

Death

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 December 2019

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Today's reading is taken from Ecclesiastes chapter 11, starting at verse 7 and reading until the end of chapter 12, which can be found on page 674 of the Church Bibles.

Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all. But let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Remember also your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near, of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.

Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain. In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut.

[1 : 20] When the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low. They are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way.

The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.

Besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

The preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed to the collected sayings.

They are given by one shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

[2 : 37] The end of the matter. All has 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.

Laura, thanks for reading. Do please keep Ecclesiastes open. The eagle-eyed will notice that we're missing out most of, well, all of Chapter 10 and most of Chapter 11, and that's simply because when I was planning this series back in the summer, I thought I could probably do it in eight.

I think probably on reflection we need nine weeks for it. So I apologize for that, and we're just doing the last bit this morning. I guess most of us have had that IKEA furniture experience.

You know how it is. You kind of, everything's designed to look perfect, isn't it, when you wander around IKEA, so it looks perfect. But then half a day later and several hours later, it all looks rather different at home.

And there's the bit that's left over. There's the drawer that doesn't quite fit. There's the bulgy bit at the back. And then there's the other bit that's missing.

[3 : 58] And, you know, you kind of find yourself thinking, have I got the instructions the right way around? Or did I sort of miss out a stage? Did I get the arrows? You know, could I kind of follow the arrows properly? And then, of course, at some stage, you can be absolutely guaranteed that the armchair expert will wander over and tell you what needs to be done.

And sometimes that is helpful. And sometimes, frankly, it is extremely irritating. Amen. Well, we've seen throughout this series in Ecclesiastes, in a sense, that is a picture of what our world is like.

It's a world where everything is tainted by sin. It is a world which is groaning, a world under the judgment of God, a world where nothing is as it should be, a world in which things simply don't work out, and there's no one who can fix it.

And, of course, on top of that, there's no shortage. There's no shortage of armchair experts who think they know the answers. Ecclesiastes, the preacher of Ecclesiastes, describes life as it really is, not the sort of parallel universe, as it were, of the advertising industry, where, you know, that mobile phone is going to revolutionize your life, that new car is going to increase your sex appeal, and that wrinkle cream will make you look and feel 21 again.

Nor the parallel universe of the election manifesto, vote for us and we will fix it. Know that a preacher addresses life as it really is, whether we're here this morning as a Christian believer, or whether we're skeptical, or whether we are looking in on the Christian faith.

[5 : 41] And in this final section of the book, he gives us three keys to living in a world where everything is vanity. And I put them there on the back of the service sheet.

Firstly, remember your creator. Now, the description of old age in chapter 12, verses 1 to 7, it is one of the best-known parts of the book, and it is almost haunting in its beauty.

But before we get there, I want us just to think for a moment about why it's there. Have a look at 11, verse 8 to chapter 12, verse 1.

So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all. But let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.

Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment. Remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body for youth and the dawn of life of vanity.

[6 : 51] Remember also your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near, of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.

I wonder if you can see what he's saying. He's not simply saying, remember there's a God out there somewhere. He's saying, commit to him.

Serve him. Do so today while you can. Because, verse 8, the days of darkness will be many, life is short.

Because, verse 10, youthfulness and energy are soon gone. Because, chapter 12, verse 1, old age and death will soon have each one of us.

It's hard, isn't it, to think about death. Perhaps especially for those who are younger. The words death and old age don't really mean very much as we kind of think of our lives stretching ahead of us, endless possibilities.

[7 : 58] It's easy to think of ourselves, well, not ourselves, but those who are younger, perhaps, as being almost immortal. So let's not make the mistake of what the preacher of Ecclesiastes is saying to us when we are younger.

He's not saying, like a sort of grumpy old man, he's not saying, yes, you're young now, but you will be old one day. I don't think he's quite saying that. Rather, he's saying, you're young.

So how would you live your life as it stretches out ahead of you? How would you live your life? In other words, he wants us to focus our minds, all of us, whether we are young or older.

I was reading the other day about a 21-year-old whose life had been cut short by a particularly nasty cancer. And as the coffin was lowered, one of her friends was heard to whisper very quietly under her breath, is this it?

Is this all there is? And the journalist who ever heard the comment wrote, there is nothing like death for focusing the mind on the purpose of life.

[9 : 17] So let's think about old age and death. Chapter 12, verse 1, there's the joylessness of old age, the days of which you'll say, I have no pleasure in them.

In verse 2, there's the bleakness of old age, when the lights go out and hopes fade, before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain.

You expect clouds to clear, don't you? Once there's been the rainstorm, you expect there might be some blue sky behind, but instead just more clouds.

A picture of hopelessness as one illness follows another with no expectation of recovery. And then verse 3, possibly a picture of the human body like a house gradually decaying and falling into ruin.

The keepers, perhaps they're the arms, the strong men, the legs, the grinders, the teeth, and the windows, the eyes. And then verses 4 and 5, the way people react to old age.

[10:26] The doors are shut as they withdraw from the outside world. The sound of grinding is low as activity levels slow down. And sleep is erratic as they wake up even with a dawn chorus.

Sounds grow faint as the hearing fails. Afraid of heights, afraid to grow out, a growing sense of isolation from the world around.

And then three pictures of old age. In verse 5, the almond tree blossoming. That seems to be a picture of hair that turns grey. And then white, happens to some earlier than others.

Or the grasshopper, normally so sprightly, dragging its weary body along behind it, rather like an old man, perhaps on his Zimmer frame. And then desire, most probably sexual desire, fails.

And then verse 6 describes death itself. The silver cord is snapped, the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

[11:35] The silver thread, which perhaps holds a beautiful golden bowl with candles in it, is snapped, the bowl is broken, the light goes out. And then the pitcher that's shattered, the wheel in the cistern that's broken, there's no access to water.

Light and water, the two necessities of life. No more. And in case we find it hard to imagine that this will ever be us, verse 7 reminds us that death comes to everyone.

It is part of God's judgment on sin, just as the Lord God said to Adam and Eve, just before banishing them from the Garden of Eden, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

We're right back in the heartbeat of Ecclesiastes. What it's like to live in a fallen world where men and women have turned their backs on God. Death is a reality.

Everything is ruined. Everything distorted by sin. Back in October, Leah Bracknell, one of the long-standing stars of the soap opera Emmerdale Farm, died and she was just 55 years old.

[12:53] She'd been diagnosed with cancer in 2016. In a blog, she wrote of her efforts to remain positive. But earlier this year, she revealed that having a terminal diagnosis left her feeling trapped in a cage.

This is what she wrote. If only you could find the door and step out to freedom and live life as it was before. If only you could wake from the nightmare, dawn breaks and you realize that it is all just a bad dream and life is wonderfully normal again.

death is the destiny of all of us. And it will come far sooner than any of us imagine because life is so brief.

Verse 8, vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity. In the words of Terry Pratchett, writing in the Times, inside every old person is a young person wondering what happens.

Where did my life go? It all happened so quickly. Remember your creator. Now I guess there's certainly an obvious application here for those of us this morning who have not put our trust in Jesus Christ.

[14:20] Do so before it's too late. The preacher knows full well that humanly speaking, that becomes less likely the older we get.

Deathbed conversions are rare things indeed because old age, as we see here, old age is not a time for radical new departures. It is a time for turning in on ourselves instead.

So please don't fool yourself if that is you into thinking that it would be easier to follow Jesus when you are older and that you might begin to do it then.

No, there will never be an easier time to begin to follow Jesus than today. But I guess the primary application is for those of us who are followers of Jesus.

Remember your creator. Do you remember how a couple of weeks ago we thought, didn't we, about living life backwards? Well, this is what it looks like. Serve Jesus today.

[15:27] As one writer says of these verses, putting one foot in the grave is the way to plant the other on the path of life. I am to let death preach to me so that I use life well today.

In other words, you see, I mustn't kid myself that tomorrow is going to be a better day to serve Jesus wholeheartedly than today is. I wonder how we might be tempted to finish this sentence. I'll serve Jesus wholeheartedly when... dot, dot, dot. I wonder what your dot, dot, dot would be in that sentence.

Perhaps once I've left school. Perhaps once I've got that promotion. Or I'm through this particularly busy period of life. or I've reduced my hours at work.

Or perhaps once I've retired. No, we are kidding ourselves if we think that tomorrow is going to be a better day to serve Jesus wholeheartedly than today is.

[16:37] Because, you see, tomorrow I am one day closer to dust than I am today. Remember your creator.

Secondly, listen to your shepherd. Verses 9 and 10. Besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The preacher sought to find words of delight and uprightly he wrote words of truth. Now, the preacher here is describing how the book of Ecclesiastes as well, of course, as the rest of the Bible as a whole came to be written.

Notice it's both a human process and a God process, a divine process. It's a human process. Verse 9, the preacher is saying he's worked hard, weighing, studying, arranging many proverbs with great care.

Rather like Luke at the beginning of Luke's gospel as he tells us he's done his research carefully, he's spoken to eyewitnesses, he's written an orderly account.

[17:43] But verse 11, it's also a divine process, a God process. These are not just the words of the preacher, they are the words of the shepherd of God himself.

In other words, these two verses describe for us brilliantly what is known as the inspiration of scripture, that each book of the Bible has two authors, every part of the Bible has two authors. There's the human author and there is God himself. It's just what the apostle Peter writes about of scripture in 2 Peter chapter 1 which I've put on the outline.

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. As such, of course, the words of the Bible are uniquely authoritative and they are powerfully effective as the two pictures in verse 11 demonstrate.

The words of the wise are like goads and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings. They are given by one shepherd. They're like goads, a stick which you might have if you're a shepherd with a sharp point on the end which you can use to prod and steer your animals to go the right way.

[19:15] A vivid picture I guess of what the Bible does as God teaches us, corrects us and rebukes us and trains us through his word guiding us in the right direction.

And also verse 11 like nails firmly fixed. The words of the Bible are dependable. They are trustworthy. Nails which aren't simply strong enough to hang your coat on but strong enough to hang your life on.

But why are these words here at the end of Ecclesiastes? Well I wonder if the key is verse 12. My son beware of anything beyond these.

Of making many books there is no end and much study is awareness of the flesh. The contrast you see between God's words that explains how the world is, that is so trustworthy and dependable and the myriad other words the books, the blogs, the spiritualities, the life coaches, the gurus who we are so easily tempted to follow.

Just as when you're having that IKEA furniture experience and you're thinking to yourself it wasn't meant to be like this. Well what do you do? You either listen to the armchair expert or you go back to the maker's instructions.

[20:42] So I wonder where God has been goading us, where God has been goading you through the autumn as we've been looking at Ecclesiastes.

Perhaps for some it's been to say no to work for once and actually spend time with our families or get to growth group. Or perhaps it's been to rip up your retirement planning rather than putting your feet up going instead you're thinking to yourself yeah I want to invest my retirement in gospel service as far as I can because that is the one thing that is not in vain.

Perhaps it's by changing your inheritance planning because actually you realise that your kids may well use it very unwisely and you're not going to leave it all to them.

Or perhaps like me you've been goaded to take a long hard look at life and not simply kind of ploughing forwards from one thing to the next to the next but instead living life backwards from the end point of death seeing what's important seeing what's significant thinking what kind of person do I want to be.

Just listen to these words written about old age by the 19th century pastor James Miller of Scott he wrote this old age is the harvest of all the years that have gone before it is the barn into which all the sheaves are gathered it is the sea into which all the rills and rivers of life flow from their springs

in the hills and valleys of youth and manhood we are in all our earlier years building the house in which we have to live when we grow old.

[22 : 36] I wonder what metaphorically speaking is the house you are building for when you grow old. If today we are living for success in this world then that is the house at which in a sense we will inhabit in old age will gradually decay and all the trappings of success will fail us.

If today we are living for leisure and that is the house so to speak that we are building that is where we will be living in old age and again that will gradually fall into ruin as life becomes harder and harder whereas if today we are living for the Lord Jesus seeking to serve him wholeheartedly in all we do then that is the house we will inhabit in old age and whether or not we listen to God's word the Bible and take it to heart determines the houses we live in.

One of the things about belonging to the same church for a number of years is that we can watch each other as we build our metaphorical houses so to speak.

There's the joy of seeing those who respond to the goading of the Bible who take it to heart who build their house their lives on the gospel and yet there's also the pain of those who don't the pain of those who don't heed the goads who seem stuck in the patterns they've always seemed to be stuck in who seem wedded to the same priorities they always seem to have been wedded to listen to your shepherd thirdly fear your judge verse 13 the end of the matter all has been heard fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man to fear God is the beginning of wisdom to fear God is to treat God as God in New Testament terms to fear

God is to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ and this is the whole of man the word duty doesn't actually appear in the original in other words this is simply what it means to be human we are made first and foremost to be in right relationship with God he is the creator we are his creatures he is the shepherd we are his sheep he is the judge we are accountable to him indeed the Lord Jesus describes himself in all three terms the new testament tells us he is the creator he is the shepherd he is the judge it's why knowing Jesus and belonging to Jesus is to know God and to belong to God which means that at the very heart of being human is not achieving the right grades or university or job it's not a winning the Olympic gold it's not living for pleasure or amassing learning and education but trusting in him trusting in the

[26 : 07] Lord Jesus Christ living in right relationship with him if we ignore that basic reality then we are running from reality but perhaps you're thinking why does Ecclesiastes finish with verse 14 for God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing whether good or evil I take it he finishes like this because in a world where everything is so short and fleeting here is the one thing that stops everything being vanity and gives significance to life and that is the judgment day and wonderfully as those who live after the resurrection of Jesus Christ we can be even more certain of that future day as the apostle Paul says in that reading which we had earlier from 2 Corinthians chapter 5 for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body whether good or evil the return of the

Lord Jesus in judgment means that everything matters everything matters so often Jesus speaks about the smallest things that matter he spoke about the idle word the death of a sparrow the number of hairs on a head a cup of cold water that's given the repentance of one sinner because for him everything matters each one is noticed he cares about the details of our lives each one he cares about the good deed that's been ignored in this world the kind word that's been harshly dismissed all be acknowledged on the final day and evil and wickedness will be punished can you see how Ecclesiastes finishes it finishes really by doing what it's been doing all the way through loosening our grip on this world loosening our grip on everything that this world promises and keeping us looking forwards to the new creation why don't we spend a few moments in reflection and then

I shall lead us in prayer vanity of vanities says the preacher all is vanity heavenly father we thank you for the great gift that Ecclesiastes is to us thank you for the way in which it pricks many of the things which we think are important and useful in this life that everyone around us is chasing after we praise you for the Lord Jesus thank you that he is the creator thank you that he is our shepherd and thank you that he is the judge that you raised him to life after his death that he will return on the final day and we pray heavenly father please would you help us to be those who take ecclesiastes to heart help us to be those who serve you today and we ask it in Jesus name amen