

Wise Words for a Full Life

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, friends, I want to begin this Bible talk tonight by getting you to come with me in your imagination. Travel back in time. We're in an ancient land.
- It's Middle Eastern. We found a man. He's a man of royal stock. He's a prince or perhaps even a king. He's a man who has had all the benefits of a rich and prosperous life.
- He's wealthy. He's also a man who is noted for his wisdom. He is deeply respected by his countrymen. He's a man of knowledge, a man of great and deep learning. He's a man who spent his life investigating a life.
- He's a man who's deeply reflected upon life. He's a man who's really worth listening to. And today he's going to let us into his brain. He's going to tell us what he's discovered about life.
- And he summarizes it in the closing chapters of his book. The book, of course, is the book we've been looking at for five weeks, the book of Ecclesiastes. So come with me as we hear him speak across the centuries.
- [0 : 5 9] Remember, he is a man way ahead of his time. His words are amazingly relevant and they are incredibly powerful. They show us some very deep secrets about life.
- So let's have a look at what he has to say. And I want you to have your Bibles open with you. So have a look at Ecclesiastes chapter 12. Now, in order to understand what's going on here in this last chapter, you need a bit of imagination.
- So those of you who don't have it, I'm sorry, but you can try. Okay, a bit of imagination. You see, our ancient teacher is speaking in poetry and what looks like riddles, but really are not.
- And his advice is clear. He speaks to us about those who have spent, he speaks to those of us who have life spread out before us. He's talking to those who are young.
- For those of you who are a bit older, there's still some stuff relevant here for you. The first thing he has to tell us is that we are not autonomous beings. We live in a world which has been created by God.
- [2 : 0 3] We live in a world owned by our creator. We are the creation of God. God made us. The second thing that he has to tell us is that our lifespan is limited.
- You see, our life is not without end. Look at verses 2 to 7. These verses are an amazing poetical expression of old age. If you look closely, there are lots of other ways to interpret it, but I suspect this is what it is.
- A picture of old age. Our author describes a time in life when the freedom of youth has dissipated. Days of trouble have come. Eyesight is fading.
- He says the sun and the light and the moon are darkened. Young and strong warriors are now elderly. The guards who once stood strong and erect are now bent over and their hands and their feet tremble.
- In verse 3, he speaks of grinders ceasing because they are few. I think the grinders he's talking about are the ones in your mouth. Your teeth.

[3 : 05] And there's lots of them missing. He's imagining an old man who has lost his teeth, whose eyesight is now dim. He has diminished access to the outside world.

The doors to the street are shut. His hearing is impaired. The sound of grinding is low and the daughters of song are brought low. You see, he can't hear much anymore.

His sleep is erratic. He rises at the sound of a bird. The bold strength and fearlessness of youth is gone. According to verse 5, he's now afraid of heights and finds it terrifying to go on a journey.

He's walking around. He's no longer dignified. You see, now he looks like a grasshopper dragging himself along. And the desire of youth has passed.

As verse 6 states, life is no longer filled with signs of promise and vitality. No, now life is filled with signs of age and brokenness. Silver cords are snapped.

[4 : 04] Golden bowls are broken. Pitches lie shattered at fountains. And wheels rest lazily at their cisterns. And this man who was created by God out of dust returns to the earth.

And the spirit which God breathed into him leaves his body and returns to the God who gave it. Friends, I wonder if you can hear what this man is saying. He is speaking from a lifetime of experience.

And he's telling us that the life we experience as vital and full has a limit to it. Life and vitality don't go on forever. Friends, listen to this wise man's words.

He's telling us a truth we spend our lives trying to avoid. We are going to die. I am going to die. You are going to die.

It might not happen today. It might not happen tomorrow. But surely as day follows day, you and I are going to die. If the Lord does not return before that day.

[5 : 21] And if this is so, we should live life as though that is a truth. A fact. Friends, our wise teacher has taught us two fundamental truths this evening.

The first truth is we are created beings. We were made by God and we are made for God and we are accountable to God.

The second truth is that we are frail human beings. Life in its present shape will not go on forever. We will age. The glory of youth will pass and we will die.

Now, our wise teacher in Ecclesiastes takes this truth and examines life in their light. And today I want to focus on how he puts work under the spotlight. We have already done a bit of this, but I want to look at it for a particular reason.

In chapter 2, he looks at work and he pronounces it as a dead end. We saw that. He talks about the fact that he worked hard in life. But when he dies, everything that he has will disappear.

[6 : 20] Everything he worked for will go. He loses control over the things that he worked for. He may have been wise. He may have been knowledgeable. He may have been skillful in his work.

He may have put in many hours of toil and grief and pain. He may have lain awake at night thinking about work. But in the end, all his effort will simply come under the control of others when he dies.

They will get his ideas. They'll get the fruit of his work. They will control it. And he will be dead and buried. And so he reflects on work in chapter 2, 26.

And he says that work in the end is simply a chasing after wind. I don't get him wrong. Our wise teacher thinks that work is worthwhile. It's still something to enjoy and get a lot out of. It's still something where we can achieve things and make things.

It can be a gift from God. Chapter 3, verse 12. But he warns us that work is grossly overrated. Work is not life. It's not the essence of life. It's not worth selling your soul for.

[7 : 24] Friends, we live in a world that is infatuated with work and career. The day we were born, hard to believe but true, the day we were born, most of our parents wondered what career we would end up in.

Wonder what we would be, what we would become. The day they sent us off to school, they pondered in the back of their minds how we would do.

And all the way through school, they looked at our reports and reflections on how we were going to see whether we were going to make it or not. They advised, they cajoled, they rebuked, they trained, they worried, they went to see teachers, they invested time and money and work, and we joined in and we competed and we jostled and we struggled and we, well, some of us achieved.

And we so imbibed the world view that we now define ourselves by what we do. I am Andrew, the pastor of Holy Trinity.

You are, imagine, John the doctor, Mildred the physiotherapist, Kathy the reception, Mike the plumber, Tim the sparky, George the engineer, Sue the graphic designer, Alfred the unemployed person.

[8 : 40] Friends, this is rubbish. You are not what you do. For if that is true, then the minute you stop doing it, you have become nothing and no one.

Don't get sucked in by this hype. Do not sell your soul for work and a career. It is not what life is about. The writer of Genesis knew that. The writer of Ecclesiastes knew that. Jesus knew that.

After all, it was Jesus who said, do not work for the food which perishes. That is, don't work for something to put in your stomach, something that will die if you just leave it around.

Don't do it. And it was Jesus who said, what good is it if a person gains the whole world, yet forfeits their soul? Friends, we are far more than what we do.

And finding identity in our work and in the pursuit of a career is a tremendous waste of a life. Finding meaning in life, in work, in a career is, I think, a horrible aberration.

[9 : 40] It is spending your life pursuing something that is a vapour. And if you don't learn it now, then old age and death will pronounce the truth about it. Now, I've pushed this before, but I've done it because I want to get to a particular place.

So if your work and career are not to be the all and end all of life, then what is? If work and career don't define your person, then what does?

Well, in order to give you an answer for this, I want you to come to another location in the Bible, the New Testament and the first reading that we read, Philippians chapter 3. If you're looking for a page number, it is 954.

954. Now, here when we get to Philippians, we meet another man, another wise man, a man called Paul, who wrote this letter. Now, let me tell you, now the first few verses of this, of chapter 3, tell us a bit about who this man is.

Have a look at it. Look at verse 5. He gives us his credentials. He was born a thorough and well credentialed Jew. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin.

[10 : 53] He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had all the marks of being a great Jew. Circumcised on the eighth day, trained in one of the most devout religious groups, circumcised on the eighth day, he says, a Pharisee, so devoted to his religion and the pursuit of it, that he persecuted heretics, such as Christians.

In terms of observing the law, he says he was faultless. Here is a man who, by the standards of the group he belonged to, was of enormous eminence.

If you wanted to be a good Jew in the first century, you couldn't get much more impressive than this man, Paul. He had so much to profit. Look at what he goes on to say.

Look at verses 7 to 11. They're profound when you see that background. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

[12 : 11] Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ. The righteousness from God based on faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering by becoming like him in his death. If somehow I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Friends, the right of Ecclesiastes was heading, I think, in the same direction as Paul the Apostle. That is, he was aware that God gave meaning and direction to life.

But Paul now builds on what the right of Ecclesiastes has said. And think about what he's saying. He is saying that the things that he was pursuing were worth nothing beside the worth of being in relationship with God in Christ.

The worth of Christ makes everything look, he uses the word, like a pile of excrement. And therefore, knowing Christ and relating to Christ is worth losing everything you have for.

[13 : 19] Gaining Christ, being found in him, knowing him, having the righteousness that comes from knowing him, experiencing the power of his resurrection, and life, sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, attaining to the resurrection of the dead.

These things are what life, death, and the future are all about. Where work ends in death and does not give meaning, life, knowing Christ, gives meaning, and relating to him goes beyond life and into eternity.

Look at what the verses that follow. Paul uses the language of toil. You can see it. But it has a much different focus. So he's talking about work now, but a different sort of work. Now he works and toils and strains toward a goal.

It is the goal, he says, to win the prize for which God has called him heavenward in Christ Jesus. And it is worth working for. And it will endure forever.

Let me help you enter into the mind of this man even further. You see, we've already seen the right of Ecclesiastes ponder the end of his life. We've already seen him take the part of an old man.

[14 : 35] Well, let me, he, let me show you, Paul ponder the end of his life. Let me show you, Paul, the old man thinking about his life. He says, and you can check it up later in 2 Timothy.

He says this, I am already being poured out as a drink offering. And the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award me on that day.

And not only to me, but also to all of those who have loved his appearing. You see, in his book, the right of Ecclesiastes pondered the fact that work had a big question hanging over it.

It was often motivated by envy and competitiveness, and its results could not be taken with you, but could be squandered by future generations. Paul says that the effort of the Christian faith is very different.

[15 : 45] It results in eternal benefits and eternal rewards. It is crowned with God's blessing and God's endorsement. Its legacy will continue for eternity.

And this is the prospect that lies before all like-minded people. Friends, I want you to take in the words that we've looked at today, and I want to save you from a very, very, very deep lie that has been thrust upon you from the day that you were born.

And that lie is that work makes the woman. Work makes the man. No, friends, it is a lie. Work does not make the man.

Work does not make the woman. Work is a gift from God by which we feed ourselves. It's an area of life in which we might serve God.

It's an area of life, therefore, that has great value. And God calls upon each one of us to work, and when we don't, he says, get on with work. But a job and a career will not determine who you are.

[16 : 52] Your work and your career will die with you. Well, there may be some ongoing benefits for other people, but what I'm saying is that a life filled with work and with the pursuit of a career at the cost of pursuing God is a horrible waste.

And more than that, it's an awful idolatry. It is to work for something that will perish, and it runs the risk of gaining the will but losing your soul.

Let me say it again. A life devoted to a career, that is, as what you are, is a wasted life. It puts aside the greater worth of knowing Jesus and growing in relationship with him, which is what you were created for.

It replaces the worth of knowing Jesus with something that Paul here calls excrement beside the greater gain of Jesus Christ. But I can't finish there.

You see, if you've traveled with me today, if you agree with what I've said, then you need to push the conclusions into everyday life and practice. So let me ask you these things.

[17 : 59] If you believe what I've said, then how is it going to change your life? How is it going to change your life? Well, let me suggest a number of areas. Let me suggest a number of things that you might do in the next week or year or decade or lifetime in order to put into practice what I've said.

Here's a practical thing that you might do in the next week. Okay? Number one, this week. Take some slot out of, time slot out of your coming week that you would have spent working or pursuing a career or doing the thing that you now think defines you.

You know, something like getting into work an hour before you need to or staying an hour longer than is required. And instead of doing that, take the time aside and use it to develop your relationship with the Lord Jesus.

read a book of the Bible. Spend some time praying. Spend it engaged in following up a friend who needs to come to know Jesus or grow in his knowledge, his or her knowledge of Jesus.

So that's an idea for this week. Just take a section of your time that you would spend pursuing a career which is expendable and devote it to that. Here's an idea for the next year.

[19 : 26] Determine that you will not skip church or Bible study for the sake of work. Seems like a light thing. But it's not. Determine that you will not skip church or Bible study for the sake of work.

Determine that church and Bible study will have first and not second priority. So that's second thing. Something for the next year. Something for the next five to ten years.

take some of the effort that you would have devoted to work or a career and give it to developing your knowledge and understanding of the Bible.

Enrol in a course of study for example that will stretch and develop skills for ministry. We have lots of people going off to Ridley doing courses and they're not probably going to end up in Christian ministry but there's an example of what they've done. Here's my last thing.

So here's number four. One for life. Friends, there are some of you here who have enormous ability and gifts. We have an extraordinary number of very able people in our congregations.

[20 : 34] And let me ask you, are you pouring your life into a career and into work? Some of you are, I know. But have you considered that you might take the very same gifts that God has given you and use them for something that will last beyond your lifetime?

Have you considered that you might give up your small ambitions and enter Christian ministry in some way? Or the support of Christian ministry in some way?

Friends, if Jesus means everything to you, then knowing Christ and making him known is worth losing a career for. Gaining Christ, being found in him, knowing him, having the righteousness that comes from knowing him and helping other people have that.

Experiencing the power of his resurrection life, sharing in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. These things are what life, death and the future are all about.

So I need to put it to you, I do this about once a year, and that is, so why can't you give up your career for a lifetime of Christian ministry? for the work of a career runs the risk that it will perish, but the work of the kingdom will not perish.

[21 : 57] No, that work will follow you into heaven. That work will greet you in heaven, in the faces of those who have come to know Christ through you, grow in Christ through you and your testimony.

So there's four goals, okay, four things to think about, how these things are going to change next week, the next year, the next five to ten years, perhaps even your lifetime.

So let's pray. Father, we thank you for life and health and safety, for power to work and leisure to rest, and for all that is beautiful in creation.

we thank you that you have given us such a great world to live in and so many things to enjoy. But above all, Father, we thank you for your amazing love in the Lord Jesus Christ, for the redemption that has been won by him.

Thank you for the transforming effect that it has on our lives and on your world. Thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that everything, that beside him, everything else is but done.

[23 : 15] Please help us to work hard as the Apostle Paul does. Please help us to press on, to press on to make him all things for us.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.