

Getting the Point: Fear God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 September 2023

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Well, perhaps you could turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ecclesiastes.

You'll find it on page 679. We're going to meet Ecclesiastes chapter 12. And actually, we've come to the conclusion. I realize there's lots of people who haven't been here for much of the series or any of it at all. But here we come to the conclusion that our editor has, on the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. And so, we'll hear it, and then we'll think about its teaching together. So, Ecclesiastes chapter 12, beginning at verse 9. Not only was the teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. The words of the wise are like goads. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter.

Fear God and keep His commandments. For this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. So, here is the point. Fear God and keep His commandments. Words are powerful things, aren't they? Words can make us change. A driving instructor tells us to go left or go right, and we will change direction. Words are powerful for making things. Think about wedding vows, and they make a marriage. Words can be inspiring.

We have to listen to Martin Luther King's, I have a dream speech to appreciate that. Words can also cause breakage. You're fired. Words can be weapons, or words can be sweet medicine.

Proverbs 16, verse 24, rather, like honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. So, the important question as we come to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes is, which words should we listen to? Whose wisdom should direct us? We live in the day of the life hacks. We have bookshops that are chock full of self-help guides. And so, here we have this wonderful little section at the end of Ecclesiastes, where we're not listening any longer to the preacher or the teacher of the first twelve and a half chapters. Now we hear the words of an editor, as he wants to summarize and to give his response to all that the preacher has written and said. So, we can think about this little section a little bit like a book review, or maybe the blurb that you find on the back of a book that tells you why this is worth listening to. This is a man who knows, in verse 12, that of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Somebody in the Bible college that I went to had that taped up in our study hall, for obvious reasons. But he knows, this guy, he knows there are many books, there are many places to go to find wisdom, and it's entirely possible to become weary as people looking to know how to live, but choosing to listen to the wrong word. And so, as we come to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, the teacher does, the teacher's editor here does two very simple things for us. He gives us two recommendations. One, he's going to recommend to us this teacher and his writings, and then secondly, we'll see that he recommends the teacher's key point, which is to fear God. Okay, so even for those of you, I know there's many of you who haven't been here before, as we come to the end, we kind of get to review and to think with this editor about all that's come before. So, first of all, let's see him recommend the teacher and his writings. So, we've come to the end of this book.

[4 : 56] You know, why accept it as wisdom? Why look to apply it to our lives? Well, that's what the editor wants to address. So, he begins in verse 9 by reminding us that the teacher was wise. Okay, so there is wisdom here from this teacher. And of course, according to the Old Testament, wisdom, the beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord. And we're going to get there later. But to know and to enjoy God as creator and redeemer, savior, that's wisdom. And this teacher, he has it. So, therefore, if we are the people of God, we can learn from this guy because he'll give us direction because he's living the way God would want us to live also. But he doesn't just have this wisdom for

himself. And that would be a wonderful thing in and of itself. He shares this wisdom with others.

Not only was the teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. So, let's think together about some of these words of wisdom that he imparts. First of all, in verse 9, we're reminded that our teacher has given us words of knowledge. And in some senses, that summarizes what the whole book is trying to do. The teacher is trying to direct us, here is how to live wisely in the ups and downs of life. Here is a wise way to proceed when we don't know, but God knows. And so, for example, and this is where having our Bibles open is going to be helpful, chapter 7, verse 11 and 12, we read this, wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun.

Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this, wisdom preserves those who have it. So, to listen to this teacher's knowledge is to receive a wisdom that can preserve and guard our lives. And for those of us who were here last week, we heard some really key knowledge for our lives. Chapter 12, verse 1, remember your Creator in the days of your youth.

And what he wants to do is he wants to direct us to know our God and to enjoy our God. That's knowledge. Biblically, that's knowledge, and we find that here in Ecclesiastes.

There are also words of beauty, our editor says, that we can find in this book. And so, when it says the teacher searched to find just the right words, what he wrote was upright and true, he's taking great care to order, to select, to put things in a beautiful way. And there is beauty in this book.

[7 : 51] Think about how it begins. Again, go to chapter 1 and look at this poetry about the cycles that we see in the world. In some ways, it can give a sense of despair, but there's beauty as well. The sun rises, the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north.

Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. Or the very famous poetry of chapter 3, reflecting the realities that there are times and seasons for life. There is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build. These are words that are true, but they're also beautiful.

But it's not just words of knowledge or words of beauty. There are also words that on the surface are painful words. Look at verse 11 when it says the words of the wise are like goads. A goad was some kind of implement with sharp bits in it that would get a flock moving. So a shepherd would use a goad. Maybe we can think of a cowboy with its spurs, with his spurs rather. So think about a cowboy boots with spurs on them, and those spurs are intended to drive into the horse, to drive the horse forward. There is pain, but that pain creates the appropriate direction of travel. Same for a goad that would guide the flock. We've heard some words that we could describe, I think, as painful. Think about how he opens the book. Meaningless, meaningless, or vanity, vanity, says the teacher. Utter vanity. Everything is vanity. To be reminded that our life is like a mist, here today and gone tomorrow, can be really difficult to hear. Painful words. It awakens us to the fact that we are mortals, that all of us will die. But those painful words have an intention. They're supposed to turn us again and again to our God, who is eternal. Or to read chapter 3, verse 19.

It's painful. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath. Humans have no advantage over animals.

[10 : 39] Everything is meaningless. Chapter 4, verse 2. These are painful words. I declared that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive. So, one thing that our preacher has done is he's confronted head on some of the injustices, some of the suffering in life, and he's taken that perspective, imagine this is all there is. Imagine there's no God. And again, he does that to drive home the emptiness of that life and to point us to meaning and to life in God who is eternal. The teacher's point of view is very unlike John Lennon's famous, imagine. Imagine if there was no heaven. That was supposed to be a good thing. But our preacher in Ecclesiastes keeps reminding us, if there's no heaven, if there's no eternity, then what we're left with is the fact that life is short, that we all die, that there is no meaning to be found in the end. There is no gain to be found. So that, as we hear those painful words, we would change direction. We would escape despair by looking to the one who is above the sun, that we would look to God himself. Jesus himself used words as goads. Perhaps you remember in Acts chapter 9, Paul, the apostle, at this point a persecutor of the church, was heading to Damascus in order to arrest and to imprison Christians. Well, Jesus appeared to him on that road, and one of the things he said to Paul is that to

Saul, it's hard for you to kick against the goads.

So apparently, you know, God had been at work in Saul's conscience. Saul was being pointed towards the reality of Jesus as Lord and Savior, but he was resisting that. But eventually, as Jesus appeared to him, his faith was put in Jesus, and he went on mission. So goads, painful words, can serve a purpose if we receive them well, so that our direction would move towards God. But again, it's not just words of pain.

We also find words that give security. There's a different picture in verse 11. So it begins, the words of the wise are like goads. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. So here we're invited to imagine a shepherd who's out in the desert, perhaps, and he's looking after the flock, and it gets to nightfall, and he needs to put up a tent.

And as he puts up the tent, then he needs to drive in those nails. And when those nails are embedded in the ground, now he's a home, now he has shelter. The words of our teacher are intended to be a shelter, a refuge, a security. Where do we find that? So for example, if we go back to chapter 3, remember those times and seasons, that beautiful poetry. The point that the preacher was making there is that we all go through these seasons, but we don't know when these seasons will come to us.

And the challenge for us is, how do we live well when we don't know what one day will bring, but there is comfort and security in knowing that God sends them, and God knows, and we can trust Him.

[14 : 20] There is also security for us in this book as we get to the positive instruction. So chapter 9, verses 7 to 10, lovely words. Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. And one of the things that we've seen again and again is that we are encouraged to enjoy the life that God has given to us, to enjoy the everyday gifts and kindnesses that come from the hands of our God.

If we want to know how to live life wisely and well, here is security for us to receive from God, to enjoy each day as a gift. Chapter 12, verse 1, here's more security. When he says, remember your Creator, he's saying to us, you have a Creator, and your Creator invites you to know Him and to enjoy life with Him. And there is security for us when we have a personal living relationship with our God. So think about what he's just said. This teacher is wise. His words are full of knowledge and beauty, and those painful ones serve a good purpose, and there's words of security.

It's the equivalent of a five-star review, isn't it? This is a way of saying that wisdom is wonderful, but he's not even done there. There's one more really important thing to notice in this review.

At the end of verse 11, these words of the wise, they were given by one shepherd. Who's the shepherd he's talking about? Well, of course, at one level, he's talking about the teacher who's just imparted to us 12 and a half chapters of wisdom. But on a deeper, higher level, the Old Testament people of God knew that God was their shepherd. He is the shepherd of His people. That imagery is there in Exodus.

That imagery is there in Ezekiel. And the point that we're invited to see here is that God is the source of all true wisdom. The wisdom that we find in the book of Ecclesiastes, that comes to the people through the teacher, but God is the source. So that we can trust these words if we want to know how to live wisely before God, because these are words of wisdom that come from God Himself.

[16 : 56] Now, before we leave this point, I think we need to go wider and to recognize that just as our editor has said all these wonderful things about the book of Ecclesiastes, so he could say this is true of the whole Bible. Because the whole Bible are words of wisdom given to us by one shepherd, our great God.

So let's just listen in and hear words both from and about Jesus. Here's some words from Jesus about the knowledge that He gives to us as the Son of God. He said, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Here's an end of anxiety and weariness. How should I live so that I can feel that freedom that I was made for? No, the truth is it's found in and from Jesus.

Jesus has said, if you know me, you'll know my Father as well. If we're looking to know God, then we have this wonderful words of wisdom from Jesus saying, you find God as you find me.

Of course, Jesus too spoke beautiful, memorable words, didn't He? Our boys and girls in Sunday school are just starting in the book of John, and John is full of wonderful words. I am the good shepherd. I am the bread of life. We think of maybe his most famous story, the prodigal son, Luke 15, the father ran to meet his son through his arms around him and kissed him. Or Jesus' words to

the thief who was dying beside him on the cross, but who recognized that Jesus was different, that Jesus had done no sin, and he heard the words, today you'll be with me in paradise. The words of the Bible are full of beauty and truth, and when Jesus speaks to them, he speaks to them to draw us to himself and his truth that saves. We know too that Jesus would use painful words in order to redirect or to properly direct his listeners. Maybe we could think about in Luke chapter 12, there was an occasion where there was a report given about a tower in Siloam, which had fallen down and 18 people had been killed. And Jesus used that as an occasion to tell people that they needed to be ready to meet with God. He said, unless you repent, you too will perish. No, those are painful words, but they're words that would lead them to salvation. Think about his parables of judgment. Jesus was often found saying, depart from me, I never knew you. Reports of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Again, painful words, but intended to drive us away from that judgment to turn to Jesus and find salvation. Because in Jesus, we also find words that give us security, security for now, but for eternity also. Now think about Jesus declaring, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. I am with you always to the very end of the age. Those who come to me, I will never send away. There's wonderful security in the words of Jesus, in the words of Scripture. So since this is true of Ecclesiastes, since it's true of the Bible, since it's true of what we hear from the Lord Jesus, really the only recommendation for you and I today is this. Let's take our Bibles and let's read them.

Let's love this Word. Let's live by it. Perhaps to read and pray through again Psalm 19, or if you've got a lot more time, Psalm 119, described by some as a love song to the Bible.

[21 : 19] So that's him recommending the teacher and his writings. But let's now move on to our second point, where we discover the editor here recommends the teacher's key point, which is fear God.

Now we know, I imagine, that it's popular today to have a life motto or a mantra. Many people choose them. You can go online and you can find literally hundreds of really positive life-affirming mottos to choose from. People like to choose perhaps Gandhi's, be the change you want to see, or think positive, be positive. I think for any of these life mottos, the challenge is always, how do we find one that is big enough to cover all of life? The ups and the downs. And this takes us back to our editor.

So imagine, again, if this was the back, if this was the review on the back of the book of Ecclesiastes, we would find him saying, you should read this wisdom. It's truth that you need for your life.

The teacher's main idea will change your life forever, if you lived in the day of advertising. And so what we need to discover as we come to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes is, what is the key point that he drives us to? And this is where it's really important, because there are lots of people who read the book of Ecclesiastes and who actually miss the point.

Because the key point isn't necessarily the one that keeps getting repeated the most often. So some people read the book of Ecclesiastes and they hear so often, meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless, or vanity, vanity, and think, well, this must be the main point.

[23 : 13] Here is the preacher looking at life without God and saying, life without God is pointless. There's no real meaning. There's no real gain there. And of course, that's true, ultimately.

But our teacher was always doing much more than just looking to one side and exposing the emptiness of life without God. He wants to give a positive message. And the point that we need to get, the life motto that is big enough for all of our lives, we find there in verse 13, two words, fear God, keep His commandments. This is a life motto, fear God, big enough to embrace how we live in our families and our friendships, how we carry out our work and our study, how we handle our joys and our sorrows, how we use our leisure and our pleasure, how we confront illness and death. Fear God.

We find it five times in this book, this theme of fearing God breaks through, pointing us to life above the sun. So, chapter 3, verse 14.

We find, I know that everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear Him. Chapter 5, verse 7. Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, save yourself all that time. Fear God. Chapter 7, verse 18.

It is good to grasp the one, not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes. The fear of God will guide us in everyday wisdom. Chapter 8, verses 12 and 13. Although a wicked

person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before Him. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them. Even if it looks like the wicked are prospering, still fear God. It's the right way to live in God's eyes. So, if fear God is the dominant theme of this book, what does it mean?

[25 : 56] If you want another book review, Mike Reeves, Michael Reeves, wrote a really helpful book called Rejoice and Tremble. It's not up there, actually, but Rejoice and Tremble is a very helpful book on the fear of God.

And here's his definition, which I found very helpful to hold on to. He talks about the fear of God as a heartfelt and happy enjoyment of God as creator and redeemer. And to read his book, you discover there is this fear that includes a sense of wonder. Maybe we've had that kind of experience, a sense of trembling in the presence of something glorious and beautiful.

Well, to fear God is to tremble as we recognize how glorious our God in Christ Jesus truly is. Fear God. Here is truth that sets us free. Sometimes people can live with a fear of God that's unhealthy.

fear of God. So, Martin Luther, the famous reformer, as a teenager, I think, maybe even younger than that, he was terrified of thunderstorms. And he became terrified of God's naked power until he came to faith, until he understood the kindness of God. And so, we can misunderstand the fear of God and only think in terms of power. So, having a proper understanding of the fear of God can set us free from that kind of negative, oh, I just fear God's power. Having a proper fear of God can also set us free from the fear of God's judgment. Perhaps we've lived in our past, maybe even in our present, with a really guilty conscience. Perhaps we've struggled over our sin. And then we've come to receive Christ as our Savior. And we understand that there is no condemnation for us, that our sin and our guilt has been paid for and removed. And so, that fear is now gone.

[28 : 10] To fear God is a truth that sets us free to enjoy Him as He truly is, to delight in His beauty, to enjoy Him as a good Father through His Son, the Lord Jesus. What does it look like to fear God?

Three things very briefly. The first is obedience, fear God, and keep His commandments. To love God, to tremble at His glory, it is not separate from our call to keep His commands. Jesus wasn't embarrassed about connecting love and obedience. And so, a proper fear of God that delights in Him goes with keeping His commandments. Remember John 14, 15, if you love me, keep my commandments.

So, we show that we fear our God, that we have this heartfelt and happy joy in Him as we obey. The fear of God also takes us right to our purpose as people. See the last line of verse 13, fear God says, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. In the original Hebrew, it just says, for this is the whole of all mankind. This is the essence. This is what we are here for, to live in proper relationship with our God, to know Him and to enjoy Him, to love Him and to honor Him. So, in fearing God, we find our purpose. How many people do we know today who are desperately wondering, what is life all about? What am I here for? We're here to fear God. And then there's one last painful word, this time from the editor, as he reminds us of judgment. We should have this proper fear of God. Verse 14, for God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. And he includes that there again to make us think, as we come to a close of this book, have I responded properly to this wisdom? Am I trusting in God? Am I fearing Him? Do I delight in Him as my creator and as my Savior? So, here we are at the end of Ecclesiastes, where we've been introduced to the key point, which is to fear God. And he introduces that to us so that we would live that out in our lives. But we need to recognize that to do that begins first with knowing

Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. We cannot have a proper relationship to our God outside of trusting in Christ. Let me commend and recommend Christ to all of us for now and forever, that we would discover Him as our creator, that we would enjoy the Lord Jesus as our Redeemer, that we would love Him as our friend and brother. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. Let's pray together.

Father God, we live in a world where there are many fears and dangers, and there are many people who live with fears of different kinds. And so, Lord, we thank You for this invitation to a greater fear, fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom, to have a joy in who You are as our maker, and to have a sense of wonder that in Jesus You would be our Redeemer. And so, we

pray that You would enable us as we come to the end of this book, to practice this fear of God, that we would want to keep Your commandments in response to all that You have done for us in the Lord Jesus, that we would understand that this is our purpose, that it wouldn't just be our duty, but it would be our joy to live with worship, to live with faith and obedience. And Lord, that You would keep us close to Your Word as a way of keeping us close to Yourself. We thank You for the beauty and the truth that we find all through the Bible. And so, we pray that we would be a people of the book, that we would love Your Word, that we would make time to read Your Word, that we would think deeply about it, and that we would apply it to our lives. And we pray for our good, for our joy, and for Your glory.

[33 : 38] Amen. Now, we'll finish our time singing the hymn, Behold Our God, and we can stand together as we sing.

Who has held the oceans in His hand? Who has numbered every grain of sand?

Kings and nations tremble at His voice. All creation rises to rejoice.

Behold Our God, seated on His throne. Come, let us adore Him.

Behold Our King, nothing can compare. Come, let us adore Him.

[35 : 04] Who has given counsel to the Lord? Who can question any of His words?

Who can teach the one who knows all things? Who can fathom all His wondrous deeds?

Behold Our God, seated on His throne. Come, let us adore Him.

Behold Our King, nothing can compare. Come, let us adore Him.

Who has felt the nails upon His hands? Bearing all the guilt of sinful man?

[36 : 36] God, God eternal, humble to the grave. Jesus, Savior, is now to reign.

Behold Our King. Behold Our King, seated on His throne. Come, let us adore Him.

Behold Our King, come, then compare. Come, let us adore Him.

Amen. We'll close with these words of encouragement from the end of 2 Peter.

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and forever. Amen.