

Reckoning with God

Ecclesiastes 6:7-12

This morning we come to the central passage of the book and to the midpoint of our series through Ecclesiastes. For six chapters now, the Preacher has been exploring with gut-wrenching honesty whether or not there is any lasting gain, any meaning, satisfaction, or significance to be found during the few days we have on this earth under the sun.

His exploration has been marked by honest and hard questions about life, faith, and God. Like walking down an endless hall lined with doors on both sides, so our lives are surrounded by questions as we live out our days in a fallen world. We know there must be some explanation behind each door, but most of them are opaque, and the view through the keyhole only keeps us guessing. Some doors invite us to come in and understand—they're already cracked, and we just have to gently push them open and see. Some doors look promising on the outside but the room inside is rather plain and empty. The Preacher has spent a lot of time going in and out of those doors. He has looked for lasting gain in our accomplishments and activity: work, wealth, pleasure, entertainment. He's looked for it in human wisdom. He's wrestled with the implications of time and the problem of injustice. He's sought for lasting gain in human relationships. In religious activity, in money and possessions. And for the most part, he has intentionally avoided the "God" door—the God question, having set aside (for the time being) any difference God might make in the equation of life. Searching for now as though that door isn't there.

But what he's found behind each door has not been encouraging. Twenty-six times so far in this book, the Preacher (probably King Solomon) has described this life as *vapor*, vanity, meaningless, fleeting and fruitless. It's the picture of shepherding or chasing the wind: it's hard to grasp—to understand or control or get any gain out of it—because it doesn't last and it doesn't amount to much. A puff of smoke, and then it's gone. A beautiful door concealing an empty and decaying room.

And with each empty room, more doors seem to appear—more questions, more confusion. What's worse is that some of those doors are locked. No amount of pushing, prying, or banging will supply the clarity or understanding we want. Those questions will remain until the Lord returns or we go to be with him. And that's hard to swallow—especially when we don't like what we see. It's frustrating, perhaps even maddening. But each locked door and each empty room reminds of the door we've been trying to avoid.

So it is that we find ourselves, whether we like it or not, standing again in front of the God door—no longer able to avoid the question of what difference he makes in all this. The temptation is to stand in the hallway and shout our complaints at God from the outside. Like a

cowardly neighbor who yells at you about how to run your household from behind the safety of his fence, so we dispute with God about the way he runs his world, while trying to retain a safe distance from him. But you can't stay in the hall forever. At some point in our search for meaning and gain, despite our best efforts to sort it all out by ourselves, we have to come in and reckon with God. There comes a time for all of us as we struggle to make sense of life, to finally recognize both the limitations of our humanness and the unsearchable wisdom, sovereignty, and power of God.

That's what Solomon discovers at the conclusion of his study in the first half of the book, and what will in turn pave the way for the reflections and instructions he's going to offer for living life in a fallen world in the second half of the book.

There comes a time for all of us as we struggle to make sense of life, to finally open the door and reckon with God. But before the Preacher does that he takes one more glance over his shoulder at all the other doors that he's walked through—all the other places he has searched for lasting gain and significance under the sun, and reminds us that each one of them has been found wanting. So in vv. 7-9 we have a summary of life's vanity.

These verses offer at the same time both a conclusion to the study we looked at last week—how serving money, wealth, and possessions instead of God will ultimately disappoint, as well as a summary of Solomon's findings in the book so far. If you've been with us through this series, you'll recognize each of these themes and ideas from earlier parts of the book.

First he reminds us that toil or work ultimately disappoint. Verse 7: "All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied." He's made point several times so far. As tempting as it is to look for life and lasting gain in our careers, in our education, our productivity, at the end of the day we're still unsatisfied. Now Solomon has also reminded us several times that work is itself a good thing—part of God's creational design. And that when our satisfaction is in him, we can take joy in the work of our hands. But work itself will not satisfy. One commentator captures the bleakness of the situation like this: the laborer "works to eat, for the strength to go on working to go on eating."¹ And on and on it goes. No lasting gain. Vapor. Vanity.

Then the Preacher reminds us that wisdom too, left to itself, is a disappointment. First half of v. 8: "For what advantage has the wise man over the fool?" Sure he has acknowledged before that "there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness" (2:13). But he's also reminded us that both the wise and the fool go to the same place—the grave. Human wisdom may smooth out a few of the bumps on the road, but it's still the same road. No amount of great learning and knowledge can stay Death's hand—not even wisdom can supply lasting gain in this life under the sun.

Next Solomon glances the door of social relationships—the second half of v. 8: "And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?" We saw back in ch. 4 how relationships fail to supply the gain and significance we look for in life—our relationships are too often stained by oppression, envy, isolation, and pride. None of us are immune from this, but the poor, weak, and needy are particularly vulnerable. That's whom the Preacher refers to

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (BST; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 61.

here—“the poor.” But this poor or vulnerable person has figured out how to conduct himself in front of others, the kind of social knowledge necessary to survive in a fallen world. Yet that too falls short. There’s no advantage or gain, no protection from disappointment.

And so he glances at one last door—our personal possessions. Verse 9: “Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite.” Here is something good, or at least better than something else. The “sight of the eyes,” something that you have in your possession, is better than “the wandering of the appetite”—something you long for but don’t have.² Like the old adage, “A bird in hand is better than two in the bush.” Our lives are filled with wants and desires. That’s the explicit goal of the marketing industry—to create desire. But a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in hand is better than Big Mac on a billboard. There are some things that are gain and advantageous in life. Yet notice how the verse ends: “this also is vanity and a striving after wind.” Even our good possessions will some day be consumed, wear out, and disappoint.

So it is that the Preacher, having set aside God amid his exploration of life and search for lasting gain, has come to the end of himself and what he can find and figure out, and now stands at the door ready to reckon with God. Solomon is ready to acknowledge the fact that this world, as difficult and confusing as it is, is not random and callous, but the intricate orchestration of an incomparably wise, sovereign, and powerful God. And this is exactly where he’s been heading the whole time. As Phil Ryken notes, “by talking openly about our disappointment with life, he is trying to awaken our longing for God.”³ So we come to Solomon’s concluding reflections on his six-chapter study, vv. 10-12. Let’s take a look at those verses together:

Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.¹¹ The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?¹² For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? (Eccl. 6:10-12).

Solomon begins by recognizing God’s sovereign power and wisdom. “Whatever has come to be has already been named.” Now, one could read this line negatively, as if to say “whatever happens is the same old, same old—there’s nothing new under the sun.”⁴ And it makes sense that way. But in the second half of the verse he refers to someone stronger than humanity, who is in fact calling the shots—that is, God. And though he doesn’t claim to understand, throughout the book he has recognized that everything in life is part of God’s grand plan:

- 3:11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”
- 7:13: “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?”

And so what he acknowledges here is that despite his questions and frustrations, there is a sovereign and powerful God who is at work amid the vanity to bring about his plan—a God who has already named all that is to be.

² See Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 175; Richard L. Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Gary Burge and Andrew Hill, eds. (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

³ Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 146.

⁴ See, e.g., Ryken, 144-145.

This is the God who the apostle Paul describes as “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion” (1 Tim. 6:15-16). This is the God who is beautiful enough to display his glory, wise enough to design an entire universe to do so, and powerful enough to make it happen despite human rebellion and sin. Moreover he is the God who is compassionate enough to deal kindly with rebels against his plan, to rescue them and reunite them to himself through faith in his Son, Jesus, who gave his very life for their rebellion.

This is a God who is not like us. We are made in his image, but he is above us, beyond us. He is Creator, we are creation. So Isaiah tells us that his “thoughts are not [our] thoughts, neither are [our] ways [his] ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are [his] ways higher than [our] ways and [his] thoughts than [our] thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). Or as Job confessed in ch. 12: “With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding. If he tears down, none can rebuild; if he shuts a man in, none can open” (Job 12:13-14).

And so to recognize God’s sovereign power and wisdom is at the same time to recognize our own limitations as humans, which is what the Preacher expresses in the rest of these verses. “And it is known what humanity is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he”—namely, God (Eccl. 6:10).

Acknowledging God’s sovereignty and power doesn’t make our questions go away. It doesn’t take away the pain of life in a fallen world—the loss we experience, the betrayal, the loneliness, the disappointment and frustration. Acknowledging God’s sovereignty and power doesn’t even mean that we always agree with him. But it does recognize that we humans don’t have enough information to either fully comprehend or rightfully dispute with God and his plan. As Doug Wilson puts it, “A man’s arms are too short to box with God.”⁵ Because we are creatures, not Creator, we are limited in our scope of understanding. This is one of the lessons Job learned in ch. 9 of that book: “If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. He is wise in heart and mighty in strength- who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded? . . . For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together” (vv. 3-4, 32). So Solomon explicitly asks in Ecclesiastes 6:12: “For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?” The implied answer is, No one on earth. Therefore who can dispute with God on these matters? Can any of us really venture to correct God’s definition of good? Or tell him what’s going to happen tomorrow? Rather, when we dispute with God, according v. 11: “The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man?” As Phil Ryken reminds us, “We need to know our limits, and one of our limits is that we do not have the wisdom to out-talk God.”⁶

Tom Wright explains:

It is all too easy to make the mistake of speaking and thinking as though God . . . might be a being, an entity, within our world, accessible to our interested study in the same sort of way

⁵ Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 69.

⁶ Ryken, 145.

we might study music or mathematics, open to our investigation by the same sort of techniques we use for objects and entities within our world.⁷

But God is not like us, not just an object of inquiry like any other, and so our tools, our perspectives, our methods of investigation as humans here on earth will only take us so far. So Wright continues, “a great many arguments about God—God’s existence, God’s nature, God’s actions in the world—run the risk of being like pointing a flashlight toward the sky to see if the sun is shining.”⁸ At some point you have to put away the flashlight and simply take a look at the sun—which in reality is far too brilliant to take in all at once. As the Preacher says later in 8:17: “Then I saw all the work of God, that *man cannot find out* the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, *he will not find it out*. Even though a wise man claims to know, *he cannot find it out*.” Some doors will remain locked until the Lord returns.

Again, this doesn’t mean we aren’t honest with our questions. The Preacher’s investigation has been bold and provocative—he’s raised questions most of us in room shudder to ask before man and God. But he goes there, which encourages us (as we looked at in our second week) to be honest with the questions, the doubts, the fears we have about life, faith, and God, and to wrestle seriously and honestly with those questions. It’s okay to acknowledge that life in a fallen world doesn’t make sense. To lament—to protest to God in prayer—the hurt and pain and even outrage we have as we watch and experience what goes on day in and day out under the sun. And it’s okay to ask Why? Why Lord? How long?

But it does mean that we bring our questions to God with reverence, respect, and humility—recognizing God’s sovereignty and our human limitation. Which reminds us once more of the entire point of Solomon’s investigation—to show us the fleeting and fruitless realities of this world, and therefore draw us in our search for lasting gain to God. To know and enjoy and find our lasting satisfaction in him.

Just because we can’t know God and his ways *fully* in this age doesn’t mean that we can’t know God *truly* and *genuinely*. After all, as Christopher Wright reminds us in book aptly entitled, *The God I Don’t Understand*, “Knowing and trusting does not necessarily add up to understanding. Even knowing somebody very well is not the same as understanding them fully, as the most happily married couples will readily testify.”⁹ So it is that in knowing and glorifying the God we don’t always understand, we find our hope and satisfaction in a vain world.

Wright continues:

There are things I don’t understand about God, but they flood me with *gratitude* because I couldn’t live without the reality of their truth, accepted by faith. The supreme example is, of course, the cross itself. Who is bold enough to say they *understand* exactly *how* the cross has dealt with our deepest needs? And yet we cling to the fact that, by God’s grace and on the authority of God’s Word, it has.¹⁰

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 56.

⁸ N.T. Wright, 56.

⁹ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 13.

¹⁰ C. J. H. Wright, 18, emphasis his.

It's in the cross of Jesus that we find at the same time the greatest mystery of God and creation, and the answer to all life's mysteries and questions. Quoting Tom Wright again, "no human argument could ever, as it were, get God in a corner, pin him down, and force him to submit to human inspection. *[But] it is part of the Christian story that there was a moment when God was indeed pinned down, subjected not just to human inspection but to trial, torture, imprisonment, and death.*"¹¹ All so that we could know and find life in him.

Our life is filled with questions. Doors on every side, each one reminding us of the vanity, emptiness, and confusion of life under the sun—life in a fallen world that doesn't work the way it should. But let us not forget that Jesus, when he hung on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin—to take on himself the full weight of God's holy anger against our human rebellion—a rebellion that every human participates in, whether large or small. When he hung on the cross to take on himself every grief we bear, every sorrow, every disappointment, every disease, every sin, every unanswered question, every reminder of life's vanity, and to deal decisively with all that's wrong in this world through his death and resurrection for us. . . . Let us not forget that when Jesus hung on that cross, he too asked a question of God: "My God, my God, *why* have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Chris Wright comments, "To me it is profoundly moving that the word that introduces our most tormenting questions—'Why...?'—was uttered by Jesus on the very cross that was God's answer to the question that the whole creation poses."¹² Why?

Let us not forget that for all our questions, all our legitimate complaints (and even our illegitimate ones), there is Jesus, who has made our sovereign, wise, and powerful God known to us through his life, death, and resurrection, and who invites us to find lasting hope and gain by surrendering our lives in faith, so as to know and enjoy and be eternally satisfied in him.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, 57, emphasis mine.

¹² C. J. H. Wright, 21.