

Fruitful Working in the Perplexities of Life

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bible reading, and we're looking this morning at the book of Ecclesiastes. As I've said, you have a handout there which gives you a little outline of the book on the reverse and of our study this morning.

If anybody wants to go into the book in more detail, then on the church website, on the sermon section, there's a little section for extra information. All these handouts from the last few weeks are there. I've also put up there today a longer handout on the book of Ecclesiastes, laying out the whole book over two pages with various highlights and so on, which if somebody wants to study it, you might find that helpful. That's available on the website. We're going to read just in two places this morning, in chapter one, the first little section, and then a few verses from chapter three.

The words of the preacher. You'll see the footnote there. He's got a name, Kohileth, which really means the one who gathers, who gathers the congregation together to hear the words.

Difficult to translate, but let's call him the preacher. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.

The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind. And on its circuit, the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.

[1 : 51] To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness. The man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

What has been is what will be. And what has been done is what will be done. And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it's said, see, this is new? It has been already in the ages before us.

There's no remembrance of former things, or perhaps better to read as a footnote, of former people. Nor will there be any remembrance of later people yet to be among those who come after.

I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem, and I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. And it's 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 of striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight.

[3 : 00] What is lacking cannot be counted. Turn over to chapter 3. I'm going to read it verse 9 after the very famous little section about a time for every matter, a time to be born, a time to die, a time to sing, a time to dance, all of that.

We read verse 9. And what gain, what profit has the worker from his toil? I've seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart.

Yet, so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. As I perceived, 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 all his toil. This is God's gift to man.

[4 : 06] Amen. Amen. Amen. May God bless to us his word and give us understanding and wisdom. Amen. Well, turn up, if you would, the book of Ecclesiastes.

And you have a sheet there that gives you an outline of the book and also an outline on the other side of where we're going this morning. We'll come in this little introductory series about how to walk in wisdom as believers to this book of Ecclesiastes.

It's a much misunderstood book and a much neglected book in the church. It's been called the black sheep of biblical books. Or somebody's put it this way, the delight of skeptics and the despair of saints.

Because it seems at first sight so often to be full of pessimism, cynicism, even nihilism. With its refrain there in verse 2 of chapter 1. Sorry, yes.

Vanity. All is vanity. Apparently, it was the favorite Bible book of Kaiser Wilhelm of First World War infamy. So that's not really a great endorsement, is it?

[5 : 14] It's a bit like saying it's President Putin's favorite part of the Bible. It doesn't really work. Some Christians, therefore, can't really believe that most of this book actually is the inspired word of God.

At least not taking it at face value. And they assume that most of it is written really by an unbelieving skeptic. All except actually the last few verses.

That last paragraph from chapter 12, verse 11. Where at last we get some sense. And he says things like, fear God and keep his commandments. So people who think that say, well, there you have the contrast.

Everything that's gone before is wrong. Rather like a lot of what Job's friends say. And it's foolish. But only at the end do you get to what is right and true.

The trouble with that view is, of course, if you look at that last paragraph in chapter 12, you'll see that the writer there affirms that everything the preacher has said in the previous 11 chapters is right and true. He spoke uprightly words of delight.

[6 : 15] Uprightly he wrote words of truth. So that makes it difficult to write off the whole of the book as sub-Christian pessimism, I would suggest. On the other hand, you find some rather pietistic Christians who have noted the very positive parts of the book.

And they feel actually they're rather too positive. And even hedonistic. With that refrain that keeps coming, as in chapter 2, verse 24, for example. To eat and to drink and to find enjoyment in toil. For there's nothing better in life. There are some people who think, well, that surely can't be a Christian message. Some people are very suspicious of the idea that Christians should have too much enjoyment in life. And so they want to write off that.

So perhaps the commonest way that evangelical Christians tend to take this book is to see it as a critique of secularism. Of life without God. A book that's showing up the emptiness of that life and the futility of ignoring God in life.

So it's saying what you need, Mr. Secularist, is to understand God like we Christians do. And then your questions and your perplexities and your miseries will all be solved.

[7 : 26] There'll be no problems anymore. And all the vexation in your life will cease. If only you'll just see from our Christian perspective. And some Christians do think like that and talk like that.

But in fact, let me tell you that if you're the kind of person who thinks like that, then you are the very person that the preacher of Ecclesiastes has in his sights. Not skeptical secularists.

There weren't any of them anyway when this book was written. But rather simplistic and trite Christian believers whose ideas of faith and whose ideas of God are very greatly flawed.

You know, the kind of person that thinks, well, all you need to do is come to Jesus. Now all these problems that you've got in life, they'll evaporate. And everything will be fine. And you won't struggle anymore.

You won't weep anymore. You won't have pain anymore. Well, friends, as I hope you know, that view is totally foreign to the Bible. Totally inadequate.

[8 : 26] And it's totally foreign to all of our experiences of real faith, isn't it? In the real world. And it's that kind of triumphalist nonsense that the book of Ecclesiastes sets out to puncture and cut right down to size with its cold blast of realism.

And it is just as cold and icy blast as the beast from the east that we've been facing in these recent weeks. He's confronting people who want to think that life is other than it really is.

And who, because of that, never really come to terms with life in a fallen world. Life under the sun. And life as it always will be, even for faithful Christian believers.

And he's forcing them and us as readers to come to terms with reality. So that life as it really is won't flourish in our faith.

Because we're trying to pretend that it's not really as it is. When it is as it is and always will be as it is. And so in chapter 12, verse 11, we're told that the preacher speaks words that are like goats.

[9 : 34] They're like nails. They prick. They provoke. But, he says, they are words of truth and uprightness. And therefore, they're words of delight. Because they are God's truth.

They are the words, he says, of the one shepherd. And he alone is the one who can shepherd us in the way of real joy. Venturesome joy. All through this very vexed journey that is our lives.

Think of Psalm 23 we just sang a version of. He speaks about the shepherd's rod and staff. Now, that's a challenging thing, a painful thing at times. But it's a comforting thing because it can lead on the right path.

Even through the darkest valleys of our human existence, says the psalmist. And he can do so in such a way as gives us the oil of joy, great satisfaction and even joy, even in the presence of many enemies.

And not least in the presence of the enemy of our own human nature. And that's what this book, Ecclesiastes, is all about.

[10 : 39] We may well be, and indeed we will be, baffled by many things in our lives. But if we believe the words of the one shepherd, and if we heed his truthful life, we can find blessing, nevertheless, all through this vain life under the sun.

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

Even in this veil of tears. That's the message of this book. There is a path of venturesome joy, even through life's vexed journey.

But only, only if we are led by the one shepherd. That's what this book gives us, the teaching of the one shepherd. It teaches us the way of real delight.

It teaches us the words and the ways of God so that we'll fear him and listen to his instruction. For this, says chapter 12, verse 13, literally is the whole of man.

[11 : 49] What he's saying is this is what it really means to be truly human. This is a book to teach us how to live as true, fruitful human beings in this fallen world.

And that means that there is a message here for everyone. Maybe you are a skeptical secularist. Maybe you are a rejecter of God and Christian faith. Well, there is plenty in this book to make you think, to challenge your assumptions about life.

And I hope you'd be open-minded enough to engage with its questions, honestly. But there's also a very great deal here, let me say, to challenge us as Christian believers. Because the writer of this book will not let us get away with trite and facile understandings of our faith.

Christians have got to learn to think deeply about the perplexities of life. So the preacher, Kohelet, you'll see that's the name in the footnote there.

It's a difficult word to translate, but let's call him the preacher. He exposes false optimism of all kinds. And he forces us to face up to the real vexations, the real perplexities that will face us in this world under the curse right to the very end.

[13 : 04] But he does so not to drive us to despair, but to save us from despair. It's not living in denial of reality. But it's living with the truth that really sets us free in life, that can liberate us for real joy in life.

That's what Jesus said, isn't it? The truth sets you free. Well, that's what the preacher is saying, because he is bringing us the words of the one shepherd, the good shepherd. The great God and Savior made known to us fully in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So let's try this morning just to give four themes that you need to grasp hold of if you can understand this book. If we're going to be liberated for fruitful working amid all the perplexities of life, for venturesome joy on life's journeys.

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

Life will be passing. And so we've got to learn to live with the brevity of life. We've got to live with mortality that we can't control. Look at verse 2 of chapter 1.

[14 : 13] Five times that repeated word, vanity. It's almost the motto of the book. If you've got an NIV, it says meaningless. Others have futility.

The Hebrew word hevel, it's a very hard word to translate. It means bubbles or vapor or breath. Something that's ephemeral. Something that's incomprehensible. Something you just can't grasp hold of.

And that sums up for the preacher the whole of our human lives. It's futile. It's in vain. It's passing. And every bubble of human pride, every fantasy of human folly is pricked and deflated by that one little word.

Hevel, vain. It shatters the illusion of all our let's pretend. Just like the boy who shouted at last, the emperor's got no clothes on. It brings us right down to earth with a bump, that little word.

It has various shades of meaning. And that's why you have different translations. But here in the first half of the book of Ecclesiastes, the slant really is on life as being ephemeral, as being transient.

[15:18] And therefore fleeting, uncontrollable. Control of our mortal lives is something that eludes us. We can't control a life that's passing. And soon it's going to be left behind.

That's the reality. Verse 3 of chapter 1 there you see says, What gain therefore, what enduring profit can there be from our toil or work in this world? Well in the end, the answer is none.

Verse 14, it's all hevel. It's all in vain ultimately. To spend your life chasing after gain in a passing world, he says, is as daft as trying to chase the wind.

Striving after wind. If you can catch it and bottle it. And that's how futile your life really is. If you think you can have permanent gain in a passing existence.

And this refrain, the futility of striving after wind. Again, that's a phrase that repeats again and again. All through just the first half of the book. The last time is in chapter 6 verse 9.

[16:20] That's the exact halfway point of the book. There's 111 verses I think before that and after it. Exactly the same number of Hebrew words. Very striking. Probably something to do with how the book is structured.

But at any rate, what the preacher is saying in plain English with all this reference to striving after wind is simply this. You can't beat your mortality. And to think you can is just futile.

It's like chasing the wind. Trying to capture it. So if you do spend your life trying to do that, you are deluded. And what's more, your self-delusion will in fact ruin the life that God has given you to enjoy here on this earth.

Because time, like an ever-rolling stream, will bear us all away. And that's the clear message of the opening poem in verses 3 to 11 of chapter 1.

I've called it the past generations. Verse 4, a generation goes, a generation comes. Verse 5, sunset and sunrise. Wind from the north, wind from the south.

[17:27] On it goes. Time's ever-rolling stream. And in the end, verse 11, there's no remembrance of former things. Probably better, former people. And he says there'll be no remembrance of us either.

How many of you know your great-grandparents' names? How many of you even know your grandmother's maiden name? Striking, isn't it, how quickly everything's forgotten.

And the preacher's saying, you've got to be serious about the facts of life. I passed my 50th birthday last year. Remember when I turned 35, thinking very clearly, that's halfway to my three score years and ten.

And I thought, oh well, if perchance four score, I've got a bit longer. Once you pass 40, you haven't got that. Once you pass 50, really, there's nowhere to hide. You still think like you're 25, but your bones and your joints tell you a different story.

That's what the preacher says. Face up to it. Your life is Hevel. It's fleeting. It's already fading away from you.

[18:33] And what enduring gain, what profit is there from all my toil, all my striving after wisdom in life? Look at chapter 2, verse 15. Very sobering.

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, this also is vanity.

For of the wise as of 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 as the fool.

It's all the same in the end. And so verse 17, it's just chasing the wind. A lot of people try very hard, don't they, in life to overcome mortality.

That's why they chase wealth. Of course, wealth can protect you, can buy health to a certain extent. That's why in certain places in the country, the expectation of life is in the mid-80s.

[19:34] In other places, it's as low as the 50s. But you can't chase it forever. A lot of people chase education. Or they seek wisdom. Or they seek learning.

Or they seek salvation in their political ideals. Whatever it is, the preacher explores all these things. But whatever it is, it's only ever for a time. And in the end, what happens to the fool will happen to me also.

It was Woody Allen who said, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying. Well, you can't, can you?

Because we're living with mortality that we cannot control. Life is passing. Life is ephemeral. It's Hevel. And you need to live with that and not live trying to strive against that reality.

The chief obstacle to living well in this life is the refusal to accept our transience, our mortality. Years ago, I came across something that Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, said to a graduation service of students at Stanford University.

[20 : 47] And there had been a couple of speakers before him who'd given the usual flattery and flummery. You know, you're the cream of the crop. You've got limitless potential in life. All that sort of nonsense you get at graduations.

And then Steve Jobs stood up. And this is what he said. Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've encountered to help me make the big choices in life. How about that?

Fairly pricks the bubble of Ivy League pomposity, doesn't it? He went on. Remembering you're going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking of something to lose.

You're already naked. There's no reason not to follow your heart. Now, that's not the whole story, of course. But it is an awful lot like a key point that the preacher is making in this first half of Ecclesiastes.

Because his focus is on exactly that. Facing up to the reality of life's brevity. So as to rise above it in order to find a truly meaningful existence in this mortal world.

[21 : 50] Despite life's brevity. And that alone, he says, is the road to joy on life's journey. Look down to chapter 2, verse 23.

Those verses there describe the vexation. The discontent. Of the man who won't come to terms with his own mortality. He enjoys nothing from his toil and striving.

His days are full of sorrow and vexation. His nights are disturbed. Because, if you look up to verse 18 just above, because he knows he can't take it with him. He's going to have to give it all to somebody else.

It's making him bitter. Dissatisfied. But look down to verse 24. How different for the man who pleases God.

That is, who fears God and who trusts him to be God and to order his mortal life. Not struggling against the allotted span that God gives him. To him, the preacher says, God gives a great gift.

[22 : 49] The fact of wisdom and knowledge and joy in life. The footnote there for verse 24. The word enjoyment is very helpful. Because the enjoyment he has is that he can see the good.

That's the blessing that God gives to his people in this passing world. And that is the path to joy. To be able to see the good gift of God for its time. Even in this passing world.

And that's the paradox of biblical faith, friends. It's when we submit to the reality. Both of our own mortality. And also of God's majesty.

It's then and then alone that we discover the liberating joy that has eluded us. When we've tried to strive for those things ourselves. That's the first key.

To a fruitful life. It's embracing the brevity of our lives. It's learning to live with this mortality. That we just can't control. And yet trusting in the God who does control it.

[23 : 49] And so being able to see the good. And that's the way God gives us wisdom and knowledge and joy even in this life. But the second thing the preacher wants us to embrace honestly therefore is the bafflement of life.

Because we must grasp the transcendence of God. Life isn't just ephemeral but life is enigmatic. It's going to be perplexing. And we've got to learn to live with bafflement in life.

We've got to learn to live with mysteries that we cannot understand. And the word Hevel also has this sense of the enigmatic. The incomprehensible.

And that's really the particular focus in the second half of the book. Both senses are always there of course. You can't divide them all neatly. But that's more of the emphasis in the second part.

And the truth is. What the preacher is saying to us is our lives are so often like what Winston Churchill said of Russia. Riddles wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

[24 : 55] And isn't that true? It's so often that life is beyond our comprehension. Not just because we are passing but because we are pitiful.

Because we are small and earthly. And there's just a vast, vast realm beyond us and above us. That we are completely ignorant of. I don't mean just the physical universe.

The world of physics and astrophysics. The sort of thing that Stephen Hawking could understand and explain. I'm talking about above and beyond even that. Chapter 5 verse 2.

It's really the key verse here. God is in heaven. And you are on earth. So never forget that. God is the transcendent creator.

And we are but transient creatures. We're just puffs of wind. So no wonder. Life is full of enigmas that baffle us. Of course. There's another key phrase all through the book that reminds us of this constantly.

[25 : 56] Again you'll see it back in chapter 1 in verse 3. And again in verse 9 and verse 14. And all the way through. Under the sun. So chapter 1 verse 14. I've seen everything that is done under the sun.

And behold it's vain. It's a striving after the wind. Now that's not just the wrong view of a secularist who doesn't understand God.

Because the preacher uses another variation of that phrase. Chapter 1 verse 13. Under heaven. Under the sun. Under heaven. It's all the same. So what he's saying. Even from the standpoint of faith that knows about heaven.

There are always going to be huge mysteries in life. Why? Because we are not God. Who is in heaven. Life is Hevel.

Life is an enigma. It's above us. It's beyond our ken. It's going to elude us. Often. Because God is transcendent in his ways.

[26 : 57] His ways are the ways of heaven. They're beyond us. For as the heaven is higher than the earth. So my ways are higher than your ways. So my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.

Says the Lord through Isaiah. And so even though wisdom is good. And we must seek wisdom. All our wisdom is always going to be limited.

Because we're not God. Look at chapter 7. Verse 19. Wisdom is good. He says wisdom gives strength to a wise man.

More than 10 rulers who are in a city. Wisdom is great. But look up just a few verses to verse 15. The righteous.

That's the wise. Often perish. While the wicked fool. So often prospers in life. Well that just seems so wrong. Doesn't it? That's baffling to us. Why is that?

[27 : 53] There's so many things in life that baffle us. We just can't explain. I don't just mean things like, you know. Every time you decide to have a barbecue.

It's guaranteed to rain. Or every time your toast falls on the ground. You know, it's always the butter side down. I don't just mean mysteries like that. But I mean real mysteries. Perplexities. Hard things.

Like the Christian man who's met by the police. And charged with a traffic offense causing an accident. A place that he wasn't even at. And yet he has to fork out of his own pocket thousands of pounds for his own defense.

Just to prove himself innocent. Why on earth should that happen to me? Or why some people suffer so much ill health in themselves and in their family. Sometimes the kindest, gentlest, loveliest people you know.

Whereas at the same time, some of the nastiest, horriblest people you know have wonderful health. And wonderful wealth. Life is so full of mysteries like that, isn't it?

[28 : 55] That we find so difficult. And often we're baffled. And we can't explain why God allows these things to happen. Chapter 8 verse 17. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Because so much is perplexing. Or chapter 9 verse 15. A poor wise man, he tells of. Who saves by his action a whole city. And yet nobody even remembers that man.

Upon whom all their lives depended. And yet we open our newspapers. And what are they full of? Drivel about celebrities. Who've never done anything wise or anything useful in their whole lives.

But are celebrated all the time. Or chapter 10 verses 6 and 7. A great perplexing evil under the sun. It seems so wrong.

I've seen slaves on horses. Elevated. While real princes walk like slaves. What he's saying is some of the ablest and best. And most distinguished people in the world.

[29 : 56] Are utterly unknown and utterly unheard of. And unrecognized. While utter fools are so often elevated to high places as rulers. And presidents.

And party leaders. Isn't that true? And even with God's revelation to us. Even knowing his word. The world is still so full of many things that baffle us and confuse us.

And that's why the question that comes so often in the Bible is this. Why? Why Lord? The answer is because God is transcendent.

He alone is above the sun. He is in heaven. And we're on earth. And so says the preacher. Let your words be few.

Learn to be quiet. And just stop displaying your ignorance. Be in awe of God. He says. Fear him. It's so, so important to learn. To be humble. To recognize and admit that we don't have all the answers.

[30 : 57] And we never will have all the answers. And hold our tongues. When we don't have the answers. Because it's so easy to be trite. So easy to be superficial. About perplexing pain and miseries in life.

And therefore it's so easy for us to be foolish and wounding with our words that are meant well.

Somebody is suffering terrible agonies. And we think it will help them to spout texts at them.

All things work together for good. Cheer up. Don't worry. Something good will come of this. Please don't. Please don't say that to me. When I'm suffering some terrible agony.

Because it's not true. Nothing good may come of that particular mysterious agony. In this passing life under the sun. The world is full of perplexing and painful enigmas.

Sometimes the best thing we can do is let our words be few. Eugene Peterson says. A crashing destruction of idols. Of easy answers to the questions of life meaning.

[32 : 04] Including religious answers. Sounds all throughout this book. Because God alone is in heaven. And we are on earth.

He alone is transcendent. He alone can explain it all. We can't. And we've got to learn to live with that. With the bafflement of life. We've got to live with mysteries that we will never be able to comprehend or explain.

But there's more to this vexation in life. Even than the fact that God is the creator. And we are but creatures. Because the world that we inhabit under the sun is not actually the world as God made it to be.

And so we've got to understand also that life in this world is going to be a bitter one. And that's the third thing we have to come to terms with. The bitterness of life. We've got to grasp the real tragedy of sin.

And that life is evil. And therefore it will be painful. And we've got to live with many miseries that we cannot curtail. The preacher is very, very clear about that.

[33 : 11] Chapter 7 verse 29. God made man upright. But they have sought out many schemes. What a perfect summary of the Bible's teaching on sinful human nature. Or chapter 8 verse 11.

The heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. Or 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 is what he's saying. Don't be shocked. This is a fallen world. Christians should be the least shockable people on the planet. When we observe things like chapter 3 verse 16 observes.

That even in the place of justice. Even there is wickedness. And even in the place of righteousness. In the church. Even there is wickedness. Don't be shocked.

That even policemen or lawyers or judges can be crooked and corrupted and abuse their position. Don't be shocked. When even leaders in the church can fall into sin and abuse their position and do terrible things.

[34 : 12] Don't be shocked when parliamentarians tell lies. Or are self-serving or are lining their own pockets. Don't be shocked. Of course we should be saddened. But not shocked or surprised.

Because we of all people know this is a fallen world. A sinful world. The whole creation. The whole creation. Says the apostle Paul. Has been subjected to.

Hevel. Vanity. Futility. Because of man's sin. And that means our lives are subject not just to finitude. Because we are creatures and not the creator.

But also to futility and to frustration because of that curse of sin. And so as the preacher observes so clearly. This is a confused and a corrupted and a very confusing world at times. And it will be to the very end. Even for faithful believers. There will be vexation friends. All along life's journey.

[35 : 14] There will be groaning. Right to the very end. As the apostle Paul puts it. We have to grasp that. That's the truth. God made man upright. Well yes.

Genesis tells us God made a good world. An ordered world. A beautiful world. Both physically and morally. And much, much of that beauty remains. Not only in the physical realm. But also in the moral realm.

God's moral substructure of this universe still holds true in many ways. And when people, when nations live in the line, in line with that. In general they will do well. The Bible tells us.

Righteousness exalts a nation. But as the story of Genesis 3 onwards tells us. There's been a mighty earthquake. Hasn't there? In this whole world order. Not just physically but also morally. And so even man's best wisdom. Which comes from God himself. Still leaves us facing pain and perplexity. Even though we are righteous in Christ.

[36 : 13] Even though we're people of faith. And so even the great so-called victory chapter in the New Testament. Romans chapter 8. What does it tell us? Paul says you're going to be groaning.

Along with the whole of creation. Right until the very end. Until this world's resurrection. Until it's reborn. Beyond the curse of sin. And so just as Job learned.

That there will be many mysteries and much pain. Even for the righteous in this world. So the preacher here affirms that there will always be perplexity. Great mystery.

In this ephemeral life that we can't control. In this enigmatic life that we can't always comprehend. In this evil life that we can't curtail.

We know that. We know we're often baffled about these things aren't we? We have to swallow such bitter things in life.

[37 : 11] Why? Why was that lovely little child struck down with cancer and died in infancy? Why has my marriage been such a struggle since the very beginning?

Why was I widowed so young and so painfully? Why haven't I been able to have children? I'd love children. I'd long to have children. When all around the world people are killing their babies through abortion.

And having them spat out unwanted. Why? And on and on and on. Life is full of bitter agonies. And that is the tragedy of sin.

The whole creation subject to futility. To vanity. To have hell. Says Paul. And that's why this earthly life is in the end all vain.

It's just a vapor. It's a breath. It's going to disappear. So in the end then, is it all nihilism?

[38 : 17] Is it all despair? No. Not if we listen to the preacher. Not if we don't miss this final thread of great, great importance.

Which is all through this book. And it's about the beauty of life. Even now. Because we need to grasp not only the tragedy of sin. But also the great, great triumph of the gospel. Notwithstanding all his realism.

The preacher is equally intent that life is eternal. That life does have purpose. And we must learn to live, therefore, with the beauty in life now. And with that meaning that can bring us contentment.

And indeed bring us joy in life's journey. Even here in this book, there's a great platform of hope.

There's a great springboard of joy. Not from pretending and trying to escape from reality.

But rather by seeing the good, even in the midst of it all. Chapter 5, verse 18. Behold, I have seen the good, says the preacher.

[39 : 20] Power to enjoy what you have in this life, verse 19. To accept your lot and to rejoice in your toil. This is the gift of God.

How do you get that? How do you get that power? Well, by seeing what the preacher does see. By seeing this life under the sun.

This transient life in the light of the transcendent. What is above the sun. And seeing the sin and the futility in this world. In the light of God's ultimate intervention.

To end all that is vain. Forever. Chapter 3. That we looked at. Is perhaps the most famous chapter in this book. All about the time for everything.

But don't miss verse 17 of chapter 3. There is a time also, he says, for God's judgment. God will judge the righteous and the wicked. He will intervene in this futile world under the curse.
[40 : 22] That's the sure message of this book. It's right there in the very last verse. Again, God will bring every deed to judgment. And that means that in the end, this whole vain world.

This passing world of Hevel will itself pass. Will itself be forgotten and be no more. And in its place, there will be a real world. A lasting world.

A world where nothing is ever in vain. And you see, once you see that, everything does change. It's when you grasp the true light of eternity that God has set in our hearts.

That you can see then the beauty that does fill God's world even now. And which can be enjoyed even now. Even though it's only for a time. Once we see the solid joys and the lasting treasures of His eternal kingdom.

And once we stop seeking lasting profit merely from this world's passing pleasures. That's what liberates us actually to find joy in these good gifts of God.

[41 : 28] Even though they're passing. Because we're not seeking salvation from them anymore. Not seeking significance from them. We're just using them for passing sustenance.

Which is what God has given us to have them for. For joy in the midst of vexation. And that's God's great gift to us in this earthly life. Chapter 3 verse 13.

We can eat and drink. And we can take pleasure in our toil. Once we learn to accept that this is but a passing pleasure. That it is not a lifetime's investment.

Live like that. Not seeking from these things the significance and the permanence that they can never give, he says. Again, chapter 5, verse 19. Accept that reality.

Accept that this is God's gift. And that is how life will be. Liberated from enduring misery. Liberated from bitter discontent.

[42 : 26] And that's how you will be kept with real joy in your hearts. That's the gospel message of Ecclesiastes. That's just what Jesus says in different words in Matthew chapter 6, isn't it? Don't be weighed down with anxiety about the things of this life.

The clothes, the food, all of those sorts of things. No, no, no. Seek first the kingdom of God, he says. And all those things, they will be added to you. You will find joy in them.

You will find joy in life's journey. But only if your heart is invested not merely in these things under the sun, but in the Lord and his everlasting kingdom above the sun.

That's the only way to true blessing. That's the only way to find the beauty in this passing world. In the midst of the bafflement and the bitterness that will be there right to the very end.

And it begins with hearing these words. Hearing the words of the one shepherd. So if you want to find joy in this passing life, you need to do these two things, he says.

[43 : 27] First, to be humble. Let your words be few. Learn to listen to God's words. The words of the one shepherd. Because he alone can lead you into that path of joy.

Do you trust him? Can you trust him to do that? We know so much better even than the preacher, don't we? This one shepherd. We know his name, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We know him as the good shepherd who even lays down his life for the sheep. Who came to bring life. Life, he says, in all its abundant fullness. We know the one who has brought about the great reversal that the preacher here is only looking forward to.

And we've seen even more sure and certain hope already above the sun. Jesus says to his disciples, I have overcome this world of vanity.

So be of good cheer. There can be venturesome joy for all life's vexed journey. There can be gain. There can be profit, real and lasting in all our earthly toil under the sun.

[44 : 32] Because in the Lord, none of our labors are ever in vain. So he says, be humble and trust the great shepherd's words.

And therefore, secondly, be happy. Be liberated from this world's burdens for this world's blessings. Don't let the brevity and the bafflement and the bitterness of this life, don't let it de-joy your life.

See the good. But you'll only be happy like that if you'll be humble. And if you'll stop trying to be God and stop trying to control a world that you can't ever control and a mortality you can never control.

Look at chapter 5, the end of chapter 5 as we finish. Because it's there that you see just so clearly the two ways that we can choose to live as Christian believers in this world.

The way of godly contentment and real joy. Or the way of grumbling discontent and real misery.

Verses 15 to 17 there. You see, they describe, don't they, the way of refusing to live gladly with your

limitations in this world under the sun.

[45 : 42] Unable to accept, verse 15, that you leave your life naked just as you came into it. And so verse 16, you see, life is a grievous evil.

A fruitless toiling after the wind. Reaping just darkness. And verse 17, a life full of vexation and sickness and anger.

What a grim way to live. But plenty of Christians live like that, discontented with the life that God has given them. And therefore unable to see any of the joys that he has given them.

But there is another way. There's a way of letting God be God. Accepting the lot that God has given us. And doing it with glad thanksgiving.

Even amid the pain of life. The puzzles of life. The perplexities. Look at verses 18 and 19. I've seen what is good and fitting.

[46 : 43] And it's to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of life that God has given you. For this is his lot.

Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and to rejoice in his toil. This is the gift of God.

Two ways to live. Totally different. Baffled and bitter. Because we can't explain it all and we won't accept it all.

And therefore life is full of vexation and sickness and anger. Or just as baffled often. And yet believing and trusting in him that we know to be the good shepherd.

Whose words bring truth and delight. And who has given us to find joy even in the midst of all these frustrations and perplexities and pains in life. That's the way that leads to verse 20.

[47 : 44] To be the sort of person who never remembers the days of your life. Because God keeps you occupied all the time with joy in your heart. Which one of those two ways do we want to live as Christian people?

The choice is ours. But what you choose is going to make an awful lot of difference to your life. And to the joy that you find even in the midst of this passing world of pain.

Follow me. Says our great shepherd. Heed my words. And live that way. Because I am the way. And the truth.

And the life. In all its fullness. There is a way of venturesome joy. All through life's vexed journeys. If we will see the good.

That he has given us. To rejoice in. Even in this fleeting life. Let's pray. Oh Lord.

[48 : 51] Our great shepherd. Grant us. That humility. We pray to listen to you. To let you teach us. And to let you be God. And to let you lead us.

In that way of venturesome joy. All through. The many vexations this life. Will bring to us. May we be people. Who are occupied daily.

With joy in our hearts. So that none of our labors. In this world. Will be in vain. But we are investing. So greatly.

In all that is above the sun. That even. Life. In this dark shadow. Below the sun. Will be brightly lit. By appreciation. Of all your goodness. And an eye that sees. All your gracious gifts to us. So lead us.

[49 : 48] We pray. In your paths. For we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.