

Ecclesiastes chs 11-12. RISK

Home Group Notes.

I read of a church that doesn't call its groups Home Groups but Connect Groups. This is way much cooler and brilliantly says The Most Important thing about these groups – that here we should connect to each other and to God. Nice.

Next Sunday you'll get a cracking sermon but no HGnotes because you'll be doing Christianity Explored. Possibly this evening you might be aware of the others who will be joining you next week and you can pray about how to make them feel at home and to help them as they take the risk to come and sit near you and think about spiritual stuff.

There won't be welcome, worship, word or works. But you'll still need to welcome them. There won't be any worship. Not for a bit. Word will be done by the DVD and the booklet that you will each get and your reading of Mark's gospel.

Meanwhile this week:

Welcome: Who here has done an Alpha? How many time!? Where and with whom and did anyone else in your group continue with Jesus / Church / faith? Has anyone done CE or some other equivalent?

Worship: I'd encourage you to have one more really good worship sing song before next week. Psalm 6

Word:

1. Can anyone remember anything James said?
2. 11.1 – what does this mean?
3. Read 11.1-6 as a whole – what's the thrust of it?
4. Read 11.7-12.1 as a whole – what's the thrust of this bit?
5. 11.9 be happy vs judgement warning – is this a contradiction?
6. 11.8, 12.1 – days of darkness, trouble – what's this pointing to?
7. Read 12.1-12.7 – what's the thrust of this section.
8. Grinders could refer to people who grind out flour or to what else?
9. Why did I want the One word sermon to be Remember?
10. Why did I change my mind to Risk.
11. Read 12.9-12 – why do I think this is the call to stop thinking about it and commit?
12. Read 12.13-14 Why do Some (not me) preachers think that this is the only bit in Eccles that matters? Why do I think they're wrong?

Works: Pray, for next week especially. Perhaps you might pray about taking a Risk to Enjoy the Gift of Life...

//*/ THE SERMON

We've been trying over these last few weeks to **find the Meaning to Life** by looking at the Book of Ecclesiastes. The main big drum beat of the book is that Life is Meaningless, **Vanity of vanities** all is vanity. It's all **vapour**, a passing mist.

Ecclesiastes is a style of writing called **Wisdom** literature – it's full of advice about **how to live** and what life is for. For example – **Sow your seed** in the morning and at evening let not your hands be idle. (11.6) this is good advice to **keep going**. Times maybe hard, invest yourself and your money in different things and who knows what will really pay off, you don't know so **you must keep going**.

The great thing about this sort of wisdom is that by and large you already know it. What's **hard is to apply** it. It is hard to keep going when everything seems to be **falling in on you**, you know that it's right

to keep going but if you've ever been **rejected** for a job and then had to **pick yourself** up and try again. **It's hard.** (You'll be glad to hear that I was rejected from three jobs before I came here! I'm not sure what that means!)

Wisdom is easy – it's the applying of it. But reading Wisdom is good for us because it **encourages** us and reminds us that **this is the right way** so keep going.

Ecclesiastes is unique in the Wisdom books because it says from the first chapter that **Life Sucks**. Meaningless! Everything is Vanity, Futile, vapour.

You can **play by the rules** and get really wealthy but then who knows who will **inherit** your wealth and what they will then do with it?

You can play by the rules and still see **Idiots promoted** over your head. You can play by the rules and still see the **wicked prosper** and it all seems to terribly **unfair**.

Solomon writing this says Cheer up! Because **both the Good and the Bad** – whether you play by the rules or not – it ultimately doesn't make a great deal of difference because **everyone dies**.

A lot of sermons and **commentaries** conclude that actually **Ecclesiastes is Meaningless** right up until these last few verses in ch12 – so the book concludes: **Fear God**, keep His commandments for this is your duty, for God will bring everyone and everything to a Final day of judgement.

It's as if they're saying **Life is meaningless** without God (yes) and in order to **keep us in check** we need the final threat of judgement! (well you have a point).

But I think Ecclesiastes is trying to be so **much more helpful** than that in our pursuit of meaning in life.

The Really Big point I was trying to make last week was about **celebrating Life Now**. “**Enjoy**” was the one word sermon.

We spend a lot of time talking about heaven and eternal life and I wonder if we **accidentally appear to belittle** the life we live now as if all that matters is the life beyond this life. As if this life was **just a training** ground, a **waiting** room. So my point last week was Enjoy life Now.

Chapter 10, you may remember, was full of **useful advice** that encouraged us to **play** by the rules. It is better to be wise than to be foolish, even if your life is cut short, even if injustice happens, its still better to be wise.

Chapter 11 starts off by encouraging us to be **generous**, take risks, invest broadly. **Cast your bread** upon the waters – it's a bit like saying Don't put all your **eggs in one** basket, **Nothing ventured** nothing gained.

Let God be a part of your thinking and come into your values and your **meaning** to life and into the answer about **who you are** and what you would like to **do** with your few **short years** on this earth. **If God isn't** part of your thinking – if everything that you value and love is all that you can see and touch **Under the Sun**, then life will be very **meaningless**. So my advice in the first sermon was to **Look Up**. Lift your eyes above the Horizon, see the God who has made you and who still **cares** about His Creation.

And if you struggle with the **injustice** in the world – well good for you. **Solomon saw** so much that was wrong with his courts and legal system and despite being terribly wise and rich and powerful he did nothing.

And it made me **very cross** and may be we should look out for things like this that **wind us up** and get us going. My one word in that sermon was **Hand**, because one of the things that upset me was Solomon's **inability to see God** at work around him, in the midst of all his 'Life's Unfair' stuff in chs 3&4 – he couldn't see God at work. Alas we can be like that too. Dear God, **Open our eyes** to your hand at work in our lives!

Then came the word **GIFT** – it was a plea really for us to come to see all that God has given us as Gift. For me to see **my life** as a gift, **you** as a gift – if I can do that then that will **seriously alter** how I go about life.

Then last week **Enjoy**. To me this whole book can be summarised in the verse: **Enjoy life with your wife** whom you love all the day long of this meaningless life that God has given to you under the sun. (9.9)

Those of you who can remember all that will be saying What's New this week. What I'm saying is: keep going, be generous, be bold, **Take some Risks**.

Now 11v9 we come to this marvellous **glorification of Youth**. So enjoy what strength and health you have! Let **your heart give you joy** in the days of your youth, Follow the ways of your heart ... - sounds a bit **Disney**? That's fine right up until you decide that you want to grow up and be an **Asset Stripper** – or any other sort of stripper for that matter. **Follow your heart** – it sounds good in a song, until you wonder if you are being tempted to steal or commit adultery and then suddenly it's your heart that needs keeping in check. Now you need external help, now you need Wisdom.

I wanted my one word sermon to be **Remember**. Remember God. Remember God in your youth. Yes **enjoy** all the joy and passions and **vigour** of Youth, make the most of these few short years whilst you have all your **faculties** and enthusiasm.

But into that you must Remember God – you must remember God because you will need Him to help you when following the desires of your **heart is not the healthy** thing to be doing. Life has about it this **constant paradox** – 11v9 – Be **happy** young man ... but know that God will bring you to **judgement**. **Joy** is such a precious part of life and we opt too quickly for the **shallow hollow trivial** versions that lead only to emphasising how very meaningless life is. A C3 Rabbi (called Rab) said Man will have to answer to God for everything he saw and did **not enjoy**. (did not **make the most of** – we might say).

I'm reminded of a scene in Lord of The Rings – a conversation between the hero Aragorn and the feisty lady **Eowyn** – he asks her What do you **fear** and she replies – “A **cake**, to stay behind bars until old age accept them and all chance of valour has gone beyond recall or desire”. (Two Towers if you were wondering ...)

I'd like to change my mind. I said I'd like the one word sermon to be Remember – actually if you remember anything today I'd like it to be the word **Risk**.

Take the **Risk to enjoy** life. You'll need to remember God to do that properly.

It's good to remember God now, in our younger days. It's good for us to **encourage Mikey and Sarah** as they seek to help our kids to remember God in their youth.

When I say **take more Risks** – I don't mean the ones that you already like doing – Go mountain climbing and outdoor adventurous stuff – especially if that's what you already do – I'm suggesting other risks that you might find tougher - **risk praying out loud**.

Risk asking your **neighbours** over for coffee or a meal.

Risk the name of **Jesus on your lips** whilst you are in the Pub being obedient to last week's sermon!

And not in a swearing kind of way. Risk forgiving someone who really knows how to get your goat.

Risk.

Because – chapter 12 comes to us all if **Death** doesn't catch us first.

We have either this short life to live or the **joys of becoming old**. Solomon now describes what he feels it means to grow old – **pleasure** of youth goes – your body starts **creaking** like an old house, you stoop over more and look up less, your **teeth are worn** down and grind less, your eyes grow dim and you **see**

less, you don't sleep as well as you once did so you are up with the Lark anyway. Not that you can **hear** the birds as clearly as you once did. **Fears** that didn't seem to trouble you before hand (12.5 Jerusalem Bible translates this as **When going uphill** is an ordeal) – the dangers of the **streets** – start becoming real fears for you. Your hair goes as white as an **almond** tree in blossom, you have all the **bounce** and joy of a **dying grasshopper**, and as for sex.... The Hebrew says the **Caper** berry no longer affects you – we're not sure what that means but maybe Capers were thought to help the appetite or the taste buds, but some think they may have been thought of as an ancient equivalent of an oyster. There comes a time when even the **Capers won't help stir you!**

So Solomon says **Remember God in your old** age, before death, before the Silver cord is severed. We're not quite sure what 12v6 means but it's clearly **euphemistic** for death – a bit like us saying **Shuffled off this** mortal coil, pushing up the **daisies**, gone to meet his maker. **If you are Old.** (My grandma worries terribly about old people – all of whom are 10-20 years younger than her) Please don't think to yourself – **its too late** for me, I've lived my life, I can't suddenly come to God, God will think I'm terribly shallow for turning to Him at this late point in life, No I've **made my bed** and I must lie in it.

Solomon says Don't think like that – **Remember God now – Look Up!** See the **Hand** of God at work in your life today, see life as a **Gift** and **Enjoy** it. Look to Jesus the Lord the **Giver** of Life! Now is the time, for you to take **one more** adventure – choose life – **Risk what little** faith you have on Jesus.

There's a poem that starts: **Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light.** I think its about **not accepting the shortness** of life, the inevitability of death, about **NOT resigning** yourself to your last few days.

I think it's a call to **make the most** of This Life – even if it is to be **stirred** up by anger, or the **injustice** you see in the world. It's the call to **enjoy** all that is good in the world, to see each other as a **Gift** and all that God has given you as a Gift, to see your skills and talents and **remaining** days as a Gift. That is my advice to you if you have not **committed** your life to **Jesus** – take the **risk**, rage against death - **Do not go gentle into that good night.**

We love to laugh at the bit that says “**of the making of many books** there is no end and much study wearies the body” – but actually what it is saying is **You know enough**, enough to make a decision. You know **enough about God** and about life to make a decision about how you want to live. You **cannot sit** on the fence forever. By this **Easter**, lots of you will have done **Christianity Explored**, you will have thought about Jesus and who he was and is and what Jesus offers to us and why and how we might take that invitation.

By Easter **you will have more than enough** to make a decision. Take that Risk. **Life is too short** but you know now that taking that Risk, to **commit your life** into the hands of Jesus isn't saying – this is my **insurance for life beyond death** but rather a way of discovering the God who wants to be **part of your life now** in this life. **Remember God** – be it in your **youth** or in your **old** age or if you are any age in between – for in **Jesus** you will find the **Lord the giver** of life, in Jesus you will find meaning and **purpose** to life.

May you come to **Look Up**, and see the **Hand** of God at work, and see **all** that God has given you as a **Gift** – even your own life: a gift and so **Enjoy** it, enjoy life. May you come to take the **Risk**, the call of God, to **enjoy** the Life that He **gives** us, a life that starts **now** and will carry us **through death** and judgement **and beyond** but it starts now, with the promise: Jesus says I am with you always to the very end of the age. Amen.