

It was Benjamin Franklin who said, "Certainty? In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." Well certainly the Teacher in Ecclesiastes as we come to the last in this series would agree with the former that death is certain and he would have added and it is the end of the matter. He has said it over and over and in our last passage he repeats the thought.

However for the most part of the passage today it is not death but the aging process that concentrates his mind. But also, as we have seen throughout, what he observes of life under the sun, in this world makes him think it is all meaningless, a puff of wind.

## 1. The Aging Process.

From v1-7 we have a series of metaphors describing the process of growing old and the teacher's main thought is that growing old sucks!

Firstly v1-2 growing old is seen as a coming storm. V1 he speaks of coming days in which you find no pleasure, and then v2 the darkening of the cosmic lights and the storm clouds returning - a picture which says the Teacher saw impending old age as a catastrophe.

Vs 3-5 gives us the clearest metaphor of the aging process.

V 3 the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop - these are metaphors for the deterioration in the body. The arms no longer have the strength they had, the legs don't seem to hold us up so well, the joints no longer seem to have the same oil in them that they used to have, and the fear of the zimmer frame is always there!

The grinders refer to female servants who would grind the corn but is an obvious picture of the toothless smile. Similarly the image of those who spent leisure time looking out of the window growing dim is a reference to eyesight failing.

There is more as we go into v4 for it seems to speak of growing deafness. The doors that once were open are shut. The sound fades. Men wake with the lark but they can no longer hear it!

Let me carry on with v5. Growing old means a fear of being up high or down low. Being out only creates fear, fear of crowds and being jostled or knocked over, fear of journeys.

Friends the teacher certainly knew his stuff as he said in 1:13 he had studied all that is done under heaven and we know that what he says here is true.

V5 ends with three other images, the white almond blossom is the silver threads in your hair, the arthritic grasshopper speaks for itself and I'll leave the lack of desire to your own imagination.

The end v5b is death and the inevitable funeral.

But just in case you are still saying age and death is not relevant to me the teacher speaks in v6 of the way death can come at any time. Just as a link may go in a chain and the whole chain be lost or as the pulley might break dropping the pitcher to the bottom of the well, death can come suddenly.

The teacher gives us a very clear picture of the way that age debilitates us it removes our physical strength and energy, it limits our movement and opportunities to do things, it limits our desire to do things and it leads to death. As we see in v7 there is the reversal of creation. God had temporarily united spirit and body and now the process is undone. Death for the teacher was very much the end.

Now friends what the teacher has set down here could appear in any magazine or newspaper today. Today we are still frightened by the aging process.

In 2008 Helena Frith a writer said this, "At a wedding reception more than a year ago, I stood next to a girl in the queue for the loo. Seeing our reflections in the mirror I was horrified. She was young, pretty, and glowing - and next to her, I looked positively ancient.

So, I decided to spend a year researching as many anti-ageing treatments as possible."

The results came out in a book, "To hell in high heels". Her conclusion was, "The most important thing I have learned is that, for me, going to hell in high heels means victory over old age by staying elegant, sane-looking and true to myself."

In the face of all this aging process the Teacher offers one piece of wisdom, "remember your creator."

It sounds good and, as I have tried to show all along, the Teacher is not an atheist. However, for the Teacher, God is not personal and knowable. So yes remember your creator because as he gave you life so he will take it, but still the Teacher was left, and leaves us, with the question "but what was that life given for?"

Friends in our world today that answer will come in a thousand different ways by people who just like the teacher have thought about it and studied the world. However unlike the Teacher they will give you a positive spin and again unlike the Teacher they will want some of your money to help you discover that!

For the Teacher the answer eluded him. In v8 we have the summary of his message, "meaningless".

Now in a sense, as we have seen over and over again the Teacher has a point. Age does weary us and the years do condemn. None of us likes the aging process but despite all the creams, vitamins, health regimes and visits to the gym there is nothing that we can do about

its ultimate effect upon us. The curse on Adam is true for all of us "for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). However that is as we have been seeing not the sum total. For as we have been remembering over these recent weeks of Easter we have the resurrection to look forward to. When God tells us, "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor 15:53). Yes my body is wearing out will wear out and I shall die as we all must but that is not the end of it because "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54).

So we bear the aging process with dignity and fortitude as one more step on our path to eternity knowing that "to be with Christ is far better," (Phil 1:23)

But the idea of everything being meaningless is not the final word in Ecclesiastes for, as we turn to v9, we turn from the words of the Teacher to the words of the author of Ecclesiastes who has brought us the words of the Teacher within his own framework which is there in 1:1-11 and now in these last verses comes in a summing up of the teacher and a final message.

## 2. A summary of the Teacher and his message, v9-12.

In a sense we could see these verses as a bit like an end of term report from a teacher or better a reference.

Vs9-10 is not the glowing endorsement it might seem. The Teacher was wise, he taught knowledge and he investigated and put in order many proverbs. He tried to find words of delight and to write honestly words of truth. It all sounds good and as I say it is a bit like a reference where you might write, "he works very hard" and the but is left unsaid.

The Teacher had work hard but still the summary of his message hangs over everything - life under the sun is meaningless.

No wonder the writer carries on to describe these words of wisdom as like a shepherd's goad prodding into action but I'm not sure he sees this as a positive because the start of v12 could be translated, "furthermore of these my son be warned," and the rest of the verse speaks of the inexhaustible well of written knowledge which exhaust the student, as the Teacher himself had been exhausted by his research. This reading of the verse would fit the context because the writer does not see the Teacher's wisdom as a positive and I hope as we have gone through the book we have seen that, while there is much in what the Teacher said that we can affirm, his final analysis of the meaning of life falls well short of the full truth revealed in Scripture.

So what the writer is saying is yes Teacher B+ for effort but he warns his son, and us as readers, of the dangers of such wisdom, which I presume is the purpose of the book and the reason it is in the Bible.

How often human study and wisdom seems attractive and sensible but also how misleading it can be.

Human wisdom will always be appreciated because we are human and so we love to be amazed by the human intellect. Is it a bit like watching Jonathan Creek, we love to be amazed by the illusion and the plot line but the end result just like human wisdom is, as Matthew Sleeman reminded us when he was here just like mist, like vapour, like a puff of wind.

For all his wisdom and efforts the Teacher could not fathom out the purpose of life and was left with death as the final outcome and a dread of growing old. What is the profit in such wisdom? It is indeed meaningless and we do well to be warned about it.

## 3. A final message

In the last two verses the writer gives a final message which brings the whole book back into line with the rest of the O.T.

The message is simple:

**a. Fear God**, that is respect God, honour God and worship him. However the God of the writer is, it would seem, different from the God of the Teacher and what the writer tells his son to do is to establish a right relationship with God in terms of honour and worship.

**b. keep the commandments**, that is the normative teaching of the Old Testament. That was how he would maintain his relationship with God.

The writer sums it up, to fear God and obey him is the most important thing a man or woman can do.

**c. that is because God is Judge**. He is sovereign over all. Knows everything even those things said and done in secret and he is the judge of everyone.

This is teaching that is very much consistent with the rest of the Old Testament.

It is what the writer would have us centuries later hear that God wants us to have a relationship with him in which we recognise him as God and honour and worship him as he deserves and to maintain that relationship as we take his word seriously and obey it.

## 4. God's word to us

The word of God is the same for just as the writer here called these readers to fear God so God would say the same to us today. As I say it I know the response, but surely because of God's grace and mercy we have no need of fear any longer. Friends if we have this in mind then we are very mistaken. Our God is indeed gracious and loving, gentle and kind but he is still the awesome and holy God.

The writer here said fear God and keep the commandments because you will be judged. Paul in 2 Cor 5:10-11 says something similar, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience."

He knew that one day he as everyone else would stand before the judgement seat of God. Of course he did not fear condemnation there but evaluation. He feared the evaluation of God. All he did was in the sight of God who was his heavenly Father but who he also knew as a holy, awesome, powerful and majestic God.

Recognising the reality of the judgement seat of God Paul served God with fear. He took God seriously and he took God's work seriously.

Those of us who saw the presentation of the life of James Hudson Taylor on Weds will have seen a man who took God seriously. You'll remember how Hudson Taylor having been robbed of his goods and tricked by a servant into sleeping on the steps of a temple went on his way hungry tired and angry. He broke down on the way confessing before God his anger and concern over losing a few material possessions and not over the countless souls being lost.

He was taking God seriously. He too knew what it was to fear God.

What does it mean for us to fear God?

There are a number of synonyms we might use -adoration, awe, respect, reverence, honour, with an occasional sense of terror, wonder.

To bring it into our lives I think one thing we might say is that to fear God is to pause in the morning to say, Thy will be done today - so that we are living each moment conscious of God and wanting to obey him. This is not just the what would Jesus do idea but recognising that our God is a holy God who calls us to live holy lives.

A second thing is that fear is stepping into worship with an awesome respect, Paul's word in 1 Cor 11 about taking communion in a "worthy manner" come to mind. Is that how it is as we come together on a Sunday? Do we recognise we are coming into the presence of a holy and all powerful God, yes a God who allows us to call him Father but an awesome God nonetheless and so who deserves our whole attention and the best of our efforts in worship not the dregs of our time and attention.

One preacher put it like this:

"When we do not fear God, our faith is skewed. When we're tone deaf-hearing only the melody played by the strings (grace, mercy, comfort), but ignoring the brass and wind and percussion sections of the spiritual life (holiness, reverence, fear), we find ourselves reducing God to the dimensions of our needs, imaginations. He becomes a servant of our desires, a divine bell hop. When God is tailored to our specifications, without any space for trembling, He is soon domesticated. Jesus is sentimentalized. "

That rings bells with me perhaps it does with you.

This is the whole duty of man or woman to fear God that is to have a right relationship with him where he is God and we are his children who seek to honour and worship him. Are you doing that? Are you doing it every day or just on Sunday or just on some Sundays? Is God God in your life or are you?

The Teacher's view was that life lived under the sun with little or no knowledge of God was meaningless. However the writer of Ecclesiastes and the rest of the Bible remind us that life lived with God and for his honour and glory is life immortal with purpose and meaning.

Let that be an end of it! And the people said - Amen!