

## The End of the Matter

### Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.” This is the ominous note on which Ecclesiastes opened back in ch. 1:2, and as we come to the final passage this morning, it is the note on which the book closes. “Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity.” Vapor, smoke, a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes.

From beginning to end, Ecclesiastes has forced us to take a cold, hard look at the disappointments and instability of life in a fallen world—life, as the Preacher puts it, “under the sun”—here and now, in the world you and I see and experience and trudge our way through every day, which does not work the way that it’s supposed to ultimately because of human rebellion against God. This book has systematically exposed the emptiness in all that we look to for life and lasting gain under the sun: work, wealth, pleasure, knowledge, justice, relationships, politics, religion, success. Ecclesiastes resonates with the deep longing, the unspoken sadness, and the quiet fear in our hearts as we wrestle with life’s inconsistencies and come to terms with the fleeting and fruitless realities of life under the sun. We get up, eat, go to work, do our job, interact with people; we go home, eat, watch some TV, go to bed, get up, eat, and do the same thing all over again. We work hard, we acquire all this stuff, we accomplish all these achievements, and yet none of them satisfy and none of them last. We can’t predict how life will go; we can’t control it, we can’t hold onto it, we can’t even understand it. None of it is secure. Life is vapor. The only things that stand between us and losing our dreams are time and chance. And as we’ve seen, eventually everything succumbs to them. And after that, the grave. This is the experience of Ecclesiastes, and it’s your experience and my experience.

But is vanity really the final word in this book? The answer is no. It is the key theme of the book, the word itself occurring 38 times. But there is a method to Solomon’s madness. As Pastor Doug O’Donnell puts it, “If you are a fallen human living in this fallen world, Ecclesiastes was written to depress you. It was written to depress you into dependence on our joyous God and his blessed will for your life.”<sup>1</sup> There is a reason the Preacher has pressed hard against us, exposing the hollow dreams we trust in for the looming disappointment they are: to teach us that *the longing in our hearts for lasting gain and stability will only find its rest when we surrender to God in fear and obedience*. The longing in our hearts for lasting gain and stability will only find its rest when we surrender to God in fear and obedience. This is the point of his conclusion in 12:8-14, and as such the main thrust of the whole book.

The final verses of Ecclesiastes have an interesting history among readers and interpreters of the Bible. They are most likely written by an editor or someone who compiled the Preacher’s

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas O’Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 83.

(probably Solomon's) writings and wrote a short introduction in 1:1-2 (or 1-11) and this short conclusion in 12:8-14. One of the key indications that it's an editor and not the Preacher is that it talks about the Preacher in third person, rather than the Preacher talking himself.

For some, these verses are the only sane lines penned in the whole book. They see the bulk of the book as basically the unorthodox rantings of a depressed, self-centered man, and the only reason it made it into the Bible is that the conclusion in essence says, "Ignore everything he just said, and just fear God and keep his commands."<sup>2</sup>

But that kind of exclusively negative evaluation is severely exaggerated, which I think we've seen throughout the book. The book is brutally honest about how messed up the world is, and it says some shocking and even scandalous things to make its point. But it never completely leaves God out of the picture; in fact, what we find in the summary here is just that—a *summary* of the message we've heard throughout. We've already been told six times to fear God,<sup>3</sup> and we've been told throughout that in the fear of God and faith in his sovereignty, there is great joy to be had in life under the sun, even when that life doesn't amount to much.

There is much wisdom in these pages, which is what this conclusion tells us—*what* the Preacher wrote in v. 8, *how* the Preacher wrote in vv. 9-10, and *why* the Preacher wrote in vv. 11-14.

We've touched on what he wrote already—the main thrust in v. 8 that life is vapor. But think about *how* he communicated that. Verses 9-10: "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." Phil Ryken summarizes this description in terms of logical clarity, literary artistry, and intellectual integrity.<sup>4</sup> Let's think about this for a minute.

The Preacher wrote with *logical clarity*—he worked skillfully to impart *knowledge* that we might be *informed*, "weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care." Though we've had to wrestle hard to understand some things, think about the arguments he's made in this book in his effort to help us find our way in a fallen world.

- Who would have thought that attending a funeral might be more beneficial to us than a wedding or a party? But as we follow his argument in ch. 7 we saw how a funeral forces us to think about what truly matters in life, since that's where we're all headed (7:1-2).
- We naturally think that if we work hard at doing good for God, he'll do good for us. But the Preacher undoes our logic, showing us that both prosperity and adversity come from God's hand (7:14)—that life is not a performance, but a gift, which calls us to depend entirely upon God.

So, logical clarity. He argued his points carefully. Second, he wrote with *literary artistry*—he wrote with *beauty* in order to *capture our attention* and *enliven our hearts*. Think about some of the imagery he's employed in this book:

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 274-283.

<sup>3</sup> Eccl. 3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 276.

- Using the endless cycle of nature in ch. 1 (the sun goes round and round the earth and never finishes its journey) to illustrate the rat race of human life.
- The “catalogue of times” in ch. 3—“a time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, a time to pluck up what is planted” (3:2). A beautiful way to demonstrate both the order woven into this world, and our inability to control it.
- “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”—a nice visual image of the importance of community (4:12).
- The very word picture of “vanity” or vapor or smoke to describe all that we’re trusting in.
- Or the silly image of someone trying to shepherd or chase and take hold of the wind, as a picture of our empty striving for lasting gain in this world (e.g. 1:14, 17).
- The colorful descriptions of foolishness: “For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools” (7:6). “The lips of a fool consume him” (10:12).
- The somewhat humorous and somewhat terrifying picture we saw last week of old age like a decaying house and estate (12:1-7).

Literary artistry. Third, the Preacher wrote with *intellectual integrity*—he spoke *truth* in order to *deepen our dependence on God*. Think of the great truths that he’s declared.

- The brevity of life: “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’” (12:1).
- The holiness of God: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God” (5:1).
- The sovereignty of God: “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” (7:13).
- The wickedness of all humanity: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (7:20).
- The beauty of joy: “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” (2:24).

Some of these truths we’d just as soon ignore. But the Preacher has been honest enough to face life’s disappointments, even his own failures, and to wrestle with the mysteries of God in order to impart to us the truth—even if that truth hurts. And sometimes it does.

In fact, that’s one of the reasons he wrote the book, according to vv. 11-12: to sting us, and to stabilize us. Let’s look at those verses together: “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 imagery here comes from the world of agriculture. A “goad” is basically like a cattle prod; a pointed stick you use to get the sheep to move. It hurts, but it also leads you in the right direction. And sometimes sheep need that kind of persuasion. The “firmly fixed nails” have been understood a couple of ways. Perhaps as a parallel to the goads, like a nail sticking out of a board

you prod the sheep with. But more likely, I think, is simply the picture of stability. Just as sharp things can sting you and move you along, so they can be used to stabilize you, like driving a tent peg firmly into the ground, or a nail firmly fixed in a piece of wood. The collected sayings of wisdom, or perhaps, those who master those sayings, are firmly fixed in a floating world. As one author puts it, “Life may be a vapor, but wisdom can help us pin it down, giving us a place to hang our experience.”<sup>5</sup>

The aim of the Preacher’s wisdom is to sting and to stabilize. To prod us and protect us. And the source of that wisdom is identified as the “one Shepherd.” Now people have debated whom that’s referring to as well, but in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, and in the context here, *God is the source of wisdom*.<sup>6</sup> What’s intriguing here is that editor of this book notes this quite explicitly, that while the Preacher was exploring life from the ground up, trying to make sense of things and sort it out, the same Shepherd who guided the rest of the writing of Scripture was guiding him in his exploration and writing. Ecclesiastes is not just Solomon’s reflections; it’s God’s Word. “To read Ecclesiastes is to hear our Shepherd’s voice.”<sup>7</sup>

And if these wise words come from the one Shepherd, God, we are wise to pay careful attention to them and to walk in obedience. That’s what v. 12 is telling us. The warning here against the weariness of making many books is true enough by itself (there are more than a million new books published every year<sup>8</sup>). But the point is not so much study in general, but going on and on in new research and publishing *without taking to heart the wisdom that has already been revealed here*. As Doug Wilson puts it, “if we have not been mastered by a short book like this one, the long line of remaining big fat books will be nothing but weariness in the head (v. 12).”<sup>9</sup>

And so what will it take, not so much to master this book, but *to be mastered by it*? Where has it all been headed? Verses 13-14: “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.”

Where do we find hope and lasting gain and stability in an inconsistent and unpredictable world? Through our surrender to God in fear and obedience. As Augustine famously said in the opening prayer of his confessions, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly enough the shape that rest takes, according to Ecclesiastes, is fear and obedience. Fearing God and keeping his commandments. As the Preacher puts it, “this applies to every human,” or perhaps even stronger, is “the whole duty of humanity”—to fear God and keep his commandments. As one author states, “It is only in relationship to God as God and in submission to his will that we find ourselves to be truly alive and on the road to full humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ryken, 278.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Prov. 2:6; Job 28:12, 23. For God as shepherd, see, e.g., Isa. 40:11 and Ps. 80:1.

<sup>7</sup> Ryken, 279.

<sup>8</sup> Ryken, 279; citing statistics from UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 109.

<sup>10</sup> As cited in O’Donnell, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 373.

Now we all know what it means to live in fear. As we make our way through this fleeting, fruitless, and frustrating world, if we're honest, we find ourselves driven quite often by fear, which shows itself in all sorts of beautifully dysfunctional ways. We fear not getting our way, having our dreams crushed before our eyes. We fear being taken advantage of by others, or being hurt or betrayed. We fear the pain and humiliation and shame of failure—what if I don't get the job? What if I let them down again? And with that we fear rejection. We fear being found out for who we really are, of what people will really think of us if we ever take off the mask. We fear the unknown—where will I go to college? Where will we come up with the money for this bill? We fear what we can't predict and can't control. And so we walk through life with our shield up and our sword out, either ducking in self-protection, retreating into ourselves and appeasing others in order to guard against whatever terrifies us. Or else attacking in self-promotion, where we redouble our efforts to achieve our desires and dreams, even if it means running over others as we clamor for control, as if to force life into submission. We become a law to ourselves in order to protect self and achieve our desires, ignoring whatever wisdom Solomon is selling and repeating his study on our own terms, for our own purposes.

We're afraid. But fear is not the problem. It's what we fear, or rather *whom* we fear, that matters. As Paul Tripp reminds us,

These relational-situational-location fears are only ever put in the proper place and given their appropriate size by a greater fear---fear of the Lord. . . . Allowing yourself to be twisted and turned by whatever fear seizes you at the moment is an unwise, unstable, and unproductive way of living. . . . *Only when God looms larger than anything you're facing can you be protected and practically freed from the fear that either paralyzes you or causes you to make foolish decisions.*<sup>12</sup>

The hope and stability and lasting gain our hearts long for amid this vapor is found not in responding to our fear in self-protection or self-promotion, or in repeating Solomon's study, but in surrendering to God in fear and obedience to him.

Fearing God involves a certain tension between recognizing on the one hand God's holiness, majesty, righteousness, and justice, and on the other hand, his mercy, love, grace, and patience. He is our King, who deserves our obedience, and also our Judge, as we saw last week, and as the Preacher draws special attention to in the final verse of the book: "For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." As an all-present and all-knowing God, nothing escapes his sight. And as holy and just God he can and must judge sin and treason against his throne, including the sins and atrocities that humans commit against one another.

And yet this holy King and Judge, if we are united with his Son Jesus by faith, is at the same time our Father, who cares tenderly for us according to his love, mercy, and grace. If our faith is in Jesus, who lived in righteousness before his Father where we failed, and who gave his life for us on the cross, to take the judgment we deserved—the judgment for not fearing God and treating him like king—so that he could cleanse us of our sin and failure, and through his resurrection from the dead, give us new life—if we have trusted Christ as our Savior, then we have what the apostle Paul calls "the Spirit of adoption as sons" (Rom. 8:15). Through faith in

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Tripp, "When Pastors Should Be Fearful," *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, June 15, 2012 (italics mine). Available at: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/07/15/when-pastors-should-be-fearful/>

Jesus and by God's Holy Spirit, we have not only been rescued from the punishment of sin but brought into God's own family to become children and heirs and servants of his kingdom.

So the King is at the same time our Father, and fearing him means recognizing both of those things. It's the tension one would have if you grew up in a royal family. On the one hand you present yourself before the king in respect and awe, and in submission to his authority. And then that same king invites you to come sit on his lap and cuddle with daddy. The very arm that holds the scepter by which God will execute justice and righteousness on the earth, is the same arm that holds us close to provide refuge, peace, and the stability we need in an upset and unsettling world. The invitation to fear God is not asking us to cower in the corner like a frightened child hiding from his alcoholic father when he gets home. Rather, it's an invitation to bow before the beauty, majesty, and holiness of your King, and then to run and cling to your Father in joy and peace and love.

And yet, it's more than just bowing before and clinging to him in love; it's also serving him in joyful obedience. "Fear God *and keep his commandments.*" You can't claim to love and respect God if you have no interest in keeping his Word. That would be like claiming that you love and respect your parents even though you're sneaking out each night behind their backs and doing things they've told you not to do—that's not loving and respectful. Rather, fear and love show themselves in obedience. As one author writes, "To fear God embodies faith and hope in God, as well as a genuine love for God. And when one, by the gift of God, possesses the fear of God, sin loses its sweetness and strength, and obedience to the Word of God follows naturally because it becomes the delight of the soul."<sup>13</sup>

When God is bigger and more beautiful to us than anything in this world, then our love for him will naturally translate into obedience. Just as Jesus told his followers, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We don't obey *so that* God will love us; we obey *because* we are loved, and we love him, and we *want* to honor him with our lives. We obey because our love for him is growing increasingly greater than our love for sin. We obey because we have tasted the instability and dissatisfaction of all that this world offers, and we know that there is nowhere else to go to find life and lasting gain. We obey because God's grace in Christ is still at work in us, changing us more and more into his image by the same Spirit who adopted us into his family. We obey because God is King and Father; it is our duty and our delight. We obey because we trust God that even though we are weak and helpless, living out our days in the vanity of this fallen world, we know that "in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

It is in fearing God, our King and our Father, that we find what it means to truly live. Now some of you may have had bad experiences with your father, and so this illustration of relating to God as Father rings a bit hollow. And if that's your case you need to know that God is not the father you had, or perhaps never had; he's the Father you were made for. He is the Father who knows you—he knows what's in your heart, how you're wired, what you love. He knows even the ugly things in your heart, and *he still loves you*. He's the Father you can trust to be there, to protect you, to provide for you, to seek you out when you're lost and straying, who loves you enough to discipline you and sting you, in order to bring you back. He's the Father who sets upon you the same love and affection and delight that he sets upon his eternal Son, Jesus, whom you've been

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<sup>13</sup> O'Donnell, 85.

united with. He sees in you the same righteousness and holiness as in his Son, Jesus. He is a Father you can fear in the most beautiful and liberating sense of the term.

One of the reverberating notes that Ecclesiastes sounds throughout is that God is not like us. He made us in his image, but he is utterly different, set apart, holy. We are creatures; he is Creator. We make mistakes; he does everything in perfect accordance with his purpose and will. We break our promises; he always keeps his word. We bumble our way around the earth; he rules all things from the heavens. We can't make sense of life; he sees the beginning from the end. We are needy; he is completely satisfied and glorified in himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are servants; he is King. We know very little, far less than we think; he knows and sees everything that is, was, and is to come. Our lives on earth are transient; he is eternal. In short, *we are humans; he is God*. He alone is worthy of our awe and respect, our love and delight and obedience. He alone can provide the hope and lasting gain our hearts long for amid this vapor. May our hearts find their rest in him, to the glory of his name.