

CREATURE STORY

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12:8

INTRODUCTION: YOU ARE A CREATURE!

In the movie *Toy Story*, the action figure Buzz Lightyear is absolutely convinced that he is a daring space ranger, on a dangerous mission to save the world. Of course, he is totally deluded. And one of the main threads in the movie is Buzz's discovery of who he really is. The key moment comes when Buzz and Sheriff Woody have been left behind and are desperately trying to reunite with their owner Andy. When Buzz tries to radio into "Star Command" Woody finally loses it. He waves his arms around and shouts in his face "You are a toy! You are aren't the real Buzz Lightyear, you are an action figure. *A child's plaything!*"

After a pause, Buzz says: "You are a sad, strange, little man."

That's *Toy Story*. I think that we could call *Ecclesiastes: A Creature Story*. It is as if the teacher is waving his arms around and shouting in our face: "You are a creature! You can't bring the world under your control, you are just human being!" Time and again he has called us to realise how small we are and to remember how limited we are, and recognise how futile it is when we try to ignore the creaturely nature of our existence. And if we're honest we might be tempted to respond: "You are a sad, strange, little man." Sometimes the teacher sounds so despairing, so dreary, so defeatist. In fact, he wants to rescue us from harmful delusions, that instead of resisting our creatureliness, we would receive it as a gift, and so be released from a life of futility into a life of freedom.

And as we read the final section of the teacher's exhortation, this argument comes to a climax. The teacher is driving home what I think has been his point all along: we are creatures; and because we are creatures, the world is not fully under our control. Here are some examples of where you will see this as we read the passage together in a moment.

1. *We are creatures*

Throughout the whole book, the Teacher has lifted our eyes to remember the Lord, to look to him as the one who has given us all things. And it's right at the end of his teaching, in the passage before us today, that he refers to God as the Maker and Creator for the first time. He says in verse 5 of chapter 11:

*As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a mother's womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things.*

And then again at the beginning of chapter 12: *Remember your Creator...*

As we remember that God is the maker of all things, we remember that we are not. As we remember our Creator, we remember that we are creatures. As we come to know God, we come to know our ourselves as those made by God and dependant on God. And as we come to know ourselves, and as we bump up against the limits of our own wisdom, we come to know God better too. We realise that the world depends on his constant provision and not ours. On his controlling power and not ours. And so much of these chapters we will read today are exploring the nature and limits of our own power and wisdom as creatures in the world created by the Lord.

2. *The world is beyond our control*

And the point the teacher makes is that the world is beyond our complete control. Now there is a sense in which we can have some control over the world around us. For God has made us in his image, and we can move out into the world and make our mark. From the very beginning we were created and given the capability to be fruitful and to multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it. And so the teacher says, wisdom is better than folly. You can use save to rescue a city, or to speak constructive words; you can sharpen an axe and sharpen your skills to get better results; you can reject lavish and lazy living and be useful to yourself and other people.

The teacher is careful to tell us, however, that our attempts to control the world can only ever be partial, and even our wisdom itself is limited. When we think we can fully control the world around us, we find out that the world is, finally, uncontrollable. And this is *the* dynamic tension of life as a creature in God's world. If the world was always controllable then life would be easy. If the world was always complete and utter chaos then we'd learn to deal with that. But the fact we can have a some control, but not complete control, that's what really makes life frustrating and difficult. We can feel like we make such dramatic progress, only to find out that so much about ourselves and the world remains the same. We can accumulate much helpful wisdom, only for a little bit of folly to ruin everything, like the stench of a dead fly polluting a whole bottle of perfume. We can work hard on good things, only for our work to crumble and hurt us. We live in a world where the future is uncertain and often where power is often given to those who are unworthy. We have so little control even over our own words. Little birds can carry them to places we never imagined they would go.

The beginning of chapter 12 is a hauntingly beautiful poem about how our lives, and even the world itself, are so fragile and always seem to be falling apart. And despite all our best efforts, we can't avoid all days of trouble, we can't remove all that is difficult from the world, we can't reverse the way things inevitably decline, and we can't resist the reality of death.

We can't do it, because we only creatures. And when we try, we will always end up in frustration, and the effect of all our striving will be fleeting. Like trying to shepherd wind, or manage mist:

"Meaningless! meaningless!" Says the Teacher.

Everything is meaningless!"

Let's read Ecclesiastes 9:11-12:8

READING: ECCLESIASTES 9:11-12:8

REFLECTION: FALLING WITH STYLE!*1. The Teacher's paradoxical application*

"You are a creature!" That is the Teacher's message. But his application of that message is surprising. For you might think that the only option is to throw our hands up in the air and retreat from the world. I mean if we can't bring the world under our total control then what's the point?! The exact opposite is true, however. Faced with our limited control, the Teacher counsels us to be bold. Sharpen your axe, ship your grain, scatter your seed! Here's the paradox: when we try to control everything around us, the world becomes a place of opposition; it resists our attempts at control and so we find ourselves retreating from the world.

When we embrace our creaturely nature, however, the world becomes a place of opportunity. Freed from the need to be in control, and remembering God's control over all things, we can move out into the world. We can enjoy the world as it is in front of us, we can take risks as they present themselves to us, we can invest in the people and the things that are before us.

Trying to live as if we can control an uncontrollable world is, it turns out, an intolerable burden. It opens us up to all sorts of anxieties and fears, and it robs us of the possibility of joy.

But as Peter Leithart says,

The Teacher shows us a way to real joy: the realisation that we are not in charge, we never were in charge, and we don't need to be in charge because that's [literally] Someone Else's job! For the Teacher, the life of faith is a life of joy because faith liberates us from the burden of taking care of a creation that was never ours to begin with.

We are not in charge, but we are also not at the whim of random chaos. We have a Maker and a Creator, and in Jesus we discover that this God is a kind Father who rules the world with sovereign love.

And so like Jesus, the Teacher is encouraging us to live in this world as children. Embracing our dependance on the Father, seeing the world as under the control and care of the Father, and enjoying creation under the loving gaze of our Father.

2. *Some particular applications for today*

And so what might this mean for us today? How might embracing our creaturely nature help us to live freely and joyfully in the world that God has made? Let's consider three particular applications.

- *To young people*

And the first particular application is for the particular group of people that the Teacher addresses: young people. Listen again from chapter 11 verse 9:

*You who are young, be happy while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you into judgment.
So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigour are meaningless.*

I think this is what the teacher is saying. Knowing that you are a creature liberates you to live life with **freedom** and **focus**. Firstly, you are free from the lie that life is all up to you. You don't have to bear the burden of justifying your own existence. You don't have to carry the weight of forging your own identity. The responsibility for creating your own meaning and determining your own values does not rest on your own shoulders. The future doesn't lie in your hands, but in God's hands. It's not up to you to fix everything that's wrong with the world, it's up to God.

And so be free! Says the teacher. Be happy and let your heart be joyful. Pursue good things as they present themselves to you. Take opportunities as you see them. Even take risks to do hard things and see what happens!

Whether it's deciding what to do after school, or figuring out who to be friends with, or whether you date someone or not, or doing your work at school, or learning an instrument, or starting a YouTube channel, or whatever. Whether it's something small and simple, or something big and complicated. You don't have to compete with others, you don't have to compare yourself with others, you don't have to impress others. The teacher says: Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see. You can freely pursue what is good and right without being consumed by fear of the future, because the future was never under your control in the first place.

But secondly, what the teacher says gives you focus. See, the world, too, says follow your heart, but it offers no guidance. With no clear vision for the future, or no greater standard above you, how can you know what is good and right? How do you know whether your what your heart desires is going to help you or harm you? And that can be stressful. For if you have freedom but no direction, then you're just lost. But that's not what the teacher is saying here. He says, "follow your heart" AND he says "for all these things God will bring you into judgment."

There is a God who has made the world. And he has made you. And he tells you how to live in the world and what is right and good and true. And when we live in accordance with what God tells us, then we will find ourselves to be truly free.

And so from Ecclesiastes alone, God tells us not to make decisions based on accumulating possessions, or pleasure or popularity. He says these things don't last and always let us down. So instead find companions who will build you up and not put you down. Work hard but don't smash yourself. Enjoy the good things of this world but don't be consumed by them. And most of all *fear the Lord*. Live in the awareness of God's presence, remember the reality of his judgement, and trust in the gift of his grace. He says, "remember the creator in the days of your youth."

Of course, it's through faith in Jesus that this freedom and focus comes to its total fulfilment. In Christ we are fully justified, fully seen and known by God, and our eyes are opened to see what is truly meaningful and valuable. And so Paul writes in Galatians 5: You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

- *In generosity*

Of course this is not only a message for the young among us. It is for all of us. The teacher encourages all of us to live freely in the fear of the Lord. He uses two illustrations: one about shipping your grain across the sea – making bold investments, because who knows how God will bless our ventures. And the second is about sowing seed far and wide, in the morning and the evening for who knows which seeds will succeed and where. Now this second image of seed sowing appears a couple of times in the new testament and applies the same image to both generosity and evangelism. And I think both of those applications flow out of the passage in Ecclesiastes today. So let's finish by exploring each of those a little further.

Firstly, when we recognise we are creatures, and that the world is not under our total control, we are free to be generous. I think this ties in with one of the most curious verses in the whole book of Ecclesiastes. Did you notice chapter 10 verse 19? It's very weird isn't it:

*A feast is made for laughter,
wine makes life merry,
and money is the answer for everything.*

Now I don't think that is a principle to embrace for all of life. The teacher is acknowledging, however, that money is perhaps the greatest tool we have to offer. And so it's no surprise that our modern world – which is obsessed with gaining as much control over the world as we can – is also obsessed with getting as much money as we can. Money can provide solutions and open up opportunities that would otherwise be beyond our reach.

When we are liberated from the burden of controlling the world, however, we are also liberated from the need to be always growing our bank account. Instead we can put whatever we do have to good use, generously using what we have to invest in people and projects around us. This is the very same thing Jesus taught in his parable of the talents. Because we are ruled by a generous and kind king, what we have can be boldly invested rather than buried away.

So the teacher says,

*Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.*

Use your money and your time, and your gifts and and your abilities, and your power and your position, your home and your help, whatever God has given you. Give it generously, for who knows how God will bless your efforts, and who knows what will grow from your giving. This is exactly what we are encouraged to do in 2 Corinthians 9:

Remember this: Whœver sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whœver sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

- *In evangelism*

And we are also free to proclaim the good news of the gospel. For I reckon there is maybe no other place in our Christian lives where we feel so out of control than in evangelism. None of us can control a human heart, and cause it to turn to Christ in repentance and faith. Only the Holy Spirit can do that work of transforming someone from the inside out.

But when we embrace the limits of our control we are then free to widely scatter the seed of the gospel and see what God grows. I think this is at least part of the point of Jesus' parable of the sower. We can't control all the different soils, we might not even know what type of soil there is around us. And so scatter the seed of the word everywhere. Some of it won't even break ground, some might grow up quickly and wither, but others will take root and bear great fruit.

If you feel out of control in your efforts to tell others about Jesus, that's exactly true. But God is in control and who knows how we will use your efforts for the good of the people around you and for the glory of Jesus in the world. And so take the good news and spread it widely:

*Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.*

At the end of the Toy Story movie, Buzz and Woody have escaped from the sadistic Sid's house and are trying to catch up to all of Andy's other toys in a moving truck. The truck is pulling away when they realise that Sid had strapped a rocket to Buzz's back. They light it and and are launched into the sky, and eventually they land in the truck and are back with Andy where they truly belong.

And when they're high in the air and Buzz is using his wings to guide them in the truck. Woody says, "You're flying!" To which Buzz replies, "No. I'm falling with style."

It seems to me that Falling with Style is exactly the sort of life the teacher is calling us to live. His pœm in chapter 12 forces us to confront the fact that , yes, we are falling apart. And yes, the world itself is falling apart. You can't stop the fall, and you can fly away from all the troubles and the difficulties of life in this world. But you can take what God has given you, you can light it on fire with the fear of the Lord, and you can use what you have for the good of others and for the glory of God.

As mere creatures in this fallen and falling world we cannot bring the world fully under our control. But we can fall with style until the Lord calls us home, and then we too will be where we truly belong.

Let's pray.