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May 16th: Ecclesiastes 2 & 1 John 3:11—4:6

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Building kingdoms in the mist. Assurance and discernment by the Spirit.

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Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 2. I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity.

I said of laughter, It is mad, and of pleasure, what use is it? I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.

I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house.

I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

So I became great, and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me, and whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure.

My heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity, and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly, for what can the man do who comes after the king, only what has already been done.

Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness, and yet I perceive that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, What happens to the fool will happen to me also.

Why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies, just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity, and a striving after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool, yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.

This also is vanity, and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest.

This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.

For apart from him who can eat, or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity, and a striving after wind. In Ecclesiastes chapter 2 the preacher continues his

exploration to discover if there is anything of lasting and enduring value.

He wants to find out if there is any gain to be found. Daniel Fredericks argues that verses 1 to 3 need to be associated more with the preceding chapter than with that which follows. Verse 3 he claims is a bookend or inclusio with verse 13 of chapter 1. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. The experiments that he engages in in verses 1 to 3 are similar to those of verses 12 to 15 and 16 to 18 of chapter 1. The preacher will later make some positive claims about enjoyment, although it is nonetheless here included with the vapour. Fredericks cautions against presuming that the answers to the preacher's rhetorical questions in verse 2 are negative.

He maintains that the preacher holds a distinction between laughter and pleasure, a distinction that can be substantiated by study of the rest of the book. Rather than thinking that the rhetorical questions are immediately answered, perhaps we are being invited to follow the preacher's investigations to their conclusion, to discover his thoughts on these matters. There is a parallel between the relationship that the preacher establishes between his body and wine and that between himself and wisdom.

He drags his body along with wine, while his heart guides him along with wisdom. He experiments with what he calls folly in keeping with his intended quest outlined in chapter 1 verse 17, and I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. Drinking alcohol as such is not condemned in scripture, although drunkenness and allowing oneself to come under wine's power is.

The preacher seems concerned to explore wine's potential as a source of pleasure and release, although he is also concerned not to give himself over to it in a way that would undermine his quest. He wants to explore folly without abandoning himself to it. How we interpret the nature of the preacher's quest here might be coloured by our beliefs concerning his identity.

If the preacher is a persona of the great and wise Solomonic king, a fictional character created by the author of Ecclesiastes, rather than Solomon himself, we may allow him rather more liberties in this area. However, we should also consider the fact that the historical Solomon did take a path of folly himself, so we need not presume that his exploration of wine was a particularly sober one, even if it was part of a mindful investigation. Furthermore, folly need not be read in a stronger sense.

Drinking wine allows even the wise man temporarily to experience the folly of light intoxication, without surrendering his wisdom to do so. The folly of wine might be akin to the laughter of verse 2. Those who surrender themselves to wine and laughter are fools. However moderated by wisdom, wine and laughter need not be foolish at all.

They provide a measure of relaxation and release which may, in their own ways, serve the wise person, who might otherwise be too weighed down in his toil to be able to establish any distance from it. Wine and laughter can be the servants of rest. Verses 4-9 describe the preacher's kingly activity of creating a world of delights.

Many commentators, rightly I believe, see parallels with the Lord's activity of planting Eden in Genesis chapter 2 here, although Catherine Dell expresses reservations, suggesting that what intertextual connections there are have been greatly overstated. The opening chapters of verse Kings present a similar portrait of the creation of a new Eden in its description of Solomon's earlier reign, his construction of the temple, his adorning of the city of Jerusalem with great and beautiful buildings, and the visit of the Queen of Sheba. There are several allusions in those chapters back to the early chapters of Genesis.

Whether or not we believe that the preacher was Solomon, he is clearly the figure most evoked by the preacher's description of his work here. Humanity was always called to follow God's pattern in forming and filling the world, to create their own beautiful worlds. The preacher, as the king in Jerusalem, makes the city a sort of great garden city, filled with beauty, riches, pleasure and delight.

The point of this exercise was not merely the pleasures to be enjoyed within the realm, but also the wise activity of forming the realm itself, an activity that, in many respects, follows the pattern of God's own activity. However, after creating this great and beautiful realm, and enjoying the satisfaction of creation and all of its sensual pleasures and delights, he returns to consider his labours in terms of the question of chapter 1 verse 3, what does man gain by all of the toil at which he toils under the sun? There are definitely benefits and advantages to his labour and its transitory rewards, but they are just that, they are transitory. They do not represent the sort of lasting gain that he is seeking.

They are good, but they are still vapour, destined to pass away without trace in their time. Compared to folly, wisdom is clearly to be preferred. Indeed, for the preacher, it is to folly as day is to night.

There is considerably more gain to it. However, in the end, both the wise man and the fool will pass away, and their wisdom and folly with them. They will die, and ultimately be forgotten, as he argues in verse 16.

The legacy of both will ultimately fail, be misused, be abandoned, or be forgotten. The meaning of the past is in many respects at the mercy of the future. Our labour and our sacrifices are of little worth if their benefits are despised and squandered by those who come after us.

Our lives are retroactively robbed of meaning. This is why children dishonouring their parents and despising their sacrifices can be so painful. When we invest our lives in

establishing a good legacy, we put the meaning of much of our lives at the mercy of our children and others who come after us, with no guarantees that they will respect and honour our labours, and ensure that our sacrifices achieve their fruit.

Solomon was tragically doomed to leave a vast and glorious kingdom to a proud son who would precipitate a catastrophic split and the loss of most of its riches. The preacher sums up the results of his investigation in verses 22-23. He experiences sorrow and vexation, a lax rest.

Solomon's great works reached their zenith in 1 Kings 500 years after the Exodus, when he completed the great temple and palace complex in Jerusalem. It would seem that, of all times when rest or Sabbath might have been achieved, it was in that time, a year of jubilee times ten. However, restlessness was still the outcome.

All is fleeting vapour, slipping through our fingers, beyond our attempts to grasp and control, to attain lasting substance, or to say at any point that we have truly arrived. Again, none of this means that wisdom, joy and life's pleasures are worthless. They have their value.

They are gifts to be received from God in our toil. They are signs of God's goodness. Indeed, there is nothing better than to enjoy these transitory things, even as we appreciate that they are nonetheless vapour.

Every breath is a remarkable gift from God, even though little is more transitory than a breath. Wisdom is finding delight in the vapour, without losing sight of its vaporous character. We discover God's goodness in the transitory but good joys of life.

We also see his justice in the way that God elevates some and brings others low in order to serve the righteous. This too is transitory, however, but it is good in its time. A question to consider, how might this chapter be read against the backdrop of Genesis chapters 1-4? 1 John 3.11-4.6 For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.

We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

By this we know, love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the

truth and reassure our heart before him.

For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him, and by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard was coming, and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

They are from the world, therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us.

Whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. To this point in 1 John chapter 3, John has been characterizing the righteous, setting them over against those given to sin, rebelliousness and those who belong to the devil.

Now he continues, expressing the opposition between the righteous and the wicked in terms of the contrast between Cain and Abel. Verse 11 connects with what has gone beforehand, with its reference to lack of love for one's brother as a sign of being a child of the devil. Once again, as he has done at several points already in the Epistle, he recalls the teaching of Christ concerning love for the brethren.

In John chapter 13 verses 34-35, A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

And John 15 verse 12, This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. In the contrast between Cain and Abel that he proceeds to draw, John is continuing to draw upon the teaching of Jesus recorded in his Gospel. John chapter 8 verse 44, You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar, and the father of lies. The devil was a murderer from the beginning, and Cain was of him.

The motivation for Cain's murder of Abel was the fundamental hostility between the righteous and the wicked. Cain's deeds were evil, and Abel's were righteous. Abel's sacrifice was accepted, while Cain's was rejected.

Cain was angry to be rejected, seemingly regarding his sacrifice as a means of getting his way with God, rather than as a genuine offering. The wicked hate the righteous, because the deeds of the righteous reveal the true character of their deeds, and their character. The wicked don't merely kill the righteous because they are spurred by their own wickedness, but because they are implacably hostile to those who do good.

By contrasting love for each other with murdering our brothers, we might perhaps think that John is grossly exaggerating for rhetorical impact. However, we should here recall Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, verses 21-24. You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, You fool, will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Just as Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount, John traces murder back to its roots in the heart, showing that it springs up from hatred towards one's brother. God does the same thing in Genesis chapter 4 when he challenges Cain before his anger, envy, and hatred towards Abel has borne the fruit of his act of murder.

In verses 6 and 7 of that chapter, the Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? and Why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it. Recognising the deep hostility that the wicked feel towards the righteous, John's hearers should not be at all surprised that they are experiencing the hatred of the world.

The example of Cain and Abel serve to suggest that the enmity of the wicked towards the righteous has been there from the very beginning. This is not a new thing, and Christians should not be surprised to face it. When they experience it, they should know that they stand in the long history of enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

None of us start off in the realm of life. We must pass out of death into life. An assurance that this has occurred is experienced as we live and act in love towards the brothers.

This love is the fruit of the transition, and it is also in this practice that we are assured

that the transition has taken place. The assurance is not necessarily known as we stand back and look at our works, but rather as we live in love towards God and our brothers. We can often think of assurance as if it were strong knowledge of an objective truth, rather than as knowledge of a relational reality, which is not caught in the objective-subjective opposition that many approaches to assurance are.

You do not know that you have a loving relationship with someone generally by standing back and scrutinising your heart, nor by abstracting yourself from the relationship and examining its objective character in a detached manner. Rather you best know that you have a loving and healthy relationship with them, as you live in loving communion with them. The same is true of our relationship with God.

Assurance is a knowledge that is largely gained indirectly as we live in love towards God and our neighbour. The person who does not love has not made the transition from life to death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.

He may not yet have killed his brother, but the sin of murder, the seed of his father the devil, has taken deep root in his heart. The true pattern of love is provided by Christ himself. As Jesus teaches his disciples in John 15 verse 12, This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. Paul spoke of Christ's love as the fullest expression of love back in Romans chapter 5 verses 6-8. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We must follow this pattern of love in the way that we treat our brothers.

The contrast here is a pronounced one. On the one hand there is the taking of the life of our brother, whether in the ultimate act of murder or in all the little multiple lesser ways that we assault them, undermining their relationships, their property, their reputations, or the way in which we live in envy towards them. On the other hand there is laying down our life for our brother, whether in the ultimate sacrifice or in the many ways in which, in love, we privilege their concerns over our own.

True love is necessarily evidenced in deeds. For instance if we see our brother in need and we have what he requires for his assistance but we still do nothing, we lack any evidence for the love of God dwelling in us. Like James, John wants his heroes to be in no doubt that love is not merely a matter of fine words, it must be embodied in deeds of love.

When we have assurance we will be able to approach God with confidence in prayer.

There will, however, be times when we feel our hearts condemn us, and John wants us to know how to respond well when this occurs, particularly for those who suffer with scrupulosity, with an obsessive conscience that constantly accuses them of various infractions. It is very important to find some way to set their hearts and their minds at rest.

We have limited knowledge of our own hearts and we should be wary of placing too much weight on their judgements. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4, verses 3-5, But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact I do not even judge myself, for I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

We should not allow the accusations of our weak consciences to prevent us from approaching God. Rather we should seek the forgiveness that he has promised and commit ourselves to the way of love, finding assurance as we are taken out of ourselves and into relationship with the God who is so much greater than our accusing hearts, a God to whom we can confidently entrust ourselves. Where we do have confidence before God, we will find that our prayers will be much more effective.

As we are conformed to the character of Christ, our prayers will also be conformed to God's will, and we will receive surprising answers. If we constantly hesitate in approaching God with the accusations of conscience, we will be stunted in our growth, and John wants us to avoid this. But if we press our accusing consciences notwithstanding into ever more committed appeal to God our Father, the more we do this, the more our hearts will be set at rest, and the more that our prayers will be effective.

In his farewell discourse in John's Gospel, Jesus had taught his disciples about love for each other as his commandment to them. This commandment is the one new commandment, personally embodied in Christ himself, which sums up all of the other commandments. Keeping this one command not only sums up but also includes all of the other commandments.

In keeping this commandment we will keep all of the others. In verse 24 he moves from the singular commandment to the plural commandments, perhaps to underline this relationship between plurality and singularity. This is how we are to abide in Christ.

Once again this is reminiscent of John chapter 15 verses 9-14. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. How do we know that God abides in us? By the spirit that he has given us, the spirit that Jesus promised to his disciples in the farewell discourse.

Once again we should not presume this to mean that we know that he abides in us by being able to point directly to the spirit in our lives and say, there, God dwells in me. No, the spirit blows where he wishes, although we see his effects. The assurance comes through the spirit's work within us.

The spirit will lead us to call out to God as Father. The spirit will lead us to love our brothers. The spirit will produce in us a spirit of prayer.

The spirit will lead us to long for God's promised future. We almost certainly won't be able to point to the spirit doing this in our lives, but the effect in our lives will be such that we will be assured of our fellowship with God. As he works in us, this confidence will be a result.

Love, assurance and discernment have all been important themes in John's epistle to this point, and the theme of discernment, previously discussed in chapter 2 verses 18-27, reappears in chapter 4 verses 1-6. The spirit grants us love, but the spirit also grants us discernment. In chapter 2 verses 20-21, But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.

I write to you not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. And in verses 26 and 27 of that chapter, I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you receive from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you.

But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him. Love and discernment belong together. Looking back at John's teaching about love, it should be clear that it is also teaching about discernment, about recognising what belongs to the truth and to God through the criterion of love, as that in which all the commandments in their particularity are consummated.

Jesus had warned his disciples about false prophets back in the Olivet Discourse, in Matthew 24, verses 9-13. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another, and hate one another.

And many false prophets will arise, and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. Just as there had been false prophets in the last days of Judah, so there would be false prophets in the days before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

The faithful needed to be prepared, and to be able to discern between what was true and what was false. Lying spirits had gone forth. People were sent strong delusion, and were believing lies because they hated the truth.

A key test would be found in the knowledge that the true spirit of God bore witness to Christ, as Jesus had taught in John 15, verse 26. But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. The truth of Christ, as the incarnate Son and Messiah, was a powerful touchstone for testing and identifying spirits, and recognizing the true spirit of God.

False spirits do not bear witness to Christ, but to some other thing that will usurp his place. If we want to be able to discern the true spirit of God, testimony to Christ is the watermark. In contrast to the true spirit's testimony, the testimony of false prophets was inspired by the world, and heard by the world.

The true people of God, however, would be known in the fact that they hear their Lord's word, as he had taught, in John 10, verses 2-5. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens.

The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the fact that the spirit bears witness to Christ enables us to discern what is truly of the spirit of God, and what is counterfeit?