

"The End of the Matter" Ecclesiastes 12:9–14

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes 12, 9-14. In addition to being a wise man, the preacher also taught the people knowledge. And he pondered, searched out, and arranged many proverbs.

! The preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails. They are given by one shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned. The writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. The conclusion, when all has been heard, is, Fear God and keep his commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Amen. Opening question for you. How much information do you consume? And where do you consume it? A little bit of a confession.

[1 : 08] Before I actually give my confession, I told Christine this just last night, and she gasped audibly. And then I felt embarrassed. And now I feel even more embarrassed sharing it this morning.

So here's the confession. I am subscribed to 112 podcasts. I couldn't believe it. I counted every one of them. And maybe you're just like, yeah, no problem.

I'm like, I have 200 podcasts. Like, no, that's nothing. That's small, small potatoes. I thought it was maybe 40. And I counted them up. It was 112. 112 podcasts.

I will say, of those, 74 shows, I have listened to at least some part of some episode this year. So there's a lot of them that I don't listen to. Some have kind of gone defunct.

I haven't unsubscribed. So maybe the 112 isn't so big of a number after all. But then I figured that out of those 74, I have a consistent rotation of about 40 that I listen to somewhat regularly.

[2 : 09] Some weekly, others in spurts. But 40 in total. Some, a small amount, are pure entertainment. It's like an audio story that's in a podcast form, whatever. But so 40.

40 episodes. And I thought about this this past week. And I thought, how on earth am I able to consume that kind of information?

And the answer is, I can't. How about you? What information are you consuming and how are you consuming it? Does much of this information that you consume actually stick?

I can say for myself, I don't think it does. How can one consider a dozen separate talks every single week?

Is there room for reflection or contemplation in your life as you consider the knowledge you take in? And then another question. What is the ultimate purpose of this level of consumption?

[3 : 09] Is it making you, is it making me wiser? I think this is a really important question. Do we want to be wise? I said, at this point, what I am doing is I am preparing for, like in three decades maybe, I'm going to appear on Jeopardy.

And that's where all that information is going to come to use. Maybe. But I'm not contemplating it in a way that is making me wiser. Helping me to live better, necessarily.

How about you? How are you processing all of the information and knowledge and truth that comes into your life? Last week, we examined verse 8 of chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes.

And that was the conclusion of the book from the point of view of the teaching of the sage. Verse 8 ends, it's a bit of a bookend, with verse 2 of chapter 1, where the sage both, I guess, opens and closes the book by saying, Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.

That's how he ends Ecclesiastes. This week, now that the sage has finished, a new character, and it could very well be the same writer as the sage.

[4 : 28] It could be the same person. But it's clearly a different voice that we encounter starting in verse 9. And it is the voice of a commentator.

This is more of a summary section, verses 9 to 14 of chapter 12, that wraps up the book. And the commentator is going to summarize the sage's teachings.

He's going to help us to understand the importance of not just taking in truth or taking in information, but contemplating it. Okay? Applying it to our lives so that we may hopefully become wise men and women as we live out this mortal life under the sun.

All of the investigations that the sage has conducted, all of the conundrums and tensions that we've explored, make it clear that wisdom is not just about this transfer of knowledge, but about learning to apply these ultimate truths to our lives, so that we don't merely become somebody who's really good at trivia night, but somebody who is quite wise in their dealings.

And then ultimately, we will see that wisdom not just helps us to be wise, but reveals to us this ultimate purpose for our lives, and how that ultimate purpose of our individual lives ultimately helps us to participate in the purpose of all of creation.

[5 : 57] That creation was designed with wisdom, and it is going towards a very specific end. And the wise person understands that we get to participate in that.

So, reflecting on the sage's teachings, the commentator, and that's who I'll be referring to throughout this sermon, the commentator will make clear that the meaning and purpose in life we all seek are discovered through the proper application of truth, allowing us to lead truly wise lives for a very specific purpose.

So, the commentator sums up the sage's teachings, and helps us to see the joy that wisdom brings, the guidance that wisdom offers, and then ultimately the purpose that wisdom gives.

So, jump in it with me. We're on page 44 of these individual books. There is one left at the welcome table. Feel free to grab it. It is our gift to you.

Better late than never. There's also individual Bibles that you can grab to follow along. If you can, resist using a Bible app, because you'll get distracted.

[7 : 13] And I know that because I'll get distracted. So, try to open a physical book. Page 44. We'll jump into our first point. The joy that wisdom brings. Let's read verses 9 and 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. Notice first how the commentator begins by affirming the pedigree and motive of the sage.

He was indeed, that is the sage, he was indeed wise and skilled at compiling and bringing together the various materials that we have and we've been reading through in Ecclesiastes.

He was discerning. He was intelligent. But more importantly, he understood his role as a learned and wise man, as a sage. And what was that purpose?

It was to serve the people around him. His pursuit of wisdom and understanding aimed to help those nearby flourish and grow and become wise in their own right.

[8 : 20] But what was the purpose of this wisdom? Just to avoid the pitfalls of life under the sun or was there something more? We get a bit of a clue when we consider how the commentator describes an aspect of wisdom as words of delight.

I don't think the text is saying that the sage took together all this information and was just really good at prose and made it roll off your tongue so it is memorable.

I think what is being understood here is that the sage or the preacher was communicating the importance of wisdom for our own personal joy.

Not happiness, not joy in a moment, but a deep heart joy. And why is this an important consideration for us? I think it's for a couple reasons, but here's a big one.

We are skilled at framing information to serve our agenda. Sometimes it's appropriate to present information positively rather than pessimistically.

[9 : 30] I think it's a really important thing to do. But more often than not, we engage in crisis management that leads us to treat the truth as flexible.

That truth becomes more like modeling clay than it is a rock. We can bend it, we can shape it, we can make it look the way we want it to look.

I mean, it's common in politics, but I would suggest to you that it's much more common in our own lives. I'll give an example.

It's from my own life, it's from this week. This week I spoke disrespectfully to a family member. I was frustrated and I reacted without thinking.

Very, I was not charitable to this family member. And I had to apologize, but I wanted to apologize with excuses. I was tired.

[10:29] You know, you misunderstood me. Listen, if you only understood maybe this, I listened to a podcast last week, I wasn't going to say that, by the way. A podcast, you know, this information, you know, justifies me pushing back against this or that.

All I wanted to do was apologize and then do it in such a way that made me feel ultimately justified in speaking ill and disrespectfully to this family member.

I'll just say, and this is like, you know, this isn't the regular, but by God's kindness and grace and through some good kind of like dialogue with my dear wife, I was able to just say sorry and not justify it even though it killed me because I wanted to be right.

And it demonstrated to me and I think it's helpful for us to consider how we are, we play loose and fast with truth so that it can suit us. We are fine to sacrifice an aspect of the truth, say the 20% of the truth that is a bit sticky and prickly and difficult.

So we can affirm 80% of the truth, but in doing so, what we do is we ultimately sacrifice the truth upon the altar of our ego. does it, doing such a thing, does it bring true happiness?

[12:07] Does it bring true flourishing? Again, consider the wisdom that the sage has put forward is a wisdom that is to bring both joy and ought to be integral. It is for the sake of other people, right?

The flourishing and the betterment of somebody else. If I would have, and by the way, this is not bragging, I have a thousand times, okay, had a sorry, not sorry type of apology.

But in those situations, does that either bring me true joy or does it elevate and help the other person to flourish? And I would say, no, it doesn't. I am fine for reputational crisis management to sacrifice my joy and somebody else's good opportunity to grow and to flourish so that I feel a bit better about myself.

It's quite remarkable that given all of what the sage has said in Ecclesiastes, that what he is suggesting by wise living would even lend itself to joy.

So much of Ecclesiastes, when we've interacted with it, has been heavy. It's been a lot of tension between do this, don't do this. I'm going to elevate this aspect of life, I'm going to take that same aspect of life and say that it is vain.

[13:41] And so much of life was cast in a really difficult light. A real light, but a difficult one. More than one occasion somebody said to me throughout these weeks, I'm ready for Ecclesiastes to be finished.

And yet, right off the bat, we are seeing that the sage is teaching wisdom in such a way that if it does not bring joy into our hearts, then it might not be true wisdom.

Wisdom must always have in mind a self-giving. Since truth should be both integral and bring joy, according to the sage, it isn't just for us to possess, but must be shared for the benefit of others. therefore, one can't be both wise and selfish. These things are completely incongruous. You cannot be integral and joyful if you are weaponizing the truth to serve your own agenda.

If you live according to half-truths or manipulated truths or self-serving truths, you are actually living by lies and not truth at all. And almost certainly, you will not experience a genuine, deep joy.

[15:04] You might enjoy ease, but not true joy, as living an integral, joy-filled life is often a very challenging one because it requires humility. And you will certainly never enjoy the fruits of wise living.

I wonder if we take some time this week or maybe this afternoon to contemplate some of the sages' words and if you in your contemplation have a bit of self-reflection and ask some of the difficult questions.

Am I living according to the truth or a shadow of the truth or 90% of the truth or maybe I've treated the truth not as a rock but as some clay.

And then ask yourself the question in those circumstances and in my life generally am I experiencing a deep heart joy or just moments of ease?

Friends, are you finding joy in how you're living while considering what is truly right and wise? So wisdom must bring joy or it's not wisdom but wisdom also offers guidance in a very turbulent life and as we've seen over 10 weeks in Ecclesiastes well really it's been 12 weeks but 10 sermons in Ecclesiastes!

[16 : 31] We've seen that life under the sun is quite turbulent. So wisdom brings joy but it also brings guidance. This leads us into our second point. Look with me at verses 11 and 12.

Actually we'll just read verse 11 for now. Here we see that wisdom guides our lives through two images goads and nails.

First let's take a look at goads. It's a term we might not be too familiar with but think a staff or a switch used to guide a stubborn herd animal presumably a sheep by inflicting some kind of discomfort to them so that they are led away from danger and towards nourishment and safety. There's pain involved there's discomfort and perhaps even confusion why is this happening to me but the shepherd's goal the good shepherd's goal is the health of the sheep the health of the herd the second image is nails it describes nails but really if it would help think of tent pegs in the ancient eastern mediterranean a lot of semi-nomadic living there were shelters that were put up storms and disasters and maybe even catastrophes would come upon people in the wilderness the nails had to secure the shelter so that there would be a level of stability and safety that the shelter would be integral see the pegs or the nails hold secure what would otherwise be blown away or damaged and in this to a double metaphor we see this image of wisdom both motivating proper action and the importance of relying upon truth that can be trusted wisdom directs us in where to go and helps us to have confidence in the truth and stand firm upon it there's a promise of goodness and consistency for life is what we're seeing what isn't promised is experience after experience or a promise of indefinite progression where we are always making or consuming or developing wisdom is therefore a guide toward the truly good things in life and stability for a life lived in that truth such guidance and stability they're incredibly vital they were vital back then and they're vital today because there are many false ideas about wisdom and human flourishing numerous competing narratives claim to reveal what will truly bring us joy and satisfaction many perceptions many deceptions pretend to be truth there's also charlatans many people that are self possessed experts seeking followers by recycling!

false ideas are promising great benefits if you only follow their five steps for success or apply their three tips for a better you whatever it may be a lot of these people are platformed on podcasts or on YouTube we live in the age of the influencer and it is really striking how the sages words are true even today where he says there's nothing new under the sun that there is always in every generation with God's people a false vision of who God is and the godly life that we need to be aware of and flee from it is remarkable how there isn't really a new set of heresies but really a small collection of age old ones that just get repackaged for the new generation with modern speak and just maybe promises that are a bit more grandiose than the generation before this seems to be affirmed by the commentator about the sage in the next verse look with me at verse 12 my son beware of anything beyond these and by the way this is not just a reference to the sages words but almost certainly would refer to the majority of the written

[21 : 18] Old Testament Bible that would be available at the time at the very least the sages words maybe some of the proverbs some of the Psalter and the Torah the first five books of the Bible I'll start again in verse 12 my son beware of anything beyond these of making many books there is no end and much study is a weariness of the flesh you know there is a kind of posture of concerning ourselves with being people that are learned where we are constantly learning but never coming to conclusions it is an exhausting affair for there is no true purpose for wisdom beyond looking wise like we've talked about just in the previous point a wisdom that is self serving truly is no wisdom at all wisdom is always self giving so a constant learning a constant getting of degrees a constant consumption of the newest!

fad or the newest approach to whatever it may be the newest ideology a bit of philosophy mixed in with new age we're constantly learning but never coming to conclusions C.S.

Lewis in the great divorce really depicts this type of person and I'm going to read the section at length and I'm really indebted to Derek Kidner he's now passed away but one of the commentators that I've used throughout this time but he quotes C.S.

Lewis and here is the whole section and again this is depicting! a type of person who is always learning but never truly reaching the truth this is what it says quote this is the spirit talking to a man I can promise you no scope for your talents only forgiveness of 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 ah but we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way for me there is no such thing as the final answer the free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through

the mind must it not listen said the white spirit 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 wisdom guides us to a truth it guides us away from falsities but it ultimately guides us to a truth and a truth that is stable a truth that might have different applications slightly different applications for different times but the content of which doesn't change truth is firm it is everlasting it adures wisdom indeed guides us to live a selfless life rooted in such truth it does this how by shaping and forming our hearts directing our affections not to ourselves and interestingly not even primarily towards our neighbor although that is an important aspect of being a wise person but ultimately towards the

Lord and to the conviction that he has created us to know him and enjoy him and live according to his ways this is the purpose of wisdom and the purpose that it provides us with and this leads us to our third and final point the purpose that wisdom gives starting in verse 13 finally finally after ten weeks of wrestling through ecclesiastes we have long sought the answer to our question what is the purpose of our life what is the purpose of all of our lives and the purpose of wisdom and of right living is that we may fear God and keep his commandments you see for those who have eternity written on their hearts that's what the sage said back in chapter three nothing less than knowing the eternal

[26 : 04] God and being known by him living under his good and godly rule! learning to obey his commandments and realizing that all of life is under his watchful and beautiful gaze only that will satisfy us nothing else will everything else is what the sage calls vanity vanity vanity all is vanity how could we find ultimate meaning in anything else it would be a fantastic time to put a nice bow on the entire book but before we get too excited let's put a critical hat on and ask ourselves the following question is there really true eternal joy in fearing and serving a divine being because if that's the case we have to say no to a lot of other things that are good okay so are we really pushing all of our chips into the middle of the table betting on God are we through ecclesiastes we are reminded of the absolute futility of elevating ourselves above all else time and again the sage has given us examples of why it is not a good thing to pursue earthly pleasures to their ultimate end as if they will give us eternal satisfaction because such things will perish time and again he reminds us of the absolute futility of elevating ourselves above all else living for our own glory our own reputation or ultimate purpose is an absolute fool's errand says the sage for those who yearn and understand that we are made for eternity pursuing such eternal desires through fleeting things are more than just fruitless they're actually detrimental to our lives they harm us and actually they harm others we are pursuing the eternal one our creator to recognize that we matter before him and that he delights in us and every time we look with that longing and yearning towards something else things are bound to go awry ultimately we deny his goodness we deny that he is the creator and the truly wise one and that in him there are joys unspeakable we know where true joy resides and it's not in

God that's what we say that's what I say and all of this stems from what the Christian faith calls the fall and much and I've touched on this a little bit but much of what overshadows the entirety of Ecclesiastes is Genesis 1 2 3 where mankind disobeyed God and now every subsequent generation is doomed to elevate ourselves to a godlike status and fail utterly fail in doing so so you see to to revere and to fear and to enjoy and to serve the one true God creator of heaven and earth is precisely what we were destined for and yet we are time and again proof that we can't attain it we know our purpose we see wisdom as our guide in the ultimate joys that await us and try as we might we can never enjoy it so the question again are we going to put all of our chips into the middle of the table and bet on

God and I would ask the question to myself as well how has it worked out when I bet on myself or you bet on your career or you bet on your family or your health or whatever else is in this on this planet in this life under the sun okay if you truly bet on your on whatever it might be earthly speaking how has that worked out has it given you eternal joy and has it guided you towards the truth have you been free from the hurt of others in a very deep horrendous way have you somehow avoided!

hurting other people have you been a truly wise person I want to suggest to you that you probably have not you probably have not and this is why Ecclesiastes is such an important book for us and for every generation to read because what it does is it exposes the conundrum of conundrums that is our eternal longings and our inability to get there our task which lies before us that is impossible

to fulfill the perennial frustration of mankind and I would say also why Ecclesiastes is such an important book is because it ultimately shows us the mercy and goodness and graciousness of a loving God it prepares us for Christ himself to come in the flesh and save us from life under the sun from our futility when we cry out to God for mercy what does he do he says with a resounding response yes

I will come so to fear the Lord it's a trust in God to remedy the situation that you cannot that you have no hope in remedying to trust him to fulfill your eternal desires that you cannot fulfill and to give you eternal joy that you cannot grasp as hard as you have tried and this is exactly what Jesus does he resolves the insolvable conundrum of Ecclesiastes so that Ecclesiastes really does if we read it with humble eyes and prayerful hearts we will long for Christ to save us from this existence and friends this will completely transform your life the fear of the Lord will completely transform your life for it will transform every other fear the fact that God knows all of our secrets in verse 14 take that in he knows all of our secrets do you have secrets that are secret for a reason probably he knows them that is a fearful thing but if we fear the

[33 : 05] Lord and know that he is for us and not against us then all of the things that God knows about us the scary things ought not to fill us with fear but remind us that we actually matter to him every aspect of our life everything we do good or bad is known to him and he considers it it reminds us that in Christ we will not be judged as guilty when we stand before him and therefore we can behold his mercy and love as pure as a pure and beautiful gift of grace see how that transforms the skeletons in our closet to be examples of God's mercy at work it's a beautiful thing when we become aware of our wrong doings when we are sin engaging in sin we can find joy in the one true shepherd who is gently guiding us towards repentance and truth and we can understand that when we are being disciplined by

God it's not because of his great wrath towards us for Christ has taken our wrath the Lord's wrath that should be poured! out on us and instead it is again a testament to God's love when we are asked to keep his commandments they are not regarded as a burden but as a way to enjoy life as it was intended to be enjoyed for God's ways are stable and they're true and they're wise and they're foundational for all of life to exist and when we see God as creator and not ourselves as creator then we can see the futility of our ways!

and trust in the foundational integral joyful laws that God has given us we can find genuine and lasting joy knowing that he takes delight in us and created us for a very purpose this is the whole duty of man but it actually is much more than just a duty okay verse 13 it says this is the whole duty of man and it would seem that the translation team in the ESV and the translation that Derek used made a translation decision to add in duty because it's not in there in the original language to convey the importance of duty the importance of working for the Lord so the original says this is the whole of mankind which transforms our purpose from doing to being okay that for those that have put their faith and trust and hope in the one true

God the commentator and the sage is saying you have found your very purpose for being your reason for existence has been made known your ultimate purpose is fulfilled in the one true God friends we are called to fear and obey not a tyrant but the shepherd of our souls and this shepherd is far greater than all other shepherds why because he lays his life down for his sheep and he gives us his very spirit to indwell and strengthen us and he continues to make intercession for us because he is at the right hand of God the!

Father and he has gone to repair a place for us in his father's household so that we may enjoy him forever and ever and ever world without end will you trust in him will you honor and obey him will you trust in his just judgment will you know perfect freedom because you have received!

[37 : 06] His grace by faith friends in his service there is perfect freedom for his yoke is easy and his burden is light and here's the beautiful thing about life in Christ this is from the apostle Paul 1 Corinthians 15 in verse 58 it means that as we then labor as people in Christ our labor is no longer in vain it means the things we can do on this earth have reverberate throughout eternity when they're done for God's glory and in the fear and love of him as a response for what he has done for us