Risk, Rejoice, Remember, Fear
Ecclesiastes 11-12

So we're finishing Ecclesiastes. And having shown us how a secular, under-the-sun, approach to life - where God plays no meaningful part in your life - can never give you hope for the future, or purpose for life, or even a moral basis to live by, in the last two chapters the Preacher gives us the alternative - and it's the life of faith.

Risk Generously
Verse 1, 'Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.' Or, literally, '*Send* your bread upon the waters.' Because in the ancient world, if you traded grain you had to use trading ships - you literally sent your bread upon the waters. But every time you did, you were taking a risk. Because if the ship went down, you didn't just lose your bread, you lost your livelihood. Plus, given months spent in transit, it could be years before you saw a profit.

But, if you didn't risk, you'd never see a profit.

Ok, but why does the Preacher bring up risk taking, of all things, as the first marker of the life of faith? Because in an 'under the sun world', no God lovingly weaving the story line of your life; no Divine Defender protecting you, you're at the mercy of time and chance. You don't know what rainy day is around the corner. So you dare not risk, because life's risky enough already. So you play life safe, suffocatingly safe, holding your stuff, or those you love, too tightly. But also, because you're afraid to risk, what you *will* risk is your integrity, because you won't have the courage to stand up for something you know is true because it's also unpopular.

Or, instead of fearing to risk, you'll risk foolishly. You'll take too many risks. You'll take up base jumping, or whatever gives you a rush. Because if there's no God, life's ultimately meaningless. As one base-jumper said, 'Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.' In other words, life's nothing, so cheat death for as long as you can.

So, when it comes to risk, follow an under-the-sun world view and you'll be self-protective or self-indulgent.

But the life of faith, the Preacher says, does something very different. Because when you know there *is* a God in loving, sovereign control of your life, you won't be paralysed by fear, but neither will you risk foolishly. You'll risk wisely and generously.

Verse 2, 'Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.'

Donald Rumsfeld, the former American defence secretary who died this week, said, 'As we know, there are known knowns… things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns… we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And… it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones.'

And the Preacher says, yes… but. Yes, you don't know what disaster could happen or even if it will happen. But rather than that being difficult, let it shape the way you live. Verse 2 again, 'Give a

portion to seven, or even to eight.' Don't put all your grain in one boat. Spread your risk. Risk wisely.

But there's another way to read that. Because when a rich person gave a feast, he would send portions of food to the poor. And the Preacher's saying, do that. Risk generously. Even though you know life is inherently risky, there are unknown unknowns, risk yourself on others. Use your capital, social and financial, and give yourself away on behalf of others.

The one thing you shouldn't do, he says, is play it suffocatingly safe: v3, 'If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.'

In other words there are known knowns. Some things in life are just certain: The Dutch lose at football. Clouds that are heavy bring rain. A tree that falls over isn't getting back up. But not all life's like that, he says. And if you wait for certainty in life, you'll never do anything: v4, 'He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.' In other words, don't be paralysed by fear, or wait for perfect conditions.

Instead, let the fact that you *don't* know the future spur you to action. Because even though you don't know, God does. Verse 5, 'As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God *who makes everything*.' You don't know what of your work will succeed, but God's work always succeeds. And you can risk wisely and generously, not because you hold your future in your hands, but because He does.

Jesus told a parable about servants given money to invest in their master's absence. But which servant was condemned on the master's return? Those who risked? No, the one who played it safe and hid his talent in the ground. And an 'under the sun' world-view will leave you overly risk averse, because you'll fear for the future, so you'll build yourself a bunker. Or, you'll build yourself a barn, like the rich farmer in Jesus' other parable, you'll hoard, because you'll think your resources are yours to live a life of comfort. Self-protective or self-indulgent

But trust God and you'll be self-sacrificial because you can risk generously. Verse 6, 'In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.' Not everything you attempt will succeed, but God's work in and through you always will.

You see, there is an 'above the sun', kingdom logic that says, try and save your life and you'll lose it; but be willing to lose your life and you'll find it. That it's in giving that you receive, that it's in dying to self that you live. As Paul says, 'whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.' (2 Cor 9:6). Why? Because Christ sowed himself for you. Because he risked everything for you. And when you know that, you can risk for others.

So, look above the sun, put your trust in God and risk generously.

Rejoice Greatly

Verses 7-8: 'Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all.'

Now, a secular world-view cannot give you a good reason to rejoice. Because either you'll see that everything you could take joy in, like music, or love, or art, are just chemical reactions in your brain and all your accomplishments are ultimately meaningless, *hebel*, and you'll despair. Or, you'll find joy in those things *despite* what it says, maybe even to anaesthetise you to what it says. Either way, it can never give you a reason to be filled with joy. But Christianity can.

'Light is sweet' the preacher says, because life is sweet. Especially when England beat Germany and you have a German son-in-law. Life is sweet because it's to be savoured, because you've been created to delight in life. But he's not burying his head in the sand. He knows death is coming: v8, 'Let him remember that the days of darkness will be many.' It's that he knows that a life of trusting God can give you reasons for joy even in the face of death.

In fact, it's not just that you *can* rejoice, you *must* rejoice. He commands it: v9, 'Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.' And by young he means anyone not in the terminal decline of chapter 12. So, today, we're all young.

But what's with an 'above the sun' - there is a God - world-view that can command you to rejoice in life? Because it tells you that your life, and the things of life, are gifts from your loving heavenly Father. And not to recognise that is to insult the Gift-Giver.

Look at v9, '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.' God's invited you to a feast, the Preacher's saying, so feast! Enjoy it. But live knowing there is a final judgment. 'Great', you might think, 'so the Preacher's like my dad, 'sure you can go to the party, just don't make any noise and be home by 9.' No. He's saying, 'you're young, so grab hold of life. But as you do, know there are counterfeits to true joy. So live within God's boundaries so you can experience the joy that's really joy'. As GK Chesterton said, the boundaries God sets are not the walls of a prison, they're the walls of a playground within which things can get really wild.

But here's the thing, it's not just the law-*breaker* who faces judgment, it's the law-*keeper.* It's the one who refuses to enjoy God's good gifts, and leaves them wrapped-up, like the elder brother in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, who doesn't believe his Father could be that good.

As the people of Israel stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses set before them blessings and curses. And the curses were what would happen if they failed to obey God. But among the curses, listen to what Moses said. Because one reason judgment might come would be 'because you did not serve the Lord your God *with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things*' (Deut 28:47). In other words, when God abundantly blesses you, it's a sin *not* to be filled with joy, because it's to live as if God's a liar, that he isn't the great, generous, gracious gift giver that he is.

In *The Last Battle*, the curtain comes down on Narnia, and all who love Aslan are streaming into Aslan's country. But there's a party of dwarves sat on the ground, eyes tightly shut, refusing all offers to come join the party - because they refuse to be taken in. They refuse to believe Aslan is that good. Aslan even sets a feast before them, but when they eat it, they think it's straw and dirty water. To which Aslan says, "You see… They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning

instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken *in* that they can not be taken *out*."

Exactly, the Preacher says, so leave the prison of your under the sun world, the prison of your mind, and rejoice in the sunshine of God's blessing. As Paul writes, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.' (Phil 4:4). Because when you know that in Christ, in the Lord, you are loved and called and chosen and forgiven you have multiple reasons to rejoice.

But, things will try and rob you of that joy. Verse 10, 'Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.' So, there are psychological things that can sap your joy. Like comparisons. Teddy Roosevelt said, 'Comparison is the thief of joy.' Constantly compare what you have, or don't have, with others and it'll vex your heart. Or there's pride, see those below you, who can't help you up the ladder, as inconveniences, and you'll live in a near constant state of irritation. Or there's the cynicism or unbelief of others which can breed disillusionment in your own heart. Remove each of them, the Preacher says.

But there's also physical stuff: pain in your body. And health issues can sap your joy. So do what you can to stay as healthy as you can, for as long as you can, the Preacher says.

So, risk generously, rejoice greatly, but thirdly,

Remember Humbly

Chapter 12:1, 'Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.' Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, 'remember *God*'. He says, remember your *Creator*. Remember you're a creature. Remember what Augustine said, 'You have made us for yourself, O God'; that you'll only find true joy by finding your identity in him and not in creating it yourself; in living the life and fulfilling the purpose he designed you for.

And remember his character - and let it shape yours. Remember his protection and don't fear. Remember his provision and cultivate thankfulness. Remember his greatness - that it might humble you and you might worship him.

And to remember is active, not passive. And we need to be active because we are so prone to forget. It's why the Lord gave Israel the feast of Passover, so that every year they had this reminder, God is the God who sets people free. It's why Jesus said of his Last Supper, of breaking bread in communion, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. Why? Because we're prone to forget that the Son of God had to die for our sins, and that the Son of God loved us so much he *did* die for our sins.

But why remember your Creator when you're young? Can't it wait till you're old? No! the Preacher says, you need to do it, v1, '*Before* the evil days come.' The days when you become increasingly frail.

Now, in our western secular culture no one likes to face ageing. We idolise youth, and you'll be offered creams, and hair dyes, or in some cases hair transplants, and botox, and surgery to try and stop the sagging. But if you think about it, a world-view that can't face death is a bizarre world-view, because death is the one thing about your future you can be certain of.

How much better, the Preacher says, to face it, and let it inform how you live. Because the house you build now is the one you'll live in in old age. The garden you plant now is the one you'll walk in. The wells you dig now are the ones you'll drink from. The friends you make, the company you keep, the character you forge, whether you live to get or to give, will all determine who will be there when the evil days come.

So, the Preacher says, cultivate your relationship with your Creator *now*. Verse 2, 'Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened.' Before all those things that light up your life, like friends, and family, hopes and ambitions, are slowly extinguished. Before 'the clouds return after the rain.' Because, when you're young, there's always light at the end of the tunnel. Things might be bad now, the sky might be dark now, but the sun will come out again. But when you're old and frail, the sky never clears, one rain cloud follows another.

Verse 3, 'In the days when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent.' A Mrs Tilford recently wrote to the Guardian newspaper and said, 'How to find out if you are old: fall down. If people laugh, you're young. If people panic, you're old.' It's tragically true. Your hands tremble and your legs give way.

Verse 3 again, 'the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed.' Your teeth fall out and your sight fails. Verse 4, 'And the doors on the street are shut - when the sound of grinding is low'. Your hearing goes, and the young are still out there, working at the grindstone, but you're increasingly cut off from that outside world. 'And one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low'. Your sleep pattern becomes erratic and pleasure in the joys of life diminish.

Verse 5, 'They are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way.' Fears increase. 'The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails.' Your hair goes grey, if there's any left; your mobility's reduced; and as for sex - well, you can forget that.

And when you're young you think, that'll never happen to me. O yes it will, the Preacher says. One commentator (Gibson) quotes the British author, Terry Pratchett, as saying, 'Inside every old person is a young person wondering *what happened?*' Life happened, says the Preacher. So, remember your Creator now. Because, v5, 'man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets'. Your funeral is one day nearer than it was yesterday.

But when death does finally come, it brings about the reversal of creation. Genesis tells us, 'the Lord formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature' (Gen 2:7). But the end point of life, the Preacher says, is, v7, 'and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.' It's the *hebel*, the futility of life.

But, as CS Lewis wrote, 'the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so.' Because, through the resurrection of Christ, death has been defeated, and the new creation is coming. So… remember your Creator *now*.

Risk generously; rejoice greatly; remember humbly; but finally…

Fear Reverently

Verse 13, ‘The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.’ The secular world view tells you, you set the rules for your life, don’t cede that control to anyone else. And the Preacher says, ‘Who are you kidding? You have virtually no control over your life whatever.’ Instead, fear God, recognise his greatness and your smallness; his fullness and your emptiness; his holiness and your unholiness. And as you do everything else, your ambitions and desires, your strengths and successes, your fears and your failures, will all find their right place.

Because, as you begin to fear him, you’ll want to obey him. Every world-view will influence the way you live - so pick the one that makes your character more like God’s, the Preacher’s saying. Verse 14, ‘For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.’ You see, if the secular world views tells you everything, ultimately, is meaningless *hebel*, the fact of the final judgment tells you everything is *full* of meaning.

Which is great, but how do you get through that final judgment?

Well, go back to v11, 'the words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.’ And a goad is a stick you prod an animal with to get it to go in the direction you want. And a nail firmly fixed is one you can hang stuff on, because it can take the weight. And the Preacher’s saying, the words of the wise, given by the One Shepherd, are the guide you need and the thing you can hang everything else on.

The question is, who is that One Shepherd?

Well, the only other times ‘one shepherd’ is mentioned in the Old Testament is in Ezekiel, where God says, ‘I will set up over them *one shepherd*, my servant David, and he shall feed them’ (Ezek 34:23). And ‘My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have *one shepherd*. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes.’ (Ezek 37:24). And then Jesus came, and said, ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep… There will be one flock, *one shepherd*.’ (John 10:11,16).

And he’s the One Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep. The shepherd who knew all about nails. And you can stand in the final judgment and not fear it, because at the cross Christ has born your judgment for you. So you don’t have to obey God out of fear of judgment, but out of the joy of gratitude. Not out of duty but out of delight. And as you do, the collected sayings of his word, become your guide and the thing you can hang everything else on.

Follow a secular world-view and it will leave you hanging in the air. Follow Christ, and you’ll stand on solid ground. Fear him with reverence and awe and joy and you’ll find yourself being changed into the image of your creator. It’s what you’ve always been meant to be. And you’ll become more bold, and more humble; more kind, and more courageous; more generous and more selfless. An under the sun, secular world-view can never give you that. So why choose it?

Risk generously, Rejoice greatly, Remember humbly and Fear reverently.