

Bitter Despair or Believing Delight?

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- [0 : 0 0] We're going to turn now to God's Word, and we're in the book of Ecclesiastes this morning. Do turn to chapter 1. Ecclesiastes chapter 1, I'm reading from verse 12 this morning.
- So we're reading here, and we're reading through to the end of chapter 2. So Ecclesiastes 1 from verse 12.
- And to know madness and folly. I perceive that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation.
- And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure.
- Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, it is mad. And of pleasure, what use is it? I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine.
- [2 : 0 5] My heart still guiding me with wisdom. And how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.
- I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted them, all kinds of fruit trees.
- I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought female and male slaves and had slaves who were born in my house.
- I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.
- I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.
- [3 : 0 8] Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept from my heart no pleasure.
- For my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was the reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had expended in doing it.
- And behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. So I turned to consider wisdom, madness, and folly.
- For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, and there is more gain in light than in darkness.
- The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet, I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.
- [4 : 1 5] Then I said in my heart, what happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.
- For of the wise, as of the fool, there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come, all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool.

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

I hated all my toil, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled, and use my wisdom under the sun.

This also is vanity. So I turned about, and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun.

[5 : 18] Because sometimes a person who is toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill, must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity, and a great evil.

What has a man from all the toil and striving of his heart with which he toils under the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation.

Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. 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 or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

But to the sinner, he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

[6 : 25] Amen. May God bless to us his words this morning. Well, good morning everyone.

Do pick up your Bibles and turn to the passage that we read together there, beginning at verse 12 of Ecclesiastes chapter 1. I see many are away on holiday this week for the school holiday.

Hope the weather remains good for them. And also for us who are here. Welcome to the congregations in Bath Street and in Queen's Park. And it's good, isn't it, to join together as one around God's word this Sunday morning.

Verse 12 then. I, the preacher. Literally, I, Koheleth. It's a name. It's a title. Who have been king in Jerusalem.

Probably not Solomon himself. Verse 16 there you'll see speaks about all the kings before him. There was only one king in Jerusalem before Solomon.

[7 : 31] That was David. But whoever he is, he is clearly aligning himself with all the kingly wisdom. Certainly evoking memories of that wise king par excellence, Solomon.

As if to say, well, I'm speaking with all possible regal wisdom and authority. I really do know what I'm talking about. Obviously, somebody later has finally gathered the preacher's words together for us.

That's clear, isn't it, from verse 1. It's also clear from the epilogue at the end of the book in chapter 12. So the final author has brought this preacher's message together for a later generation of God's people.

Rather like somebody does today in the collected writings of some famous theologian or whatever. And so that begs the question for us, well, who was it first done for?

And it seems likely that it was for the Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. Now we know quite a lot, don't we, about their situation in life from books of the Bible like Ezra and Nehemiah, from the prophets Haggai and Malachi and others, as well as, of course, from secular history.

[8 : 46] And the truth is they were quite a beleaguered people. Yes, they'd returned to the land of promise. Yes, the temple was rebuilt. But although the words of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and so on had been fulfilled in part, there was an awful lot that they hadn't yet seen fulfilled.

Remember how Ezra told us there was great joy when the temple was rebuilt, but there was also much weeping because it was so much less than they had hoped for.

So believing life for God's people is still very hard, just as it's still very hard for Christian believers today, longing for what's still to be fulfilled for us when the Lord Jesus returns.

And when God's timetable doesn't march to our tune, well, we find that hard, don't we? We want things now. We want it our way. And so we become very tempted, don't we, to pursue heaven that we want our way.

And that was a real temptation for the returning exiles. They found huge changes, actually, to the economic landscape in the 70 years they'd been in exile. Before, it had been a largely agrarian economy.

[10 : 02] But now, under the Persian Empire, it had become a trading commercial empire. Coinage, cash had become king. Credit lending had begun to fuel business life.

And land and property and so on had become very big business. Mortgages had become a big industry. Well, it really sounds rather familiar, doesn't it? And it seems that God's people, Israel, were becoming just as obsessed with financial security, with material gain and so on, as the rest of the world around them.

Fear and greed, profit and loss, income and capital. These have become the building blocks in the rat race of life. So much so that God was increasingly marginalized in practice.

With a little more than religious lip service being paid. It was a relentless striving for gain. That was really what mattered in people's lives.

Nehemiah chapter 13 tells us about the Sabbath day, which was the central institution of faithful observation for Old Testament saints. It was being squeezed out because, well, there was a need to do business just like everybody else.

[11 : 20] So you didn't lose out. So they were treading the wine presses. They were transporting commodities. They were selling in the markets just like all the rest of the world. Well, if Tesco's open and if Asda's open, then you're going to lose out if your shop isn't open too.

Or in the University of Jerusalem, if all your classmates were working away on the Sabbath. Well, if you don't do that, then you're never going to get a top degree. You won't be in the milk ground.

You won't be there up at the top getting jobs in these new accounting firms that are growing up everywhere to count all the money from these business transactions. So, yes, you know that it means you'll miss out on hearing God's word with a congregation of his people.

But once you've got on a bit, once you've achieved more, once you've got there, well, it'll be different and you can come back. There really isn't anything new under the sun as we saw last week in verse 9.

But you see, God said to his people through his prophet Malachi at that time, you're robbing me, all of you. But they were so blind and they didn't even see it.

[12 : 30] And just as Malachi warned God's people against seeking their prosperity and their future by their own strife, by their own toil, well, so Koheleth the preacher does exactly the same.

But he just does it in a different way. The prophets, they would point out the wickedness of abandoning God in that way. But the preacher here points out its sheer folly.

It's vain, he says. It's absurd. If you live like that, you're just chasing the wind. You're a fool. Friends, if we can't see the relevance of that same message today in our work-mad, progress-mad, profit-mad world, well, we're just as blind as they are.

Because it's a problem for every generation. Remember the Apostle James writing in the New Testament in James chapter 4. You say, he says, we'll go and do this and that in future.

And we'll make plans to make a profit. And yet, says James, you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? It's just a mist that appears for a little while and then it finishes.

[13 : 45] And yet you say, we'll do all these things. No, instead, he says, you should say, well, if the Lord wills, we'll live and do this and that.

But you boast in your arrogance. You're not taking God seriously at all. It's just the same, you see, because that is just the basic nature of human sin.

And even as believers, our natural drift is away from the truth and into delusion. Away from reality, where God is really at the center of all things in life, into fantasy, where if God is anywhere at all, he's just somewhere on the periphery.

But actually, our own lives are what takes center stage. That's just the first law of spiritual dynamics. Not that all things tend to entropy.

That's the second law of thermodynamics. But this is the same. All human hearts tend towards godlessness and selfishness left to themselves. The preacher states a very stark lecture in chapter 7, verse 29.

[14 : 49] God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. There's a constant tendency to sinful self-delusion.

Now, whether that's in the 5th century BC, like perhaps the first readers of this book, or in the 1st century AD, the readers that James was addressing, or indeed today, you and me in 21st century Britain, we all, left to ourselves, will drift into illusion.

And we live as if this world's human wisdom and this world's human achievements are our future, are our real profit and our gain, are our real hope in this life.

But that is all delusion. Utter self-deception. Oscar Wilde said this, The secret of life is to appreciate the pleasure of being terribly, terribly deceived.

And that is how so many people live their lives. Even often believers like us. The very people that this preacher is speaking to. God's people. And so his mission, you see, is all about dispelling that kind of delusion and deception and bring us back to reality.

[16 : 10] Back from a deceptive fantasy world that sin is always leading us into and leading us towards. And that's why this book speaks so powerfully to our world today. To Christian people.

To church people. Because so often, we're trapped on the treadmill of life. So often we are deceived, actually, into living lives of practical idolatry.

Robbing God. But also, also robbing ourselves of the joy in life that God wants us to have here on this earth. Of course, if you're not a Christian believer, well, of course, it also speaks very pointedly to you.

And you might have to realize, just like Oscar Wilde, that actually you have been purposely seeking pleasure in being terribly, terribly deceived.

So let's listen to the preacher. This most wise of men who gave all his earthly energies. Verse 13. Applied his whole heart to fathom the truth about life here on earth.

[17 : 15] And here's what he concludes. Human wisdom cannot control life. And human wisdom cannot capture life for profit. And so real human wisdom means coming to terms with life as it really is.

Let's look at these things in terms. First of all, in verses 12 to 18 of chapter 1, he tells us that human wisdom cannot control life. Even the greatest of earthly wisdom can't ever get control of life.

It can only clarify its utter vexation. Verse 18, the first half. In much wisdom is much vexation.

And therefore, the pursuit of wisdom in order to find lasting profit in life will only end in a severe headache. That's the second half of verse 18.

He who increases wisdom increases sorrow. See, the question of verse 3 is still in the air there.

[18 : 22] What does man actually gain in a lasting way from all his toil? And now the preacher summons all his wisdom to confront reality and to assess the real world as he sees it plainly.

And he begins in verses 13 to 18 here by stating his conclusion before demonstrating then how he gets to that by giving us examples in chapter 2 of his observations, his expert understanding.

A bit like an abstract at the beginning of a paper. It tells you the main findings. Now let's be clear. We need to be clear right at the start. The preacher in this book is not just a pessimist.

Many people think that, but he is not. He is not saying that all wisdom is just useless. In fact, in chapter 2, as we read, it's very clear. Wisdom is far better than folly, he says. Real wisdom is essential because actually it dispels folly and fantasy.

Real wisdom forces you to see the reality of what he talks about here in verse 15. That you can't get control of life. Look, what's crooked cannot be made straight.

[19 : 32] You can't get ultimate profit from your mortality. What's lacking, what's no longer there, can't be counted, can it? And real wisdom sees this. Real wisdom admits it.

And real wisdom knows why this is so. Verse 13. Look, because there's a God in heaven who is sovereign over everything that is under heaven.

And he, says the preacher, has given this vexed and frustrating life to human beings. How about that?

Well, that's the Bible's consistent teaching, plain teaching. God created a wonderful world for us. But because of our sin, because of our rebellion, well, right since the beginning, we have brought the world under a curse.

Go back and read Genesis 1 to 3. It's all there. Every arena of life is cursed with frustration. Our human relationships, our relationship to God.

[20 : 37] In fact, the whole of creation is cursed. Not totally destroyed by God, no. Not totally abandoned by God, no. In his mercy, he still has his hand of blessing upon this world.

Otherwise, it would be destroyed. But nevertheless, cursed. Subject to futility. As how the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans chapter 8. Until this whole creation is redeemed and renewed forever by God.

But only God can do that, can't he? And so viewed from a merely human perspective, verse 14, under the sun, everything will always be bound to futility.

It will be vanity. It will be just chasing the wind. And from within this world, the world's great problems are simply unsortable.

Verse 15, they can't ever be straightened out for good by human beings. And so the preacher's point is this. Unless you begin there with the Bible's view of the world, you won't ever find anything other than frustration and a life full of vexation.

[21 : 53] And that's what verses 16 to 18 are saying, isn't it? He turns now from wisdom's assessment of the world to look at wisdom and learning and education itself.

And he asks, where does it really get you in the end? Here's the world's greatest wisdom, verse 16. That of Solomon and all of his followers combined.

Can't be greater. Huge experience of wisdom and learning. And a wholehearted pursuit of that knowledge, verse 17. Applying my heart to it. And where does it get him?

Well, nothing but a disappearing puff of wind. Striving after wind. Nothing, verse 18, but headaches. More vexation. Increasing sorrow. And probably an ulcer to boot.

See, wisdom is good. Of course it is. But if it's honest wisdom that really sees the world as it is, then it will bring pain, won't it?

[22 : 55] Precisely because it removes all of these pleasurable delusions about life that we so often take refuge in. And unless you can learn to accept the Bible's view of life.

Come to terms with the real limitations of life that has to be lived. In a world that, yes, is full of God's blessings, but also is subject to his curse of ultimate fertility.

Unless we can embrace that reality. Then all our striving will bring only vexation. Sorrow. Dissatisfaction. A never-ending headache.

And that's the point that he wants us to grasp here. Because our world, you see, is intent on maintaining the delusion. Maintaining Oscar Wilde's pleasurable deceptions.

We do that. Why? Well, because the real truth is too painful for us. That's why the cosmetic industry makes us so fortunate of the delusion of making us feel we can stay young and beautiful.

[24 : 02] But in the end, no amount of creams for your face will make those crooked wrinkles straight. What's crooked? Can't be made straight. Botox might do it for a little while if you want to have a face like a stretch balloon.

But even that, in the end, won't work. Our governments are beset with the same delusions, aren't they? They think that they can legislate the world into utopia.

They think they can make the crooked straight by their policies. But they're forgetting, aren't they, the first law of spiritual dynamics. They're forgetting the many schemes of man.

That's why every new tax law brings two new tax loopholes. Because the crooked heart of man cannot be made straight by man.

Think of the NHS. Our NHS, sorry, we've got to call it now. More and more and more money is consumed by it all the time. And yet it gets no better. It just gets more strained.

[25 : 04] Why is that? Well, of course, we've got an aging population and all the rest of it. But it's far more to do with something deeper. With a human heart. And far more to do is specifically with our own culture's march away from Christian morality and Christian responsibility.

Back in the 1950s when it began, the NHS was seen as a privilege. It was respected. It was well used by people. Now, well, it's a divine right that I should have everything I want exactly when I want.

And it's wantonly abused by so many in our population. It's ironic, isn't it, that on the one hand we deify our NHS. We worship it like a god. And on the other hand, we destroy it all the time by our demands upon it.

Same in our schools. Talk to any teachers. There's vastly more spending. But for the most part, it's not a lack of money. That's the problem. It's a lack of morality.

That's the problem. Our society has turned its values upside down. Well, we shouldn't be surprised, should we? And everything else goes belly up. So we've got teachers constantly afraid of pupils in many schools.

[26 : 17] We've got parents who side with their abuse of children against their teachers, undermining their teachers' authorities. Well, no wonder you've got chaos in schools.

And sad to say, in Scotland, our education system is falling further and further behind the rest of the United Kingdom. You see, all the money in the world will never fix that problem without a real reckoning with the truth.

And the truth about the twisted hearts of human beings. Including young human beings who are just as twisted as the older ones.

And what our politicians need to grasp is that their laws can never make people good. All that laws can ever do is restrain their evil.

It's what they're for. And as long as we cherish the delusion in our world that deep down people are basically good at heart. But we're living in la-la land, aren't we?

[27 : 18] Things will only get worse. No real worldly wisdom opens our eyes to reality. It doesn't close them in fantasy.

As Shakespeare said, it's the fool who thinks he's wise. The wise man knows himself to be a fool. In other words, he's humble. He realizes that, in fact, he can know so little and do so little to change the world.

Human wisdom alone cannot get control of life. Not in any arena. But, of course, we hide from that fact because it's too painful. And even as Christians, often we like to think that we can capture something lasting out of life by our striving.

Something to give us meaning. Something to give us significance. Identity. So the preacher turns to explode the folly of that thinking in chapter 2, verses 1 to 16.

All the wisdom in the world can't control life to straighten it out. It twists its perplexities. But nor can it capture life's passing glories for any sort of lasting gain.

[28 : 29] Human wisdom can't capture life for lasting profit. Even the greatest earthly wisdom can only clarify the vanity, the vanishing ephemeral quality of our life on earth.

And so the pursuit of pleasure as a way of finding something lasting in life, that can only end in heartache. The cry of vanity there in chapter 2, verse 11.

Or the pathos we'll come to in verse 16. How the wise dies just like the fool. Verses 1 to 11 give us an assessment of the world through wisdom.

And this time it's in great detail. It looks at all the good things in life. Can you capture these manifestly good things, these wonderful things, for some sort of lasting profit? That's the question.

I don't think the preacher's despising these things. It's a very bad heading in the ESV, speaking about self-indulgence. It's actually the reverse. Verse 1, he says, I'll test you with pleasure.

[29 : 37] There's no sense of the illicit in that. The word pleasure is the same word that's translated joy in verse 26, which is clearly said to be a gift from God. It's a wonderful thing.

So pleasure, joy is a wonderful thing, a gift of God. But, verse 2, it's just like laughter, isn't it? It's not a commodity that you can store up. You can't capture it.

Joy and laughter aren't things that you can do that with, nor are they things that you can find just by searching for them in themselves. Laughter comes in response to something else, doesn't it?

To a funny thing or to a funny person. You can't just command people to laugh. I remember once being on a plane with Edward. We'd been coming back from a conference. And I showed him a very funny video on my iPad.

And he had his earphones in. And actually, I was very worried. He was laughing so much, I thought he was possibly going to die laughing on the plane. But there was a man sitting just beside us, looking at this spectacle.

[30 : 42] He wasn't laughing at all. In fact, he just scowled at us. He thought we were mad or something. Laughter doesn't spread like that, does it? Joy doesn't spread like that. It's caused by something else.

And we can't bottle up laughter or joy for a miserable day in the future. By nature, these things are momentary. They're responses to other things.

They're fleeting things. They're ephemeral things. In that sense, they're vain. They're passing. And yet, so much of life is spent in pursuit, vainly, of these uncapturable things.

Nothing wrong with wanting these things. They're good things, joy and laughter. There's no disapproval at all there in verses 1 to 3. There's nothing wrong with joy or laughter or wine to cheer the body.

Although not to paralyze the body. Don't forget last Sunday evening, Proverbs 31. But we're told explicitly in verse 3, his wisdom is guiding him in all of this. But the question is, what gain is there in the end from it all?

[31 : 50] And that's a real question for all of us to ponder. Is the reason that we pursue the things we do in life because we're looking for these things to achieve something ultimate for us?

Or are we pursuing them because just in themselves, they are worthy things to do? We can be so concerned, can't we, with getting places in life.

We talk about it, don't we? Getting on. I need to make progress. I need to make it. I'll strive here. I'll go there. I'll do that. And then I'll have achieved my goal.

I'll get where I want to be. But you see, the preacher here is just like the Apostle James, isn't he, with that attitude. He's saying, hold on, stop and think for a minute. Have you forgotten that actually your life is just like a mist that appears for a little time and then it will vanish?

Look at verses 4 to 10 there. This man had more and did more than most of us could ever do in 10 lifetimes. He made great works. He made houses and palaces, gardens, verse 5.

[33 : 03] Greek translation there is paradise, gardens of paradise. He filled them with wildlife. He filled them with his household, verse 7. He amassed, verse 8, great wealth. And he used it well.

Look, he promoted all sorts of culture, choirs and singers. Probably we should read instruments there rather than concubines. That's how the King James Version has it.

Seems to fit more with the choirs and the singers. But at any rate, whatever it is, this is a picture, isn't it, of regal magnificence. He became great in fame and in power, verse 9.

And yet, notice, unlike so many of celebrities today, it didn't seem to go to his head. Wisdom remained with him, he says.

And so, verse 10, his heart found tremendous pleasure and satisfaction, do you notice, in all his efforts, in them. His life was immensely rewarding as he did all of these things.

[34 : 06] Pleasure in his work was actually the reward for his work. Now, that's a right view of human labor. It was the great scientist Albert Einstein who warned against teaching children that success for them would mean money and wealth and fame and all those sorts of things.

Now, he said, the most important motive for work in school and life is pleasure in work. Pleasure is its result. And knowledge of the value of its result to the community.

That's the reward. And that's right, isn't it? There is joy to be had in work and in life. And joy is the natural reward for our labors.

But, once again, you can't bottle up that joy. And store it up for a joyless day. There will come a time, and the preacher talks about this in chapter 12. When, as we get older, we face what he calls evil days.

When our strength is fading. And we will not have pleasure any longer in those things that we once were able to do. You can't capture that joy now for profit in the future.

[35 : 17] You see, you can't spend that joy or that laughter in the joyless days to come. You can't earn it and then store up a supply of pleasure and satisfaction and work for the time when there will be no longer any work to be done, or you're no longer capable of doing it.

And that's what we see in life, isn't it? What was once commanding, powerful, intellect? Well, it fades away.

I remember my father becoming like that. He was probably the greatest mind and capacity of anybody I've ever met and greatest capacity for work. But there came a time when he could hardly string a sentence together.

Now, joy in work is a reward in the doing, in its time. And today's won't last, but tomorrow's satisfaction, far less many years hence.

It's like the manna in the desert. Do you remember how God gave the manna as a gift every day? It was a daily gift from God. But if the people tried to store it up for tomorrow, it went rotten.

[36 : 41] You see, in the same way, if you don't realize the limitation about our mortality, if you don't accept that and live with it instead of striving against it, then it will ruin everything of your life.

Look at verse 11. When he considers all his toil, when he looks for something lasting, something to keep, well, it's not there. It's just wind.

It's all blown away. It's gone. You see, as soon as you want something more, something lasting that our mortal life cannot give, even the pleasure and joy that you do have, well, even that will then evaporate.

I'm a bit like that, I'm afraid, with holidays. It infuriates my family because from the first day that we're on holiday, I start to get depressed because it's nearly over.

And they get so cross with my Eeyore-ish attitude because the danger is that I spoil the whole holiday that we have got and spoil it for everybody else. Because I'm trying to bottle up the joy and the pleasure of that holiday and take it home to go on enjoying afterwards.

[37 : 51] It doesn't work like that, does it? You can't do that. And if you try to do that and think of your holiday like that, you will ruin the joy that you could have had in the time. You see.

If you ask from a holiday the legitimate joy of a holiday, well, it's wonderful. But if you ask it to last, you'll spoil even the fortnight that you've actually got. And so it is, friends, with life, you see.

Unless we accept earthly life for what it is, that it is a mist appearing for a time, that it's not the ultimate place of our joy and our satisfaction.

Well, unless we do accept that, there will only be the miserable realism of verses 12 to 18 here because of the inescapable fact of our mortality.

Look at verse 12. No one coming after such a king can possibly gain more. And certainly, you see, verse 13, there is more gain in such a life than in a life of folly.

[38 : 55] A life that knows what it is about, not a life that's just blind and stupid. And yet, look at verse 15. In the end, all go the same way to the grave.

The way of vanity, verse 16. No earthly remembrance. The wise dies just like the fool.

The wonderful life and the wasted life, in the end, will look exactly the same, won't it? In that little urn of ashes handed to you at the crematorium.

And see, real wisdom sees that you can't control life. You can only clarify its vexations. And you can't capture life's pleasures and joys.

All you can do is clarify that it is a passing vanity in the end. And so thirdly, you see, the teacher tells us that real human wisdom means coming to terms with life as it really is.

[40 : 00] And that's the message, isn't it? Verses 17 to the end of the chapter. Real wisdom can't hide in fantasy with Oscar Wilde. It insists on going deeper.

It must get at the truth. Intelligent people, thinking people, they won't make self-deception the secret of life like that.

Not if they're being honest with themselves. The unexamined life is not worth living for man, said Socrates. And all intelligent people should agree with that, you would think.

But of course, you see, when we do banish the bubble of deception, often we discover it's a very bleak business. Waking up to reality about life can be very painful indeed.

Plenty of people have discovered that in the last year. And there are only really, in the end, two ways to react to it. The first is painted for us there in verses 17 to 23.

[41 : 01] It's the way that Kant can't come to terms with biblical reality. That there is a bigger story needed to explain the world. And that without that, this world will always be crooked and twisted and vexed and uncorrectable.

That's really the position of the secularist. That's the atheist materialist. But in a practical way, it is often also the view of many professing Christians who are actually looking often for more in this life than this life can ever really offer.

More answers, more experiences, more blessings. But listen to the preacher. If you won't come to terms with reality about this world, then you will find that that is the road to despair and bitter dissatisfaction.

Everything in verses 17 to 23 is full of futility, isn't it? Regret. Verse 17, So I hated life. Everything is grievous and vain.

Verse 18, I hated my toil. There's no reward of joy even in the work itself. Well, there are many people like that, aren't there? There are Christian people living like that.

[42 : 18] See, present joy also will elude us if we're seeking something lasting in that which can only ever satisfy for a time.

It turns bitter in the mouth very quickly because we've tried to make it into something ultimate, something that we can possess, something that we can find significance in, find our salvation in.

But not only will that not last, it will make us bitter in the present as well. Like verse 19, you see the despair of the thought that what won't benefit you is now going to benefit somebody else.

And who knows if he was a total fool who didn't toil for it like you did. I don't suppose there he's thinking about inheritance tax in verse 18 or verse 21.

That's a pretty bitter thought for many people, isn't it? Not for the multi-millionaires, of course, they know how to avoid it. But for decent folk who have saved and stewarded wisely, want to hand something on.

[43 : 23] The thought of Mr. Sunak wasting your life's work and labors in HS2 or some other vanity project. Sticks in the crowd, doesn't it? Or those no good relatives it might be.

Never came near you in your life but gather round like vultures on your deathbed sniffing a will. And it's serious, isn't it? People very often do see their life's work squandered.

I had a friend who was finance director of a chain of companies and after he retired he had to watch it go down and down and eventually go bust through utter mismanagement and foolishness and greed.

It was a grievous vexation to him. In our world you see it's a mixture of delusion on the one hand trying to control life through technology through genetics through new science and so on trying to capture life with a pursuit of pleasure and profit and so on as though it could last and yet on the other hand it is so full isn't it?

of bitter despair and dissatisfaction. Isn't verse 23 there pretty close to the bone? Even for Christians days full of sorrow and vexation and anxiety nights full of sleeplessness striving to get somewhere in life and yet just in the end reaping nothing but dissatisfaction no joy.

[44 : 49] But there is another way not not the despair of bitter dissatisfaction but the delight of believing detachment and that's the note that the preacher leads us to in verses 24 to 26 at the end you see leads us all back to God where he began back in chapter 1 verse 13 life isn't meant to be about striving for security for ourselves striving for satisfaction and security through our toil and striving for significance through our achievements as though we were ever going to find that in this passing world no life is all about finding the reality that we were made for finding that this is a passing world that it's not our home that it's not the place where lasting treasure can be found it is a wonderful world it's full of blessings to bring joy for a time not least in our daily labor done with gladness before God who has made us before God who has given us gifts and abilities to do these things to be busy within life but it is a passing world it is a cursed world it's a world destined for dissolution that's waiting for its rebirth and its renewal and that and that alone is where our hope lies where lasting profit can be found that is the message of the Christian gospel but meantime as Paul says in Romans chapter 8 we long for it we wait for it with patient endurance and that is the key to real fruitfulness real rejoicing in life instead of just futility and regret in life joy eludes us and will elude us when we are seeking joy alone but joy comes to us in abundance from God the creator when we are seeking him alone to seek lasting joy in and from the world alone is sheer folly it will lead only to despair these are God good gifts that he gives us along the way but they are not and can't ever be our destination isn't the C.S. Lewis who puts it so well the settled happiness and security which we all desire

God withholds from us by the very nature of the world but joy pleasure and merriment he has scattered broadcast we are never safe but we have plenty of fun and some ecstasy it is not hard to see why the security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and pose an obstacle to our return to God a few moments of happy love a landscape a symphony a merry meeting with our friends a bathe or a football match have no such tendency our father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns but will never encourage us to mistake them for home you see the very real joys in life food and drink and work and love and friendships they're all meant to lead us above to the giver of joy to the home of true joy and it's when we see that it's when we wake up to that and delight in that then that's when we're released to savor every true joy that God has given us for the time of this passing life and we'll no longer be bitter at what these things can't give us because we've stopped looking in them for things that they can never give instead we're delight in what we can have in this world in joy in fulfillment in real pleasure even in just the ordinary things of life all of God's refreshments along the way we can learn to rejoice with a satisfied dissatisfaction

C.S. Lewis again aim at heaven he says you'll get earth thrown in aim at earth and you'll get neither and that's the paradox you see of the way of true delight it's the way of believing detachment not looking for lasting bankable joy from a vain and passing world but rather seeing that as verse 24 says all joy in life even in these simple things food and drink and work all of these are a good gift from the hand of God seeing that and living day by day for each day verse 25 you see savoring God's gifts as his gifts to be enjoyed with much thanksgiving to him but not worshipped as idols not made into saviors in place of God and there's nothing better in life he says than to live like that so you see the preacher's wisdom confronts us so clearly doesn't it with two ways there's the way of delight believing detachment from this world seeking joy above and beyond in God himself seeking heaven and yet paradoxically therefore finding all of earth's joys thrown in to the full as inns along the way liberation to see as we sang in the hymn heaven above is softer blue earth around is richer green something lives in every hue that Christ's eyes have never seen that's verse 26 the first half the one who pleases him

God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy to see all of that to see the good believing delight even in this cursed world but the other way well it is the way of bitter despair bitterness and dissatisfaction even in the midst of the real joys of this world and it's the second half of verse 26 isn't it a miserable business just gathering and collecting but only to lose it all in the end utter folly but more than folly do you see it's sin it's the sinner says the preacher who strives in that futile manner because that is the essence of sin at its heart it's seeking a savior in mere created things and not in the creator himself that's the very heart of idolatry but sin you see in the end is always self-defeating it's always self-destructive it was that way in the beginning wasn't it where mankind grasped for the fullness of life but reaped instead only death and banishment and so it is always you see driving us to grasp for gain for profit

I know the truth is we'll end up just gathering and collecting only to lose it all lose it notice to the one who pleases God to the one who is not seeking gain for themselves but is seeking God himself so let me ask you are you finding joy in your life in your daily food in your drink in your daily walk in your work in your relationships if not you need to ask whether you're asking more from these things or looking for more in these things than these things we're ever designed to give or ever can give and perhaps you're looking for less than you could be seeking from God alone who is the giver of all true joy listen as I close to the words of another preacher the preacher the son of God himself oh you of little faith therefore do not be anxious saying what shall we eat what shall we drink what shall we wear for the pagan

[53 : 04] Gentiles seek after these things and your heavenly father knows that you need them all but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you seek heaven and you'll find earth thrown in as well in all its fullness of joy there's only really one way to live isn't there if you want to be really wise amen let's pray there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find joy make his soul see the good in his toil this also I saw is from the hand of God for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment but to the one who pleases him

God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy and so Lord from whom all good things do come grant to us thy humble servants that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that are good and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same through all of our life through our Lord Jesus Christ amen did God and for our Lord God and you you