

The Grand Conclusion

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading comes from Ecclesiastes chapter 12. Starting in verse 8, we read, Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity.

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.

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 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.

This is the word of God. Great, thank you, Celeste. Let's pray together briefly as, before we look at this word.

[1 : 13] Heavenly Father, once again, as we come to your word, we do come with humility. We come, God, not to sit over your word in judgment, thinking that we have the final say.

We acknowledge that you are God and we are not. Lord, we come to your word because we want to encounter you, the living God. We want to hear you speaking to us, to both challenge us and to comfort us, to draw us near to yourself.

God, this morning we pray that you help us to understand your word, and to hear you speaking to us, and help us to respond appropriately. God, help us to love you more, and to trust you more, and to obey you, because you have spoken to us today.

And so we pray these things in your awesome and your majestic name. Amen. Now, in order to understand our passage today, we need to just be reminded of the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes.

If you're new, let me explain it to us again. Ecclesiastes kind of has two authors, or two voices that are speaking. The majority of Ecclesiastes, almost everything actually, from halfway to chapter one, or the second verse of chapter one, right up to almost the end of chapter 12, is the voice of this skeptic, who the author calls the teacher.

[2 : 37] In Hebrew, his name is Koheleth. And Koheleth, or the teacher, he is not the author, but the author is using his words to make a point.

And what is his point? Well, the author, who employs the words of this teacher, the author's main point is this, life is not meaningless.

The author has used the hopelessness of Koheleth's worldview to provoke us and to think about life beyond just life in the sun. The teacher, Koheleth, he looks around him, he's not very aware of God, he knows there is a God out there, but this God doesn't seem to break into his life.

And he looks around and he just thinks life is meaningless. And the author's kind of using this teacher, this Koheleth, to provoke us and to think about the meaning of life.

It's kind of like when I was a teenager, I loved listening to music, U2, and Dave Matthews' band, and these other bands. And one of my favorite things to do was to try and work out or listen to or research the story behind the lyrics to the songs.

[3 : 50] So you hear a great song, you think, oh, that's a nice song, and then you go and find out what prompted the writer to write that. And you hear the reason behind the actual author's intentions, and suddenly it makes the song come alive.

It's kind of like maybe another analogy might be you read Macbeth, some Shakespeare, and you find out what's going on.

And then at the end, you hear Shakespeare actually stepping in saying, okay, this is what I want you to take from it. Or maybe you read *The Lord of the Rings*, and you think, I don't know what's going on. And then you listen to an interview by J.R. Tolkien.

So you say, ah, okay, I understand. Well, the author of *Ecclesiastes* has been employing the words of this teacher, Koheleth, to provoke us. And the teacher's been saying, meaningless, meaningless, everything's meaningless.

And the author's saying, is that really the case? Is that really the case? And so in chapter 12, today we sit down with the author, and we get to hear him speak and tell us his intentions for writing the book of *Ecclesiastes*.

[4 : 57] Okay, does that make sense? You following? And he does this in two ways. In verses 9 to 11, he summarizes the work of the teacher.

And then in verses 12 to 14, he gives his own conclusion. Okay? And so let's dive in and see what happens. And so the last six weeks, we've been following this teacher, Koheleth, on his quest.

And he's been searching for meaning and purpose, wisdom and knowledge, justice and truth. And look at how the author sums up the work of the teacher, verses 9 and 10.

He says, Besides being wise, the teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

The teacher sought to find words of delight and to honestly write words of truth. So he's saying, the teacher's like a collector of fine sayings. He's traveled around, he's asked many people, and he's collected these words of wisdom, and he's arranging them and putting them in order, and he's trying to come up with the summary of his explanation of the meaning and the purpose of life.

[6 : 10] *Ecclesiastes* is his summary of his work. But has this worked? Has the teacher's approach really got him anywhere?

I mean, he's been on this quest and this journey, and what is his conclusion? Where has he arrived? Has it actually helped him? Maybe another way of asking that is, should we follow the teacher and go about things the way he has?

Should we go and read all the sacred texts and interview thousands of people and collect all our summary of wisdom and come up with our own answer? And if so, will we find the answer to the questions that we ask in our heart?

Well, the author answers yes and no, both positively and negatively. Look at what he says in verse 11. First he says, yes, the teacher has some wisdom.

Look at verse 11. The words of the wise are like goads, like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings. They are given by one shepherd. So the author tells us here that these wise sayings, the kind of things that the teacher's been on his journey to go and collect and find and navigate and arrange and study and put together.

[7 : 26] These sayings are like goads. Do you remember a few weeks ago we said what a goad is? It's that sharp pointed stick that a farmer uses to provoke the sheep and the cattle to go where he wants them to go.

And so as the author's been, as the teacher's been collecting these sayings, he says, these words of wisdom are like a goad that are meant to provoke us out of our slumber, out of our laziness.

They get us thinking. They get us thinking about what is life really about? What is the meaning and the purpose of life? And so the author is saying, actually the teacher's in his quest to find the meaning of life, he's been provoked, he's been challenged, he's been provoked out of his complacency.

Sometimes words of wisdom are uncomfortable. Sometimes God's word is uncomfortable. uncomfortable. Sometimes God's word can feel like it is provoking you, challenging you.

And if you're new to faith, that might feel uncomfortable at times. You read something in the Bible and you think, hang on, hang on, I don't know if I can believe that. But isn't that exactly what you'd expect from a God who's different from you?

[8 : 36] I mean, if you just agree, if the Bible agrees with everything that you believe and your worldview, is God maybe not just exactly like you? Sometimes God's word can provoke us, can challenge us, can offend you even.

But the words of wisdom are like that. They challenge our complacency. And so the author says, yes, Koheleth's search has yielded some wise words which are meant to help us think about the meaning and the purpose of life.

There's some wisdom there. But on the other hand, the author says, actually, this doesn't really help Kohelet. In many ways, he gets back, he comes back to where he began in the first place. Look at verse 12. He says, My son, beware of anything beyond these. Or another translation says, Furthermore, my son, be warned of this. Of making many books, in other words, writing many wise things, there is no end.

And much study is a weariness to the flesh. The author's telling us here, you can search for all eternity and explore human philosophy and human wisdom and never arrive at anything concrete, any conclusion.

[9 : 54] You can read a thousand sacred texts and you can travel to the Himalayas and go to this temple and sit under this Buddhist teaching and listen to that preacher and listen to a million sermons. And if all you're doing is filling your head with more and more knowledge, you can go round and round in circles and wear yourself out and never arrive at anything concrete or substantial.

In fact, this is exactly what happened with Kohileth. If you got your Bible, turn back with me to chapter 1, verses 2. The opening sentence of the teacher, these are his words.

Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless. meaningless. That's how he began his search. And 5,500 words later, 220 verses later, 12 chapters later, how does the teacher end his search for meaning?

Well, look at the very last thing he says in chapter 12, verse 8. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Everything is meaningless.

Here this wise man, this teacher, has gone on this lifetime exploration of the meaning and the search of life and he's collected sayings and he's interviewed hundreds of people and he's sat under the very best teachers and where has he ended up?

[11 : 26] At the exact same place where he began. He has gone round and round in circles and made no ground. I don't know if you remember Nielsen's very first sermon from six weeks ago in chapter 1.

He spoke from chapter 1 about how the teacher says, life just goes round. The river runs down and gets into the sea and the sea never gets full. The wind blows from east to west and west to east and east to west.

The sun rises and it sets and tomorrow it rises and it sets. There is no change, there is no gain, there is no point. Do you remember that? Well that's exactly where Kohelet has landed.

The opening sentence of his search is identical to the closing sentence of his search. Meaningless, meaningless says the teacher there is no meaning.

And so having explored wisdom and pleasure and work and money and death and youthfulness and old age and truth and justice the teacher has come back full circle to where he began.

[12 : 37] The author says verse 12 Be warned my son of these there is no end of the making of many books there is no end and much study is a weariness to the flesh.

And at this point the author steps out from behind the curtain Shakespeare comes out from behind the pen the songwriter comes out from behind the album and he tells us that he respectfully disagrees.

He has arranged the words of the teacher like goads to provoke us and to challenge us and just when we think we might be tempted to agree with Kohelet he says no that's not the point of life don't listen to Kohelet that's not what I want you to say.

Look at verse 13 with me the end of the matter in Hebrew there's just two words there end matter it's emphatic it's like final conclusion the end of the matter all has been heard fear God keep his commands for this is the whole duty or the essence of man.

The teacher has gone round and round in circles and ended up back where he started and just when we're thinking this has been a monumental waste of six weeks of coming to church the author steps in and says wait let me put you back on the path let me put your feet on a solid rock the end of the matter all has been heard in the turmoil and the confusion in the disorder of life here is a word that will break the cycle of futility that will cause you not to waste your life when you feel like you're walking on sinking sand and you're sinking deeper and deeper and deeper when the ideas and the philosophies of world views take you nowhere here is a rock upon which you can build and bank your life when the winds of change blow in a post-modern post-truth world where everything is up for grabs and nothing is certain the author steps in and says here is a word of conviction here is a word of certainty here is a word of clarity when all has been heard and said fear God keep his

commands this is the essence of mankind or humanity now if you're new to church or new to faith that instruction to fear God may sound pretty odd

[15 : 21] I mean we've got enough things in life to fear already right we don't need to add more to it what's up with this instruction to fear God the word fear feels like a very negative emotion it feels disempowering when you fear something you want to draw back and retreat right I remember when I was a boy we grew up in Johannesburg and you know we don't live in apartments in South Africa you have a garden and my brother and I used to play cricket most afternoons and we invariably hit the tennis ball over the wall and so you'd jump over the wall to go and fetch the tennis ball but the neighbors had some big dogs and so you'd jump up on the wall and you had to look under the trees if the dogs were around and then you'd jump over quickly get the ball throw it over and often the dogs would hear you jumping over and would run like crazy down the garden and you had to leap up grab on the tree and climb back over the wall before the dogs got you right fear feels like something you want to run away from or escape so what's up when the Bible says we should fear God

I mean that he says this is the sum total the essence of what it means to be human when he says this is the whole duty of man the Hebrew doesn't have the word duty this is the essence of humanity well admittedly the Hebrew word to fear is a difficult word to translate sometimes it can mean fright or scared but generally it means an awe or reverence before something that is majestic to be an awe or reverential before something of authority listen to how Sinclair Ferguson describes it this is the best description of the fear of God I can find he says this to fear God is to know him and yet to love him wholeheartedly and unreservedly because of who he is and what he has done to have this profound sense of being in the presence of majesty it is a thrilling awareness that we have this greatest of all privileges mingled with the realization that now the only thing that really matters in all the world is his opinion to have the assurance of his smile is everything and yet to feel that he frowns on what we may do is desolation or anguish to fear God is to be sensitive to both his greatness and also his graciousness to fear God friends is to humbly and yet assuredly bring our entire lives before him and say here I am have your way in my life knowing that you are completely known by him anyway and yet somehow loved by him nonetheless and the bible says new testament and old testament that this is actually one of the most important ways to relate to God if you want to know God if you want to experience the living God one of the ways to relate to him is to relate to him like this to fear him let me read a couple of scriptures just to show us this Deuteronomy 10 says this and now what does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God to walk in his ways to love him to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul or think of Philippians chapter 2 in the new testament the apostle Paul after writing about the majesty of Jesus who went on the cross for sinners like us says this therefore now brothers and sisters as you have always obeyed in my absence so now much more in my presence now much more in my absence work out your salvation with fear and trembling with a sense of trepidation knowing that God is at work in your life or in Hebrews chapter 12 writes this let us offer acceptable worship to God with fear and awe knowing that our God is a consuming fire in other words we don't approach God with just a callousness and a casualness and a oh well you know we'll see what happens there's a reverence for who he is this is the sum total all has been heard and said fear God keep his commands now what does that actually mean what does that look like in our lives well a couple of things on the one hand it means to trust

God supremely in scripture to fear God means realizing that God is bigger than our issues and therefore we can trust him with our issues in Exodus chapter 20 as the people are in the wilderness Moses says this to them he says do not fear the giants the problems the wilderness the things around you don't be afraid of those for God has come to you to test you that the fear of God may be before you and that you may not sin so saying you're going to come against a whole lot of obstacles don't be afraid of them but have a worldview see in your mind the majesty of God fear him and trust him as you face these challenges and so friends what are some of the challenges that you face this week are the economies and tatters maybe work is challenging maybe uncertain whether you're going to keep your job that's okay don't fear that fear God

God is bigger than your work God is bigger than your travels God is bigger than your challenges fear God he is God work is not God your boss is not God the economy is not God no God is God and therefore you can trust him it's to trust him supremely it's a call to prioritize God as first in our hearts and our lives to fear God is to live with the realization that God is God and I am not that God

is the center of the cosmos the universe and I am not now that's not just being humble that's being honest that's not humility that's just reality the problem of course with humanity is that we tend to think of ourselves as the center of the universe and that causes all sorts of problems right and this is what the teacher wants us to see what the author wants us to see he's saying you may never find the answer to every question that you ask you may not find the solution to every philosophical conundrum that's okay following Jesus doesn't promise to solve every problem or make life easy and a bed of roses in fact if you're going to follow Jesus sometimes that's going to make life more difficult but what he is saying is this if you fear God you will break out of the cycle of futility if you want to find the essence of life know this he is God he is the center of the universe you are not so it's a call to prioritize God but it's also a call to enjoy the blessings of God without being ensnared by them

[22 : 43] I don't know if you've noticed over the last couple of weeks as we've gone through Ecclesiastes there are these kind of weird passages throughout the book that Tremper Longman calls the Carpe Diem passages they say drink be merry eat your bread enjoy the wife of your youth do what you want live it up and if I'm honest as one of the preachers we've kind of skipped over them pretty quickly have you noticed that okay maybe in CG you've asked that question why don't they ever talk about these things okay and the reason is because these are pretty difficult passages I mean what do you do with them right are these passages God's wisdom to us that we should obey or is this the foolishness of the teacher that we should reject right well what do we do with these Carpe Diem passages well I think the answer is this the answer is if you fear God obey them and enjoy the blessings of God but if you don't be very careful in other words if you want to enjoy the good things in life without being ensnared by them without being mastered by them make sure that

God is your God not the pleasures of life don't live for the pleasures of life they'll ensnare you live for God and if you live for God you get to enjoy the pleasures of life and be free from their snares and their tentacles the way to enjoy the pleasures of life without them becoming your God is to live for the one true God and to center your life on him because when you live for Christ and his approval when he is your deepest longing and your greatest ambition when what God thinks about a matter is the most important thing to you when you fear God then you can live however you please maybe another way of saying it is like this friends love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might and all your strength and you'll figure the rest out as you go along so as a Christian there are many things in life that the Bible doesn't give us answers to should you take that promotion that new job well fear God and you'll figure it out maybe you're dating somebody and there's a hole of questions you're not sure how do you handle this relationship what's appropriate what's not appropriate well fear God and you'll figure it out maybe you're not so sure about money how much is enough

I mean how much should I give away how much should I save the Bible doesn't give you an answer to that well fear God sent to your life on the majesty of Jesus and you'll figure it out so when you come to those Carpe Diem passages the answer is this let the fear of God being your guiding rock the light of the path and if you do that you can enjoy the pleasures of life without them becoming your God does that make sense the fear of God is a clarifying word in a world of confusion but here's the other thing it means the fourth thing the final thing is this it's a call to eternal significance look at verse 14 with me of our passage it's the final verse in the whole book of Ecclesiastes and this is what it says the end of the matter all has been heard fear God keep his commands this is the essence of man verse 14 for God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing whether good or evil what the author tells us here is that one day each one of us is going to be accountable to God for the lives that we've lived he says every deed whether good or evil positive or negative now on the one hand that should cause a humility because we should know that we're going to be answerable to God for the way that we've lived our lives every careless word that you've said every dumb tweet that you've loaded up on social media right every grudge that I've held in my heart every stupid thing

I've done I'm going to one day be accountable to God for that but it's not not only the negative things it's also the positive things look at what he says for every deed whether evil or good in other words what he says every little thing that I do in God's name for the glory of God is not going to be forgotten Jesus actually says this in Matthew 10 he says every cup of cold water that you give to a little child in his name and for his glory you will how does he say it you will by no means lose your reward and what Jesus is saying here is you can do little things that nobody in the world notices

every good motivation in your heart every little thing that you do has eternal significance because sovereign God in heaven notices and it's not inconsequential and so that little thing that you do that nobody notices it or put it this way it transforms the meaningless things of our life into that which has eternal significance and purpose suddenly the myriad of things that Kohelet looks at and thinks meaningless vanity purposelessness are suddenly impregnated with eternal meaning and so think about this tomorrow you're going to go to work and if Kohelet is right meaningless vanity purposelessness who cares your job is just a means to get a salary to earn some money and then you're going to die but if the author is right if God is going to bring every little thing that you do and remember it nothing is inconsequential and so suddenly that transforms your work into just an opportunity to earn a salary and get money into a vocation into a calling into a chance to bless somebody a chance to glorify God in your workplace it's a chance to as you go and teach in the classroom to impact students and to grow them as you do your research it's a way to find out about the world that God has made and make it a better place as you write up a contract as a lawyer it's a chance to do justice and do what's right to protect someone's interests as you make money it's a chance to provide for somebody's pension and care for their future knowing that your life is not inconsequential changes your workplace it impregnates every little thing you do with eternal significance and meaning or think about pleasure if you're in Christ and you seek to honor God and live by faith the things that you do enjoy in life are not just distractions from the arbitrary meaninglessness of life to keep you going through the drudgery of life they are gifts of heaven for you to enjoy they are gifts from your father and so as you go on that trip or that overseas holiday as you go and enjoy time with your kids these are a gift from God for you to enjoy or think about money and wealth for the teacher money was an enigma it was something he was meant to enjoy but it only ended up causing pain but if Christ is supreme if he's the one that you love and treasure unreservedly you get to enjoy the blessings of God without feeling guilty because money is not your God but God is well friends think about the fact that one day you're going to get old and one day you're going to die for Kohelet this is completely meaningless arbitrary we get old ultimately death is the final enemy none of us get to defeat it and that's the end but for the author he says that's not true if you're in Christ if you live for God if God is the one that you live to please the most important one in your heart then you can truly say with the apostle Paul to live is Christ and to die is gain because the grave has been defeated one day at the end of your life death gets transformed from an enemy into a servant that will take you home what the author is saying here is that to live for the majesty of God makes every little

meaningless and arbitrary thing in life suddenly impregnated with significant and eternal consequence because nothing is forgotten friends you but now see what he says he says there is a point if you don't want to waste your life and I don't want you to waste your life then walk away from the futility of life under the sun abandon empty philosophy abandon humanistic wisdom abandon your striving after the wind trying to grasp the wind center your life on God and who he is truly the God who is the center of the cosmos who knows you better than you know yourself who loves you better than you could ever love yourself or hope to be love set your hope on him friends the words of the author is this give yourself to the only one whose opinion really matters in life live under the greatness and of his grace give yourself to him don't waste your life live for the one who knows you infinitely better than you could ever hope to imagine and yet who loves you to the cross and back all has been heard this is the end of the matter fear God live for him set your hope on him this is the essence of humanity well as we come to a close how should we do this how should we grow in the fear of

[32 : 23] God well I want to give us three quick suggestions three very simple ways to do this how do we become those who are not enslaved by the trappings of life but live in the fear of God how do we become those who as Sinclair Ferguson said live with the assurance of his smile as the most important thing in our life how do we live with his opinion as the most important thing to us well three brief things first do this dive into the scriptures dive into the scriptures Christian writer and author Tim Talley says this there is an inseparable relationship between the revelation of God in the scriptures and the fear of God in the heart Cynthia you okay you're welcome to go to the degree that we are in the scriptures is the degree to which the fear of God will reside in our hearts friends you want to be those who fear God you must come to know him as he reveals himself in the scriptures you cannot grow as a Christian without being committed to his word friends day by day start off your day getting on your knees and saying God come and reveal yourself show yourself to me

I want to know you as you reveal yourself to me in your word dive deep into the scriptures secondly feed your soul on the majesty of God J.B.

wrote Phillips wrote a book and he says your God is too small I think that's true for most of us even as Christians our view of God is infinitely infinitely small friends if you want to grow in the fear of God if you want to be rooted and anchored into a solid rock Christ our assurance in the midst of the storms and the uncertainty of life get to know the majesty and the immensity and the sovereignty and the holiness and the infinite glory of who God is don't have a small view of God get to know his majesty friends the one true God of the Bible is infinitely more majestic and glorious than you can imagine grow your understanding of who God is to the degree to which we know his majesty and his sovereignty and his holiness and his splendor is the degree to which God will consume our hearts know the depth of his majesty and then finally prayerfully surrender to Christ prayerfully surrender to him

Psalm 86 Jeremy put this up on the slide earlier I didn't know that Jeremy was going to but Psalm 86 says this this has been my prayer for my heart this week and my prayer for us as a church and I want to urge you to make this your prayer this week there is none like you amongst the gods oh lord nor are there any works like yours for you are great and do wondrous things you alone are God and then here's the prayer another translation says give me an undivided heart to fear your name God don't allow me just to honor you and revere you on Sunday morning on a Thursday night at CG unite my heart give me one heart that whether I'm in the marketplace whether I'm on the sports field whether I'm out with a friend whether I'm dating somebody whether I'm at home or exhausted when I'm singing songs of worship may my heart be undivided united teach me oh God your ways that I may fear your name

God give me an undivided heart to revere you and to know me to know God deeply to have a heartfelt love so deep and so rich that it changes the way you live begins with a prayer of surrender begins by saying Lord have your way in me teach me your way show me your majesty guide me in your truth give me an undivided heart that fears your name the end of the matter all has been heard fear God keep his commands this is the whole essence of man let's take a few minutes to reflect and respond and then I'll lead us in what to do next I want to encourage you let's just maybe sit quietly for a minute or so what is an appropriate response for you let's take time to do that more how

[37 : 56] AND opportunity to seize the next minute and to explore all and what And well even I'm writing I'm writing videos and do Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you, God. Thank you, God. Thank you, God. God, I pray that we will have such a glimpse of your glory, God, that living for your opinion will be the most important thing in our life.

Thank you, God. Thank you, God. That knowing that the only thing that matters is what you say and what you feel. Thank you, God. Thank you, God. To have the assurance of living under your smile.

God, you're not going to be the most important thing in our life. I'm going to be the most important thing in our lives. And to hate the prospect of ever living under your frown. God help us to be sensitive to both your greatness and your graciousness I pray God won't you come and deliver us from small gods insignificant gods gods that are no gods at all come and astound us with your majesty we pray you