Guest Preacher - Mr Donald Macaulay

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Date: 27 November 2022

Preacher: Mr. Donald Macaulay

[0:00] Let's turn back then to the chapter that we read, the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 12. And perhaps we can look at verse 11 and 12 especially, but I'm going to consider the whole chapter rather than any one single verse as such.

Verse 11, the words of the wise are like goads and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings. They are given by one shepherd.
Maybe that's the question I should have asked. Who is the shepherd? My son, beware of anything beyond these, of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.
Book of Ecclesiastes is often considered the saddest book in the whole of Scripture.
[1:22] And I would take a guess and say that the great majority of us have not spent much time reading through and studying the book of Ecclesiastes.

It's not a book that we tend to be terribly familiar with. And maybe there's very good reason for that, because it's a book that really addresses one very simple question.
And the question it addresses is this. What's the point of life? Why are we here?
What is the point in being born and being alive? Now, that's a question, of course, that philosophers and various others have considered throughout history.
And you will find many, many discourses written on that particular theme. And it's interesting that this question appears here in throughout this particular book.
[2:33] This is what the writer says in verse 13. The end of the matter. All has been heard. Much study, he said, is a weariness of the flesh.

And, of course, many students and children will testify to that. Much study can become very tiring at times. But we need to ask, before we come to consider the major question.
Who is it that is writing, boys and girls? Who is it that is writing this particular book? You see in verse 9 there, besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge.
Weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The preacher, verse 10. So, the question is, who is this preacher?
Who is this preacher? Even the Hebrew doesn't give us a clue. The Hebrew word is koelis that is used here for the preacher. And it doesn't give us any clue as to what his name actually is.
[3:43] But if we go back to chapter 1, and if you turn back just a few pages to chapter 1, you will see an even closer clue. The book opens with the word of the preachers.

Chapter 1, verse 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Now, that gives us a very good clue. And we would need to know, of course, well, which one of all the sons of David might this be?
Does the term king in Jerusalem apply to David? Or does it apply to the actual preacher? And again, to know that, of course, we have to go back to the grammar as it's written in the original Hebrew.
But even if you can do that, you would see that in verse 12 of chapter 1, it tells us, I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.
So we're given another clue there. We're told, of course, that David, we know that David was king in Jerusalem. But here we're told that the preacher also is king over Israel in Jerusalem.
[4:57] And then he gives us a couple of details that allow us to identify him without any difficulty at all. In verse 13 of chapter 1, he says, I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

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But you notice he follows it up with a descriptive sentence. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.
I have seen everything that is done under the sun. And behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.
Have you ever tried to catch the wind? You will know, of course, that it is impossible. So what he's describing is vanity and impossible.
Who is he? Well, there can only be one man who fits this description. One man who was king after David in Jerusalem, the son of David, and whose scripture describes for us as the wisest man who ever lived.
[6:18] The wisest man who ever lived. You notice I'm being very careful not to say his name, of course. But I'm sure you know what his name is. You will find him mentioned in great detail in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, where there are many chapters given to his reign as king.

He's the one who builds the temple. You remember that David was not allowed to build the temple.
And he is the one, we are told, who wrote, and here's another of your answers for you.
Be careful here. Who wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. Now, we have a lot of these proverbs in the book of Proverbs.
We have very few of the songs. There are only two psalms that are attributed to him. Psalm 72, if I remember correctly, and I think 118, although I can't remember offhand just now.
You can check that later yourself. And all these details tell us who this is. It has to be none other than Solomon.
[7:38] This has to be Solomon. Not his Hebrew name. His Hebrew name was Jediah, which is given in 2 Samuel 12.

And it means because of the Lord, that Solomon came to the throne because of the Lord. If you look back at the circumstances of his birth and who his mother was, Bathsheba, then you find, of course, that events turn out in a way that perhaps God ordained, but man certainly, David, had not intended.
So who is this? This is Solomon. And the name Solomon means peaceful. That is the meaning of his name, peaceful.
And if you read the description of his reign and his kingdom, it was the time of greatest peace in the history of all Israel.
When he comes to the throne, there is no dispute over his accession. Once he deals with it, he very quickly brings peace to the whole of the country.
[8:51] And then if you read the following chapters after him, and I'm sure you'll all remember the visit of the Queen of Sheba and so on, Solomon's reign is the most glorious period in the history of Israel.

Richer than any king or emperor that had been known at that time. They came from all over the world to hear his wisdom.
1 Kings 4 describes him as wiser than all men. And certainly richer. The descriptions we have of his throne, of his kingdom, you remember that it says that silver was accounted for nothing in the days of Solomon.
Everything was of gold. But strangely enough, we know very little about the man himself. We're not exactly sure what year he died.
We're not exactly sure how long he reigned or how old he was when he came to the throne. The consensus of opinion of most commentators is that he became king at the age of 15.
[10:12] Imagine that, 15 years old, becoming king. He didn't have a long apprenticeship like our current king. He became king at a very young age.

And the idea normally is that he ruled for 39 to 40 years, somewhere round about there, before he died.
And that makes him dying at the age somewhere in his mid-fifties. So he didn't live that particularly long. And yet, when you look at the detail that is given to us in the book of Kings and Chronicles, we see that in old age, Solomon sinned.
The one who was wiser than all men, to whom God granted special wisdom, to whom God permitted to build his temple, the first temple, the glorious temple of Solomon, that in his later life, he became a worshipper of false gods.
Now, there are many who argue about that. Some say that Solomon himself didn't actually worship them, that he allowed the temples to be built because of the many wives that he had.

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[11:35] He had 700 wives. Can you imagine anything worse? 700 wives.

And 300 concubines on top of that. Now, you remember that his first wife was the daughter of Pharaoh. And that gives you a clue as to, of course, where many of these wives came from.
Many of them were in the form of political alliances. That's why he married the daughter of Pharaoh, to make an alliance with Egypt. And probably many of the other wives were similarly gifts that were brought to him for political reasons.
It would have been the same with the concubines. That was the custom in the Middle East at the time. The larger your harem of concubines, the more it showed your power.
And it's debatable whether Solomon ever went near any of them. But, of course, that's another question. We have no inkling of that at all. And there are many things in the life of Solomon that are hidden from us.
[12:50] But nevertheless, we are told in other parts of Scripture, when God tells David that Solomon, his son, will build the temple, he also says in 2 Samuel 7, he says, My mercy shall not depart away from him, like I took it from Saul.

But God's mercy would always be with Solomon. And in the book of Nehemiah, in the last chapter, as Nehemiah is attempting to cleanse foreign women from among the people that have come back to Jerusalem, Nehemiah says in chapter 13, verse 26, Did not Solomon, king of Israel, sin by these things?
Yet among many nations, there was no king like him, which was beloved of his God. Which was beloved of his God.
And so there's a great debate among commentators whether Solomon actually did turn away from the worship of God in his final days or not.
Scripture seems to suggest very clearly that he did. But nevertheless, when you bring the whole picture together, it's quite possible that he simply permitted all these foreigners in his kingdom to worship their own idols rather than worshiping him himself.
[14:25] It's a debatable point. But this is the man whose glory and wisdom has been like no one else's. And yet, what do we see him in the book of Ecclesiastes writing?

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. Everything that he has learned, everything that he has experienced, everything that has gone on in his life, he describes as vanity.
Why is that? Well, if we look at the beginning of chapter 12, he says, remember also your creator in the days of your youth. It's very interesting, isn't it?
If you go back to the original Hebrew, the word creator is actually in the plural. Creators. Remember that creation is a triune act, an act of the Trinity.
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved. And you get this plurality. It's the same in Genesis 1. Let us make man.
[15:40] It's in the plural. And it's interesting that Solomon is aware of that. And that's what he says also when we saw in verse 11, And you notice the term that he uses there, shepherd.

He must have been familiar with the Psalms of David. And doesn't that draw to your mind, of course, Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd, the one who guides through the influence of his Holy Spirit.
But here is Solomon in old age. There is no question that the book of Ecclesiastes is written towards the end of his life.
And as such, he is looking back over what has gone before. And hence comes this instruction. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.
Why? Before the evil days come. And the years draw near, of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.
[16:59] Now, why does he say that? Well, first of all, history shows us, statistics show us, that the great majority of people who come to faith tend to do so in their early years.

The majority of believers are converted before the age of 25. Does that mean that if you're over 25, there's no chance for you to be converted?
Of course not. It can happen right up until the last minute, before death. But the likelihood of it happening grows less and less, the older you get.
And that might be a sad thought for you this evening, for some of us as we approach old age, that if we haven't been converted, if we haven't committed our life to Christ, that there comes a point where it's too late.

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How often do we put it off saying, oh, I'll leave it for when I have more time, when I'm a bit more mature, when I have time to sit down and think and study these things.
[18:17] But you don't know whether you'll be given that time or not. You don't even know whether at that, when that time comes, whether you will have the mental faculties to be able to do that.

And Solomon reflects on that. Before the evil days come and the years draw near, of which you will say, I have no pleasure in my life.
This is the man who had all the pleasures of the world at his fingertips. All the wisdom of the world, all the riches of the world, all the glory of his reign, and yet he has no pleasure in them.
What has happened? Well, things have happened to him physically, as he goes on to tell us in a series of metaphors that are used in the passage here.
Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened. Now that, of course, refers to your eyesight going.
[19:30] One of the first things that goes, that begins to fail, is your eyesight. That's why you notice so many of us, as we get older, we have need of AIDS.

Otherwise, we can't see so well. And the clouds return after the rain. Now it was common in the Middle East that when it rained, that usually they would clear and then you would get the beautiful sunshine and warm weather that we tend to associate with that area again.
But not in this case. It's like the storms are coming again and again. and again. Instead of getting better, things are getting worse. In the day when the keepers of the house tremble.
And the keepers of the house are his arms. Where his strength is, that's where you literally have the force to keep and look after your house.
And the strong men are bent. And the strong men there refers to your knees and your legs and your ankles. And you know very well as you look at older people, we don't have the strength that we used to have.
[20:54] It becomes more difficult for us to walk sometimes as well. I can't do the things now that I used to do even ten years ago.

When I go out to either plant potatoes or dig them up at this time of year, it takes me twice as long to do it as it used to. And I'm twice as tired by the time I've finished.
Don't have the same energy that we had when we were younger. And he goes on to say, and the grinders cease because they are few. What are the grinders?
The grinders are your teeth, particularly your back teeth that grind your food. What tends to happen to us over a period of years is that we, if we're not careful, of course there's much better dental care nowadays, but we tend to lose our teeth.
And I'm sure the abundance of false teeth even present here this evening will testify to that. The grinders cease because they are few. And those who look through the windows are dimmed.
[22:10] Your eyesight is failing again, getting worse. You can't see as well as you did before. And the doors on the streets are shut.

Notice, doors is in the plural. And this is taken to refer to your five senses. You don't taste your food the way that you used to.
Perhaps your food becomes boring. You can't tolerate many of the foods that you enjoyed when you were younger. They don't sit well on your stomach anymore.
They produce all sorts of effects that they never used to. Your other senses, your fingers, are not as sensitive as they used to be.
They're not as able to do things. That's why the grannies often ask the young people, can you thread the needle for me? You can't see it and your hand is shaking a little bit.
[23:17] all the senses, your hearing, is beginning to go. Isn't that one of the things that so many older people have difficulty with? Their hearing begins to fail as well.

when the sound of the grinding is slow. Perhaps we don't even eat as much as we used to.
And one rises up at the sound of a bird. Things frighten us that never frightened us before. We get startled by sudden sounds.
sounds. And those of us who are older will know very well that sometimes we get frightened by things that never frightened us before. And all the daughters of song are brought low.
Oh, there was a time when we used to sing quite happily. But now, I don't know about you, my voice has gone. It's not what it used to be.

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[24:22] I still tried to sing, but it's nothing like what it was even 10, 15 years ago. And I'm sure those who are presenters will testify to that. There comes a time where you have to give it up because you don't have the same voice as you had before.

All the daughters of song are brought low. They are afraid also of what is high. Try climbing up a ladder in your 70s and the way that you used to do in your 20s.
There was a time when I had no problem climbing up ladders to go on the roof and clean chimneys and even stand on the top of the chimney. In the old days when we had a rope with a clump of heather on it cleaning the chimney many, many years ago, I wouldn't dare attempt it now.
I would shake if I was halfway up the ladder. I just can't do it anymore. Terrors are in the way. We're frightened of things that we were never frightened of when we were young.
And as old age comes, we begin to get doddery. Things are changing in our lives. And the almond tree blossoms.
[25:43] You're not familiar with almond trees in this country. I don't know if maybe in the south of England perhaps, but certainly not here where we lived. Almond trees were common.

And they were one of the first signs of spring. And just as you see, and there's a few of them in Stornoway, you see the cherry trees blossoming, we would see the almond trees blossoming.
And their flowers are white. And they're a beautiful sight in spring. They come, you used to love spring with the cherry blossom and the almond blossom everywhere.
But of course, there comes a time where the leaf, where the blossom has to fall before the fruit forms. And the almond tree blossoms. The whiteness of the almond tree refers, of course, to what happens with our hair.
Our hair turns gray. Oh, we might not like it and we might attempt to dye and color and do all the various other things that people do to prevent the coming of old age.
[26:54] But you can't stop it. You cannot stop it. And even for those of us who still have hair, that in itself shows how our age goes.

The ladies are usually more fortunate than the gentlemen. The gentlemen lose their hair much more quickly. And so the almond tree refers to our hair turning white.
And the grasshopper drags itself along. Again, we're not familiar with grasshoppers in this country. We don't see very many of them. But we used to call them crickets. Big, big ones about this size. And in summer you would have plagues of them. Lots of them. And they would land on your hand and you could just throw them away. But they were a particular delicacy to eat in certain parts of the world.
Fried grasshoppers. They're delicious, actually. You might not believe it. Lovely and crunchy. But they're very nice, of course. And again, something we're not familiar with here.
[28:03] But even that, it's a drag to eat them. Become a drag to eat and doesn't agree with your stomach anymore. desire fails. And desire fails.

What kind of desire? Well, desire for everything, almost. Particularly, of course, sexual desire disappears as you get older and older.
But also the desire to eat as much. And the desire for many other things. you can't be bothered with the things that you used to enjoy.
I used to love going out to the moor trout fishing. I can't be bothered putting on wellies and walking through, sludging through the moor to get to a loch now.
It's too much effort. Just can't do it. I can do it, but it would take me all day to get there rather than half an hour or something.
[29:05] And this is what we see. Desire fails. The things that you were interested in before, they hold no meaning for you anymore.

Perhaps you've lost your interest in reading and watching television, perhaps, and the cinema and dining out and fine wines and various other things that were pleasures to you when you were young or younger.
And now, the years have come where you say, I have no pleasure in them. Well, Solomon isn't the only one who experienced these things.
In a sense, I suppose you could argue that he's simply experiencing what all of us experience as we go and come to older age. Shakespeare, he was very, very conscious of this as well.
And you find in so many of his plays references to these effects as well. And for those of you who are familiar with some of Shakespeare's tragedies, you'll remember the famous lines from Macbeth

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in Act 5 towards the end of the play where Macbeth is reflecting on what has happened to him.
[30:28] And he says, life's but a walking shadow, he says. A poor player that frets and struts his hour upon the stage.

He says, it is a tale full of sound and fury told by an idiot signifying nothing. Signifying nothing.
And it's interesting that the greatest writer of English literature, that the thoughts that he has and he puts in the mouths of his characters are exactly the same as the thoughts that Solomon has here.
Why? Because man is going to his eternal home, or as it is in the King James and the Hebrew, to his long home. And that was probably referring to the length of the grave in which the body was put.
But it could also refer, of course, to your eternal home, your long home. And the mourners going about the street.
[31:38] And then in verse 6, we get these verses, these words that people are not quite sure exactly what they mean and they argue about. Before the silver cord is snapped or the golden bowl is broken or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Now, all these things refer, of course, to water, to things that contain water. And it's impossible for us to live without water. There are some who think that the silver cord refers to the spinal cord, the cord that joins the brain to the body, that the golden bowl refers to the brain itself, and the pitcher shattered refers to the skull.
The wheel broken at the cistern may refer to the heart and the lungs, the heart pumping the blood around the body. All these are metaphors, but they all point at the same thing.
And the final thing in verse 7, the dust returns to earth as it was. Isn't that what we see from the beginning of Genesis? That the dust will return.
You are made of dust and will return to dust. And the spirit returns to God who gave it. And this is what he brings into focus in the final verse.
[33:10] The end of the matter all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing.
There is nothing that is secret from God. No matter how many secrets you have kept from others, God is aware of them.
He's aware of the deepest secrets of our mind, our thoughts, our hearts. And every one of these will be brought into judgment, whether good or evil.
And this is the warning that Solomon gives. And he gives it in a sense, as he says in verse 12, to my son. Now, whether he literally means my son, and you will know from scripture that Rehoboam who followed him paid no attention to the wisdom of Solomon.
[34:33] And in fact, quite the opposite, was the cause of the division between Israel and Judah and the end of the kingdom. Beware of anything beyond these.

Beyond what? The words of the wise are like God's. The words of the wise push you on. Those who have collected wisdom through experience.
And the nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings. Some commentators think that he's referring to his own writing here in the book of Ecclesiastes and in the book of Proverbs.
Maybe. But they are given by one shepherd. And who is the one shepherd by whom all these are given? The Lord is my shepherd.
That's what his father wrote. That's what David wrote in Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. And I'm sure so many of us are so familiar with that psalm.
[35:40] And yet is that the shepherd in whom we trust? That we know that this shepherd through the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ will enable us to do what Solomon says, to fear God.

And it's not a fear of being afraid. This is the fear of respect. The fear that brings you to do something out of love, out of respect and out of love.
and you keep God's commandments, not because you're afraid of the judgment, but because you want to keep God's commandments. That's what the Christian, that's what the believer does.
He tries to keep the law of God. Or he may fail often, he may fail daily, but he knows that even if he fails, grace and mercy are given.
And therefore he does not fear the judgment of God. Why does he not fear the judgment? Because the price of his sin has been paid on the cross of Calvary.

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[36:59] That's why the Lord Jesus came to take away the sin of the world, the sin of his people, to pay the price, that you and I should pay for our sin.

And that is Solomon's final word to us. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.
May the Lord bless to us these meditations upon his word. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for your word this evening, that we are able to meditate upon it, to understand and to see how the experience of others can help us.
Even as we look forward to the days of old age that will come upon us all, if that be your will, to grant us a long life on this earth, that our frailties become more and more exposed.
Christ, but we thank you that we can trust in the word that is written, that we can trust in the work of the Lord Jesus grant, and we can trust that you will bring us home to our eternal home.
[38:14] Bless our meditations this evening, be with us and guide us, and pardon sins through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Let us conclude our worship then by singing in Psalm 92, on page 353, Psalm 92.

On page 353 at verse 12, we'll sing to the end of the psalm. But like the palm tree flourishing shall be the righteous one, he shall like to the cedar grow that is in Lebanon.
Those that within the house of God are planted by his grace, they shall grow up and flourish all in our God's holy place. And in old age when others fade, they fruit still forth shall bring.
They shall be fat and full of sap and a be flourishing to show that upright is the Lord. He is a rock to me, and he from all unrighteousness is altogether free.
Let us sing these verses then in conclusion. Psalm 92 at verse 12, but like the palm tree flourishing. shall be the righteous one.
[39:52] He shall like to the cedar grow that is in Lebanon.

Those that within the house of God are planted by his grace.
they shall grow up and flourish all in our God's holy place.
And in old age when others fade, they fruit still forth shall bring.
They shall be fat and full of stuff, and they be flourishing in.
[41:20] To show that upright is the Lord, he is a rock to me, and he from all unrighteousness free.

He is altogether free. Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forever.
Oh, I suppose we want the answers to the questions now. I'm sure you have them anyway. Who wrote Ecclesiastes? Solomon, yes. How many proverbs and songs did he write?
Very good, well done, you got the maths right. Excellent. And what does the Ammon tree in verse 5 refer to? Oh, dear, we missed that one.
White what? White here, well done, yes, white here. It's

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