

(4) The end of the matter

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[0 : 01] The reading is Ecclesiastes 11, verses 9 to 12, verse 14. That's page 674. Ecclesiastes 11, verse 9 to 12, 14.

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, in 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 streets are shut.

When the sound of the grinding is low, and the one rises up at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low, they are afraid also of what is high, and the terrors are in the way.

[1 : 22] 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.

Before 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, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. 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 the nails, and like nails, firmly fixed are 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 : 30] 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.

One of the joys of being around children, is how excited they get about things. You go to the fairground, set up in the park, wherever it is, and everything is terribly exciting.

They want to go on all the rides, don't they, at once. You say, which one do you want to go on first? And they can't answer, because actually they want to go on all of them, all at the same time. They think they'll win the teddy bear, and the jackpot, and hit the bullseye.

Why not? And as adults, of course, one of the joys of taking them, is that they are so excited, and we are not yet, and yet we, of course, are disillusioned.

And actually, they haven't yet worked out the fact, that although the teddy, it looks as if it's easy to win it, actually it's almost impossible to win it. But they haven't made that connection, and it's exciting.

[3 : 37] Whereas we are disillusioned. Because, of course, the older we get, the harder we find it, to get excited about things, because we have learnt what life is really like.

The things which perhaps, once we got excited about, which perhaps when we were younger, as we looked at the whole of life, sort of stretching out ahead of us, seemed to be so full of promise. And as we looked at all the wonderful things that we could do, and how marvellous life would be, well, actually, as we get older, they prove disappointing.

In fact, we've seen over the last three weeks in Ecclesiastes, that everything in life is like that. It is vanity, empty, fleeting, meaningless.

Ecclesiastes contains the words of King Solomon, either written by Solomon himself, or by someone expressing Solomon's thoughts. He calls himself the teacher, or the preacher. And we've seen he describes life as it really is.

Not life in the kind of parallel universe of the advertising industry, where that mobile phone will revolutionise your life, where that car will add to your sex appeal, and that wrinkle cream will not only make you feel 21 again, but make you look 21.

[4 : 54] No, the teacher addresses life as it really is. And we've certainly seen, I think, haven't we, over the last three weeks, how he exposes the emptiness of what we might call the secular worldview.

He shows us that a world without God is ultimately a world of gloom and meaninglessness. Yes, there may be things we can enjoy on the way, but ultimately it is vanity.

But his primary purpose in writing is to give Christians a reality check for our Christian experience. In other words, he's asking the question, as a follower of Jesus Christ, what should I expect life to be like as I live in this world and as I wait for the new creation?

After all, we've seen, haven't we, that Christians live in a fallen world just as much as anyone else. We too live in a world of sin, under God's judgment. Well, in this final section of the book, the teacher gives us three keys to living wisely in God's world as we wait for the new creation.

And I've put those three on the, oh, no, I haven't. Oh, well, there you are. I'm as surprised as you are. That just means you have to remember them, so you have to concentrate even harder than usual.

[6 : 17] Well, first of all, remember your creator. Remember your creator. Verse 9 of chapter 11.

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.

Now, I think one of the things which has surprised a number of us in Ecclesiastes, especially over the last couple of weeks, is the way in which God encourages us to enjoy life. And we see here that we are to enjoy life especially while we are young.

Now, that is a breath of fresh air, I think, isn't it? Especially if we are ever tempted to imagine that the Christian life is joyless or simply a life of kind of endless duties and responsibilities that need to be done.

No, God has created a good world for us to enjoy. Go where your heart leads you, verse 9. See the things your eyes want to see.

[7 : 26] And yes, at the end of the verse we are reminded that God will judge, but there is no conflict between enjoying life and fearing God because God is the creator and he is the one who rightly lays down the parameters within which life and his world is to be enjoyed.

But above all, chapter 12, verse 1, we are to remember our creator while we are young. 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.

Now when the teacher there talks about remembering your creator he does not mean remember just as a kind of a mental act. Oh yes, I know there's a God out there somewhere. Rather he means commit to our creator or as we might say follow Jesus Christ bow the knee to him and do so chapter 12 verse 1 before it's too late because what follows is a description of old age that is almost haunting in its extraordinary beauty.

So, verse 1, the joylessness of old age the days of which you will say I have no pleasure in them endlessly grumbling and moaning.

In verse 2, the bleakness of old age when the lights go out and hope fades before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain.

[9 : 08] Of course, the thing about rain is you expect the sky to brighten afterwards, don't you? I know that hasn't happened in the last week but normally we expect when there's been a rainstorm afterwards for the clouds to drift away and for there to be some sunshine.

Well, verse 2 describes old age when that no longer happens. Instead, there are more clouds, a picture of hopelessness as one illness follows another and another and another with no expectation of ultimate recovery.

And then verse 3, possibly a picture of the human body decaying, pictured as a house gradually falling into ruin. The keepers are the arms, the strong men, the legs, the grinders, the teeth, the windows, the eyes.

And then verses 4 and 5, the way in which people react to old age. The doors are shut as they withdraw themselves from the outside world. The sound of grinding is low as activity levels slow down.

Sleep is erratic as they are woken up by the dawn chorus or perhaps aeroplanes flying overhead if you live in this part of London. And sounds grow faint as isolation from the world outside increases.

[10 : 33] Afraid of heights, afraid to go out, the streets are full of dangers and fears. And then verse 5, three pictures of old age.

The almond tree blossoming. I'm told that is a picture of hair that turns grey and then white. Some of us, of course, have to face up to that sooner than others, but you'll get there in the end.

Or the grasshopper, normally, of course, so sprightly, now dragging its weary body behind it like an old man dragging his body behind a zimmer frame and sexual desire failing.

And then verse 6 describes death itself. Before 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 and the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

The silver thread which perhaps holds a golden bowl with candles in it. The thread snaps, the bowl is broken, the light goes out. The pitcher that's shattered, the wheel in the cistern that's broken, which means there's no longer any access to water.

[11 : 50] Light and water, both gone, both necessities that sustain life, both now, no more. And verse 7, the haunting reminder that death is part of God's judgment on sin.

Genesis 3, verse 19, which would be on the outline where God says to Adam, for you are dust and to dust you shall return.

All of us by nature under the curse of death and judgment because by nature we live in God's world, it will not have God to be God over us. And God's judgment is death both in this world and in the next world.

But wonderfully, as we've been thinking about this morning, Jesus came to earth and was crucified that those who trust in him might see life and have life in this world and in the next.

remember your creator. The teacher urges us to turn to the creator before it is too late. You see, he knows full well that the older we get, the more unlikely it is, humanly speaking, that we will do that and turn to our creator.

[13 : 08] Deathbed conversions are a very rare thing. Because as we see here, old age is not a time to be open to fresh ideas or radical new departures.

No, old age is a time for turning in on ourselves. We mustn't fool ourselves that it will be easier to begin to follow Jesus or that someone we know that it will be easier for them to begin to follow Jesus when we're older.

It won't be. And the urgency of turning to Jesus, one of the things that as Christians we constantly need to be bringing before those that we are seeking to talk to about the Christian faith.

I sometimes think we can be so dispassionate, so afraid perhaps of being thought to be manipulating people, so worried about being open to the charge of ramming the gospel down people's throats, that actually we don't speak with the urgency that we ought to.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth. Do so while you can. Secondly, listen to your shepherd, verses 9 to 12.

[14 : 20] Listen to your shepherd. Have a look at 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, upright, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. Now these verses show all of us what it's like to remember our creator.

It is to listen to him as he speaks to us and addresses us in the Bible. Because the teacher describes here how the book of Ecclesiastes, as well as the rest of the Bible, came to be written.

He shows us it is both a human process and also a divine process. A human process, verse 9, the teacher works hard, weighing, studying, and arranging many proverbs with great care.

Rather like Luke, as he writes at the beginning of his Gospel, he says, doesn't he, I've done my careful research, I've spoken to the eyewitnesses, I'm writing an orderly account of the events of Jesus' life.

[15 : 28] But verse 11, it's also a divine process. These are not just the words of the teacher, but the words of the one shepherd of God himself. And as such, it's a perfect description of what is known as the inspiration of Scripture, that each book of the Bible has two authors, the human writer, the human author, and also God himself.

Turn to 2 Peter, which we looked at a year or so ago, towards the end of the New Testament. 2 Peter, chapter 1, on page 1225.

Keep your finger in Ecclesiastes. 2 Peter, chapter 1, verse 21.

No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, the process by which the Bible was written.

As such, of course, the words of the Bible are therefore uniquely authoritative. They are the words of God. And back in Ecclesiastes, we can see they are powerfully effective.

[16 : 47] I wonder if you notice the two pictures that the writer uses, that the teacher uses to demonstrate that. They are like goads. I wonder if you know what a goad is.

It's a long stick with a sharp point on the end which you use to prod cattle and sheep in their bottoms so that they know which direction to go in.

It's a vivid picture, isn't it, of what God does for us, what the Bible does as we listen to God, as we listen to him teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, saying that this is the way you should go in goading us in the right direction.

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

Listen to the shepherd. God's word enables us to see there is more to life than life under the sun, more to life than simply what I can see, hear, and touch.

[17 : 54] The Bible is a unique book. It enables me to make sense of this world, to live wisely in a world of vanity. And I take it that over the past few weeks, that has been our experience, looking at the book of Ecclesiastes.

It's certainly been my experience. I find it very helpful and challenging to be reminded again how I should be living rightly in this world, wisely. Which I take it is why in verse 12 there is such a contrast.

My son, beware of anything beyond these, of making many books there's no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The contrast between God's word on the one hand, which is so dependable, and on the other hand, a kind of restless searching for the next thing.

You see, the shepherd's words, verse 10, are a delight. It's wonderfully refreshing, isn't it, to hear that. We live in a world of kind of information overload, of endlessly having words kind of being bombarded at us, you know, whether it's emails at work, or projects which have to be written, or reports that need to be read, whatever it is, or adverts.

But here is the one word, God's word, which we are to prize above all else. So let me ask us, do we do that? Do we prize God's word above any other words in our lives?

[19 : 24] Do you read the Bible regularly? I think sometimes we can find that we end up reading almost anything else but the Bible. Prize God's words, delight in them, value them.

Perhaps if you got out of the habit of reading the Bible on your own, or if your time of reading the Bible is a bit stale, why not go to the bookstore later on and buy some Bible reading notes. And may I just say a word of caution to those for whom having a quiet time or having a time with God is often no more than simply downloading or listening to a sermon from the web.

Now that is a good thing to do. It's a great thing to catch up on a talk that we've missed, or perhaps listen to a talk again. But it is not the same thing as sitting down myself with an open Bible and delighting for myself in God's word.

Because the danger is we don't then feed on God's word for ourselves. We don't really engage with it and wrestle with it for ourselves. We simply listen to what someone else has to say.

But notice verse 12 that God's words may not always suit us. Beware of making anything beyond these.

[20 : 40] God's word may not always suit us. You see, perhaps you're looking in on the Christian faith. It's always good to have one or two like that here on a Sunday morning. Perhaps you've got to the stage where you're saying, well yes, I understand the message of Jesus, but I feel I just need to do a little bit more research.

I need to look into one or two other questions. Perhaps I think about what some of the other religions happen to believe. I just need a few more answers. Well, here is the warning.

It's possible to spend a lifetime doing this because there is no end of books. The Christian author C.S. Lewis captures this very well in his book *The Great Divorce*.

And he imagines someone who's been a lifelong searcher, spent his whole life kind of looking in to Christianity. And he imagines him being invited into heaven.

And this is the invitation he receives. He is told, I can promise you no scope for your talents, only forgiveness for having perverted them. No atmosphere of inquiry, for I will bring you to the land not of questions, but of answers.

[21 : 48] And you shall see the face of God. It's a wonderful invitation, isn't it? But the man replies, we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way.

For me, there is no such thing as the final answer. And as C.S. Lewis writes, he comments, the man is then heard making his apologies and rushing off to his next discussion group in hell.

Well, he wrote that in 1945. But actually, it is remarkably contemporary, isn't it? The way in which we can be so reluctant to grasp onto the truth and hold onto it and say, yes, this is the truth.

This is where I'm going to stand. Remember your Creator. Listen to your Shepherd. Thirdly, fear your Judge.

Judge, verses 13 and 14. The end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments.

[22 : 56] For this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil. Fear God and keep his commandments.

To fear God is the beginning of wisdom. It's the doorway which opens the door to living wisely in the Bible. It is to treat God as God in New Testament terms.

To bow the knee to Jesus. And verse 13. This is the whole, literally, this is the whole of man. The word duty doesn't exist in the original. It's the whole of man. This is what it means to be human.

We are made first and foremost to be in right relationship with our Creator. Not to be in the right job or winning an Olympic gold or living for pleasure or amassing learning and education, but to fear God and to live in right relationship with him.

If we ignore that, we are running from reality. Why is that the case? Because of verse 14. It's what we've been thinking about this morning. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

[24 : 08] It's a glorious thing that in a world where everything appears to be vanity. That's the message, isn't it, of Ecclesiastes over these last three weeks. Here is the one thing that stops everything being vanity and meaninglessness.

The judgments. And wonderfully, as those of us who live after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, why we can be even more certain of that future judgment than the teacher was in Ecclesiastes.

Just to see that, keep a finger in Ecclesiastes and turn on to Acts chapter 17. This is the last cross-reference. Acts chapter 17 on page 1116.

1116. Sorry, top of 1117. Acts chapter 17, verse 31. Here is the Apostle Paul proclaiming to the crowds in Athens.

What's he say? Because he, that's God, has fixed the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man who is he appointed. And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

[25 : 26] Notice the day is set, the judge is appointed, we can be absolutely confident of it because Jesus has been raised from the dead. Which of course means that nothing is meaningless.

Do you remember how for Jesus even the smallest thing mattered? Do you remember how he spoke, didn't he, of an idle word? He spoke of the death of a sparrow that's noticed. He spoke of the numbers of hairs on a head.

He spoke of a cup of cold water being given to someone. He spoke of the repentance of just one sinner. Each one noticed.

Because Jesus cares about the details of our lives. He notices. Which means that on that final judgment day all the good that's been ignored in this world, the kind words that have been dismissed, why they will be acknowledged on that day by Jesus.

And evil and wickedness of course will be punished. judged. You see, judgment is good news. Now I'm always very conscious when as Christians we speak of judgment, there are always one or two who struggle with that.

[26 : 37] How can a loving God possibly judge? Well precisely because he is loving, because he does care about his world. The opposite of a loving God is not a God who judges, but a God who is indifferent and who doesn't care about his world.

And the teacher reminds us that the time when this world will be sorted out is not now, but in the future. As we saw last week, one of the features of this world will always be its injustice.

And therefore you see as Ecclesiastes finishes, the teacher, if you like, calls us to decide, how am I going to live my life? What will the framework be within which I will make decisions?

The framework which will guide me in my living, my thinking, the priorities that I take and that I have. And very simply, there are two alternatives. One is to live in this life as if life under the sun, as if what I see, touch, hear, is all there is to life.

And yes, a life lived like that, there will be times of joy and achievement, but at the end of the day, like the teacher, we'll discover, we look back on it, and it's vanity.

[27 : 53] And the reason God has given us this book is because he wants us to, he wants to warn us against living like that. He doesn't want us to get to the end of our lives and say, actually, it's all been vanity.

And therefore, he gives us the other alternative, which is to fear God, to live in right relationship with him, to know Jesus, to have been forgiven by him, to belong to him as his people, with his Holy Spirit dwelling inside us.

And yes, we still live in the same fallen world, we still experience the same frustrations as everyone else, a world of death, injustice, a world where everything seems to be chance, or so much at least seems to be chance.

But as we listen to the words of the shepherd, we can be certain that there is more to life than simply life under the sun. And once we face the brokenness and discord of our world, why I take it we'll want to rejoice, rejoice in the fact of the judgment to come, and to rejoice in the anticipation of the new creation.

But with it, of course, comes a warning, because Ecclesiastes warns us, doesn't it, of the possible danger of claiming to be a Christian, yet actually living for this world.

[29 : 12] That's certainly one of the challenges I've taken away from the book, living as if money, possession, education, life under the sun, is all there is to live for.

Remember your creator, listen to your shepherd, fear your judge. Three keys to living in a world of vanity.

Let's pray together. Now, God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Heavenly Father, we praise you so much that you are not indifferent to your world, as we see a world of injustice globally, as well as in our own lives and the own circumstances that we face.

thank you so much that you are not a God who simply turns a blind eye. Thank you that in your great love for your world, you will judge, that there will be justice on that final day.

[30 : 21] And we pray, Heavenly Father, you'd help us to live our lives now in the light of that future and in the light of the new creation, knowing that that future means that actually nothing we do in this life is meaningless and purposeless, knowing that everything will be brought before you on the final day.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.