did I walked out never to come back he goes to

Westminster Abbey I stand here a disheveled mess you were right Davy you were right and that pales in insignificance to the bar of God's judgment when having heard so clearly the wonderful story we would be forced to stand and say you know the minister was right he was right but by then there will be no second chance so I beseech you tell the story if you know it embrace the story if you don't let us pray before the heavens in order stood or earth received her frame from everlasting you are God to endless years the same a thousand days in your sight like a day gone by what is our life it's like a vapor that appears for a wee while and then vanishes and all that you've given to us in your mercy and grace is the moments that we now enjoy and we pray that far beyond the voice of a mere man we might hear your voice calling us to repentance and to faith to childlike trust in your son the Lord

Jesus Christ and calling us to rise to our feet to go out and make known this glorious news so that others believing might have their feet placed on a rock they're going established and may come to sing the psalms with us and in singing give voice to the reality of their hearts because of your goodness and grace and redeeming love hear our prayers oh God and let the silent cries of our heart come to you for Jesus sake we ask it amen thank you