

Tradition holds that the author of Ecclesiastes is probably king Solomon. The son of David who was and is well known for his enormous wisdom and wealth. He had everything.

He had 300 concubines, women whose purpose in life was to breed his children. As well as seven hundred wives. He was well respected internationally. People wanted to trade with him, people wanted to be a part of his circle of friends. His army was enormous, his trade agreements lucrative. He was enormously popular. He had everything that we all strive for in this life today.

Wealth, sexual fulfilment, intelligence, power, love, religion. And as he rose to the top of this mountain of success, this is what we hear him say.

“It’s all pointless. Everything we do is pointless.”]

You may have heard it said as “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The Hebrew for vanity has associations with wind or vapour. Life is like a breath as we heard in Psalm 39. It all seems meaningless and transient or temporary.

Solomon is enormously successful yet bitterly disappointed. He is looking for an answer outside his immediate experience. He sees life as fleeting, “all people are like grass, pursuing self is like chasing the wind.” And there is a ring of truth even now.

But what made his life meaningless? What brought him to the point of such despair? I think it was the spectre of death. Everywhere he looked he would see death crouching at the door. People back then were surrounded by people dying at points in their life that we would consider before their time.

“Sure a wonderful moment of pleasure has past, but at the end of it, life is not about moments of pleasure”, he would think. “There has to be something more.”

Death is the very thing that makes life seem pointless. It’s the full stop at the end of a sentence. And the sentence is always too short. We want the meaning of the sentence to come about but it just full stop.

Death is there all the time. And most of us ignore it. But not tonight. Tonight we are going to reflect on death being a part of life.

Death is not something we can dodge. We all die. It’s certain. But the idea of non-existence is a scary thought . . . even to those who believe in an afterlife. The desire to live forever seems to be

part of what it means to be human. We seem to escape so many things, but to escape death is impossible. But that doesn't stop us from trying.

The idea that we can live forever dances on the horizon in front of us. It is what drives the whole post-human movement. There are places in the states where you can freeze your head for \$50,000 or your entire body for \$100,000. The idea being that you will be revived when the technology has been developed in the future. People do not want to die and they believe the fountain of youth is right around the corner. We must be able to touch it surely. Even if it's not through cryogenics, perhaps we could download our brain, our thoughts and personalities into a machine. The matrix is not implausible. It is not just science fiction, it is science prediction.

If you were given the opportunity to save 90% of your existence onto disk and live inside a new reality forever, would you not consider it?

Some people seek to be immortalized through fame. Imagine being as famous as Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Aristotle, Plato, Jesus, the Beatles. People want to build their empire, keep the family name. They want to leave a legacy. But fame is quite fleeting. Who here remembers the celebrities of the early 1900's? Do you think that David Hasslehoff of Knight Rider and Baywatch fame will be around in 20 years? How long will Britney Spears stay in the lime light?

So some join political movements to do something for humanity. But for what? One of the products of the cold war was eliminating the idea of a long-lasting future. The nuclear threat of total destruction of the planet is what I grew up with and has shaped my perspective of what is to come. I'll be surprised if we make it to the next century. So doing something to be remembered as being good for the human race is fleeting also. What good is a tombstone if there is no-one there to read it?

Our perspective of death, whether developed or not, shapes the way we live. It's one of its ironies.

People fear death, or shake their fist at it. We will do anything to escape it. Few accept it. No that's not fair. Many accept it at arms length. Many Christians accept it at arms length. We have a hope that we'll get to heaven. And that's our way of coping with the finiteness of life. It's a twenty word essay neatly filed away on the

top shelf of our virtual theological library. It's an answer that will do and sometimes it fits.

Mortality is a difficult thing to front up to. Ignoring it is not accepting it. It doesn't work like that.

In the movie *Fight Club* there is this scene where two points are made

“First, you have to know, with no fear, know that someday you are going to die. Until you know that, you are useless.”

“It's only after we lost everything that we are free to do anything.”

Does it sound familiar? And this is from a film that is trying to push us away from God. Make us feel like we don't need him. But there is a sense where it echoes the very words of Jesus. Take up your cross, leave your mother and father, leave everyone and everything and follow me.

All of these themes are echoed in a film of an exceptionally coarse and secular nature. But think about it. “First, you have to *know*, with no fear, *know* that someday you are going to die. Until you know that, you are useless.”

It should be easy for us as Christians and church goers. Jesus has conquered death. What have we to be afraid of? We believe in heaven. What have we to be afraid of?

But many Christians, including myself, still have a fear of death, though natural and real, but it is quite irrational. In the purest sense of theology, we ought to view it as a supernatural gateway into the afterlife. Death oughtn't be tragic, it can be sad, but it is a wonderful thing for the person who just died! They've been released into the next dimension. We believe that if they have been faithful to God that they are standing with him?

We don't necessarily hold tightly to this because we don't want to think about it. We leave thinking about death, like many other things in life, to later on. We hold it at arms length. Well most of the time we do.

You see, here it is. In full view this week for all of us to see. Wayne Wright passed away at the age of 54. He is someone who through his music and ministry touched the lives of literally thousands upon thousands of people. And there we see a full stop in the sentence. Many of you don't know Wayne Wright, but you can

maybe cast your mind back to another Christian who you know passed away and start to think about them. Many of you haven't dealt with death of a loved one at all but that doesn't mean you shouldn't deal with the prospect of your own.

Sometimes we react to this and try to find answers—quoting from the scriptures with God making everything work together for the good of those who love him. And we try to rationalise who it will affect in what way and how it will become this super-evangelistic tool perhaps. But I don't see that it's necessary. I don't see it like that because death in the Christian world view is not supposed to be a full stop, it is meant to be a comma. And the meaning of the sentence is already clear. Especially in Wayne's life. And I will explain what I mean.

Young people listen to this. You are the ones who need to listen to this. Because yesterday, my half brother drowned. He was 23. Hillsborough Baptist church have just been through grieving for one of their youth group who got killed in a car accident. She was 16. I had a friend who died at 18 in a motorcycle accident when he was on the way to propose to his girlfriend. A Mt Albert couple, Paul and Sheryl Burrows died in a car crash on October 30th 1987—they were in their early to mid-twenties, their mini overturned in a ball of fire.

Make no mistake. You are not invincible. You feel it. The world doesn't seem to touch you. But it can and I dare say . . . it does and it will. You are not immune from having a short life. Make every day count.

I like the quote from Fight Club because it puts death in perspective. Death stops our accomplishments on this earth. It puts a dramatic limit on our earthly potential. Young people listen to this and it's another movie quote, this time from Dead Poets society, not for any other reason than because it sounds wonderful. This is the message for you.

“Carpe Diem. Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary.”

And I'll add this because that's only half the story, the only extraordinary lives that have ever lived, are ones that are steeped in a faith that puts others before themselves.

Jesus tells a story like this.

"There's a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.' "The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.' "The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.'

"The master was furious. 'That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. "

'Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this "play-it-safe" who won't go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.

Now without too much imagination we can see that someone like Wayne fits the profile of the first and second quite well. Wayne let his gifts, which were many, be used by Jesus. What is it that was successful about Wayne? He did not waste his talent on self-indulgence. He invested his life and wealth into the things of the kingdom. The thing is this, that the interests of God were elevated above self interest.

The tragedy is not so much that he passed away and left a gaping big hole—don't misunderstand me because I do think his passing away is sad and we ought to feel shocked and grieve because there is a loss. It's awful to lose a loved one, especially when it's unexpected. But the tragedy is that there *is* a gaping big hole because so few of us it seems are prepared to have the same commitment to Jesus that he had.

This is how it is meant to be as Christians. This is what is so different. This is what gives us meaning. Love is sacrifice. We all know that. Love God. Love people.

Ecclesiastes is a book about giving us a context. It gives us a position in history. Solomon stumbles across this quite profoundly. Twelve chapters of thought later and he has three verses to say. At the end of all his musings, and pontificating and thinking about life and what gives, meaning he ends up with the following verses.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when 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 with the rain;

in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly;

when the doors on the street are shut, and 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;

when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets;

before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity. **Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. The Teacher sought to find***

pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly. The sayings of the wise are like long sticks that prod cattle, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. 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 that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

There is the answer to your life. There is the answer to living a satisfying and meaningful life, right there. Have faith in Jesus. Love him. Love him with everything you've got. And then love others. Love people with everything you've got—then you will have a meaningful life. Do not chase the wind anymore.

Stand up and be counted, seize the day and fear God. Love God and love people, that is all that is required for us to having a meaningful life.