

3. Bitter Despair or Believing Delight - the only choice for the honestly wise

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[0 : 00] The passage that we read in Ecclesiastes. This long passage begins at verse 12 with the words I, Kohelet, or I the preacher as we translate it in our Bibles.

We haven't really asked yet who is addressing us, who is speaking to us in this book, and who was he first speaking to? It's often assumed that the writer is Solomon, but of course, although there are echoes of Solomon here, he never calls himself by name, and that does seem to be deliberate.

There are several things that point against it being Solomon. He says, I have been king, not I am king. There was never a time when Solomon finished being king. In chapter 2, he speaks several times of all those who were in Jerusalem before me.

Solomon only really had his father David king in Jerusalem. So it seems that the writer, although he's deliberately aligning himself with Israel's kings, and especially with Solomon himself, the one who above all others could have been said to have it all in terms of wisdom and so on, he's not actually Solomon himself.

But it's as though he's saying, I speak with all the wisdom and authority of Solomon and all the other great kings in all their forms. I really do know what I'm speaking about. That's his point. But it's obvious in the book, isn't it, also, that somebody else has finally put the book together.

[1 : 34] We know that from the epilogue and from the prologue, verse 1 of chapter 1. Somebody else has set the words of the preacher here and then told us to listen to them. So the final author is somebody who's taking the words of the preacher and putting them together as a message for another generation.

I've just recently got a book called Through the Year with William Still. It's a year of daily Bible readings that David Searle has edited from all his Bible reading notes and has put one reading for every day of the year.

And he's done a wonderful job of it. And it brings the enjoyment of the teaching of that preacher to a new generation. He's rearranged them. And that's really what the author of this book has done here with the wisdom of the preacher.

But who was he doing it for? Well, we can't be sure, but it does seem fairly certain that it was for the returned people of God after the exile in Babylon.

Now that helps us because both the Bible and secular history tells us quite a lot about that situation at that time. We can read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi and learn a lot about what was going on.

[2 : 52] God's people were rather a beleaguered bunch. Yes, they'd returned from exile. Yes, the temple was rebuilt. Although the words of the prophets had been fulfilled to some extent, there was so much, though, that they hadn't yet seen.

None of the glorious things that had been promised and foreseen by Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah, none of these things had yet seemed to be there in fulfillment. God's glory and his redemption filling the whole earth.

A total freedom from sin and bondage at last. The kingdom of God. Remember in Ezra chapter 3, when the temple was finally rebuilt, there was such a great noise, but you couldn't separate out what was the joy and the sorrow.

People were shouting with joy and weeping at the same time. Joy because the temple had been rebuilt, but sorrow, well, because those who had seen the old temple knew that this was nothing in comparison. Never mind nothing in comparison to what they seemed to have hoped from the prophets.

So believing life for the returned exiles of God was very hard. They had not yet seen everything that God had promised would at last be given. Just like we as New Testament Christians are still waiting for all the gospel promises that will at last be fulfilled only when Jesus comes again.

[4 : 11] And longing for more is very hard, isn't it? When God's timetable doesn't match our timetable, it's easy to begin to want that ultimate future and that ultimate security and that ultimate satisfaction and to try and start getting it ourselves.

Isn't that right? We want it now. And often we want to do it our way. And that was the real temptation back then for those exiles who had returned to the land.

We know that from history and we know from the Bible that big changes had taken place in the economic landscape for the returned exiles. Before it had been, well, mainly an agrarian economy.

But now, having been influenced by the Persian Empire and so on, it was much more of a trading and a commercial economy. Coinage had been invented. Hard cash was king.

And credit and lending and debt were the things that fueled business. Land and property had become big business. Mortgages had become a big issue. Sounds very familiar, doesn't it? And it seems that the Lord's people had become just as obsessed with financial security and seeking material gain as all the rest of the world round about.

[5 : 24] Fear and greed. Income and capital. Profit and loss. These were the building blocks of the rat race of life. So much so, in fact, that God was being increasingly marginalized in practice in the life of his people.

Yes, they paid lip service to him, but often it wasn't much more than that. There was a relentless striving for gain in this life. And that was what marked out God's people as much as anybody else.

So if you read Nehemiah chapter 13, for example, it tells how Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem and found that the Sabbath day, the central institution of observation for God's Old Testament people, well, it was just being squeezed out because people had to do business on the Sabbath day.

Just like everybody else. They were treading their wine presses, transporting their commodities. The fish merchants were at work. The whole market was open. Well, of course, if Tesco's open and if Frasers are open, well, we'll lose market share if we're not open too.

And in the University of Jerusalem, no doubt, they were saying, well, all my classmates do their study on the Sabbath. If I don't, well, I won't get as good a degree as them. And then when the milk ground comes for this new thing that they've invented called, what's it called?

[6 : 42] Accountancy? Yes, to count all this coinage. Well, you know, I'll never get a leg up. So, well, I know that, I know it means I miss out on hearing God's Word and meeting with God's people, but well, once I've got on a bit, it'll be different and I can do that.

See, it reminds us of Ecclesiastes 1 verse 9, doesn't it? There's nothing new under the sun. That was going on then, just as it goes on today. And so God's people were doing the same and Malachi the prophet said to them, Malachi 3 verse 8, you're robbing me, the whole lot of you.

But they were so absorbed in this frantic, rat race way of life that they were blinded. They didn't even see that they were robbing God. And Malachi, of course, preached words of warning to these people, seeking their prosperity and their future in strife and toil.

But the preacher in Ecclesiastes is speaking really exactly the same message. He's just doing it a different way. The prophet, well, he pointed out the wickedness of the way people were living.

But the preacher here in Ecclesiastes is pointing out the sheer folly, the stupidity, the futility of it. It's vanity. It's hevel, it's ephemeral to live like that.

[7 : 57] You're just chasing the wind. Don't you see? And friends, if we can't see the relevance of the preacher's message to today in our own work-mad and progress-mad and profit-mad society, then we're as blind as the people were back then.

Flain is the nose on your face, isn't it? It's not just a problem way back then for the Old Testament people of God. It's a problem today. It's a problem every day. Remember what James says in the New Testament, James 4.14?

You say, we'll do this and do that and go here and there in the future and make plans and make a profit, but you don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? Says James.

You're but a mist that appears for little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we'll go and do this or that.

But you boast in your arrogance. In other words, you're just not taking God seriously enough in your life. And you see, that's the nature of sin, isn't it? We all of us, even believing people, we constantly drift from faith into delusion, from reality with God at the center of our life to fantasy where God really is a way out on the periphery and if he's still there at all, he's there primarily to serve us.

[9 : 17] There's a law, as you know, in science called the second law of thermodynamics. It says that everything always is tending towards entropy and decay.

Well, there's a similar law, the first law of spiritual dynamics. In fact, our preacher states it in Ecclesiastes 7 verse 29. God has made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

They're constantly drifting towards sinful self-delusion. That's what that means. And that's what we do, isn't it? Even believing people, Christian people. People the preacher wrote to in the 5th century BC, people James wrote to in the 1st century AD, and people today, people like you and me in the 21st century.

We drift into illusion and we live as if all the world's wisdom, all this world's achievements are our future, are our profit.

are where our real gain and our hope lie. But it's all delusion. It's self-deception. Oscar Wilde said that the secret of life is to appreciate the pleasure of being terribly, terribly deceived.

[10 : 33] And that's true. So many people live like that. Even the Lord's people, even us. The people that the preacher's speaking to. And what his mission is all about is dispelling that illusion and that deception and bringing us back to stark reality.

Back from the deceptive fantasy world that is always the thing that we're tending towards. And back to God's plumb line of real, clear thinking.

And that's why Ecclesiastes speaks so powerfully today to our world. It speaks to church people, to Christian people, you and me, who so often are caught up on the treadmill of life.

Unwittingly descending really into lives often of practical idolatry. Robbing God. But not just robbing God, robbing ourselves too. Robbing ourselves of all the joy that God wants us to have in this life.

And of course if you're not a Christian, well, it speaks to you too. Because you may need to realise that just like Oscar Wilde, you are perhaps purposefully seeking pleasure in self-deception, avoiding the real truth about life.

[11 : 50] So we need to listen to this preacher, to this wise man and all the wise men that gave us these words as they fathom the truth about life for us and teach us what wisdom really tells us.

It tells us three things. Wisdom can't control life. Wisdom can't capture life. But wisdom must force us to come to terms with life as it really is.

First of all, look at verses 12 to 18. Wisdom can't control life. The message is very clear. What he's saying to us in these verses is that even the greatest earthly wisdom can't ever get control of life.

It can only clarify life's utter vexation. Look at verse 18. In much wisdom is much vexation. And therefore the pursuit of wisdom in order to find lasting gain, lasting profit in life will only ever end up in a severe headache.

He who increases knowledge increases sorrow. You see, that question of verse 3 is still in the air, isn't it? Where is the real profit, the real gain in life?

[12 : 58] And now the preacher summons all his wisdom to confront reality and to assess the world as he sees it. And he begins by giving us his conclusion in these verses before in chapter 2 he demonstrates that by his experiments.

Now it's important for us to see that the preacher is not a pessimist. It's not that he's saying all wisdom is useless. In chapter 2 he tells us it's clearly better than folly.

Now real wisdom is essential because it dispels folly and fantasy. Wisdom forces you to the conclusion of verse 15.

You just can't get control of life. Whatever is crooked can't be straightened. You can't get ultimate profit in life. What is lacking, something that's not there, can't even be counted.

And real wisdom sees that and real wisdom admits that and real wisdom also knows why it's so. Look at verse 13. It's because there's a God in heaven who's sovereign and he has given this vexed and frustrated life to humankind.

[14 : 10] That's the reason. That's just the Bible's plain teaching, isn't it? God created for us a wonderful world but because of sin and rebellion right from the start it's been cursed.

Read Genesis 3.16. Every part of life is cursed. Human relationships, nature, the whole world. Not destroyed completely, not abandoned by God.

No, God still has blessing in his world. But nevertheless it is cursed. Romans 8 says it's subject to futility by God until such time as it's completely recreated.

But only God can do that. Only God can straighten out what's crooked. So that means that if you look at verse 14 you see viewed from an earthly perspective under the sun everything will always be bound to futility, chasing the wind, vain, ephemeral, passing.

And from within this world the world's intrinsic problems are simply unsolvable. That's what verse 15 says. It can't ever be straightened out. And the preacher's point is this.

[15 : 21] Unless you begin with this and understand the truth of the Bible's view of the world, your whole life will only ever be frustration and ruin. It doesn't matter how wise you are, how clever you are.

Unless you accept this, as verse 18 says, all your great knowledge will get for you is vexation. Without this, all our greatest earthly efforts to understand it all will just give us a headache.

That's what verses 16 to 18 say, isn't it? It's plain. The writer turns his assessment on wisdom. He looks at wisdom and learning and education itself and he says, where does it get you?

Here's the world's greatest wisdom, the wisdom of Solomon, wisdom of all his followers combined, verse 16, huge experience of wisdom. And he puts all his heart, his whole energies, everything he has into assessing its worth.

And what does it get him? Just a puff of wind. Nothing. Just vexation and sorrow and worse. Just a headache.

[16 : 31] Probably an ulcer too. Wisdom is good, oh yes, of course it is, but if you're honest, wisdom will bring pain, because it removes the pleasurable delusions that Oscar Wilde wants us to have.

And unless we can learn and accept the Bible's view of life and come to terms with the limitations of a life that must be lived in a world, yes, full of God's blessings, but also subject to his curse and subject to ultimate futility, unless we can accept that, then ultimately all our striving will only ever bring us vexation, dissatisfaction, and sorrow.

Just a never-ending headache, that's the point. And you see, that's why the world exists so often, as Oscar Wilde said, in delusions of pleasurable deception, because the truth's so painful.

Just think about the cosmetic industry, it's made a fortune on that, hasn't it? Delusions of pleasure. People thinking we can keep ourselves young forever and ever, but in the end, all the money in the world can't make the crooked straight, those wrinkles will still be there eventually.

Or you can have buttocks injections and get rid of them for a while if you want to have a face like an overstretched balloon, but it won't work forever. Think about government and public policy.

[17 : 59] Secularist politicians, you see, they think that they can legislate the world into utopia, don't they? But it's sheer delusion. They forget that what's crooked can't be made straight.

They forget that there's a law of spiritual dynamics. They forget that God made man upright, but there are many schemes. You just need to look at it. Every time a new tax law is passed, it creates two new loopholes for the accountants, doesn't it?

Many schemes there. Politicians who view the world like that forget that the problem in this world is that the world is cursed and that we are sinful.

people. And therefore the twisted human heart can never be legislated to perfection, of course not. Look at our National Health Service.

Money is poured into it more and more and more and yet it doesn't seem to be getting any better. Why is that? Well, ultimately the answer for that is because of the human heart. That's why. Specifically, in our society, it's to do with our march away increasingly from Christian morality.

[19 : 03] when the National Health Service began after the war, we were a nation who understood Christian values still. We thought it was a privilege to have free treatment. We revered it, we respected it, but not now.

We're so self-centered, we think we deserve everything, we treat it as a right and therefore it's abused by everybody. That's the problem with the National Health Service. It's insoluble. It's the problem of the human heart.

Although, maybe Patricia Hewitt isn't particularly helping. It's the same with our schools, isn't it? Mass is more spending on money in schools, but it's not money that's the problem or lack of money.

It's morality and lack of morality. That's the problem. If our values and our sense of right or wrong are turned upside down, we shouldn't be surprised when everything that we like gets turned upside down as well.

Isn't that right? So when teachers are afraid of pupils, and when parents are on the side of delinquent children instead of helping the teachers, well, not much surprising that we have schools in chaos, all the wisdom in the world, all the money in the world will never fix the problem of the human heart.

[20 : 12] That's the truth. What our politicians need to grasp is that laws can never, ever make people good, can they? They can restrain evil, but they can never make people good.

And as long as we cherish the delusion that people are basically good, well, we're living in la-la land. Things will never get better, they'll only get worse. And it's sad that at the moment in our political landscape there doesn't seem to be any political party that's got the hang of that.

But real wisdom, you see, opens our eyes to that reality. It makes us see it, it insists that the clouds of fantasy are dispelled and we face the truth. It was Shakespeare who said it's the fool who thinks he's wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.

The wise man knows that actually he can do so little. You just can't get control of life by wisdom and knowledge. But we hide from that because it's painful.

And even as believers we try to retain the fantasy that by striving we can somehow capture something out of life, that we can give meaning and significance and achievement to our lives.

[21 : 27] Isn't that true? That's what the preacher turns to in chapter 2. All the wisdom in the world can't control life, it can't straighten out life's perplexities and twists, but nor can wisdom ever capture life's passing glories for gain.

Wisdom can't capture life for profit that's lasting. Even the greatest earthly wisdom can only ever clarify the vanity of life. It's vanishing, it's ephemeral.

And so the pursuit of pleasure as a way of finding something lasting in life can only ever end in heartache. It's the cry of vanity in verse 11 of chapter 2, isn't it?

It's the cry of pathos in verse 16, how the wise dies just like the fool. See, in verses 1 to 11 of chapter 2, again, we have wisdom's assessment of the world, this time in great detail as he looks at the good things in life.

Can you capture the manifestly good and wonderful things in life for profit? That's the question. We often think the preacher is despising these things.

[22 : 36] Quite the reverse. He says, I'll test you with pleasure. The word actually is joy. It's the same word as joy in verse 26. There's no sense of this pleasure being illicit or wrong.

There's nothing wrong with joy. It's a wonderful thing. But like laughter, you see, in verse 2, it's not a commodity that you can store up and capture, is it?

You can't put joy in a bottle. Nor does laughter and joy tell you very much about the source of it. Chapter 7 goes on to tell us, well, very often the fools are full of laughter.

But joy and laughter aren't things that you can find by seeking them for themselves, are they? Joy and laughter just comes from being in a situation of joy or being around a funny person.

It's not tradable. You can't just say, well, I'm laughing, you laugh too. I was on the plane the other day when I was coming back from a meeting in London. We don't have a television at home, but I've got one of these little iPods with a two-inch screen.

[23 : 34] You wouldn't believe it, but it's really very effective. So I sit on the plane, I was looking at a very funny comedian. I won't tell you who he is, but he comes from near Glasgow and he's got a very foul mouth, but he's a very funny man. And I was laughing my head off with my earphones in looking at this little thing.

I was laughing, I realised I was laughing out loud. I looked around the man beside me and he just scowled at me. You see, laughter isn't really transferable like that.

It's not a commodity that can be exchanged. He couldn't share it. And you can't bottle up laughter or joy for a miserable day in the future, can you?

By nature, these are momentary things. These are responses. They're fleeting, they're ephemeral, in that sense they're vain. And yet so much of life is often a vain pursuit of exactly these kind of things.

There's nothing wrong in wanting these things, they're good things to want, to joy, there's no disapproval in verses one to three, there's nothing wrong with pleasure and joy, with laughter, with wine. He explicitly tells us he was still guiding his heart with wisdom, just in case we're in any doubt.

[24 : 46] But the question is, what gain is there in the end in these things? It's a question for all of us, isn't it? Is the reason for the things that we pursue in life, the things we do, is it because they are an end in themselves, they're worthwhile things to do, they're worthy things to do?

Or is it that we're pursuing them because we're looking for them to get us somewhere? We're so concerned getting places in life, just think of the vocabulary that we use, getting somewhere, arriving, making progress, making it.

We say, well, I'll strive here and I'll do this and I'll do that and then at last I'll have achieved my goal. The preacher says, you see, just like James the Apostle said, hold on a minute, stop a second and think.

Have you forgotten that your life's just a mist, just appearing for a time and then vanishing? Where are you going to get in the end? Look at verses 4 to 10.

This man had more and did more than most of us would do together in ten lifetimes. He made great works, houses, palaces, gardens. The word in verse 6 there is the word that paradise comes from.

[26 : 05] He recreates paradise almost. He fills it with animals, he fills it with folk from his own household, verse 7. He amasses huge wealth and he uses it well. He uses it for the pursuit of culture, choirs, high culture.

If that word there is concubines, well, a bit of low culture too. We don't really know what it means. I think probably it doesn't mean that. But either way, whatever it means, this is a picture of magnificence.

He became great in fame and in power, not like these B-list celebrities that shave off their hair and get in all the newspapers. But people of real worth.

And look at verse 9. It didn't go to his head. His wisdom remained with him. That's unlike Solomon, isn't it? We lost it a bit at the end. And look at verse 10. He found tremendous satisfaction in his labours.

His life was immensely rewarding. Pleasure in his work was the reward for his work, says verse 10. And that's just as it should be, isn't it? You read the biographies of great people, you see the immense satisfaction they receive in their labour so often.

[27 : 15] And that's a right view of human labour, isn't it? Albert Einstein warns against saying that we should encourage children to work hard at school and think of success in terms of the wealth and the money that they can earn.

No, he says this. The most important motive for work in school and in life is pleasure in work. Pleasure in its result. A knowledge of the value of its result in the community.

That's right. There is joy to be had in life. Joy in our labours. That is the natural reward for our labours. But you can't bottle up that joy.

You can't save it up for a joyless time. A time that will surely come. The preacher tells us that in chapter 12, doesn't he? Evil days when we will say, I have no pleasure in them.

You just can't capture the joy of your work for profit, for joy in the future, to spend on those joyless days. I was thinking about that last week.

[28 : 18] I went to visit my father. He had an immense capacity of mind, immense capacity to find joy in his labours for the gospel.

But his mind's gone. I find no joy in that now. The evil days have come. You see, you just can't save up and supply joy for the future like that.

Pleasure in a bottle, that when your work is done, you'll be able to just get it all back. No, it doesn't work like that. Joy in work is a reward that we get in the doing of it.

And today's joy won't last for tomorrow. It won't last overnight, will it? It's like the manna in the wilderness. You gather up what you need for today. You try and store it up for tomorrow, you find it's full of worms. It's rotten. That's the way of joy in our work.

And friends, unless you realise the limitation of our mortality and accept it and live with it, it will ruin everything in our lives.

[29 : 17] Look at verse 11. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I'd expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity, a striving after the wind, nothing to be gained.

You see, once he thinks about it all and looks for something that's lasting, it's just not there. It's wind. It's blown away. Where's the profit? Where's the gain?

There's nothing. You see, he wants more. He wants lasting joy from life. And as soon as you think about that, about the pleasures of the things that you do have, then even the pleasure that you do have now in your work, even that begins to evaporate.

I'm a terrible pessimist. I am jealous of those who are as cheery as Eeyore, and I hope one day maybe I might be able to be that optimistic.

But when I go on holidays, my wife gets very, very upset with me, because as soon as we're on holiday, I get depressed because it's nearly time to come home. And she gets very cross with me, because I'm in danger, you see, of spoiling the whole holiday.

[30 : 30] Not just for me, but for everybody else. Thankfully I'm married to a psychiatrist. Think how much worse I would be otherwise. But you see, I want to bottle up the joy of that holiday and take it with me when I go home.

I want it to last forever. But you can't do that with a holiday, can you? That's not what a holiday is. Ask from a holiday the legitimate joy and relaxation and rest of a holiday, and you'll rejoice in it.

But ask it to last and be something that will go on and on all the time you come home. Well, you'll spoil even the fortnight that you've got. Isn't that right?

I'm trying to teach myself that. But so it is with life. That's what the preacher is saying. Unless we accept life for what it is, a mist appearing for a time, not the ultimate place of joy and salvation and satisfaction, unless we accept that, there can only be miserable realism.

And that's what we find in verses 12 to 18, isn't it? Because of the inescapable fact of our mortality. You see verse 12? No one coming after such a king could achieve any more.

- [31 : 44] There certainly is more gain in life, he says, in wisdom than in folly. Verse 14, a life that knows what it's doing, not a life blind and stupidly going along. And yet, verse 15, he says, in the end, they all go the same way.

Why isn't a fool alike? Well, we've forgotten. Both will be dead, just the same. Sobering to think that, isn't it? Think of the crematorium. I've heard long and wonderful eulogies of the deceased.

Speaking of a life full of richness and achievement. I've heard others, for there's been almost nothing to say. But the little pot of ashes at the end is exactly the same for both, isn't it?

The wise and the fool. You see, real wisdom and honest wisdom about life realizes that you can't control life. You can only confirm and clarify all its vexations.

You can't capture life's pleasures. All you can do is clarify the fact that they're passing. They're ephemeral. They're going to be gone. And therefore, you see, thirdly, real wisdom must come to terms with life as it really is.

- [33 : 00] That's the message of verses 17 to 26. Real wisdom can't hide in fantasy like Oscar Wilde. It insists on going deeper at once, the truth.

And intelligent thinking people shouldn't be satisfied with self-deception, should they? Not if I'm being honest. It was Socrates who said that the unexamined life is not worth living and all intelligent people should think the same, shouldn't we?

But you see, when we banish the bubble of deception, it's often a very bleak business. That's the truth. And there are only two ways to react to the reality that wisdom exposes.

The first is painted for us in verses 17 to 23. It's a way that can't come to terms with the biblical reality, that there's a bigger story needed to explain this world.

And that without it, the world is always going to be crooked, always going to be uncorrectable and vexed. Now, it is the position, isn't it, of the secularist, of the atheist, of the materialist.

- [34 : 03] But friends, also, it's the position of many Christians who just can't accept the limitations of this life. We're always looking for more than there is or can be or will be in this life.

More answers, more experiences, more blessings. Friends, listen to the preacher. If you want to come to terms with the reality in this world, that way is the road to despair and bitter disappointment.

All is futility and regret in verses 17 to 23, isn't it? I hated life, verse 17. It was all grievous and vain. Verse 18, I hated my toil, not even the reward of joy in the doing of the work, if you think like that.

Plenty of people are like that, aren't they? Sadly, plenty of believers often live like that, hating their life, hating their toil. You see, because joy eludes us even in the joyful things when we're seeking something lasting in what can only ever satisfy for a time.

And the taste turns bitter in our mouth so quickly when we think like that. Because we've tried to make something ultimate that was never meant to be ultimate, something to find significance in that was never meant for us to find significance in.

- [35 : 32] And not only doesn't it last, it just ruins the present as well. Despair. But the thought that what won't benefit you will even benefit somebody else.

Some fool, he says, who didn't toil for it. I'm not sure in verse 18 and verse 21 if he's thinking about inheritance tax or Mr. Brown. That is a real vexation for some people, isn't it?

Everything you've toiled for, well, it'll go to Mr. Brown in the Exchequer or it'll go to those useless relatives of yours who don't deserve it anyway. Margot can help you with that, by the way.

She's got forms for legacies. But it's serious, isn't it? I've got a friend who was a finance director of a large UK company and he took early retirement and left and he said to me some years ago, that firm is going to be destroyed because those who have taken it on are fools.

And I read in the newspaper just a few months ago that the firm had gone bankrupt. It's terrible to watch your life work disappear down the drain like that, isn't it? And our world, you see, is a mixture, isn't it, on the one hand, of delusion.

[36 : 44] We try to think that we can control life. Think of all the technology, the genetics, all of that stuff. Try to capture life for the pursuit of pleasure and profit as though it really could last.

And yet, on the other hand, there's despair and bitter dissatisfaction, isn't there? Isn't verse 23 very close to the bone, even for us, even for Christians? Sorrow, vexation, anxiety, sleepless nights, striving to get somewhere in this life by, well, our toil, our career, by the things we're pursuing, even by Christian ministry.

It doesn't have to be the way of despair and bitter dissatisfaction. There is another way, isn't there? Verse 24, it's the way of delight and believing detachment.

That's the note of these verses when he turns us back to God, do you see? Life isn't meant to be about striving for security ourselves, searching for satisfaction, for significance through our work, through our achievements, as if we can ever find that here and now.

No, even our achievements in Christian terms, in church terms, life is about accepting the reality about what life in this world is for.

[38 : 04] Ours is a passing world. It's never going to be our home. It's not where our lasting treasure can ever be found. It is a wonderful world, yes, it's created by God, full of blessings and joys to be rejoiced in, in their time, not least in our labors, using the gifts and the abilities and the opportunities that God has given us for his glory and for our blessing and joy, yes, but it is a passing world.

It's a world destined for dissolution. It's a world awaiting its rebirth and that is where our hope lies. That's where lasting profit can be found and there alone.

That's the gospel message, isn't it, in Romans 8? We hope, but in the meantime, we long for it and wait with patience.

And that's the key to real fruitfulness and rejoicing in the place of futility and regret. Joy eludes us and will always elude us when we seek joy alone, but joy comes in abundance when we seek joy and the creator when we seek him alone.

To seek lasting satisfaction and gain in the world and from the world, well, that's sheer folly. That can only ever lead to despair. It can never be the destination.

[39 : 28] It can never be our end. Listen to what C.S. Lewis says. The set of happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world.

But joy, pleasure and merriment, he has scattered broadcast. We're never safe, but we have plenty of fun and some ecstasy. It's not hard to see why.

The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and pose an obstacle to our return to God. A few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match have no such tendency.

Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant ends, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home. Do you see?

All the joys of life, the real joys, joys in our toil, in our work, in our love, in our friendship, in our daily food and drink, they're to lead us above, they're to turn our eyes to our true home, to the giver of joy.

[40 : 33] And when we see that, and when we accept that, and when we delight in that, then, well, then we're released to savor and enjoy all the many blessings that there are in this life.

No longer bitter about what they can't give us, because we're no longer looking for what they can't ever give, ultimate satisfaction, but delighting in what we can have, the joy, the fulfillment, the pleasure, even in the ordinary things of life, the day-to-day things, eating and drinking, all God's good gifts along the way.

We learn to rejoice, if I can put it this way, with a satisfied dissatisfaction, increasingly dissatisfied looking for heaven, but increasingly satisfied with all the things that God has given us to enjoy along the way.

C.S. Lewis again puts it so well, aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in, aim at earth and you'll get neither. And that's the paradox of the way of delight, the way of believing detachment.

Not looking for more, for bankable joy, for lasting profit, that's vain. But rather seeing, as verse 24 says, all the joys in life are the gift of God, living day by day for each day.

[41 : 56] All his gifts are to be enjoyed by us in thanksgiving to him, but not to be worshipped by us as idols in place of God. That's the point. And the preacher says there's nothing better, nothing better in life than to live that way.

So you see, real wisdom dispels the illusion and forces us to be honest. And when we are honest, there's only two ways to live. There's a way of delight, of believing detachment from this world, seeking joy and gain beyond this world in God himself.

And yet, paradoxically, that is what opens up our life to enjoy the wonders of this world. Heaven above is softer blue, earth beneath is richer green, something lives in every hue.

Christless eyes have never seen. When you've had your eyes open to the glory of heaven, the glories of this earth strike you as you'd walk through it day by day with new abundance and glory. That's one way.

The other way is the way of despair, the way of bitterness and dissatisfaction, even amid the joys of this world. Because we're seeking in the gifts what can only ever be found in the giver himself.

[43 : 19] And that is indeed a miserable business, says the preacher, to live that way. And look at verse 26. Don't miss that. It's more than that.

It's sin. It's the sinner who futilely strives like that, isn't it? Because it's idolatry, isn't it? Seeking a savior in God's gifts, even his best gifts.

That's the very essence of sin. But sin is so self-defeating. It has been from the beginning. It's destroying when mankind first grasped at life and reaped death.

And so it is always when we grasp for gain and profit and reap just vanity, wind. And notice, he says, losing it all to the one who doesn't seek profit but seeks God himself.

Friends, to live like that, that is sheer vanity. It's folly. It's chasing the wind. So let me ask you this. Are you finding joy in your life?

[44 : 28] In your daily food and drink, in your work, in your relationships, in the ordinary things of life as you go along here living in Glasgow? If you're not, maybe you're looking for more than there was ever designed to be from those things in life.

And maybe you're looking far less than you could be in seeking the God who is the giver of all true joy in life. Let me close by reading the words of another preacher, the great preacher, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh, you of little faith, never do not be anxious, saying, what shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear? For the pagans seek after these things, and your heavenly father knows that you need them all.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. However, don't be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. There's nothing better for the person, says the preacher, than he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or find any enjoyment, for to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

[46 : 06] to the sinner he's given the business of gathering and collecting only to give to the one who pleases God. This is vanity or striving after wind. There's only really one way to live, isn't there, if you're wise?

One way. Let's pray. Amen. Amen.