

## 8. The Liberating Realism of the True Gospel

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 29 April 2007

Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to the passage that we read there in Ecclesiastes chapter 6, page 556 in our Church Bibles. And this passage is all about the liberating realism of the true Gospel.

Throughout the first half of this book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher has been forcing us to come to terms with reality, reality about life, about the universe, about everything.

And again and again, he surveys life in this world, life under the sun, as he calls it. And he comes to the conclusion, vanity, in vain, that word hevel, literally bubbles or vapor.

It's a word almost impossible to translate, but in fact, through the book, it has rather a range of subtle nuances in its meaning. But in the first half of the book, right up to that verse 9 of chapter 6, there's a particular slant towards it, meaning in vain, in the sense of being transient, of impermanent, of ephemeral.

And that's reinforced by that phrase that often goes along with it in that first half of the book, striving after the wind. The whole emphasis of the preachers coming to terms with reality about life is that we must come to terms with the impermanence of our mortality.

[ 1 : 3 1 ] Life simply is ephemeral. It's passing. And we just can't control it. And the material world and all that is in it is passing.

We ourselves, as we read last time in chapter 5, we enter the world naked and we depart just the same way. We take nothing with us. And in that sense, life is vain.

It's ephemeral. It's impermanent. And so material things, passing things, these things can never be the key to joy in this world.

No, whether we have much in life or whether we have little in life, the power to enjoy these things comes only, as we saw last time, from above, from God himself.

And therefore, the key to life is therefore to seek that, to accept that, to seek the gift of God that comes from above. The key to life in this world, in other words, is to have a believing walk through the brief material existence that we have.

[ 2 : 4 1 ] But there's more to come to terms with than just the brevity of life under the sun. And more and more, as we get into the second half of the book, the focus begins to be on not just the brevity of our lives and the fact of our mortality, but in fact, the often baffling nature of our lives and of the world itself.

Not only is our existence marked by vanity in the sense of being impermanent and ephemeral, but also by vanity in the sense of being impenetrable and enigmatic.

That's the nature of our human existence. In so many ways, when we take an honest look at life, we're forced to that reality, aren't we? When we remove ourselves from the cocoon of protective fantasy that we so often inhabit, we just have to admit that the world and our life is a baffling one to live in.

So much of the world is elusive. It's enigmatic. It's frankly incomprehensible to us. We're surrounded by manifest injustice, by evil, by all sorts of things that just don't seem to add up.

It's just a mystery to us. And that's true, isn't it? Even as Christian believers, one of our commonest questions is, why?

[ 4 : 05 ] Isn't that right? Why, Lord? Why is there so much struggle in my life? Why does someone that I love, who's such a good person, who's a godly person, why do they get struck down with a cancer that's incurable when some reprobate gets a cancer that can be cured?

That's the cry of Ecclesiastes 8, verse 12. A sinner does evil a hundred times and yet prolongs his life. Why? Or in chapter 9, another evil under the sun.

The same events happen to all, he says, the good and the wicked. He who sacrifices, the one who goes to church and is religious, and the one who doesn't. Same things happen to both.

Why? And so, says the preacher, the key to life and the way of real wisdom is coming to terms not only with the impermanence of life, but also with the incomprehensibility of life.

The believing walk, the way of joy and contentment must learn to tread with confident faith, a world that is both brief and a world that is baffling.

[ 5 : 20 ] And so, you see, verses 10 to 12 of chapter 6 that we read call us to an acceptance of that reality as a starting point for our lives, if we're going to find any wisdom to help us through our day-to-day lives.

Look at verse 10. It's very stark, isn't it? It really cuts us down to size. Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.

Well, to be named means to be given a destiny. And what he's saying is that God has framed what man is destined to be, and he's destined to be mortal, and that's that.

You see, in these three verses, 10 to 12, the word man, Adam, is repeated four times. What advantage to man? Who knows what is good for man? Who can tell man?

See, the very word reminds us of our mortality, doesn't it? That we're dust. God made man, Adam, out of the dust, Adama. Actually, the second half of the book of Ecclesiastes ends with that thought as well.

[ 6 : 28 ] Just before the epilogue, chapter 12, verse 7, he talks about us returning to dust. It seems to begin and end this section. But his point here is simple, isn't it? That's what you are.

You're dust. So accept it. Don't debate it. How can you dispute with your creator who created you? It's just like Isaiah 45, 9, isn't it?

Can the clay dispute with the potter? Don't be ridiculous. All your protestations can't change reality, verse 11. The more words, the more vanity.

It's just wind. You see, we want answers about life, don't we? We want clarity. We want explanation for everything. We're always asking why.

When there's a tragedy that happens. The first thing we ask, isn't it? Why did this happen? Why did God allow this to happen? But know, you see, remember chapter 5? Don't be rash with your mouth.

[ 7 : 25 ] Let your words be few. We need to accept the reality of our mortal limitations. We need to accept the world's anomalies, the world's mysteries.

And we need to learn to live with that tension in this brief life, in this baffling world. That's the beginning of wisdom, according to the preacher.

Well, is there any hope? Is there any help for us, these few days of our life, on this passing world? Verse 12, who knows what is good for man in his mortal life?

Who can tell him what will be after him? Well, he's already told us that, hasn't he, of course? God alone can tell us these things. But you have to shut up and listen.

It's what chapter 5 was telling us. God is in heaven and we are on earth. So be quiet. Stop being vain. Stop your vain words.

[ 8 : 26 ] And listen to what God says. And of course, in the epilogue of this book, in chapter 12, we're reminded, aren't we, that the preacher speaks these words of God to us.

He speaks to us words of delight, words of truth. Wise words. Carefully arranged proverbs, he says, to act like goads, to act like nails, to fix our lives on.

And in chapter 7, that's exactly what we have. Some of these wise words, these proverbs. What is good for a man to live by all his mortal life? Well, listen to the preacher.

Listen to the wisdom that comes from the one who's greater than you. Don't dispute it. Accept it. And this wisdom, says verse 12, will preserve the life of him who has it.

Chapter 7, verse 12. We'll come to that at the end. See, as always, coming to terms with reality and escaping from fantasy and from delusion is the beginning of wisdom for life.

[ 9 : 30 ] That's the preacher's constant message, isn't it? So, look at verses 1 to 6, first of all. These verses tell us that wisdom embraces the reality of a fallen world.

In other words, it is real and realistic about death. And because it's realistic about death and embraces it as the supreme reality of life, real wisdom sees the preciousness of life.

And therefore, it lives seriously, not in the shallow superficiality of those who seek to live life, escaping the reality of death, colluding together in lives of delusion and fantasy about it.

Now, you see, this is a message that couldn't be more relevant for our society. Isn't that right? Our society is marked in so many ways by escapism.

We live in denial so often about the processes of aging and death. Modern medicine, modern cosmetics, they all allow us to pretend that this is not the case.

[ 10 : 35 ] They want us to think that somehow or other we can conquer the aging process. And, of course, there's a fortune to be made in those industries just because of that. Unlike the Victorians, who almost had a morbid fascination about death, and by contrast, hushed up all talk about reproduction and birth, we're the exact opposite.

We talk endlessly, don't we, about sex and reproduction. And yet we hush up and hide, and we talk about death in euphemisms, in illusions.

We sanitize it. We remove it away behind curtains in hospitals. We try not to think about it. When we do have to think about it, when we do have to mention it, well, we use euphemisms.

We talk about slipping away or passing on. We don't talk about death. I've quoted before from Arthur Kessler, the Hungarian writer, who speaks of how even undertakers join in this delusion in dressing up and beautifying corpses.

Quoting, Endeavouring, he says, to transform the dead with lipstick and rouge into horizontal members of the perennial cocktail party. You see, we want only the house of feasting, only the house of mirth, even for corpses, not the house of death.

[ 11 : 58 ] But, he goes on, this horrid pantomime is due to the fact that there has been a flight from the tragic facts of existence. But, says the preacher in this passage, that is sheer folly.

It's the very antithesis of true wisdom because it flies in the face of reality, doesn't it? It's an absolute reversal of reality. And, it's no accident, therefore, that when you live life with a profoundly unrealistic view of death, when you try and pretend death away, you will also find that you live life with a profoundly perverse valuation of life itself.

You'll have a back-to-front morality. You'll begin to see, as verse 1 says, you'll begin to see life in the opposite way to that. That precious ointment is something more important than a good name.

In other words, the experience of material things, of wealth and of luxury, and the pursuit of them, is more important than the character that you become. Which, in fact, is the only real legacy that you will leave behind.

Your name. And so, if you live like that, the day of birth becomes all-important. You party. You celebrate life just as something to have and to possess. Rather than giving any real thought to the significance of life.

[ 13 : 23 ] What it's all about. What it's all for. Life becomes all about just what you have. Not about what you are and what you are becoming. But no, says the preacher, that's sheer escapism.

It's folly. It's utterly shallow and superficial if you live life that way. That's why, he says in verse 2, the house of mourning, the funeral, is better than the house of feasting.

Just because it's the place that forces you above all to face up to reality. For this, death, is the end of all mankind. See, the funeral service on the gravesite is one of the very few places in our world that forces us to face up to reality.

Isn't that right? In our sanitized, make-believe, let's pretend world of the 21st century. Of course, the television news appalls us as we see dreadful things happening in the world.

But we switch it off, don't we? Either literally or mentally. We have compassion fatigue, we're told. Well, we also have reality fatigue in so many ways. The irony, of course, is these days that we escape into what's called reality television.

[ 14 : 39 ] Could hardly be anything of more sheer fantasy than that, could there? As somebody said, I wonder what George Orwell would think that instead of Big Brother watching us, we're watching Big Brother. But you see, staring into the mouth of an open grave is a very, very sobering place, isn't it?

That's why at a funeral service I nearly always say words something like these. Every one of us here will one day be brought to a place like this in a coffin like this.

See, death forces us to see reality, doesn't it? The living, verse 2, must lay it to heart. If you're wise, you will, verse 4. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning.

It's in realism. It's the fool who hides. It's the fool who is escaping into the house of mirth. And it is the house of mourning so often, isn't it, that shows up reality, that exposes those who have simply lived with their heads stuck in the sounds of fantasy.

And when tragedy strikes their whole life, in fact, collapses, it's shattered, their emotions are unhinged. I've seen it so often, there's a vast difference in taking a funeral service of believing Christian people and those who have no hope.

[ 16 : 06 ] Marked by dignity, by composure that comes from reality, that comes from understanding. Of course there's grief, real grief, profound grief. But there's a seriousness and there's a depth about the proceedings that comes from a life lived with the wisdom that embraces this reality of the fallen world, that embraces the supreme reality of death.

People so often think, don't they, that it's Christian believers who live with a fantasy, who have their faith as a crutch to help them escape from the reality of life. But in fact, it's quite the opposite.

It's the Christian, at least it's the Christian who understands the scriptures, that has really taken this reality to heart. That this is a fallen world, that this is a corrupted world, a tainted world, and that there will be pain and sorrow and adversity and perplexity and sickness and ultimately death will come to us all.

And it's those who have lived their life thus, seriously, who are not in fact shattered when calamity comes, when reality looms so large that it just can't be pretended away and we have to face it.

One of you told me this week about a young Christian woman who was diagnosed with very near terminal cancer, just weeks to live. And of course, there's trauma, there's shock, there's pain involved in all of that.

- [ 17 : 38 ] They said to me that there was a peace and an acceptance and a strength of heart in this person and that, friends, is something that only comes from true Christian realism that faces the reality of this fallen world that's realistic about death.

Of course, not all Christians are like that. Indeed, all of us have hearts that drift constantly, don't they? Naturally, to want to chase fantasy.

That's why there's so much in the church today, even in so-called evangelicalism today, that is just escapism dressed up in a lot of pious language. All sorts of talk about promises of health and of healing and of fulfillment.

All about the house of feasting. Nothing about the house of mourning. But the truth is that the house of mourning is where we learn the hard lessons about reality.

Do you see verse 3 that we spoke to the children about? We are to value, says the preacher, the sorrows, literally the vexations. That's how it's translated normally here. We are to value the trials of life, the reality, even of death.

- [ 18 : 54 ] Why? Because it's by sadness of face that the heart is made glad. You see, there's a capacity for real joy. There's a power to plumb the riches and the beauty and the wonder of human experience that simply can never be had by the escapist, by the shallow bon vivant, by the superficial materialist.

can't be had because that capacity is a capacity that belongs to the heart, that has been forged on the anvil of affliction. It's been forged in the fires of mystery and tragedy and sorrow in life.

We know that, don't we? It's so clear sometimes. So often, those Christians we know that have learned the seriousness of life through fiery trials of many kinds, and yet these are so often the people who are able to live with the greatest gladness of heart.

Isn't that right? With the greatest detachment, with the greatest contentment and joy despite all that's going on around them because they've learned the truth of what life is really about.

Not just the celebration of what you have, the precious ointments, the luxury, but rather the stewardship of what life is for. And the true gladness of heart that we long for is found in that alone.

- [ 20 : 22 ] That's the paradox. And that's why we need the stark wake-up calls of the Scriptures to face reality, to be serious about life because we're realistic about death.

We don't like these kind of calls. Of course we don't because it rebukes us. It rebukes our superficiality and we don't like that. But far better, says verse 5, far better to hear and to embrace the wise rebuke of reality than to escape back into the laughter of fools.

Sometimes that happens, doesn't it? Somebody wanders into a church like this, they hear a word that confronts them, that shocks them, that challenges them. Sometimes it is, indeed, at a funeral, isn't it?

And you're convicted. But then, you disappear out into the street and quickly take refuge again among the laughter of friends, the laughter of fools, those who help you cover over again and delude yourself and escape the reality that you've been faced with.

Well, the preacher says to you, that's escapism. Don't do that. It can sound so comforting, can't it? Like the crackling of thorns blazing under a fire that flash up and spark and flame.

- [ 21 : 44 ] But it just fizzles away so quickly. Absolutely no use, no substance for cooking on. No, says the preacher, the way of wisdom is to be real about death and therefore to be serious about life.

Wisdom embraces the reality of a fallen world. But second, wisdom embraces the reality of our fallen hearts. It's real not just about death, but it's real and realistic about depravity.

And that's what the warnings of verses 5 to 10 are all about. Can you see? The wise believer has come to terms not only with the fallenness of the world and therefore has a realistic view of the mysteries and the perplexities of a world that is corrupted, that is twisted, where bad things do happen to good people.

No, the real wise man has also come to terms with a very real corruption and depravity of his own heart. Even as a believer, as a person of faith, he knows that left to himself the tendency will always be to lapse into denial about the truth, to seek to go his own way.

It's just another way of saying the wise person is realistic about their own sin. Verse 7, even the wise can fall into madness, into folly.

[ 23 : 10 ] Even the good heart can be corrupted. And therefore, real wisdom recognizes the truth about ourself. And it lives not just seriously with realism about the world, but carefully with restraint about ourselves and our own lives.

You know, there's one thing that a totally honest Christian learns more of every single year as they get older and hopefully wiser. What is that? They learn more about their own capacity to sin and to make a mess of things.

At least that's what I find I'm learning when I'm being honest with myself, which I'm not always. But there are so many pitfalls, aren't there, that can floor us. But they all play, you see, on our innate capacity for self-deception, to escape from reality because we constantly want to hide from the truth.

We want to hide and make this world and our life in this world all that there is. we want to find in this world what we can never ever find in this world and that is heaven on earth.

And that's a desire that's so deep, so innate in the heart of every one of us because we're rebels against our God. It's in the Christian heart that's why there's so much prosperity theology in churches today.

[ 24 : 39 ] Whether it's a crass health and wealth variety or whether it's much more subtle. Just reading in the paper yesterday about a miracle course that's coming to Edinburgh this summer claiming to do all sorts of things.

It's in the Christian heart. It's in the secular heart. That's what explains the drive for individualistic materialism that there is so much of in our society. It's what explains the political utopianism of whatever hue of politics is yours.

You think you can make heaven on this earth. But all of that is fantasy. It's a failure to accept the reality that we are sinful.

We're disputing with one stronger than us and trying to deny what's real that we are depraved. We're corrupt. Even as Christians we're constantly drifting into trying to pursue gladness of heart ourselves as though it was something we could have truly and ultimately in this world.

we don't want it God's way. We don't want his prescription of sadness of face as a way to gladness of heart. His way of realism of coming to terms with life as it really is.

[ 25 : 52 ] We want it our way. We want it without pain and struggle because we're naive, because we're so unrealistic about ourselves, our own fallen hearts.

we so easily are therefore led astray by so many pitfalls we face in life. The preacher mentions just four snares like that in verses 5 to 10.

All of them though are forms of escapism, do you see? And the truly wise believer won't be naive. He'll recognize that yes, even I am in danger of falling like this and I need to live with care and restraint.

I need to guard my heart. Verse 7 you see is material gain, the oppression of bribery and easy gain. It's such a corrupting thing, isn't it?

It's so powerful, the urge for money, but so easily it makes fools of us, doesn't it? I was just reading about that poor major, what's his name, do you remember? Who cheated by coughing on, what's it called, who wants to be a millionaire?

[ 26 : 55 ] And the poor man now, his whole life, his misery has been made an absolute fool, children, spit in his face as of his urge for money, for a bribe.

Remember cash for questions? Neil Hamilton, the man's been paraded as a fool in the media ever since. Now we've got cash for honors, it's the same thing.

Why on earth do people fall for that? Well, it's escapism. It's a flight from the reality that life involves responsibility, it involves work, it involves honest toil, it's a flight into a fantasy that makes us think we can have a neverland now, we can be somebody big, or we can have things, or we can have power or recognition.

That's what every lottery player is chasing after, isn't it? But even Christians, even believers, we're all vulnerable. Think of the tragedies that there are so often.

Alas, public scandals in the church, leaders, ministers, teachers, teachers, many have ministry being ruined by the power of a bribe, somebody being offered something to boost their reputation, it might be, or just plain avarice.

[ 28 : 12 ] That's why in the New Testament it says a Christian leader must not be a lover of money. Be real about your own heart, says the preacher, you can be tripped up, you can be flooded. Verse 8, it's impatience, isn't it?

That's a real snare too. Notice what he says, that impatience is a manifestation of pride, you see? Proud in spirit. That's because underneath all impatience is really impatience with God and his ways and his working in our lives.

We want things differently, you see, we want gain now, we want answers to our prayers now, we want escape into a prideful impatience, who wants our own way all the time.

And we're cross with God, because God doesn't work to our timetable. But you see, the truth is that God is working to a long-term view. It's the end that he's concerned with, not the beginning, just like verse 1, it's the character of a name that he's after, not the cosmetics of life, not the superficial.

So easy for us, isn't it, as Christians to hide impatience with a lot of pious language. We talk about wanting to serve, to use our gifts. Well, you see, what God is interested in is a patient spirit.

[ 29 : 29 ] He's interested in a heart that produces long-term fruit, fruit that will last. That's what Jesus said. He doesn't want flash-in-the-pan beginnings, fancy things that end up with nothing.

That's good for us to remember, isn't it, as Christian churches? It's good for me to remember as a Christian pastor. A patient spirit is better than a proud spirit. Or verse 9, it's anger.

So often, that's the evidence of escapism in a mentality too, isn't it? Refusing to submit and accept the reality of life in a fallen world, and it makes us angry.

We have to live in a fallen world, and other people are fallen too. But we get angry, we get vexed with God, we resent God, because we struggle with perplexity and adversity in life.

Isn't that right? And God doesn't sort it all out, and we get cross with Him. But oh dear, what a destroying thing that can be.

[ 30 : 32 ] Nursed in the bosom, anger suppurates, it festers like a boil, doesn't it? And it erupts out at times of crisis in our lives, and so often, it's anger erupting out that destroys relationships, destroys us with them often.

Anger has the power to consume you. So be careful, says the preacher. We're all vulnerable. Live with restraint. We're all vulnerable too, aren't we, to verse 10, to nostalgia.

How many times are we tempted to look at that as we look back in life? We wouldn't have done that in my day. We all do it, don't we? We do it about work, we do it about society, we do it about the church, but you see, again, it's just escapism from the reality that we're called to live in, the reality of the present day, where God has put us now to live for him.

And we're nostalgic, we look back through rose-tinted spectacles because we're disgruntled about the things, about the way things are today. We're disaffected with life as it is, we're resentful, and we want to fly from reality.

But you see, that kind of nostalgia, says the preacher, does not come from wisdom. It's sin, it's rebellion against reality, and therefore rebellion against God.

[ 31 : 58 ] We need to take that seriously, don't we? Such a big problem often in the church, people look back to the good old days, to this or that or the other that was so much better then.

When there was more people in church, when the streets were quiet, when there was no shoppers on Sunday, when society was more moral, when the church had more influence, or whatever it is. But you see, that's just false reality, says the preacher, forget that.

Stop using it as an excuse to shirk your responsibility to do now, today, what God has called you to do, living in this world, the real world, to get out and to make Jesus Christ known in a society that is decaying, that is rejecting Him.

You see, our hearts are so easily corrupted, aren't they, in all these ways? And that's why so often the church is much less effective than she should be.

Because we don't embrace the reality of our own depravity, nor our easy propensity to turn from wisdom to madness, to foolishness.

[ 33 : 06 ] We don't like hard words and warnings and rebuke from Scripture. We think, well, we don't need it, that's for other people. But we're wrong. The wise man will live daily with realism, real about our fallen nature, our depravity, and therefore will live with restraint.

It will welcome the rebukes of Scripture. But there's one more thing that is an immense good, indeed a necessity, if we are to live believing lives in a brief world and in a baffling world.

in our existence under the sun. And if we're to live it with reality and not with despair. And that's verses 11 and 12.

That true wisdom embraces the reality of a future hope. In other words, it's real and realistic about a deliverance that is to come. And above all, you see, that is what enables us to live now with the tension and the perplexity that sometimes gives anguish in our life.

And yet, to allow the vexations and the sadness of our faces to make our hearts glad and not drive us into despair. Wisdom is good, says verse 11, with an inheritance.

[ 34 : 30 ] Now, that word inheritance always in the Old Testament really means the promised inheritance of the people of God. It's a particular portion of land, for example, that was given for each tribe so that they would have a constant place in God's kingdom forever, never be cut off.

In the New Testament, Paul tells us that in Jesus Christ, all of that has been finally fulfilled. In Him we have obtained an inheritance rich and glorious, an eternal kingdom of glory.

Peter, in his first letter, calls it an inheritance that is undefiled and imperishable, that's unfading, that's kept in heaven for us. And that is the hope of the true believer.



It always has been. And when that's our future, then wisdom must recognize that reality and never lose sight of it, even as we are supremely realistic about the present realities of death and of sin and corruption in the world and in our own hearts.

because that, and holding on to that with wisdom, is good. It's a truly powerful thing that enables us to live in the midst of a perplexing world, a troubling world, and yet to do so with wonderful peace and wonderful hope.

[ 35 : 48 ] We have peace because we have protection in life. All the days that we see the sun, we have the protection of this realistic biblical perspective in the past and also for the future.

So we're not floored and shattered by what a fallen world throws up in our path. Nor are we ruined when we find that our own hearts constantly seem to tempt us.

No, we are at peace. We have a real shelter because we don't expect the world to ever be any other kind of world now in this age.

But rather we look for a deliverance, for an inheritance that is still to come. And that's the knowledge that can protect our life. That's the knowledge that gives us peace because we know that God is in control, that it won't be forever.

We have hope as well as peace. Not just protection under the sun in this life, but preservation beyond the sun. And that's the greatest thing of all.

[ 36 : 56 ] You see, verse 12 says the advantage, that is the real gain, the gain that has been so elusive through this book. The gain of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

What does he mean, preserve the life? Well, he's not talking just about physical life, obviously. Otherwise, he contradicts himself just a few verses on in verse 15 where he speaks about the righteous perishing just like the wicked.

In chapter 8, verses 12 and 13, he makes it very, very clear, you see. He talks about the evil man who may prolong his physical life.

And yet he says it's those who fear God who will be rewarded ultimately. Not so the wicked. He will not, in the ultimate sense, prolong his days, his life before God.

Clearly, you see, the preservation of life that he's talking about here is something much more than just length of days on earth. Of course it is.

[ 38 : 01 ] I have to say some of the scholars shy right away from this, but the preacher is absolutely clear. He knows that what matters in the end is God's judgment. That's the very last verse of the whole book, isn't it?

God will bring every deed to judgment. judgment. We've seen that before in chapter 3, verse 17. It's in chapter 11, verse 9 also. There is a judgment to come.

And true wisdom, says the preacher, lives in this world in the light of that judgment to come. Because the true wisdom of faith preserves the life of him who has it through the judgment.

And that's why he says in verse 1 that for the wise the day of death is better than the day of life. It's just what the Proverbs writer says in so many places too. Proverbs 14, 32.

The wicked is overthrown by his evil doing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death. Or Proverbs 24, verse 14. Know that wisdom is such to your soul.

[ 39 : 06 ] If you find it, there will be a future. All your hope will not be cut off. Again, not so the wicked. The evil man has no future. The lamp of the wicked will be put out.

Of course, for us as New Testament believers, it's so much clearer, isn't it? It's clearer, but not different, because the New Testament tells us plainly that the prophets spoke of the same salvation and the same pattern of salvation, suffering first and then the glory to come.

The preacher here is just preaching the gospel to us. It's a real gospel that takes the present with absolute reality and doesn't try to pretend away the ills of this world and the reality of our mortality.

But it's also a gospel that's real and certain about the future. Wisdom preserves the life of whom has it through the judgment that is to come.

And that's why, you see, the Christian gospel is supremely liberating. It's the real power for living in this vexed world. We can face death with a steady eye.

[ 40 : 17 ] We can face depravity with a steady eye because we can also see the deliverance that is to come. We have a certain hope. If we didn't have that hope, we would either have to live a deluded life in this world, pretending away the pain.

Or the pain would crush us and lead us to despair. But no, because we have that certain hope, we can face it all and we can have strength.

Let me close with the Apostle Peter's way of putting this in the New Testament. We have, he says, a living hope through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

We have an inheritance, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us. And so in this we rejoice, even though for now, for a little while, we do face grievous trials.

That's the gospel. Therefore, he says, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, serious-minded, serious-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 41 : 37 ] And live your life in this world of death and in this world of depravity, in the sure and certain hope of the deliverance that is to come.

And if you live like that, friends, you will not be crushed by life, nor will you have to pretend and delude away the harsh things of life.

But you will face them with the power and the strength of the knowledge of God that is ours in Christ. And you will know the liberating realism to live this life with a heart of gladness that comes only, only from the true gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, may God help us live lives like that today. Let us pray.