

Wisdom: Generous Boldness, and Joyful Gratitude

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Date: 09 November 2025

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[0:00] Thanks very much, Heather. And do keep your Bibles open at that passage as we look together through what I think is a really moving but a really meaningful passage that we're looking at this morning.

In the film Inception, it's one of my favourite films. I'm just not quite sure I understand what's going on in it. But if you've seen it, it's a great film. Near the beginning, Leonardo DiCaprio's character is asked this question.

And someone says to him, do you want to take a leap of faith or become an old man filled with regret, waiting to die alone?

He's been challenged to take on this incredibly dangerous, probably impossible mission. And of course he says yes, it would have been a much worse film if he'd said no. That sounds like a terrible idea.

But of course he says yes as well, because what could anyone fear more than that alternative that he's given? Becoming an old man filled with regret, waiting to die alone. The tragedy of coming to the end of life and realising that it hadn't been well lived, it had been wasted, is a terrifying thought.

[1:16] And really the whole of the book of Ecclesiastes and especially our passage this morning is to help give us the Bible's wisdom so that we avoid that mistake.

That whatever age we are this morning, whether it is in 70 years' time or whether we feel like we've got there already, that we would grow to become old men or old women, not filled with regret, but able to look back over our life and have joy and contentment.

Not because life has been a walk in the park and we've got everything right, but rather because by God's grace, by listening to God's word, by facing up to the reality of God's world and our place in that, we've been able to live with wisdom in all the days that God has given us.

So in some ways what could be bigger than this topic that we're looking at in these verses? Of course this one passage is not going to cover every single aspect of that, but I think just gives us this great picture and approach to help us living wisely all the days of our life.

As I said, this is our penultimate week in Ecclesiastes. We'll finish next week. I hope that a number of the themes and that we'll cover in these verses will be familiar to us by now.

[2:43] And I think as well the approach that this passage takes is perhaps something we'll be familiar with. There are two halves, I think, in this passage. In each of them we are faced up to a fact about reality, an undeniable fact about existence.

And then in each one we're told, so this is how to live in light of that. This is wise living facing up to the facts. Here is a life that you will not regret.

And so here's our first point then. Chapter 11, verses 1 to 6, we see this. We don't know what will happen, so live with generous boldness.

We don't know what will happen, that's the fact, so live with generous boldness. That's the wise living in light of that fact.

You do not know or you know not is repeated three times in those six verses. The preacher whose words we have here in Ecclesiastes is underscoring, as he has done previously, just the limits of our knowledge, our understanding, our ability to predict what will come next.

[3:55] Again, we are not God. We don't know the things God knows. Wisdom is not about knowing everything. It is just as much about knowing what we don't know and never will know.

Verse 2, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. We don't know what's just around the corner. We might make our plans, but ultimately things are out of our hands.

And that lack of control is the emphasis of verse 3. You know, if the clouds are full of rain, there's a good chance things are going to get wet. If a tree falls down, well there it is and there it will stay.

The point is there's nothing that you have done to decide that. You've not had any input into that. Things are beyond our control. Verse 5 goes on to speak about the child growing in the womb.

How we do not know, repeated again there, we do not know the way that life begins. We're able to see amazing kind of 3D ultrasound images of that incredible process.

[5:07] And medical experts can describe the different stages and what's expected to happen when. But the truth remains, we don't actually know God's work in bringing life to occur.

You know, how cells become a soul. Or lastly, verse 6, the image here is agricultural. The farmer plants the seeds, but again, he does not know which will give a good crop this year.

Which ones will grow, which ones will not. Those things are beyond his control. And the point there, as we've seen then, is that we don't know what will happen.

We're not going to spend ages on this because we've seen it before, repeated in Ecclesiastes. But also, I think because when we consider the evidence, even with all of our technological advancements that have gone on in the thousands of years since Ecclesiastes was written, we can't really argue against the fact.

We're not in control of these things. We can't tell the future. I've been reading Lord of the Rings recently. You've all been this close from like an avalanche of quotes from Middle Earth that I've managed to restrain myself.

[6:23] But I'll give you this one from Gandalf who says, That's true, isn't it? Our knowledge of the future is incredibly limited.

And that is the fact. And so the question is, and this is where wisdom comes in. The question is, what are we going to do with that fact? We don't know what will happen.

So how do we live? Well, the preacher says, so live with generous boldness. Live with generous boldness. This idea of generosity is verses 1 and 2.

Kind of casting, or it could be translated, sending out bread. Then into verse 2, giving portions to 7 or even 8. This is a picture of generously giving what we have out to those around us.

Of sharing what God has given us. One commentator speaks about giving to 7 or even 8. It's kind of the equivalent of how we'd say to the nth degree.

[7:27] It's reckless almost. A costly giving. And what is the motivation or the reasoning for this generosity, for this giving? Well, the second half of verse 2, For you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.

It's that exact fact that we've just spoken about, isn't it? We don't know what's going to happen. That is the opposite of the world's message. It says, well, we don't know what's going to happen, so you better hold on tight.

You better save up for a rainy day. You better make sure that all eventualities are covered so you can control things as much as possible. And yet the Bible says, look, you might not be here tomorrow.

And so share what you have today. It's an incredibly challenging message for us to hear. I think if we're honest, in our often kind of comfortable Christian world, we can be far more shaped by the world's approach, than the radical approach the Bible gives us here.

What would it look like for us to say, you know, these are the finances God has given me. This is the time that God has given me. These are the gifts that God has given me.

[8:41] These are the relationships that God has given me. I want generosity rather than self-interest or even kind of prudence to be the defining feature of how I use these to serve God and serve others.

Because I don't know what is around the corner. I don't know the future, so I want to use these things for good and for others in the present. That is the Bible's wisdom. And that is Jesus' wisdom as well.

Jesus, into the New Testament, tells the parable of the rich fool who builds bigger barns to store away for himself all the goods and crops his land produces, thinking he's sorted for many years to come.

In so many ways, he's the kind of the wise investor. And yet Jesus in that story says that that very night, his life is taken from him and his goods have benefited no one.

Wisdom means that not knowing what will happen motivates generosity rather than hinders it. So generosity, but it also motivates boldness as well, we see.

[9:52] Here's verse 4. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. We spoke last week about the wisdom of preparation, and that's true.

But here the preacher also says, well, at some point, you've just got to go for it. You can't live your whole life saying, well, what if? What could go wrong?

That if you wait for the perfect moment when you know success is certain, actually you'll never do anything. You know, you wait kind of four months for the Black Friday sales because you need a new toothbrush.

And then suddenly you start thinking, oh, there's Cyber Monday just around the corner, and then there's the January sales. There's always reasons we can put things off to not do things. And yet the Bible is saying here, look, wisdom sometimes just says just get on with things.

The wise life invests itself into various different tasks or opportunities or relationships rather than constantly thinking of reasons not to do things or always waiting.

[10:57] When Gretzky, he's the world's greatest ever ice hockey player, I'm told, I'm not a big fan, but he did famously say, you miss 100% of the shots you don't take.

The Bible would agree that if we just stand waiting, time and life itself would pass us by. So go for it, this passage is saying. Now, the Bible doesn't say that that guarantees success.

In fact, this passage says, doesn't it, we don't know what will be successful. And yet the Bible says that's all the reason, just all the more reason to get going. And actually the Bible is giving us here something far more than what we might just consider sort of general wisdom that we get from the world around us.

It's not just saying, you know, strike while it irons hot, or don't put all your eggs in one basket or other phrases we hear kind of trotted out, even though they might be right and they might have wisdom in them.

What we're getting here is actually deeper than that. It's that actually success in the various things we face in life isn't the be all and end all anyway.

[12:07] Get busy in life. Be bold. Don't waste your life here, we're told. But actually the success of any project or relationship or task we're involved in is not what defines us.

Because actually for the Christian, the one who lives out true wisdom of trusting in Jesus, then our identity, our hope is found in him.

Our worth is in him. Our security is in him and all that he has done for us. And so our world says, you know, don't rush in. Wait for the perfect moment.

Ensure the conditions are there to guarantee success in whatever you're aiming for. Because what if you try it and it goes wrong? What if it doesn't work?

What if you fail? What if you don't succeed? Even when Gretzky is saying, you know, take all those shots because then you'll score the most like I did.

[13:07] But what if we miss all the time? That's the kind of worry that can paralyze us, isn't it? And yet if our identity is in Jesus, knowing his love for us, then our success or all lack of success is not the be all and end all.

We're able to be bold. We're able to be involved in things. We're able to try something new. Still always being shaped by that attitude of generosity. But able to do that with confidence because we have a certain foundation in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps there are things, even in your life, that come to mind right now where fear of failure prevents you from moving forward.

It's incredible to hear that the gospel says that doesn't need to be a barrier because we are not defined by our success. Let me give us one particular example.

If you're a Christian this morning, which is looking to share our faith, looking to share Jesus with people, isn't that something where that always feels like there would be a better time?

[14:15] There's always a good reason not to bring Jesus into this particular conversation. What if they think I'm weird or I've not quite got the time to fully explain it? Or what if they say something which I don't have the answer to?

Again, I think the Bible's wisdom here would say, look, just go for it. Just try it. Just step out. And you're not defined by how people respond.

That you can be bold knowing the certain and unconditional love of Jesus for you. Isn't it a life where we are free to be generous and bold?

Not always worrying about the uncertainties in the future, but actually motivated by that. Is that not an incredibly attractive thing? Because that is the invitation that the gospel holds out to each one of us this morning.

The Bible doesn't promise success in everything we do. But it does say we can have something better than that, which is a life which isn't defined by our successes or failures, but is secure in knowing that while we are so limited, we are in the hands of a perfect God.

[15:28] We don't know what will happen, Ecclesiastes reminds us. So live with generous boldness. That's our first point in this passage.

Let's move on then to the second half of our passage now. And again, we're going to see here the same pattern. Here is the fact. Here's how to live in response.

And what we see here, this is from chapter 11 verse onwards, is this, that we do know life is short, so live with joyful gratitude. We don't know what will happen, so live with generous boldness.

We do know life is short. There's the fact. So live with joyful gratitude. There's the wisdom. There's the instruction for a life well lived.

Now verses 7 and 8. Life is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all.

[16 : 26] But let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. Again, Ecclesiastes here presents us this really positive picture of the world God has created and that we live in.

It's to be enjoyed. It's to be rejoiced in. But Ecclesiastes also reminds us time and again that life is short and that one day it will end.

Remember that word vanity. All that comes is vanity. We read it then. That's not saying that everything is pointless, that everything is in vain. That word, as we've said before, it literally means a breath.

Everything is a breath. It is fleeting. It's like smoke in the wind. You can't keep hold of it. It's saying life and everything in it is short. And then chapter 12 goes on to give us this really poignant, poetic description of that brevity of life.

As it pictures the aging process. Do have a look there with me as we look through that. Chapter 12, days where pleasure, verse 1, becomes harder to find as life gets more difficult.

[17 : 40] The days when the body doesn't do all that it used to do. And we get this picture language, the keepers of the house. I think that's the hands that used to do so much work but begin to shake.

Where even the strong men are bent over. Where the grinders cease because they are few. It's talking about your teeth and how you start to lose them.

Reading on, sight dims. Hearing grows low. The almond tree blossoms as hair becomes white. Energy and desire deplete.

Why? Well because the end of verse 5, man is going to his eternal home. Life on earth is precious but fleeting.

Until verse 6, the silver cord is snapped. The golden ball is broken. The picture shattered at the fountain. These images of that which is of great worth.

[18 : 39] And yet so fragile coming to an end. And let me say to you this morning, if you see yourself in this picture of old age this morning.

If that's the stage of life you're in now. Where the strong men are bent. Where the grinders are few. Where energy levels decrease and medical appointments increase. This passage is here at least partly to give real dignity to that.

That still life is a precious thing. As I was looking at this this week, I thought it was so telling. That this stage of life being pictured and described here of old age.

Which is so often hidden away or ignored. Something our society has perhaps so little time for or is embarrassed about. I think it's telling that the Bible doesn't hide that away.

But in fact here it is described so beautifully at the conclusion, the climax almost of this great book that we've spent our time looking through. There is real dignity for those at this stage of life.

[19 : 50] But this passage is also here to remind us all that this is where we're all heading. Verse 1, remember also your creator in the days of your youth before the evil or that can be troubled days come.

It's as if the preacher is going into the school or the youth group or kids church and says, Look guys, you think you're young, you'll think you'll live forever, but remember where you're heading.

Because actually life is short. And that is a message for all of us this morning, however fit and healthy or not we might feel. And so again the question then becomes, well what do we do with that message?

If that is us being brought face to face with the facts, what do we do with those facts? What do we do with that breath of life that God gives us?

Well as we've said, the message here is that we do know life is short. So live with joyful gratitude, the preacher says. This passage, this whole book is not doom and gloom.

[20:58] It is here to be joy and celebration. Celebrating the good that God has given us in the time that he has given us. That's verse 9 there, isn't it?

Do have a look. And that verse finishes by saying, We perhaps hear that as saying, enjoy yourself, but you're going to pay for that later.

As if God is some kind of cosmic killjoy who will be cross at you for having had fun. That's not, I think, what that verse means at all. Really that idea of judgment at the end of the verse has got two different aspects.

First is to say, live this enjoyment within the bounds of God's law. That this is how God calls us to live. Find your joy in that way of living.

This isn't free reign to do whatever you want. Remember, we're accountable to God. But there is real joy in living that way. Within the way that he has designed us to be.

[22:06] But I think even more than that, the original language here can equally mean that God expects us to have joy in the good things he's given. That we are commanded, almost, we might say, to have joy.

It's not here that we will be judged for having too much joy. It's actually a warning that we won't have had enough. Because often that joy is a measure of our gratitude to God.

For all the good things that he has given us. Again, so how then do we have joy? Knowing that life is short. How do we, as verse 10 says, remove vexation from your heart.

Put away pain from your body. Perhaps that just sounds impossible to you this morning. Perhaps at the very least that sounds insensitive. Because life is hard.

How can you just be told to have joy? Being told that life is short and that there's difficulty in the future doesn't mean everything is easy in the present. We know that all too well.

[23:10] And again, the book of Ecclesiastes, we've seen time and time again, is realistic about those struggles. And so what is the answer, though, that it gives?

What is the power behind that? Well, chapter 12, verse 1 tells us, Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth. This passage says that the key to enjoying our breath of our life is to remember the Creator who gave us breath in our lives.

That the world doesn't revolve around us, but it revolves around him. And that he has given us so much to enjoy here in his creation.

And even though our time here is imperfect, and it is short on an eternal timescale, still we're able to find joy in that.

Because ultimately, in the end, verse 7, after our life, after this picture of old age that we've been so poignantly given, we read that then the Spirit returns to God who gave it.

[24:17] That our Creator brings his people back to their eternal home. A heavenly home that is certain. A heavenly home which is eternal.

A heavenly home where Jesus has prepared a place for us if our trust is in him and the forgiveness he offers. We remember that our Creator is also our Redeemer.

That we might enjoy his gifts in the present, knowing his greatest gift of all, our salvation through Jesus, will carry us into eternity. One of the great historic documents of the church, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, begins with these great words asking the question, what is the chief end of man?

To which it gives the answer, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That actually beginning now, but reaching into eternity, joy is part of our duty as God's people.

Not a superficial, kind of put a happy face on it kind of joy, but a joy that can weep, a joy that can share sorrows, a joy that is realistic about the struggles of our world, but still a joy that can rejoice in the good gifts of God as we remember him as our Creator.

[25 : 39] Again, isn't this different from the world's advice? Especially that given to young people where folk are so often told, you know, look, have fun now, think about God later, or maybe just forget about God altogether and just enjoy yourself.

The Bible says, actually, remember God while you are young. Whatever age you are this morning, you can include yourself in that young bracket for the next two minutes. Remember God while you are young, precisely because that is what brings joy in life.

Whatever age you are, I can make the promise this morning, and there will be people, older people who are part of this church, who in so many ways could make this promise with far more weight than I could.

And I know that they would love to speak to people, and particularly the younger guys about it, but I'm sure they would agree with me as I'm able to say this promise, that living for God in your youngest years and right through life, whatever stage you are at this morning, that might not be easy, but if you stick with him, you will never look back and regret that.

If you trust in Jesus and live day by day, depending on him and the forgiveness he brings, and make generous and bold decisions based on that, with joy and gratitude for all that he has done, that will mean that we do not grow old, looking back over a life of regret and missed opportunities.

[27 : 10] But rather as our final days approach, we will be able to echo really some of the final words of the Apostle Paul. Let me read this, and then we'll pray together.

He says this, Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we want to come before you now, whatever age we might be, whatever stage of life we are in, and come to remember you, our creator, that we live in the world that you have made, that we live as people made by you in your image.

Lord, we recognize that our world and our lives are not perfect, that your good creation has been marred and stained by sin. And yet at the same time, we want to thank you that there is so much for us to give you thanks for, and to find joy in, and that we are able to do that, when we find our hope and security in you, and all that you've done for us in Jesus.

Lord, we are so aware that life is uncertain. We don't know what is going to happen next in our own lives or in our worlds. We know that our knowledge is limited, and we're brought face to face with that fact day after day.

[28 : 47] But we do pray that with that in mind, we would be motivated to live with generous boldness, committing all we have to serving others and bringing glory to your name. We pray that knowing that you are in control, and you are a God who cares for us, would free us from either idolizing success, or living paralyzed by a fear of failure.

But rather, we would be able to live full lives with open hands, doing our best, while always knowing that our identity is found in you, and your love for us, not anything that we achieve, or any success that we have.

Lord, we pray that in our breath of our life, and even in the hardships of life, you would help us be people characterized by joy and gratitude for all you have given us and done for us.

We pray that will be an honest joy that doesn't shy away from the challenges that we all face, but which is still able to see them in light of the eternal love you have for us.

We pray that we would fight for that joy, and that we would be eager to demonstrate that joy to the world around us, because we truly believe that the gospel is good news. We pray that you would help others, you'd help us to encourage others in seeking the joy of their salvation, even as we dwell alongside them in the hardest and darkest times.

[30:13] And we pray that you would help us to live all our days, lives of wisdom, independence on you, remembering you as our creator, looking ahead to returning to our eternal heavenly home, and that everything we might do, that would be for the glory of your name.

And we pray all of these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen.