

ARPC Sunday 10th April 2022 OOS

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn: All glory, praise and honour

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Sermon: Fear God and Keep His Commandments

Well done everyone we have reached the conclusion of Ecclesiastes. I know that many of you have enjoyed the challenge. Thank you for your encouragement along the way and for sticking with it. Do speak to me and each other about what wisdom you have acquired from the Teacher about life under the sun.

This section is an afterword, a comment on the Teacher and his message, by the editor, followed by three specific instructions. His goal is to praise and commend the Teacher but importantly to instruct fear and obedience to God for everyone as the way of wisdom.

Praise for the wise Teacher (v 9-11)

Do you have a story of a teacher who was very good, who taught you well, who inspired you? One of my favourite films is "Dead Poets society" where John Keating, a progressive English teacher tries to encourage his students to break free from the norm and go against the status quo and live life unapologetically, with significant consequences for them both good and bad. The editor of Ecclesiastes introduced us to the Teacher in 1:1 with "*The words of the Teacher, (Qoheleth) son of David, king of Jerusalem.*" Now the editor, concludes by praising and highlighting the wisdom of the Teacher and his ways.

He is wise: his understanding of life and wisdom led to advice for living as he makes sense of what is often meaningless (Hebel) under the sun.

He imparted knowledge. He is a communicator, a teacher, he imparts what he knows to others, to the people. Good teachers do that don't they! They know their subject and they find ways of imparting their knowledge to their students and they care about you and treat you as an individual. It is a difficult task, and we should acknowledge and respect all good teachers. He has covered many important aspects of life; he has spoken of nature and its cycles, time, suffering, money and riches, work, friendship, politics, the paradoxes of life, the future, the sovereignty of God, how to live in difficulty, old age and death, it has been a comprehensive look at life, with good understanding and wise practical instruction for living well.

How has the Teacher imparted his knowledge? Pondered, thought about things, searched them out, examined and researched, set in order, and in communication he has found the right words. He has used poetry, proverbs, instruction and much of it has been memorable, such as his poem on time in chapter 3.

However, this is not simply about doing a job well, this is a serious business, the words he wrote are upright and true. So, he commends the Teachers words and this collection of sayings. They are good and worth considering and following, as I believe we have found to be true.

This can be applied to Ecclesiastes and to the scriptures generally. The teacher commends all that has been written as upright and true. *"All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the people of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."* 2nd Timothy 3:16

ARPC takes the bible seriously and I commend to you all those who endeavour to communicate it well to you, those in 3D groups, those who teach our children, or in 121's, the leadership of Living Well and parents who consider how they should teach their children the truths about God and give them biblical wisdom. We are all to be wise teachers and the role of teacher is important. When we take time to think, and research the word of God and communicate it well and relevantly, we do a good thing.

David Gibson in his book tells us that the words upright and true also have the meaning of delightful, and another commentary confirmed this, translating it satisfying. Reading, understanding, teaching, and communicating the truth of the scriptures, is a pleasurable thing, what a wonderful task it is, and the editor says the Teacher (Qoheleth) is good at it!

A well-chosen proverb from the editor (v11) *"The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings are like firmly embedded nails-given by one Shepherd."*

Goads are cattle prods, pointed sticks that inflict pain to guide an animal. It's an image of rebuke and discipline; painful truth we might say when truth is given that corrects wrong thinking and behaviour. Sometimes tough things need to be said! Throughout, the Teacher has been saying to us, you are going to die, accept that fact and learn to live in light of that fact. He has at times shocked us, upset us, and challenged our thinking in this regard, *"and I declared the dead who had already died, are happier than the living who are still alive"* 4:2; *"a good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth"* 7:1 Sharp and painful words to help us wise up, accept death and get on with living!

Firmly embedded nails driven deep and very hard to remove, and you can confidently place your expensive mirror or painting on them. The picture is of stability and security. The truth of wisdom, the truth of God's word is a stable, dependable, a trustworthy thing and life can be lived, enjoyed and appreciated when we live within the security and stability of its teaching. God's rules govern the game of life, and he is no killjoy or grumpy old man, but the creator who has come that we might have life and have it in all its fullness. The prodigal son discovered this fact after he decided to rebel and wish his father dead, but life ended up in poverty and disgrace.

The fact that the words have been given by one Shepherd is intriguing. Is he talking about David or Solomon or another wise person? Most interpreters see this as a reference to God, hence the capital S, based on a prophesy in Ezekiel about the Messiah, being the one Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:24-25). Jesus himself took that idea and applied it to himself,

"I am the good shepherd"..... "They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." John 10:11-16

There is great stability in being able to trust the words we read. The words of the wise are like firmly embedded nails, the words of Jesus, the word of God is truly dependable and a fantastic guide for life.

Three important lessons in conclusion (v12-14)

Beware (v12)

Beware of what? Beware of adding to the teaching of wisdom and of excessive study. Many of us know that study is extremely tiring. The use of our brains requires a lot of blood supply and therefore energy, it is actually hard work, and is accompanied by levels of stress in terms of the importance to us of what we are studying for, a performance, or exams or in presentations. The warning here is to be careful about what you study and about over studying.

Beware of what you read and think about, beware of following every new idea, and beware if it takes you outside of what you know to be true and trustworthy. When I left college, the big idea was post modernism, and the challenge it presented to the truth of Christianity. Now we are not only postmodern but post Christian. When I first came to Dublin the new idea at the time was Open Theism, the idea that God does not know the future, and many were talking about how it had infiltrated churches through certain pastors in Dublin. Today we are told that revisionist theology leads us to abandon the traditional view of marriage and the church needs to revise its thinking regarding what marriage is. While we should listen and debate; we are warned to beware of anything in addition to what we have been given as the word of God. This is a warning about the influence of ideas of wisdom that challenge what we know to be true and contained within the wisdom of God's word. And while it is good to read and think about these things, it is the Teachers contention that we can spend too much time on all these ideas and isms and too much study only wearies us and is therefore not helpful. Beware of adding to the truth of scripture, and over studying alternative ideologies.

Fear God (v13)

The idea of fearing God automatically moves us to think negatively about God and what the implications of fearing God mean and practically look like. But fear of God must be understood by us as reverence and respect for God. The prodigal son did not reverence and respect his Father, he wished him dead, that is what a lack of fear of God looks like. For example, if a person disrespects a court, they refuse to recognise it and obey its rulings.

The call to fear God has come to us before in Ecclesiastes for example in relation to time and eternity in Ch 3:14-15

"I know that everything God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so everyone will revere him."

The argument is that what God does is eternal, we cannot add to it and cannot take away from it. He is above all things, controls all things and is sovereign over all things for all eternity. We are locked into time. When we look at the past, we might want to change things or relive them, but we cannot. When we look ahead, we do not even know how the rest of this day might work out, we cannot control the future or alter it.

The answer to why God has set the times as he has, is that we might fear him who placed us in time. God does it so that humanity will enjoy life as given and will fear him.

In Ch 5:1-7 The Teacher says, *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God”* *“stand in awe of him”* and we were instructed what fear of God, a respect of God looks like;

- **Listen to him. (v1)** We are to come to listen, the great call to Israel in the OT was, *Hear O Israel*, (Deut 6:4) Jesus would speak to the people with this instruction, *Those, who have ears to ear let them hear*, and the apostle Paul reminds the church, *“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* Romans 10:17
- **Pray carefully (v2-3)** The fool will speak many words they spill out their mouths. Therefore, distance yourself from the fool and do not speak many words before God. Jesus highlighted this distance in the prayer he taught us, *“Our Father in heaven”* and he said, *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* Matthew 5:7-8 Pray carefully knowing you come only by grace and to one who is transcendent.
- **Obey, fulfil your vows. (v4-6)** There is nothing as detrimental to a relationship than lying, making vows or promises and not keeping them. To do so to your headmaster as a pupil would be foolish, to do so as a child to your parents would be foolish, to do so to the Guards would be foolish, to do so before a judge in a court of law would be foolish and to do so before the transcendent Lord Almighty would be foolish. Keep your vows made before God.

This is how you fear God and stand in awe of God

In Ch 7 the teacher considered the paradox's we encounter in life and his advice was the memorable wisdom (v16-18) Do not be super-righteous, or overwise, that will destroy you. Do not be over wicked (that is very wicked) or a fool, why die before your time? He tells us it is good to acknowledge and hold to both aspects of the wisdom given, that is don't be super-righteous or very wicked, and the **one who fears God** *“will avoid all extremes”* or *“will succeed at both”* *“or will follow both”!*

His wisdom in the face of life's paradoxes, and those things that are difficult to understand is we should avoid trying to please God with a pharisaic super-righteousness, with a human pride that says if I'm good and religious then I will avoid any disaster in life. Such a response means we do not know God properly, he is to us a vindictive bully whom we must somehow please, nor do we understand the reality of life that the righteous do sometimes perish despite their righteousness, and most tragically it is a salvation by works and we do not properly fear God and seek his grace.

He is also saying neither should we give up on God when life makes no sense and abandon all restraint and turn to wicked living. Super-righteousness destroys our lives and super-wickedness leads to an early death. In this we also see God as capricious, vindictive and we rail against him, or we see him as being powerless, unloving and uncaring and so we abandon restraint, belief and sin without fear.

To truly fear God will cause us to avoid these extremes and by faith recognise we must trust him and walk with him through the doubt and questions. Fear God.

Lastly in Ch 8:12 The Teacher says, *"I know it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before God."*

Ecclesiastes is wisdom for life when it doesn't always make sense, in Hebel. Whereas Proverbs, also a wisdom book, tells us what the normal outcome should be. In essence it is you reap what you sow which is normally correct but that is the dilemma the teacher has uncovered in his search for meaning in life; sometimes those who sowed a righteous life died in their righteousness early.

Generally, however, it will go well with those who are righteous, and it will not usually go well with those who are wicked. Therefore, wisdom encourages people to walk and react to all injustices with the steady walk of doing the right thing at the right time. That is a position of faith and trust in God as the Teacher says, Fear God, humbly and obediently walk in his ways.

Keep his commandments (v13b)

"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole (duty) of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

The instruction to fear God is worked out in obedience to his revealed will, this he says is the whole duty of humanity.

Here is the conclusion of the matter, in our quest for meaning in life, Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole (duty) of man. The word duty, if have your bible open is contained within brackets because it is not in the original text. So, it should read, *"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man"*. It may not read very well, but it teaches us that obedience to God is our essence, it was what we were made for, and it ultimately where we find meaning.

The reason for our obedience, given here is the threat of judgement. That works because no-one likes to be punished, it's basically why we try to obey the speed limits in our cars, the threat of financial or other penalties keeps us obedient.

However, the Christian does not fear God and keep his commandments because of fear of punishment, because the punishment for our sin has been already placed upon Jesus and God's wrath has been satisfied. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Therefore, our response is for a different reason, one of grateful thanks for the one who has taken our punishment upon himself, our response of obedience is in response to his grace towards us, his choosing us and his love for us. Love is the motivation for obedience not

judgement. The teacher has looked comprehensively at life and in every aspect, in time, suffering, with money and riches, work, friendship, politics, the paradoxes of life, the future, in good times and bad, in old age and death, and his conclusion is, we find our essence or meaning in God and in obedience to him. In Jesus we find the same hope grounded in love. *"If you love me, you will obey my commands" John 14:15*

I started with a reference to the film "Dead poets society" and the danger in John Keatings philosophy was he did not factor God into his motivation for life. The editor is not so unwise as he finishes in v14 reminding us that we will be judged or give account for our lives to God. The question posed then is are you ready? Are you prepared to meet God and give account to him of the wonderful gift of life he has given you?

Those who are wise do prepare by acknowledging God as their Creator and Saviour and in the security of knowing God in Jesus are then able to live under the guidance and security of his wise words.

The conclusion of the matter in this Quest for meaning in life is found in God and specifically to Fear God and obey his commands.

"This is love for God: to obey his commands; and his commands are not burdensome."
1st John 5:3

"For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." *Philippians 1:21*

Hymn: I will offer up my life

Announcements

Presentation to Stuart Ferguson

Prayers of Intercession

Hymn: All Glory Be To Christ

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

"The Teacher's words are upright and true . . . they are goads . . . and firmly embedded nails." How does this description help and challenge you?

What have you learned from this study of Ecclesiastes? What will be your key takeaways?

One of the main themes in Ecclesiastes has been the certainty of death and the final judgment. Considering these things, how will the way you live each day be impacted?