

# The Way of Beauty and Blessing in a Baffling and Bitter World

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good, we're going to turn this morning to God's Word, and we're beginning a new series this morning in the book of Ecclesiastes. And you should also have little handouts on your chairs, which Willie will be referring to later.

But this morning we're having a bit of an introduction to the book, and we've got a few readings from various chapters. We're beginning in chapter 1, but we'll also have a little reading from chapter 3 and also chapter 12.

So do turn your Bibles to Ecclesiastes. It comes straight after Psalms and Proverbs. Psalms is right in the middle of the Bible, so turn to the middle of the Bible and turn right a few pages and you'll find Ecclesiastes.

I'm reading chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, and then 12 to 15, and then we'll flick over the page and I'll let you know where we're going. So Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 1.

The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

[ 1 : 05 ] Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. And look on to verse 12. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight.

And what is lacking cannot be counted. Turn over the page to chapter 3. I'm reading from verse 9. What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

[ 2 : 06 ] Also, he has put eternity into the man's heart. Yet, so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live. Also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil.

This is God's gift to man. And then turn to the very last chapter of the book, chapter 12. I'm reading there from verse 8.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. Besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

The preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

[ 3 : 12 ] They are given by one shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

The end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Another way to read this would be, for this is the whole of man. And Willie will explain that later. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Amen. May God bless his word to us this morning. Perhaps you turn with me to the very last chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes.

We're going to be dotting around today by way of introduction. And as Paul said, you have a little summary sheet for today, and also a little outline of the book on your chairs.

[ 4 : 19 ] Hope that's something you can take away, and it'll help you over these coming weeks as we're going to be studying together. Now, this book of Ecclesiastes is, I think, much misunderstood, and often neglected, therefore, in the church.

It's been called the black sheep of biblical books by one scholar. The delight of skeptics and the despair of saints. And that's because it seems at first sight to be so full of pessimism, of cynicism, even of nihilism.

With that refrain, vanity of vanity, all is vanity. You see it begins, book ends it there. The words of a preacher in chapter 12, verse 8. Apparently, Kaiser Wilhelm of World War I infamy declared Ecclesiastes to be the best book of the Bible, which you might think is hardly a ringing endorsement.

It's rather like perhaps the president of North Korea today telling us it was his favorite part of the Bible. And many Christians, many preachers indeed, have problems with this book because they can't believe that actually it is God's word, at least not taken at face value, because of its perceived negativity.

And so they assume that the preacher must be writing from the point of view of an unbelieving skeptic, a secular pundit, who's actually getting it all wrong.

[ 5 : 42 ] And only then, when you come to the very end of the book, the epilogue, chapter 12, verses 9 to 14, only then are we getting actual real spiritual truth, which is an antidote to all this sub-Christian pessimism that's come before.

Look at chapter 12, verse 13 and 14. At last, here now we seem to get sense, don't we? Fear God and keep his commands. And so people say, well, there's the great contrast.

Everything that goes before is all warped and foolish thinking. And now at last, at the end, you get the right way, fearing God. But of course, the trouble with that view is that in this very final section, in chapter 12, the writer actually affirms, doesn't he, that the preacher has taught, in all the preceding chapters, things which are upright and true.

Chapter 12, verse 10, words of delight, words of truth. Uprightly, he wrote these things. So we can't just write it all off, can we, as sub-Christian pessimism?

On the other hand, there are some very pietistic Christians who have noted that there are some very positive parts of the book. And in fact, they feel that they're far too positive, too hedonistic even.

[ 6 : 56 ] The repeated refrain that comes again and again, first time in chapter 2, verse 24, but again and again, that tells us that we're to eat, we're to drink, we're to find enjoyment in our work. But there's nothing better in life than that.

And they don't know what to do with that. They think, surely that can't be a Christian message. Some people are very suspicious, aren't they? The very idea that Christians should enjoy things in life. So perhaps the commonest way for evangelical Christians to take this book is as a sort of critique of secularism, of life without God.

It shows up the emptiness of life, the futility of ignoring God. And so what you need, Mr. Secularist, is to understand God like we Christians do. And then, well then, all your questions, all your perplexities, all your miseries in life will be solved.

All the vexation that you face in life will disappear. And some Christians do think like that, don't they? But if that is how we think as Christians, then let me tell you that we are the very kind of people that this preacher has in his sights in Ecclesiastes.

Not skeptical secularists, they didn't exist, did they, in ancient Israel? But rather, superficial and simplistic and trite believers whose ideas of faith, whose ideas of God are actually deeply flawed.

[ 8 : 22 ] Just like Job's friends' ideas were so flawed, remember? And just as often, Christians today have very flawed ideas.

The kind of idea that if you come to Jesus, well, everything will be lovely. Everything will make sense at last. You'll never have to struggle. You'll never puzzle again. You'll never weep again. But friends, that is totally foreign to the Bible.

And it's totally foreign to our real experience of faith in life, isn't it? And it's that kind of triumphalism that Ecclesiastes sets out to puncture, to cut right down to size, with all of its blasts of cold realism. The preacher is confronting people who wish that life were other than it really is. And that because of that, they've never really come to terms with a fallen world, a world under the sun, which will always be fallen and problematic, even for Christian believers.

And so he's forcing us to come to terms with reality in life, so that life as it really is will not actually floor us.

[ 9 : 39 ] Because we're trying to pretend that it's not like it really is. But it is like that, and it always will be. And so he speaks with words that chapter 12, verse 11 here says are like goads, like nails, things that pierce and provoke us.

But notice also in verse 10 he says that they're words of delight. They're words of truth and righteousness. Because it's God's truth. It is the word of the one great shepherd, who alone can shepherd us on the path of life, with real venturesome joy, even in the midst of this vexed journey that we experience in life on earth.

Think of Psalm 23 that we sang, the Shepherd Psalm. His teaching will be a rod and a staff to us. That's challenging, isn't it?

Painful at times. But also greatly comforting to lead us through the darkest valleys, even the valley of the shadow of death itself, and to do so in a way that gives us the oil of joy, great satisfaction, delight, even in the presence of the many enemies that we will still face.

Not least, of course, the great enemy of our own mortality. And that's what this book is all about. We may well be, and we shall be, often baffled by many things in life.

[ 11 : 05 ] But if we will believe the words of this one shepherd and heed his truth for life, we can find the way of blessing, even in the midst of this vain life under the sun.

You can be believing, and yet baffled, and yet at the same time be greatly blessed, richly blessed, in a life of fruitfulness, of fulfillment, and great joy, even in this fallen world.

And that's the message of this book of Ecclesiastes. There is a path of venturesome joy that leads us all through life's vexed journey.

But only the words of this one shepherd can lead us to it. And that's what this book gives us, teaches us the way of real delight, the words and the ways of God, so that we will fear him, and so that we will keep his instruction.

Because then, as verse 13 of chapter 12 says, then we will understand what is the whole, literally the whole of man. In other words, what it truly means to be human.

[ 12 : 11 ] And that's the great question, isn't it? Of our age. This book teaches us the way to true and fruitful human life, nothing less.

And what that means, of course, is that there is a message here for everyone. Yes, if you are. A skeptical secularist. If you're a rejecter of God and of Christian faith, well, there is plenty in this book to make you think.

Plenty to challenge your aspirations about life. And I hope that you'll be open-minded enough to engage with its questions. But there's so much in this book also to challenge the Christian believer. Because the preacher will not let any of us get away with a trite and a superficial and naive understanding of our faith. Christians must be willing to think, to question, to grapple.

So Kohelet, that's the title that's translated the preacher or the teacher. If you look back to chapter 1, verse 1, you'll see that the footnote tells us that.

[ 13 : 16 ] The preacher, he exposes false optimism of all kinds. And he forces us to face up to the real vexations, the perplexities that we will face in a world still under the curse until the Lord Jesus returns in judgment.

But he does that not to lead us into despair, but to save us from despair. Because it's not by living in denial of reality, but living with truth that will really set us free in life and that will liberate us for real joy in life.

And that's what Jesus said. And that's what Kohelet, the teacher, says also. Because he is bringing us the words of the one shepherd, the good shepherd, the gracious God who is made known fully to us at last in the person of his son, the Lord Jesus.

So I want to try in our brief time this morning to give you four key themes from this book. And they're on your sheet there. Four key themes that we need to grasp if we are going to find the way of venturesome joy on this vexed journey of life.

And the first thing the preacher insists that we must embrace is the reality about the brevity of life. We must grasp the transience of man. Because life is ephemeral.

[ 14 : 40 ] It will be passing. And we've got to learn to live with that brevity of life, to live with mortality that we cannot control. Look at the words that are repeated five times there in chapter one, verse two.

It's almost the motto of the book, isn't it? Vanity. The NIV has meaningless. The Hebrew word hevel, it's almost untranslatable. It can mean bubbles or vapor or breath.

That is, it's something ephemeral, something incomprehensible, something that can't be grasped hold of. And that's what sums up all of human life for the preacher.

It's futile. It's in vain. It evaporates. Every bubble of human pride, every fantasy of human folly is pricked, is deflated with this one little word, hevel.

It shatters that illusion of let's pretend that we like to have. It's like the boy who shouts of the emperor, he's got no clothes on. It's a word that just brings reality absolutely down to earth with a bump.

[15:47] And the word has various shades of meaning. That's why you get various translations of it in different Bible versions. And actually in the first half of the book of Ecclesiastes, I think the particular slant is on life as ephemeral, as being transient, as being fleeting, and therefore uncontrollable.

Control of our lives is something that eludes us. We cannot control a life that is passing and that will soon leave us behind, can we? So verse 3 of chapter 1 is a question.

What gain, what enduring profit can there be from our toil and our work? Well, the answer is in the end, there can be none. Verse 14, it's all vain, it's all hevel.

It's as daft as chasing the winds, striving after the winds to think that. That's how futile your life actually is if you think that you can have a permanent gain out of a passing existence.

And the refrain of futility, of striving after the wind, that's one that repeats again and again all the way through the first half of this book, right up to chapter 6, verse 9.

[17:03] Chapter 6, verse 9 is the exact halfway point of the book. It's exactly 111 verses before it and 111 afterwards. It seems that it does have some sort of significance for the book's structure.

But at any rate, chapter 6, verse 9 is the last time that you find this phrase striving after wind. And so in this first half of the book, there is a particular focus on the meaning of this word hevel as vain, as futile, as ephemeral, as impermanent.

So what the preacher is saying in plain English is this, you just can't beat your mortality. You can't. And to think you can? It's just futile. Chasing the wind, like trying to capture the wind in a bottle. And if you spend your life trying to do that, you're deluded. And your self-delusion will in fact ruin your life, the life that God has given you to enjoy here on this earth.

Time, like its ever-rolling stream, will bear us all away. That's the clear message, isn't it, of this opening poem we'll look at next week in chapter 1 here, verses 3 to 11.

[18:18] You could give it the title, The Past Generations. Verse 4, A generation goes, a generation comes. Verse 5, Sunset, sunrise. Verse 6, the wind in the north, the wind in the south, there and back.

Time's ever-rolling stream. And in the end, verse 11, there's no remembrance of former things, or probably better translated, former people.

And no one is going to remember us, either, in the future. I wonder how many of us here could tell what your great-great-grandmother's name is, or even your great-grandmother's maiden name.

Be serious about the facts of life, the preacher's saying. It's passing us by. I'm 55 on my next birthday.

I remember turning 35 and thinking, wow, that's halfway to my three score years in 10. But if perchance four scores, or maybe I'm not quite in the second half yet, but I'm afraid when you're in 55, you've really got nowhere else to go.

[19:25] You're definitely, definitely in the latter part of your life. And the preacher's telling us, yes, you're right. Your life is Hevel.

It's fleeting. It's fading. And what enduring gain, what lasting profit will there be for all my toil, my striving for wisdom?

Look at chapter 2, verse 15 and 16. It's very sobering. What happens to the fool will happen to me also.

Why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart, this also is vanity. For of the wise as the fool, there's no enduring remembrance.

Seeing that in the days to come, all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool. Well, it's worth remembering, isn't it, for those about to start a university course to make them very wise.

[ 20 : 26 ] That's where it's all going to end. As some people, of course, are always trying to overcome their mortality. Like Jeff Bezos of Amazon, the world's richest man, investing in what he thinks will be the cure for eternal life.

Well, the preacher looks at all of that sort of nonsense in chapters 1 to 3. Some people chase wealth and of course wealth can gain you health for a while to an extent.

I remember reading when I moved to Glasgow from the south of England, living in Wimbledon, that the average age there was well into the 80s, but the average age of life for a man in Glasgow was only 69. I made a mental note to move back south before I get to 69.

68 and a half, I'm on the train south. Some people chase health, don't they? Some people chase education or it's the political ideas or whatever it is that they seek their meaning in in life.

But friends, whatever it is, you're only going to have that for a time. And no matter how wise you are, whatever happens to the fool will happen to you.

[ 21 : 30 ] So what's the point in all that wisdom, all that toil, all that education, all that achievement? It was Woody Allen who said, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve it through not dying.

But that's the one thing we can't do, isn't it? Even Jeff Bezos will discover that. Because we are living with mortality we cannot control.

Life is passing, it is ephemeral, it is heavile, and we need to start living with that and not striving against that. The chief obstacle so often to living well in this life is refusal to accept our mortality, our transience.

Years ago, I came across something that Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, said in a graduation of students from Stanford University. And after a couple of previous speakers had done the usual thing, flattering the graduands with all sorts of waffle about their limitless potential and how they're the cream of the crop and blah, blah, blah, Steve Jobs got up and said this, remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've encountered to help me make big choices in life.

Well, wouldn't that prick the bubble of that Ivy League pride? And he went on, remembering you're going to die is the best way I know to avoid the traps of thinking you've something to lose.

[ 23 : 00 ] You're already naked. There's no reason not to follow your heart. Well, that is definitely not the whole story, but it's an awful lot like what the preacher is trying to get across to us in this first half of Ecclesiastes.

Because his focus is on exactly that, facing the reality of life's brevity. So as to rise above it and actually find a meaningful existence in this mortal life despite its passing brevity.

Because that alone, friends, is the road to real joy on life's journey. Look down to chapter 2, verse 23. Describes the vexation, the discontent of the man who hasn't come to terms with his own mortality.

He enjoys nothing from his toil, from his struggle. His days are full of sorrow, vexation. His nights are disturbed because, as verse 18 there says, he knows he can't take it with him.

And it makes him bitter, makes him dissatisfied. Look down to verses 24 and 26, how different it is for the man who pleases God. That is the one who fears him and trusts him to be God and to order his mortal life, not struggling against the life that's allotted to him.

[ 24 : 23 ] To him, the gift in God's hands is one of wisdom and knowledge and joy in life, verse 26. Seeing the joy. The footnote there you see on verse 24 is very helpful.

Seeing the good, finding enjoyment is seeing the good. Seeing all the blessing that God has given to us even in this passing world. That's the key to the path of joy.

And of course, the paradox of biblical faith is that when we submit to the reality of both our own mortality and of God's majesty, it's then alone that we will find liberating joy.

The joy that's always eluded us when we try to strive for it ourselves. The first key to a fruitful life is embracing the brevity of our lives.

It's learning to live with mortality that we can't control. And yet trusting that there is a God who does control it. And so seeing the good, that's the way God gives us wisdom.

[ 25 : 33 ] That's the way he gives us knowledge and joy in our earthly life. But the second thing that the preacher wants us to embrace honestly, therefore, is the bafflement of life.

Because we've got to grasp also the transcendence of God. life is not just ephemeral, life is enigmatic. Life is going to be perplexing. And we've got to learn to live with bafflement in life, with mystery that we simply cannot comprehend.

This word, Hevel, also has this sense of the enigmatic, the incomprehensible. And that really does seem to be the focus particularly in the second half of the book. Both senses of the words are always there, of course.

We can't tie it down too neatly. But the truth is, in our lives, so often, we find that life is, well, it can be described the way that Winston Churchill described Russia.

A riddle wrapped inside a mystery, inside an enigma. Isn't that often the way we find life? It's beyond our comprehension. Not just because we are passing, because we're so pitiful, so small, so earthly.

[ 26 : 47 ] And because there's just a vast realm that is high above us and beyond us and that we're completely ignorant of. I don't just mean the universe and physics and things that clever scientists like Stephen Hawking and so on can explain.

I mean a world even above all of that. Chapter 5, verse 2, really sums it up. It tells us, God is in heaven and you are on earth.

And you must never forget that. God is the transcendent creator. We are but transient creatures. We're puffs of wind by comparison. So no wonder life is an enigma and it so often baffles us.

So another key phrase throughout the book that reminds us of this repeatedly. It's there in chapter 1, verse 3, and verse 9 and goes on and on again. Under the sun. Chapter 1, verse 14, everything under the sun.

Behold, it's hevel, it's vain, it's striving after wind. Now that is not just the wrong view of the world that a secularist has.

[ 27 : 56 ] We know that because the preacher uses variations of that phrase. It's there in chapter 1, verse 13. He says, under heaven and under the sun. He's talking about the same thing, people who recognize there's a heaven.

So what he's saying that even from the standpoint of faith, we must recognize that there will be huge mysteries in life just because you and I are not God.

There's always going to be things far above and beyond our ken. Life is an enigma. And very often in life, total clarity is going to elude us because God is transcendent in his ways.

the ways of heaven transcend our ways. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, so my thoughts than your thoughts, says the Lord to Isaiah, Isaiah 55. And so even though the preacher tells us rightly wisdom is good and we must seek it, at the same time our wisdom is always going to be limited. So for example, look at chapter 7, verse 19.

[ 29 : 10 ] It says, Wisdom gives strength to a wise man more than 10 rulers who are in a city. Wisdom is great, he's saying. And yet if you look back to verse 15 there, he says the righteous, that is the wise, often perish while the wicked fool is the one who seems to prosper in life.

How does that work? That seems so wrong. That baffles us. And so many things in life like that baffle us. And they're beyond our explanation. I don't mean things like why does it always rain every time you plan to have a barbecue or why every time you drop your toast on the floor it always lands butterside down.

Those are mysteries, but those are trivial things. But they're much more serious things that baffle us. Like the totally innocent person who gets accused of a crime they didn't commit.

and it ruins their life and it costs them an absolute fortune to defend themselves while those who accuse them wrongly in the end just get away with nothing. Why does that happen? Or why do some people suffer so much ill health?

They're often the loveliest people that you know. And why is it that so often the most horrible people you know have all the health and wealth and all the success in life?

[ 30 : 29 ] Why? I mean we're so often baffled aren't we? We ask the question why does God allow that? It's chapter 8 verse 17.

Even though a wise man claims to know he can't find it out because there's so much that's perplexing. Chapter 9 talks about that poor wise man who saves a whole city but nobody remembers him.

Nobody's interested in him but our papers are full aren't they? Endlessly of the drivel of celebrities who don't do anything at all in life but have vast recognition. Why is that? In chapter 7 he talks about the perplexity of slaves on horses the lowest of the low and the fools riding on posh horses while real princes walk like slaves.

Some of the ablest and best and finest people are utterly unknown utterly unheard of in our world while folly is so often set in high places. Well my goodness is that not true.

Presidents, prime ministers and the like. See even as Christians with God's revelation to us in the Bible the world is still full of baffling enigmas to us isn't it?

[ 31 : 45 ] And that's why all through the Bible the question is so often why? Why Lord? Because God is transcendent. He alone is above the sun.

He is in heaven and we are on earth. And therefore says the preacher let your words be few. Learn to close your mouth and stop just displaying your ignorance.

Be in awe of God he says. It's so important the teacher says to learn to be humble. To recognize that we don't have all the answers.

And sometimes we need to just be quiet and not speak. Lest your mouth lead you into sin he says in chapter 5. It's so easy isn't it as Christians sometimes to be trite to be superficial about painful and perplexing mysteries in life.

And therefore to be wounding with our words. When we think it comforts somebody in acute pain for us to sort of quote glibly Bible verses at them.

[ 32 : 59 ] Don't worry it'll all work together for good. Surely something good will come of all of this. Please don't come and quote that verse to me when I'm facing some tragedy in my life.

because the truth is that nothing good may come of this in this life under the sun in this world of Hevel in this world of elusive enigmas.

Now when we're suffering like that we need somebody whose words will be few. Eugene Peterson says a crashing destruction of idols of easy answers to the questions of life's meaning including religious answers sounds right through this book.

Because friends God is in heaven and we are on earth. God alone is transcendent. God alone sees it all knows it all understands it all. We are transient we can't and we never will in this world.

And we've got to learn to live with bafflement in life with mysteries that we will never comprehend here on earth. but of course there's more to this vexation of life than just the fact that God is a creator and that we are created beings finite beings because the world that we inhabit is under the sun and it's not the world as God made it to be is it?

[ 34 : 31 ] And so to understand life in this world we also have to come to terms with the bitterness of life we've got to grasp also the tragedy of sin in this world and we've got to learn to live with the bitterness of life to live with miseries that we cannot ourselves curtail.

Preacher of Ecclesiastes is very very clear about this look at chapter 7 verse 29 famous verse God made man upright but they have sought out many schemes that is a perfect summary of the Bible's teaching about the sinful human nature or chapter 8 verse 11 the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Chapter 9 verse 3 the hearts of the children of man are full of evil and madness is in their hearts while they live. So don't be naive don't be people who are easily shocked in this fallen world this is a fallen world and Christians should be the least shockable people on earth.

When we observe as chapter 3 verse 16 does that in the place of justice even there is wickedness in the place of righteousness even there is wickedness don't be surprised if you find politicians and lawyers and judges who become corrupted and who abuse their positions even there don't even be surprised if churchmen fall into sin and abuse or parliamentarians are given to self serving and become money grabbers and liars of course we're all saddened and we should be saddened at all of these things but we shouldn't be shocked we shouldn't be surprised should we because we know this is a fallen world we live with the tragedy of sin the whole creation says Paul in Romans chapter 8 has been subjected to futility this word haveil because of our sin and so our lives are not just subject to finitude because we're creatures we're not the creator our lives are also subject to futility to frustration because of the curse of sin in the world and so as the preacher observes so clearly this is a confused world a corrupted world and a confusing world to live in and it will be right to the very end even for the most faithful

Christian believer there will be vexation all along life's journey there will be groaning right to the very end that's what Paul says in Romans chapter 8 we need to grasp that God made man upright Genesis chapters 1 and 2 tell us God made a good world an ordered world a beautiful world physically and morally and many of those many of those echoes of course remain they infuse our world don't they with great wonder and we can learn much wisdom about our world because of that in physical terms in the sciences in the arts and so on and of course also in moral terms because

God's moral substructure of this world also in many ways holds true and that's why when people and when nations live in line with God's moral substructure for this world in general they do prosper righteousness exalts a nation says

[ 38 : 09 ] Proverbs 14 but of course as Genesis 3 tells us there's been a great earthquake in this whole world order morally as well as in the natural world and so even man's best wisdom which comes from God itself even that leaves us feeling pain and perplexity even for those who are righteous in Christ even for Christians and that's why the great victory chapter in Romans chapter 8 tells us plainly that we're going to be groaning along with the whole cosmos until the day of resurrection until the rebirth of this world at the coming of our Lord and so just as Job remember when we studied him learned that there are many mysteries and much pain still even for the righteous in this world so Ecclesiastes affirms the same for us there will be great perplexity in this world of Hevel this ephemeral life that we can't control and this enigmatic life that we can't always comprehend and in this evil life that we can't wholly curtail we know that don't we we're so often baffled and so often we have to have to swallow bitter things in life why should that lovely little child be struck with cancer and die why is my marriage been such a struggle so bitter why was I widowed so young so painfully why can't I have the children that I've longed for while all around

I read that one in three pregnancies in this country of precious babies that I would long for are being aborted and killed life is so full isn't it of bitter bitter agonies well this is the bitter tragedy of sin this whole creation has been subject to futility to vanity to hevel and that's why this earthly life is in the end all vain and everything in it it's a vapor it's but a breath it will one day suddenly disappear so is it in the end all despair is it just nihilism well no not if we listen to the preacher and don't miss another thread of vital vital importance in this book and that is that the preacher tells us about the beauty of this life that we must grasp not just the tragedy of sin but also we must grasp and hold on to the triumph of the gospel notwithstanding all his realism the preacher is equally insistent that life is eternal and that it does have purpose and so we must learn to live with that beauty of life even now and with meaning that really does bring contentment and joy in this earthly life even here in this book there's a platform of hope there's a springboard of joy for us not from pretending and trying to escape from life's many vexations but rather as he puts it seeing the good even in the midst of it behold I have seen the good he says in chapter 5 verse 18 power to enjoy what you have in this life to accept your lot to rejoice in your toil this he says is the gift of God now how do you get that well you get it by seeing what the teacher does see by seeing this life under the sun by seeing this transient life in the light of the transcendent in the light of what is above the sun and by seeing sin and futility in life in the light of the hope of God's ultimate intervention at the end to bring an end to everything that is futile and vain chapter 3 is very famous isn't it reminds us it's a time for everything under heaven but it also reminds us that there is a time also for judgment and God will judge the righteous and the wicked

God will intervene in this futile world under the curse and that is the sure message at the very end of this book just turn again to chapter 12 where we began this last verse God will bring every deed to judgment and that means that in the end this whole vain world this passing world itself will be havel will be forgotten will be no more and in its place will be the real world the lasting world where nothing is ever in vain and once you see that you see everything about life changes so when you grasp true sight of the eternity that chapter 3 says God has set in our hearts it's then that you can begin to see all the beauty that does fill God's world even now and therefore can be enjoyed even now in its time once we see the solid joys and the lasting treasures of his eternal kingdom and once we stop seeking to find enduring profit merely from this world's best pleasures because the best of them are passing that is the thing that will liberate us to find joy in all the good gifts that God has given us for their time because we're not any longer seeking salvation in these things but just passing sustenance from them and joy in the midst of vexation that is

God's good gift to us in this earthly life we can eat and drink we can take pleasure in our toil once we begin to accept that this is just a passing pleasure it's not a lifetime's investment live like that not seeking from these passing things the significance the permanent gain that they can never give accept that reality that's what he's saying in chapter five and that is God's gift to you that's how life will be for you as a believer not an enduring misery full of bitter discontent because God will keep you occupied with joy in your heart and your life will be fruitful even amidst the world of great futility that's the gospel message of ecclesiastes the Lord Jesus says exactly the same thing just in different words in Matthew chapter six don't be weighed down with anxiety about the things of this

passing world with food and clothes and the like moth and rust will destroy those in the end no seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all this will be added to you you'll be able to see the joy you'll have joy on life's journey only though if your heart is not invested in these things which are merely under the sun but if your heart is truly invested in the

Lord and his kingdom above the sun that's the only way of blessing and beauty in a world that will remain baffling and very often bitter right to the very end isn't that what you want for your life it's not what you desperately need in the middle of a baffling and bitter world especially the baffling and bitter days that we've been living through well it begins friends with hearing and heeding the words that the preacher brings to us in this book just as we close look look at that last paragraph of the book again chapter 12 verse 10 the words he brings to us he says are words of delight and truth verse 11 they're given by the one shepherd capital S God himself and verse 13 to hear and to respond to his words that is to fear God and to follow his command on our life is literally the whole of man that's what it says there's no word there duty what he's saying is this is what it is to be human to hear God to live for him is what it really means to find most fulsome humanity in this world and that's why it's to him that the preacher points us to the shepherd the great shepherd of our souls as the apostle

[ 47 : 26 ] Peter calls him and we know his name don't we even better than the preacher I am the good shepherd says the Lord Jesus I lay down my life for the sheep and he did that so that he might bring about the great reversal that the preacher foresees here in verse 14 the day of judgment and restoration when the confusions the corruptions of this world will be reversed forever I came said Jesus that they may have life to have it abundantly to find true humanity solid substantial permanent life the removal of everything that is bitter and vain and brief the gospel of Jesus Christ fulfills every hope of the preacher and Jesus tells us that that true life has begun already now through the triumph of his cross and his resurrection and that we may enter into that eternal life today simply through faith and trust in him not into a fantasy that pretends to banish all pain and perplexity yet we're saved in hope says Paul the end is not yet said Jesus in this world

Jesus said you will have tribulation vexation but it is a sure and certain hope it is an anchor above the sun it's a message of victory that gives us joy even in this vexed and fallen and fading world because I have overcome the world said Jesus in the truth of the gospel you see there is for us even now beauty and blessing in the midst of a world of bafflement and bitterness in the midst of the brevity of life there can be venturesome joy all through life's vexed journey and there is real gain real lasting profit in our toil because in the Lord as Paul says to the Corinthians none of your labors for him are in vain so friends as we shall see as we go through this book the message of the preacher to us is rejoice be joyful seize the day seize the day in every moment of this brief life on earth be liberated from this world's burdens for this world's great blessings see the good and live the joy but that liberation will come only only when your quest for lasting happiness lasting fulfillment in this world comes to an end and you see that futile quest for what it really is vain chasing the wind it comes when you hear and when you take heed of the words of the one shepherd because he said to us no one comes to the father and the joy of the father's house but by me without him life will be forever vain ephemeral enigmatic and evil but whoever comes to me says the

Lord Jesus Christ the true shepherd I will never cast out follow me he says heed my words of truth my words of delight because I am the way and the truth and the life the life that is eternal well may God help us and encourage us as we begin to study this book together let's pray oh Lord our great shepherd our good shepherd our loving shepherd grant us humility we pray to let you be God over us so as we hear your voice as we desire what you promise as we love what you command above all other things we may be led all the way through the vexed journey of this brief life this often baffling and bitter life led in the way of venturesome joy seeing the beauty of everything you've given us in its time because our hearts are ever fixed where true joys are to be found and so we know none of our labor in this world need ever be meaningless need ever be in vain so hear us and help us for we ask it in

Jesus glorious name Amen