

# Wise Words about the Realities of Life

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Date: 25 March 2012

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[ 0 : 00 ] which has a little bit of a dark feel to it, and I'm hoping that today won't be as dark as it's been. So great to have you with us. Let me pray and ask God to help us as we search his word.

Father, we pray that you would help us tonight to understand your word. We pray that you would help us to see its impact. We pray that you'd be at work in us by your spirit to transform us into the likeness of your son.

And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Friends, you need to have your Bible open tonight. Tonight we're really largely just doing some Bible flipping, but at least it's restricted mostly.

We're going to sort of be restricted largely from pages 536 in your Bible, so the beginning of Ecclesiastes, to page 543. So open your Bibles, because I'm going to read large slabs of the Bible tonight.

That's a good thing for us to be doing, because that's what we're here for. We're here to learn from God. And I want to remind us of where we've started. Every week we've come back to the same statement, because the writer of Ecclesiastes has a thesis statement.

[ 1 : 16 ] It is this. Vanity of vanities, says the teacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And as I've done the last few weeks, I'm going to repeat this week. The NIV puts it another way.

Meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. Or the Holman Christian Standard Bible puts it. Absolute futility. Absolute futility.

Everything is futile. And remember what that word means. That word vanity or futile has a broad range of meaning. And when you add it to the sentiment of verse 3 of chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes, you get a very dark picture.

Repeated time and time again through this book. The impression is that everything is untrustworthy or enigmatic or insubstantial or fruitless or unable to be depended upon.

And he says you can prove this by experience, by observation, by participation in the world, by honest reflection upon it. Meaningless, meaningless. Utterly meaningless.

[ 2 : 15 ] Everything is meaningless. We're going to start on that dark note yet again. We're not going to end as dark as we have in previous weeks. And so I want to encourage you with that. Because, you know, it was a bit hard going last week because it was unrelenting.

There's going to be some more of that this week. But I'm going to take four or maybe even five key parts of life that this writer talks about. And we're going to see what he has to say.

And the first one is time. What does this writer have to say about time? Well, we've just read the passage. Can you see it there in chapter 3? It's on page 537 and 38.

He goes through that. And most of you are too young to know a song that was designed on this. But anyway, it's just talking about the times that exist in life.

And if you read through these verses, you find there is a rhythm about these verses. And listen to how they end. Right when you get to the end of all of these things. That is, there's a time for this and a time for that.

[ 3 : 14 ] A time for this. A time for that. A time for that. A time for this. Look at how it ends. What gain have workers from their toil? Can you see what he's saying?

The writer is saying, life is filled with this wonderful variety. But in a meaningless pattern. There is so much in life. A time to embrace.

A time to reframe from embracing. You know, and so on. A time to work. And a time for war. And a time of peace. And all of these things. But really, they are put all together in this sort of meaningless pattern.

We spend it going from one activity to another. Never knowing why. Never knowing quite why the next activity is the next one. Never quite being able to choose which one it is to be.

Our chances of choosing the right moment, the right time, are riddled with uncertainty, aren't they? Events. Seasons. All are imposed from outside of us.

[ 4 : 16 ] No one chooses a time to weep, do they? We are slaves to outside forces. Weeping comes upon us. Because something terrible in life comes upon us.

We didn't choose it to come at that particular time. But it came. And we weep. We are slaves to outside forces. We are far from being the captains of our own souls.

And we know it from daily life, don't we? Essays always come at the wrong time, if you're a student. Families demand at the wrong time.

If you're a parent, children cry at the wrong time. You know, you've got the day planned out.

Everything's going to go according to plan. And you know, something tragic happens. Your children end up crying.

And you've got to go and change all of your life. And whatever it is for you, this happens, doesn't it? Or illness comes at the wrong time. It's the last time you ever needed it. But it comes.

[ 5 : 18 ] Work comes. The knock comes on the door at the wrong time. The demand for your time comes. Your employer comes and says, oh, this has arrived on my desk.

And I'm going to shift it to your desk. And it comes at the wrong time. These things are out of our control. They happen to us, don't they? Human beings are inadequate under God's disposal of the epochs of time.

Time comes. Time goes. A time for this comes. And a time for that comes. And it's not the time that we would have ordained for it. But it comes. And yet, this points.

This itself points us beyond time. If time and the times of life are determined by outside forces, then what's the question? Then maybe, just maybe, there's someone in control of those outside forces.

In other words, in time, God has been, has put within us an inner intuition of time. A tantalizing intuition that there might be a God behind the times of life.

[ 6 : 23 ] Who orders these things. And that actually the knock on my door. The event in my family life. Might actually be ordained by God.

And might be under his control. Now, of course, if you're not a believer in God, you just assume it happens by chance. But even these times of life may indicate that there's someone behind them. Now, what about justice? Let's think about justice for a moment. I want you to turn in your Bible. So, since you've got it at chapter 3. Have a look at chapter 3, verse 16, to chapter 4, verse 3. And let me read these to you.

Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was in. And in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well.

And I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked. For he has appointed a time for every matter and for every work. And I said in my heart, with regard to human beings, that God is testing them to show that they are but animals.

[ 7 : 27 ] For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath. And humans have no advantage over the animals. For all is vanity. All go to one place.

All are from dust. All return to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth. So I saw that there's nothing better than that I should enjoy, that they all should enjoy their work.

For that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will be after them? Again, I saw the oppressions that are practiced under the sun.

Look, the tears of the oppressed, with no one to combat them, to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors, there was power, with no one to comfort them.

And I thought of the dead, who have already died. I thought of the more fortunate than the living, who are still alive, but better than both, is one who has not yet been, has not yet seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

[ 8 : 30 ] I wonder if you can see what he's saying here. When you look at it, what is he saying? He's saying, when we look at the world, realistically, openly, without fudging at all, when we look at the world, it seems at times morally upside down.

And you can see his examples there about justice. Still, if there is a God, and if he rules over time, then there will inevitably be judgment, won't there?

But if you die before you see that judgment, then what use is it? What then? Then are you any better than an animal? And Ecclesiastes says, well, no, you're not. Or the writer of Ecclesiastes says, no, you're not. Therefore, his point is that if any meaning is to be found in life, it must be found in life itself. You can't just rally to the prospect of some future judgment.

But then having said that, he concludes that there's no meaning in life, in and of its own. So given this, we can just enjoy life and work. That's chapter 3, verse 22. So friends, so he said justice doesn't work either.

[ 9 : 39 ] But then he moves on to religion. And even religion gets a hammering by this writer. Have a look at it. Ecclesiastes chapter 5, verses 1 to 7. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

To draw near, to listen is better than sacrifice offered by fools. For they do not know how to keep from doing evil. Never be rash with your mouth.

Nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God. For God is in heaven, and you are upon earth. Therefore, let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.

Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, my vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at you and say, you say, what you say and destroy the work of your hands?

[ 10 : 49 ] Much dreaming and many words is meaningless. Therefore, stand in awe of God. Let me try and explain what is going on here. The attention in these verses, I think, is humans as worshippers. That is, humans who believe there's a God and who worship a God.

The target of the religious person, sorry, the target that he has in mind is the religious person who likes a good worship experience, I think.

I think that's what he's having a go at. The sort of person who turns up to church and who listens with only half an ear. And hears something that he likes and says, oh, perhaps I ought to determine to do this.

And utters a quick vow. And then doesn't fulfill it. Who makes a promise but never quite gets around to actually fulfilling it. Such a person, this writer, is saying it's forgotten where they are.

They've forgotten who they are. And they've forgotten God. And friends, let me tell you that that is religion the world around, isn't it? Right, where we go along. We go along to whatever religious experience we want.

[ 11 : 53 ] We like it. We think it's good. Every now and then it hits us emotionally. And we make some sort of response. And we make a quick vow. And we say, yes, I'll do that.

And then a day passes. And we're back where we are. Even secular people, even non-religious people have a version of this. It's called New Year Resolutions. They're gone within a week, can't they?

And there are Christian versions of exactly the same thing. We say, I'm not going to do this any longer. I'm going to do this action. And really, it's gone. And we're very light on them.

So what else could we look at in life? What else might give some sort of structure and meaning to life? Well, death might. Mightn't it? Let's have a look at what he has to say at death. The whole book is scattered with comments about death.

We've looked at some already in previous weeks. I want to just look at a couple more. And I want to do so because the writer of Ecclesiastes faces it head on more than anyone else in the Bible. It is death that causes him to reject wisdom as the way to find meaning in life.

[ 12 : 57 ] Death, he thinks, is the test of all things. Have a look at verses 18 to 21 in chapter 3.

We've already looked at this a little bit, but we'll look at it again. I also thought, he says, sorry, I'll just find the place.

I said in my heart, with regard to human beings, that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same.

As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath and humans have no advantage over the animals. For all is vanity. All go to the same place.

And all come from the dust and to dust return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and the spirit of animal goes down to the earth. Now have a look at the next one.

Have a look at chapter 5 verses 15 and 16. Chapter 5, 15 and 16. As they came from their mother's womb, so shall they go again.

[14:00] Naked as they came, they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away within their hands. This also is a grievous ill. Just as they came, so shall they go.

And what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? Now friends, if you go on in Ecclesiastes, it keeps going like this. He's relentless about death.

Death puts this great question mark over life. Death is really the thing that if you... In fact, remember what he said in week one? He said, it is better to go to funerals than it is to go to parties.

Why? Because when you go to funerals, you know that that is where you will end up. And that may cause you to ask the right questions about life. If you know that life ends in death, you will ask the right questions about life.

Now friends, I want to now get to how we make sense of this as Christians. We haven't done a lot of that these last few weeks. I want to do it now. You see, there's some incredible context between this book and Genesis.

[15:12] And this is where I think the answer is found. I want you to think about Ecclesiastes and Genesis for a moment. In Genesis 1, how does God make the world?

He makes the world a place of peace and harmony between God and humans, humans and each other, humans and the environment that he has put them in. But by Genesis 2 and 3, what has happened?

Well, things have changed. People have rejected the idea that God might be Lord over them, King over them, the one who ordains their existence. And instead, they say, we want to be the rulers of our own existence.

They reject the idea of living under the loving rule of God and instead choose independence, choose to be their own lawmakers, choose that they will know what is right and wrong for them.

And the end result, we're told in Genesis 3, is that the human race is excluded from the life-sustaining presence of God. We're told that in Genesis 3, verses 22 to 24.

[16:16] And not only that, but the earth that they live on is subjected to a curse. And what was not happening before now happens. So where the garden was a place of fruitfulness that almost grew without you doing anything, in Genesis 3, it is a place that yields thorns and thistles.

It is a place of curse, where human beings are condemned to increased toil. And work is no longer part of that original blissful existence, but rather work is a terrible, onerous thing.

And death is seen to be the ultimate physical destiny of all human beings. Can you see what's happened? Genesis 2 and 3 says sin comes into the world and takes us away from Genesis 1.

Sin comes into the world and takes us away from the blissful existence in Genesis 2. Of human beings walking in the garden with meaningfulness and the presence of God among them.

Their actions in Genesis 3 whisk that away from them. And all of a sudden, everything has become a hodgepodge of things that sometimes make sense and things that generally don't.

[17:43] What are the links between Genesis and Ecclesiastes? Here, let me suggest some.

Genesis speaks of the earth as cursed. Ecclesiastes doesn't use the word cursed, but it says the world that we look at has kinks.

It talks about things that are crooked and gaps, things that are lacking. And it says that they are irrevocable because they are imposed by God.

If you want to chase that verse, it's chapter 7, verse 13. So that's the first thing. The earth is cursed in both Genesis and in Ecclesiastes. Then, in Genesis and Ecclesiastes, we have a similar view of humanity.

Genesis makes the point that humans are an unstable combination of dust and breath. Genesis 2.7 and 3.19. And Ecclesiastes makes exactly the same point.

By the way, here's something interesting. The second human being born into the world. Anyone know his name? Shout it out if you do. The second human being born into the world.

[18:49] Abel. Yeah. Now that word Abel is almost identical to the Hebrew word for vanity, which is Hevel.

Sounds exactly, and those echoes are meant to be there. Also, let me think about this for a moment. Ecclesiastes highlights. Have a look at chapter 7, verse 29.

In your Bibles there, 7.29. See this alone I found. That God has made human beings straightforward or upright.

But they have devised many schemes. Can you see what's going on? Humans had an original righteousness. God made them right.

God made them related to Him. And then we're told in Genesis that humans fell. And the calamitous results. Well, the world got screwed up.

[ 19 : 51 ] Have a look back at chapter 7, verse 20. Look at what chapter 7, verse 20 says. Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.

Have you ever heard that before? Have a look. Just keep your finger in Ecclesiastes. Have a look back at Genesis chapter 6. And see if it has echoes of this passage.

Genesis chapter 6. Verse 5. That's on page 5 of the Bible.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth. And that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

Listen to that and then listen to chapter 7 again of Ecclesiastes. Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning. Both say exactly the same thing.

[ 20 : 53 ] Humans are sinful. Genesis 6. 5 has striking similarities with Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes. Not only chapter 7 here but chapter 8, verse 11.

Chapter 9, verse 3. And it's repeated. Genesis has echoes of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes has echoes of Genesis. And it even comes down to men and women. Ecclesiastes has some very harsh things to say about women.

And Genesis portrays women also as having a part in sin. Genesis talks also about human beings being excluded from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The writer of Ecclesiastes has a preoccupation with the ignorance of human beings. Can you see what I'm saying? I'm saying Genesis and Ecclesiastes say much of the same things.

They appear to be deliberate, these echoes, these similarities. If so, Ecclesiastes is looking at life in a fallen world. Ecclesiastes is looking at a world post-Genesis 3.

[ 21 : 57 ] And it's saying a world post-Genesis 3 looks like this. It is experienced like this. It acts like this. And he's saying, look, be realistic. Don't fudge.

Be realistic. This is the way the world is. As a result of the sin of human beings. But also he is implying it was not always like this.

It was not intended by God to be like this. It was made this as a result of human sin. It is made like this because of judgment upon human sin.

Friends, I wonder if I could now just summarize Ecclesiastes for you and then get on to the good news. Let me summarize Ecclesiastes. You've got a little outline there. I've got some headings.

Ecclesiastes 7 verse 20 says, all humans are sinful. As a result, all humans face death.

[ 22 : 57 ] So point number one, all humans are sinful. Chapter 7 verse 20. Chapter 7 verse 2, all humans face death. Death is the destiny of everyone.

The living should take this to heart. Three. Death is about judgment. What is judgment about? It's a place where you face the consequences of how you have lived.

Have a look at Ecclesiastes 3.17 again. 3.17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked.

For he has appointed a time for every matter and for every work. Friends, the writer of Ecclesiastes thinks there is a day when you are going to stand before God and have to give an account.

Whether you have been righteous or wicked, you will stand before God and you will give an account. Have a look at Ecclesiastes chapter 11 verse 9.

[ 24 : 02 ] So 11 verse 9. Rejoice young man. I presume you probably include young women as well. Rejoice young man while you are young and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.

Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. It is sobering, isn't he?

Saying, yeah, by all means, go ahead, try everything out, test life out, enjoy it, do all the things that are in your heart to do. But know this. That you will be judged for the things that you do.

But I need to tell you that the book of Ecclesiastes is not the final word on this. You see, he did not believe in an afterlife. He did not believe in what we Christians believe in.

Second, the writer of Ecclesiastes had not seen or heard of Jesus and his ministry. And let me tell you what happens in Jesus. In Jesus, God himself, who was the one who imposed futility, judgment

and death on the world in response to sin, actually enters into his world.

[ 25 : 15 ] In Jesus, God becomes human. Comes into the world. He comes into the world twisted and bent as it is.

And you know what? He suffers the futility of it. He suffers its worst wickedness. He experiences death. A death of a righteous man for unrighteous people.

The death of a just man for the unjust. How futile does that look? And in Jesus, God accepts, experiences, and deals with the ruin of the fall spoken of in Genesis 3.

And do you know what? He turns what looks like futility, the death of a good man, at the hands of bad men. He turns that futility into victory.

For he rises from the dead. And says, it was not futile. It was meaningful. It was full of meaning.

[ 26 : 25 ] The defeat of death in Jesus.

Feet of death in Jesus. And its futility by Jesus is the promise that the curse will be lifted for all of creation. And things will be reversed.

Put back to how they were meant to be. With that in mind, I want you to turn with me to Romans chapter 8, verses 18 to 25. And the first one to find it can yell out a page number.

Romans 8, 18 to 25. Someone got it? 919. 919. Thank you. Let me read it to you.

And I want you to listen to all the words very carefully. Romans 8, 18 to 25. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

[ 27 : 39 ] For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. For the creation was subjected to futility. Who by?

I presume by God. Not of its own will. But by the will of the one who subjected it in hope. So God subjected the world to this futility, this meaningless looking existence.

Why? And with what object? In hope. That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay. And will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption and the redemption of our bodies.

Friends, I wonder if you can hear what he's saying. He's saying, we Christians know that the world should not be this way. But we still encounter the world as it is.

[ 28 : 43 ] Those times still come at the wrong time. Those times, you know, we still die. The world, we still look to be part of that futile world.

We groan in labor pains as the creation does. We know that adoption is for us. The redemption of our bodies.

And then he says, for in hope we were saved. And the hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

In other words, we still live in a world that does look meaningless. But we know that that is not what God intends. But it looks meaningless at the moment.

But because of Christ, we have hope. And we can look forward and say, yes, it looks meaningless. But no, because of Christ, it will not be. And it won't waste away.

[ 29 : 42 ] That is, it won't be meaningless. It will be full of meaning. Why? Because of Jesus. So, I want to just finish this.

Next week we are going to look at the very last chapter of Ecclesiastes, which is just full of good things. But what is it, apart from giving us hope and saying, God is going to end futility, what else does Ecclesiastes tell us?

I want to leave you with three thoughts. Ecclesiastes says this, Given that we know that life is lived under the sovereign reign and rule of a creator, we can live life to the full.

Even though at times we will find it mysterious. Life is to be lived, if you're a Christian, boldly and adventurously, because we live in God's world that is under God's oversight.

So, the rite of Ecclesiastes says, Do you know God? Then live life heartily. Two, the world is a created place, and life is good while it lasts.

[ 30 : 50 ] So, enjoyment of God's world is not a sin, but can perhaps be seen as a positive duty.

And friends, I want to say that really strongly, you see, because we Christians are Greek in our thinking.

The Greeks said things that are here on earth, they're bad. Things that are part of the eternal, the universal, they are good. So, for Greeks, you know, a lot of the physical things of life were bad.

Now, we Christians are not like that. This world was created good by God, and we have come to know its goodness in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we can therefore enjoy life.

But not only that, you see, what the rite of Ecclesiastes says, and this is for those of you who are young here, so the rest of you can just turn off for a moment. For those of you who are young, it says, This is especially important when enjoyment is at its greatest.

When you are young. That's what he says in chapters 11 and 12. Enjoy it. Soak it up. However, as you live life heartily, as you enjoy all that life has to bring, remember to be responsible.

[ 32 : 05 ] And that full enjoyment and fulfillment in life is always found, not in independent living, but in the company of God and under his loving rule.

So, for all of us, young and old alike, where is fullness of life found? Where is hearty living found? It is found in knowing what God has done for you in Christ, and that this world he has given you is good, and that life is best lived in the company of God and under the loving rule of God.

Finally, this writer says, if you know God as your creator, then you would admit your finitude before him and his work, and you will be humble, and you will recognize that God's loving rule is to be loved, respected, obeyed, and lived by.

Friends, those three things, did you see them there? If you're a Christian, if you're a reader of Ecclesiastes, live life heartily. If you're a Christian, if you're a reader of Ecclesiastes, take his advice, live life heartily, actively, heartily, and live life responsibly before your God and in the face of Christ.

Great advice, isn't it, really? So it's been a dark book, but it has some really glorious things to say to us as Christian people. Because we know that this world has been subjected to futility, but that futility will end because of the work of Christ.

[ 33 : 52 ] And because we are children of God and we sense some of the tension in the world, we can live in this world as it was designed to be lived in. Actively, heartily, and responsibly.

So let's pray. Father, we admit our smallness, our temporariness, our finitude before you.

We recognize that your son came into this world and experienced the worst of what looked futile, but really was not. Father, please help us, because of what we know in Christ, to live life actively, heartily, and responsibly.

Father, please help us to live life in such a way that the people around us might say, how can you live life this way? To which we might respond. We can live it this way because we have come to know life as it is intended to be.

Life lived before you. Father, we thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen.