

ECCLESIASTES 12:8-14
(OT: Pro 1:1-7; NT: 1 Cor 15:50-58)

INTRODUCTION: What's the Point?

- Imagine a quest to discover the point of life...
 - Throw limitless money at it → Withhold no experience from it → Consider all the options/opportunities of education/work/success/parties/money/sex/power.
 - And not just in theory → Go out there and try it all.
- We don't need to imagine such a quest – or see if we can get Bill Gates/Jeff Bezos/Elon Musk to make it happen – bc the Preacher in Ecclesiastes has already done it for us.
- And today we get his conclusion.

Transition: To get to it, want to borrow outline one commentator uses to work through this text by looking at: 1) **What** the Preacher said, 2) **How** he said it, and 3) **Why** he said it.¹

WHAT HE SAID

- **V8** gives us summary of entire book: **Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.**
- Preacher's last words are same as his first (**1:2**) → Begins/ends exactly same way.
 - Hebrew word for vanity is *hevel* → It means smoke/vapor/breath.
 - And that's what life is.
 - Like your breath on one of these crisp fall mornings: It's real. You can see it. But when you try to grab it – there's nothing there.
 - It's fleeting/temporary: Here and then gone in the blink of an eye. *Hevel*.
- Preacher's sermon ends where it began, but as **one commentator** observes: "*we are not the same people. Reading Ecclesiastes has given us a bigger perspective on life. The preacher has shown us how vain life is; so when we hear him make the same statement at the end of his book, it strikes us with much greater force.*"²
 - Now we know that the stuff of life – under the sun, without God – will never be able to satisfy us.
 - In and of themselves education/work/success/parties/money/sex/power...
 - All of them turn to dust bc death turns us to dust.
 - "*Nothing in our search has led us home,*" says **Derek Kidner**; "*nothing that we are offered under the sun is ours to keep.*"³

Without God, life is hevel.

Transition: While this is how the Preacher's sermon ends, it is not how the book ends...

- Instead, we get an epilogue from the author.
 - Remember we said that author of this book was not Preacher.
 - Author introduced us to Preacher and collected his sayings (which make up the body of the book), but now he gives us some commentary of own at the end.
- First, he affirms **what** the Preacher said with some reflections on...

HOW HE SAID IT

- What's it been like for you to read and hear from Ecclesiastes?
- Author suggests two words:

1. **Reading Ecc brings PLEASURE: VV9-10:** Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

- **Tom Wolfe** (American author/journalist) described Ecclesiastes as: “*the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth... the greatest single piece of writing I have known.*”⁴
 - I wonder where it ranks in best books you’ve ever read.
 - Personally, I’ve loved it → A little sad that we’ve reached the end.
- Here truth/beauty come together: Harsh reality in beautiful poetry/proverbs/prose.

1:9: There is nothing new under the sun.

1:14: [Life is] a chasing after the wind (NIV).

3:1,4: There is a time for everything... a time to weep and a time to laugh (NIV).

3:11: He has set eternity in the hearts of men (NIV84).

3:20: All are from the dust, and to dust all return.

4:9,12: Two are better than one... a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

8:15: A man has nothing better... than to eat, drink, and be merry (NKJV).

12:1: Remember your creator in the days of your youth.

- Praise God for his word → For its truth and for its beauty.

Transition: But as this book has brought pleasure...

2. **Reading Ecc has also brought PAIN: V11:** The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

- A goad was a staff that either had a sharp point or had nails embedded in the tip.
 - Shepherds used them to keep their animals on right path → Like a cattle prod.
 - Turn to the left and they’d feel pain...
 - Turn to the right and they’d feel the same.
 - It kept the animals going where they needed to go.
- Words of Ecclesiastes do the same for us.
 - They are full of truth...
 - But sometimes the truth hurts.
 - Your life is a breath. You will die. You will be forgotten.
 - We wince.
 - But see how these words **are given by one Shepherd.**
 - God himself, dealing kindly with us...
 - Telling us truth we need to know...
 - Telling us what to do with it.
 - Keeping us on the path of life → Taking us where we need and want to go.
- **V12** warns us to take this needed medicine: **My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.**
 - Since the truth hurts, some reject it and look for easier, more palatable answers.
 - **C. S. Lewis** describes such a person in *The Great Divorce*.⁵
 - On the borders of heaven, a **lifelong searcher** is invited in.
 - But the **Spirit** warns him: “*I can promise you... no scope for your talents: only forgiveness for having perverted them. No atmosphere of inquiry, for*

I will bring you to the land not of questions but of answers, and you shall see the face of God.”

- The **man**, not being ready to accept the truth, replies: *“Ah, but we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way! For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not?”*
- *“Listen!”* God’s **Spirit** says to the man. *“Once you were a child. Once you knew what inquiry was for. There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you had found them. Become that child again: even now.”*
- But, in love with his questions, **man** refuses and abruptly ends the discussion by remembering an appointment and hurrying off to his discussion group – in hell.
- **G. K. Chesterton** once said that the point of opening your mind is the same as of opening your mouth: to shut it again on something solid.⁶
 - That’s a word that’s needed in our day.
 - Accept the words of the loving Shepherd – even when it’s hard...
 - We humble ourselves before the Bible...
 - And receive it as God’s Word.

Transition: After summarizing **what** the Preacher said and **how** he said it, author draws book to a close by telling us...

WHY HE SAID IT

- What’s the point? Are you ready for it? After 12 chapters, 222 verses, 4,537 words...
 - Here it is: **V13: The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.**
 - Author cuts through the complexity of human existence and distills our purpose into a single directive: **Fear God and keep his commandments.**
 - This is not a restrictive duty but a liberating one...
 - Life under the sun cannot fulfill you.
 - You were made to walk with God.
1. What does it mean to **Fear God**? In the Bible, it’s a sense of **reverence/awe**...
- **REVERENCE:** God is not senile grandfather we like to imagine.
 - Our God is a consuming fire (**Heb 12:29**); It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (**Heb 10:31**).
 - You say, that sounds a little Old Testamenty → What about Jesus and the NT?
 - Okay, here’s Jesus in the NT...
 - **Lk 12:4-5:** I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell.
 - God is not to be toyed with/played with → He’s like **electricity**:
 - You can enjoy him → The warmth and light he brings...
 - But stick a fork in the socket → There’s power enough to kill you.

- With this **reverence** comes **AWE**: Wonder-filled amazement/delight...
 - For he's not just the God of power, he's also the God of grace.
 - **Ps 130:4** describes it this way: **With you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.**
 - **Pro 28:14**: **Happy is the one who fears the LORD.**
 - **Isa 11:3**: **Delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.**
 - His grace towards us makes us amazed in his presence.

Transition: We **Fear God** by worshipping him with **reverence/awe** → And then we...

2. **Keep his commandments.**

- Knowing who God is/what he's done for us, we respond with obedience.
 - We don't just do what seems best to us under the sun.
 - We live as he's designed.
- Or you could put it this way: We respond to God's love by following Jesus.
 - Keeping God's commandments is not a burdensome task.
 - It is a loving response to the one who made us and saved us.
 - Imperative to get the order right.
 - We don't obey so that he'll love us → We obey bc he loves us.
 - **Alistair Begg** illustrates this with the immortal words of **Johnny Cash**:⁷
 - I keep a close watch on this heart of mine // I keep my eyes wide open all the time // I keep the ends out for the tie that binds // Because you're mine, I walk the line.
 - Love leads to obedience, not the other way around.
 - Loved by him, in following his commands we find life → Think of all good commands he's given us in this series:
 - Be joyful and do good → Choose gratitude → Resign position as GM of the universe → Live without regret → Deal with your pain → Enjoy your life today → Eat bread with gusto.
 - There is no better life than that!
- But emphasis here falls on **keeping** them → Big diff bt knowing them/keeping them.
 - Don't let words of this book merely fill your head...
 - Understand things world calls us to prioritize will never make us happy...
 - Yet go on pursuing them all the same.
 - Instead, put this book into practice → Live in joyful obedience to Jesus.
 - How will your life be different after this study?
 - Pick one of things we've learned and align your heart with God's design.
 - He will give you the strength you need to follow him → **Fear God and keep his commands...**

CONCLUSION

V14: For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

- What do you make of that final sentence?
- **Derek Kidner:** *"It kills complacency to know that nothing goes unnoticed and unassessed, not even the things that we disguise from ourselves. But at the same time it transforms life. If God cares as much as this, nothing can be pointless."*⁸

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a littler deeper.

- Arthur Brooks, *Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier*.
- Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*.
- David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*.
- Paul Jeon, *Nothing Matters, Everything Matters*.
- Walter Kaiser, *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*.
- Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*.
- Tim Mackie, *The Bible Project: Wisdom of Ecclesiastes*.
- John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ: A Treatise in Which the Whole Controversy about Universal Redemption is Fully Discussed*.
- Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*.
- Philip Ryken, *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes*.
- Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

Endnotes

¹ I owe this outline to Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, 273-282.

² Ryken, 274.

³ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 104.

⁴ Quoted in Ryken, 276.

⁵ I came across this illustration in numerous places, including Kidner, 106; Ryken, 281; and [this](#) Alistair Begg sermon.

⁶ See [this](#) blog post, accessed 11/22/23.

⁷ See Alistair Begg, *A Surprising Punch Line*, accessed [here](#) 11/24/23.

⁸ Kidner, 107.