

One Shepherd

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

- [0 : 0 0] Well, I want to echo James' welcome to you. Happy Valentine's Day to you as well. And certainly we hear today about the love of God for us, so it's appropriate.
- And as you may know, this is the last series on our book of Ecclesiastes. It is a book that has been an adventure to go through, I think.
- It pokes us, it prods us, it in some ways might be frustrating to us, as well, but it also surprises us with God's joy.
- It humbles us by reminding us that there is a God who's in charge, and it is not me. It takes the pressure off. And through it all, this book leads us to Jesus, who alone can fill our deepest longings and our deepest needs that we have, needs that are beautifully described in this passage as well.
- So I'd like you to turn to your Bibles now. If you've got a Bible nearby, grab it. It'll be very important. We're looking at Ecclesiastes 11.5 through 12.4.
- [1 : 1 1] And if you are a young person watching this today, this passage is especially for you. Because King Solomon, who's lived this very long and full life, very powerful, rich person, at the end of this book, he wants to share his wisdom with a young person in his life.
- And perhaps it's his grandson, or it's somebody that he knows well, somebody who has their whole life ahead of him, as you do, and who will be helped by his advice.
- And it is advice that changes your life. Now, if you've been listening over the last few weeks, you know that the preacher loves this word, vanity.
- It's actually a hard word to translate, as we've said. It means a mere breath or vapor. And he has experienced all that life has to offer, because he's so wealthy and powerful, but he sees that there is a meaninglessness about life.
- He's frustrated about a lack of significance to the things that he is doing and experiencing. It's a bit like me shoveling snow yesterday.
- [2 : 2 5] In the driving snow, I shoveled and shoveled and shoveled, and by the time I finished, the first part that I was starting with looked the same as it did when we started.
- And not only that, I found out that I was throwing some of that snow onto the part I'd shoveled earlier. That's hevel. That's meaninglessness. And this is what is right about what the preacher is saying, that everything in life is meaningless if there is nothing but what is under the sun.
- But this passage is going to tell us that there is much more. There is the life under heaven. God himself from heaven changes everything.
- He brings the deepest and weightiest meaning to every part of our lives. He knows you perfectly, the numbers of hairs on your head, and you are significant to him.
- And so I want to point out three words of advice that he gives you young people, and it's good for us to be listening in too, as those who are older, he gives you three words that change your life.

- [3 : 42] They all start with R. He says, rejoice. There are awesome things about being young. Rejoice in them. Secondly, remember.
- There is a God who created you. Remember to make him the most important thing in your life, especially when you go through the hard times of life. And thirdly, he says, restore.
- Let God restore your relationship with him by loving him, listening to him speak to you, and obeying you, because you will see him face to face one day.
- So I want to start with that word rejoice, verses 11, 5 through 10, because here the preacher says that your life is an awesome gift.
- Look at verse 5. He says, we are wonderfully made in a way that's hard to fathom. We don't know, he says, the way that the spirit comes into the bones in the womb of a woman with child.
- [4 : 44] And so you don't know the work of God who makes everything. You see, he's saying, you are made in God's image from when you were first growing inside your mother.
- Now, the science textbooks tell you about the physical process, but it tells you nothing about what God has done, how God has made your soul, how he has made you in his image, how you can know God and love him.
- He has designed you to enjoy the good things that are in creation. Light, he says, is sweet. And he says, it's pleasant for the eyes to look upon, to see the sun.
- So what should you do? Well, verse 8 says, take joy in all the years that you have. Verse 9 says, 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. You see, your friendships, your families, the good things in your life are meant to be celebrated as gifts from God and enjoyed.
- [6 : 02] So laugh more, hug more, cheer someone up more that needs it. It's the opposite of being negative and cutting down and complaining about people in your life and the situations you face.
- You see, rejoicing is not about fulfilling every desire that I might have. It's always connected with what is good. As one commentator put it, rejoicing and God's goodness dance together, always.
- And we do that by remembering that God will judge you and me one day. He will bring everything to light. The good things and the bad in our lives.
- Are you enjoying the opportunities and the gifts and the people that God has given to you? And you know, that rejoicing is so very important in your life because it will help prepare you for your life ahead.
- For the dark days that he says are sure to come. Verse 10 says, this is also the time to remove bitterness and pain, which is also translated as evil, from your lives.
- [7 : 15] And we do that by the forgiveness of our sins, by praying for healing. If you don't, it takes root and comes out in those hard times.
- The time is now because youth and the dawn of life are fleeting. They're temporary. So don't try to hold on to youth after its time. Instead, rejoice now in what God has given.
- And take this opportunity to be healed in the forgiveness of your sins. There's wisdom in this for all of us because it's true for any good season in your life.
- Christians need to be good at the art of taking joy in all God's goodness, big and small, throughout his creation. Well, we have opportunity.
- And that brings us to the second R. Besides rejoicing, 12, 1 through 7, tell the young person to remember. Now look at verse, look at chapter 12, verse 1.

[8 : 16] It says, Remember 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.

You see, this remembering is about a personal relationship with God who is your creator. He teaches this to you who are young because it's very easy to forget God with all of the new and exciting situations and experience that you are facing.

It's easy to enjoy creation without enjoying the creator. You can ignore that creator. And yet, that is where your identity comes from.

That is where the goodness in life that you are meant to enjoy comes from first and foremost. Now that word remember is a strong word. It doesn't mean just memorizing something that's kind of irrelevant that you'll never use in life.

It doesn't have much to do with you. And when I thought of this, I thought of a job that I had until very recently. I had a side job. I was hired as a grade 10 math tutor until last week.

[9 : 32] And I was hired by my son Nicholas. Now the pay was not very good and that's partly because I was learning grade 10 math as I was tutoring. But, I found out many important things.

I found out very important things about equations of linear functions and that there are formulas to remember. There are point-slope forms.

There are slope-intercept forms. There's the general form as well. Nicholas did a very good job of memorizing them and I memorized them as well. But I can tell you that this will have no bearing on my everyday life.

I haven't used them since high school and I'm almost certain that I will never use them again. With apologies to any engineers that are out there. But I want to tell you that to remember the Creator is very, very different.

It is about bringing God into absolutely every part of your life. In the Psalms, to remember God is to set Him above every joy, the greatest joy that you have in your life.

[10 : 50] This is important wisdom. Pay attention to this. Think about what brings you the greatest happiness in your life. And now decide that God will be more important to you.

This is what it means to remember. And Jesus says, that's why Jesus says to think of Himself and His kingdom as the greatest of all treasures. The thing that's worth selling all your goods and buying.

That is what remembering is. Do this now before it's too late, before you become hardened and the hardship of life overtakes you. Now I think the preacher is being very kind and caring here to this young person.

He thinks a lot of them. He is teaching him to know God as His highest joy before he tells him the bad news, which is in verses 2 through 8.

He tells him that as life goes on, your body is going to gradually give out and you will die along with every person in this world.

[12 : 01] And that is so important because death is something that our society is in denial about. Because there are no answers under the sun to death. We even have today something called biohackers, which are people who are trying to hack the aging process.

There's one guy who says, I can guarantee you, you're going to live 180 years. And this is a denial of death. We don't want to even say the word death because it's harsh to us.

And so we usually use the word passing or being in a better place or resting in peace. But the preacher wants this young person to be really clear about what death is.

And he uses graceful poetry to describe how everybody's bodies slowly let us down and death is ahead of all of us. They're memorable words. In verse 2, he says, getting close to death is like a storm that used to clear up over time.

But this time, it comes back and it stays. It stays dark and cloudy. And then verses 3 through 5 says that aging is like this big home.

[13 : 15] And there's different people who are experiencing what it means for your body to break down. And I think it's wonderful that he says, remember God in this kind of household.

People slowly wear down in different ways. Some people become bent in this household. Some grinders, which is their teeth, fall out. Eyes are dimmed.

The hearing gets worse in these images. Different fears begin here. And it says as we go along here that hair turns like almond blossom color.

And in the ancient Near East, those almond blossoms were white. Here in Vancouver, I think there are probably many different colors from what I see. There is this image then of a grasshopper dragging itself along to show the great difficulty that some will have in moving around as they get towards the end of their life.

And then there is this desire that can fade about wanting to even live. And then finally, he uses these beautiful images in verses 6 and 7 to show that precious things are being destroyed with death.

[14 : 27] It describes the moment of death. So the silver cord, so precious, is snapped. and a golden bowl of such great value is broken. All life is immensely valuable, he is saying here, and death shatters it.

It's not right. And the last images are of a pitcher and a pulley wheel at a well or a fountain, and they're broken so that water, which is essential to life, isn't any longer available.

In all this process, you can see in verse 7, death is final. The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Well, these are vivid, poetic images, and it tells this young person how real death and dying is.

And it is helpful wisdom, because if we are clear about this, we will know the reality that we are dependent upon God for our very life. our greatest need is to remember that God is our creator, and actually to place ourselves into his hands.

[15 : 42] This is wise humility. And you know, there is a great frustration about death for this preacher. He says at the end here, verse 8, vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

All is vanity. He's saying death is so meaningless. Why do people have to die? And he's experiencing this truth that God did not intend this for creation.

Death and decay came into the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience. And we are under that curse. We are under that judgment, so there is a loss of meaning.

There is a deep frustration. All is meaningless if death has the final say. It's not the way it should be. I had a friend at my first church in Pender Harbor.

This was 30 years ago. Can't believe it now, but he was well into his 90s. And I was a young person, and he had lots of wisdom. He had a wonderful, positive attitude for life, and he had lived a very interesting and active life.

[16 : 49] And I learned a lot from him. He was a much loved teacher and principal, and his students still came to him. They were retired themselves, and they'd visit him. And he was also a world class mountaineer who had planned to attempt the first climb of Mount Everest in 1937, except his partner died in a climbing accident just weeks before they were going to leave.

So here's this guy with all these incredible experiences, and he was in great shape in his life for his age, but he was definitely slowing down. And we used to go for short walks near his home.

One day, we talked about aging and what it meant for him. And what he said was, you know, there's so many things that I want to do, but I'm frustrated because my body won't let me.

And I asked him, what do you feel like inside? What age do you feel like right now? And he said right away, 18 years old.

That's what I feel like inside. And I wasn't surprised because he had a vitality in him that was so different from what was happening to his body. And that brought us to talk about the resurrection of the body and what that might look like, what joy that would be.

[18 : 12] And you see what that conversation was about. Death is not the way it is supposed to be. There is a true frustration here. And that frustration leads us to this passage in the New Testament that is closely associated with our book of Ecclesiastes.

It's Romans 8, 19. And what does Paul say here? He says that creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God.

For the creation was subjected to futility, pebble, meaninglessness, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption, obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of child birth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we eagerly await the adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies.

You see, this is where the preacher leads us. He leads us to Jesus and his gospel in his frustration. You see, he with all creation longed to see death overturned.

[19 : 39] They longed to find meaning. And here we see the meaning for all of creation. creation. Here is God's plan, his great purpose, that Jesus frees us in all of creation from the curse of death by the forgiveness of our sins.

His hope surrounds us and it is certain. It is certain that we will be adopted as daughters and sons and that he will redeem, he will free us, he will free our bodies.

This is the goal, this is the meaning of all of life, of what God is doing. And that brings us to our final point that I'll end with.

It is the word after rejoice and remember, it is the word restore. Verse 9 to the end tells us, let God restore you.

And here's how he does it. The preacher in verse 10 looks for words of delight and words of truth that are like goads. Now goads are like sharp sticks that prod cattle or sheep forward to where the shepherd wants them to go.

[20 : 51] And so what's written here is given by God the shepherd to prod and to move the young person and us towards Jesus who is the good shepherd, the one shepherd.

Jesus is both under the sun and he is under heaven. Heaven and earth come together in Jesus. When he came to earth, this is the gift that he brought.

And so the incredible news is this, that Jesus came and brought the weight of glory into our lives by restoring our relationship with the eternal God.

Here is the gift of Jesus. This is the kind of weight gain that you want on Valentine's Day. When we have peace with God by Jesus forgiveness, the weight of eternity floods our lives.

His word shapes us forever and they prepare us for an eternal life with God in heaven. And so the preacher says all my writings are summarized by really two very short commands.

[22 : 05] Fear God, and fear is a big word, it means revere or depend on him, honor him, obey him, worship and praise him, love God. It means to set him above all of your joys.

And then the second thing is very simply this, keep his commandments. Which means walk in the eternal ways of God. Because in doing this you're going to grow in his eternal love.

You will be prepared for heaven. You will help others into the eternal life. You will move them towards heaven. And God's goodness will lead you home, as we sang earlier in our service.

And he ends by saying, look, this is the whole duty of humanity. And you know that word duty is not in the original. So he actually writes, this is what makes humanity whole.

evil. This is how you live out eternal life now. It is the weighty life, the very opposite of vanity and heaven. Jesus will judge us at the end of our life.

[23 : 14] He will praise us, as we hear in the last verses of our book, if we walk in these eternal ways. Listen to this, God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

You know, many things that we thought on that judgment day were very insignificant that we did behind the scenes. Something we said to somebody, a way that we served, the things that we prayed about, we think these are not very significant in the world.

But we will discover that they were greater than the greatest empires that stand and fall. And maybe the things that the world thought were great that we were doing meant nothing at all.

They actually were hebel. We will find that out in that judgment day. So may we live for the eternally significant weighty things today by the help of the Holy Spirit.

For the great purpose of God is that we will see Jesus in all of his glory. That we will be like him. That we will know him and love him forever.

[24 : 29] This is the deepest reason to rejoice. Jesus is the reason and the way that we remember, remember God, set him on the highest place in our life.

And this is the way, Jesus himself, that we are restored forever. And so we do not lose heart, as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4.

though our outer selves are wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison.

As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, they're often hebel, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Amen. And now, that is the intent of the byway individual to the followers.

[25 : 31] Thank you so much for caring for caring for doing this. I think this is the right thing I really need. I think this is the right of everything that I do.