

4. The beauty of life

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[0 : 0 0] I'll turn, if you would, in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 3. We're not going to look fully at this chapter, although we will look at some of it tonight, but it's the last tonight of a short series of four studies on big themes that run through the book of Ecclesiastes.

We looked, first of all, at how we have to come to terms with the fact that life is brief. Secondly, we looked at the other great theme that runs through Ecclesiastes, and that is the bafflement, the mystery, the perplexity of life here under the sun on this earth.

Last time we looked at a darker side of that, the bitterness that is so often present in our world and even in our lives, and in our Christian lives too, just because this is not only a mortal world but a fallen world.

But tonight I want to turn our thoughts to another theme which is equally prominent, indeed very, very prominent in Ecclesiastes, and one that I don't want us to miss.

And it's the beauty of life. And that's something that, in the midst of the perplexity, the pain, the mysteries, and the hardnesses of life, God does not want us to miss the beauty of the great and the good gifts that he's given to us to enjoy during the time of our lives here on earth.

[1 : 4 0] So that's what we're thinking about tonight. I wonder if you've heard the expression, a pessimist is what a fantasist calls a realist.

Well, we live in a world where fantasists so often seem to be in control. And that means that realists who look squarely at the facts of life as they really are, who seek to examine the evidence for the world as it really is, not as we might wish it to be or hope it would be, but as it really is, realists tend to be scorned, tend to be abused as cynics, as skeptics, especially by the media, the political elites that are so powerful in our world today.

Want to denigrate something, you attach the word skeptic to it. So climate change skeptics is a morally deficient class of people, because they ask questions.

Or Euroskeptics. You hardly ever hear that with anything other than a note of contempt, do you, in the media. They're meant to be faintly ridiculous.

People who take a Euroskeptical point of view. Although that is becoming harder and harder, I think, as the hard economic facts of the things that have happened since the European Monetary Union are becoming more obvious, not least to the population of Ireland.

[3 : 1 1] It's not a good day, is it, to be a politician in the Fianna Fáil party in Ireland, having just taken a drubbing in the polls. These sort of brutal economic facts are starting, aren't they, to erode a lot of the romantic fantasy.

And it is a romantic fantasy that the founding fathers of the European project had, that man can build utopia in Europe, if only we go about it the right way.

But likewise, the preacher of Ecclesiastes has been scorned, and was not as a skeptic, as faintly ridiculous. But many Christians, by many preachers too, they see the Ecclesiastes writer as a pessimist, as a cynic, as a skeptic, as somebody whose views really in the main can only be wrong.

But I think, as we've seen just these last few weeks, studying this book together, that certainly is not true. What the preacher of Ecclesiastes is, is a realist. He's someone who observes the reality of life in this passing world, in this perplexing and very often painful world.

He observes it, and he tells it as it really is. Not as we would sometimes like it to be. And what he's doing, as he teaches us, and as he speaks to us, is he is forcing believing people, people of faith, forcing them to live not with fantasy, but to live with reality, with the world as it really is.

[4 : 53] And yet, he wants us to do that, not with abject despair at all of these things, but with real, genuine hope.

He wants us to do that with a hope that is based itself on reality, hard reality, biblical certainty, about the God who has revealed his plan and purpose to the world and for the world.

Oh, just as we were saying this morning, in his promises, his covenant purposes, that can never, ever fail. And therefore, he wants us to be able to live, not with a pretend, a manufactured optimism about life, something that's simply false and that is foolish, but rather, he wants us to live with a real solid joy that can and should attend our journey through this mortal life, whatever the vexations might be, whatever the trials and difficulties will be, that we should be able to live with solid joy in the midst of all of these things, right till the very end.

That's what his message is to us. As we've seen, even here, deep in the absolute, realism of this unusual book, this provocative book, there is a platform for real hope.

There is a springboard for real joy. There's a time for everything. For every matter under the sun, says chapter 3, verse 1, that we read.

[6 : 30] And look at verse 11. God has made everything beautiful in his time. It's right that we should sing about the beauty of the earth and the sky and the good things.

And yes, it was lovely, wasn't it, to be bathed in sunlight this morning and yesterday morning. And there's nothing better, says verse 12 here, than for people to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.

To find joy in the beauty of life that God has made beautiful for us. Now those are not the words of a cynic, are they?

They're not the words of a sceptic. They're the words of the very best Christian realism. So the preacher is clear.

We've seen that again and again. We cannot be escapists. We cannot be, as Christians, fantasists, chasing the vain nonsense of a simplistic faith that says, well, come to Jesus and everything in your life will be wonderful from now on.

[7 : 37] Every version of that kind of prosperity gospel is just a sham. You know it's a sham. And so does the man in the street. That's why he looks at it and scorns.

So the preacher is clear. We're not to be chasing fantasies like that. There's no hope at all in that kind of escapism. Trying to get out of the enigmas of this life.

The ephemeral nature of this life. The vanity that is all around us in this world. To try to escape that is indeed just chasing the wind.

Look at verse 20. All go to one place. All are from the dust. And to dust all return.

You can't escape that, friends. Something that I often say at funerals. There'll come a day when the crowd will be here for each one of us.

[8 : 38] And it just doesn't help us get anywhere in life, does it? To pretend that that's not going to happen. To pretend that our mortality isn't real. So there's no hope in trying to cheer yourself up by blanking out the harsh realities of life.

But rather, says the preacher, wisdom and true faith looks up to God and finds joy even in the vexations of life. even in this transient life under the sun.

We can see it in the light of the transcendent. And we see even sin in the light of the hope of God's righteous intervention that will bring an end ultimately to all of these things.

Will bring an end to the futility and the hopelessness that is all around us in this world under the sun. And chapter 3 here famously reminds us that there's a time for everything.

But notice verse 17. We noted this last time. There's also a time for God's judgment. God will judge the righteous and the wicked for there is a time for every matter and every work.

[9 : 55] God will judge the righteous and the wicked. He will at last intervene in this vain world, this futile world. And that is the certainty that underlies everything else in this book.

It's a certainty that is there in the whole Bible right from the very beginning in Genesis chapter 3 right to the very end of the New Testament. That God will at last intervene and put right all wrong and judge all wrong.

That's how the Bible ends. That's how the book of Ecclesiastes itself ends in chapter 12 verse 14. God will bring every deed to judgment with every secret thing whether good or evil.

And that means that in the end this vain world, this passing, fleeting world of Hevel, this world itself will be forgotten.

This world also will be gone like a puff of wind. And in its place, says the Scriptures, there will be a real world, a lasting world, a new world with solid joys and lasting treasure as we sang of in our first hymn, where absolutely nothing is ever in vain.

[11 : 11] And you see, once you see that, once you understand the future, the reality that is certain on the promise of God, that is what changes everything.

That is what brings us liberation. Not out of this vexing world, not yet, but liberation nonetheless in it. We're liberated to live in the light of that world that we know is coming with its solid joys and lasting treasures.

And once we grasp that, friends, there can be joy, there can be great joy, even in the midst of the vexations of this life. And there can be fruitfulness, great fruitfulness, even amid the futility and the pain and the bitterness of our human lives on earth.

There really can. But it depends on grasping and accepting that we are living with the paradox that chapter 3 and verse 11 here expresses. Do you see it?

He's made everything beautiful in its time. also, he has set eternity into man's heart. Yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

[12 : 28] God has made time and space, he says. Of course, those go together, don't they, as Einstein would tell you. And God has filled time and space with beauty.

Beautiful things on the earth and beautiful things all surrounding our earthly lives. But it is and it always will be time-bound beauty.

Because he has also put eternity into our hearts. We're not just made for time. Here's the paradox. We're made also for eternity, for God himself. And yet we're still in time.

And while we're still in time and bounded by that mortality, we're never going to be able to understand it all like God does. We cannot find out what God has been doing from beginning to end.

That's why even as Christians we don't have all the answers. That's why when somebody asks you a difficult question, sometimes the answer is, I don't know. And you go off and you ask that question to some clever Christian who's much more mature than you and you think you'll get an answer and what they say is, I don't know.

[13 : 44] It's one of my favourite answers. I use it all the time and most of the time it's true. We can know some things, of course we can, because God has told us many things, but we can't know it all.

And we will never know it all on this earth. And our problem is that if we try to explain everything, including the eternal things, including the big questions of life, questions of meaning and purpose and so on, and we try and explain those things merely in terms of what we can see and feel and touch and hear now, the things we can observe in this world, we are trying to do what is impossible.

And when we try to do that, of course, we're miserable. We can't find the answers. All we can see is that there are this futile, it's vain, it's puzzling, it's perplexing, it's bitter.

Life is brief, it's baffling, and often full of bitterness. It's when we do these things and try to explain everything without the thing we cannot know ourselves, but can only find from God, that we find that that inability casts a shadow over so much in our lives.

And moreover, we find that we can't see straight to even rejoice fully in the things that are real and wonderful in their time, here and now in our lives. Things that God means us to enjoy and to rejoice in, even though they will only be temporary and last for a time.

[15 : 24] You see, if we allow ourselves to become bitter with that frustration, just because we can't understand it all, then the danger, friends, is that we miss out on so much joy that God wants us to have in the midst of this life.

But when you stop looking at these passing things, beautiful as they may be, as things to give ultimate joy and ultimate security and ultimate meaning and ultimate answers to our lives, then, paradoxically, that's exactly when we're liberated to find great and satisfying present joy in these things, that God made them for that very purpose, just for a time.

Just as an example, think of fresh flowers, think of cut flowers. Now, we're canny Scots, and as a canny Scot, I could say to myself, fresh flowers, what a waste of money.

I mean, they'll be dead in a week, won't they? Maybe even less. So, there's no point whatsoever in me buying fresh flowers for my wife, because they won't last. Well, that's true, isn't it? So, I come in on a Friday night, and I say to my wife, well, they had lovely flowers in the shop, and, you know, I would have bought you some, but they won't last, and, well, there wasn't any point, was there?

I know my wife should probably say, no, I suppose there wasn't really, was there? But, you know what? God has made fresh flowers to be beautiful in their time.

[17 : 17] They're not meant to bring joy forever, but they are meant to bring joy to your wife the very moment that you come in the door and you hand them over to her. That's what they're for. And they do, as you all know, men, don't you?

I hope so. I'm going to be asking your wives. So look at chapter 3, verse 12. Let me give you my rough translation. There's nothing better than to be joyful and bring fresh flowers to your wife and enjoy them as long as they live, even if it's not that long.

Don't deprive yourselves of fleeting joy. You see? Now, husbands, I am especially asking you to take note here. But by the way, if you go to Tesco to get your flowers, they come with a 10-day guarantee, so at least you get your money's worth.

Might as well do that. But you see what I'm saying? We mustn't become warped in our thinking. We mustn't become grim and miserable.

So we only see the dark side of life. We only see the vexations. We only see the bitterness of a fallen world. And there are Christians who live like that.

[18 : 35] But friends, that's not godly. It's not biblical. I remember my uncle once telling me, we were discussing a certain person that we both knew who was rather like that.

And he said, you know, I think there are an awful lot of Christians who when they get to heaven, the first thing God is going to do is get them down on the floor and give them a really good tickling. And I thought that was a fairly profound theological insight.

I've been quite tempted to do the same myself with people before they get to heaven, but I just warn you, be very careful. If it's somebody of the opposite sex, don't do it. It could be greatly misunderstood. But God doesn't want us to wait till we get to heaven to find joy, any joy.

We're not to miss out on the beauty in life, the joy in life. The wonder, the loveliness, the marvellous things in the created order, in our relationships, in friendships, the so many, many good gifts God has given us.

They're all passing. They're beautiful though in their time. And as long as you don't worship these things, as long as you don't seek from them what they can never give to you, ultimate joy and satisfaction, then they're there to fill our lives with present joy.

[19 : 57] And that's why God's put them here on the earth. And Paul says that very, very plainly, doesn't he, to Timothy. I think Ewan quoted those verses earlier. Let's just turn to it so you believe me.

1 Timothy chapter 4, I think it's page 992 in the church Bibles. Listen to what Paul says.

The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.

What is this terrible thing that they're teaching? They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

For everything created by God is good and nothing's to be rejected if it's received with thanksgiving for it's made holy by the word of God and prayer.

[21 : 05] See, some people forbid marriage and sex, require abstinence from certain good things, food and drink and so on. But what does Paul say? That's not godly, he says.

He says that's demonic. It's the teaching of demons. Not our good and gracious and generous heavenly father. Not holiness to think in those ways.

It's anti-holiness. God has created these things good in their time to be received with joy and with thanksgiving.

To provide joy for his people, for us. God has richly provided us, says Paul, with things to enjoy.

So don't denude your life of joy. Look back to Ecclesiastes chapter 9, verse 7.

[22 : 01] Go eat your bread, enjoy. Drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

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 is your portion, your reward in life, and in your toil in which you toil under the sun.

Enjoy the good gifts that God has surrounded your life with, is what he's saying, just like Paul. Some Christians can't really believe that that is God speaking.

But friends, that is God speaking. These are words of the good shepherd, holy and true, to guide us in life. God's not a killjoy.

Look back to chapter 3 that we read. Now we could say, verse 2, there's a time to die.

[23 : 05] So what's the point? But there's a time to be born, he says, and to love life as well. Or he could say, as he says, here, there's a time to kill, to break down, to mourn, to weep, to refrain from embracing.

But there's also a time to heal, to build up, to laugh, to embrace, to dance. don't miss that in life.

That's what he's saying. Don't de-joy your life just because these good gifts won't last forever or haven't lasted. Sometimes people's lives turn bitter and dark and never recover from something that's been lost from their life.

maybe they've lost a friendship or a job. Maybe it's been a bereavement of a loved one. And somehow after that they never ever recover and their whole life is blighted always.

Yes, there is, of course, a time to mourn. And grief is real. But that time is not forever. There's a time to leave mourning behind.

[24 : 37] There's a time to leave bitterness behind and weeping. And a time again to embrace, to laugh, to dance, without feeling guilty, without feeling that somehow God is disapproving of what you do.

He's a God of joy. It's very easy, you know, isn't it, sometimes to handicap ourselves in that way. To cripple the rest of our lives.

Some of us are more prone to that than others, it depends a bit on our temperament. Some people are natural tiggers, and others are natural eors. I'm afraid I'm very much in the latter category, in fact I think eor is far too much of a cheery optimist.

But if you're like that, it's especially difficult, isn't it? I remember when I was young, you used to get upset and often cry and say to my parents, something like this, I don't want to grow up.

Some of my friends probably think that's come true, but I used to feel that keenly. I remember saying to my parents, I don't want you to get old and I don't want you to die.

[25 : 51] What's going to happen if such and such or such and such? Maybe some of you felt like that too. I remember my parents saying to me, well, when that time comes, the Lord will show you the way and help you.

But you're not grown up yet and we're not dead yet and we are here. So don't let all of that thought spoil all the fun that you can have now and go out and play football.

And you see, that is exactly what the preacher is telling us all the way through this book of Ecclesiastes. I commend joy, he says, present joy, seeing the good in all God's good gifts to us now in their time.

Rejoicing in them now for what they are. Present blessings, not ultimate answers to all the great matters of life. No, of course not. If you just go through the book and highlight how often he comes back to this call to joy, you'll be very, very surprised.

Look again at chapter 2, verse 26. We've looked at it before. To the one who pleases him, he says, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

[27 : 04] Joy in the simple pleasures of life, in food and drink and work. Yes, life is ephemeral. It's passing. You won't live forever. But while you do live, as chapter 3, verse 12 says, there's nothing better than to be joyful and to do good as long as you live.

God's gift to man is that you should eat and drink and find pleasure, in simple things like your daily work and toil. True, yes, life is enigmatic.

We can't fathom all God's ways. Verse 11 is perfectly true. But we can be joyful now and we can live gladly with what we do know of God's goodness. And yes, as we've seen, he's very clear, life often is evil.

So, that last week in chapter 8, in verse 14, the righteous do suffer. The wicked all too often do prosper. But the right response comes immediately in the next verse.

I commend joy in the midst of all these circumstances, he says. Look at chapter 9, the heading in our Bible is, death comes to all.

[28 : 19] And so it does, he argues in the chapter, the good and the bad, just like the animals, they all end up in the grave. And we might be tempted to say, well, what is the point then?

What's the point of a life that just ends up in the grave? If even the most precious things that we have in life come to an end in death, the deepest relationships we have with friends, with loved ones, above all with our spouses, with our parents, with our children.

Isn't it better to never even get into these relationships? Because even if they do grow strong and if they last, well, there's going to be a final party, isn't there, in death, if not before?

Better never to get in love. Some people think like that. And they handicap and cripple their whole life.

So awful the thought of losing love like that, losing something, that it's better never even to have it in the beginning. It's a thought, isn't it? But it's a tragic way to think.

[29 : 35] Deprives us of so much joy, so much that's worthwhile, fulsome, fulfilling, in the deep loves of life. ask somebody who's lost their life's partner.

Perhaps they're in deep pain and grief still. Or maybe don't ask them. It would be perhaps insensitive. But if you did, if you said to them, don't you wish you were never married at all because this grief is so awful?

I can pretty much guarantee that what they'll say to you are, no, of course not, a thousand times no. How could I ever say a thing like that? The joy, the joy that I've enjoyed all through my married life so transcends even this grief that I would never for a moment have had it a different way.

Ask somebody who's had one of the most painful, tragic losses that you can have, losing a child. Don't you wish you never even had that child?

So awful is this grief of losing them? No. No, the joy, the God-given joy, however temporary that might have been, utterly, utterly outshines everything else.

[31 : 00] Of course it does. Brothers and sisters, I want to say this to you very seriously. Don't, allow your life to be de-joyed just because even the very best joys in life, at their best, are going to be passing and won't last forever.

Don't allow your life to be de-joyed because of that. Notice the preacher, copy diem, seize the day, seize the day that God has given you, this day, to rejoice and be glad in it.

That's what Jesus taught as well, isn't it? Read Matthew chapter 6. Don't be weighed down, he said, anxious always about the future, about food and clothes and all of these things, things which rust and decay, things which yes, are beautiful in their time, but will fade.

No. Seek first the kingdom of God, the ultimate things, and all these things, he says, these present joys, these passing joys, these things then will be added to you so that you can have joy in them.

That's the way to present joy. It's when we become detached from the worship and the seeking of eternal joys in that which is passing that we're liberated to find the great joy that is in these things but otherwise we can't have.

[32 : 26] That's the way of blessing. And it's the only way amid the bafflement and often the bitterness of this present world. But it begins, it begins with faith in the God whose words this preacher is speaking to us.

Look over to chapter 12 in the very end of the book. These words, says verse 10, these words of joy are words of delight, upright words of truth, he says.

they're given, says verse 12, verse 11, by the one shepherd. And we're to fear him, says verse 13, we're to keep his commands, we're to trust that this is the whole duty of man.

This is the whole of man, is what it says. This is what it means to be most fully human. Trusting his words for joy on life's journeys.

And we can trust him, friends, because we know this shepherd. We know him as the great shepherd, the good shepherd, who laid down his own life for his sheep, so that that day of great reversal that we all long for is guaranteed.

[33 : 55] The day when life in all its abundant and permanent joy will be revealed at last forever and this passing world is done. See, the Lord Jesus Christ and him alone, he has given us certain hope.

He's given us an anchor above the sun. For I have overcome the world, said Jesus. And that's the certainty that alone can really give us joy, even in this vexed and passing and fading world.

But when we know that, we've no need to pretend a way this bitterness isn't real, pretend our mortality isn't real, pretend the pain that we will come across and perhaps are feeling even now in life that it isn't real.

The days of darkness will come and the grave will come for every one of us. But because we've got no need to fear that judgment, but rather we've got a cause to long for it, then that great day will lift us out of vanity.

It'll lift us even now into the glorious light of the goodness of God even in this life. And it means that we know that none of our labor, even in this present passing world, none of our labor is in vain.

[35 : 22] because all that we do in Jesus' name is going to last forever. Our life does have perplexity and pain and it is passing, but it does have a purpose that is eternal.

And that means that we can live even now with meaning that brings real contentment to our lives. just look at chapter 11 as we close.

Verse 7, light is sweet and it's pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. Well, isn't that true today? So, if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many.

All that comes is vanity, it's fleeting. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.

But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Do you see that perfect balance? No fantasy, no pretending, no unreality, sheer reality about what is ultimate.

[36 : 45] it. But nevertheless, real joy, real liberation on our journey through life. That's our calling as God's people. To awake every morning, to rise, to go forth in God's name, to labour cheerfully in the work that God's given us to do, to run our course with constant joy, and to walk with God through time for eternity, praising him and receiving and rejoicing in the manifold, great blessings that he has and will keep sharing our lives with.

That's the way of venturesome joy through life's vexed journey for the one who knows and trusts and follows the great shepherd made known to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.