

One Shepherd

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Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 00] Good evening, my name is Ben Roberts. It is wonderful to be with you as we finish up this series on Ecclesiastes. And if you have been a bit lost or a bit discouraged over the last six weeks, I think you're in luck this evening because with his final words, our preacher gets very direct and he gets much more hopeful. So what we're going to do this evening is start towards the end of that passage that you just heard with why this book was written. What is it for? Why is it in the Bible? What's it about? We'll start with the why, then we're going to double back to the beginning and reflect on the situation that we find ourselves in, these themes of hevel or vanity and judgment. And as we go along, we're going to look at the prescription that this preacher offers.

How do we live in light of the situation that we find ourselves in? And how does it point us towards hope? So let's take a look at the why. So this is chapter 12, verses 9 and 11 near the end.

Why is this book in the Bible? Verse 9, besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people wisdom or knowledge. So the preacher, he's not just some academic that's just kind of spinning things off. He is a teacher. He's not doing something theoretical here. Ecclesiastes is practical.

He writes about how life really is and what to do about it. Ecclesiastes is a user manual for life. Verse 10, the preacher sought to find words of delight and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

So in this user manual that he's put together, the preacher sets out to find delightful words, things that would be nice to hear and nice to listen to. But in the end, he writes down true words.

[1 : 50] Because without truth, there's no delight. And so over the last weeks, we see that this book was actually designed to dismantle our darlings, to destroy our pretty fantasies, to replace them with beautiful truths. You want to find delight and happiness in this life? Well, your pipe dream of success or wealth or sex or whatever it is won't give it to you. You will never find delight without truth, without knowing about Hevel, about vanity. You're never going to find justice without acknowledging the reality of evil and suffering that we face. You're never going to find hope without coming to terms with judgment. So Ecclesiastes was written to help us be truthful, to be truthful about the world that we're in and who we are in it. And when we embrace this truth, we can find delight. Verse 11, the words of the wise are like goads and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings. They are given by one shepherd. So these words are goads. They're sharp sticks to move a stubborn animal. They poke us and they want us to move. They want us to go in a different direction.

They want us to wake up to something. Goads. They're nails. They're firmly fixed. And so this is to say the truths in this book are also foundational. And so don't flail against them. Don't complain about them. Hang your life on them. You can count on them. They're also given by one shepherd. That is, they are from God who, like a shepherd, wants us to go in the right way. So where have we gone? Well, Ecclesiastes is wisdom for life on the ground here and now. It teaches us that to find delight, we have to reckon with the truth. And it wants us to act according to life as it is, not as we wish it were. And even though it feels harsh, it's from God. It's for our good. So what are these truths that we need to reckon with in order to make our way to delight? Well, there are two in this passage that handily sum up a lot of the ground that we've covered in the book. And those two are Hevel, or vanity, and judgment. And these things are like two different landmarks. And they kind of locate us within the map of life, within the map of the reality that we find ourselves in.

And you're probably very familiar with Hevel by now. This is a very, this is just an insistent theme in this book, that this life and our pursuits are like a puff of smoke. They're short, they're insubstantial. And the main way that we see it in this passage is kind of in the middle bit that we read. It's all about our inevitable aging and decline and death. So the preacher says, remember also your creator in the days of your youth. Before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them. So there's youth, and then there's the evil days that are coming when our delight for life withers away. Verse 2, he says, the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain. In other words, the created order reverses itself. And it actually happens within our bodies. So we're made from dust, and we begin our return to the dust. The body that the creator has made is going to slowly come unmade.

And all of these images that follow after those couple of verses are describing that unmaking of our bodies. So he says, eventually your body is going to look like this abandoned house that's falling into disrepair. And it was once really beautiful. It was full of life and joy and activity, and it's going to languish. When its workers lose strength, your muscle will wither. Like a grasshopper dragging itself along, your movement is going to atrophy over time. The grinders are going to cease, and that's talking about your teeth decaying and falling out. The windows are going to fog, and it's talking about your sight dimming with cataracts. Doors of friendship shut as your impact on the world fades away.

Your voice will quaver your life, like this house will empty and quiet. And like the end of birdsong, your speech and your hearing will diminish. As the almond tree blossoms white, so will your hair.

[6 : 28] He sums this up by saying, desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home. Before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

The ultimate vanity is you. It's your body. You're just a puff of smoke. You will inevitably be betrayed by your body into age and decline and death. Your life will snap like a twang, like a silver guitar string, shatter like a golden bowl or a pitcher.

These things are precious images. A golden bowl is a precious thing, and our life is a precious thing here on earth, but it's short. It won't last. It will end. And when you become dust, your spirit returns to God who gave it. These are things that we know as people that live on the earth.

This is not a surprise that we will decline in age. It is a thing that we try not to think about, if we're honest. But remember, this book is a user manual. It's for life on the ground now.

And that's why the repeated word in this section over and over and over is before. Before, before, before. In other words, as our aged preacher to the youth, to his son, this will happen, but it hasn't happened yet. And before it does, this is what you need to do.

[8 : 00] You need to remember, and you need to rejoice. Remember. Remember your creator. Remember him, not when it's too late. Remember him now. When your desires tempt you to chase after Hevel, when you think this is going to be the thing that's going to satisfy. Remember that your decline and your death are inevitable, but your spirit will go to that creator. That's a nail firmly fixed.

It takes hope with one hand, but it actually gives hope with another. Because before that happens, before the silver cord snaps, we have now. We have right now. And right now, we're able to orient our lives towards God. Instead of being oriented towards vanity, towards things that fade away, we can turn our attention to God, the one that our spirit is going to go to. Hevel will end.

And there's actually something outside of it. There's something beyond it. There is eternity. And so, the preacher is brutal here, but he's asking us, are you ready for the house of your life to fall into disrepair? Have you reckoned with what will happen when your spirit goes to God?

Do it before. Do it before it happens. And if you're not ready, rejoice. Because God has given you time. He's given you time right now to prepare. Rejoice. It's commanded two times in this passage.

Every good thing falling from God's hand, like manna, is to be eaten and enjoyed and acted upon now because it's going to turn to worms. Rejoice in what is good now because you won't always have it.

[9 : 40] That's a goad. Look at what's right in front of you. Pay attention. Sometimes I find that I'm always planning for the next thing. So, I'm waiting for what's going to happen tomorrow, or I'm waiting for the weekend. I'm waiting for the vaccine. I'm waiting for when I can go on vacation again, waiting for life to really start. But it's not going to start. It's already ending. That's what the preacher says. And so, that near-death experience, the one that helps you recognize that life is short and precious, and you need to think about what's really important in life.

You need to bet on eternity. That's the book of Ecclesiastes. This whole book is trying to help you have that experience. To wake up to now, the opportunity God has given you, and to orient your life to what is really important, what really lasts. So, that's the first landmark. It's Hevel. Hevel will come for you. You can't escape it. So, remember your creator and make things right with him.

Rejoice in the gift of time that you have to do it right now. And the second landmark is judgment. So, again, that word judgment, it seems like it would rob us of hope. But actually, it surprisingly brings hope in the book of Ecclesiastes. Because judgment says, your life does matter. So, in some translations, vanity, they translate it meaningless, meaningless, meaningless. It doesn't mean meaningless. It means short and substantial, right? Your life does matter. Someday, things are going to be sorted out. We might be tempted to despair and think, life's short and maybe it's also pointless. Evil flourishes. Nothing changes. Maybe I should just give up. Maybe I should party up while I can. But judgment means that God looks at your life, short as it is, vain as it is, and He says, what you do matters. It matters enough for me to pay attention to it now and to act on it later.

God thinks that our actions have lasting consequences. That it all certainly means something. And the preacher says, walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment. And then later, for God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil. So, Hebel doesn't mean that nothing matters.

It doesn't mean that it's meaningless. It means that all these earthly things that we're so, that it's so easy to get caught up in them. All of these earthly things, including our own bodies in our life, all of it needs to be measured in the light of eternity. Eternity shows us what's a puff of smoke and what lasts. And judgment is this promise that eternity and its values are going to triumph.

[12 : 22] God is going to straighten it out. And so the question isn't what we're tempted to think about, right? What's right and wrong for me? What do I think is meaningful? What should I do? What means something to me in this life? That's not the question. The question is, what does God think is right and wrong? What does God say will last? And what does He say will pass away? So, let me ask you what Ecclesiastes asks. In your life, have you reckoned with the reality of judgment? Have you reckoned with the reality of eternity? That one day, God will overturn the way things are and He will make them the way they ought to be? And we're going to be accountable to Him for what we did with this time with the gifts that He's given. That is a goad. That should put the fear of God into us. And that's exactly what He's trying to do. That's what He says in verse 13. The end of the matter, all has been heard, fear God and keep His commandments. For this is the whole duty of man. The whole duty of man means this is the whole of humanness. This is what you have. This is what lasts. This is the most important thing.

This is your whole purpose. To recognize that God should define our reality. That's fearing Him. To embrace His way of living. That's keeping His commandments. Because outside of God, all is vanity.

That is short, insubstantial, and gone tomorrow. So the end of the matter is this in Ecclesiastes. Loosen your grip on vanity. Tighten your grip on eternity. How do we do that? How do we do that as those that hope in Jesus? We've been given this map. What do we do with it? Well, the hope of eternity shines somewhat dimly to our preacher. I mean, we're seeing it poke through here. He's saying this is real. We need to reckon with it. He doesn't give us a lot of instruction on how.

But Jesus and the gospel have brought it to broad daylight for us. In Ecclesiastes, he says, These words of warning and hope are from one shepherd, whom we have now met in Jesus, our good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

By the nails of vanity and judgment, he was fixed to the cross. The house of his body was broken. He took on decline and death, what we earned.

[14 : 52] And he took on God's judgment on this passing world. And three days later, he was restored and refurbished, resurrected with a body that is not imprisoned by Hevel, but made for eternal life in a new creation.

So, that's a lot, isn't it? Saying that Hevel and judgment, these things, they're realities, they remain in our world. We travail in them for now. But through faith in Jesus, our experience of them is transformed into hope.

Jesus' promise of eternal life is a treasure that's laid up in a jar of clay within us. What Hevel destroys, the God of hope will one day restore.

And the judgment and suffering and evil under the sun, which condemn us, which frighten us, Jesus bore all of those things, so that our fearsome judge could become our Father, the one that gives us forgiveness and welcomes us into our eternal home.

Our absolute need and futility is revealed in Ecclesiastes. It strips us bare. We see that we have nothing. We need something from outside of all of this, from outside of ourselves, something eternal to break into human existence and to save us, to forgive us, to transform us.

[16 : 13] And in Jesus, it has. Amen.