

Ecclesiastes 7-12: Into the Light

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everybody, and let me say straight away, I wished last week that you all had Bibles in front of you so that you could follow along when I was reading passages.

You may not have felt the lack of a Bible in the same way. However, if you would like a Bible so that you can follow along this week as I read passages from Ecclesiastes, the Bibles are here, and here is Leonor passing them out.

So, up to you, but if you need a Bible, grab one. Now, pause while Bibles are passed out.

That's all right. Now, I hope everybody who would like a Bible has got a Bible, and away we can go. All right. May we begin by praying together. Holy Father, it is your word, inspired by your Holy Spirit, that we turn to now.

[1 : 39] May that same spirit be in our minds and hearts to bring us the message of the word, and so to transform us into disciples who are more faithful and more hopeful henceforth than we have ever been.

Granted, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now, the title of this second talk on Ecclesiastes is Into the Light.

I began last week by dealing with the first six chapters of the book. I told you why it's a favorite book of mine.

Heart speaks to heart. I recognize in the writer a tamed cynic such as I am myself, and he warms my heart.

He's a wisdom writer. He's a wisdom writer. He is teaching godly realism.

[3 : 09] We did talk a bit about that last week. He's not a pessimist. He's not a goofy optimist.

But he is a realist. And he's telling us things in this world in so many ways are bad.

But above it all is God. And God is really good. That's the lesson that he wants us to learn.

Godly realism is realistic godliness. It's the good life that the philosophers in the West, at any rate, have always been trying to focus and never quite managing.

It was Plato, well, Socrates, Plato's teacher, who set that question. What is the good life?

[4 : 20] And Ecclesiastes, as I say, is answering it. The philosophers keep discussing it, but they can't answer it. However, in Ecclesiastes, there's wisdom, which does answer the question.

We are all encouraged to ask it. And at the end of Ecclesiastes, chapter 12, we're going to hear him saying, and it's very much an enigmatic summary that you're going to hear now, because we haven't yet gone through the argumentation that leads up to it, but he does round everything off by saying, verse 13 of chapter 12, the end of the matter, we would say the bottom line, all has been heard, there's nothing more that needs saying on this theme, fear God and keep his commandments, for this is, now the translators divide, this is the whole duty of man.

That's the meaning that some of them get from the Hebrew. The other way of taking the Hebrew is, this is the whole of human life, meaning the life that is real life.

Quitta comes to the same thing. This is the whole duty of man, this is the whole of the life that's good for man. This is realistic godliness.

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.

[6 : 18] Everything we do is going to count. So, take life seriously. That's his message. Realistic godliness, the good life for man, is summed up in those words.

Now, of course, for Christians, there is a good deal more to be said. Ecclesiastes is an Old Testament pundit. Christ has come.

And the whole New Testament revelation is before us. And it takes us a great deal further, in terms of the Christian hope, what we have to look forward to, than this writer can do.

He simply doesn't know how good is the goodness that God has set before us, the goodness that will be truly ours, beyond this world.

But Ecclesiastes is getting the angle right. At least, that's what I'm saying now, and that's what I think our study is going to show us.

[7 : 29] You live for God. You live before God, in his presence, where everything counts. You live under God, recognizing his providence in the things that make sense.

There are a few. And in the things that don't seem to make sense, of which there were many. That's the point, which Ecclesiastes wants to hammer into our hearts, or shall I say, screw into our minds. He wants to make it to us so strongly that we shall never lose sight of it. You see, he's three things together. He's a poet who sees this imaginatively, as well as having the poet's skill in focusing and concentrating his vision, so that it comes across like, well, the force of a bullet, if you allow it to.

As a poet, he's also a pundit. We said that last week. He really is a wise man, and there's a testimonial at the end of chapter 12, as we saw last week, which confirms that, beside being wise, verse 9 of chapter 12, the preacher also taught people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

He sought to find words of delight. That's his skill as a poet being celebrated. Words of delight.

Words of delight. And uprightly, he wrote words of truth.

[9 : 18] Words of wisdom. Well, yes, that's what he's doing. And he does it as an artist. A poet as a sort of artist.

And a pundit as a sort of artist in thought, thinking about life. He operates, however, writing this book, not in the manner of a modern philosopher or wiseacre, not in the manner even of a person like C.S. Lewis.

He isn't following a single focused train of argument through from beginning to end. He's much more like the painter, who actually is a character, appears regularly on PBS.

I don't know whether you ever see the program. He paints a picture commenting on what he's doing as the program proceeds. He starts with a blank canvas and puts in a bit here and a bit there.

And quickly, a picture emerges. He's an artist. He knows what he's doing. And the bit here and the bit there add up to a very impressive picture.

[10 : 42] Impressive because working so quickly, nonetheless, he achieves balance. He achieves proportion. He achieves a nice mess and blend of colors.

Well, it's the painter's style which you find in Ecclesiastes. And actually, in all the wisdom writers in the Bible.

A bit here, a bit there. He returns to themes that he started. A bit more here, a bit more there, and so forth.

And the picture, as a picture, builds up. You need to understand that in order to get the wisdom out of the book.

He is a painter with words, drawing or painting a picture of life. Bad life, frustrated life, good life, wise life.

[11 : 49] It's all here. To man, to make his point, he writes his book in the way in which, long ago, back in England, the Great Western Railway.

I'm a railway addict. That's another thing about me that you may like to know. The Great Western Railway built the Severn Tunnel under the estuary of the River Severn.

It's the longest rail tunnel in Britain. There's more than four miles of it. The Severn is about three miles across at the point where the tunnel was built.

And building it was an engineering achievement of no small order. The tunnel's a little over four miles long.

The first two miles are all downhill at a gradient of, well, in England, we would call it one in a hundred. And over here, they would say one percent.

[12 : 54] Okay. Down, down, down. And that corresponds to the ground covered in chapters one through six, and covered two in my first talk, last week's talk.

And then there's two miles up at the same gradient, so that if you plot the gradient on a graph, well, it's down, and then it's up.

And that's what I had in mind when I called the first talk into the dark. And what I have in mind as I now proclaim that the second talk, don't forget, is called Into the Light.

You get it? Well, the angle of the journey up into the light is, as we shall see, a plea to let wisdom lead in the life that you're living.

And the leading of wisdom is focused in three principles, which we should be looking at in detail before we're through.

[14 : 15] So, the bewilderments of life must not be allowed to do any one of these three things.

It must not diminish the enjoyment of one's life. It must not discourage us from enterprise in our lives.

And it must not distract us from early godliness, that is, from remembering our God in the days of our youth.

Just let me quote a few texts to confirm that. The bewilderments of life mustn't diminish the enjoyment of one's life.

Jewish expositors, you know, think that Ecclesiastes is a book about joy. They say it that way. And as I read these passages, I think you will see why.

[15 : 21] Chapter 2, verse 24. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat, who will have any food to eat, or who can have enjoyment.

For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. Okay. Okay. Okay. Note that. And look on now to chapter 3, verse 12. Where are we? Page 554 of the Old Testament.

Oh, thank you, Leonor. Okay. Now, Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verse 12. And that's not all.

Look on to verse 22 of the same chapter. I saw that there's nothing better than that a man should rejoice at his work.

[16 : 45] But that's his lot. Nothing better than that. And then again, chapter 5, verse 18. This is what you read.

Behold, what I've seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun.

The few days of his life that God has given him. This is man's lot. Gift of God. And then chapter 8, verse 15.

I commend joy. Have you ever noticed that Ecclesiastes commends joy? Well, he does. I commend joy.

For man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful. This will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

[17 : 45] All sorts of bad things around him. But this is the good thing that God has given him. I commend joy.

Yeah. And that's not all. Chapter 9 now, verses 7 through 9. Go. Eat your bread in joy. And drink your wine with a merry heart.

For God has already approved what you do. This is a word to the person who is laboring. Laboring or committed, shall I say, to serve God.

Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Live life, in other words, as a sort of celebration of goodness. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he's given you under the sun.

Because that's your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. And under the sun, your toil may not seem very significant.

[18 : 56] But before the Lord. It's the fulfilling of your calling. And as you toil, take joy.

For that's God's gift. And it comes up yet again in chapter 10, verse 19.

Bread is made for laughter and wine gladdens life. That really underlines what he's already just said. And then chapter 11, verses 8 and 9 and 10.

If a person lives many years, verse 8, let him rejoice in them all. Although let him remember that the days of darkness will be many.

Life isn't going to be a bed of roses. But if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all. And then verse 9. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth.

[20 : 04] Let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. Enjoy yourself. That's what he's saying.

And then verse 10. Remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body. Although youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

And are full of things that you can get depressed about. But you see what he's saying. Joy is the gift of God.

Ask for it. Take it. Gab it. Grab it. If I may put it that way. And well, the badness of things around mustn't diminish our enjoyment of life.

Enjoyment of the good things of life. And then I said, we mustn't let the bewilderments of life discourage us from enterprise in life.

[21 : 13] Towards the end of the book, the writer touches again and again on the fact that enterprise is essential to the good life.

You set yourself goals. You're doing something as distinct from doing nothing. You have aims in the tasks that you set yourself.

You have achievements in the tasks that you set yourself. If you look to the tasks for enjoyment, just as the things that you're doing, well, it's all going to go sour on you.

Chapter 2, which we looked at last time, underlines that. That's where the writer pretends to be or acts the part of Solomon and says, I did everything.

I was as rich as Croesus. I was able to indulge every whim. And I looked to the things I was doing for joy and satisfaction.

[22 : 19] And none of them brought it to me. No, he's not saying that. What he's saying is, as I labor to do things that seem worthwhile, so I look to God for joy and I shall find it.

I shall take joy in my labor. I shall take joy in my enterprise. So, chapter 9, verse 10.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. Put your back into it. Work as hard as you can. The joy will come as you do that.

And you've got a number of words of encouragement at the beginning of chapter 11 along the same line. There are pictures here, of course.

But all the pictures are saying the same thing. 11, verse 1. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. What you start doing may not seem very hopeful, but it will produce results.

[23 : 33] And then, verse 2. Give a portion to 7 or even to 8, for you don't know what disaster may happen on earth.

If you want that put in economic terms, spread your investments, because any of them may go wrong. But it's saying more than that.

Just spread your generosity. That's the point that the writer is making. Spread your generosity. Because you don't know what particular endeavors that you make in some department may come to grief.

Some will, though some won't. And then in verse 6 of chapter 11, he says, In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand.

For you don't know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. The fruit is a matter of God's decision, and you can't control that decision.

[24 : 49] You can't foresee it. But nonetheless, if you're enterprising in the way that you sow, some of the seed will come up and be fruitful.

Some of your endeavor will show itself, even in this life, to have been worthwhile. And then the final thing, don't let the bewilderments of life distract you from early godliness, early commitment to be the Lord's servant.

That's the message of chapter 12, where the writer begins to speak particularly to young men.

Young men for young people of both sexes, of course. And says, remember your creator in the days of your youth, before you begin to come apart at the seams as in old age.

We can't help doing. And he has a lovely, vivid, allegorical passage here about the onset of old age and the different forms of weakness that it brings.

[26 : 08] Well, this is the thrust of the second half of the book of Ecclesiastes. Don't let the bewilderments of life, which frustrate you, which disappoint you, which encourage you to be aimless and scatterbrained, which give you the feeling that life isn't worth living, so that you cease trying.

Don't let any of those things keep you from enjoyment and enterprise and early godliness, because you'll lose your joy if you do.

Well, that is a bird's eye view of the message of these chapters. The rest of our time will be spent zooming in on specific details of the way he expounds these thoughts.

And the layout of the material changes now from what I've just said. And from chapter 7, verse 1 to chapter 9, verse 6, the central truth, the central reality that he's talking about is the worth of wisdom. And that's the heading in my notes, the worth of wisdom. And then from chapter 9, verse 7, down to chapter 12, verse 8, the heading in my notes is the way of wisdom.

[28 : 00] And he's going to tell us that the way of wisdom is first to enjoy. You've seen him saying that.

Cultivate contentment and joy as you go. That's God's way. And act. Do what you tackle. Well, tackle things and do them with your might. Put your back into them. Work hard. Aim at something worth doing.

And you will find that joy goes with you as you do it. And wisdom, he says, will bring you success in your everyday actions.

Your everyday quest for worthwhile achievement. And wisdom will bring you enjoyment in that form of everyday living.

[29 : 06] Wisdom brings success. Wisdom brings enjoyment. He actually says wisdom will bring some success. Wisdom helps one to succeed.

There he is, saying it explicitly. Well, that's the second division of these concluding chapters. The worth of wisdom.

The way of wisdom. And then, finally, something that we've already looked at. The word of wisdom. Chapter 12, verse 13.

That's the word of wisdom. The end of the matter. The end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments. For this is the whole business of life.

And here, I think, is the moment to say, the writer uses the phrase, or the verb, fear.

[30 : 18] Fear. And then the noun. The fear of God. He uses that to describe the life of faith. We need to realize that that's what he's doing.

Fearing God. It's a standard Old Testament phrase, as a matter of fact. It isn't a matter of terror. It isn't a matter of shuddering in God's presence.

It isn't a matter of losing sleep in anxiety as to what may happen. It's a matter, rather, of awe and reverence for the great God.

Greater than you can understand. That's where it starts. It's a word for the worship of God.

Let worship and adoration be the temper of your life. And it's a word for obedience and service of God. Doing his will as you understand it, discern it, and as you perceive, you can please him by doing it.

[31 : 37] And this, again, is a point to which he's recurred again and again, all through the book, right from chapter 3, verse 14.

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it.

God has done it. That's a declaration of the sovereignty of God. He isn't answerable to us. He doesn't tell us what he has in mind and a great many of the things that he actually does in his providence.

And we have to be content to live without knowing what God is up to in many different departments of the world's life.

But God has done it, says the writer. This is the closing words of verse 14. God has done it so that people fear before him.

[32 : 47] Well, that fear is awe and reverence for the God who is so much greater than we can grasp. And chapter 5, verse 7, comes back to the same theme.

When dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. It's easy to live on unrealistic fancies. Fantasies. That's the point that he's making. But, last words of the verse, God is the one you must fear.

Be a realist. Acknowledge that God is in charge. And accept what comes from his hand. Then in chapter 7 and verse 18, there's a further touch on the same theme.

It's good that you should take hold of this, and from that withdraw not your hand. In other words, be guided by wisdom in what you do, rather than trying to take advantage of ongoing circumstances which you don't understand anyway, because you see they're in the hands of God.

[34 : 15] It's good that you pursue your enterprise, as God calls you to do, for the one who fears God.

Got it? The one who fears God shall come out from both of them. In other words, worthwhile endeavors will bring joy.

Joy in the knowledge that one was involved, engaged, in worthwhile endeavors, and joy in the good that comes out of them.

Not everything will prosper. No, that's true. But some things will. And there is matter for joy, as he tells us in chapter 11. We've already quoted that.

And then, once again, in chapter 8, verse 12. Having said, though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, so that it looks as if God isn't concerned with what he's been doing. [35 : 27] No judgment has fallen on him. He seems to be doing all right, although the things that he's actually engaged in are bad.

Yet, second half of the verse, chapter 8, verse 12, I know that it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him.

But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like shadow because he doesn't fear before God. The end of the day for him will be sorrow.

The end of the day for those who fear God, however, will be joy. It will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him in the way that we are all of us called to do.

Well, those are the touches which the writer gives to the theme of fearing God. And I would love at this point to jump into the New Testament and talk about the hope that is embedded at the heart of the life of faith as it's revealed to us in the New Testament through the resurrection and ascension and enthronement of our Lord Jesus and the promises of glory in him, through him, with him. [37 : 01] We know something of those promises. We live in the joy of knowing that they're true. Well, that takes us beyond the Ecclesiastes experience.

Sure it does. But nonetheless, in the Old Testament set up, they're sufficient in the it's expressed in the words I know that it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him. They've put their destiny in his hands and they are content to wait and see what reward and joy that he has in store for them.

Well, even that, the Old Testament principle, the Old Testament pattern of the life of faith, that's enough to bring joy, that's enough to bring fulfillment and contentment and a peaceful life. Yes, that's what the writer is telling us there. So, where are we? We are on, as we set ourselves to fear God, we are on track for what the New Testament teaches us to call glory. [38 : 29] people. And, I'm deliberately saying this without reference to our Lord Jesus Christ through whom it all becomes reality.

Okay, suffice it to say then that the fear of God is the way of wisdom, the summons to fear God is the word of wisdom, the fear of God, that is the life of faith, is what life should be about for all of us, with all one reverence, with worship and adoration, with obedience and service.

Yes, that's the track on which we are to travel. That's the way we are called to go. And, everything counts and will finally be assessed in a way which shows whether it was good and godly or whether it was self-serving and so neither good nor godly.

You see, this writer is concerned that his readers, all the people he teaches, should have the right sense of direction and the right sense of proportion and the right sense of purpose in life. That's what he's on about in all these passages. Well, now, let's go back to chapter 7 through 9 verse 6 where it's the worth of wisdom that he's presenting to us and he has two thoughts to give us, two thoughts which we need after the first six chapters of the book which have piled up the sad story of things that are vanity and evil and just not good. [40 : 50] First thought, wisdom shows us the things that are better than other things. Wisdom, in other words, shapes our value system.

so far, that is in the first six chapters, this ministry of wisdom has been waiting in the wings but it hasn't been brought out yet as part of the exposition.

Now, however, the writer says, I'm going to bring it out and you will see how wisdom shows us that some things are better than other things, shaping our value system, as I said.

Well, from chapter 7, 1, to chapter 7, 12, or perhaps 13, it's a poem, a Hebrew poem, and in the Bible it's set out that way, and the word better is the key word of the thoughts that are piled up there.

a good name, verse 1, is better than precious ointment. Yes. And the day of death than the day of birth.

[42 : 13] Really? Well, let him go on. It's better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for death is the end of all mankind kind, and the living will lay it to heart.

Thought, if you're going to be a realist, face the fact that life doesn't go on forever. We've only got a relatively brief life in which to make the most we can of things, be a realist in facing that fact and making your plans accordingly.

Then there's this, verse 3, sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

Again, really? Well, yes, what he's concerned to do here is to make realists out of this.

And he's overstating the point in order to stick it firm and fast in our minds. There are people who go through life on laughter.

[43 : 29] In other words, they are giggling their way through day by day. They are not at any stage thinking seriously about their life.

They're not at any stage thinking seriously about the fear of God. They are living frivolously on the surface of things. That's his point.

And that's the point which he's underlining in verse 4. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, whereas the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

And then call to humility in verse 5. Humility is good. it's better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.

Well, yes, one can live one's life listening to and thinking about pop music, but the song of fools, well, that's his phrase.

[44 : 34] And it really is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise and think about the realities of life in a sober way than always to hanker to be entertained by the song of fools, song, that is, that doesn't deal with the realities of life at all.

As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools, this also is vanity, he says.

Well, yes, you see what his point is. The life of giggling is rather distressing to those who themselves are trying to take life seriously under God and who wish that other people would do the same and perhaps are praying that folk close to them will do the same and the fools go on giggling and it's like the crackling of thorns under a pot.

And so he goes on in verse 8, better is the end of a thing than its beginning. The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. No comment needed, I think, on any of that.

And then verse 10, a negative, don't say why were the former days better than these? Chances are they weren't.

And he says it's not from wisdom that you ask this. he wants to keep us from nostalgia. And I must say I think that he's tremendously insightful in doing that.

[46 : 19] People who look back to the old days when they tell themselves, they kid themselves really that everything in the garden was lovely, they are not being wise because it really wasn't like that.

but you know nostalgia because we meet nostalgia in society and we find nostalgia rising in our own minds and hearts.

Why were the former days better than these? It's not from wisdom that you ask this. Really, they weren't. Be a realist. And on he goes.

Wisdom is good with an inheritance. It's an advantage to those who see the sun. When you've got wisdom guiding you, you're in a better position than when you haven't.

And then verse 12, the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money. well, yes, this writer is a realist about that too. When you have a little something in the bank, you're going to be happier than if you've got nothing in the bank.

[47 : 38] And well, this is the way he says it. And the advantage of knowledge, we're halfway through verse 12 now, the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life.

of him who has it. Wisdom teaches to anticipate things going wrong and prepare for it.

Wisdom would teach us all, for instance, to have earthquake materials ready, stored somewhere in the house, just in case the big one comes in our lifetime.

And some of us have done that, and some of us haven't. confession is good for the soul. I must confess that my wife and I haven't got round to it yet. By this writer's standards, we're not doing too well at that point.

But you see what I mean? The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom, if you let wisdom guide you, preserves the life of those who have it. restrain.

[48 : 46] And then, from verses 13 down to 18, he's saying in a bit of fancy, which is too elaborate or too subtle to explain now.

I've almost, you see, finished my time. But there he's saying in those verses, be realistic and restrained before God. Restraint, not overdoing things, is a part of what wisdom directs. And so it does. Well, there's wisdom, samples of wisdom, showing us what's better, what things are better than other things.

Very down to earth, very factual, but fundamental to the good life.

The good life is a sensible life, and we must labor to live sensibly. And then, verses 19, right through to chapter 9, verse 6, we can't look at this in detail, but it's an elaboration, that part of it is an elaboration of the second thought about the worth of wisdom, namely, that wisdom gives strength, as is actually said in verse 19 of chapter 7, wisdom gives strength to the wise man, more than ten rulers in a city, wisdom gives strength to accept and live with unpleasing things, all those unpleasing aspects of life that were detailed for us in chapters 1 through 6, and the rest.

[50 : 46] He goes on to add a few more, which he hasn't dealt with yet. Wisdom gives strength to accept things, live with things that we wish were different.

you know, that famous prayer, I can't remember whose prayer it is, but it is famous even if it has to go down or if it has to appear in this talk anonymously, say I've forgotten, God, give me strength to change what can be changed and to accept what cannot be changed and to know the difference. Have you ever heard that prayer, used that prayer, internalized that prayer? There's so much wisdom in that, and to know the difference.

Yes, wisdom gives strength to live with the things that can't be changed and, well, there's a lot of detail which we just can't look at because time is beating us.

Jump on with me then to the way of wisdom as it's laid out for us in this here a little there a little style which the author is pursuing laid out for us in chapter 9, verse 7 through chapter 12, verse 8.

[52 : 21] I said, say again, the way of wisdom has two centers, two foci or focuses, enjoy everything that God gives us to enjoy, cultivate contentment, that's the first thing.

If we look around us, we shall find that God is giving us all sorts of good things which we never noticed. Well, notice them, says the writer, and give thanks for them, be grateful for them, enjoy them, and cultivate contentment with the life that includes them.

That's the life you're living now. there are some people who can never believe that they're living a good life. When I say good, I mean enjoyable rather than moral.

They can't believe that they're living a life that's full of joyful things. They don't notice the joyful things because they're always glooming about the things that are wrong and the discomforts of their life.

Change that, says the writer. Do better. And then act with enterprise. We've talked a bit about that. And don't postpone commitment to God.

[53 : 48] What he's getting at in chapter 12, and indeed in the last verses of chapter 11, is the un wisdom of saying to yourself, oh well, religion, serious godliness, I'll take that up later.

But for the moment it must wait because there are other things that I want to do first. Well, says the writer, and implies the writer, if you allow yourself to say that when you're young, you will end up in trouble and this is the form that the trouble will take.

Chapter 12, verse 1. Evil days will come, the years will draw near, of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them, and something will be happening to you, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for you at this late stage in your life to start taking God and godliness seriously.

You know the passage, I'm sure. It's picturing old age, its onset, as like an old decaying house that's beginning to come apart at the seams in the way that neglected houses do.

I'm going to read this through with detailed comments. Evil days will come, and years will draw near, in which you will say, I have no pleasure in them, before the sun, and this is the picture now, the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened.

[55 : 58] You don't find that you've got it in you to appreciate new light on anything. And the clouds return after the rain.

it looks as if there's going to be more trouble in store for you and you haven't got resources to, or reserves to do anything to avoid it.

In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, that's when your legs begin to wobble and you need a cane to walk with, and the strong men are bent.

Yes, you are a hunched person and your legs bend too. You can't stand up straight anymore.

And the grinders cease because they are few. You've only got a few teeth left and they don't meet so you can't actually masticate.

[57 : 04] those who look through the windows are dimmed, your sight begins to go, and the doors on the street are shut.

I think, though the commentators are sixes and sevens on this one, I think that means that your mouth, that's the door on the street, the mouth through which you talk in order to relate to people and things around you, your mouth falls in because of the lack of teeth and you can't think of things to say.

You're in company and they're talking all around you and well, you're just standing there and you don't think of things to say so you don't speak, you're not part of the conversation, you're out of it. The doors on the street community are shut. The sound of the grinding is low, you're trying to eat your soft food, you can't do it with any vigour and when you rise up at the sound of a bird, it takes a very small sound to give you a start and make you feel shock, a sense of shock.

All the daughters of song are brought low, you don't enjoy music the way that you used to, you're afraid of what's high, yes, your sense of balance is gone, terrors are in the way, whenever you go out you're scared because you're not mobile any longer and a whole lot of things that are there, outside yourself become terrors, they become realities that can do you harm because you can't dodge them, the almond tree blossoms, your hair goes white, the grasshopper drags itself along, as I said you're not mobile, you're travelling very slowly, probably with a cane, a walker, and desire fails, yes, you're on your way to your eternal home because man is going to his eternal home, it says, and before you know where you are, the mourners will go about the street and the mourners are there for you because your life has come to an end, and that's what verses 6 through 7 are all about, it isn't that there's any particular silver cord that he's thinking of now, he's simply saying, however precious the cord that holds things, ties things together, think of any use of cord or string that you like, the cord that binds things together may be of silver, precious cord, cord of life, but it's going to snap, the golden bowl, well, the bowl made of gold, it's precious, yeah, but it's going to break, the pitcher, very necessary for collecting water at the well, the fountain, the pitcher is going to be shattered, the wheel will be broken at the cistern so that the, what am I trying to say, the well won't work, the well wheel is gone, you can't wind up the bucket, the wheel is broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to

[61 : 14] God who gave it, and life is over, and says the writer in effect, this is reading between his lines, but it's what he wants us to read between his lines, I don't want any of you who read my stuff, think about it, to come to the end of life, and have to say, oh, how much wiser I should have been, how much better, as a believer, I might have done, and it's too late now, I can't do anything about any of it, vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity, fog, mist, steam, you can't see through it, and you've lived your life not seeing

God's way, and now life's over, and it's too late to do anything about it. Yes, that is a sombre thought to finish on, but remember what he's rounding off is a celebration of the path of wisdom and joy, and that's what you and I should be holding on to.

That's the wisdom that he wants us to take away from our study of his book. That's the light into which these last six chapters of his book lead us.

And that's what I wanted you with me to see and rejoice in as we finish our study of Ecclesiastes, which now we do.

We can talk a little about this. We've got a bit of time. Thoughts? It's a strange book, but it's done my heart good.

[63 : 31] Is there anyone else here, I wonder, whose heart has been done good by Ecclesiastes? I'm glad to see those raised hands.

Thank you.