

Ecclesiastes - Sermons

Christopher Henderson

Introduction

Towards the end of 2024, I finished preaching through Ecclesiastes in our church, Anchor Church Lymington & Pennington. This had taken, on and off, about two and a half years. I had wanted to preach through the whole book, not missing any of it out, and also not taking too much at once. But I had thought that might also be a bit much all in one series. So, we did a bit at a time, over the course of five or six shorter sermon series, working our way through.

The week we finished, a couple of people at church, who happened to be coming for lunch that Sunday, suggested that I should make my sermons on Ecclesiastes available in written form. Although I was encouraged to know that there were at least some people who were sorry to see the end of these sermons on Ecclesiastes (having imagined the prevailing feeling would have been one of great relief), I was reluctant to do what my friends suggested, for a few reasons.

First, a sermon is always bound to its time, its place, and the people who first received it. Take it out of that original context and it generally loses some sharpness. Second, a sermon is never really finished. As Friday approaches, one simply has to pull together what one has, and rest in the knowledge that it is God's Word one is preaching, and leave it to His Spirit. Therefore, to gather sermons together as though they might be a finished product, is not really something I am inclined to do. There is lots of work left undone, and these are far from perfect.

Third, slightly more technically, I wasn't keen to bring together sermons into a written format, as I knew that I had been influenced by various authors at various points of preaching, but that I wouldn't be able to remember where! If I had been writing essays, I would have carefully included references and footnotes. But when preaching sermons, I will generally just say, "some people think that..." or "as has been said..." So, I'm conscious that in bringing these sermons together, I am unable to give detailed acknowledgements of ideas I have been influenced by. However, that's somewhat mitigated by the fact that, with Ecclesiastes, I generally didn't agree with any writer that much! Some books were better than others. The technical commentaries had all sorts of suggestions in their introductions about how to understand Ecclesiastes, most of which didn't seem to accord with my view that it is the Word of God. Occasionally, these commentaries were helpful in observations of the detail. But the books I found most helpful were those which came from authors who had actually preached the whole book, as though it is the Word of God and as though it has something to say to Christians now. I might have gotten hold of various passages in different ways from them, but it's so helpful to read someone who has actually preached the book, rather than just written about it. And there is nothing like preaching the whole book to start to see what it is about overall.

So, without being able to give detailed acknowledgements throughout, these were the books I was most helped and influenced by:

Ecclesiastes - Why everything matters: by Philip Graham Ryken.

The Message of Ecclesiastes, by Derek Kidner.

Destiny - learning to live by preparing to die, by Derek Gibson.

Finally, another reason I was reluctant to undertake this task is that I don't think my sermons read as well as they preach. Indeed, I don't think sermons should read as well as they preach - they are meant to be heard. When I write sermons, I try to write in a way that I can hear myself speak. This is different from writing something designed to be read. In bringing these sermons together, as requested, I have done a little bit of work to make them into something to be read rather than heard, but not very much. They still read as sermons. For those who heard them originally and enjoyed them enough to ask for them to be brought together here, that may mean this end product is a slight disappointment. For those who like well-constructed, grammatically correct sentences, it certainly will be.

Anyway, I expressed some of these reservations to my friends whilst we all had lunch, but they were not very persuaded by them. They had found the sermons encouraging, they wanted to revisit them, and they said they might want to share them with a few friends. Fair enough. So, here they are.

First, however, a brief introduction to Ecclesiastes. I had written the rest of what follows in this introduction for Anchor Church, and I had sent it out with the weekly notices every time we returned to Ecclesiastes. It's not an easy Bible book to read, though it is fascinating, so the aim of this was to help the congregation be prepared a little better as we returned to Ecclesiastes at various points.

Who wrote Ecclesiastes?

We don't know! Ecclesiastes is presented as the teaching of a figure called *Qoheleth*, in the original Hebrew (or, in the Greek translation, Ecclesiastes!) This Hebrew word is sometimes translated as "Teacher" or "Preacher", or even "Philosopher". It is a hard word to translate. It relates to the word for "assembly" (*qahal*), so *Qoheleth* is simply someone talking to a group of people. To translate the word as "Teacher" or "Preacher" is to infer what kind of assembly we are talking about, and may therefore affect how we read the book. So, in the sermons, I just stuck to using the word *Qoheleth*.

But who is *Qoheleth*? The answer might well be King Solomon, but I don't think we can be sure.

Arguments for Qoheleth being Solomon

Qoheleth is identified as "son of David, king of Jerusalem" (1:1), and Solomon was the son of David who followed him as king.

The theme of wisdom is prevalent through the book, which is something Solomon was known for. 1:13 and 1:16 talk of Qoheleth searching out and growing in wisdom.

The greatness of Qoheleth, as described in 2:1-11 would seem to resonate with the splendour of King Solomon.

Then there is the comment in 12:9-10 about Qoheleth arranging many proverbs, which makes us think of Solomon (compare with Proverbs 1:1).

Arguments against Qoheleth being Solomon

Any Davidic king could use the title "son of David", so, it's not a straightforward reference to Solomon.

Ecclesiastes is much less 'autobiographical' after chapter 2 and it doesn't really make us think of Solomon. Indeed, some bits would be odd for Solomon to say (e.g. 3:16, where Qoheleth observes wickedness in the place of justice, surely a comment about those in authority).

It would be odd for Solomon to say that he has surpassed all who were over *Jerusalem* before him (1:16) as only David was king in Jerusalem prior to Solomon.

If it were Solomon, why not say so explicitly, like in Proverbs 1:1?

So, overall, we don't know for sure who Qoheleth is. But, in a book that is clearly meant to have an elusive quality to it, that's not really a surprise. Perhaps it's just best to see Ecclesiastes as messianic wisdom, which, whoever humanly wrote it, ultimately comes from the One Shepherd (12:11).

Meaning of *hebel*

"Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" (1:2) Or, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Such a phrase occurs several times throughout the book.

We may just need to let go of our favourite English translation here! The original word is *hebel* (pronounced hevel), and it's difficult to find one English word to translate it. It generally is something like: breath, mist, vapour. And the primary idea is something that's *transitory*, rather than *pointless*. Sometimes, the idea of pointlessness or meaninglessness may follow as an implication. In some cases of the use of *hebel*, I think it does. In other cases, I am sure it doesn't. To say that youth is *hebel*, as in 11:10, for instance, is simply to say something we all know - youth is fleeting. It is wise to grasp hold of this fact and make the most of one's youth, before that time is gone. But had we translated *hebel* as *meaningless* in this instance, we would be making an entirely different and much more negative point.

So, again, this is a case where in Anchor Church, we just got used to hearing the original word, *hebel*, and we reminded ourselves of it every time we came back to Ecclesiastes. *Hebel* - think of breath hanging in the air on a cold winter's morning. There for a bit, rather spectacular perhaps, then gone. That's *hebel*.

Why is everything *hebel*, then? Well, that depends on the perspective Ecclesiastes is coming from – under the sun.

What does "under the sun" mean?

This is the key question for understanding Ecclesiastes.

I think "under the sun" means: ***this fallen world***. And especially, this fallen world, ***as if this is all it's ever going to be***. Why do I think that?

This fallen world

There are plenty of allusions to Genesis within Ecclesiastes, which link to the theme of the Fall. For instance:

- 3:20: "All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return," reminds us of the curse in Genesis 3:19.
- Again, in 12:7, "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."
- The problem of death is a major theme in Ecclesiastes. *Qoheleth* is fairly brutal in reminding us, again and again, that we live in the world of the Fall. He knows we need to be reminded of this!
- 7:29 "See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." This has resonance with the Fall narrative, as do the verses before.

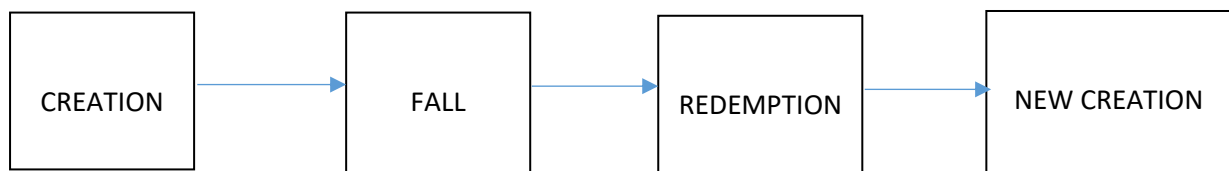
- 7:13: “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” Similarly, 1:15 “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” There is a crookedness to the world, as a result of the curse. And who can straighten that out? It seems to me this question is asking: who can undo the Fall?

There is also an interesting (though sometimes overplayed?) link with Romans 8:20. The word *hebel* is, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), translated by *mataiotes* (which means emptiness, futility, frustration). This is the same word Paul uses in Romans 8:20: “For the creation was subjected to futility (*mataiotes*), not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.” This is talking about the Fall.

So, I think, “under the sun” is talking about “this fallen world.” But, going a bit further than that, I wonder whether Qoheleth is addressing our tendency (whether Christian or non-Christian) to live as though this fallen world is all that there is ever going to be.

As if it's all there is ever going to be

The big story of the Bible could be summarised in four chapters:



I think Ecclesiastes addresses our tendency to live our lives in this fallen world, as though this fallen world is all there is ever going to be, that it's not just a chapter in the bigger story, but that it is the framework for the whole story. We live as if we can write a story for ourselves in this fallen world, which can have meaning and purpose and satisfaction. Even believers do this – we live as though we can find satisfaction and meaning, without reference to the rest of the story.

So, I think we see Qoheleth repeatedly doing three things through the book:

- (1) He is showing us that if this fallen world were all that there is, if there were no bigger story, if under the sun world were it, then our lives would just be *hebel*. The question is therefore repeatedly asked, why are you content to live as though this fallen world were it? But more than that...
- (2) He is tapping into our sense that, actually, we know there is a bigger story (for instance, the famous verse about God placing eternity on our hearts).
- (3) Then, and we especially started to get to this as we moved into the middle and latter part of the book, he's giving us wisdom about what it's like to live in this fallen world, because for the time being, we still have to! Some of this is wisdom for *how to live* in this fallen world, but there is also wisdom that just *acknowledges* what this fallen world is really like. There is also, intriguingly, the possibility of joy and satisfaction in our work in this fallen world, which can only come as a gift of God (5:19-20).

So, in my view, Ecclesiastes is not...

- **Life is meaningless without God, so you need to believe in God, i.e. it's addressed to atheists.**

God is all the way through Ecclesiastes. And He is the God of this fallen world. Plus, there weren't that many atheists in the ancient world to address!

- **Life is all good, just enjoy God's good gifts to us.**

This will come up in places, but to think that's the sum teaching of Ecclesiastes is just to pick the verses we like!

- **Life is all terrible.**

Ecclesiastes is not just about being miserable. I think Qoheleth is not trying to drag us down into his gloomy perspective. Rather, I think he's lowering himself to ours, and he's exposing it as being full of contradictions and empty of meaning and light. Even though we don't think of ourselves as gloom-merchants, Qoheleth is trying to show us that if we were intellectually honest, we should be! He's then nudging us to acknowledge the bigger story, because when we do, things are much less gloomy!

Overall, then, I don't think Ecclesiastes is wholly negative nor wholly positive. Just as with the message of the gospel, which was much easier to preach from Ecclesiastes than I had ever imagined, Qoheleth has to include the very negative in order to help us receive the very positive. When preaching Ecclesiastes, it was often the case that the final songs we sang in the service were about heaven.

Qoheleth challenges us, he gets us to think about death far more than we want to, but he does it because he knows there is a bigger story that is so, so much better than the one we think we can write for ourselves.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11¹

Now whilst I was doing the dishes the other evening, I was listening to a lecture on Youtube – a lecture about *The Lord of the Rings*, by a theology professor². You probably think there are better ways to spice up doing the dishes, but this was mine. And it was great.

He made a very interesting observation. He was talking about his days as a theology student, studying lots of different languages. And he noticed an interesting little detail common to all these languages.

That is, that each of them has a word, which it tries to spell, though it's quite hard to. It's neither a noun nor a verb, but it's a word that simply captures a noise. Something like a grunt, or a sigh. For us, it's "ah" (with variations, like *ahhhh*, or *aaaaagggghhh!*). It can be different in different languages. But, he observed, it's always there. Ah... the word you use to express ... well, what?

A number of things: *Oh well, never mind*, perhaps. Or, for when you thought something was going to be simple, but it goes wrong. Or, it's a word of resignation. Or disappointment. Maybe it's a word for: *there we go, I've done that job, what's the next one?* Or even, it's a word for *what's the point?*

And you wouldn't ever need to use this word if everything went well. If everything felt like it had purpose. If everything was right.

But it's not. Even when everything is great, there's the feeling that it's only transitory, that it's just in the moment, and then what next? *Ah. Ahhhhh. Or Aaaagggghhhh!* It's not going to be long until we use that word, until we make that noise again.

Well, in many ways Ecclesiastes is a book about that word, about that noise.

And you might be thinking, how in the world is this the thing to be speaking about today? We've had a nice church breakfast. We've done a slot in the service on things we're thankful for. We've been praising God for His goodness to us. Why have this reading?

And the answer is, because when we're done, and we pack everything away this morning and head off home, it won't be long before something makes you go, "ah!" Maybe you'll go away thinking, that was nice, what's next? Oh, the lunch. Oh, the washing. The same old things. Until the next nice thing you can briefly enjoy. And then off you go again.

This is what Ecclesiastes is about. It latches on to that sense of frustration you have about life, and which we all try to ignore so we can just carry on. Ecclesiastes doesn't do that. It latches onto that sense of frustration, and it makes you face up to it.

And it keeps banging on about it, and says: look. This sense of frustration – can you not see that it pervades everything about life? Something's not right. When things go well, they then go wrong again. When there is something good, it never lasts. There's a sense of a story that's not finished. Or a story that's stuck, that can't move on to a happy conclusion. Happily ever after feels like it should be possible, but if we're honest, under the sun, it doesn't appear to be.

¹ Note that in our church, we preach from the NIV 1984 translation. This is because this was the translation of a number of Bibles we were given when we got started as a new church. My preferred translation would be ESV. But, frequently I appreciate the readability and balance of the NIV 1984.

² This reference I can remember: look up Ryan Reeves' channel on Youtube. There is lots to enjoy!

And I don't think Ecclesiastes does this to drive us to despair. I think it does this to wake us up. So that you would realise that *this world is broken*. That it isn't right. Because then you might lift your eyes and look to something better.

So, one very simple point for this passage, which we'll slightly adjust towards the end. **Everything is hebel.**

Everything is *what*? Well, let me explain. Verse 2, in our Bible translations, it reads: "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless."

You might know that by a different translation. "Vanity of vanities," perhaps. The original word in the Hebrew is actually a very difficult word to translate. So difficult, that as we preach through Ecclesiastes, it might be best just to introduce you to the original word and stick with it – *hebel*.

Hebel hebeliim. Everything is hebel. Okay, what does *hebel* mean?

It means something like vapour, smoke, or breath. Like on a cold day when your breath hangs in the air, before it dissipates. This is what the verse is saying. Everything is basically like that.

Hebel. Transitory, insubstantial, there for a bit, looks rather wonderful, and then it's gone. Try to grab hold of it and you can't. Now, sometimes (but not always), that will have a further implication: that what we're talking about is actually pointless. But whatever it is, and indeed life generally, it's all hebel. That's it. Breath on a cold winter's day. Breathe. Admire for a bit. Gone.

And we want to say, really? You really mean everything? And the answer is, yes, and the rest of the book is why.

To which you might say, fine. Well, says who? Who is this guy anyway? Well, that's a bit of a mystery too. Nothing in Ecclesiastes is easy.

Verse 1: the words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. Who is that? Well, some people have said it was David's son, Solomon. And it might be. But there's enough as you go through the book to make you think, hmm I'm not sure.

The word behind 'Teacher' is hard to translate as well. The original word is *Qoheleth*. Some translate it as Preacher. It links to the Hebrew word for assembly. So, it's someone just speaking to people.

Who it is, it's a bit of a mystery. But that phrase, son of David, would at least to some extent present this as messianic wisdom. Wisdom on what this world is really like.

And it is just devastating, isn't it? This is normally the sort of conclusion you try to stop people from reaching, because it can't do them any good to say things like this.

Everything is *hebel*! It's all transitory and fleeting and disappears and is forgotten! No, come on, don't say that. You don't mean that. It's not good to think that way.

Fine, says Qoheleth. Answer this question then: verse 3, "What do people gain" – what profit, what reward is there – "from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?"

When all is said and done, when your time comes, what do you have to show for it?

The church we were at before we moved to Lymington, you walked past all the graves to get to the front door. Lots of headstones, many of them faded, the names illegible. Some of them fallen over. Indeed, some of them had to be pushed over, to keep the churchyard safe!

What do people gain, in the end? We labour. We decline. And then decay and death takes it all. And one day the church warden pushes your headstone over.

Verse 4, “generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.” We’re made in the image of God, to be lords of the earth. But then we return to dust whilst the earth remains. Will the paths you walk bear any mark that you walked them? No, the world is entirely indifferent to our presence.

And yet, like us, it too is trapped in what Qoheleth sees as an endless cycle of what looks like meaningless motion. Verse 5, “the sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.” And that’s not an eager sense of hurrying. It’s the sense of panting. Like a never ending Park Run. Round and round goes the sun.

So too with us. We get up, we do all the stuff we do, we go to bed. We do it all again tomorrow.

Go to school. Have lessons. Come home. Do homework. Go back the next day. More lessons. Hand in the homework. Get more.

Round and round it goes. You cook the dinner. It disappears. A few hours later, everyone’s hungry.

You change a nappy. Then there’s another one. Sometimes within seconds. You do the washing. Everyone’s got clean clothes. For about a day. You weed a flower bed. Two weeks later it’s full of weeds.

We celebrate Harvest. Praise God for all the food we have. Then the cycle all starts again.

The wind, verse 8, it “blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.”

It’s like on a weather map with all those arrows. And okay, that looks quite complicated. It’s a commotion. Sometimes it has force and power. But it’s basically just air going round and round. It never arrives at a destination. It never reaches a conclusion.

All those things in life, which were such a commotion, and yet in the end what did they lead to?

Verse 7, “All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full.”

That’s such a picture of futility. All the things we work at. Is the task ever finished? It’s like going round and round on a treadmill. We, in the end, are the things that are finished. Someone else comes and takes our place, and the treadmill keeps going round.

Are you feeling this weighing you down yet? Verse 8, “All things are wearisome, more than one can say.”

Perhaps you want to shout out, “No, it’s not like this! There are good things in life! And there are happy times!”

And yes there are, but they are all just transitory aren’t they? They just punctuate the endless cycle of round and round. So that it all becomes about just getting to the next thing you can briefly enjoy.

That great goal of each day: the sofa. Something nice to eat and drink. Watching something.

Getting through to Friday. Getting to the next holiday. The next big family do. Christmas.

And none of these things last. They’re not the destination. They’re just tea breaks for life, which otherwise just goes round and round, until you die.

And there is no satisfaction. There is no sense of “there, I’m done now.” The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing, verse 8. Even if you do reach the summit of your ambition, you get all the way to the top, plant your flag, admire the view, and say, *There I did it!* Where do you go then? What next?

We can write for ourselves no other conclusion than the inevitable one which we all try to avoid. And in the meantime everything just goes round and round.

And nothing is new in all of that. Not really. Verse 9, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”

And Qoheleth knows you’re objecting at this point. Verse 10, he knows you want to say, “Look! This is something new!” Whether it’s the internet in our time or the iron age in his.

No, he says, nothing is really new. “It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.” What are all these things, after all? Inventions might be new, but we’re just inventing more ways of doing the same old things. The basic facts of living, they’re all the same. Love, hatred. War, peace. It’s just new ways of doing that. Fundamentally, there is nothing new.

And no-one is remembered. Verse 11, “no one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.” I remember doing our family tree when I was a child. I spent time asking my grandparents about it. I enjoyed adding more names to the tree. But most of them were just names on a page. Nobody actually remembered them.

Even if you make it into the history books. Do you think people really remember *you*? Historians never agree who people really were, what they were like, what motivated them. That remains elusive.

Hebel, says Qoheleth. Everything is *hebel*. Vapour. Breath. Transitory. Breathe - admire for a bit - gone.

And it’s almost as if he’s saying, *Come on, disagree with me! See if you can!* And at one and the same time we can’t disagree, and yet we feel as if we must. Yes, perhaps everything is *hebel*, but at the same time, it shouldn’t be!

Because Qoheleth is challenging you to find lasting meaning in this world as it is, so that you realise it is a broken world. And so that you ask whether there might ever be such a thing as a redeemed world. Whether there might ever be *a perspective which is different from this world as it is*.

And that’s where it becomes crucial to notice the perspective which Qoheleth has adopted as he makes his argument to us. Did you notice it?

Everything *under the sun* is *hebel*.

Did you see that phrase come up in our reading a couple of times? Verse 3: “What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil *under the sun*?” Verse 9: “There is nothing new *under the sun*.” It’s just a couple of times, but it comes up a lot throughout the book. This is Qoheleth’s perspective.

Under the sun, everything is *hebel*. So now the question is: what does he mean by “under the sun”?

Some people have argued it’s about whether you have God in your perspective or not. Everything is *hebel* without God. But put God back into the picture and all the *hebel* goes away.

I don't think that's right. Because you just have to read Ecclesiastes and God is there all the way through. And besides that, it's just not true. If you become a Christian does all the frustration suddenly go away? No, of course not. We still experience frustration.

No, everything under the sun is shorthand for *this world which is broken*. This fallen world. This world of Genesis 3. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and they had to leave the Garden. And the world was cursed. And that's the world we live in. Fallen. Subject to frustration, as we read in Romans 8. This world, in which Adam, under the sun, now yields fruit from the ground by the sweat of his brow.

And too often we just try to carry on. Too often we live as though this broken world is a place where we can find peace and satisfaction and meaning. And we try our best to escape from the fact that this is impossible.

And Ecclesiastes is waking us up to reality and saying to us, *please understand that you live in a broken world*. There is no lasting meaning to be found in it, as it is.

It's waking us up, so that we might then ask if there is the possibility of redemption. So that we might ask if there is a bigger story which can take us to another chapter, beyond *under the sun*. To which the glorious answer of the Bible is, "Yes!"

There's nothing new in this broken world. And then the God of the Bible says, "I am doing a new thing". Isaiah 43;19, for instance. I am doing a new thing! He is the God who breaks into this broken, round-and-round story, and moves it on to something new. And supremely He did it two thousand years ago, when God the Son took on flesh and came into this fallen world.

And He took all of that brokenness, all of our sin, our rebellion, which broke it all in the first place, He took the curse, which we deserve, on Himself, and on the Cross He died for it. He took it all to the grave, and He left it there! Rising to new life. Promising, that if we come to Him, confessing our brokenness and our rebellion against Him, that He will give us *new* life, make us a *new* creation, with the hope of *the New Creation* to come. That great hope with which the Bible closes: Behold I am making all things new!

Right now, you're living in the world of the curse. The world of *hebel*. Wake up to that! Remember that!

But in Jesus, something new was done. And something new is coming, for all those who are being made new in Him.

And we will still sigh now. *Ah*, or *Ahhhhh*, or *Agggghhhhhhhh!* – we will still use that noise. That noise which expresses frustration, and pain. But for those in Christ, it's a pain which no longer tends to despair, but leans into hope.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

“Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” we read last time. Or, hebel hebeliim! Everything is hebel! Breath. Hanging in the air. Looks nice for a time. But then gone.

And, when it was preached in church, it certainly got people talking afterwards. Maybe it got you thinking. And maybe you wanted to disagree with Ecclesiastes.

Not everyone would disagree straightaway. There are people I’ve met who say that Ecclesiastes is the book in the Bible that first really connected with them. They had come to a conclusion like this themselves, and they were really surprised to find the Bible agree with them. And so they would say Ecclesiastes was a big part in their journey to becoming a Christian.

But many other people will want to disagree. They’ll listen to what we heard last week and want to say, yes, okay, maybe, but... actually, no!

I don’t want to agree with this. Life is good. It’s full of blessing. And there are things to enjoy and I’m going to enjoy them.

So that even if we get into Ecclesiastes, and get what it’s saying, and agree with it to some extent, there can still be that reaction that wants to pull back and say “actually, no!”

But a couple of things to say.

First, remember the perspective of the writer’s arguments. It’s an “under the sun” perspective. We saw the phrase a couple of times last week, we see it a couple more times this week.

And we said that’s not a God-less perspective. It’s not saying life without God is meaningless but if you have God in your life then everything is fine. God is all the way through Ecclesiastes. He is the God of the world described here.

Rather, this under-the-sun perspective, we said, is the perspective of this fallen and broken world. This world which in the curse of Genesis 3 was subjected to frustration. This world which, to use language from today’s passage, has been made crooked.

And it’s in this perspective, where Qoheleth says, if you try to look for anything that lasts, that endures, that has ultimate meaning and purpose in this fallen and broken world, you will not find it. Because if the only perspective on offer is that of this fallen and broken world, then absolutely everything is...

Hebel. We have that word again in this passage, in verse 14. Hebel: it means something like breath or vapour. And my suggestion is that you get into the habit of just using the word hebel. And whenever you see the translation of it, start your thought process from there. It’s all hebel. It’s all breath.

I really hope that before the end of this series, there will be some cold, frosty mornings. Because, as soon as there are, go outside, breathe out, watch your breath hang in the air until it disappears, and say to yourself: that’s what Ecclesiastes is saying.

In this fallen and broken world, everything is like that. If this fallen and broken world were all it were ever going to be, everything is hebel.

You can stick your fingers in your ears, your head in the ground, or just shout “no!” (or maybe just one of those). But I don’t think you can refute the point.

If this is all it is, this fallen and broken world, then everything I do, everything I enjoy, every experience or relationship I ever have, however deep and meaningful and significant at the time - all of it, in the end, vanishes without a trace. Like breath in the air on a cold frosty morning.

And as we move on into this passage, Qoheleth is going to start moving away from the big sweeping generalisations and imagery we read last time, because he knows that his conclusion is so profoundly unsettling that he has to demonstrate it in the details of life. So today's passage starts to move him into a survey of all the experiences you could have in life, to say that if this under-the-sun world is all there is, then it is all hebel.

And it starts here in verse 12, and I'm going to leave our headings for this passage until a bit later. We'll work our way up to them.

Verse 12. "I, the Teacher," and again the original word is hard to translate. I, Qoheleth – means something like someone speaking to a group of people gathered together. "I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem." Might have been Solomon, might not, I'm not sure.

But the point is what his quest is here. Verse 13, "I applied my mind," or my heart. This was not just an intellectual exercise. This was one of those pursuits where you give it your all. "I applied my heart to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens."

That is, he's looking into the whole gamut of human experience. He wants to understand everything about life, all the things we do. A bit like the One Show, if it were hosted by Melvyn Bragg, it's that sort of agenda.

He wants to understand life. And he's studying and exploring this by wisdom - that is, human wisdom, I think. This is not at this point the Biblical fearing-the-Lord wisdom we're talking about, just human wisdom, by which, in God's grace, you can still find out a lot.

So, he's watching documentaries about life. He's meeting people. He's talking to people. He's observing and experiencing for himself as much as he can.

He's reading the best novels of the day, watching good films, going to exhibitions at art galleries. He's understanding how people engage with the world and what it's like to live.

He's engaging with philosophy and big ideas, and he's down the pub just listening to what people's days have been like.

It's that kind of thing: studying and exploring by wisdom all the deeds that are done under the heavens. And we'll get some details on that in the coming chapters. But here is the conclusion now: "It is a heavy burden" – or if we go a bit more literal with our translation – "it is an evil task God has given to the children of Adam to be busy with."

Verse 14, "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are hebel, a chasing after the wind." Now I'm not sure I've ever tried chasing after the wind, but you can see the point. It would be futile and frustrating.

Except Qoheleth says, you have done that, and you are doing that, if you are living as though you can find anything that endures and lasts and has purpose and meaning in this under-the-sun world.

Because, here's what he's seen: whatever we do, and despite everything that people do, verse 15, "What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted."

All the things that people do, and here's the thing. We can't fix the fundamental problems with the world, we can't straighten out all the problems we have in our lives, and we can't find fulfilment. *Whatever* you set out to do or accomplish, however hard you work: you cannot fix the world and you cannot find fulfilment.

That's our first point today, in this under-the-sun perspective, **We cannot fix the world and we cannot find fulfilment.** All the deeds done under heaven. None of them in the end, individually or altogether, achieve that.

Verse 15: What is crooked cannot be straightened. You can't fix fundamentally what's wrong with the world. You can't straighten out all the problems of life.

There will always be this crookedness that cannot be made straight.

There will always be problems. There will always be brokenness. On a big scale: one generation might make a particular part of the world better, but then another generation comes along and rips it apart.

And on a smaller scale, on the scale of your life: you will never get to a point in this life in which everything is sorted and fine and just continues that way forever. Things will keep going wrong as often as they go right. Your work and the things you do will be frustrating. And then there will be decay and death.

And Chapter 7 verse 13 is even more explicit about why this is: "Consider what God has done," it says, "Who can straighten what he has made crooked."

This is the curse of Genesis 3, where God said, because you ate from the forbidden tree, "Cursed is the ground because of you," and, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

This is a fallen, broken world, and we cannot undo that, says Qoheleth. Having surveyed all of the deeds that we get up to under the sun: we cannot fix the world, we can't fix life.

Now, that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to make things better. Of course you should. Gardeners keep on weeding, even though they cannot fix the problem of weeds.

It doesn't mean, for instance, that we should ignore climate change and say, too big for us, we can't fix that. I am absolutely not saying that.

What it means is that we face up to this fact. This world is fundamentally broken. Life in this world is fundamentally broken. And all the deeds done under heaven by human beings like us cannot undo the Fall.

Okay, then, you might say, even if that's true, we can still find meaning and purpose and fulfilment in the meantime, can't we?

No, says Qoheleth: "what is lacking cannot be counted." There is a sense that there is so much lacking from life.

Sometimes we can describe what it is that we're lacking. We don't have the time to do all the things we would like to do, or even all the things that are expected of us. We don't have the resources to do all the good that we would like to do. And however much we have, it would not be enough.

So, it's obvious there is stuff that's lacking. But it goes deeper than that, doesn't it? That nagging feeling, under the sun, that there is something lacking from *life*, from what it means to be alive, and we don't know what it is. That yearning, that aching - and we try to find it in this and that and the other, but it doesn't work, not in any sense that endures, because - all is hebel. Breath hanging in the air, before it disappears.

And we might say, no, surely someone out there is happy and content, but Qoheleth would say, go on then, find them! Find me the person, who is living in this under-the-sun-perspective and who is not still yearning. And yearning for they know not what.

All the things that human beings get up to, and yet we cannot fix the world and we cannot find fulfilment.

Yet, still people go on searching for answers. And Qoheleth goes on, telling us about his search for answers, and he really sacrifices modesty to make his point here. Verse 16, he says to himself, "I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." So if he can't figure all this out, nobody can.

Verse 17, "I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly," - I researched it all, all of human experience, the good and the bad, trying to find answers.

And it is all a chasing after the wind. Herding cats. Chocolate teapots. Pick your image for futility.

Because, and this is the second point, in the end: **We can't find answers.** Not happy ones.

Verse 18, "For with much wisdom" - human wisdom, that is - "with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

We can't find answers. And the more we apply ourselves the more depressed we get. The more you look into it, the more you understand the crookedness of the world. You have a more in-depth understanding of its problems. But you haven't found any answers to fully and finally straighten things out.

The more you experience of what life has to offer: the parties, the sailing, the holidays, the grand designs, a life of leisure in the New Forest - *but*, you haven't found any answers on where lasting fulfilment is. You do now have arthritis and are experiencing decay.

We can't find answers. All we can find is more examples of crookedness. More ways to express a sense of unquantifiable lack. And that is depressing. People seek to enquire by wisdom, and it just brings sorrow.

To use a Lord of the Rings analogy: you're mining for mithril, and in the end all you get is a balrog. Because, all, in the end, is hebel.

Unless, unless God straightens things out. "The kingdom of God is near", said Jesus, when He began His public ministry. And suddenly, things were being put right, which nobody else could put right. Demons were cast out. People were healed. Some who were literally crooked, were made straight. God's putting-things-right rule was coming into the world, in the Lord Jesus.

Best of all, through His death for our sins on the Cross and His rising again, He puts us right. He gives us His Spirit and straightens out what's crooked in us. He gives us the power to obey His command: Repent and believe the good news.

The good news is that the kingdom is coming, and one day will come fully. And everything will be put right, once and for all. The crooked will be made straight. And what is lacking – there will be nothing lacking. The river of the water of life will flow from the throne of God and of the Lamb, on either side of it the tree of life. No longer will there be anything accursed – this is all the start of Revelation 22 – and, Revelation 21 verse 6 He says, “to the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.” There will be nothing lacking, for those who wake up to that thirst now.

That’s what Qoheleth is doing: Waking us up to that thirst. In this under-the-sun perspective, if we live only in this, as though this is all there’s ever going to be, then it’s all hebel. We can’t fix the world, fundamentally. We can’t straighten out our lives, so that they’ll just be great forever. We can’t find meaning. We can’t find answers. Face up to that.

But, the Kingdom of God is coming in Jesus. God’s putting-things-right rule. It’s breaking into the world now. And we join in with that work now, as we unsettle people with the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, as we preach the good news of the Kingdom, and as we do our bit in putting things right, in the sure and certain hope that such work will not be in vain.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Imagine a conversation between two people who are catching up on the week they've just had. It doesn't matter for the purpose of this exercise whether they are Christians or not. I wonder whether it's a conversation you can relate to in any way.

So, two people catching up. The first asks, "How are you, how was your week?"

The second replies, "Oh, it's been lovely. We met up with friends on Monday. We went out for dinner at that restaurant we like. I met up with another friend on Tuesday, did a bit of retail therapy too. And they finally finished getting our kitchen done on Wednesday. We're so pleased with it. So, when the new sofas arrive that's the inside done. And then it will just be the garden to sort out. But someone came to quote on that on Thursday, which was exciting. We might put in a hot tub. And then there was the family do on Friday, which was just lovely, bit too much wine drunk maybe, but it was lovely. So, yes, it's been a busy week."

The first person says, "I'm so pleased to hear that. What are you doing next week?"

The second replies, "Going on holiday. We need a break."

Verse 10, says Qoheleth, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure." And yet, it all was all *hebel*, verse 2, verse 11. Breath, vapour, mist, fleeting, nothing gained in the end.

Now we really need to be careful – as we bring those verses up against a kind of conversation that we might be able to imagine having, or which we might be jealous of other people being able to have – we really need to be careful to think: what is Qoheleth telling us here?

Because one danger is that we lurch too far the other way and think he's telling us that all pleasure is rubbish, that this is a polemic against joy. And we should all just be dour and religious and boring. But the Bible is not anti-joy. Far from it.

This is not anti-pleasure. It's anti *self-indulgent pleasure*. The question for us this morning, to answer honestly for ourselves in our hearts, is this: are you seeking to live a verse 10 kind of life? A life in which, as far as it's within your means, you deny yourself nothing your eyes desire, and you refuse your heart no pleasure. Because then so much of what you do, so much of where your energy goes, is in the end going to prove to be just *hebel*.

Because the other danger with this passage is that we side-step it, with a very simple formula. We say, okay, pleasure without God is *hebel*. But if we put God into the picture, acknowledge that He is the One from whom all good things come, then I can say thank you to God for all His blessings and carry on living verse 10. In effect, I act as though I can sanctify gluttony simply by saying grace.

That's the subtle danger, I think. Say grace, say how grateful I am to God for all His blessings, and then self-indulgent pleasure is just fine.

But no, **self-indulgent pleasure is *hebel***, says Qoheleth. That's today's point.

And you can see that it's *self-indulgent* pleasure that this passage is talking about. Not least from verse 10. "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired." Literally it's what my eyes asked for. I saw it. I wanted it. I got it. Most of us don't have the means to say something quite like that. But as far as you can, *why not?* – that would be the feeling of many. I see it. I want it. I can get it. Why not?

But it's not just verse 10 where we see this is about self-indulgence. You see it also from the number of times the phrase "for myself" comes up. It's actually quite a few more times than in our translation. Verse 4: I built houses *for myself*, planted vineyards *for myself*. I made *for myself* gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made *for myself* reservoirs and so on. Verse 7: I also owned *for myself* more herds and flocks... Verse 8: I amassed silver and gold *for myself*... I acquired *for myself* men and women singers.

For myself, for myself, for myself. This is self-indulgent pleasure. For me. I see it. I want it. I get it.

So, here is the question for believers and non-believers alike, as we go through this passage. Do you live your life by a principle which is as close to verse 10 as your means allow?

As far as your resources and time permit, do you live by a principle whereby you will deny for yourself nothing that your eyes desire? You will refuse your heart nothing it asks for. Because Qoheleth gives the verdict on that. It's hebel. It's a chasing after the wind. It gains you nothing.

Let's go through the passage.

Verse 1: I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." This is not simply recklessly abandoning himself to pleasure. He's going to maintain some sort of standing-back perspective. A bit like keeping a diary, perhaps. Maybe you can imagine him making a documentary as he embarks on this experiment: *Super Indulgent Me*.

He tries laughter, verse 2. But he concludes it's foolishness. Comedy, in the end often does have a certain madness to it. All the absurdities of life, all the frustration and brokenness in the world: comedy is a way to respond to that. Laughter is the best medicine, it's said. Well, if you're talking about palliative medicine, perhaps. But it doesn't cure anything.

The twisted cannot be made straight, what is lacking cannot be counted, we read last week. So you might as well just laugh at it. And we do. But what is that, in the end? "It's foolishness," says Qoheleth. "What does pleasure accomplish?" Does it go any way towards straightening things out? Does it help towards filling that unquantifiable sense of lack? No.

So, Qoheleth tries cheering himself with wine, verse 3, and embracing folly – still, you note keeping up, his diary, still being guided by his wisdom, not a fearing-the-Lord sort of wisdom, but keeping a standing-back perspective. He's wanting to see what's good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. Because you only live once - life is only brief, in the end, so what's the best way to live it?

So, he tries cheering himself with wine and embracing folly. People wonder whether that means debauchery or not. My guess is not, because of the mention of wisdom. I think this is simply an attitude that is now widely prevalent. Have a glass of wine – why not? And not just every now and again, but every evening. Why not? It does cheer things up, doesn't it, so why not every day? Join a wine club. Get massive boxes delivered to your door. Get through life that way.

Next thing he does: great projects, grand designs on the grandest of scales. Kevin Macleod is really licking his lips as he asks Qoheleth how much all this cost.

Verse 4: I built houses for myself. Not just one house. *Houses*. Why not have a second house? Or a third? If your eyes should ask for it.

He builds houses and plants vineyards (which will come in handy for the wine drinking). He makes gardens and parks and he plants all kinds of trees. There are pools to water all the trees. He gets in

that Capability Brown chap, who seems to have designed the garden in nearly every National Trust property.

And you note this is not simply, “I bought all this stuff”. I had the money, so I went and bought a 100 million dollar estate where this has already been done. No, there is work here. This has involved effort. He has made plans. He has designed things and project-managed and all the rest of it, just like we do in all our grand plans, however limited they are by our resources.

And you want to say there is something good in this, don’t you? Doesn’t it remind you a bit of Genesis? Adam was put in the Garden of Eden to work it and tend it. We’re made to cultivate. We’re made to design, to create, to undertake projects, to do exactly the sort of stuff Qoheleth is doing here.

But notice again, the phrase which is all through this: “for myself.” These are self-indulgent projects. Just for me. Because I want to.

And these are such great projects that lots of people are needed to manage it and work it. So, verse 7: he gets slaves. A whole workforce to service his stuff, to service his desires. Ah, well we don’t do this. But there are substantial sectors of the economy that exist to do nothing other than service the desires of the well-off.

Qoheleth goes on. He owned herds and flocks, more than anyone in Jerusalem before him. Verse 8: he has silver and gold, the treasure of kings and provinces.

He’s a patron of the arts too. He has his own personal choir. He has live music whenever he wants it. Why not, if you can? This is an age where there are no CDs or Spotify, after all. This is the only way to have music. Why not?

So, he says, “I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well, the delights of the heart of man.” And let’s not be prudish about it. If you’re going to give yourself over to this kind of experiment, and you’re denying yourself nothing that your eyes ask for, then indulge whatever sexual pleasure you want too. *Why not?*

Qoheleth doesn’t dwell on that point though, and he doesn’t really need to, does he?

And by the end of all that, his description of this experiment, are you not just a tiny bit jealous? If you had the means to do this, wouldn’t you want to? Or let’s ask a slightly different question: within the means at your disposal, is this basically how you live now? Maybe you try and sanctify it all by saying grace, but basically, it’s just self-indulgent pleasure.

Although, it’s not just about pleasure, all of this, is it? Qoheleth is not just lounging by the pool being waited on all the time. There is also work in all that Qoheleth does here. He has to plan all this, research it, project manage, and then look after all this stuff. And that’s enjoyable too. See, “my heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour.” This is not just pure hedonism with no effort.

This is creating, cultivating, managing, keeping in order. And there is a reward in that. And Qoheleth will return to this idea.

But, when it’s all just for self, and it’s all lived in an under-the-sun perspective as though this is all there will ever be - when it’s simply self-indulgence in this under the sun world, what does it accomplish? Verse 11: He looks at all that his hands have done, all that he had toiled to achieve. And

despite the satisfaction he took in his work, despite the fact that by definition pleasure is enjoyable – what does he conclude?

It's all hebel. Breath, vapour, fleeting, in the moment. It doesn't last. To treat it as though it might is futile. It's a chasing after the wind. You gain nothing. All it means is that you go to the grave having smiled along the way, that's all. A big pile of dust that briefly became a human being, worked hard for the next pleasure, then the next, then the next, and then became a big pile of dust again. What have you gained? Nothing. Dust at the start. Dust at the end.

Self-indulgent pleasure in this fallen and broken world. Living as though what this world has to offer me is all that there is. Denying my eyes nothing that they want. It doesn't last. It's transitory.

But this fallen and broken world is not it. For those who follow Jesus there is the world as it will be – a redeemed world, a New Creation. We see the Kingdom breaking into the world now. One day, it will come in all its fullness.

And our King, Our Saviour Jesus, taught us about joy the night before He died. John 15: Abide in me, He said. Let my words remain in you. Remain in my love and obey my commands, just as He obeyed the Father's commands and remained in His love. And then He said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

This is true pleasure: being drawn into fellowship with the God who is love and who knows lasting and deep joy more than we can imagine.

And here is the thing: in our fallen-ness, we would almost consider it axiomatic that pleasure would by definition be self-indulgent. But true pleasure is not. It doesn't say, for me, for me, for me. God's joy is not self-indulgent joy. No, the Father delights in the Son. The Son delights in the Father.

All other self-indulgent pleasure in this under-the-sun world – okay, there will be some satisfaction in all your work to attain it. But here's what I found, says Qoheleth. It's all hebel, breath. It does not satisfy.

Ask yourself, honestly. Am I basically trying to live verse 10, maybe with an attempt to sanctify it through saying grace? Am I simply pursuing self-indulgent pleasure and calling it a blessing? Or am I seeking to know the joy of Jesus, who delighted in His Father, obeyed His Father, and knew His Father's joy in Him?

The joy of the Kingdom. It's not opposed to wine. Look to the wedding at Cana. It's not opposed to cultivating and creating. Look to the Garden of Eden. It's opposed to pleasure that is simply and only for me.

Rather, says Jesus, seek first the Kingdom: God's putting-things-right rule, in your life and in this world. That's where joy is to be found, from the moment you come to Jesus. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field," said Jesus. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all of this stuff and bought that field.

Joy from the moment you come to Him, to the moment when you see Him again. And for those who directed their time and energy towards the Kingdom, what pleasure it will be to hear these words. "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness!"

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

I wonder where you end up when you're trying to buy someone a present, maybe at Christmas time, and you don't know what to get them. What's your go-to shop for the person you don't know what to get?

For me, it's often a bookshop (perhaps because I like bookshops). I go in, and I start scanning the shelves for anything which I can convince myself that person might like. That search normally takes me to the biographies and autobiographies section. It's the sort of present where you say: I know-you-like-him off the telly, so I got you his book.

And it's always interesting, I think, to see how those books are presented. How they sell the fact that the person's life is worth reading about. That you'd want to know what it is like just to *be* that person. That you might even find some wisdom for how to live your life.

Well, just imagine, as you're scanning those biographies, you come across one by that lesser known celebrity, Qoheleth. It's probably called "Hebel" or "Breath". And subtitled, "why all the other books on this shelf aren't worth reading."

And if anyone has done it all, if anyone has tried everything, it's Qoheleth. Surely his wisdom would be worth reading.

Well, we've been following his biography these last few weeks. We've been tracking Qoheleth's quest as he's surveyed human experience. Chapter 1 verse 13, I devoted myself to study, by wisdom, all the deeds that are done under heaven, he said.

We heard him say, chapter 1 verse 15, that despite all we do in life, there will always be a twistedness that cannot be straightened, a sense of lack that cannot be quantified.

At the end of chapter 1, he briefly considered wisdom and knowledge, but concluded that it just makes you more depressed. You just learn more about how everything is broken.

We heard him last week, test his heart with pleasure. Every self-indulgent pleasure under the sun, he denied his eyes nothing that they asked for.

But it too was all hebel. A chasing after the wind.

And now today we come to the next thing – wisdom. Verse 12: "Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly."

And wisdom here, it's not the Biblical fearing-the-LORD sort of wisdom, I don't think. It's just human wisdom. And this is not so much about knowing lots of stuff from books, though that might come into it. Rather, wisdom is just simply about living well. It's good, moral, practical advice for how to live life well.

Because if you ever meet anyone who is very intense and intellectual, who thinks a lot about life, who maybe reads French philosophers and all that kind of stuff – if you ever meet anyone like that, you've probably thought: that's all too much for me. I'm just trying to live life as best as I can, nothing more complicated than that.

Well, that attitude is exactly what Qoheleth turns to now. "I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom," – how to live well, how to get through life skilfully, in a good, moral, upright sort of way. Good, simple, home-spun wisdom. "And also madness and folly" – he considered what it looks like when life is not lived well.

And the last half of verse 12 is very hard to translate. It might be saying: what more can be done in this quest than what he, the king, is doing? With his seemingly limitless resources, he's the ultimate test case. It might be that. But it's not clear.

Anyway, here's his conclusion, and it's our point for today. **Wisdom is better, but death makes it hebel.** Living life well is better, but then on the other hand, everyone dies so what's the point?

Now remember, this is a conclusion reached in an 'under the sun' perspective, in the perspective of this fallen and broken world, as though this is all it's ever going to be. We'll come back to that.

So, wisdom is better, firstly. And that is obvious, isn't it? Just think about your wider family, or your circle of friends, or all the people you went to school with. There are probably examples of people who have done life really well, and other people who haven't, who have made poor choices. Well, wisdom is better than folly, verse 13, just as light is better than darkness.

See, when the lights go out, you can't move around so easily. You thought you knew the way around your house, but you start bumping into things.

You certainly don't achieve so much in the dark, do you? If there's a power cut and the lights go out, you don't think, oh well, I'll just read that book now. Or, I'll put together that flat-pack furniture. Or, I'll start knitting a beanie. None of that would go very well.

Life lived in the dark doesn't achieve very much and it involves a lot of stumbling around.

Verse 14, "the wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness."

The wise navigate their way through life well - by living sensibly, planning ahead, working hard, and living what others would consider to be good, moral lives. And things tend to go better for those people, don't they? If you're wise you can avoid certain disasters and be prepared for others.

Fools, however, just stumble through life and make a mess of things. They ruin their lives.

So, obviously wisdom is better than foolishness. We all know that. And we all want this for our children, our nieces and nephews, our godchildren. We want them to make sensible decisions and to live good, upright lives. We want them not to make mistakes, but to live well, and to be prepared as best as they can for whatever might come their way.

So, wisdom is better, obviously. But...

But, verse 14, I came to realise that the same fate overtakes them both. And it's very clear by the end of the passage what Qoheleth means. Look at the end of verse 16: "like the fool, the wise too must die!"

And this fact of death, it is the thing that Qoheleth keeps coming up against in Ecclesiastes. Every time he seems to have hold of something that is good and might carry purpose and meaning under the sun ... but then you die. You return to dust. Nothing in the end was gained. It's all hebel.

Death is something we in our society try to avoid thinking about. Even when you go to funerals, people try to avoid talking about it. But Qoheleth will not shy away from it. He wants us to be bothered by this.

So wisdom is good, but then you die. You lived life well, but then you died. So, what was gained?

Verse 15, "I thought in my heart 'The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?' I said in my heart 'This too is meaningless'" – hebel.

I've thought of this in a number of pictures this week. Life is like we're all on a hike. And some of us go about it wisely. We've got the right kind of clothes and footwear. We've got the maps, the provisions and so on. So, we go about the hike with more skill and success.

Others are fools. They have none of the right stuff. They don't apply themselves. They fall into bogs and get into all sorts of difficulties.

But the twist is this. We're all on a hike, marching towards a cliff edge. And we all drop off and die. So what was the point in doing the hike well?

Or, we're all canoeing down a river. Some are wise. We apply ourselves. We learn to do it well. Others are fools. They're crashing into the river bank, occasionally capsizing, just making a mess of it.

But zoom out and you'll see, we're all headed towards the same waterfalls. What was the point? It's just absurd, isn't it?

But then, I thought, even those images aren't quite right. Because it's not a cliff edge or a waterfall that you all get to at roughly the same time. It's more like there's lightning strikes, or meteorites that come crashing down and take anyone out at any point.

Yes, generally, if you live wisely you may well live longer than those who live foolishly. But then it's totally random as well, isn't it? Death may come for any one of us at any time, irrespective of whether we were wise or foolish. It's just absurd, isn't it?

And Qoheleth makes this personal. Verse 15, The fate of the fool will overtake *me also*. Have you ever thought about this for longer than half a second? One day I am going to die. And I can't say, well I'm in my 40s, so I've got another 30 or 40 years before I have to think about this. I can't even think, well I'm going about life fairly well, so I *ought* to have another 30 or 40 years before I have to worry about this. It could happen today.

One day I am going to die. What will that then mean for how I lived?

Because here's the killer, forgive the pun – here's the final mockery that death makes of a wise life well lived: it will not, in the end, be remembered. Verse 16, the days will come when both the wise and the foolish will simply be forgotten.

And, okay, it might take a while. If I go first, I'm sure my children will remember me. If there are any grandchildren, yes, but I expect what memory there is will fade, or coalesce around just a few stories and photographs. And then, that will be it. Did I live life well, or was I a fool? - who cares? Do you honestly care that much whether your great-great-great-grandad was wise, or if he was a fool?

And Qoheleth is outraged by this reality. And he won't ignore this. He won't just say, ah well, let's just press on. And it leads him to despair. Verse 17: "I hated life" – the whole business of human living – I hated it. The work that is done under the sun is grievous to me. All of it is hebel. It's a chasing after the wind.

Wisdom is good, but death makes it hebel. It's like life is a card game, and you want to play your cards as well as you can, but the game is fixed and everyone is going to lose.

If 'under the sun' is all there is. This world as it is, fallen and broken. If this is all there is, if there's no more grand narrative than this, then you've got two choices, the way I see it. Number one: face up to the obvious, face up to the truth, face up to the reality of death and how it makes a mockery of everything. But that leads to despair. As Voltaire apparently once wrote in a letter "I hate life and yet I am afraid to die."

Or, number two, and this is what most people do: press on as best you can and ignore the reality you live in, just ignore the fact that the lightning can take anyone out at any time.

And I can see why many go that way. But there is an absurdity to it, isn't there?

I remember where we lived before, there was a guy who put his life motto at the bottom of all his emails. I think he had come up with it himself. I can't remember what it was exactly, but it was one of those mottos like, "Work hard. Enjoy life. Laugh often." And maybe you hear that in discussions. Maybe when you're getting into those "deep" discussions about life. And someone says, "the way I see it, you've just got to work hard, enjoy life and laugh often. That's my motto, that's what I live by."

And Qoheleth would scream "that's just absurd!" Because no matter how hard your work, how much you enjoy life, or how much you laugh, one day, sooner or later and it might be sooner, you are going to die, and the days will come when you and your motto will be completely forgotten.

And Qoheleth wants you to be outraged by this. He wants to tap into that sense you have that this isn't right. He wants to shatter your belief that this under-the-sun perspective is all there is.

We'll get to chapter 3 in a couple of weeks, where Qoheleth says that God has placed eternity on every person's heart. Verse 16 here, translated a bit more literally, has the same word. "There is no remembrance of the wise or the fool for eternity."

Qoheleth is tapping into that sense that God has placed on everyone's heart and saying, isn't this outrageous? Do you not feel it to be so? Find me the cat or dog that's outraged that it won't be remembered in years to come. But you are. You know it isn't right. A life well lived should be remembered. It should endure.

And it can. How? Because under-the-sun is not all there is. This fallen and broken world is not the whole story, but is one part of it. It's just part of a story that goes: Creation, Fall, Redemption, New Creation.

And what moves that story forward through redemption and into a new creation, is a wisdom that comes from above, rather than one which simply comes from below.

It's a wisdom from God which seemed like foolishness to the world: The crucifixion of the Son of God. His death for our sins, through which our life has been won, and through which the hope of New Creation is secured.

Under-the-sun wisdom is good, but death makes a mockery of it. But in the wonderful story of redemption, God in His wisdom has beaten death and has saved us.

Great, so now a life lived well, a wise life, is no longer meaningless for those who follow Jesus? Well, sort of. So long as you realise that a life well-lived now looks rather different.

It is lived by this wisdom which comes from above. And that will look like foolishness to the world. Living in a way that invests in the Kingdom, which we do not yet see in its fullness, will look like foolishness to those who think you invest in nothing beyond retirement.

Living by this wisdom will lead to sacrifice. And if the Cross was foolishness to the world, so too will be the Cross-shaped life.

Be alarmed, therefore, if all around you consider your decisions in life to be eminently sensible. Christ has become our wisdom. His wisdom is good. Living by it is supremely good. And such a life will endure beyond death and be remembered before God forever.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26³

Well, I wonder how you're coping with Ecclesiastes thus far. When you get into it, it's both a very interesting and a very uncomfortable book.

We like things that are very interesting. Whether or not we're academic types, we all enjoy those interesting conversations one occasionally has. The ones that we might even say were really quite inspiring, and we had the feeling of our minds being stretched, or of just glimpsing beyond what had previously been the horizon of our imagination.

The trouble is, the truly interesting conversations in life are very often the ones which also make us uncomfortable.

And that is what we're finding as we listen to Qoheleth. He says very interesting things, things which resonate in our lives even thousands of years later. But it also gets rather uncomfortable, very uncomfortable, even. In our last passage, Qoheleth brought it home very personally: *one day I too will die*. More than that: *one day I too will be forgotten*. Ouch!

So, it might all start to feel a bit too much. And we might try to excuse ourselves from proceedings at this point. This is all very well for the clever, philosophical types. Or for people who are into all this spiritual stuff. But there's such a thing as the real world. There's such a thing as work. And so I don't have time for this.

So, thank you, Qoheleth, but I'm off now. You and anyone left listening to you can carry on with all of this stuff if you want to, but I have to get up tomorrow and go to work. And, as it turns out, I have enough of a sense of purpose and well-being in doing that.

Okay, Qoheleth would say, let's talk about work then, because I thought about that too. Quite a lot, in fact - this won't be the only passage that says something about work. Oh great, you might think, but stick with it, because it's not all negative. We have to get through the negative first, but there is a hint of moving things on in this passage today, and of themes which will be expanded upon as we go through the book.

But you do have to think about the negative first. You do need to open your eyes to what you might be trying to avoid thinking about, as you busy yourself going to work in under-the-sun world.

Two points from this passage: there is **Anxious work for what could end up going to a fool**. And there is **Satisfaction in work as a gift of God**.

First, **Anxious work for what could end up going to a fool**. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," goes the expression. Except, in the end, says Qoheleth, it seems to be "everything ventured, nothing

³ This passage was originally preached by someone else in our church. I have written this sermon to complete my own set of sermons for Ecclesiastes, and because I would love to preach this passage one day!

gained,” or even, “everything ventured, and everything gained for someone else who ventured nothing!”

Verse 18: “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is *hebel*.”

Now, there will be more things to say about work in Ecclesiastes, but what we’re thinking about here is the enduring results of our work. The things that might outlast us, whether that’s something we’ve built, an organisation that we’ve set up or steered in a certain direction, changes in our work which we were responsible for, a home which we’ve lovingly created and fashioned, or simply the money we gradually accumulate in our savings (or hope to).

Whatever it is - this is about the results of all our efforts which haven’t simply disappeared through the food shopping and the gas bills. The things we’ve worked at, big or small, where we can stand back and think, *look what I’ve done*.

And we’ll all have those. I’m not just talking about people with high flying careers. We’ll all have things which will outlast us, accomplishments that will be there when we move on. There will be things we’ve worked at which we’re proud of, and where we’re especially proud because of all the effort, all the toil, or even all the worry that it took to accomplish.

But here’s the thing, says Qoheleth. You can’t take it with you. And you’ll have to leave it to the person who comes after you, *and they might be a fool*.

Sometimes, this happens in our lifetimes. Perhaps we move house, and the next people come in, and they demolish all that we had painstakingly and lovingly built. Or perhaps we move job, and the next person who comes into our role changes everything and makes it completely different. Maybe they do that well, maybe they do it really badly. Either way, all that we worked for, what was the point? But if it doesn’t happen in our lifetime, it will happen when we die. Everything we have now, everything you’ve saved, every penny which you worked jolly hard for, everything you own, your home and everything you’ve done to it, every ministry you’ve been involved in - *everything*. It will all be left to the person who comes after you.

And they may be wise. They might do really good things with it. But they may be a fool. They may squander all that you leave to them. They may even use it for ill and not for good! And you won’t be able to do anything about it, because they will have control over all the work into which you have poured your effort and skill under the sun (verse 19).

So, says Qoheleth, *hebel*! Indeed, the more he thinks about it, he doesn’t just feel less good about all the stuff he has accomplished. He now stands back from it and he *hates it* (verse 18). Maybe he feels a sense of it mocking him.

Because if you had looked to all of these things to define you, if you had thought that here in these things could be my legacy, the mark I will leave on the world - here in under-the-sun world, through the fruit of my toil, I can write a story which has purpose and meaning, Qoheleth says, *no, you can't*. You actually have no control over your legacy.

And so, verse 20, “my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it.” They don’t deserve it! And who is to say whether they will squander it?

Overall, then, Qoheleth concludes, this is another instance of hebel, a great misfortune (or even, a great evil). Another attempt to write a story of meaning and purpose in under-the-sun world, this time through good old fashioned hard work, but it can’t be done. Everything you do will pass on to another, and they could be a fool.

So, that being the case, what did you get from all that anxious striving, verse 22? All that worry and grief that you poured into your work? Well, just that, verse 23. You got pain, and grief, and sleepless nights. You got stress and other negative impacts on your health. You got less time to spend with the people you really care about. And when it came to the parts of the day in which you were theoretically free to enjoy yourself, you found that work had given you a zombie-like presence that could cope with nothing more than vegging out on the sofa.

You got scammed, in other words. All of those subtle pressures that were put on you as a child - the future is all about you, you can achieve anything, life can be fulfilling. And work presented itself as the means of writing for yourself that story full of meaning and purpose in under-the-sun world. This was how you could have an impact. But actually, it turned out to be more like a big whirlpool in the middle of your life, sucking in all your time and energy and leaving little for the people and the things you actually wanted to invest in.

And whoever picks up what you leave behind could be a fool.

Pretty depressing, isn’t it? Thanks Qoheleth! Except Qoheleth would say, no, you misunderstand. I’m not trying to drag you down to my gloomy perspective on life. I’m stepping down into your perspective, and I’m saying be honest with yourself. If you seek a story of meaning and purpose and fulfilment in under-the-sun world through your work, be honest, the only story you can write for yourself is just hebel, isn’t it?

But there is another way. And we start to get hints of it here. Because there is a bigger story, and when you see that, you can actually have **satisfaction in work as a gift of God**.

Verse 24: “A man can do nothing better than...” Now, that doesn’t exactly sound like the beginning of an unequivocal good-news sentence. It sounds more like the beginning of a concession. *There is nothing better than*. But these thoughts will develop as we go through Ecclesiastes, so even if there is a slightly tantalising sense to this, let’s look to see what is good.

“A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”

Here’s how to go about work - not to see in it the means by which you’re going to write a story of meaning and purpose in under-the-sun world, not to see it as the thing which is going to define you, or in which you find your fulfilment, but first of all to see it as a means to simple necessities and pleasures, such as eating and drinking, and as something in which you can take satisfaction (verse 24).

We get to the end of the day, and we are pleased with what we’ve done. We might be tired, physically or mentally, but it can be a good kind of tired. How so? Because we’ve not looked to work as a means of ultimate fulfilment. We’ve just seen it for what it is, and whether or not it has lasting and enduring impact, you can have that simple sense of satisfaction in the present, because you’ve *done* something, because you’ve *helped* others, because you’ve *provided* for your family - that can be enjoyed in the present as a gift from God.

But there’s more to it than that. Because actually, what we need to do, and what we so often fail to do, is to situate the story of our work in the bigger story of *God’s work*. And that’s where our passage finishes. Here is something God is doing and will do.

Verse 26: “To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.”

“To the one who pleases God” - that means the person who has faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only One who has ever pleased God on His own merits, but *in Him*, cleansed and forgiven for our sins, we please God too. And to us God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness. In the case of work, wisdom and knowledge to understand who our work is ultimately for and thereby where its value truly lies. And happiness in the satisfaction we can take in our work in the present, day by day, and in the simple things we can enjoy as fruits of our work, such as food and drink.

But to the sinner, who may well try to find their meaning and their fulfilment in their work, well then everything we said before remains the case. There is just the task of gathering and storing up wealth. There is no true fulfilment. There is no purpose or legacy. It’s all frustrated by death. And it will be passed onto others.

Although, in the end, says verse 26, God will make sure that the riches of this world do not pass into the hands of fools, but rather He will give them to the ones who please Him - the saints. The meek, Jesus said, they are the ones who will inherit the earth.

Look to the bigger story. Look to the work that God is doing. If you try to write your own story, in under-the-sun world, as though enduring meaning and purpose are found through your work and your accomplishments, it can’t be done. And it is remarkable how much we keep slogging away at that goal, even as we can see it doesn’t work.

But if you realise that it's not primarily about the work that you do, or the story that you write, but that it is about the work God does, and the story He writes - if, because of that, you turn to Jesus in repentance and faith and are united to Him, then you are one of those Paul calls *God's workmanship*.

"For we are God's workmanship," wrote Paul, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). And if God is at work in you, and uses you to do works which He has prepared beforehand for you to walk in, well there is the way in which your work can, after all, endure.

Though it won't be about what *I* did, but what *He* did, through me.

In the meantime, enjoy what He gives you to do today. It's perfectly fine to look for nothing more in your day's toil than the satisfaction of an honest day's work, and that you put food on the table for everyone to enjoy. In fact, that is a gift of God, which we often fail to enjoy, because we're chasing after the wind, trying to find meaning where it isn't to be found, trying to create meaning which was never ours to create.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8⁴

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...”

And then follows a beautiful and well-known poem. What does it mean, though? What’s it about? And how’s it meant to make us feel? What kind of questions does it cause us to ask?

I think in churches I’ve heard this passage used in two ways. First, in conversation, as a Biblical get-out for not signing up to something: “sorry I can’t sign up to anything, sorry I can’t do that thing anymore: times and seasons, you know.” A Biblical get-out: there is a season for being committed to things and a season for not...

Or, I’ve heard it read in funerals. And don’t get me wrong, I think this is a great reading for a funeral. But, I’m not sure I’ve ever heard it preached in a funeral, or that it’s ever really been dwelt on.

Because, I think, ponder this reading for a few minutes, and alongside its obvious rhythm and beauty, somewhat disturbing questions and feelings also start to emerge. But just read it out, and move on quickly to the eulogy, and everyone feels it was nice, but nobody takes much from it, and then it’s forgotten. That’s maybe why it’s chosen for funerals - other suitable readings are more obviously unsettling. This one can be read, enjoyed, and forgotten before you’ve realised what it might be saying.

Let’s ponder it now. I think there are two strands which emerge from this poem the longer you sit with it. The first, and this strikes us more immediately, is its beauty. There is a beauty and pattern and rhythm to life which this poem expresses wonderfully. We enjoy listening to this, and rightly so.

The second, however, is a sense of brokenness, or even futility. There’s much pain as well as joy. And all of these things seem to cancel each other out. The question of verse 9, which we’ll come onto in the next passage, naturally emerges from this poem. What gain was there? What was the point?

So, somehow, this poem conveys a tapestry which has both beauty and brokenness, a sense of some purpose but maybe a frustrated one.

And therefore it expresses this life, and life in this world, extraordinarily well. There is beauty. There is also brokenness. There is a time for everything, but does it add up to anything? Creation and Fall, in other words. There is much that is good and beautiful in life, but it is frustrated and broken. It is, as Ecclesiastes so often does, unsettling us, so that we would yearn for the bigger story which the Bible has to tell us.

We’re not going to have very structured headings as we look at this passage - it’s a poem. But let’s just pull out some contrasts that we see.

⁴ This passage was originally preached by someone else in our church. I have written this sermon to complete my own set of sermons for Ecclesiastes, and because I would love to preach this passage one day!

Firstly, as already mentioned, there is **Beauty and Brokenness**.

The beauty is obvious, isn't it? There is a rhythm to these verses. It's almost comforting, like the noise of a gentle tide going in and out. Just as there are rhythms and patterns in life: morning and evening, summer and winter, work and rest, holidays and term time - there is something comforting about this.

And we need it all. Contrary to the popular song, I don't wish it could be Christmas every day. I enjoy Christmas coming round, and then I enjoy moving on to the next part of the year. And I don't wish I could be on holiday all the time. I look forward to holidays, and that is good, and I look forward to returning to work at the end of a holiday, and that is good.

And over the course of life, we move from one sort of time to another. It makes for a rich tapestry. There is beauty to it. And we feel it in this poem. Perhaps that's our first emotional response to it: comfort, beauty, purpose.

Except, sit with it a bit longer, and you start to wonder. A time to die, to uproot, to kill, to tear down, to weep, and so on.

Now, some of these, you can turn into comforting thoughts. There is a time when a shepherd might tend and care for a lamb, and there is a time when he might slaughter it. That might cause you to wonder a bit, but it is explicable. Building and tearing down - yes, there might have been a time to build a treehouse in the garden for the children. Years later, it is unused and starting to rot, it needs to come down.

But even after those sorts of efforts to make it all sound nice, these things aren't always nice. Sometimes - often - they're an expression of the brokenness of this world.

And some of these are just obviously always bad. A time to die, or a time for war? There might be 'peaceful' deaths, or great war stories of heroics and gallantry - but both death and war always feel profoundly wrong, don't they?

There is brokenness, all through life, so much so that for every aspect of beauty there seems to be a counterpoint of brokenness. What kind of world is this, if so often the works of art, or music, or the stories which we find to be the most beautiful are also the ones that have the most sadness?

There is beauty and brokenness here. It's what life is like. It's what this world is like.

There's also a sense of **Completeness and Futility** in this poem.

There are three poems which stand out in Ecclesiastes. One, right at the start, where everything goes round and round and round and nothing is achieved. It sets up a main theme of this book, that everything is hebel, a theme that has been explored through Qoheleth's quick survey of the places he has looked for purpose.

There is a poem right towards the end, in chapter 12, all about old age and death, with an exhortation to remember our Creator, before we start to go through such decline. And then there is this one, coming ahead of the middle chapters - chapters which are difficult to structure, and difficult to preach (and therefore often missed), but which in their form express rather well the middle years of life, the bulk of it, the whirl. You go from this to that to the other, from one season to the next, and suddenly, it's all done. You're into old age and death. And you look back and think, well what was all that about? It was a complete life, perhaps, but what did it add up to?

This poem comes ahead of that. And it does express completeness, first of all. Each of these pairs, they express not just opposites, but everything encompassed by those opposites. And there are fourteen pairs. Two lots of seven, where seven in the Bible is a number associated with completeness.

This is a full life, expressed here. The fullness of experience in this world. Everything is experienced. There is birth and death, and in all the time in between, all of these things happen. Planting, uprooting, killing, healing, tearing down, building up, weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, scattering, gathering, embracing, refraining, searching, giving up, keeping, throwing away, tearing, mending, being silent, speaking up, loving, hating, fighting and being at peace.

You don't generally have to live three score years and ten to experience something of all of that. If you do, you certainly will have done. There is a completeness to this.

And yet notice, you can't just have all the positives and miss out on all the negatives, to have a full life, can you? You visit all the sections of a card shop through this poem, don't you? We would love it if we could just visit the birth, congratulations, birthdays, marriages sections of the card shop in life. But in the fullness of a life, you will also have the sympathy cards, the get well soon cards, the thinking of you cards.

Just having all the positives doesn't add up to a full life. Perhaps we wish it could. But when you look back at it, strangely, it's sometimes the most difficult times that seem the most sacred, the most precious, and absolutely key to the story. As believers, we will look at those times and see our Father at work in our lives, making us more like Jesus, drawing us to Him. A time to bear fruit, and a time to be pruned, perhaps.

Even though a season may have been filled with unspeakable tragedy, somehow it plays its part to complete a story that has beauty.

We have it in our church calendars and liturgy too. It's not just celebration all the time. There are times to fast as well as times to feast. Even within a service, a time to mourn our sin, and a time to rejoice in our salvation.

And yet, as we appreciate the completeness of this poem, there also seems to be a sense of futility. All of these pairs - they also seem to cancel each other out. So that the sum total of everything about a life appears to be nothing.

We're born, but then one day we die. Every relationship we have, if it hasn't ended in other ways, some of which are just naturally related to different seasons of life - we move away, we drop out of contact - others of which are more painful, but in the end if nothing else ends a relationship, death will. The stuff we have, it won't last forever. Things we built, if we don't tear them down, someone else will one day.

There is a futility which emerges from this poem. Because whilst we will scream that all of this *does* add up to something, and something very significant, the question has to be asked, well, what? What we have here appears to be a zero sum game - a beautiful one, but a zero sum game nonetheless. What was gained, the question verse 9 will ask us in the next passage, very naturally emerges from this one.

What was the point? We feel there must be such purpose in such beauty, but then again, what?

A couple of other contrasts we see. There is a **wisdom and yet a sense of powerlessness** in this poem.

The wisdom is in acknowledging what this poem says. There are different seasons in life. It is wise to acknowledge that, to discern which one you're in, and to live accordingly. For instance, there are times in life when we need to build and plant, to gather and to keep, and then as we grow older, it's time to downsize, to let go, to throw away.

Discerning what time of life it is, what season you're in - that takes wisdom.

And it is wise to remember that you can't hold onto one season of life forever. We are unable to create a Paradise for ourselves and then hold onto it. One season will be followed by another. Parents, your children will grow up. They might move away. The way you do Christmas now is not going to be the way you do it forever more.

And it is wise to remember that there will be ebbs and flows in life. Times of mourning are going to come. Don't expect life to only ever be easy. It won't be.

That's all wisdom. But there is also a sense of powerlessness in that.

Wisdom may equip us for living life well, but it does not equip us for taking control of what life gives us. Many of the significant things that happen in our lives will be things we didn't plan for and which were completely out of our control, starting with our birth, and ending in our death.

Times and seasons come upon us. We neither cause them nor ask for them, much of the time. Some of them will be exceptionally painful. Some we know will come - death for instance. Others, we know they do happen to people, but we thought they would never happen to us.

We are powerless, in the end, to determine the shape of the story of our lives. And so there is the sense of something overpowering in these verses. Something bigger than you, that sweeps you up and carries you along.

And to a non believer, there is something ominous about that. Something profoundly unsettling. After all, if you try to discern a structure to this passage, an order to the way these pairs are

presented, you can't really find one. And some of them go from good to bad, others go from bad to good, and a few are really rather ambiguous as to which is bad and which is good.

But these things will come upon us. One after another, in whichever order they come. We are wise to ponder this, but we are powerless to shape it.

Except, of course, there's something that a believer will see in these verses that a non-believer won't: **Providence**.

All of these things which I am powerless to control, which come when they come and not when I determine: there is One who is over them all. And He is wise. And He knows the reasons why. And He can see how they all fit together and *do* add up to something.

There is a time for everything under heaven, and in heaven there is One who is over all time. The verses which follow will go onto mention God further, not necessarily in a fluffy and unambiguously comforting way, but we are reminded: God knows. He is over it all.

And, actually, He is the One who moves the story on, beyond under-the-sun. He does that by intervening and acting in this world, in this part of the story.

Did you notice in this poem, these pairs listed here - they are basically all things that God does as well? Some of them relate more to judgement, some to salvation - but these are all things that God does and causes.

Supremely, of course, we think of the Lord Jesus. There was a time for Him to be born and a time for Him to die. There was a time for mourning, and there was a time for rejoicing. There was a time when we were at enmity with God, and now we are at peace.

Our Saviour stepped into this world. He knew the beauty and perplexities of this poem. And He moved the story on. That, in the end, is the only answer to the questions which this poem raises, if we would only spend some time pondering it.

Because without that bigger story, without that perspective - what was this poem about? What is life about? What does it all add up to? Well, pinning down an answer to that - you may as well chase after the wind.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Well, I want you to imagine that we are characters in a story, being written by an author.

And there are four chapters to the story. There's chapter 1 – where everything gets started, and everything is good. But then you get to chapter 2 and there's a crisis, and it all falls apart. There are still some good things, but chapter 2 is hard. Chapter 2 is called, "Under the Sun", incidentally. And it's hard. You need rescuing from chapter 2.

But then comes chapter 3, and that's the chapter of redemption. There's still difficult stuff in chapter 3, still a bit of chapter 2 in there, but chapter 3 is the turning point, which moves the story forward to its happy conclusion, which is chapter 4, happily ever after.

But there's a problem. The characters of the story, us, are stuck in chapter 2. And we can't get out of it. And there is no conceivable plotline through which the characters on their own can move the story forwards. If it's just down to the characters of the story, there will be no chapter 3. The only way the story can move on is if the Author Himself steps into it.

Of course, we know He does that. It's true in the Old Testament. God gets involved in human history directly. It's supremely true in the New Testament, where God writes Himself into the story as one of us. And He moves the story decisively into chapter 3 in such a way that we can move on too.

The thing is, though, so many people just stay in chapter 2. When they think about it, they feel there ought to be more than chapter 2, and certain moments in life really make them want to believe that there must be. But then they just shrug their shoulders and carry on, as though chapter 2 is all there is, as though everything just goes round and round in a chapter 2 world. And even those of us who have been rescued, and brought into chapter 3, we can still lapse back into a chapter 2 mindset, as though under-the-sun is the whole story, where we find our meaning and purpose.

And therefore everyone needs to be told, either because they've never woken up to it, or because they're in danger of falling back into the old mindset, everyone needs to be told, chapter 2, on its own, would make a rubbish story!

If chapter 2, under-the-sun, were the story, and you just went round and round in chapter 2, that would be a rubbish story. It would be like a story that goes "once upon a time there was some breath. It hung in the air for a while and looked really rather beautiful. Then it was gone."

What I think Qoheleth has been doing is waking everyone up to the fact that if chapter 2 *is* the story, then the story is rubbish!

See, maybe you feel like Qoheleth is a really gloomy chap. And that in Ecclesiastes, he's dragging us down to his point of view to tell us whatever he wants to tell us.

But I don't think that's it. Qoheleth isn't dragging us down into his gloomy perspective. He's stepping down into ours. And he's saying, look, it's really gloomy down here – haven't you noticed? You're acting like chapter 2 makes for a good story all on its own, with meaning and purpose and significance. It doesn't! A life lived in chapter 2, as though chapter 2 is it, is just hebel.

And, you kind of know that, don't you? And, you kind of have the sense that there is a bigger story. And there is, and you need to look to the Author of the story to move it forwards.

Ecclesiastes is shock treatment for characters who are otherwise going to stay in chapter 2, when they could move on to chapters 3 and 4.

And we start to get that feel in this passage in Ecclesiastes. There is a bigger story. And we need God to work to bring it to its conclusion, and to make us a part of it.

Verse 9: “What do workers gain from their toil?” It’s a question that was posed right at the start, in the third verse of Ecclesiastes – and it’s asked again, because we’re moving towards a sort of interim conclusion here.

“What do workers *gain* from their toil?” Whatever it is you busy yourself with doing in life. Whatever you put your effort into. What do you gain, in the end?

And especially, do you gain anything which *endures*? This has been a niggling point for Qoheleth. Fine, there are some good things in life, and you can enjoy your work in the present, but is there anything about it all which endures? We come back to that question.

Verse 10, “I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.” That might be a fair translation, to have it in that negative sense, but it could be more neutral than that. “I have seen the business that God has given people to be busy with,” might be better. In any case, it’s a repeat of the thirteenth verse of the book, where Qoheleth said he devoted himself to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. He’s saying it again, as he’s about to come to some interim conclusions.

One of which is this: we do see **fleeting beauty in the present**.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time,” verse 11. Ah, what a lovely verse that is, we say. You could put that on a greeting card and send it to people. And when I’ve been looking for colouring sheets for the children each Sunday as we’ve gone through Ecclesiastes, there aren’t many out there, but there are loads for this verse!

It’s a lovely verse, isn’t it? Well, yes, and no. Because it has a huge qualifier on the end, doesn’t it? He has made everything beautiful *in its time*. Not forever!

It’s beautiful *in its time*. That is lovely - *but*, then it decays, gets ugly, and fades away. We planted some bedding plants in the Spring. They did well. Some even lasted into this very mild November. But they don’t look so good now. They were beautiful in their time. And it’s the same for us, and all the things we undertake.

You think of the elderly couple living in their house, which used to be beautiful – they’d done it up when they were younger. Now there’s plenty that needs doing again, and the garden is overgrown. It’s a picture of life. Beautiful, yes. With a God-given beauty, yes. But only in its time.

Fleeting beauty in the present. But also, and this is also God-given, **the sense of a never ending story**.

Still verse 11, “He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

There’s a sense of a story, for one thing. Don’t miss the significance of words like ‘beginning’ and ‘end’. So far in Ecclesiastes, it’s been round and round and round. But now, we have a sense that there is a story, with a beginning and a conclusion, and a purpose that moves you from one to the other. We have that sense, don’t we?

And we have that sense, not simply of a story, but of a never-ending story. He has also set *eternity* in the human heart. A sense of forever-after. When a loved one dies, it would feel absolutely outrageous to say that their story had finished. You have a sense that it goes on.

Most of the time, people live in chapter 2 of the story, under-the-sun, as though that is it. Qoheleth has exposed what a purposeless story that would be, and now he's saying to us, 'come on, you know it's not that way.' How do we know? God has given us that sense in our hearts. We are made to be part of a story, a *good* story, which goes on forever.

And yet there is a big qualifier here too. *We can't work out what that story is!* He has set eternity on the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. And that's frustrating!

For the Christian, it's frustrating, because although God has told us, in broad outline, what the big story is, and He's told us how we're a part of it, and it's a wonderful story, yet He hasn't told us the details. And sometimes we really wish we could know. Especially when it seems so unfathomable – something happens and you think "why? Surely you could have written my story in a different way from this, and still reached the same conclusion?"

But for the person who is not yet a believer, it's even more frustrating. Why? - because you have no sense even of the broad outline of the story! Either because you haven't heard it, or because you've rejected it and you're trying to fill it in with your own ideas. But it's really all a mystery. What came before? What will happen after? Will it go well or will it go badly? And how does your day to day life now have anything to do with that? You basically have no idea. You have a sense that the story does go on forever. But you have no secure sense of what it might be.

Fleeting beauty now, and an unfathomable sense of eternity: both given to us by God.

And whilst that's the case, there is nothing better, verse 12, than for people to be happy and to do good while they live, and to eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil. That is God's gift too.

And yes, that is positive. And the believer especially rejoices in this. But do you notice, again, there's a massive qualifier in that statement? "*There is nothing better than*".

In a chapter 2 world, in an under-the-sun world, in which there is God-given but passing beauty, and a God-given but unfathomable sense of a never ending story, there is *nothing better than* enjoying it whilst you can. And that enjoyment *is* good, and it *is* God's gift to you, and if you know that the story goes on into chapters 3 and 4, and that you're a part of it, then all of that will be really positive⁵. But if you're insisting on staying in chapter 2, in this under-the-sun world, then that's it. There is nothing better than that. Enjoy it whilst you can, but that's it.

And you have to ask, why would you be content just to remain in chapter 2 of the story, to remain in under-the-sun? Don't you want to move on? Don't you want to be part of chapter 3 – redemption? Or chapter 4 – happily ever after?

If you do, you need to look to the Author. See, **we need God to complete the story**. That's the last point.

Verse 14: here is, finally, something done *which endures*.

⁵ I am still undecided, to be honest, about how positively verses 12-13 are to be read. Towards the end of the book, I was happy to preach similar verses in a wholly positive way. Here, though, I still had the sense of waking unbelievers up to the inadequacy of their practical worldview.

"I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it." What God does is never hebel. It doesn't hang in the air for a bit and then fade away. It endures.

Now that either mocks you and mocks the fact that nothing you do will endure. Or, it is the clue to your salvation. Because here, finally, is the possibility of true and lasting *gain*.

If you're allowing Qoheleth to wake you up to the possibility of a bigger story, one with redemption, one with a happily ever after, then this is the clue to your part in it. And it's going to have nothing to do with what you might do. Why? - because what you do on your own doesn't endure. But it is going to have everything to do with something *He* does, because what He does *endures*.

Recognise that you need the Author of the story to move your story forwards. Realise that there's no way that you can do that.

In other words, fear God, verse 14. Honour Him and reverence Him as the only One who gets to write the story, and as the only One who can actually move it forwards.

You might not want to do that. Sometimes, that can simply be for reasons that are obviously selfish, or for reasons of pride. Sometimes, it's for reasons which are a bit more complex. Sometimes, it's because of other characters in the story whom we love, and we want to say how the story should go, so that we know it ends well for them, and therefore we refuse to acknowledge and reverence the only One who is the true Author. But if you want to move on into chapter 3, and then one day into chapter 4, you must bow to the Author. Fear Him. He is God and you are not. He writes the story.

And He moves the story forward. Verse 15, I think is all about that, and I'm not sure about the translation in our NIVs. The first bit's okay. "Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before," - that's the start of Ecclesiastes again, the end of that opening poem. It's restating the problem. And it's doing that in order to give a solution. Let me give you how I think this last bit should be translated: "And God seeks what's been driven away."

It's three Hebrew words in the original. One - "God". Two - "seek." Our NIVs have given that the slant of calling to account, but it's most naturally "seek" I think. And three, "what's been driven away" - the verb for pursuing, but in a passive sense.

God seeks what's been driven away. That most immediately makes me think of Adam, driven out of the Garden of Eden, and all of us his children. He seeks us. He seeks to bring us back, to redeem us, and to bring us to the New Creation.

It might also have the sense of God seeking the past, that is, the meaningless past, which would just go round and round and round. God seeks to straighten it out, as it were, and to resolve the story into its glorious future.

He seeks the past. He seeks the lost. Either translation works for me.

And He does it, as we're about to remember in Advent, through writing Himself into the story. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, came into our world. He said that He had come to seek and to save the lost. And He died on the Cross for our sins, defeated death, and rose to new life, so that we can follow into new and everlasting life.

Don't get stuck in chapter 2. Don't stay in under-the-sun. Look to God to complete the story. Because when you do, that is a story which He will make beautiful, forever.

Ecclesiastes 3:16 – 4:3

Well, here we are, back in Ecclesiastes. I wonder how that makes you feel.⁶

Maybe: Hooray – I love Ecclesiastes! I love puzzling over it.

Or, perhaps: Oh no – not Ecclesiastes! I really don't get it. And it's all rather miserable.

Or: Okay, I'll put up with it. Christopher clearly enjoys it, so that's nice.

And I do. I find it fascinating. I think it asks deep questions of us, questions about where we look for meaning, and how we live in this fallen world.

And the big question you have to ask to get what this book is saying is this: what is Qoheleth's perspective? Where is he coming from?

That, you may recall, comes down to figuring out what he means by the phrase "under the sun." This is a phrase used all through the book, and in this passage here.

Well, here's what I think.

I reckon that a lot of people have a sense that the big story about the meaning of life goes something like this. In fact, this is how a lot of stories go.

There was, in the past, a golden age. A time when things were right.

But things are not like that now. The world is messed up. We're messed up. Everything is broken. It needs saving.

So, next you get redemption. Something or someone saves the day, so you can get to the final chapter – happily ever after.

That's how stories often go.

And, Christianity fits that pattern too. We start with creation: Genesis 1 and 2, everything is good. Then, the Fall: Adam and Eve sin, everything is cursed. It's the world we live in now. Then, redemption: Jesus dies for our sins, we're forgiven and things start to get fixed. Then, New Creation: final judgement, God makes everything new, those who trust in Jesus live with Him in glory forever.

Under the sun, I think, is the second chapter of the story. It's the perspective of this fallen world. And, I think, it's the perspective of 'this fallen world', as though this is all there is ever going to be, as though there is no rest of the story.

Because here's the thing. We are so prone to live as though the rest of this story isn't there. We so easily lapse into living as though this fallen world is all that there is, and is all that there is ever going to be. And we live as though we can write a perfectly good story for ourselves, with purpose and meaning and satisfaction, just in this fallen, under-the-sun world.

And I think Qoheleth adopts this 'under the sun' perspective to show us any story like that, which we might try to write for ourselves is, in the end, just rubbish! If this is all there is, then everything would just be hebel. Remember that word? - it's breath, like breath in the air on a cold morning. It hangs there for a bit, looks pretty and is gone.

⁶ This was, I think, the beginning of our second series in Ecclesiastes.

And, so Qoheleth adopts this under the sun perspective, sometimes to nudge us, to prod us, to wake us up - to say, look, you know there must be more to the story than this, don't you? He does a bit of that in today's passage. And he adopts this perspective to show us: look, if under the sun is all that there is, then everything is just hebel, isn't it? And he does a lot of that today.

He does this with some hard truths. In this under the sun world, if this world as it is were the whole story, then three bleak conclusions follow.

There's no guarantee of justice, there's no answer to death, and there's no comfort for the oppressed.

So, verse 16, something else I saw, "under the sun." **There's no guarantee of justice.** "In the place of judgement" – where the poor ought to be protected and their rights upheld – "wickedness was there." Again, "in the place of justice" – where your complaints ought to be dealt with fairly, and wrongs righted – wickedness was there."

And this happens. In some places, it happens a lot. But all of us will experience it, to some degree or other.

Something happens that really isn't fair, and the system doesn't help you. Something happens that's wrong, and the system upholds it. The guilty are found not guilty. The innocent are condemned.

And sometimes, injustices can be corrected. It's right to try. But an awful lot won't be. So, if you just want to live as though this world, as it is, is all there is ever going to be, then you have to accept that, in the end, it's not a just world. That's it.

Except, you don't want to accept that, do you? You have a sense that, in the end, there will be justice. And Qoheleth knows you think that. Hence, verse 17, "I thought in my heart, 'God will bring into judgement both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.'"

There will be justice, in the end. But you need a bigger story for that to be true.

Second thing, if you just limit your story to 'under the sun': there's **no answer to death.**

And it's not just Qoheleth who wants to unsettle you about this - God does too. Verse 18, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals." The same fate awaits both. As one dies, so does the other. All come from dust, all return to dust.

Everything is hebel, verse 19 – breath. Some breaths hang in the air for longer, but all disappear. Everything dies. Birds, fish, elephants, tigers, bears, people - they all die.

So, if under-the-sun world is all that there is, what's the difference between the death of your family pet and the death of your loved one?

Well, you will scream the answer to that question: *everything!*

And you're right, of course, but you need more story for that, don't you? If indeed, there is a difference between the spirit of a man and the spirit of an animal, verse 21, and if there could be something noble and eternal awaiting humans, then you need a bigger story for that. So won't you look to the bigger story that the Bible presents to us?

Because if you won't, verse 22, this is all that's left. "There is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot."⁷

And, tragically, so many just do that. They scream at what Qoheleth says here, and then they just do verse 22. They just get on with it. They go back to their work and enjoy it as best they can. So long as you've got Disney+ and an occasional glass of wine, it'll be all right ... *I suppose, I guess, I don't know, whatever, another glass of wine?* And for Qoheleth, it is maddening to see so many just comfortably embrace and live out such meaninglessness.

Third thing – under the sun, if this fallen world is all there is: there is **no comfort for the oppressed**.

4:1 "I looked and I saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun" - all the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter.

How could they? Power is on the side of the oppressor, so the only aid they receive is what that power allows in. Charities make their appeals and money is given and good is done. But some will be missed. And you will read headlines like we had this week from Afghanistan: medics saying they don't have what they need, and they just have to watch babies die.

Under the sun, if this is all there is, then at times this incredibly bleak assessment will be true, that "the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun."

If this is all there is, there is no comfort for the oppressed.

But, that must be wrong, mustn't it? Do you see what Qoheleth wants us to say? To scream, even: *Please God would there be more than "under the sun"!* A bigger story!

And, of course there is. A book like Ecclesiastes really makes you appreciate Easter, doesn't it?

Jesus, the Son of God, dying to save sinners, dying so that a fallen, broken world can be fixed, so that it can be transformed. And then rising on Easter Day, the first of a new humanity, the herald of a new creation, in which there will be justice, eternal life and freedom, for those who have come to Jesus.

Easter is such good news! And how bleak our worldviews are without it, if we would just be honest with ourselves.

Ecclesiastes reminds us, do not live as though you can find meaning for yourself in this under the sun world. You can't. Come to Jesus and be part of the bigger story. Be a part of the bigger story, in which there is redemption, in which there is new creation, in which there truly is happily ever after.

⁷ There are a few instances throughout Ecclesiastes where simple pleasures such as work are commended to us. The question is whether this is a positive or a negative thing. My feeling, as I worked through the book, was that in some instances, and especially toward the end of the book, they genuinely are more positive, but that in other instances, including here, they are somewhat more ambiguous, even negative. In the more negative instances, I think, these verses reinforce the futility of life when one doesn't look to the bigger story. In the more positive ones, they become ways in which we can still live in under-the-sun world, to the glory of God, having grasped the bigger story. But I might be wrong!

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

Now so far in Ecclesiastes, we've had a lot of hebel – that word we've learned. Hebel – breath, like breath on a cold winter's morning. Hangs in the air a bit, and then it's gone.

We've had a lot of that. And, if you live as though this fallen world, this under-the-sun world, is it, then, whether you go after pleasure, or work, or wisdom, or whatever, then it's all hebel. You can't write a meaningful, satisfying story for yourself just in "this fallen world." You need for there to be a bigger story.

But, actually, you know there is a bigger story, don't you, says Qoheleth? And that of course gets us to look at the bigger story which centres on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope of a New Creation to come.

That's Ecclesiastes so far. And it's been fairly brutal. Qoheleth has not minced his words.

But, you may have thought, okay, I agree. I know this fallen world isn't it. I accept the challenge that I should not slip back into living as though this is all there is. And I'm so thankful for Christ and the hope I have of a New Creation, where everything is put right.

But, I still have to go to work tomorrow. I still have to look after the grandchildren this week. I have this, that and the other to sort out. So, yes the gospel has changed everything, but on the other hand, I still have to do all the normal stuff, subject to all the frustrations that come along in this fallen, broken, under-the-sun world.

So, does Ecclesiastes have anything to say about that? Well, that's what we get onto in this passage. How to approach the normal toil of life. And how not to.

Three headings for this section: Working with a quiet mind, working with others, and wisdom for those at the top.

First, **Working with a quiet mind** (verses 1-8).

Here are four attitudes you might see as people approach work and all the stuff they have to do. Three are bad. One, in verse 6, is good.

First, envy. Verse 4: "I saw that all labour and achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour." Now, okay, it doesn't *always* spring from envy. He's just making his point with vigour here.

But, actually, envy does motivate our work an awful lot of the time. Whether it's at school, where the reason you try that little bit harder is mainly because you don't want that other child to score higher than you. Or whether it's because you've just looked across the fence at what your neighbour now has in their garden, and you want the same (or slightly better).

And so, people work and toil out of envy. They want to keep up with others. They want to be better than others. They're unable to cope with the fact that someone of a similar age and stage has achieved more, or has a better house, or has more stuff. There is that feeling of "that's not right, I'm better than him", or her.

Children and adults alike – this affects us all. There's a lot of envy around. It's good for productivity and the economy. But it's terrible for the soul. And, says Qoheleth, it's hebel, it's a chasing after the wind.

Because, if envy is your motivation, you'll never get to your goal. There is no finish line for envy. They get an amazing barbeque, you get a bigger one. But then they get a new car, and so on.

Envy is a powerful motivator, but it never reaches its goal.

Here's the second attitude towards work, in verse 5 - idleness. Just don't bother. It's a lot of effort and why put yourself through it? Why be so stressed? All that stuff on your list that you ought to do this week. Just don't, or just do the minimum.

That may have a certain appeal. You may even convince yourself there is wisdom in this attitude. You watch other people running around in great stress, and the just-don't-bother approach, the just-be-chilled attitude, it might seem quite wise.

But idleness is a false contentment. And in a very pithy little proverb Qoheleth demolishes this approach. "The fool folds his hands and ruins himself." Literally, he eats his own flesh.

Idleness is self-destructive. If you don't do anything to get food, for instance, your body will just start digesting itself. And if you just decide not to bother with anything that seems like too much hard work – whether it's putting in the effort at school or in the office, or in parenting, or in sharing the gospel with people, or in coming to your Father each day in prayer – whatever it is, if it feels too hard, so that you just don't bother, well, you will ruin yourself. You will become less of what you were, less of what you're meant to be.

So, don't work out of envy, and don't be idle. How should we work then? Well, verse 6, with a quiet mind. That is, work with contentment. Verse 6 gives us another proverb: "Better one handful with tranquillity" – or quietness – "than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind."

Here's how to go about work in a fallen, under-the sun-world: with a handful of tranquillity, with a quiet mind, contentment, peacefulness.

That's in contrast to grasping for two handfuls and having lots of toil. Work with a quiet mind, with contentment.

Now, you notice there, Qoheleth doesn't tell you how to get tranquility. He just says it's better. Where does this contentment come from, then?

Well, the answer must be from having learned the lessons of Ecclesiastes so far. It must come from having realised that if I live in this under-the sun-world as though it's all there is, then throwing myself into my work to find meaning and fulfilment, would just be hebel.

It must come from looking to the bigger story, the story which includes under-the-sun, but which is bigger than it. It must come from looking to the story which has the hope of a new creation coming, in which the crookedness of this world and the crookedness of my heart are going to be put straight. It must come from, as New Testament believers, from looking to Jesus, and His death on the Cross to pay for my sins, and the new life of the resurrection. And then knowing, as we saw in Romans 5⁸, that through faith in Jesus Christ we are justified before God, we have peace with Him, and the hope of glory. That's where this quiet mind comes from, this contentment.

Then, with that, you can get on with your work. And you're not grabbing for two handfuls, because you're already content before you started.

⁸ A recent sermon series before this one.

That's unlike the fourth attitude Qoheleth now shows us, in this little portrait in verses 7-8. Maybe you know someone like this, someone consumed by work. Verse 8, there's a man, all alone, with neither son nor brother. He has no dependents – it's just him. There's no end to his toil, and yet he finds no contentment in the wealth he has as a result of all his work.

So – he has no one to share it with, he has no one to enjoy it with, he doesn't enjoy it himself, and yet he's consumed by his toil. And it begs the question, "For whom am I toiling? Why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" Do you know anyone like that, or are you like that?

How should we go about work, then, in this fallen and broken under-the-sun world? Well, what's your heart like before you get started? Is it stirred up by envy? - I must work, so that I can keep up with others, and get ahead, do better, achieve more.

Is it not stirred up, but rather given up? - apathetic, no motivation, can't be bothered, who cares?

Is it that you're just consumed by work itself, eaten up by it? You never enjoying the fruits of it, you're just consumed by the whirl of it all.

Or, actually, are you content before you even start? See, the Christian can be, because you already have it all. You have a great hope. And, knowing this, you can then work, and toil, and aim to achieve things. And there will be frustrations along the way and things will go wrong. It may even be hard and mundane. But you've done the work God gave you to do that day. And in some way you have served others, or provided for others, and you have thereby glorified God. And you're one step closer to home.

What is the state of your heart as you face work? Stirred up? Given up? Eaten up? Or is it full up – already content⁹? Let's pray that God would help us to work with a quiet mind.

Secondly, **working with others**, verse 9-12, partnership, companionship. Two is better than one, says Qoheleth. And I think the context is work in general here. This is not saying marriage is better than singleness. This is saying, we're all made to work *with* others.

Verse 9 – if you've got two people, you can do more than simply double what you could have done on your own. That's so often true. If you were carrying something together, for instance. It is so much easier and quicker with two than if you were dragging it along yourself.

Verse 10 - you can help each other out when things go wrong. If you fall down, your friend can help you and vice versa.

Verse 11: and the image here is probably more to do with two people travelling together through the wilderness, when the cold nights come, they can sleep back to back and keep warm.

And verse 12 - if there's two of you, you can defend yourself if there's any danger, and you're probably less likely to be attacked to start with.

So two is better than one, and actually, as the end of verse 12 says, three can be even better. "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

And that is all so obvious you might be thinking why does it need to be said at all? Well, it needs to be said, because whilst we are made to work with others, and whilst it is so obviously better, the sin

⁹ I knew this was a cheesy line when I wrote it, but it was irresistible!

in our hearts turns us in on ourselves, and we plod on just on our own. I can manage perfectly well, on my own, thank you. I don't need your help, or your suggestions, or your encouragement.

Why do co-workers need to spend any time together at all, we start to ask ourselves (especially post-pandemic)? Perhaps they don't. Isn't independence a good thing? It's weak to rely on others. And, in my Christian life, why do I need to come to church? – I can carry on as a Christian perfectly well on my own, can't I?

You see, this does need to be said. Two is better than one. We weren't made to do our work all on our own. It doesn't lead to flourishing. It leads to diminishing, it leads to detachment, it's a way in which we turn in on ourselves. In every sense, we work best when we don't just rely on ourselves.

This leads nicely into our final point: **Wisdom for those at the top** – because those at the top might be uniquely inclined to rely upon themselves.

Verse 13, "Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning," who no longer listens to advice.

And when you get to the top, how often this is true. I'm the one at the top, so I must be wiser. That's how I got here. People are expecting me to come up with all the vision and ideas.

But how often the Bible tells us that the wise person is the person who listens, who takes advice, who knows they need to ask others. And how often in life do we see that the person at the top just stops doing that.

And this especially happens when they've been at the top for a while. You notice the contrast here, it's with an *old* king. He's used to the power. He's cemented his position. He knows what he's doing. And he stops listening.

That's a warning for any of us who lead and any of us who are getting old. It is always wise to listen!

But here comes another warning, If you think yourself special for being at the top, if you see yourself as a visionary or some great inspiration to others. Or, from the other side of things, if you invest all your hope in a new leader, whether at work or in a church or for a nation – here's another warning: leaders come and go, and they're forgotten.

And these last three verses of our passage are confusing. Our NIV translators have had to make a few judgements to decide who is being talked about in each verse, and even then what we have is unclear. Is it the old king who had risen from prison to the kingship, or is this a new guy taking his place? Are there even three people in these verses: a king, his successor and the one after him? Or is it only two?

Perhaps it doesn't matter. In fact, I tend to think that when you get something like this in Scripture, it's not because Scripture has been poorly written, it's to help make a point. It's meant to be vague, because, in this instance, who can even remember all our past leaders once they've gone? Were there two or three, I don't know. Look back over the last ten years and see if you can name all the Prime Ministers we've had. Oh yes, there was that guy, then there was her, then him, then hold on a minute... And if that was easy, try the last fifty years, or a hundred. They just become a blur.

Look at the end of verse 16: getting to the top - if that's what you're after, whether it's to become Prime Minister, or head of the company, or head of the PTA, or whatever it is - in the end, it's hebel, it's a chasing after the wind. You get to the top, maybe even with lots of people cheering you on, and then one day someone else will come along and take your place. And people will get all excited

about them. “He was the future once,” said a former Leader of the Opposition to the then Prime Minister. Years later, as he stepped down from being Prime Minister himself, he used the line again and admitted, I was the future once.

It’s all good wisdom, this passage, when it comes to our work and the achievements we aim for, isn’t it? And when you think about it, this is not just random little bits of wisdom to help us through.

A quiet spirit, contentment: that only comes when you have peace with God, when you come to Christ. Working together rather than alone: well, that prideful turning in on oneself, that’s part of the essence of sin, we need to be unturned. And knowing it’s not all about getting to the top on a wave of support and acclaim: well, that’s wisdom straight from the King who came not to be served, but to serve.

So, when we get up tomorrow, and embark on our work in this fallen, broken and frustrated world, may we do so with a deep contentment in our heart, a delight in the companionship of others, and whatever our station might be, a desire not to bring glory to ourselves, but glory to Christ, the King who sits on the throne, now and forever.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Watch yourself when you go to church. That's the big message for us from this passage. And especially, watch your mouth. Be careful what you say. Indeed, be careful not to say too much, because first of all you need to listen.

And you might think, well this is all well and good. It's nice to have a bit of wisdom about how to go to church - thank you very much. But you miss how serious it can be to come to church in the wrong way, to join in corporate worship in the wrong way.

See, you might actually be offering what is in God's eyes "the sacrifice of fools", verse 1. The things you're saying in church, as part of the worship time together might actually be leading you into sin, verse 6. The things you said and the lack of follow through might even make God angry, it might lead to Him destroying the work of your hands.

Or, to put it in familiar language from Ecclesiastes, have you ever considered that the things you say and sing in church could actually be nothing more than hebel, verse 7? Breath. You said 'Amen', you joined in saying great things, you sang the songs of the people of God, but actually, for you, those words had no more significance than the breath which conveyed them.

It's a shocking thought, isn't it? Because you might have thought, in terms of the message of Ecclesiastes, that the people of God worshipping together would be a moment of bright sunshine piercing through the hebel of this fallen and broken world. Whereas actually, your involvement in church might be hebel. Just a lot of hot air. Wow, you don't expect to hear that do you?

Great that you're here this morning! But your attendance could be meaningless and, in the end, offensive to God. Wow!

Be careful how you come to church. Three headings for this passage. Be careful to listen. Be careful what you say – that is, especially what you say to God. And, be careful to do what you say.

First, then. **Be careful to listen.**

Verse 1, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." Now, in the Old Testament context, "house of God" means the Temple, in Jerusalem. That was *the* place where, in a special way, God was most present with His people.

And in the New Testament we see that fulfilled in a few ways. First, of course, in Jesus, because He is God with us. Second, in individual Christians, because we have the Holy Spirit in us. And third, as we see for instance in 1 Peter, in the church, the people of God gathered together. When we sing His praises and pray to Him together and listen to His Word read and preached - that's an amazingly special and wonderful time.

But, be careful when you go. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God."

How did you arrive at church last Sunday? I don't mean, did you drive or walk, but how were you, spiritually?

Sure, some weeks will just be a bit of a shocker. Things will go wrong, and you will just stumble in, or arrive in a whirl, or on the back of an argument, or distracted by something. Those Sundays will happen. But as far as it's in your power, come ready. Guard your steps.

How do you do that? Well, it can start the night before. The Sunday morning shocker can be the inevitable consequence of the Saturday night howler. And then, as you prepare to meet with God's

people, did you pray beforehand – for yourself, your family, your church, the preacher? Did you maybe even open up the Bible reading and give it a few moments' thought. Did you think over who might be there and who might especially need encouragement?

These are all good ways to guard our steps as we come to meet together.

And if you're thinking, *oh, this is all a bit much, isn't it* – well, if you were going to school, it would be no good turning up in your pyjamas, not having had any breakfast. You go to everything else in life prepared and ready. So when our Holy God gathers His people to hear His holy Word, how much more should we get into the habit of preparing ourselves for it?

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God, and crucially, that means "Go near to listen". Come to church fully convinced that what you are going to hear should be much more important than what you intend to say.

See, when we come to church, and the Bible is opened and the Word of God is read and faithfully preached, and we then encourage one another in the truths of God's Word, when that happens, God is speaking to you. So, listen.

I mean, it's obvious isn't it? God speaks, we listen. God speaks – how amazing that He does speak to us! God speaks – where else would our attention rather be, because these are the words of eternal life!

And yet. It's a major theme of the Bible. God speaks, and here are all the ways people didn't listen. When you come to church on a Sunday, are you consciously coming to listen? Are you praying, Lord make me like good soil this morning?

When the sermon starts, are you expectant, ready? Or are you a consumer, sitting there waiting for your attention to be won, and if it's not, then that wasn't your fault? Are you willing to work at it, when the passage is hard or the preacher's just not so clear this week, and you have to think?

Because if you haven't listened, your worship was nothing more than the sacrifice of fools. And that happens, doesn't it? People come to church. They enjoy having a sing, they say some Amens, but they switch off totally during the sermon. Then they enjoy the conversation over tea and coffee and off they go. I've done my bit for God this week.

Fools! says Qoheleth. And they don't even realise it's a bad thing. "They do not know that they do wrong," which is a gentle translation, because the word there is "evil."

We have to be careful to listen. And it is hard, isn't it? It's hard in a small church where you know the preachers better than you would in a bigger church, so you don't just see me up front when I'm looking smart and godly. You see me get annoyed at the children or respond to something less than well. You've picked up on what my hobby horses are just as I've picked up on some of yours.

We don't have that sort of feeling you get in a larger gathering, in which the singing is amazing and it's all just so well managed and the sermon starts and there are a few hundred people all on the edge of their seats and it feels really rather magical. We don't get that. You have to endure me looking you in the eye more often because I've got fewer eyes to look at. All of this can make it harder to listen!

And then if you're married to the preacher and he's been really annoying that morning. Or he's your dad and he's told you off. Or he's just so much younger than you, and he's the one who has a thing or two to learn, and so on.

There are very human reasons why it is hard to listen, but listen we must. Because amazingly, God chooses to speak to us through others.

Well, that's verse 1. We'll be quicker with the next six. Be careful to listen. Secondly, **Be careful what you say**, i.e. the things you say to God.

Verse 2, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God." This, I think, is especially about the things we say in corporate worship. And how we make sure that the words that come out of our mouths do not just prove to be hebel, in a fallen world of hebel.

And just have a think about the things we say in service. There are the things you say "Amen" to. There are the truths to which we commit ourselves as we say a creed. There are affections we claim to have, or at least wish to have more, as we sing. There's what we say about God, what we say about Jesus - that He is the Lord, that He is our Lord. And so on.

And that's just standard. Do you want to be hasty and add a load more to that? Pay attention to what you're saying to God. Don't say it lightly. Realise who you're talking to. He is in heaven, you are on earth. He is the Sovereign Lord. You have amazingly been brought into covenant relationship with Him through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Take it seriously, what you say, what you say Amen to, what you sing. It doesn't mean it can't be joyous, of course not. You think of wedding vows being said, for instance – they are very serious words to say, but they can be said with such joy. So, you can sing with joy and say things boldly. But take it seriously, because you can't fool God.

Don't say these things just because everyone else is saying them. At the top of our sheets we have a little message to guests. We love welcoming guests. And sometimes those guests won't be believers. That's fine. But we want it to be clear that they're not expected to join in with what we're saying. It would be wrong of us to get a guest to say something to God that they don't mean.

Now, there is an important question here, of how this all works for our children. Because you will have seen how in Anchor Church we love to have children in our services all the way through, and we love to encourage them to join in with what they can as soon as they're old enough. So you might be thinking here: hold on, might we be leading them into saying things they're not ready to say?

That's a good question. And the answer is to do with covenant, and capacity, I think. It seems to me that all the way through the Bible, the way that God's covenants work is to include children. If you're part of God's covenant family, then your children get treated that way too. They grow up learning the language. They grow up by learning their place in God's family. They hear the story of salvation, right from the start, as though they are a part of it. So, I love it when a toddler shouts Amen! I love it when children join in. And as they do, it's for families and for church families to surround them and bring them on in their understanding of what we're saying together.

And then capacity: according to their capacity to understand, as a child, that's how I believe their response is to be judged. Okay, they won't understand things as deeply as we can expect adults to. Their understanding of what they're saying and singing will grow as they get older. It's all according to their capacity now.

So, yes, children, please do join in. And as you get older, you'll understand the point I'm making here more and more. Be careful what you say.

Finally, **Be careful to do what you say.**

Here's a question: when you leave church on a Sunday, do you remember what you signed up to? Not literally signed up to, but do you remember what commitments you might have made, as we said our Amens, as we sang our songs? Has the connection been made that what you said maybe should have some implications in your life in the coming week, or for the things you might pray for this week?

Because here is the last warning this morning – okay, you've come near to listen, you've been careful with what you said, but also, be careful to do what you say.

"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil your vow."

Oh, I don't make vows, you think. Well, what did you say Amen to? "Amen" is not a liturgical equivalent of "yeah, whatever." Okay, it's not quite the same thing as making a vow, but you're invited to commit yourselves to things every week in church, aren't you? Just praying the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," - there's one.

And actually, most of us have made some vows in church: at baptism, at confirmation, maybe marriage vows, maybe ordination vows. So, there is quite a lot!

And to commit yourself to something without any thought and then to go away and not live it – and I don't mean that we're meant to go away and be sinlessly perfect, nobody is - I mean someone goes away and there is no attempt, because it was just words, breath, hebel. Well, that's not neutral. That's sin. That's foolishness. It's actually better not to have said any of those things rather than to say them and then not do them, verse 5. Because to do that is for your mouth to lead you into sin, verse 6.

Oh no, but it was a mistake, I didn't mean it. It's just, that's the stuff you say in church, isn't it? God doesn't take it that seriously, does He? Yes, He does. You can't just appease Him with flattery. Look at the end of verse 6: why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?

And I have a responsibility here too, as preacher. So does James, and anyone else up front. We have a responsibility not to ever manipulate you, in the way we call for a response. If we were to ask you to stand if God has spoken to you or to come up to the front, or whatever might look really sensational and dramatic - we mustn't ever manipulate you, or come anywhere close.

And you have a responsibility too. Don't let the words you say to God just be another example of hebel. Be careful to do what you say. It's not to earn your salvation, but it's in gratitude for God's grace. Be careful to do what you say, in dependence on Him, and praying for Him to change your heart, so that you might bear that fruit in your life and live in the power of His resurrection.

Because, otherwise it could all be hebel. Verse 3, just as when you've got loads of difficult things on your plate you tend to get crazy dreams and disturbed sleep, so too when there are many words, even many fine words, well there is likely to be foolishness. Verse 7, much dreaming and many words are meaningless.

So, fear God. Stand in awe of Him. Remind yourself of who our God is as you come to church each week. He is a gracious God, a loving God. He welcomes each one of you with a tender welcome. And He is holy. So, come to listen. Be careful what you say. Be careful to do what you say. Watch your steps as you come to church.

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

Well, welcome back to Ecclesiastes. We've been working our way through it. And we're just stopping off for a couple of weeks here, which will get us through to the end of chapter 6.

I really have no idea how these middle chapters of Ecclesiastes are structured, or how to break it up into a neat sermon series, which is why we're just dropping in two or three chunks at a time. But I think that random feel of it might contribute to the point it's making. The unstructured feel of these middle chapters, the chop and the change - it's just like life in this under-the-sun world. The beginning is significant, and the end is significant, but all the stuff in between – what was that all about? It was just a whirl.

So, as we started today's passage, maybe you were thinking, this is all a bit random, isn't it? Then I saw this, then this, then this. Well, yes, that's life isn't it? You watch the news in the evening, it's a sequence of stories which are generally unconnected, this, then that, then the other. Or perhaps they could be connected by one thing, one fact: this is a fallen world.

So, Ecclesiastes is a bit like that. Verses 8-17 of this passage: in this fallen and broken world, this under-the-sun world, there's basically no joy. If you're poor there's no justice, but if you're wealthy there's no satisfaction. So it's just generally rubbish.

But then, do you notice how this passage ends, in verses 18-20? This should surprise you, in a very nice and pleasant way. And actually, it should be puzzling to you; how do these verses fit into Ecclesiastes?

Because having just read verses 8-17, we've seen that people are living in this under-the-sun world, and it's all a bit rubbish. It's all hebel: breath, fleeting. Maybe they will seem happy at times, but underneath, well always there is a song underneath it all, and it is one of deep discontent, an appetite that's never satisfied, a feeling of chasing after the wind.

Only then, verses 18-20, in this fallen and broken world, in this under-the-sun world, suddenly here are some people who have joy and satisfaction and contentment, not so much in some future hope, but in the very things that Ecclesiastes has been telling us are fleeting and transitory and maybe even meaningless.

Here are some people who go about their everyday lives in under-the-sun world, who experience the same evils and frustrations that everyone else feels, but for whom underneath it all the song is now one of deep contentment, and there is an acceptance of the way life is, and there is, quite simply, a joy.

What a relief! And what a surprise! That suddenly there is some light shining from within the mist. How does that happen?

Well, two points from this passage. **There's no joy in this under-the-sun world. Unless, it's God-given joy in this under the sun world.**

First, verses 8-17, **There's no joy in this under-the-sun world.** If you're poor there's no justice, and if you're wealthy there's no satisfaction.

So, verse 8, "If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things."

If you're watching the news and up comes another story of injustice for the poor. Up comes another story about inequalities, another thing about food banks, another boat that's capsized. You're sickened by it, you're saddened - but you're not surprised, are you?

And the inquiry happens, or the report is written and someone says, this must never be allowed to happen again. And we all agree, it really shouldn't. And we really should try to make sure that it doesn't.

But then it does. And it's no surprise.

And the verse then goes on to give a reason for it. It's a bit hard to decide what it's getting at, "for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still."

But, maybe it's just deliberately vague. If it's a system full of corruption where each person up the chain takes a little bit more out of the system for themselves, if it's something more sinister where the officials in a government are all fearful and suspicious of each other and the guy at the top is a tyrant, or if it's simply a faceless and cumbersome bureaucracy you're talking about – *whatever* it is, the person at the bottom always seems to get the worst of it.

Verse 9 is even harder to translate exactly, but I feel the NIV has it right in seeing it as a further negative statement. The increase of the land – there ought to be enough for everyone, the poor ought to be okay. But there's not. Everyone is piling in, even the king. And the poor lose out, *again*.

So, there's no justice for the poor. But then you look at the rich, and they're not happy either.

Verse 10: "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is hebel" – breath, fleeting, meaningless.

It's just a perennially unsatisfied craving. You never have enough. You're never satisfied with what you have. You always want more. Money, wealth, possessions. Whatever your house looks like, it could always look better. Whatever you have, there's always that other thing you want. What is it that you've got in your mind currently, as the next thing? However many Pokemon cards you've got, the next packet could have that rare one in¹⁰. But even if it does, you still want more.

It's just all hebel; breath, meaningless.

What's more, even when you have money and possessions, people come along and eat it all up.

Verse 11: "As goods increase, so do those who consume them."

You're wealthy, and suddenly there's loads of people trying to get a slice. There's bills, taxes, insurance. All the money you have to spend just to maintain all your stuff. If you've got children, it doesn't matter if your income goes up - they consume it, somehow!

And what benefit is it to the owner except to feast his eyes on all his wealth and goods whilst he can. Lots of other people come and enjoy your stuff. You never seem to.

So you never have enough. You don't ever seem to get to enjoy it. And – the person who sleeps soundly at night, isn't you either. It's actually the person who just does a good hard day's work each day, and who doesn't have all the stuff you have.

¹⁰ In our church, the children stay in all the way through, hence the occasional illustration that makes more sense to a ten year old!

Verse 12, “the sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether he eats little or much.” Which is true, isn’t it? You do a good hard day’s work, you might be poor, you might not have all the food you want, but you sleep well.

Whereas lord of the manor next door, all the abundance he has – but it “permits him no sleep”. Which might be about lying awake worrying, or scheming, or just with a head so full of things, you’ve got so much on your plate trying to just look after all your stuff.

It might also simply be indigestion. Has it ever happened to you as it has to me? You get that Indian takeaway. It’s so, so nice. You order one or two more dishes, because it all looks so nice. Maybe a beer as well. It’s great: a sufficiency of plenty, as my grandad used to say.

And then you go to bed and lie down. And all that abundance, it permits no sleep. And Ecclesiastes refrains from making the obvious puns around hebel, and chasing after wind.

There’s no justice for the poor, but you look at the rich and they’re not satisfied either.

In fact, sometimes, it’s all lost in an instant anyway. Verses 13 and 14, which I think are about the same person.

Here’s something that is a grievous evil under the sun. Wealth that has been accumulated over time, through lots of hard work perhaps, and then it is lost in an instant. And there is no suggestion of recklessness or hastiness here. But it’s all just lost in a moment. Maybe it’s stolen, maybe through war, maybe through a natural disaster, but it’s all gone.

And there is nothing left to pass on to his children. It must be gut wrenching when that happens: everything, gone.

That’s a grievous evil in this under-the-sun world, and it happens. Here’s another. The simple fact which is true for everyone, that for all your labour and patience and diligence and dedication, you can’t take it with you in the end. In the end, it does you no good. Verse 15, “naked a man comes from his mother’s womb, and as he comes, so he departs.”

Now sometimes we get a mini-taste of this: when we move house, or when we have to downsize. And stuff has to go, and it’s really hard. But you can’t take it with you, because it won’t fit.

That’s just a taster. In the end, you can’t take anything with you. You in a box: that’s what it will come down to. And it’s a grievous evil, says verse 16. As you arrived, so you’ll depart. What have you gained? Literally, nothing! So what was all that work for? Well, you may as well have chased the wind for three score and ten years.

And so there’s just no joy in the under-the-sun world. It’s a familiar theme for Ecclesiastes. And so, whilst you will rightly point out that it’s not always *that* bad - there are some fun times, there are sunnier days and smiles and parties and achievements you’re proud of and all the rest of it –

In the end, what’s the song our heart is singing underneath it all? It’s not a song of contentment, is it? Verse 17, it’s more a song of darkness, frustration, affliction, and anger. Because you’re playing this great game of life. And any victory you have is only ever temporary. But the battle goes on. You wake up the next morning and you have to go out and win all over again. Some might win more than others. But, in the end, *everyone loses*.

Which is why there is, deep down, that song of bitterness and anger and frustration: no peace, no contentment, not really, not lasting. There is no joy in this under-the-sun world.

Except, verse 18, 19 and 20, all of a sudden, there can be. There is no joy in this under-the-sun world, **unless it's a God-given joy.**

Just listen to this: "Then I realised that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him – for this is his lot."

And, in Ecclesiastes, to see anything straightforwardly and unambiguously labelled as good, in this under-the-sun world, that's very significant! When we're spending a lot of time thinking about this fallen and broken world, the word 'good' sounds so much more marvellous than how we often use it. This is harking back to language from *before* the Fall. And 'good and proper,' could be translated as *good and beautiful*.

And what is it that's good and beautiful? To simply enjoy food and drink and find satisfaction in our toilsome labour – note that, this is not about finding satisfaction in an endless sequence of engagements with leisure and luxury. This is satisfaction in hard work under-the-sun.

And, we ought to be thinking: hold on - I thought that wasn't really meant to be possible. What is this doing in Ecclesiastes? And then we read the end of this verse "during the few days of life God has given him – for this is his lot" and we think, hmm, maybe this is negative after all. It's just a case of making the most of it whilst you can in the few days of life God has given you. Maybe we got too excited.

Except then you read on. Verse 19: When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them and to accept his lot and be happy in his work – this is the gift of God. No longer is there the never-ending craving for just a bit more. Instead, there is a sense of being satisfied, being content, and enjoying work.

And verse 20, how's about this? To seldom reflect on the days of his life – to seldom have those thoughts of melancholy when you reflect on your life and how much of it you've probably lived already and what have you really got to show for it and all the things you'd hoped for which haven't happened and you've not got much time left and maybe less than that.

To seldom have any thoughts like that "because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart." It just bubbles up inside of you. Your heart is full of joy and overflowing. Now, where does that come from?!

How do we get from no justice for the poor to satisfaction in food and drink and toilsome labour. How do we get from no satisfaction for the rich to suddenly enjoying our possessions and being content with what we've got?

How do we suddenly get ideas like satisfaction, enjoyment, acceptance, happiness, gladness of heart? When this is all still in the context of under-the-sun world, and this it's all to do with under-the-sun stuff - how do we get this?

And the answer is, it's the gift of God. The word comes up three times: given, verse 18; gives, verse 19; gift, verse 19 again.

It's the gift of God, when that happens. It's not summoned up simply through positive thinking. We don't manage this ourselves. And it doesn't come simply from work itself or from possessions themselves. It's God's gift. It's something He's doing in our heart.

And Ecclesiastes leaves it there. Tantalisingly, it leaves it there. We can add a bit more though, can't we? No justice for the poor? No, there isn't. But we know the King who rules with perfect justice and who will exalt the humble. No satisfaction in money? Well, we know Jesus, the bread of life, in whom we will always be satisfied. The ever-present risk of losing it all in an instant? That's okay, because we have an inheritance kept in heaven for us, which will never perish, fade or spoil, won by our Risen Lord Jesus. And nothing to show for it in the end? Well, I can't take my stuff with me, but when my hope is in Jesus, we're assured that our labour will not have been in vain.

That's the difference, isn't it? How does God give us this joy, even in under-the-sun world, even in under-the-sun things? It's through Jesus.

We still feel the frustration and pain of under-the-sun, just like everyone else. But the underlying song of our hearts – it's not frustration, affliction, and anger. It's contentment. It's gladness. It's joy. Do you want that? You need to come to Jesus.

Ecclesiastes 6

Now, this morning¹¹, I had some breakfast - croissants with strawberry jam. It was very nice. And now I'm eyeing the cake at the back of church and I'll have a couple of slices of that afterwards, I think.

But by the time I'm home, and I've unloaded the car of all the church stuff, my tummy will be empty enough for a nice big lunch, which may or may not be beef wellington.

And that will keep me full for a while. There might be space for an ice cream or a nice treat like that in the afternoon. And then although on a Sunday, I'm not normally hungry for some tea by the time the children are, I will be later on. Last week, I was so hungry on Sunday evening, I ate a spare pizza which I found in the fridge. I'm not sure there's anything like that today, but I'll find something suitable for supper.

And then my tummy will be full and I'll go to bed. And tomorrow morning, I'll be hungry.

Now, why I am telling you all this? Because Ecclesiastes 6 basically tells us that our souls are like our tummies. They're never full. They're always looking for the next meal. They're never satisfied - not under the sun, not without Jesus, that is. They are restless. And any season of life we think we can rest in, will come to an end.

Our souls, our hearts, our beings, are restless. They are like tummies that will always need filling, time and time again.

And Ecclesiastes 6 wants us to feel that this is actually tragic. This is a dark chapter in places. It makes a comparison which all of us will have felt very uncomfortable about.

But it wants us to feel what we don't often acknowledge: that the phenomenon of a restless human soul is utterly tragic. And that therefore we live amidst a humanitarian crisis, even here in Lymington and Pennington. As you walk down the high street, visit the yacht club, wander round Woodside or along the sea wall, you are in the midst of a humanitarian crisis: the absolute tragedy of restless souls. They are made for so much more, but they are only finding hebel.

Two headings for this passage: **the tragedy of restless souls**, verses 1-9, and verses 10-12: **Lots of words but no answers**. And that all stands in marked contrast to where we left off with the last three verses of chapter 5: God-given joy, God-given rest and satisfaction, even in under-the-sun world, for those who come to Jesus.

I think chapter 6 is there to remind us how dark it is if we don't have that. It's there to remind us how tragic it is when we see others - hundreds, thousands, millions of others - who have not yet found their rest in Him. And it's to remind us how foolish it is, if we as believers still live as though we can find rest and satisfaction anywhere else other than in Jesus and in serving Him.

Firstly, then, verses 1-9, **the tragedy of restless souls**.

Two examples, and then a general truth. Example number one: here's a thing that Qoheleth saw, verse 1, another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men, perhaps because there are so many examples of it.

"God gives a man wealth, possessions and honour, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires..." Think what that would be for you. What would that look like? - all that you would want. Imagine it: wealth,

¹¹ The morning this was preached!

possessions, and honour. And note the last of those three. You are well thought of by the people you want to think well of you. Those you love, love you back. Those you think are cool, think you're really cool.

God gives someone all of that, *"but* God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead."

Now it doesn't say why that is, in this example. Maybe it's all stolen. Maybe there's a divorce and it all gets divided. Maybe this person had a stroke and needed 24 hour care, sat there in his mansion, unable to feed himself. Maybe there's depression. Maybe it's simply an example of the general truth – that you have everything you thought would make you happy, but you do not have happiness. You're still hungry.

And where you see that, and we see it quite a lot, it's tragic. Society is not very good at showing compassion for rich and successful people. Ecclesiastes is. This is tragic, it's hebel, it's a grievous evil. All those people in their million or two million pound houses, with everything they desire, and yet restless. There is such pathos, when you see that.

Verse 3: Here's another thing, and this is example number two, and this is deliberate over exaggeration here. You may think, yes, have a hundred children, of course you won't enjoy your prosperity, it's difficult enough having two.

But the point is, these were the things that marked you out as blessed in this time: lots of children, a long life, wealth. Well, verse 3, "A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial," for whatever reason –

Now, how tragic do you think that is? Very tragic, not very much, not at all? Well, this is how Qoheleth sees it. And we're just going to read this and make one comment from it. This is how tragic that situation is:

"I say that a stillborn child is better off than he." For the stillborn child "comes without meaning" and "departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man."

More *rest*. That's the comment I want to make. That's the point of comparison. This person looks blessed, but they've not found rest, not found satisfaction, they've not found life. And that is desperately tragic.

Ah, no it's not, someone might say, I don't feel that sorry for this person. But, remember, this is someone made by God, in God's image. There's so much dignity there, there's such a high calling there. There should be so much purpose, but there isn't any. They're wandering, restless, clueless. It's not how it should be.

Even, verse 6, if he lives a thousand years and then a thousand years again, but fails to enjoy his prosperity, and then – well, it's the spectre of death again. "Do not all go to the same place?" They die, and they never found out what it was all about. They never found the water that would quench their thirst. It's desperately tragic.

Those were two examples. Now comes the general point. Verses 7 to 9. Our souls are like our tummies: always looking for the next fill, yet never satisfied.

Verse 7, "All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied."

In the last passage, I mentioned the example of when we get an Indian takeaway, and I almost always overestimate what I think I can eat. Well, even when I do that, and I'm really full, and I struggle to finish that Naan bread, which was a bad idea to add to the order – even after that, and all that abundance is not that permitting of sleep – even after that, I wake up the next morning, I'm still hungry for breakfast.

So too in life. Maybe you do get to the point where you think you've now got everything. You got all the presents you asked for your birthday and money on top of that. You have the house you've always wanted, and the extension. You have the job you strived for. You have a happy marriage, children, a nice place to live. Whatever it would like for you, you get it all, like you've just had the massive Indian takeaway of life. And then you're hungry again. Because whatever it is, it's good, but it isn't *it*. And what is 'it', what are you searching for?

"All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied." And, says verse 8, there's no advantage for the wise here. You can be the wisest person in the room, but deep down, you still have the same hunger and thirst that everyone else does.

So too for the poor man who has all the social skills he needs, verse 8. Those will do him well, yes, but this is all just as true for him.

So, verse 9, "better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite." Better to be satisfied with what you've got rather than longing for the things you don't have. Sure, but that's not what we're like. There is still that deep, unsatisfied longing, a hunger, a thirst, and it is never, ever fully and finally satisfied. Just like our tummies are never full for long.

And that word for appetite there, it could also be translated "soul": restless, wandering souls. And it's tragic. Or, end of verse 9, it's hebel. It's chasing after the wind. You never catch it. You never grab hold of it.

It's the feeling in life that you're always travelling, but never arriving.

Last half term, we went away for a week. All we had to do was get to Kent. It took ages. There were road works, delays, and changes to the route. "Are we nearly there yet?" was asked many, many times.

Well, it's that feeling we're talking about here, except you *never* get there. And any rest we do find is not the rest of the final destination. It's more like the rest you get from a service station on a journey to somewhere else.

There's a novel that was written by Julian Barnes, in 1989, *A History of the world in ten and a half chapters*. It's a slightly quirky book. And it is some years since I read it, so whilst I think the last chapter really stuck in my mind, I may have misremembered it entirely. But I don't know what I did with the book, so I couldn't look it up. But here's how I remember the last chapter.

It's a rather ghastly vision of what heaven might be like. First, there is heaven for everyone. And it's personal to you. Your heaven is personal to you. So for the main character, for him, heaven is a round of golf each day, at which he becomes more and more amazing, shooting a round of 18 day after day. And at night, he makes love to fantastically beautiful women who he's not really meant to be with. And that's repeated, day after day.

Everything he wants, in other words, forever. And it's the same for everyone, according to what they want. But what happens? They all get bored. And then, eventually, appetite dies, and they just disappear.

That's not what the Bible says about heaven! But you can see the connection to what we're saying from this passage. How tragic it is to thirst and yet never find what you are really thirsting for. The tragedy of a restless soul: even when it has everything it thinks it wants, it still doesn't have rest.

And, verses 10-12, even though there are **lots of words, there are no answers.**

You may wish to apply verse 11 to sermons, and in some settings I might too, but hopefully not here. "The more words the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?"

And there are lots of words, aren't there? There are lots of words trying to make sense of it all., articulating what it is to be a human being, and what it is all about. There are newspaper columns, articles, blogs, tweets, your favourite song lyrics – books as well, if you remember those.

But there are no answers. Just lots of words, that just go over again and again everything we already knew. Verse 10: "whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known."

And then the end of verse 10, "no man can contend with one who is stronger than he." That might actually be talking about God. That perpetual struggle humanity has, to assert itself against God, to take on for itself the authority to say what is good and what is evil, to decide for itself where meaning is to be found, to define it, and then to try to grant it - it just can't be done.

Write all the books you want. Talk all you want. And not a single step forwards is made towards the great goal of rest.

In the end, verse 12, left to ourselves, "who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow." Who knows? Listen to this person that day, read that book the next, see that film at the weekend. There will be lots of messages and thoughts in there. It will all be very interesting. But how should you live life? Who knows?

"Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?" All you worked for, will it last? The things you passed on, will they be remembered? Your achievements, your accomplishments, the things you built, maybe even literally, built. Will they remain, or be pulled down? Even the wishes you expressed for your funeral, will those be done? Who can say? No-one.

It's not for lack of words. There are lots of words. But there are no answers to the tragic fact of millions of souls that are wandering, striving, restless.

Except, except, we read in chapter 5: there *are* some who have rest. There are some who have peace, who have joy, even in under-the-sun world.

That is, those of us who know Jesus: Jesus who said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me ... streams of living water will flow from within him," speaking of the gift of the Holy Spirit, God Himself, given to believers, actually in them, so that their hearts are like overflowing streams of water.

Jesus, who cried out on the Cross "I thirst", when He was dying for all the ways I have sought to quench my thirst in anything or anyone other than God. Jesus, thirsting my thirst, so that I may know His joy.

Jesus who said, "I am the bread of the life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

How tragic it is when people don't know Jesus. That's what we're meant to feel. They're made for so much more and they're not able to find it. So, let's tell people what they're made for. Let's tell them about Jesus.

And, for Christians, how different we should be, when we have found our rest in Jesus. Not all who profess to be Christians are that different. They say they have their peace and joy and rest in Jesus, but from their pursuits and priorities it appears very much like they are still finding these in wealth and possessions.

But it's all about Jesus, isn't it? Knowing Jesus, making Him known. That's what it says on our church's website, and many others. Because without Him, what you are left with is not just life, but slightly less good. What you are left with is absolutely tragic.

Ecclesiastes 7:1-13

Well over the summer a game I heard being played a lot by our children, and others, was “would you rather?”

It’s not questions like “would you rather have a cup of tea or coffee?” It’s more like “Would you rather have to eat a whole cake but have no fizzy drink, or drink a whole 2 litre bottle of fizzy drink but get no cake?” And the other person answers and has to explain their answer.

I started getting quizzed too, on matters to do with Minecraft. “Daddy, would you rather have full netherite armour, or full diamond armour?” You can get someone to explain the answer to that whilst you decide between tea and coffee.

Would you rather... is this better, or that better? Well, it’s rather like Ecclesiastes starts to play that game in chapter 7 with some questions and answers which might surprise us.

Qoheleth switches his style and starts to give us some proverbs, and they are largely “better this than that” proverbs. This is better than that. The wise person would rather be here than there.

These are little proverbs, so they stand individually and they are pithy and memorable. But look closely, and you do start to notice ways in which these sayings have been grouped together. And overall, what this section is doing.

And I think what it is doing is this: getting us to face up to the facts. Wake up and smell the coffee. Read the writing on the wall. Face up to hard truths. Because there are some pretty big facts of life, such as death, that a great number of people do their best to avoid facing up to.

But Qoheleth wants to say to us: face the facts. And ask the right questions. One reason we don’t consider death so much is that we don’t like the questions it raises for us. But Qoheleth wants us to face them. And he leads us today to what I think is one of the biggest questions of the book. Verse 13, “Consider what God has done: who can straighten what he has made crooked?” I think that is possibly the key question in Ecclesiastes, so we’ll think about that as Qoheleth leads us there.

Facing the facts and asking the right questions, as we go through these proverbs, and play a game of “would you rather”.

First, verses 1-4: **Better consider death.**

So, would you rather go to a good funeral once in a while or spend your whole life going to parties? Hands up.

Look at verse 1. “A good name is better than fine perfume” – which is a wise enough saying in itself. Better to be known for your integrity, than to just look nice and have all the ‘product’ you could want. That’s maybe challenging, but it ought not to be controversial.

Then comes the surprise. Just as a good name is better than fine perfume, the day of death is better than the day of birth. What?! What are you saying?

I don’t think we’re to read that as: ‘oh how gloomy and pessimistic.’ The first half of the verse gives two good things, so the context is a positive one. But, we are meant to be surprised, and then to ask well how is this true?

One answer might be, well if I'm a Christian, the day I die is the day I go to be with Jesus. And that will be amazing. The first part of that day might not be very nice, but the last part of that day will be brilliant. So, we could understand the verse that way.

But, I think the context maybe nudges us in a different direction. I think this is saying that the day of death has so much more to *teach* us than the day of birth.

See, verse 2: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart."

See, there's something to learn, something which is really important to learn, that we need to take to heart. So, verse 3, "Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart."

There is something about the sadness of death, which is obviously hard, but which can be good for our hearts.

So, verse 4, "the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure."

Which doesn't mean: never go to parties, just go to every funeral you can. It's just saying, face up to the fact of death and be open to what it has to teach you. A lot of people are not open to this. A lot of people would just want to be at one party after another, one nice meal out after another, one pleasant day with friends and a bottle of wine followed by another pleasant day with friends and a bottle of wine. And that's it.

And when death comes along, well, try not to talk about it. Try to minimise the mourning. Squeeze all that right down to an absolute minimum and turn it into a party as soon as you can.

Qoheleth says, you need to consider death. You need to experience mourning and be uncomfortable in the presence of sorrow, because there are questions you need to consider, and there is much you need to learn.

I think back over the funerals I've been to. Probably more than most people my age, because of my job, and playing music at quite a lot too. And I've learned lots.

I've seen the pain of mourning. I've seen the love of a church family. I've seen mourning where there is great hope in Jesus, and I've seen mourning where there is none. I have seen a young couple process into the church behind the coffin of their baby and then the father give an address full of praise to God. I have seen an elderly widow give a eulogy in which she pointed to the coffin and said that on the very same spot, they had exchanged their wedding vows.

And my heart is better for all of that.

See, when you come away from a funeral, or a house of mourning, at least for a while, your perspective is changed, isn't it? What's important, how you should be spending your time, what you should commit to, where you should put all your energy in life, questions you should think about.

And, of course, there is a place for partying and feasting and celebrating, and those times are great. But I'm not sure I've ever come away from a party with my priorities challenged, or asking myself those questions about what's really important and how I live my life.

Even on the day of a birth - that's hugely significant, obviously. It changes things massively. But it's more about potential and possibilities and aspirations. It's about what we want for our child, what kind of parent will we be. There is a sense of a future of infinite possibility expanding outwards from that point.

Death, however, brings it all back down to a point. And you go to a funeral, and you listen to what people say, and it makes you wonder, doesn't it, when it's me, what will they say about me?

He loved his beef wellington and his Parkruns. And, he could be a bit grumpy, but we loved him.

I hope that's not it! I hope it will speak of faith in Jesus. He loved the Lord. And he served the Lord. I hope it will be one of those.

What will they say about me? What will they say about you? Better consider death.

Secondly, **Better listen to rebuke**, verses 5-7.

So, would you rather listen to someone give you a word of rebuke that you need to hear, or watch the X-factor?

Well, verse 5: "It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools."

Would you rather come to a church that will preach sermons about death, or one where we just tell you everything is fine and sing some nice songs?

Would you rather be confronted and even rebuked by what the Bible says about sin and the need for forgiveness and repentance, or just hear some very skilfully played organ voluntaries?

See, there are things that all of us need to hear that we don't want to hear. There are facts we need to face, and questions we need to ask. And in the Bible, the wise person is not the one who never needs correction, but the one who knows they need correction, and who listens to it when it is given.

Many don't want to listen, however. Verse 6, "Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools." A lot of people would rather ignore those difficult things they need to hear and drown out those uncomfortable questions simply with laughter. Comedy - just laugh in the face of these things.

But it's the laughter of fools, like the crackling of thorns under a pot, which maybe is a picture of a fuel that flares up, but doesn't last. When the laughter fades, the uncomfortable question is still there.

Verse 7: I'm not quite sure whether and how to try to fit this verse into the flow here. But it is at least a warning, if we've been reading along with a certain smugness so far. Be careful, you might yet be turned into a fool. "Extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart." We think: I'm wise, I'm not like the world. And then we go out into the world and we find that the way to get ahead is according to the world's ways. And you don't understand, that's just the way things are done. And we become a fool, and we close our ears to rebuke.

Better listen to rebuke. Also, **Better be patient**, verses 8-11.

"The end of a matter is better than its beginning" – probably in the sense of the conclusion, the consummation, the fulfilment of a thing, is better than the beginning. That is very true for Christians, with all that we have to look forward to in life in eternity.

"...and patience is better than pride." More literally, a slow spirit is better than a lofty spirit.

We're not there yet. It's going to be amazing when we are, but we're not. And you know what, it's not within my power to get there. I'm not master of my destiny. I know my limitations.

Those are good attitudes, aren't they, in any context, but essential for what it means to trust in Jesus. We're patient. We know that things will work out a particular way if it's the Lord's will and if it's not, then they won't. We know that He is working all things for the good of those who love Him, and so we are patient.

So when frustration comes along, when perplexing things happen, we are not quickly provoked in anger, verse 9. And neither do we say, "Why were the old days better than these?", verse 10, because that's not wisdom either. In some respects the old days were better. In other respects they were worse. But whatever the balance between the two, it was still a fallen and broken world.

So, better be patient in this time.

Better have wisdom, verses 11 and 12. Would you rather have wisdom or all the money you could want? Well, there are similarities between the two, but there is also a crucial difference.

"Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter, as money is a shelter," it offers protection, but there is a difference: "the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor."

That's drawing you back to the sorts of questions and reflections that might occur to you when you attend a funeral – in fact all of these groups of proverbs could be the sorts of thing you reflect on when you go to someone's funeral.

In this case, when the person in the box had all the money in the world. In the end, it didn't save them. In the end, they're poor and powerless. Money protects for a while and it can prolong life, perhaps, but it can't preserve it, not forever.

Well, neither can wisdom, you might say. The professor in one box is just as dead as the miser in the other. Well, says Qoheleth, except, wisdom can preserve the life of its possessor.

That's a point to ponder. It's left there that we might ask, *how*? Well, it must be that the wise person faced up to the facts that Qoheleth confronts us with. They faced up to the reality of death, faced up to the reality of their sin, heard the rebukes they needed to hear. They faced up to the fact that frustration and difficulty comes along and they are not masters of their own destiny. They faced up to those facts and, therefore, asked the right questions.

And that includes the key question which Qoheleth leads us to. Verse 13: "Consider what God has done: who can straighten what he has made crooked?"

This is a fallen and broken world. It is good, but it is broken. It is crooked. There is a fracture right through the middle of it. There is decay and death, so you have to go to funerals. There is frustration and vexation and so you have to be patient. And there is a lot that is wrong in you and so you will need to hear rebuke.

The world is fallen and broken. Why? Because it is under God's curse, Genesis 3, God's curse in response to sin. So the question you need to ask is, who can undo that? Consider the work of God, who can straighten what He has made crooked?

Answer – not us! Because we're sinners! Only He can straighten out what has been made crooked. Only if God acts, can we be saved.

And thanks be to God, He has acted. There is forgiveness in the Cross, new life in the Resurrection, sanctification through the Holy Spirit, and one day, all things will be made new, never to go crooked again.

Consider the work of God. Who can straighten what He has made crooked? Do you see how that question sums up so much of this book?

Let's face the facts. This is a fallen and broken world and we see it everywhere, without and within. Face the facts. Let these questions be asked. And turn back to Jesus, our only Saviour. I think I'd rather leave church this morning having done that.

Ecclesiastes 7:13-18

“Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?” We finished with that verse in the last passage, we start with it in this one.

Last time, we considered it in a more general sense. You look around the world, you can see how fallen and broken it is, and you think back to Genesis 3 and you recall that this is because of the curse, God’s response to sin. The world is under the curse. It is fallen and broken. And who can undo that? That’s a big question Ecclesiastes leads us to, and the good news of Jesus is the answer.

This week, as we consider this verse again, and the verses following, we’ll consider it in a more specific sense - the ways in which our lot in life is crooked, that things are never quite as you would like them to be.

You’re on your own, and you’d rather you were not. Your start in life was hard, and you resent that. School isn’t fun and life just isn’t fair for whatever reason. Your health is constantly not good and there’s little respite. Money is tight and you wish it was just a bit easier. There are problems in your wider family that seem impossible to deal with. The way your lot is right now, there is some good, but in other respects, you would love it if things could have worked out differently.

Consider your lot in life. Is it just what you imagined? Is it what you wanted? Is it what you feel you deserve for the way you’ve lived and the effort you’ve put in? And for each one of us here, even in a part of the world like this, there will be a way in which it seems crooked. And sometimes, it will really feel that way.

And the truth that these verses point us to is this: that God is sovereign over that. He is in charge. “Consider what God has done...”, as we apply this verse more specifically. Your lot in life – He’s not indifferent to that, He’s not powerless over it, He’s not just set things in motion and now He’s sitting back watching our lives unfold and thinking: *ooh, bad luck for you, that’s a shame*.

He is God. He is sovereign over everything, including my lot in life. And I am not sovereign. Some things I can sort out and make better, but the big things, the fundamental things, I can’t. “Who can straighten what He has made crooked?” We do not have the ability to overrule the Almighty.

Here’s the big point from this passage, and it’s our first heading. **God is sovereign in good times and bad.**

Verse 13: “Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other.”

The good times and the bad times. God is sovereign over both. So in the good times, be happy, rejoice, and give thanks. And in the bad times, consider: this too is a day that the Lord has made.

And realise: in both He remains good and faithful. He remains, for followers of Jesus, our loving Father, who cares deeply. And in the good times and the bad, He will have a purpose.

So, this verse is not just throwing up our hands up and saying, “ah! well, He’s God. He’ll just do whatever He wants,” as though He’s no different from the capricious pagan gods sitting up on their mountain getting cranky.

Verse 14 is not the response of fatalism. No, it’s a response of faith. Because *this* God is the God of the Bible, and so this is the response that says: the times may be bad, but God is still good, all the

time, God is good. And He uses all things together for the good of those who love Him, even though right now I have no idea how.

And it is often a mystery. We know general truths from the Bible about what God might be doing in difficult times. He could be using them to confirm to us that we are trusting in Jesus, and making Jesus more precious to us. He could be challenging us that we're not really trusting Him, and calling us to repentance. He could be disciplining us, stopping us from going down a particular path, or calling us back. He could be reminding us that we're not to look for lasting happiness in under-the-sun world, but in the eternity to come. He could just be waking us from the spiritual slumber we're all prone to, to bring us closer to Him and to stir us up to greater service.

And sometimes we will have a sense of what God is up to. Sometimes we'll only be able to see it much later. But often, there will still be the mystery of: yes, I get the lesson, but why did it have to be delivered in *that* way?

And we don't know. We just have to trust, God knows. And you have to trust: not simply that He is getting you to glory, but that He is achieving that in the best way too.

Good times, bad times, God has made the one as well as the other. And in a church family, we'll normally have both going on at once. For one person, things will just seem to be clicking into place and good things are happening. For another, things are falling apart, or they just find their lot in life continually hard. We'll have both of those. And both need to be expressed.

God is sovereign in good times and in bad. And, we have no idea which is coming next - the end of verse 14, "a man cannot discover anything about his future."

We have no idea. We say to each other, what are you doing next week, and we talk about what we have planned and where we're going to go, but we have no idea what's coming.

This week something brilliant might happen. Something devastating might happen. I don't know. God does. Whatever it is, He will still be your good, faithful and loving God who is bringing you to an eternity that is going to be absolutely amazing.

But to a non-believer, this kind of thought, that you have no idea what's coming tomorrow, well, just don't think about that, because there is no hope in it. Just hope things carry on all right or get a bit better. And if something bad happens, bad luck.

For us, we have no idea what's coming next, but we always have hope, because it is not just chance that brings crookedness into our lot. It is not some capricious, cranky god of the pagans. God our Father is at work in it all. And God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.

God is sovereign, in good times and in bad. And we're already starting to unpack how we respond to that. But Qoheleth does a bit more of that now. Two wrong ways to go and then the right one. **Don't be self-righteous, don't be wicked, fear God.** That's our second heading.

See, it will look unfair in life, how things go for people. Verse 15, "In this meaningless life of mine" – the hebel word again, in this transitory, breath-like life in under-the-sun world – "In this hebel life of mine, I have seen both of these; the righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness."

And you look around and you often see that. People's lot in life, how it worked out for them. It just seems random and often unfair.

There's someone who is righteous and good, and everything is hard for them. There's someone else who is wicked, and yet lives a long life of luxury.

And it's just so unfair! When you make it personal, and you're looking at that colleague at work, that other person in your school, or even someone else in your family. And it has all gone well for them and not for me. And they really don't deserve it. And I do! (or more than them, at least). Why is my life so hard and theirs has worked out so easy?

And then what about that person, who never did anything good and everything's gone well for her? Why did she get to marry and have children and a perfect house and an amazing life, when she's just so nasty and never tried hard at school? Why did he end up having a life of luxury with all the stuff he wanted when he's just so horrible and mean?

It's not fair. So, where do we go from there? How should we react? Well, verse 16, says Qoheleth, and you might wonder what he's saying here at first: "Do not be over-righteous, neither be overwise – why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool – why die before your time?"

And you might think that's just a cynical response. You see a world where it all seems random and unfair. And you think just steer a middle course. Be good, but don't get worked up about being too good, because there's no point, life could still be rubbish. But don't throw yourself into wickedness, because you'll just get into trouble. But a little bit of sin is okay. Don't worry about being too good. Don't worry about being a little bit bad.

And to be sure, that's how a lot of people go about life. But I don't think that's what Qoheleth is advocating here, because of how he is going to conclude. I think he's saying, look, when you look around the world and it's all a bit perplexing about how things go for people, there are two extremes you can end up at.

One is self-righteous. 'Overly righteous,' as it says here. You think, okay, I tried to be good and life was a bit rubbish. So, now I need to just try really, really, really hard to be good, and then it will be okay.

The prosperity gospel could take you there. Maybe I didn't give enough in the collection. Maybe I didn't have strong enough faith when I prayed for healing.

Or just simply, asides from the prosperity gospel, if I'm just more of a praying, godly sort of person, then my life should be better. I can earn a righteous person's reward by trying harder to be righteous and wise.

But it's a self-righteous attitude. I can do it. I can sort things out. I can save myself. I can make myself right with God, and He'll reward me, now. And the answer is, you can't. You need Jesus to save you. You're a sinner, and you need to come to the Cross and recognise that He has died for your sin. And He is the One who is going to sort you out. And, one of the ways He will do that is through difficult times, because after all, as Hebrews so mysteriously says, even the Son learned obedience through suffering.

So, you could plunge down that route: a sort of self-righteous, I can earn a righteous person's reward, in the present, all by myself. But it leads to destruction. In the present, it will probably make you neurotic. It could certainly make you very angry, when things don't go well. And in eternity, it will lead to your eternal destruction away from the God to whom you should have come in poverty of spirit, in repentance and faith.

The other wrong response to all of this: you could just plunge into wickedness. Good times and bad times, they just happen, it's random, it's unfair. It clearly doesn't matter whether you're good or bad, and even if there is a god behind it all, what's the point of trying to please Him if He's just going to chuck a load of manure on you from time to time?

So, just plunge into wickedness. Why not? Why not go down the path of folly? Which isn't to say: why not go completely wild and throw yourself into a lifestyle which even most unbelievers would see as wicked.

No, this is the choice a lot of people take. The I'll-basically-do-what-I-want choice. I'll go the way I think. Nobody is going to tell me how to live, certainly not God. And it may lead to death before your time, end of verse 17. It will certainly lead to the second, eternal death.

Don't go either of those ways. Instead, verse 18, "it is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other" – which is just a hard phrase to translate, it might be talking about learning why both of those extremes are bad and taking it to heart, I don't know, but the overall point is clear – "The man who fears God will avoid all extremes."

That is the way to live in this world: to fear God. That doesn't mean fear in the sense that you think that God is a bit cranky and He's sat up there with a lightning bolt He just occasionally throws at someone, so let's try to keep Him happy and not make eye contact in case He thinks of throwing it at you.

It's not that. It's to honour Him, to revere Him, to worship Him. And to accept that there is mystery to it all. Good things come. Bad things come. The good is still good, and the bad is still bad. But God is sovereign over all, and He is still good, and faithful, and loving.

The challenge here is to still worship, not as people who are brainwashed and just repeating mantras which cannot be true, but as people who trust. As people who can say, we know enough to know that this is true. We know that God is good, because of all we see of Him in His Word; because He has proved it time and again in our lives; and supremely, because He sent His Son Jesus to die on the Cross and face the wrath which we deserved. And so I know enough to trust that in this season, He is still good.

Just like a young child trusts their parents, even though they have no idea what's going to happen that day or where they're going tomorrow. But they know enough to trust they will be looked after.

God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good. Good times? God is good. Bad times? God is good. Whatever is coming this week? God is good. He is God, and I am not. He is sovereign over my lot. And I will fear Him. I will declare always that He is good, and I will worship Him.

Ecclesiastes 7:19-29

How many times in a week do you have to go searching for things in your house? It's not so much how many times a week in our household, but how many times a day.

"Right off we go, shoes on." *"Where are my shoes?"* "Well, aren't they by the door?" "No." Or, *"One of them is!"* Often what goes missing can be quite precious. "Where's the car key?" Or it could be glasses, phones, wallets, valuable things, which go missing, and then there is the urgent search to find them.

Teddy – that's one of the most precious things in our household. And it's remarkable that something as valuable and loved as teddy can be so neglected as to be lost so often.

Well, today's passage is all about searching, searching for something very precious. Wisdom. And, especially, for a deep kind of wisdom. "The scheme of things" as it says in verse 25. The big explanation. What's my life for? What it's all about? What's the deep wisdom that can explain it all?

That's what Qoheleth is after, and he searches earnestly. But, it seems, he's unable to find it.

This morning, it's not so much "Seek and ye shall find." But "Seek and ye shall not find." In fact, if we were to represent that deep explanation of it all with teddy, it looks like that nightmare scenario in which teddy is never found.

Or so it seems at first – because, actually, there is a glimmer of hope in this passage. More than a glimmer, in fact, as we'll see.

Two headings for this passage, and then a sort of third heading, that resisted all attempts at alliteration or any kind of symmetry, which is a very Ecclesiastes sort of thing. These are the two headings, and then we'll get to the third when we get there. First, **Wisdom gives strength to live well**. Second, **Wisdom for the big questions is elusive**.

First, then: **Wisdom gives strength to live well**, verses 19-22.

Verse 19: "Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city." A bit more literally: wisdom, she is strong to the wise one. Wisdom gives strength to the wise man. Like food gives you strength to do exercise, wisdom gives you strength to do life.

Wisdom gives strength to do life in a well-governed sort of way. The comparison is with a city that is well governed, ruled by ten people who know what they're doing. They take counsel together to rule the city well. If you are wise, your life is well-governed like that. You want that, don't you?

That you would know how to think about things in the right way. You know what to say and how to say it. You know what you should do in all sorts of situations. You know how to live in this world.

And here is an example of this strength-giving wisdom. Verse 20, the wise person knows that "there is not a righteous man on earth, who does what is right and never sins."

And you might say, "oh, that's just a gloomy Ecclesiastes verse", but it's the consistent testimony of the rest of the Bible. No one is righteous.

And the wise person knows that. Everyone is a sinner, including them.

Nowadays, it's often the opposite that is asserted. Everyone is basically good, really. Especially children.

But it's just manifestly not true, is it? There is something good about people, yes, but verse 20, that's what's true. There is not a righteous man on earth, who does right and never sins.

And the wise person knows that, and that wisdom gives them strength to live well. It's healthy to know this.

In a marriage, for instance - to remember, we're both sinners, that's helpful to remember. In a family - my children are sinners, I am too. Helpful to remember, because when you do, you're one step towards showing grace. Friends, work colleagues, they're all sinners, I am too. Churches - a group of forgiven sinners, but still sinners. It's a healthy thing to remember.

It's healthy for a society to know this too, to have a strong doctrine of sin.

Think on this, for instance, what C S Lewis said about democracy: "I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man ... A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows."

It's healthy to know verse 20 - it helps us to live well, and of course it paves the way for the gospel. Everyone is a sinner.

And, verses 21 and 22, here's an example of that. "Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you - for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others."

Good to remember that, isn't it? Everyone is a sinner. So are you. So don't get too hung up on everything people say about you. Because people are sinners and they are going to say things that are unfair and unkind. And you do it as well!

This gives us strength to live well, doesn't it? It's healthy to know this. But, you might think, yes, but is this it? Here's strength for living well in a world of sinners; here's wisdom to check your expectations and avoid disappointment. Is that it? I wanted a bit more than that.

What about a deeper sort of wisdom? The scheme of things. The explanation of it all. What about wisdom for sorting out the big problems and putting things right? How can we find that kind of wisdom?

Well, this is the second point: **Wisdom for the big questions is elusive**, verses 23 to 25.

Verse 23: "All this I tested by wisdom." I'm not sure exactly what "all this" is. It might be just the last few verses, or the whole of chapter 7, or the whole book so far. But, "all this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise" - but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound - who can discover it?"

The big explanation, the deep wisdom behind it all, "the scheme of things", as it says in verse 25. It's far off and most profound and who can discover it? It's deep, and no matter how much digging you do, you'll never dig far enough to find this. You'll dig past the precious metals and stones, but you don't find this.

One commentator says these verses could be the epitaph of every philosopher. Put it on their tombstone, "I said, "I am determined to be wise" - but this was beyond me."

I got into reading philosophy some years ago, or tried to. Have a look at these¹²: “History of Western Philosophy”, by Bertrand Russell. Or this one, “Ideas – a history from fire to Freud”. Right, you do not get to the end of those books and think, “okay, I get it all now.” They’re full of all sorts of ideas, from the cleverest people in history, but verse 24 still sums it up. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound – who can discover it?

Despite all this effort: verse 25 - “I turned my mind to *understand*, to *investigate* and to *search out* wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.”

Despite all that effort, all that searching, in the end, the wisdom behind it all, it’s too far off. It can’t be found.

And the thing is, working from the bottom up, it is never going to be found. I often think of it this way: there’s wisdom from below and there’s wisdom from above. Or knowledge from below, and knowledge from above.

Wisdom from below is from the bottom up. It’s what we can discover for ourselves, from the ground up. Wisdom from above, well that’s what comes from God.

What’s happened in the last few hundred years is that the very idea of wisdom from above has been banished. It’s treated as inadmissible. You can only have wisdom from below, that’s it. The trouble is, you have no resources in your wisdom from below to conclude that there can’t be wisdom from above. It’s like you’ve got a beautiful understanding of the ceiling, and you say: so obviously there is no sky.

Qoheleth goes looking for the deep explanation of it all, from the bottom up, and he cannot find it. No-one can.

And you could give into despair because of that. Some people have. Or, you just move into trivialities. Like when you get into those deep conversations in a pub. Normally it’s after pint number one, when people are up for those discussions and are still lucid enough to have them. But by the end of pint number two? Well, whatever wisdom there is, it’s too far off and who can find it, so you’ll stay for another?, and let’s talk about the football now.

Wisdom about the big questions – it proves forever elusive. In fact, all you’ll find for sure is, **the problem of sin**. That’s my third, less well-constructed, heading.

Did you notice the way the word “find” gets used in our passage? It’s deeply ironic. Qoheleth was searching for the grand explanation of it all, but look at what he actually finds. He’s like a PhD student looking for the theory of everything, and all she finds is a lab full of broken instruments. All Qoheleth finds is sin, everywhere.

That includes his own. Verse 26, “I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains.”

Now, is this an actual encounter with a real person he’s thinking of, or is this like Lady Folly at the start of Proverbs? I think it’s probably the former, an actual encounter, which derailed him in his noble search.

¹² I had these books to hold up when preaching.

Because it happens, doesn't it? Someone starts out in life, and it looks like an honest attempt to live well and figure things out, until, oh dear, along comes the nightmare boyfriend or girlfriend and it all goes off the rails.

This isn't saying anything against women, it's just Qoheleth is a man and this was his experience. You could put it the other way round: the lovely young woman who is trying to figure out how to do life well, and then along comes the nightmare boyfriend.

Or, in modern times, it could all be virtual rather than real; pornography on the internet, for instance.

There is a way out, though, if you ask God for help through His grace. "The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare."

So, the search for meaning can land upon sin in that way; that is your own sinful desires are ensnared through temptation.

Or, the search for meaning lands upon sin in this way. Verse 27: "Look," says Qoheleth, "this is what I have discovered: adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things – while I was still searching but not finding", this is what I discovered, not what I was looking for, but this, "I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all."

Again, this is not against women. It's just his experience. He went looking for meaning, but at the end of the day what he discovered about the world was only this: it's full of sinners.

This is one man saying, look, I just found one other man among a thousand who was half decent, that's it. And he was a sinner really, because of verse 20. A woman would put it the other way around. There's my best friend, she's probably the only one I could really, really trust; the only one.

"You've restored my hope in humanity," people say. Well, this is Qoheleth saying, I made a search for meaning and this is the only conclusion I could make: There is no hope in humanity.

Verse 29: "This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."

We are sinners. We wander away from the truth, we wander away from God, we wander after all sorts of other schemes and ways of living, going in every other direction but the right one.

And, from the bottom up, from that kind of wisdom, this is the one conclusion every philosopher agrees with, one way or another. Whether they say it in the right way or not, they all say it. There's a big problem, and it is with us.

But, there is hope. Because did you notice verse 29 is not just wisdom from below? There's some wisdom, some knowledge from above here.

"God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." This is the beginning of Genesis, isn't it? This is revelation.

God made us upright. It wasn't always like this. Which means, "under the sun", is not the whole story. There was a chapter which came *before*, when things were good, before we went astray. And that means, there might be a chapter which comes *after*, when things are put right.

And of course, we know there is. Because we know the wisdom of that salvation, a wisdom which the world finds offensive, says Paul, the wisdom of the Cross – where Jesus becomes sin, and dies for us.

We need to face the facts: there is no wisdom in this world that will find you your deep explanation, no wisdom which will put everything right.

You can read these books or any number like them. Will you ever get to the end and think, “I get it all now?” No, you never will. *“And I suppose you’re going to tell me if I read the Bible I will?”* you might be thinking.

Actually no, you still won’t know the answer to everything. But you will learn to fear the One who does. Indeed, you’ll come to know and love the One who does. The One who, through a deep wisdom not of this world, can save you and make you upright again.

So, seek *Him*. Seek to know Him, to know Jesus. Seek His Kingdom and His righteousness. And those, Jesus promises, you will find.

Ecclesiastes 8:1-15¹³

Well, it's a perplexing book, isn't it, Ecclesiastes? As we had that passage read out, you may well have been thinking, what was all that about?

And I think we're meant to, because Ecclesiastes is a book about this perplexing life. And even in its form and structure, Ecclesiastes conveys this. .

The book starts with some sort of structure. You feel like you can follow what's going on. It ends with some sort of conclusion, drawing it all together. But in between, it just gets harder and harder to follow. There's this and that and the other, all next to each other. You start to feel like you might be making sense of it, but then again, maybe not. It just gets more and more perplexing, before it gathers itself into some sort of conclusion and ends.

That is much like life, isn't it? It's perplexing. These middle chapters of Ecclesiastes are rather like that. They're random and hard to follow, because life is random and hard to make sense of.

So, this series covering the next chunk of Ecclesiastes was entitled, 'This perplexing life', with the promise of wisdom for living it. And as I preached this sermon, I said at this point: I'm sorry, but this series is going to be hard to follow.

For this passage, the thoughts of Qoheleth seem to be around the theme of how to relate to power, and things to remember about the powerful. But, before we get to that, we get verse 1, which is rather lovely. And it somewhat disproves the theory that Qoheleth was just a misery-guts.

"Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things?" Who can make sense of it all? No-one, we might say, the answer is no-one.

But, actually, it does seem that there are some wise people in the world, because then Qoheleth says, "Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance."

Maybe, like me, you read that, and you immediately think of godly saints of whom it is true. People who have a kind of wisdom that just makes their face shine. They don't understand the explanation of everything, but they seem to know enough, so that they can live in this perplexing world, not naively, but with a face that is brighter than those around them.

At school, our children often get shown a WAGOLL, what a good one looks like. Well, this is: what a wise one looks like. Their face is bright, not hard. There's a brightness, which comes through a wisdom from above, a wisdom which helps them to live in this perplexing world.

I don't know about you, but I want a face like that. It's not going to come from naivety, though. This wise person faces up to the perplexities all around.

¹³ This was the first in a series for chapters 8-10, as we returned to Ecclesiastes for a few weeks.

And the first of those comes as we think about power. Because it's easy to have a face which shines in a world where everything works as it should, and everything is just, and people get what they deserve, and the world is run by wise, godly, leaders. But that doesn't happen. And it's perplexing.

How should we relate to power, in this world, when the holders of power are often either uninspiring, or terrifying? Well, the answer is, **it's not always so straightforward**, and you have to think it through, but here are some thoughts.

Firstly, and this should be the default, I think, verse 2. "Obey the King's command, I say, because you took an oath before God." Or that could be because of God's oath, emphasising that people are only ever given authority from above.

Whatever it is, the default position, which will be right most of the time, is to obey: to be law-abiding, to do what your boss asks, or what your teachers ask, or what your parents ask; to pay the tax, or the parking fine, and so on. That's the first thing to say.

Verse 3, "Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence," probably that's thinking of people in the King's court, his advisers, who would be showing great disrespect for his authority, if they hurried from the king's presence. It would be a sign of disloyalty.

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not a member of the privy council. But I think there is a principle here for us: not to hurry into being disrespectful of those in authority. Maybe in the way we talk of them, that we use their titles, or their actual names (rather than nicknames), that we speak of them respectfully.

Next thought: "Do not stand up for a bad cause." To be honest, I'm not sure what that is getting at. I mean obviously, you don't stand up for something you know is bad. So, perhaps it's about not getting caught standing up for something that turns out to be bad - which can happen when you get behind something with great zeal and even greater ignorance. Or, perhaps it's about not standing up for something in a wrong way. It's unclear, perhaps because this whole area can just be unclear.

And then we start to get hints that the authorities in question aren't always that good. The king does whatever he pleases. Verse 4, his word is supreme, who can say, "What are you doing?" What then?

Well, sometimes it's better to just obey, verse 5, so that no harm comes to you. Okay, you might disagree with the rules. But they don't demand you to be immoral in following them, so just get on and follow it. There's no point in protesting. Nobody enjoys listening to your complaints all the time. So, you just get on with it, and as you do, you have a brighter face.

And this is the essence of wisdom here, end of verse 5, "the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure", the word there is actually justice. The proper time and the just way, when to do something and what to do, the wise heart will know.

Verse 6, there is a time and a just way for every matter, even though it might weigh heavily on our hearts in the meantime. There is a time and a just way. When to just get on with it, and when to protest. And how to protest.

You think of Daniel in Babylon, for instance, serving King Nebuchadnezzar. He was wise like this, wasn't he? When to just get on and serve, and when to draw the line and make a stand. That is wisdom.

And in the end, verse 7, you do not know what is going to happen in the future. A powerful ruler might fall this very day. A government might fall. A boss might be fired. You have no idea. Not everything is down to you to be put right, which is a comforting thought.

A wise heart manages to discern the time and the just way in each matter. And that enables the person to live with a brightness they otherwise would not have.

And as soon as we start to talk about the unknowability of the future, it's no surprise that Qoheleth comes back to the subject that he keeps coming back to - death.

Only, this time, I think it's to push good news. Look at verses 8-10. "No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no-one has power over the day of his death. As no-one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practise it. All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt. Then too, I saw the wicked buried - those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is hebel", (remember hebel? it means, breath, mist, something transitory).

And there's good news here, isn't there? The powerful in this fallen world - they are so often corrupt, or even frightening. Well, they are hebel. They're not going to last. They lord it over others now, but not forever. They're praised now, but not forever. One day they'll be gone.

Injustice might be rampant now, verse 11, a sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, so the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. People see others doing something wrong, they're getting away with it. That quickly becomes: everyone's doing it, so how is it wrong? And God doesn't appear to be judging? - why not?

But, and here is a thought that the wise take in, verse 12: even if someone commits a hundred crimes, and lives a long comfortable life, "I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God." And the wicked? Verse 13, "it will not go well with them."

This is wisdom, isn't it? Look at the world now, as it is, and you might despair. And how do you relate to power, when there's so much wrong with how it's used? How can you live with a brighter face, in such a perplexing world?

Here's how - by remembering there's a bigger story than just under the sun. And in that bigger story, everything will be put right.

So, yes, right now, there is a thing that is hebel that occurs on this earth, verse 14: the wicked get what the righteous deserve, the righteous get what the wicked deserve. In under-the-sun world, life is unfair. There is no consistent justice.

But you can live with a brighter face, you can do verse 15, and find enjoyment in life even now, getting on with your work, enjoying food and drink, simple things, you can do that, because you know there is a bigger story. You know under the sun is not it.

It's a perplexing life now, and we'll still feel that, acutely. But the wise one knows there is a bigger story, the story of the Kingdom of God, and the hope that, in Jesus, all things will be put right. And thereby their face will shine, even amidst perplexity.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:10

Well, Ecclesiastes has done again what it often does. It has brought right alongside each other some verses about the enjoyment of life, and some rather uncomfortable verses about death. It's done that a lot, and it's doing it again. Inevitable death, and enjoyment of life, right next to each other.

That might seem strange, but it isn't. There have been some poignant moments in the news this week in which the same thing happens. The commemorations of D Day, for instance¹⁴ - lots of positive things said about the quality of life which we have enjoyed because of those events. There were images on our screens of young children up on the stage, looking rather delighted to be there, saying thank you. Yet, alongside that, images of thousands and thousands of graves, and quite a number of veterans who, it seemed to me, didn't really want to talk much about what had happened. Life and death, right alongside each other.

Or, again, the message we heard from Rob Burrow, the rugby star who died this week, and who had pre-recorded a message to be played after his death. It was a very powerful message. It spoke of the preciousness of each day, the imperative to live and to dream, from someone who was about to die.

It often seems to be the case. Those times when we're confronted with the reality of death, we will talk about the urgency of living. A good funeral will strike both those notes with high intensity.

And yet, as these notes are played alongside each other, both at the top of their energies, a third thing pops into our minds - the question, why? What, then, is the point?

We're going to die. One day, I will leave the stage. So, life is precious, yes. Live the life you are given, yes. But, it's all just hebel, breath hanging in the air on a cold morning. Make it as beautiful and spectacular as you can, but then it's gone, along with its beauty. So, what meaning is there in what I do today?

Those three things, life, death, and what's the point? They are there in this passage, just as in our lives, they are often thrown together, at high intensity. And how do we deal with that?

Three points this morning. Firstly, **Unknowable meaning (8:16-17)**

Verse 16, and we've had verses like this before: "When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labour on earth - his eyes not seeing sleep day or night - then I saw all that God has done."

This has been Qoheleth's task: to observe life, in all its busyness, with the feeling of never getting everything done or having enough rest, like those fast-forwarded videos of people coming and going down the street and it all looks so busy. Qoheleth is observing all that, and seeing if he can sum it all up, and make sense of it.

Well, not in a way that leaves God out of the picture. He knows this is God's world, that God is at work in it. So to put it another way, He's trying to discern what God is doing, in all the details of life.

And, he can't. No one can. Verse 17, "No-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning."

And we can't, can we? Even if you're a Christian, and you know there is a bigger story than just 'under the sun'. You know there is a bigger story, which goes beyond this fallen world and which will

¹⁴ The 80th anniversary of the Normandy landings.

conclude with the New Creation. And you know the broad outline of that story, because God has revealed it to us, and you trust that it's all leading to glory.

Even then, what is God up to, just in the details of your life, right now? Or what is God up to in not giving you certain things in life which you had hoped for, or giving you other things you had not hoped for? What's He up to? Well, we say, He's teaching me patience, contentment, and so on. Yes, He is, but there are a thousand ways He could do that. Why *this* way? Why did it all have to happen *this* way?

And that's just *your* life. Scale it up to asking why things are the way they are in the world right now. What is God up to? Why *this* way, exactly?

I don't know. "No-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun," verse 17. Whilst we're living in under-the-sun world, in this fallen world, there is a lot that we are going to find perplexing and distressing. And that's talking as Christians, as those who know that there is a bigger story.

But, if you don't see a bigger story beyond this fallen, under the sun world, how do you make sense of it all? You just can't.

That said, there's no shortage of people who fancy themselves as wise, and that they do understand. End of verse 17, "even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it."

It always amuses me when people say something like, "oh, you're a church minister? That's nice. I don't really believe. The way I see it is..." - and then they give me some motto they once thought up, and they say - "that's the way I live my life." As though they've actually cracked it.

We can all be like that, can't we? Think of all the posts, blogs, videos, and podcasts out there. Or the books people write about how to live life. Wise people claiming they've cracked it. (And you're thinking 'you can talk, standing there preaching every week'!)

And then there are the genuinely great philosophers. But each of those exposes the flaws of the great philosophers who have gone before them. And in the same way, all that they say will be exposed as inadequate by the generation to come.

We seek to understand it all, and yet we cannot. And deep down we know we cannot. And yet we still seek, as though we know, there is a bigger story, there is a goal, and there could even be a reason why this was the road taken to get there.

Now, the unbeliever, what's their response to all this? Well, it could be a range of things: despair, ambivalence, or just carrying on because life's too busy to worry about whether there's actually a point.

But to the believer, what's our response to this? It's humility. It's praise. It's comfort, because God knows, and God is good, and He's in charge. And that's wisdom, and it brightens your face.

Unknowable meaning. Second thing, from this passage: **Uncertain future, certain death (9:1-6)**

Chapter 9 verse 1: "So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands." That's the beginning of a comforting thought. And it does seem to be the thought of a believer - Qoheleth is talking about the righteous and the wise, not people in general. So, presumably he's talking about being in God's hands, like we might talk about being held in Jesus' hands.

So, it starts as a comforting thought, except then he adds, “but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.” And you think, hold on.

What’s it saying? You don’t know what’s going to happen next, whether it will be good or bad? Whether your life is going to be full of love and delight, or hate and conflict?

Or, could it actually be about the seeming favour of God? Is He going to prosper you and bless you, or lead you into a time of intense trial and difficulty?

Could be that. You’re in His hands, yes, and that’s comforting. But so was Job. And what’s going to happen this week? I don’t know. It could be a week of feeling blessed. It might be really hard.

How do you respond to that uncertainty? The believer responds with a prayer for trust. And maybe a healthy, Biblical sense of fear.

We go on in the passage. And though you don’t know what’s coming tomorrow, you do know one thing about the future. Verse 2, “All share a common destiny,” and it looks like he’s thinking about death again.

The same destiny overtakes all, verse 3. It doesn’t matter if you’re righteous or wicked, good or bad, clean or unclean, religious or not religious, everyone dies. You will, I will, unless Jesus comes back first. But if He doesn’t, it’s going to happen.

And, says Qoheleth, it’s outrageous. Jesus was outraged by death when He was at the tomb of Lazarus. Qoheleth is too. “This is *the evil* in everything that happens under the sun: the same destiny overtakes all.”

It’s evil. Death isn’t right. Life is not meant to be overtaken by death. People made in the image of God, it’s not right that they should die.

But it’s also evil in the way it cuts off everyone. So, live a good, righteous life and bless all those around you; or live self-indulgently and exploit all around you - you still get rewarded with death. And that’s evil.

Interesting, then, that Qoheleth talks about the evil in our hearts just here too, leaving that connection hanging in the air for us to make: the fact of death and the sin we have on the inside. “The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live,” - yes, that’s true. What a wretched man, I am, Romans 7, who will rescue me from this body of death?

Then again, verse 4, it is still better to be alive. Even a live dog - a despised animal in Qoheleth’s day - is better off than a dead lion.

The dead, verse 5, they know nothing, they have no further reward, and they will be forgotten. All their love, their hate, their passion, their energy, is “long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.” One day I will leave the stage of this fallen world. So will you.

He’s goading you, isn’t he, Qoheleth? He’s wanting you to scream, “But that can’t be it!” Why not? Because under the sun can’t be the whole story! And either you’re rejoicing because you know there’s a bigger story, or you’re screaming that there must be.

But look what Qoheleth says the living has, whilst we’re under the sun. Two curious things to list. Verse 4, hope, and verse 5, the knowledge that they will die. Isn’t that curious? How can you have both of those things? It suggests to me that we’re only ever going to have true hope, when we have

honestly confronted the fact of death, when we have faced up to the evil in our hearts, and when we've put all of that together and realised we need a saviour.

Only when we've done that can we properly hear what comes next.

Live life, for as many days as God gives you (9:7-10)

"Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favours what you do. Always be clothed in white and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the hebel life (not meaningless, here; hebel, all your fleeting life) that God has given you under the sun - all your hebel days.

Now, some wonder whether he's really being positive here. Or whether it's just a case of: eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. But, I don't think that's right, because God is at the centre of it.

Food, drink, they are God's gifts to us, to be enjoyed. Dressing up, looking good, marriages, friendships. God is being favourable towards us in giving these things.

But neither is this advocating self-indulgence, because, verse 9, "this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun." I think this is talking about simple pleasures which we enjoy, amidst the hard work we are given to do. You can't read this and say, "well, I'm going off to apply these verses now, so I'm sorry I'll hardly be in church for the next couple of months." Self-indulgence is not where we're meant to take this. Qoheleth has already spoken of that attitude back in chapter 2.

No, this is simply saying, the life that God has given you – live it! Indeed, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." Now, that doesn't mean: whatever project takes your fancy, do it obsessively and ignore all the other things you should be doing.

No, I think that's saying, whatever your hand finds to do - well, in the first place, that's going to be the things that God has given you to do. The roles and responsibilities He has given you to do. Whatever they are, go for it. Fulfil the responsibilities He has given you.

And enjoy all the simple pleasures He gives you along the way. Go home today, have a good lunch, go out, play football, meet with friends. Spouses, tire the children out, and then when they've got to sleep have some time together and enjoy it.

And then, tomorrow, whatever it is that God has given you to do in your life right now (assuming it doesn't equate to pure self-indulgence or something altogether immoral), commit to doing it well. Make a contribution. Live this life God has given you.

Only he can't end there, Qoheleth, can he? He comes back to death. "For in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

And yes, once you are in the grave, that's it. You can't relive this life and have another go. And if under the sun were it, then verse 10 is true in an ultimate sense.

But, if under the sun is not it, if there is a bigger story... He's goading us again, isn't he? Won't you wake up and live this life like you know it isn't everything?

I mentioned that pre-recorded message this week from the rugby star Rob Burrow. I don't want to do that down at all, it was very powerful. But imagine a message from beyond the grave which doesn't have to be pre-recorded, because it's delivered in person, by someone who has beaten death.

Well, hear these words spoken by the risen Lord Jesus on Easter Day, to his friends who were hiding in the room. "Peace be with you."

There's a lot in those words, isn't there? They were spoken by someone who has moved the story on, beyond under the sun. Sin, paid for. Reconciliation with God. Death, defeated. Peace be with you.

Under the sun, there's a lot that will not make sense. And you have no idea what's going to happen next, except that one day you'll die.

But let that drive you to the One who came into this under the sun world, who lived this life, knows its perplexities, and then beat death and moved the story on. And who says, Peace be with you.

And then enjoy the simple pleasures God gives you today, and live the life He gives you to live now. To the praise of His glory, Amen.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

“That’s not fair!” It’s Father’s Day today, and I wonder how many dads have heard that statement, or one very like it, in the last week. Mums too, of course, but it’s Father’s Day so let’s make this a point about dads.

How often dads find themselves adjudicating on matters of fairness. How many times they are asked to deal rather urgently with outrageous cases of unfairness, which have suddenly presented themselves, and so sorely disrupted the peace: it’s not fair!

When I first wrote this, I had what I thought was a very amusing section here, with lots of examples of the sorts of situations which lead a child to say “That’s not fair!” And then I thought, no, I can’t put that in. I can’t embarrass our children like that. Why not? It wouldn’t be fair! So, I had to sacrifice the whole section, which in itself seemed rather unfair to me.

“That’s not fair!” How often we hear it. And I wonder, when attempting to adjudicate and to negotiate a settlement that would satisfy all parties, whether, in the end, you find yourself saying, “Well, life isn’t fair!”

Which it isn’t - life in this fallen, under the sun world, it’s not fair. Things don’t work out as they should. Time and chance happen to all. That’s what today’s passage is about.

And the question is, how do we respond to that? One way to respond would be to say, well if life isn’t fair, there’s not much point in trying. All those maxims about taking control of your future, your success is in your hands, and so on, if they’re not true, then why bother? Why bother working hard, why bother trying, why bother sacrificing? Why make plans, or have ambitions, or dare to dream?

That’s one response. But it’s not where Qoheleth goes. Sure, life under the sun is not fair, not by a long way. *But*, it is still better to have wisdom, and to listen to it. Wisdom is still better. Wisdom can even save.

Two headings today, and they’re just lifted straight from the text. First, time and chance happen to all, but second, wisdom is still better than strength. First, then: **time and chance happen to all** (verses 11-12).

Verse 11: “I have seen something else under the sun. The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong.” Those are physical qualities, now come internal ones, “nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.”

Life is unfair. In this fallen, under the sun world, life often does not reward people according to their abilities or effort.

Sometimes it does. Parkrun for instance – the person who is fastest generally comes first. Unless, they’ve decided to run with their dog, and the dog is distracted by a bush or some other business it needs to do. I always enjoy overtaking people in that situation.

But, very often, life does not reward people according to their abilities. Just think of the people who have fame and fortune and power. Some of them, you'd say: fair enough, I can see how you earned that. But there will be lots of other people, just as able, just as hard working, who didn't make it. So even there, it's time and chance. And then, there are all the people who have fame and fortune and power, and they are neither swift, nor strong, nor wise, nor brilliant, nor learned. They are, in fact, slow, weak, foolish, mediocre and ignorant. And you think, *well how did that happen?*

Time and chance, says Qoheleth. It has as much to do with where people end up as their abilities and their effort.

And this goes against all those motivational quotes you might see on posters about hard work and achievement, alongside an image of a figure standing on top of a mountain. Or those times when someone has achieved something extraordinary and they're interviewed and they say "it just goes to show if you have a dream and you work at it, you can achieve anything." No. Under-the-sun world is not a pure meritocracy. Our ability, our drive, our commitment, our character, is no guarantee of success in life. It is unfair.

I remember when I was at school, either at the end of Year 11 or the end of sixth form, there were some awards that we all had to vote on – one of them was 'most likely to be successful.' And that's easy, you vote for the person who seems popular and talented. Yes, they'll obviously do well.

Actually, you have no idea. For those of you at school, think of your class right now. Who is going to do well? Who is going to go on to lead a happy life? You have no idea. And I'm sure you'll be surprised. Life in under-the-sun world, it's unfair.

That's why we might often look at other people and the way their life has worked out, compared with ours, and then we maybe you consider the way they have lived and their character. And we think, "That's not fair!"

We look at someone who didn't live wisely as they grew up. Someone who had all the sorts of relationships that a church youth group would say not to have. Someone who just had a good time and didn't try very hard, and wasn't very nice. And now they are happily married, with beautiful children, a lovely home and a good job. And it feels unfair! There will be many similar examples – in school, at work, amongst your friends and wider family, and so on.

Life is not fair. Time and chance happen to all. Now, yes, God is sovereign, He is in charge, over all things, but from our perspective, it looks like chance. We have no idea what's coming next. We have no idea how things will pan out.

And then there's the ultimate event of time and chance. Verse 12: "Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times (or 'at an evil time') that falls unexpectedly upon them."

That's quite a stark image, isn't it? Some fish swimming along. Some of them don't know that a net is about to come down exactly where they're swimming, and so they're just swimming along like all the other fish, and then suddenly in comes the net and they're gone.

Time and chance, it happens to all, and it's not fair.

So what do we do with that? Well, on one level this is just good wisdom. To know that life in this fallen world isn't fair. And although we feel the world ought to be set up to reward ability and effort, very often it doesn't. That's good wisdom. It will help you with your expectations. It will help you to know your limitations, and to remember that your destiny is not actually in your hands, by and large.

And it will help you to remember that under-the-sun world *isn't it*. You can't write for yourself a story of meaning and purpose in under-the-sun world. So, don't expect too much out of life whilst under the sun. One of the reasons we can get so down about our lives is because we had unrealistic expectations of what life now should be like, and the things I ought to be able to have, and ought to be able to get for myself.

And so all of this is another case, I think, where Qoheleth is nudging us to realise, or to remember, that *this is not it*. The unfairness of life, it's another phenomenon that nudges us towards concluding that there must be a bigger story than just under the sun. That basic human intuition for fairness, in children and adults, and the sense of eternity which God has put on our hearts, those often link up. There must be a bigger story. And praise the Lord, there is. It's the story of the Kingdom of God.

So, life, for the time being, is unfair. That's good to know. But some people's response to that - well, it might be to try even harder, to pursue strength. To take the attitude that if life can be so brutal, then I need to be loud and I need to be strong, in order to just boost my chances of having a good life.

But Qoheleth doesn't advocate that. No, he says. Even though life is unfair, wisdom - quiet wisdom, even - is still better than strength. And that's our second point.

Wisdom is better than strength. Even though it's often forgotten, often ignored, and everything can get messed up by one sinner. Wisdom is still better than strength.

And he starts with an example, verse 13. In this under the sun world, in which time and chance happen to all, I also saw this example of wisdom, which greatly impressed me.

And people try to guess who he's talking about. Is it Archimedes, who famously came up with a way to defend a city when under siege? Well, it can't be him, because he's remembered, and this is forgotten.

But whoever and wherever it was, there was once a small city, and a powerful king came against it, and surrounded it and besieged it. But in that city there was a poor wise man. Poor, note that, so clearly he had not been rewarded for his wisdom up to this point.

And somehow, whether through a clever invention, or a cunning ploy, or a good use of diplomacy, he saved the city. But now that we come to think of it, nobody can actually remember much more about him.

It happens today, too. Someone of great ability and wisdom, who achieves something of great consequence for their community or for the society at large, and then they grow old, end up in a care home, and nobody knows anything about what they did.

But at the time - their wisdom, it was so impressive. It changed people's lives, it maybe even saved people's lives.

And so you get the conclusion in verses 16-18. And it's not a straightforward conclusion. And it's not so much a qualified conclusion. It's just, here's the conclusion and here are some other things which are also true.

Wisdom is better than strength, that's the conclusion. But it's often despised. But still wisdom is better than strength, though it's often not heeded. *But it's still better.*

Even though people often prefer strength and pay more attention to the person who looks strong. And they even forget about the person who saved them through their wise counsel. And this happens - people often forget that it was the wisdom of others that changed their course. They can even misremember it as their own wisdom. *But, wisdom is still better.*

And so we live in a world, verse 17, where you have the quiet words of the wise and the shouts of a ruler among fools. And which do you listen to? And which one are you?

It's hardly ever the case that the loudest person, or the person who spoke the most, is the wisest. Yet, how often we feel the need to speak as a way of proving ourselves. And how often we are swayed by the one who was loudest. It's worth asking, isn't it? The voices I listen to. Why do they get my attention so easily? - is it because they are wise, or is it because they are loud?

You think of the passage we had from Matthew 12, the one which quotes Isaiah 42 and says that the servant of Isaiah 42 is Jesus. Think of that servant's qualities. "He will not quarrel or cry out; no-one will hear his voice in the streets." That was Jesus. Prominent, yes, obviously, and lots of people heard His teaching. But He didn't get people's attention just by being loud, or brash, or showy, or strong, in a worldly sense.

Verse 18: wisdom is better than weapons of war - as shown by the example of the forgotten wise man in the small city. It is better, and even in under-the-sun world, it will be useful, and it can save you and others from difficulty. *And yet*, one sinner destroys much good. Never underestimate the power of one idiot to mess it all up again. To completely blow apart your community, your society, your church, your family.

Despite all of that, *wisdom is still better.* Wisdom is valuable, but so often not valued. But it's still better.

And this is very much the wisdom of the cross, isn't it? Paul speaks about that to the Corinthians. People are impressed by strength, they're not impressed by a Saviour who dies such a humiliating death at the Cross. But that's God's wisdom to save us. God's Son, dies for your sins. And calls you to take up your Cross and to follow Him.

It's helpful for a church to remember all of these things too. Wisdom is better than strength. How easy for a church to want to look strong, and to be happy when it looks strong. How easy, with social media and the internet and so on, for a church to want to be loud, and to find ways to turn up its volume. But no, wisdom: quiet wisdom, it's better than strength.

So, this is good wisdom for living in under-the-sun world, isn't it? Time and chance happen to all. Wisdom is better than strength. These things are helpful to remember as you go into the next week, aren't they? Do you have high expectations of what you are going to go out and get for yourself in this next week? Well, life is unfair. Your destiny is largely not in your hands.

Or are you thinking about all the ways in which you need to assert your strength this week? Outmanoeuvre that person, squash that one, or just to go on a charm offensive and eloquently dominate every conversation towards your goals. Well, wisdom, quiet wisdom, is better than strength.

The wisdom of the Cross, is better. And in the bigger story, it will absolutely be shown to be better.

And the wisdom of knowing that life in under-the-sun world will look to us to be unfair - it's a wisdom which acknowledges our smallness and our inabilities. It's a wisdom which can bring about a healthy fear of the LORD, who does know all of these things.

And it's a wisdom which causes us to look to the bigger story. Because under-the-sun world is not going to deliver justice, it's not going to be fair. But the Kingdom of God is coming. And that's such good news. Doesn't Ecclesiastes make you want to pray even more, Lord, Thy Kingdom come!

Ecclesiastes 10

Well, we've already said that these middle chapters of Ecclesiastes would be hard to follow. And now we get a whole chapter of proverbs, and maybe you're thinking, well how do we approach this? What point is this making?

Actually, I'm not sure I've ever heard a sermon on a passage full of proverbs. Maybe that's because we don't know what to do when there is no obvious structure.

But it has sometimes struck me that passages like these, where you get a whole string of proverbs loosely gathered together, they can be like the sorts of discussions we have in a house group Bible study.

You start talking about a topic, and people offer various thoughts and observations, just chipping in, one after another. There can be some logic to the flow, but there doesn't have to be. People just throw in their thoughts, when they get the opportunity to speak. And then something occurs to someone that only loosely links to what's being said, but they say it anyway, and the topic shifts.

So, if you imagine someone taking minutes for a Bible study which is thinking about folly and what it looks like and how to deal with it, with verse 1 as the starting point, and the discussion going on from there; and if you imagine that this Bible study is meeting at a time when an election is about to happen¹⁵, I reckon you'd get some minutes that look rather like Ecclesiastes 10.

And if you were in that discussion, I reckon you'd go away thinking how helpful it was. Full of wisdom for how to live our lives, now, with a couple of nuggets sticking in your mind, that were particularly relevant to you, and where you would like to grow.

So, no neat headings for this passage. This is just **a discussion on wisdom for living in a world of fools.**

So, the discussion starts. Verse 1: "As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour."

Just as the most expensive, carefully created perfume can be ruined by such a tiny thing as a few dead flies, so a little bit of foolishness can really mess things up.

One moment of madness, one rash word, one moment of violence, and it can ruin everything. A relationship built up over years, and trust can be destroyed in a moment. One bad photo for a politician, and it outweighs everything else they've done.

It doesn't take much, does it, and foolishness can destroy a friendship, a family, a church, a society. We want to avoid being fools, that's for sure.

The conversation moves on, someone points out that whether we're wise or foolish, ultimately that's a heart issue. It's not about knowledge or learning strategies, it's about the heart. Verse 2: "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left."

That's not advice on how to vote in a couple of weeks. It's just that in the Bible, right and left can be used to denote the good way and the bad way.

¹⁵ As was the case when this sermon was preached.

And whether we go in a good direction or a bad direction, whether we are wise or foolish – that’s an issue of the heart, who we are at our core. And because of that, we need God to work in us. This is a work of the Spirit.

And a heart that has been changed by the Spirit, first of all it fears the Lord, that’s the beginning of wisdom. Then, it knows it has gone in wrong directions, and, with chapters like this, can see how it would still go in wrong directions. So, it seeks forgiveness, it finds it in Jesus and His death on the Cross, and then it hungers and thirst after righteousness and wisdom.

But the fool, he just goes the wrong way, not fearing the Lord, because his heart hasn’t been changed. Foolishness is a problem of the heart.

Someone else adds, though, verse 3, the thing is, the fool doesn’t even know he’s a fool. He just carries on, living foolishly, not fearing God, doing his own thing. “Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.” I think that means they demonstrate to everyone else their folly, even whilst they are unaware of it.

They think they’re doing life well. Everyone else can see otherwise. Sometimes you see this in a church. Someone basically doing their own thing, ignoring any encouragements about how to live, and the basics of how to live as a Christian. They think they’re fine. Everyone else is quietly concerned.

And then the conversation takes a bit of a shift, verse 4. Someone’s read something in the paper this week about the angry outburst of a leader, or someone’s boss at work lashed out at them, and it pops into their mind as an obvious example of the fool who shows everyone how foolish they are. And when powerful fools lash out, what’s the wise way to respond?

Someone else gives the answer, “If a ruler’s anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest.” Don’t leave, don’t quit, just respond calmly. It’s often the best way. After all, remember the example of Jesus. 1 Peter 2, He was reviled, yet He did not retaliate. He quietly suffered, and He did it to save you. Thank you, that’s helpful.

But it is hard, isn’t it? says someone else. Because we live in such a topsy turvy world. In which it is so often the case that the people who have power are fools.

Verse 5, “There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones.” The rich - that probably means people who have resources and want to use them for good, but they can’t, because the people in charge are fools. Maybe at work, you could do so much more than you’re allowed to, but you’re held back, whilst the people higher up haven’t a clue. That’s what this world is like, verse 7, “I have seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves.” The people who should be in charge are not, the people who are incompetent are elevated.

So, it is really hard. What can we do about that?

Ah, well, in a few weeks’ time there is an election, someone says. We can change who is in charge, if we think that’s needed. We can try to judge who would be most competent, and who has shown themselves to be a fool, and it’s good that we can do that. Yes. The thing is, though, you’re still not going to get a government which isn’t in some way spoilt by the presence of folly. It’s the world we live in. What we’re looking to, as we’ve said all the way through Ecclesiastes, ultimately, is the Kingdom of God.

And at this point the discussion takes a bit of a lurch. Maybe the group leader got a bit spooked when the discussion became political, and they bring it back to the subject of folly.

And, specifically, that folly can be self-destructive. I think that's what we're talking about here. Verse 8, "Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake." Digging pits is sometimes an image in the Psalms of trying to trap someone. Breaking down walls, that's not a good thing in the Old Testament, when boundaries and physical inheritance were so important.

But those who are foolish to do those things, and it often comes back to bite them. Live foolishly, not fearing God, not following His ways, not trying to be wise, it's self-destructive. It's not good for your life. And I think verse 9 follows with the same sort of idea, though I'm not entirely sure.

And this reminds someone else of last week, wisdom is still better, remember, wisdom is better than strength.

Verse 10, it's like some people just hack away at life without wisdom, and when it doesn't work they go at it even more vigorously. "If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened," – the solution? – "more strength is needed." No, wisdom is better than strength. Skill brings success. You needed to learn to live in the fear of the Lord. Years spent as disciples of Jesus, that's what helps you in life. When you come across difficulty, you fall back on that, you don't just hack even harder at the problem.

Although, says another person, some things you do need to develop more quickly, don't you? That well known pastime of snake charming, verse 11 - you don't want to take too long learning that, or the snake will bite you.

Yes, that's true, everyone replies. Wisdom can also be about knowing which things to get onto quickly. Fighting sin for instance. You don't hang around learning the best way of doing that. You get on and fight it.

And then again, we slightly change topic. Because, it occurs to someone, another thing that's hard to tame is the tongue. Speech – that's one thing not to rush into, but look at how we so often do.

It's one of the key topics of wisdom – how we use words. Now words from a wise person's mouth, verse 12, they are gracious. They are good to hear. They're not out to harm, they're not said just for the benefit of the speaker. They are said to bless others.

How good it would be to speak like that! That's how Jesus spoke. I wish I spoke like that more. Foolish words, however, here's a few things about those.

First, they are often self-destructive – second half of verse 12. Foolish words, once they're out there, they can't be taken back. Once that email is sent, it's out there, and it can lead to all sorts of trouble for you.

Yes, someone says, and it can be such a downward spiral, can't it? Verse 13, it starts with just a little folly, it ends as wicked madness. One silly white lie, and then it spirals. One little false claim to save face, and then it becomes a conspiracy. How we double down on error, rather than take back what we said. Whole sections of society can get caught up by words which were just a bit foolish at first, and then spiral into wicked madness.

And another thing, someone adds, we speak too much don't we? Verse 14, "the fool multiplies words" – they just go on talking, and so presumptuously. No-one knows what is going to happen next, and yet we go on talking as though we're the ones who understand it all.

And the conversation comes to a sober pause, because everyone realises how prone to folly they are in their speaking. And they realise what this says about our hearts, from which our speech flows. And we're reminded again of how much we need forgiveness, and how we need God's Spirit to teach us wisdom in our speaking.

The pause is broken. Maybe it's the group leader again, moving on to another point they wanted to cover about folly. Verse 15: how the fool is wearied by work. Maybe because when they don't fear the Lord, when they don't really know what the point is, there's a feeling of just chasing the wind, and it's exhausting. Maybe because they are lazy, and when you just play at doing work, the mounting frustration of not being productive is in itself waring. And "he does not know the way to town." Not sure what that means – but you get the sense of a self-defeating incompetency in how they do life.

The person who likes to bring up politics interjects. What about all those politicians, and those people in authority, living it up? They don't work hard. Some of them do, of course, but some really don't.

Verse 16, "Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning." How awful when your leaders are not equipped to lead and they misuse the trappings of power, and have parties when they shouldn't have parties, and they get drunk and bring the office into disrepute. And not just because of how it looks, but because, who wants those sort of people deciding matters of justice and mercy?

Rather, verse 17, "Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth." When your leaders know when to feast, and do so for the right reasons, and who govern well. Character is important, isn't it? You don't want foolish people in power. You want wise people. And yes, the basic characterisation of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. So, it is best to have competent Christians in power. But there are non-Christians of much better character than others who will happily say certain things to get a traditionalist's vote. It is not a disaster to have a non-Christian in power, and we should recognise and appreciate the competencies and character they can have.

Anyway, the group leader is getting nervous, so they bring the discussion back to the laziness of folly. And how that's another way in which folly can be destructive.

Verse 18: "If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks." It's obviously true. Don't look after your house, it will eventually fall apart. So, too with families, friendships, communities, churches. The fool just assumes those things will always be there and so doesn't contribute. That's how things fall apart.

So, it is generally true, the group agrees, the wise person, they work hard, they commit, they make a contribution, and there is reward in that. Verse 19: work hard, and you will have food to enjoy, wine to make life merry, and money – which is very helpful for all sorts of things. That's all that verse is saying, I think. It's not saying idolise money. It's just pointing out how much you do actually need it, which is why the wise person works hard.

But, that certain someone in the group is still thinking about politics. Maybe they are feeling a bit bad about some of the things they have said about our leaders. They want to remind us that it's in the Bible that we must respect them, and they do a hard job, and often at great personal cost.

Verse 20: "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words," and they get reported. Now, in the context of absolute

monarchy, there are obvious ways it would be dangerous to be rash with your words, but the principle of respect still applies for us.

Respect our rulers. Don't revile them. Know where the line is when you can't obey. But don't disrespect. Even if a leader is not one of God's people. Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar. Paul and Peter wrote to Christians that they should respect the Roman Emperor.

Yes, agrees the group leader. And that's it. End of Bible Study. Maybe you're pondering one or two contributions in particular, where you have realised your tendency to folly.

And you're thankful again that Jesus died for your forgiveness. You're reminded that He is the only human being who has ever been perfectly wise. And you pray for His Spirit to be at work in your heart, for that thing that you're especially now going to think about in the week ahead.

We need to pray, says the group leader says. So, let's pray.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-8¹⁶

“Everything to come is meaningless,” as it says at the end of our passage¹⁷. Older translations will say “vanity”. Neither is totally satisfactory.

Those of us who have been here for our journey through Ecclesiastes so far will know what the word is in the original language: *hebel*. It means vapour or breath. The primary idea is about something that is fleeting, something that is transitory. Like breath on a cold winter’s morning - it hangs in the air, looks rather beautiful for a few moments, and then it is gone. So, meaningless can be implied, and sometimes it is, but not necessarily.

Everything to come is *hebel*. Breath, hanging in the air, and then gone. We’ve got used to that idea as we’ve gone through Ecclesiastes. We live in a fallen and frustrated world, and in that fallen world, an awful lot of things are *hebel*, it can seem. Indeed, if this fallen and frustrated world, this under-the-sun world were all that there was, then everything would be *hebel*.

But it’s not all that there is. There is a bigger story, in which this fallen world is just one chapter. Ecclesiastes has kept nudging us to realise, this fallen, frustrated, under-the-sun world, is *not* all that there is. So, don’t live as though this is it, as though this is the framework, and you can find meaning and purpose within under-the-sun world. You can’t. That would just be *hebel*.

There is a bigger story. There is redemption. There is the New Creation. Ecclesiastes keeps nudging us towards this. And as we get near the end of the book, indeed, as we get the sense of a life drawing to its close, it becomes more and more explicit. Remember your Creator, fear God, there will be a judgement. There is a bigger story, there is a bigger framework.

But, before we get into that, there is the emphasis of this passage. With all the things Ecclesiastes has been showing us about under-the-sun world, and the folly of living as though under the sun were all that there is - how then, in summary, should we live, in a fallen and broken world?

Should we just keep our heads down? Play it safe? Live a quiet and comfortable life, as best as we can? Nothing too adventurous, nothing too risky, just potter along, just make ourselves comfortable.

Well, no. That’s not the answer. Instead, the answer here is **Go for it!** Do stuff, try things, take risks. Live life. Enjoy it. In the context of what’s to come, that is - remembering God, fearing Him, obeying Him. This is not saying, go for it, in a wild, godless way. But this is saying, go for it, **live life, enjoy it, for the glory of God**. Invest in things, put energy into things. Don’t hold back. Don’t procrastinate. Don’t just play it safe. That’s the basic message here, I think. **Go for it.**

So, two headings as we go through: Go for it in your ventures, and Go for it in life.

¹⁶ This was the first in our final little series from Ecclesiastes - hence, more of a recap at the beginning.

¹⁷ Preached from the NIV 1984 translation.

First, **Go for it in your ventures - you don't know what will succeed, verses 1-6.** Sorry, that's not a great heading. I couldn't think of a better word than ventures. This includes work, but it is more than that. It's the stuff you put effort into. Things you give of yourself towards, and put energy into. Anyway, let's see that from these verses. These are not the easiest verses to understand in detail, but fortunately I think it is easier to get a sense of the overall gist.

So, verse 1 for instance "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again." What is the picture there? Because it makes me think first of all of feeding the ducks. And then I just start thinking about soggy bread in the water, and what good can that be, and then I remember bread and butter pudding, and that's something of a redemptive thought, and then I'm thinking about lunch.

The short answer is, I'm not entirely sure what the image of verse 1 is exactly. Some suggest that it might be about trade. The verb 'cast' is the verb to 'send out'. Bread can just stand for food generally, or perhaps for grain. And the waters might make us think of international trade. So, that's plausible. But I don't know for sure.

In any case, the verbs used here help to get the idea. *Cast*, or *send out*, in verse 1. And then in verse 2, *give*. Give portions to seven, yes to eight. Seven is a number of fullness. So, seven or eight, has the sense of giving as generously as you can, and then giving a bit more. It's about going above and beyond in the way that you give.

So, whether it's about trade, or whether it's about how you give to the poor, or whether it just stands for how you approach life generally, there is a sense here of going for it. In the way that you give and give of yourself. For the things you invest time and energy into. Just go for it! Don't hold back.

Because, verse 1, that's how to get a return of some kind. And verse 2, because actually, you have no idea of the disasters that may be coming.

That's interesting isn't it? It picks up an idea that recurs in these verses. There are bad things that could happen, in fact, it's certain that some bad things will happen in life, and you don't know when that will be. That might cause some people to hold back or to play it safe. That might cause them to hold onto all of their resources and all the things they could use to do stuff.

But this is saying, no! If anything, that uncertainty should be a reason to just go for it. Use what you have now, before you lose it. Invest in doing things now, put energy into doing things now, whilst you can. You don't know how much time you have, and you might not have the same energy to do things in the future. So, go for it.

Verse 3 is also hard to understand. "If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there it will lie." Well, actually, that's easy to understand. What's hard is to understand the point it's making.

Well, it might be getting us to think about things that are inevitable, like rain falling from rain clouds. And it might be getting us to think about things that are random, like trees falling one way or another. And, just generally, about things that happen which are beyond our control. How often we have to use the phrase 'weather permitting', for instance. There are plenty of things that are beyond our control.

There are plenty of things we don't know either, verse 5. The path of the wind, or even how a body is formed in a womb. Okay, we do have more knowledge of these things now, but even with all of that knowledge, there is much that will always remain deeply mysterious. How a life gets started - it's not just a matter of genetics. There is a spirit there. There is a person made in the image of God. It's deeply mysterious.

I remember seeing my oldest child being born and my immediate thought in that moment was something like "my goodness, where did he come from?" Now, don't get me wrong, I wasn't naive. I knew the part I had played and I'd seen my wife getting bigger. But, it was more of a sense of the mystery, that there is much more to it than that. Here is a new person, made in God's image. How did that happen?

And it just causes us to realise again, verse 5, "you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things."

There will always be so much beyond our control, and beyond our understanding, and all of that might cause us to hold back, to procrastinate. Verse 4, "whoever watches the wind will not plant," because maybe, that wind could mean bad weather is coming, better wait. And "whoever looks at the clouds will not reap," because maybe tomorrow will be better.

The uncertainty of life - it can lead to fear, it can paralyse. So we never do anything. And it's all very sensible, except overall, nothing is ever achieved.

But, as believers, our perspective is different from that, isn't it? Because verse 5 has reminded us, sure there are lots of things you don't know. About what, though - *about all the mysterious and wonderful ways in which our life-giving God is at work*. We're not just talking about raw, impersonal natural forces. That's not the extent of our framework. We're talking about a world in which there's lots we don't know and which is beyond our control, and in which our great God is at work.

And that changes things. Because that's not a reason to fear, or to procrastinate, or hold back. That's a reason to go for it! God is at work. You don't know what will succeed. But God is at work. So, all in all, it will be fine.

So, verse 6, "Sow your seed in the morning and at evening let not your hands be idle." Go for it with your work. You don't know whether this or that will succeed, or neither, or both. But the Maker of all things does. And He is good. So go for it, and trust in Him.

Now, there are all sorts of things we can apply this to, right? This applies in basically every area of life, and we can each think that through. But also remember, there is a context to this. Ecclesiastes is

about to tell us to remember our Creator. It's about to sum things up, by saying we should fear God and seek to obey Him.

So that when we say, Go for it, we really need to stress what we're talking about is going for it *as we seek to glorify God in all things*.

And, we really need to emphasise the things we especially do for the Kingdom, don't we? That's why we had the parable of the talents read out¹⁸. You don't want to be the person who just buried the talent, who just buried what God has given you in the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to go out there and make a return. So not just to receive the gospel, but to pass the gospel on. Not just to receive blessings from God, but to pass blessings, on and so on.

In our service of the Lord, we need to go for it. And not just hold back and procrastinate. And there will always be a reason to do that, by the way, and it will generally sound like quite a sensible reason. And to be sure, sometimes we will need to say no, but more often, I think, we need to say yes. Because, overall, you do not want to be the guy who buried the talent. Don't turn up on Judgement Day and say, Lord I would have volunteered, but you never sent the opportunity that was just right for me and my gifts. I would have shared the gospel, but you never sent the right people across my path.

Don't do that. Rather, go for it. It's one of the things I love about being part of AMiE¹⁹. The culture at the moment - it's not one of reckless risk taking, but it is one of risk taking. The general approach is: go for it, we'll back you. I love that. It's great to be part of something where all of the energy is going into things like new church plants, new gospel initiatives, and not being sucked up by a load of nonsense. Long may that continue.

So, in all our ventures, assuming they glorify God, and particularly in things we might describe as Kingdom work, go for it.

And secondly, **Go for it in life - you know there will be darkness**. Verses 7 and 8. "Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is *hebel*."

Go for it in life. Enjoy it. Again, that's in the context of fearing God and obeying Him. And that doesn't spoil life, it makes it better. The happiest people I've ever met are people who love the Lord deeply. And then they love other people in an uncommon way. And they love life. And they enjoy it.

Right down to the simplest details - the sweetness of light, for instance, the pleasantness of the sun. Do you ever do that in the morning? - wake up, and count your blessings, and thank God for them. Starting with light, breath, that you have made me, that you've given me life, that you've given me

¹⁸ This had been our second Bible reading in the service.

¹⁹ The Anglican Mission in England, a diocese within the Anglican Network in Europe - so, Anglican, but not part of the Church of England.

this day. That you've given me so many things. And that you have redeemed me and rescued me and so I have *so much* to look forward to. Do you ever do that?

So, enjoy life, all the years that God has given you. But also remember days of darkness will come, and not infrequently.

There is a wonderful balance there, isn't there? The sweetness of life and the acknowledgement that there will be plenty of dark days. You hold those things together.

In under-the-sun world, there will be dark days. Some of them will be really dark days. And we don't try to ignore that. We don't try to talk about it as little as we can. Ecclesiastes hasn't. Ecclesiastes has talked about darkness a lot. It's talked about death a lot, maybe more than we were comfortable with.

But remembering all of that, and keeping all of that in our awareness, doesn't mean we can't also enjoy life. No, we hold both of those things together - just as Jesus did, actually. He enjoyed life. He took delight in all that is good, even as He knew that His mission was taking Him headlong into the deepest darkness that anyone has ever suffered.

A darkness which He suffered., so that the final words of our passage will not actually prevail. In under-the-sun world, everything to come is *hebel*, yes. And in this chapter of the story, we will similarly pass and fade.

But, there is a bigger story. And in the story yet to come, which we can look forward to because of Jesus' sacrifice for us, it is not *hebel*. For we have an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade. We have a future where it will only be light, and never darkness. We have a Lord in whom our work is not in vain.

And therefore, knowing all of that, in this chapter of the story, that we're living in now, don't hold back. Don't play it safe. Don't procrastinate. What's the point in any of that? Go for it, for the glory of God.

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8

One of the mysteries about Ecclesiastes, as we have said before, is the identity of the person who spoke it. We said right at the start that it could be Solomon, but it's not explicitly clear. It's deliberately left unclear, I think.

In the original language, he's called Qoheleth. It's related to the word qahal, which means an assembly, a group of people gathered. So Qoheleth is simply someone speaking to a group of people.

So, when different translations say The Teacher or The Preacher, or even, The Philosopher, they are making a judgement about the sort of gathering being addressed.

Here's one suggestion no translation offers, to my knowledge: Youth Group Leader. Qoheleth was talking to a youth group. But that is what he appears to be doing here. Whether he's been doing that for the whole of the book, I doubt, but here, Qoheleth has pitched up at the local youth group, and he's talking to the youth.

The table tennis has been paused. The snacks have been eaten. The music has been turned down. Phones have been put away. Everyone has sat down. And Qoheleth the Youth Group Leader gets up. And he gives the youth a talk - about old age and death!

Well, sort of. It is about old age and death. But it's also about life, and getting the most out of it. Two points he makes. First, **Rejoice, in the days of your youth.** And second, **Remember your Creator, in the days of your youth.**

And it's really good to see how those two things go together. If you're young, you might think you do one, and then the other. Have fun now, whilst you're young. Think about God later, when you've become a boring adult (because as far as you can see, being an adult looks pretty dull).

But actually, that's not how it works. Having a great time, and living a God-centred life, these things go together. Rejoice, in the days of your youth, and also in the days of your youth, Remember your Creator. And the sooner you realise that, the better your life will be. Not just now, and not just for the next seventy years, but for the next seventy thousand years, because you are never too young to think about your eternity. In the context of eternity, we're all young.

Let's get into the passage. First, **Rejoice in the days of your youth.**

Chapter 11, verse 9: "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see."

You notice that's a command. God commands joy. He is like the really gracious host, who is so insistent that you make yourself at home and have a good time, that He basically commands it. Be happy, while you are young. Follow the ways of your heart and what your eyes see.

Now obviously, this is not saying, go wild, in a godless, self-destructive sort of way. But this is God saying, I'm telling you to enjoy life. So, to the young: rejoice in the days of your youth. Enjoy them! Experience lots of things. Have fun.

There's a bit of a caricature of religious people that they don't have any fun, because they think fun is sin. So, what you need to do is suck all the joy out of life and be very serious and that's what God wants.

Now, we all know that's nonsense, but, then again, deep down that suspicion can be there in our own response to God. That if I really go for it in my faith, if I really put God at the centre, if I really do things to serve Him, if I make the sorts of choices He asks me to, then my life won't be as much fun. So, I won't go all in.

But why do you think God made this world, with so much colour and beauty, and wonderful experiences you can have? And then why do you think God made you and put you in that world? To say to us, 'yeah, but don't touch any of that'? He is not like the adult who marches you through the best toy shop in the world and says, 'we're not buying anything, so don't even look.' He made the toy shop! He made this world. He made you, He gave you life and put you in this world, and then He says enjoy it! Sing, dance, eat, drink, play.

But you may be thinking, okay, it does say that, but then it says, at the end of verse 9, "but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgement." Isn't that a bit of a killjoy? Doesn't it put a different spin on what we've just been saying?

Not at all. It's just reminding you, again, that there is a bigger story, there is a bigger context here. God does want you to enjoy this world, and He wants you to enjoy it in good, God-honouring ways, rather than bad, self-destructive ways. To think that God is a killjoy because He doesn't want you to go down a self-destructive path, is like Adam and Eve looking at the one fruit that God had forbidden and thinking, *ah, but maybe that's better*.

In our sin, we are so suspicious that God is a killjoy, when the very opposite is true. We are so suspicious that we would turn down Paradise. We would turn away from all the goodness He offers us, because we think freedom from our Maker is somehow going to be better. And it's total madness.

There is an eternity and there will be a judgement. And one way of looking at it will be this: did you choose joy? Or were you so suspicious that you turned it down? So suspicious of God being a killjoy that you thought, maybe there's something better, maybe God doesn't really want me to have fun.

Whilst you are young, choose the joy that God offers. Yes, living God's ways involves sacrifice, it involves picking up your Cross and following Him. But, just as for Jesus, that is because actually going God's way is still the deepest joy. And whilst the best is yet to come, there is still so much in His world to enjoy now. And He wants you to enjoy it.

So, make the most of being young. Verse 10, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off troubles from your body. Look after yourself, body and mind. Turn off the social media feeds that make you feel so insecure. And get up and go do something fun.

Make the most of it, this is God's gift to you in these years. You won't always be young. Because "youth and vigour are hebel". Not "meaningless", I don't think that's the right translation here. Remember, *hebel*, it's like breath on a cold morning. One day your youth and vigour won't be there. You won't just be naturally fit, able to run around and do anything, without feeling it afterwards.

So, rejoice in the days of your youth. Secondly, **Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.**

Chapter 12: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.'"

Remember your Creator, whilst you are young, before you grow old. This is Qoheleth making his appeal to the teenager who thinks: yeah, this is probably important, but I'll think about God when I'm older. Qoheleth is saying, *you really need to respond to Him now*. Yes, in theory you can come back to God when you are older, but you really ought to come to Him now.

There are things in life, aren't there, which we tend to put off, which we could really do with sorting out now: having a pension; making a will; thinking about what kind of property would be good to grow old in. And people say, 'don't put it off. You won't be able to get your head round it when you're older.' And we think yeah, it will be fine. But then it's not.

Or, to take an example for the young - when someone says, get started with your revision now. Or, that big piece of homework, don't put it off. If you do, you won't be able to get your head round it later. And you think, yeah, it will be fine. And then it's not.

This is one of those things, says Qoheleth. Before you grow old, remember your Creator. Because you know what, if you do grow old, and you go through a decline like the one described here, then it won't be easy to change your mind about anything.

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. And that word, remember - it's a strong concept. It's not just 'think about God'. When God remembers us in the Bible, it moves Him to act, it moves Him to save. Remembering your Creator, it means coming to Him, giving Him your heart, putting Him at the centre, turning to Him.

Anything else is actually a step away. If you're intending to get somewhere, if you're headed for a target, you don't think: *well, for my first step I'll go the other way instead. I can always turn back later*. Remember your Creator now. Because if you keep going down a path away from Him, that might turn out to be a path where your heart gradually hardened, until you forgot about Him altogether. One step away from the Lord, but I'll come back later. Then another, then another, then another...

And look at the images in these verses here. The very idea of putting one foot in front of the other looks hard, let alone turning around!

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before you go through a process that looks quite a lot like uncreation. Do you see that, verse 2: the lights going out. "The sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark." Darkness to light, that's how creation goes. This is the other way around, the lights going out.

"And the clouds return after the rain." One of those days when it's one heavy shower after another, merging into longer spells of rain. No clearing of the sky. In youth, when troubles come, it's normally a setback, and then you recover and move on. As you grow old, the setbacks just keep coming.

And the keepers of the house tremble - the hands. The strong men stoop - the legs. The grinders cease because they are few - the teeth. Those looking through the windows grow dim - the eyes. The doors to the street are closed - the ears. So the sound of grinding fades.

Even so, the sound of birds at dawn wakes you up, even if their songs are faint. Someone has joked that as you grow older, the phrase "doing an all nighter", now just means sleeping through the night without waking for the toilet.

There's fear too, verse 5. Fear of heights, the loss of confidence after a fall, the fear of going out. 'Dangers in the streets' - everyone looks threatening.

The almond tree blossoms - the hair going white. The grasshopper drags itself along - one who used to spring and jump and run, now hobbling on a zimmer frame. And desire is no longer stirred. You go out for a meal, the food arrives, and you're just dismayed by how much there is.

And then comes death: "man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets."

And the youth group are thinking: *what are you going on about Qoheleth?* This is never going to happen to me. Well, okay, I guess it will, but it's so far off. It's unimaginable. Well, as someone once said, "Inside every old person, is a young person wondering what happened."

And Qoheleth wants you to consider this *now*. And remember your Creator *now*. And it's interesting that He uses the word "Creator", rather than just saying "God". Before you go through this process of uncreation, which, whether rapid or drawn out, is going to happen - before you go through uncreation, remember your Creator. Remember the One who can bring light out of darkness.

I've found the last few of years that I sometimes get tinnitus. I can hear my pulse, sometimes very loudly, in one ear. When it's bad, I wake up thinking it's thundering. It makes for a good joke, though. "How are you, Christopher?" "Not so good. I've got tinnitus." "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." "Yes, so am I."

But sometimes, when I have it, you sort of forget about it. You tune it out. You think, is it still there, and it's like you almost have to listen for it, and there it is.

That's a bit like the reality of death, the reality of ageing. Death is a drumbeat which sounds through the whole of life. But we get really good at tuning it out. Our brains adjust so that we can't hear it. Well, hear it now, says Qoheleth. Hear it whilst you are young. [When preaching this sermon, there was quite a lot of drumming my hands together through this section!]

Ahead of you is a process of ageing. A process of decline. Eventually, verse 6, the silver cord is severed, the golden bowl will be broken, the pitcher will be shattered, the wheel broken at the well - no more water. These are all images of death. All images of something precious, shattering. An event that feels that it should not happen.

And the dust returns to the ground it came from and the spirit, the breath, returns to God who gave it. That's Genesis 2 imagery, in reverse.

Listen for that drumbeat. Don't tune it out. And as you go through life, every time you fall, every injury, every grey hair - don't tune it out. This is happening. There is a process of uncreation going on, because of *the* Fall, because of sin. The language here is reminding you of that.

And who should you remember as you face that process of uncreation? *Your Creator*. The One who shines light into the darkness of our hearts, and shows us Jesus. Jesus who came, Jesus who died, Jesus who rose, so that we can be forgiven, and justified, and glorified.

Remember your Creator, so that you might become a new creation in Jesus. So that you will know life with Him forever.

Otherwise, youth group, all you young people full of hope and promise and ideas and ambitions. Otherwise, whatever story you write for yourself, even if it's a one in a million kind of a story, verse 8: *hebel. Hebel hebelim*. Breath. Gone.

So youth group - rejoice in the days of your youth. And remember your Creator, in the days of your youth. That is how to have life, now, and forever.

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Well, I don't know about you, but when I get to the end of a book, one of the things I want to know is what other people think of it. I'm curious to know if the things that I got from it are in any way similar to the things that other people got from it.

So, often, when I've finished a book, I go online and I start reading reviews of it. I want to see: did other people see the same things that I saw? Did they get the same points that I did. Or did they get entirely different points? Did I get it right? Maybe this is why some people enjoy being in a bookclub.

And this is a bit like what's going on in these final verses of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth has stopped speaking, in verse 8, finishing as he had begun: Hebel hebelim! Everything is hebel. And now, for these last few verses, someone else is speaking.

And it's a summing up. It's a bit like saying, okay, what did we get from that? What did we make of it? Did we enjoy listening to Qoheleth, or not? Perhaps it was it a mixture - sometimes we really enjoyed listening to Qoheleth really enjoyable, sometimes we found it really hard.

So, what have you made of Ecclesiastes? And what was the point? These verses are a little mini-review, at the end of what Qoheleth said.

And actually, these verses ask, did you realise that what you've been listening to are really the Words of the One Shepherd? Did you realise that this book was inspired by the God who speaks to His people and shepherds them through His words? This was God's Wisdom you were reading, spoken through Qoheleth.

And second, these verses say, did you get the point? Because the point is ever so simple, but absolutely transformative when someone gets it, and lives it. This was the point: Fear God, keep His commandments, there will be a judgement. The Words of the One Shepherd were given through this book, to land you at that conclusion.

So, two points from this passage. **The Words of the One Shepherd**, that's what Ecclesiastes is. And, **Fear God, keep His commandments, there will be a judgement**. That was the point.

First, then: **The Words of the One Shepherd** (verses 9-14). What you've been listening to were the words of Qoheleth. Verses 9 and 10 make that clear. At the same time, verse 11, they were given, by the One Shepherd. That is, these are God's Words.

So, as we've gone through Ecclesiastes, if at any stage you have been thinking: *ah, I don't like this. Just give me the teachings of Jesus, my Good Shepherd. That's what I want to hear*. Well, that's what this was, ultimately.

The words of Qoheleth are genuinely his and in his style. At the same time, they are the words of God, the One Shepherd.

And here are some things about these words. First, they were very carefully crafted. Verse 9: Qoheleth was wise, but he also took seriously the task of passing that wisdom on. Some people are wise, but hopeless at teaching. They just don't see the point in trying to be interesting. Not so Qoheleth. He was very careful in putting together what he had to say.

He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. Proverbs are sayings, sometimes just a pithy little sentence, sometimes a bit longer, like: here is something that I have seen under the sun. Ecclesiastes has been full of them.

And they've been selected and put together very carefully. Except you may be thinking: *hold on, really?* Haven't we acknowledged many times, and especially through the middle chapters, that Ecclesiastes can be really hard to follow? That you feel like you lose the thread?

So at the start, you feel like you're following the thread in chapters 1 and 2. But by the time you get to the end of chapter 3 you have the feeling of, *hold on, where are we going?* And that feeling continues. How one bit leads to the next, you're not altogether sure. It's only when you get to chapter 11 that you sense some conclusions being reached. And then there is the poem about old age and death, and then this neat little conclusion. So, there's structure again at the end, but in the middle, it was a bit of a blur. How can we say that this was carefully crafted?

Because, I think, even the form of this book helps to convey something of its message. Think about it: isn't this quite a lot like life? The first years of your life - it feels like there is a structure, a path you follow. You do this, then that, and then the other. There is youth and promise and the sky's the limit. But that's a lie, because then comes being an adult, and then it's just a blur. The sense of being on an upward trajectory goes. The sense of being on any kind of trajectory goes. Time whizzes by as you go from this to that and then to the other, and can you believe it's November²⁰ already - until the sense of a trajectory reasserts itself, but now it's this: old age, decline, death.

The structure of this book powerfully conveys much of what it says, I think. Those of us who are in that forty, fifty year blur in the middle. Will you not just stop a second and consider?

So, this has been carefully arranged, I think. Granted, Qoheleth is the sort of teacher who makes you work for it. He doesn't make it easy, but he does make it fascinating²¹.

Another thing about these words: verse 10, "He searched to find just the right words," - words of delight, more literally - "and what he wrote was upright and true." They were true words, unflinchingly true. But, at the same time, they were words of delight, words that we enjoy hearing.

And some might come to mind. Maybe the poem at the start about everything going round and round, or the one in chapter 3 about times and seasons. Or again, the poem just before this passage about growing old. They are put together well and we enjoy listening to them. We appreciate them.

²⁰ No prizes for guessing which month this sermon was preached in.

²¹ So, this is one of the reasons I think it's such a shame when a book or a sermon series on Ecclesiastes concentrates on the beginning, the end, and misses out much of the middle.

Again, though, you may be thinking: *words of delight, really?* Isn't that a bit of a stretch, overall, when much of Ecclesiastes is so gloomy? Hasn't this Qoheleth guy been a bit miserable?

But, I think, that is a fundamental misconception about this book - that Qoheleth is a really gloomy guy, who is trying to drag you down into his gloomy perspective of the world.

I don't think that's right. I don't think Qoheleth is trying to drag us down into a gloomy perspective. I think he's stepping down into ours, and exposing it for what it is. The perspective that a great many people have, and which we sometimes lapse back into, where we go about life as though this fallen and broken, this under-the-sun world, is all that there is, and that you can write for yourself a beautiful, happy story full of meaning and significance in under-the-sun world. He's stepping into that perspective and he's saying: *Come on. This is hebel!* If you really think under-the-sun world is all that there is, then everything is hebel, and *you* should be really gloomy.

Except, he says, I don't think you do really believe that. I think you know that there must be a bigger story. God has placed eternity on every person's heart, and you know that under-the-sun is not the whole story, it's just a chapter in the story.

So, throughout Ecclesiastes, he's kept on nudging us to look beyond under-the-sun, to the rest of the story. He's been nudging us towards those things that can only be true if there is a bigger story.

The idea of something new, for instance. There's nothing new *under the sun*, but there will be something new in the bigger story. The idea of work that endures. Not *under the sun*, not if this is it. But in the bigger story, yes, there's the possibility that our work was not in vain. What about justice, things being put right? *Under the sun*, no. In the bigger story, yes.

And so, as we've gone through Ecclesiastes, these words have been words of delight, and we've often sung of heaven after the sermons that we've preached.

But at the same time, and this is another thing about these words, they have been painful. Like goads, verse 11, sticks with sharp nails embedded in them, cattle prods, to make a stubborn beast keep moving in the direction that it should be moving.

That's what God's Words can be like. He's our Shepherd and His Words spur us on. They keep us moving in the direction we should be going. Sometimes that's because His Words delight us and we move towards them. At other times, His Words will be painful to hear, but they correct us. They stop us from lapsing back into living as though under-the-sun world were it, as though all I need for meaning and purpose is here.

Ecclesiastes may well have hurt at times. It may have jolted. That's what Our Shepherd's words sometimes do. But they are necessary, to get us to the place that He wants to get us.

So, verse 12, "be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body." Now, I don't think that is saying, don't read anything other

than the Bible. But it is saying, there are big things that the Bible has to tell you, things about God, things about you, things about how to be saved, things about what you're here for. And once you hear the Bible's answers to those questions, *those are the answers*, so don't carry on looking for them in other places.

Rather, carry on delighting in them. Carry on pondering them and thinking about them. And carry on exploring and enjoying the life that God has given you in this world. But don't go searching in other places for the answers to those big questions that are here. Just hear the Shepherd's voice, guiding you home.

When you were a child, you used to know this. You asked questions, because you wanted answers, and when you got answers, that was great. Be like that again. Don't be someone who says, yes, this Biblical take on things is very interesting, this book of Ecclesiastes is very interesting, and then just goes off and studies something else.

The words of the One Shepherd, given through teachers like Qoheleth, that's what you need. That's what this book has been.

And what's been the point of it all? Simply this. **Fear God, Keep His commandments, there will be a judgement.**

Verse 13, "Now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." Or even, simply, the whole of man. This is what life is about. This is what we're here for. Fear God, keep His commandments.

Hallowing His name. Loving God, delighting in Him. But not treating Him casually. Honouring Him, revering Him, knowing that He is awesome and majestic and mighty. And as we delight in Him and honour Him, delighting in His ways and seeking to walk in them.

Because there will be a judgement. There will be a summing up. Verse 14: "For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

And again, children often seem to have a sense of this. Actions have consequences. We reinforce that with them all the time, although I wonder whether they know it deep down to start with. Actions have consequences.

Whatever the case, it seems to me that they know this is the question to ask of Christianity: What happens when I die? What happens at the end? Are there consequences? It's the question children know to ask when you're telling them they need to do something. *What happens if I don't?* So they know this is the question to ask of Christianity. What happens if I don't? Are there consequences, because if there are no consequences, then there is no point to being a Christian, because it doesn't matter.

Children know this is the question to ask: is there a judgement?

Adults, however, it would seem to me, suppress this truth. They run away from it. No judgement. No consequences. Even though it goes against everything we feel to be right, because in so many other ways, we want there to be consequences for people's actions, we demand it - but just in the short term. Not ultimately, because, well, we don't like the idea that there are consequences to face.

So, what do we do? We shrink the framework. Under the sun - we make it the whole story. Everything happens in under-the-sun world. We live as though this is all that there is. And we try to be sunny and optimistic about that. And Qoheleth has come down into that perspective and shown us how gloomy it really is if we are intellectually honest. Because if we are, if under the sun is it, then everything is hebel. Your work, your achievements, everything, everyone.

Admit it. Under the sun isn't the whole story, it's one chapter in a bigger story. Admit what you basically knew as a child. There will be judgement. It's the only way you can have the conclusion that you know to be right, that everything truly does matter.

Admit it, because when you do, congratulations - after twelve chapters of Ecclesiastes you have now found yourself at the beginning of Wisdom. And knowing the fear of God, you will ask the question that you need to ask, how then can I be saved?

How can I fare well in that judgement? It's one of the ways to characterise the difference between wisdom and folly. Wisdom asks that question. Folly hides from it. How, then, can I be saved?

But having asked it, you are ready to hear of the Creator who came into Creation, the Author who wrote Himself into the story, who stepped into under-the-sun world, the Shepherd who gave Himself for His sheep, who took all our sin and brokenness on Himself and died for it, in order to make the crooked straight. To redeem us. To rescue us. To do something new.

This is what Qoheleth has been doing. Stepping down in order to redeem. Showing the world that what it calls light is actually darkness, that what it calls meaning is actually hebel. And giving us the conclusion that we know to be right, that everything does matter, and it matters because there is a bigger story. To bring us to the beginning of wisdom. Actually, the beginning, middle and end of Wisdom. Fear God, Keep His commandments. This is the whole of man.

To wake up in the morning, and to know that this day is from God, and for God, and if you are to do anything good, it will be through God. And to live in under-the-sun world for His glory, as we look forwards to the new thing that He is doing.