

# OpenTheo

## May 26th: Ecclesiastes 12 & Acts 4:5-31

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The end of the matter. Peter and John before the Jewish authorities.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

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## **Transcript**

Ecclesiastes chapter 12. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near, of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them. Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut, when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low, they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way, the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets, 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, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the

spirit returns to God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity. Besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings, they are given by one 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. Ecclesiastes chapter 12 concludes the book, returning to the theme of death that the preacher has explored throughout it. In the previous chapter in verse 8 he had written, So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many, all that comes is vanity.

The counsel given here is given to the youth, to the person who still has many years ahead of them. This clearly continues the thread of the immediately preceding two verses. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.

Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Days of darkness of the closing shadows of old age are about to come, and before that time the young man should rejoice as he can.

These verses however present the present duty of the young man against the backdrop of those days of darkness that await. These richly poetic verses begin with a charge to remember your creator, and end with a reminder that the spirit will return to God who gave it. The young man ought to enjoy his youth, but as a gift of God, in light of the fact that it is temporary and fleeting, it is still vapour.

Indeed, the proper enjoyment of his youth can be a way in which he remembers his creator, a conscious appreciation of the goodness of the creator in his gifts. The pleasure and the delights of life won't last forever. The time will come when he may not have the ability to enjoy any more.

The verses that follow have traditionally generally been taken as a reference to the body closing down. The grinders, for instance, are a reference to the teeth that are falling out. The darkening of the sun and moon and stars may be a darkening of the consciousness

or perhaps of the eyes.

The keepers of the house may be the arms. Those who look through the windows may be the eyes. The doors leading out to the street that are shut have been taken by some to refer to constipation, by others to the closing down of the mouth and the ears, as the old person's hearing and his voice weaken.

However, many commentators have seen other things going on here. Some see a lot more of a literal description here, the description of the death of a lord, the mourning for him, and then the collapse of his estate over time. Beyond this, we could also see a lot of eschatological imagery here.

The imagery, particularly that of the darkening of the sun, moon and stars, has much in common with the sort of language that we find in the prophets concerning the day of the lord. For instance, in Joel chapter 2, verses 1 to 2 and 6 to 10, Jesus of course uses similar language in the Olivet Discourse. Michael Fox goes through the passage, exploring each one of these sorts of readings one by one, the allegorical, the literal and the eschatological for each particular verse.

Craig Bartholomew, rightly I believe, challenges this particular approach. He maintains that it is unhelpful to draw such a sharp line and division between metaphorical and literal language. All language is metaphorical.

Rather, he argues that the preacher is working from the death of the individual to the end of history, thereby invoking the prophetic vision of God's cosmic judgement. That is why it is so important to remember your creator in your youth. Like Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, Kohelet does not work with the notion of the isolated individual subject here, but conceives of humankind as an integral part of God's creation.

The connection between the individual and the whole cosmos could also be seen for instance in Job's curse upon the day of his birth, in Job chapter 3. Themes of God's creation of the whole cosmos and of his particular birth are drawn together. Rather more helpfully than his threefold reading of the passage, Fox writes, in Kohelet's telling, the two events, the end of a world and the end of a person, resonate in each other. The poem is intended to be mysterious and ambiguous, and the process of interpreting it may be as important as the particular solution one arrives at.

Kohelet sets us in a dark and broken landscape, through which we must find our way with few guideposts. In a fundamental sense, however, the obscurity of the details does not prevent us from understanding the poem. In fact, it is hard to fail.

The gist of the poem is clear. Enjoy life before you grow old and die. Clear too is the poetic power of the passage.

The scene is weird and unsettling, evocative of diminution, quaking, darkening, silence

and fear. The poem depicts the inevitable ageing and death of the youth who is addressed in chapter 11 verse 9 and who merges with the you of the reader in chapter 12 verses 1 to 7. We can never fully penetrate the fog of the scene, but when we peer through the murk of the images, metaphors and symbols, we realise with a shudder that we are describing our own obliteration. In the interwoven images of a person, maybe a world, or perhaps a whole cosmos that is collapsing, we are reminded once again of the vaporous character of life.

All levels of our reality have a transitory and vaporous character to them. A man will ultimately die, a culture or civilisation will finally collapse, and the whole cosmos will ultimately come to its end. In images of the life of a house and a street closing down, of smashed pottery, broken vessels and snapped courts, we have a multifaceted image of a world failing.

This is all summed up in the preacher's great motto. Vapor of vapors, says the preacher, all is vapor. The words of the preacher end where they began, but returning to this same point, those now familiar words are far more evocative and powerful.

The words of the preacher are now over and we return to the framing words of some other figure in the concluding verses of the book. Given the fact that the words of the introduction and the epilogue frame the entire book and the words of the preacher, the vantage point taken by the writer at this point is a matter of some concern. Some have argued for instance that the writer of the epilogue takes a rather ambivalent approach to the words of the preacher.

Michael Fox writes for instance, While showing respect for Koheleth, the apologist keeps a certain distance from his teaching and from other recorded wisdom as well. The words of the wise are fine and good, but they also must be handled gingerly. The apologist by no means repudiates Koheleth, yet he cautions that wisdom holds certain dangers.

The postscript in chapter 12 verses 13-14 reminds us that wisdom, originating in human intellect and tradition, takes second rank to piety and obedience to God's law. The words of the wise are not always comfortable, pious and traditional, as the books of Ecclesiastes and Job prove. They can sting and they must be approached with care.

However, I agree with Craig Bartholomew that Fox's position is unpersuasive. The preacher is described in verse 9 as being wise. He is described in terms that are reminiscent of Solomon.

We might think of the description of 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29-34, And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Esrahite, and Heman, Chalcol, and Dada the sons of Mahal, and his fame was in

all the surrounding nations. He also spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.

He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts and of birds and of reptiles and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

Whether or not the preacher himself is Solomon, the description of him here certainly evokes the character of Solomon. He is praised as a teacher of the people, as someone who studies and gathers together various anthologies of proverbs. He gives thought to the best forms of expression, wanting to communicate truth in a way that is beautiful.

We might think of Proverbs chapter 25 verse 11, a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. The words that he writes are also described as words of truth, taking all these details together. While we might be able to render them in part in a more ambivalent sense, in their cumulative force they do seem to give a far more positive vision of the preacher than Fox allows for.

The writer of the epilogue, Addressing a Son, describes the words of the wise, collections of which we find in the book of Proverbs, for instance, or see in the book of Job, as like goads or nails firmly fixed. Nails and goads might both be images of things that prick and prompt people to action. The words of the wise correct and direct.

They're not comfortable, but they are good for us. Alternatively, the image of the nails firmly fixed might stand in contrast to all the things that we've seen about the vapour to this point. The vapour and everything else swirls around and is unpredictable, but if you want something that's secure and lasting and that can be depended upon, look to the words of the wise.

Their words can be depended upon because ultimately they come from one shepherd, from God himself. However, although it is very good to learn from the wise, there is a danger of going beyond their words. The writer of the epilogue is probably not forbidding this, rather he's cautioning the son that if he moves beyond the tutelage of the wise and tries to understand these things for himself, he has set for himself a daunting and a difficult task with a great many associated dangers.

The person who leaves behind the clear sight of the shore provided by the straightforward teaching of the wise and ventures forth upon the sea of wisdom for himself is in great danger of becoming shipwrecked. The preacher who sought out these things for himself undertook such a journey, but such a quest is not for everyone to try at home. We must all recognise our limitations and few of us should undertake to think things through from first principles for ourselves.

The writer of the epilogue concludes the book by summing up the message that he wants the son to take away. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's a message that we hear in the book of Psalms, in Job and also on several occasions in Proverbs.

Here, as in those other places, the fear of the Lord and the keeping of the Lord's commandments are put at the forefront of the task of wisdom. Indeed, the writer of the epilogue describes these as the whole duty of man. In considering death, mortality, temporality and the vaporous character of life, we are excited into a new awareness of our end as human beings, both the terminus of our lives and the telos of our lives.

This chapter began by charging the young man to remember his creator in the days of his youth and it ends with the writer of the epilogue reminding the son that every deed will be brought into judgment. He should enjoy his life, he should eat, he should drink and he should rejoice before the Lord, but he must also recognize that he will give an account for everything that he does. We live in the shadow and the vapor under the sun, but that does not mean that our deeds are of no consequence.

Where the realm of sight is transitory, inscrutable and insubstantial, we must learn to live by faith in the God who is above the vapor. A question to consider. On what basis do you believe that the writer of the epilogue writes that fearing God and keeping his commandments is the appropriate response to all that the preacher has raised within the book? Acts chapter 4 verses 5 to 31.

On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, By what power or by what name did you do this? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone, and there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated common men, they were astonished, and they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, What shall we do with these men? for that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.

But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name. So they called them, and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.

And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened, for the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old. When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them, and when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God, and said, Sovereign Lord, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who threw the mouth of our father David your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. After the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple in chapter 3 of the book of Acts, in chapter 4 Peter and John, after being jailed overnight, are now placed before the Sanhedrin, who enquire of them what they are doing.

They are being questioned by a who's who of Jerusalem's elite, the rulers, the elders, the scribes, Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and other members of the high priestly family. And the key question that they want to have answered is the power or name by which they perform the notable miracle. The miracle itself is clearly evident, but as those who perform the miracle were known associates and disciples of the would-be messiah Jesus of Nazareth, there is clearly a problem.

Of course, it's possible that the situation might be salvaged. Perhaps these Galileans can be dissuaded from speaking in the name of Jesus, and can attribute their miracle to the power of God more generally, in a way that would allow them to fit in with the orthodoxy of the elite. Perhaps these men have a few sectarian differences, but we should focus upon the commonalities.

Jesus had promised his disciples that they would be brought before councils and kings

and other rulers of the Gentiles, and that in the day that that happened, the Holy Spirit would give them the words to speak. Here Peter is filled by the Holy Spirit, and he addresses the Sanhedrin. In his answer he exposes something of the surreal character of the situation.

They are being examined concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, giving a lame man the power to walk again. Of course, the real issue is the power or name by which the deed was performed, and on that front Peter immediately torpedoed any hope that the Sanhedrin might have had, that the apostles would attribute the miracle to God's power, apart from any reference to Christ. No, the power of healing for this man came from the name of Jesus Christ, a man that God had raised from the dead, although they had crucified him.

The Jewish leaders had a track record of persecuting and killing the prophets. Each successive generation could rehabilitate the prophets that their fathers had killed, yet they were within the same line of those who killed the prophets, as Christ pointed out. Jesus, however, presents a problem.

Jesus' disciples are still acting by his power, and declaring the message of his unjust crucifixion in a way that seems to delegitimize the authority of the Sanhedrin. God had decisively overruled them, in a death sentence no less. It is very easy to water down and domesticate the teaching of dead leaders and prophets.

Just about everyone believes that if they lived in the days of Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, they would have supported everything that he stood for. The message of the dead is easily defanged, rendered safe and palatable to those in authority. However, the spirit of Christ is stubbornly active and alive in his disciples, and the leaders cannot simply suppress it.

This miracle, then, is a miracle that directly challenges and undermines their authority. As he does in the second chapter of his first epistle, Peter references Psalm 118 verses 22-23. Christ is the stone that was rejected, and yet he has become the cornerstone.

God is building a new temple, and the great builders and leaders of Israel have rejected the very stone that the entire edifice is going to be ordered around. Jesus made a similar point in his response to the authorities in Luke 20 verses 17-18. He looked directly at them and said, What then is this that is written? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. As James Bajon notes, in the rabbinic discussion of this text, they noted the Jews' typical rejection of the chosen leaders that were sent to them. This is similar to the message of Stephen in chapter 7 of this book.



Jesus of Nazareth, then, is the promised Messiah, and the Jewish leaders' rejection of him made them profoundly culpable. While the layman may have been healed or saved from his crippled condition, Peter wants to make clear that the principle extends much further. Jesus is not just one power among many others.

Perhaps a patron saint-type figure that people can pray to in a tight spot. No, there is no salvation in anyone else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

This salvation is not just physical healing. It also includes deliverance from sin, reconciliation to God, forgiveness of our sins. Christ is not just the Saviour of Israel.

He is appointed as the universal Saviour. There is no other name under heaven given among men. Wherever you are, whoever you are, Jesus is unique.

He is the only source of salvation. The boldness of Peter and John is absolutely astonishing. Only a couple of months ago or so, the same man that is speaking with such boldness here was denying Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest to a servant girl.

Now he is boldly proclaiming the authority of Christ to all of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It is also clear to the authorities that Peter and John are not trained members of the scribal class. They are not philosophers, nor do they have extensive rhetorical training.

While they may know the Hebrew scriptures, perhaps even being able to read them for themselves, they are not acquainted with all the different interpretations and readings of these things. They are lay people, they don't have the formal education that the religious leaders themselves would have. It becomes apparent to the leaders that they have been with Jesus.

When he had reasoned with them from the scriptures, Jesus had completely outwitted the leaders of the people. Obviously these men had learned from their master. When we consider that the apostles had spent three years travelling with Christ, living with him, learning from him and hearing him speak to many different crowds, we should not be surprised at the depth of knowledge and insight into the scriptures and God's truth that they exhibit.

And even after the resurrection, Jesus had spent much of the forty days teaching them concerning the Kingdom of God. While they may not have had a formal education, Peter and John had had extensive training, and even more intensive than the rest of the twelve. The leaders now face a quandary and they deliberate among themselves concerning what to do.

It is very clear that a great sign has been performed, God's power has been manifested in the raising of this lame man. But yet this miracle had been performed in the name of

Jesus of Nazareth, a man whom they considered to be a false messiah and had put to death. Seeking to avoid the message spreading further among the people, they instruct Peter and John not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John cannot accept the condition of silence. Craig Keener notes the parallels between this and Plato's description of Socrates' response to the leaders of Athens. Socrates, threatened with death, yet given the possibility of release if he remained silent, responded in a respectful but firm way.

If you should let me go on this condition which I have mentioned, I should say to you, Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the God rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up the philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I may meet. It is quite likely that Luke wants us to see the parallel. If Socrates was the gadfly of Athens, then Peter and John and the rest of the apostles are the gadflies of Jerusalem.

Peter and John's response invites the leaders to consider the situation from their perspective. If God has charged them with this message, to whose word should they give priority? The leaders of the people or God himself? The New Testament puts a strong emphasis upon submission to and honouring of authorities, even authorities that are unjust. The apostles do not go out of their way to provoke confrontation.

Confrontations follow them wherever they go, but the confrontations are caused by other people's violence and injustice, not by their own behaviour. They will speak truthfully to rulers, in a prophetic way, but they do not willfully undermine or reject them. Even here, in the case of the council that sent their master to his death, this general posture of honour, submission and respect gives their resistance on these particular points so much more force.

These are not the words of rebellious men, but men who are seeking to be obedient and are respectfully speaking to the council in a way that encourages them to look at the situation differently. James Bajan notes that in Peter and John's response to the questioning, we see expressions that are typical of both Peter and John. Doing what is right in the sight of God, or the description of Jesus as a living stone, these are Petrine statements that we find in the first epistle of Peter.

On the other hand, the expression what we have seen and heard has a Johannine signature to it. All of this seems to give some weight to the authenticity of these words. All of this leaves the council in a bit of a bind.

The crowd is praising God for this incredible miracle, and they do not seem to have strong grounds on which to punish Peter and John. So strictly warning them, they send them away. Peter and John return to the other disciples, and they join together in prayer to God.

This prayer is of great importance in this chapter. The whole mission of the apostles is driven by prayer. They are acting in the name of Christ as those who are continually seeking God's face.

The ministry of the church begins with constant prayer in the temple, awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then the response to the gift of the Holy Spirit is constant prayer in the temple again. Peter and John had been going to the temple to pray in chapter 3, and now again in chapter 4 they are returning to prayer. Prayer is the engine of the church's mission.

Verses 24-28, with which the prayer begins, is a glorious statement of God's power in creation and providence. God created all things, and he rules over all things. He is truly the sovereign Lord.

They quote Psalm 2. The nations of the world are being gathered together against the Davidic king and against God. The Gentiles are raging, the people are plotting, the kings and the rulers are gathering and scheming. Indeed, this is precisely what had happened in that very city.

They had gathered together against God's holy servant, Jesus, the servant, the one that was promised in the prophets. Although he was the anointed one, the leaders of the Gentiles and the leaders of God's people thought that they could withstand him, and the glorious irony of the whole situation was that they assembled together precisely in order to do what God had intended that they should do. Even as they sought to resist the Lord, they were merely performing his will and intent.

The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord. He can move it whatever way he wants. They might have meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Peter, of course, had made similar statements on the day of Pentecost. There is an immediate response to their prayer. It is a sort of aftershock of Pentecost itself.

The place they are gathered in is shaken and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Going forth, they continue to speak the word of God, and they do so with boldness. A question to consider.

There is a very strong presentation of God's power and sovereignty in human affairs in this chapter, even over the actions of his enemies, even over those most wicked actions involved in the crucifixion of his son. How can an understanding of divine providence and sovereignty in events in history help us to act with the sort of confidence that the apostles show here?