

# Words to Live By

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Preacher: Donald Smith

[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. For the last three months now, we have been drinking in the teacher's wisdom of Ecclesiastes, haven't we? And he has had a lot to show us, sometimes very encouraging words, sometimes very challenging words. And we actually heard the last of his words in this great book last week. He ended his sermon exactly where he began in verse 2 of chapter 1. He opened with the really striking words, didn't he, that by now will be ringing in our ears. A breath, a breath, everything is a breath. And then he showed us, as he looked at life under the sun, exactly what he meant. And so, what felt like a shocking statement at the beginning of chapter 1, when he repeats it in verse 8 of chapter 12? No longer should we be shocked so much as nodding knowingly in agreement. Everything is indeed a breath. And maybe no longer that thought makes us uncomfortable. Because hopefully by now we've been hearing the teacher, we'll see it as freeing. As we approach life knowing that it is brief. And that's okay, so we might as well enjoy it while we can, while looking forward to what is to come. And with those final words, a breath, a breath, everything is a breath. The teacher, I think quite fitting to the style we're maybe slowly becoming accustomed to, sort of drops his mic and exits stage left. And we, the audience, after 12 chapters of some of the most joyful, uncomfortable, wonderful, painful, poetic wisdom, are left sitting in something of a stunned silence. It's like the end of a great book that proved far more thought-provoking than you ever expected it to. As the final chapter ends, you don't jump off the sofa and get on with life, do you? But you sit and try and process what you've just read, what you've just seen, what you've just heard, and figure out what it means for us. But thankfully at the end of Ecclesiastes, we have someone to help us with the next steps. What now? Where do we go from here? Because as the teacher exits stage left, on comes someone who's seen the play before. I'm going to call him the narrator, not because I think it's a great description of what he's doing, because I don't really know what else to call him. Whoever he is, he is someone who knows well what Ecclesiastes means, and why it matters, and what we should now go and do with it. And so instead of leaving us to wonder aimlessly where to go from here, he picks up the microphone to give us some final parting words, one last piece of wisdom.

So let's take on board this closing message by just breaking it down into three simple, but potentially life-changing instructions.

Number one, the narrator says, listen to the teacher's wisdom. Listen to the teacher's wisdom. wisdom. He begins, doesn't he, in verse 9, by commending the teacher's wisdom to us. Here was a wise man, but better than being just wise, here's a wise man who wanted to share his wisdom with others. Just look there at verse 9 with me. Not only was the teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The teacher searched out to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

The narrator's message is basically pointing in the direction of the teacher who's just walked off the stage. He says, listen to him. Listen to what he has just said. He's a wise man who wants to teach you, who's carefully crafted every word he's written, so listen to his words.

[ 4 : 51 ] I don't know what you think of that. When I was first looking at it at the start of this week, I was initially slightly confused, I suppose.

Because it's basically, isn't it, a commendation of the teacher's wisdom, a recommendation to listen to him at the end of the book. I felt a bit odd that someone was telling me to read a book that they've just watched me finish.

But as is so often the case with Ecclesiastes, there is much wisdom in what might first appear to be madness. I love Lord of the Rings, and you should too.

But for a few years, I used to, this was a while ago, but I used to basically read the books on repeat. I'd read them from cover to cover, and then when I got to the end, I'd go right back to the beginning

again.

You might think that sounds ridiculous, but let me tell you, it didn't get old. It did not get old, because every time you went back through it, it wasn't a case of, oh, I know the story already.

[ 6 : 14 ] Instead, on every read-through, I'd see something new in the detail. I'd understand something I'd previously missed. I'd make a connection that I'd never noticed before.

Why? Because it was so beautifully and carefully written. It didn't get more dull the more I read it. It became increasingly richer. It didn't become old. It became more beautiful. That is, I think, Ecclesiastes.

That is what the narrator wants us to know about Ecclesiastes. If much of it you found yourself not understanding the first time round, then you're in good company.

Maybe I shouldn't say good company. You've got me for company. And I think the narrator adds this commendation at the end. Because our temptation sometimes, isn't it, with a hard read, is to put it to one side and say, that's not really for me.

[ 7 : 28 ] I didn't get a whole lot from that. But the teacher tells us, doesn't he, that these words are carefully written.

Beautiful words. He's wanting us to be encouraged to go back and read again. We're at the end of our series in Ecclesiastes this evening.

Do not let that be the end of you in Ecclesiastes. Go and read it a second time. And you'll see a few more glimmers of gold than you did on the first reading.

And the same will happen again on the third read-through and the fourth. And every time after that. The narrator lets us know, even if you didn't get a whole lot from round one, this is a beautifully written book.

And beautiful books get better and better with age. So keep coming back. Listen and re-listen to everything the teacher said.

[ 8 : 30 ] Drink it in. Pour over it. Discuss it with one another. Come back to it again and again. Ponder it. Let it percolate in your minds. Be encouraged by it.

Be challenged by it. Be moved by it. And move because of it. So the narrator tells us to listen to the teacher's wisdom because it is beautiful.

And there is much more we can keep learning from it. But he also tells us there, doesn't he, what we can expect as we keep coming back.

And what we've heard as we've gone through the teacher's wisdom. As we unfurl the wisdom this book offers, we will find that it has given us or will give us again both pleasure and pain.

In verse 10, we read the teacher's search to find, it says they're just the right words. Just the right words is more literally words of delight.

[ 9 : 41 ] These are good, joy-bringing words. That's what the teacher searched out to find. He searched carefully to find the words that bring joy, pleasure, happiness, rejoicing.

That's what he wanted his wisdom to bring. His words bring pleasure, but they will also sometimes bring pain. Verse 11.

The words of the wise are like goads. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd.

A goad was basically just a stick with like nails or something sharp in the end of it that a shepherd would use to start prodding any sheep that started wandering astray.

It's a really great illustration, isn't it, of what the teacher's words sometimes do. Indeed, what all of the words of the Bible sometimes do.

[ 10 : 46 ] We are wandering people, aren't we? We constantly go astray as we're here this morning. Doing things we shouldn't do.

Putting ourselves in positions we know we shouldn't be in. We need a lot of correcting. We're also prideful people, aren't we?

We don't like to be told that we need correcting. We don't like to be told we're wrong. We don't like to be told we're going the wrong way. But that is what the teacher's wisdom will have sometimes done to us and will continue to do to us if we keep coming back to it.

It will bring us brief moments of pain. A prod in the back. A moment of piercing.

But only ever in order to get us back onto the right path. If we love living for me, the wisdom of living for others might sting a little as it uncovers our selfish living.

[ 11 : 58 ] But it does so only to get us back on track. If we are living for wealth, the teacher's words decrying wealth's vanity might hurt for a moment.

But they will steer us, won't they, to where we need to go. If we're looking for satisfaction under the sun, the teacher's warning that none of it will last might leave us despairing for a moment. Those words might well hurt. But if we heed his voice, before long we'll find ourselves finding satisfaction in the one above the sun.

Sometimes wise words will hurt. But never needlessly. Wise words will sometimes hurt, but never needlessly.

So be challenged by God's wisdom. Be challenged by the teacher's words.

[ 13 : 07 ] There'll be of little value to us as we leave the book of Ecclesiastes if we only take from it the parts we agreed with or like the sound of.

We'll get nothing if we're only looking for our opinions to be reinforced. If we want to learn, if we want to be corrected, if we want to end up back on the right path, we must recognize that sometimes we are lost, sometimes we are wondering.

If we want to be shaped by God's words, we need to make an effort, don't we, to hear and listen and obey what it says is good, even when we don't think it's good.

Let it bring you moments of pain in order to get you onto the right path. In the teacher's own words, back in chapter 7, it is better, it is good to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the songs of fools.

So take on boards the words of pain, but relish also the words that bring pleasure. The gold prods us back onto the right path, but that right path is one primarily of joy.

[ 14 : 30 ] We've seen that, haven't we, that we saw it last week in particular, the joy we can know when we allow ourselves to be shaped by the teacher's wisdom, the enjoyment we can find in the short years of this life when we learn that everything is indeed but a breath.

It's really important, isn't it, that we hold both of those things together. We should go looking for both the words of pleasure and the words of pain. If we're only looking for one or the other, we'll find ourselves joyless or pretending there's nothing wrong with us.

Neither of those things are where we should be as Christians, are they? So first of all, listen to the teacher's wisdom, expecting to hear pleasant words and painful words that grow in richness every time we read them, because this is a carefully and beautifully written book.

Secondly, the narrator wants us to learn from the teacher's warnings. Verse 12, Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them, the words of the wise, of making many books, there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

Listen to the teacher's wisdom. Be careful about listening to other people's so-called wisdom.

[ 16 : 08 ] If wisdom is simply teaching us how to live in the world, then there is an awful lot of wisdom in our world, isn't there? There are an awful lot of voices crying out for our attention each and every day.

There is no end to the books that will tell us how to live life. I had a quick look just in the lifestyle section of Amazon where you get all your self-help books and the like.

There are over 70,000 books for sale. It's a lot of worldly wisdom to try and take in, isn't it? It's not to mention the never-ending advice we hear on TV, social media, YouTube, all the rest.

All around us, there are many voices crying out for our attention. And the narrator wants to say, be careful who you are listening to.

Be careful who you are letting shape the way you see the world. Because the way you see the world is being shaped by someone or something.

[ 17 : 20 ] And the narrator says, well, make sure that's the teacher. Make sure that is the word of God. We hear all sorts of things, don't we, in the world around us offering us what wisdom, how to live life, how we should see the world, how we should spend our time, how we should organize our time, the food we should eat, who we should listen to, who we shouldn't listen to, how we should think about all sorts of social issues.

There is no end to it. There is no end to it. And the narrator doesn't quite say, does he?

He doesn't say, ignore everything. We're not to bury our heads in the sand. But he does say, be very careful. Two warnings we see in here that he wants to leave us with.

First, quite plainly, there at the end of verse 12, don't try and learn everything. You don't know everything. And that's how it's always going to be.

You are never going to complete knowledge. You are never going to finish wisdom. You're never going to understand this world.

[18:37] There's one thing we've seen in Ecclesiastes, and it is that this world often doesn't make sense to those of us who cannot see it from God's point of view. And that is all of us.

The world doesn't make sense. And so the teacher has taught us, hasn't he, that actually life is to be enjoyed more than it is to be understood. And you will weary yourself needlessly if you pursue knowledge and learning for all of your days.

God did not make you to figure out the answers to the questions that he already knows. He made you to glorify and enjoy him.

I mentioned that the 70,000 books on Amazon, it would take you 190 years if you read one of those every day.

That's just a very small section, isn't it? If you went to the library at Aberdeen University, how long would it take you to consume all the knowledge that has been written? It is beyond us, isn't it?

[19:42] It is way, way beyond us. So the narrator says, don't try and learn it all. Learn what you need to to live life well in this world.

Learn by these words. Live by these words. And approach the rest of the world's wisdom with great caution.

But also, I think he says this, he says, beware of other teaching because while there is no end to books, there is an end to the wisdom that they can offer.

You see the kind of contrast the narrator brings up of making many books, there is no end. What I've been learning through all of Ecclesiastes is that everything else has a very, an end that will come very soon, doesn't it?

And that, I think, includes the wisdom included in the many books there are. If you picked up a book on wise living, living the good life, printed just a hundred years ago, it probably would have told you to take up smoking or something.

[21:00] The world's wisdom changes, doesn't it? Twenty years ago, we would have been told we should buy diesel cars because it was good for the environment. The world's wisdom changes, doesn't it?

We look back and think, how ridiculous, how silly. What do you think a hundred years from now, future generations will think of the best wisdom of our day?

Do you think they're going to look back and think, wow, they really had it all figured out in 2023, didn't they? Of course not. Ask yourself, honestly, do you think the wisdom of our age is going to stand the test of time?

Our culture's approach to religion, sexual ethics, medical ethics, are generations to come really going to look back on us as enlightened?

The world's wisdom, like everything else, is but a breath. It's here one moment and it's gone the next.

[22:13] So beware, because what sounds like wisdom to us now might not be wisdom to us at all. But the good news is that there is wisdom that does last.

There is wisdom that does stand the test of time. Think of what you have heard over the last 12 weeks or so in our series in Ecclesiastes. It's been around for thousands of years and it still, doesn't it, speaks so much truth and wisdom into life in Aberdeen in 2023.

The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever. Here before us we have wisdom that is not a breath.

Wisdom that will stand the test of time. Wisdom that is worth learning to live by. If you want to live well in God's world, be careful with the wisdom of this world, but listen carefully to the wisdom of God's word.

word. And then thirdly and finally, we live longing for our eternal home, longing for our heavenly dwelling.

[23:38] Let me just read verse 13 and 14 again. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.

For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. All has been heard.

At the end of everything we've seen, the narrator summarizes the teacher's message. Fear God because he is going to judge everything.

Fear God because he is going to judge everything. Fear and judgment. I wonder what your immediate reaction to those two words are.

It wouldn't surprise me if the majority of us don't feel overwhelmingly positive about them. But again, listen to the Bible's wisdom on this matter.

[ 24 : 48 ] Just turn back with me actually to that passage Wilma read for us earlier in 2 Corinthians 5. The fear of God is a wonderfully rich biblical concept and I cannot do it at all justice in the next five minutes.

And indeed I think part of what the narrator is doing there is if you want to know how to fear God, you should go to the Bible's wisdom books. So if you want to know more about fearing God, Ecclesiastes 1 is a good place to begin and go through once more and think what does it look like to fear God?

But the reason we're back in 2 Corinthians 5 is because I think Paul summarizes what it means to fear the Lord really helpfully here in a way that marries well with what the teacher has been saying in Ecclesiastes.

If you've got that passage in front of you, it's page 1161 in the church Bibles. If you just look at verse 11, we didn't read this earlier because it kind of starts a new section, but Paul says since then we know what it is to fear the Lord.

Since then we know what it is to fear the Lord. What's he saying there? He's saying what I've just talked about is what it is to fear the Lord. What I've just said in verse 1 to 10, that's what it looks like to Paul to fear the Lord.

[ 26 : 10 ] What does it look like? Verse 2, longing to be clothed in our heavenly dwelling. Verse 7, we live by faith and not by sight.

verse 8, we long to be at home with the Lord. Verse 9, we make it our goal to please him, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Longing to be with him, living to please him. That is what it means to fear the Lord.

That is what the teacher wants us to do. That is how to live well in God's world. Long to be with God and live to please him.

Again, there is so much wisdom in the Bible about how to do that. I can't summarize it in the next few minutes. if you want to learn it, read God's words. Take it all in.

[ 27 : 24 ] Listen to his wisdom. But it is exactly where the narrator knows we should go off the back of all that the teacher has said.

Live to please God. let me just take a moment and ask yourself in the week that has passed or the week that is coming, who have you lived to please?

Whose favor have you tried to earn with the decisions and the choices you've made? If we want to take on board the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, in the weeks to come and the months to come and the years to come, we will make our decisions based on what we think will please God.

That is wisdom. But the wonderful result of that, Ecclesiastes shows us, is that when we live to please God, we will know joy and satisfaction.

A joy and satisfaction that can be found nowhere else under the sun. All the other things we chase in this short life, we do so because that's what we think will get out of them, isn't it?

[ 29 : 03 ] we live for money, not because we want more money, but because we think money will bring us happiness. We long for a spouse or a family because we think that's what will bring us happiness.

We live for happiness. happiness. And the teacher in Ecclesiastes says, if you please God, you will be happy.

You might not have more, you might not get everything that you think would make life successful, but you will be joy-filled.

God. And that is the most wonderful promise. As we live to please God, that doesn't mean we will do amazing things for him, but it does mean we will bring a smile to his face as we approach him with a smile on our own.

Let me just finish with an illustration of what I hope will happen one day. We have a six-month-old. he brings much joy into our life already.

[ 30 : 16 ] He's not quite at the stage of drawing and colouring things in yet, but one day soon he will be. And here's what I hope will one day happen.

It might not. I'm not going to be completely devastated if it doesn't. Maybe in two or three years' time he'll get his crayons out and he'll start drawing a multicoloured picture of our little family. And once he's done it in the kitchen table he'll run through to my desk where I'm sitting on my chair and he will hand this to me. His little attempt at using the gifts he's been given to do something for his father.

And I'll look at it and it'll probably be absolutely terrible. Like it's not going to be good is it? But it will bring me so much joy.

And it will bring him so much joy to see the joy on my face. Not because he's done something amazing but because he's done something for me.

[ 31 : 31 ] he's done it not to get anything out of me not for rewards not to earn my favour but because he loves me and I love him.

That is what it means I think to fear the Lord to live life seeking to please him not doing wonderful amazing things that he'll be super impressed by but just doing the best we can with what we've got to please our most loving heavenly father as his most loved children.

So fear God and keep his commandments. Let us pray. Father we do thank you for the wonderful words of wisdom.

that we find in your word. We thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes. We thank you for the truth it speaks into our lives.

We thank you for the words of pain that uncover the folly that is in our hearts the foolishness of how we so often see the world. But we thank you Lord that those words of pain are not there to hurt us they are there to guide us and bring us back onto the right path.

[ 33 : 00 ] A path where you are our shepherd leading us day by day. Leading us into your presence. Leading us joyfully as your children.

And so we pray that we would learn from your wisdom. that we would be shaped by it. And that we would love to live pleasing you in all that we do.

We thank you for your amazing mercy and grace to us in taking us in as your children. Only because of the most precious bloods of your one and only son.

In whose most wonderful name we pray. Amen. Amen. We're going to close by singing. What is it?