

"The End of the Matter"

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me one last time to the book of Ecclesiastes. We are in chapter 12, verses 8 through 14. We've come to the end of our study in this rich and challenging! And we get to hear today what Ecclesiastes calls the end of the matter. We come to the epilogue of this book where the main message is summed up for us. When all has been said and all has been heard, here is the main thing. So, as you turn to chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes, let me pray.

Father, how we long to be people of wisdom, people who know what it means to live life as it is meant to be lived. Give us ears to hear what the conclusion of this great book of Ecclesiastes has to say to us, this book that you have inspired and preserved and through which you continue to speak today.

Guide us by your Spirit and lead us to your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found. In His name we pray. Amen.

All right, Ecclesiastes 12, 8 through 14. Vanity of vanity, says the preacher, all is vanity. Being wise, 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.

[2 : 43] So, in this book of Ecclesiastes, we've been on a quest, a quest to discover the life well lived.

Or as verse 13 puts it, we've been on a quest to discover what is the whole duty of man. That is, how might we live such that we could look back over our lives and say, I've done all that I was meant to do. With this life I've been given, I've lived it well.

Now, are you on a quest to discover the life well lived?

Of course you are. Who isn't? Who doesn't want to look back over their life and say, I've lived it well. With this life I've been given, I've done all that I was meant to do.

But, in this quest for the well lived life, Ecclesiastes has found many dead ends.

[3 : 59] In fact, at times, Ecclesiastes has felt like nothing but a series of dead ends. After all, listen to the words that serve as the bookends, as the frame for this quest.

Chapter 1, verse 2. Chapter 12, verse 8. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All. But the life well lived, it's chasing the wind.

So, it seems that we've ended where we began. Vanity. So, is that it? Is it all just a dead end? Is there no such thing as the life well lived?

Are we just back where we started? Well, yes and no. Remember T.S. Eliot's famous lines near the end of his poem, Four Quartets?

He says, We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time.

[5 : 18] We've come back to this realization that all is vanity.

But what do we now know now that we've taken this quest? Well, we know that in order to really find lasting meaning, lasting substance, lasting joy in this life, in order to really find the life well lived, we need more than just life under the sun.

When the preacher says, All is vanity, the all he's referring to is all of life considered apart from God, our Creator.

And all there really means all. There is no creaturely reality that can hold up the weight of a human life.

Your soul is like a treasure of gold. It is heavy with beauty and glory and worth.

[6 : 37] And the tragedy is that we try to hold up this golden treasure with the thin reeds of pleasure and power and worldly wisdom.

And they all break. And the soul falls with them. But what can hold us up if every creaturely reality is nothing but vanity and a fleeting breath?

Only the Creator. Ecclesiastes is showing us that we have to look beyond the frame.

The quest from chapter 1, verse 2, to chapter 12, verse 8, has not been a dead end. It has followed every alternative path so that we might find the only true lasting road to a life well lived.

And that's why in the epilogue to this great book, verse 11 can take this book so full of its dead end explorations and place it among the words of the truly wise and describe it like goads and like nails.

[8 : 05] What's a goad? Well, a goad was a sharp stick that a shepherd would use to direct sheep away from harmful paths.

And has not Ecclesiastes been like a goad? Has it not prodded us and poked us to see the futility of so many of the dead end paths that we're prone to take?

Try pleasure, Ecclesiastes has said. See where it leads. Try power. Try wealth. Try earthly wisdom. Let's take those paths and see that they're all vanity. But after the goad comes the nail.

And then, you see, like a nail firmly fixed, Ecclesiastes has given us something that at last is stable and secure, a place not just to hang a coat, not just to hang a bag, not just to hang a few bits of choice advice.

[9 : 17] No, here is an anchor upon which you can hang your whole life. Your soul, in all of its weighty beauty, can rest here and be secure and never fall.

You know, it's sort of like we've been staring at a painting in a museum. And inside the frame, there's this picture of human life that's ultimately empty and fleeting.

And as our eyes move across the picture, we come to the edge, we come to the frame, and then we scan over and we hit the frame again, and we come down and we hit the frame again. And we think, but everything I see in this picture is vanity.

And the more you stare at the picture within the frame, the more empty life becomes. And your heart sinks and your spirit drops. Is this all there is? All is empty.

But then one of those, you know, one of the guys in the museum with the blue coat comes over and taps you on the shoulder and says, friend, friend, look beyond the frame.

[10 : 26] Lift up your eyes. Turn around. Lift up your gaze. There is more to be seen. So as Ecclesiastes comes to an end, as we return to the frame of vanity in verse 8, we're beckoned to leave vanity behind, to step beyond the frame, to leave the dead-end paths, and to find that the life well lived is the life lived in the presence of God.

verse 13 and 14, 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. And so in these last two verses, we see the contours of a life well lived.

We see first the heart of a life well lived. And what is that heart? It's a heart that fears God. What does it mean to fear God?

In the Bible, to fear God means to live in awe of His reality. And that's a bit different than how we usually use the word fear, isn't it? We usually say we're afraid of something because we're scared it's going to hurt us and we want to run away and hide, right?

[12 : 03] But this kind of fear, the fear of God, doesn't necessarily mean you want to run away or hide. It's the sort of feeling you get in the presence of something truly majestic, truly great.

Natural beauty perhaps provides the best analogy. You know, when you stand on the edge of something like the Grand Canyon or when you see 20-foot waves rise in the ocean during a storm, that combination of power and beauty fills your heart with awe.

And yes, you know that a 20-foot wave is dangerous and so it's scary in that sense. but even if it wasn't going to hurt you, even if you were safe on the shore, you would still look at it in awe.

That's a bit of what the fear of God means. To understand God's character, the perfection of power and beauty, of wisdom and goodness, to understand the excellence of God's character and being and to feel the reality of it.

And to fear God means that the reality of God is the shaping reality of your life. It means that you care more about what pleases God than what pleases other people.

[13:35] It means that you care more about God's approval or disapproval than the approval of your colleagues or neighbors or classmates. It means that the reality of God is the standard by which you measure all other wisdom, all other goodness, all other beauty.

That's why verse 12 can say, 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, those words weren't just penned in the midst of finals week, right? Ecclesiastes, notice, Ecclesiastes isn't saying we should never read books, never study, never explore ideas and see where they lead.

He's saying beware. Beware of chasing after every new idea. You can always find one more path to explore, one more idea to chase, one more pleasure to experiment with.

Humans will always be contriving yet another way to try to find meaning and purpose under the sun apart from God. But in the end, Ecclesiastes says it will only lead to weariness.

[15:00] real wisdom. The heart of a life well lived is fearing God.

There is no book, no podcast, no TED Talk that will give a better foundation for a life well lived than this. Fear God.

After all, what else could you put at the center of your life? that could compare to this. God is the perfection of beauty, the pinnacle of righteousness, the sum and source of all truth, the very ground of being itself.

God is the one from whom and through whom and to whom are all things. Why would you dance in the shadows when you can step into the light and be flooded with light?

fear God. But how can we grow? How can we grow in the fear of God? Well, friends, on the one hand, the fear of God is ultimately something that only God's Holy Spirit can bring about in the human heart.

[16:20] Only the Holy Spirit can open the eyes of our hearts to understand and worship God as God truly is. but on the other hand, the means that the Holy Spirit uses to do His work is so often and regularly the Word He has inspired.

Do you want to grow in the fear of God? Do you want the reality of God to be the controlling reality of your life so that you can be liberated from all the petty little fears that drive you?

then meditate upon the character of God revealed in the Word of God. Study His attributes.

Ascribe to Him the glory He deserves. Praise God for who He is. Meditate on His perfections. When you read Scripture, prayerfully keep an eye out for those descriptions of who God is and what He is like.

You know, often we go to Scripture looking for a little bit of advice to do this and a little bit of comfort to do that and those are good. We should go to God's Word for everything. But do we go to behold God as He has revealed Himself to us?

[17:45] Go to see His holiness. His righteousness, His faithfulness, His goodness, His sovereignty, His majesty, His timeless eternity.

Do you need help doing this? Of course you do. We all do. We all need help learning more about who God reveals Himself to be in Scripture. And thankfully, God has raised up teachers throughout the history of the church who help us take the truths of Scripture about who God is and understand them and apply them and make them shine.

You might consider reading a book like J.I. Packer's Knowing God, a wonderful book to begin meditating on who God is and His glory so that you might grow in the fear of Him.

You might read a little bit each day with your daily Bible reading and then spend time each day worshipping God simply for who He is and pray.

And pray that the Holy Spirit would allow the right awe of God's reality to rise up in your heart because that is the heart of a life well lived. Fear God.

[19:03] But in verse 13, we also see not just the heart of a life well lived but the direction of a life well lived. What is the direction of a life that is well lived?

Verse 13 says, fear God and keep His commandments. How different that is from most of the advice we receive about living a well lived life.

You know, money, fame, impact, friendship, community, family, service, these are the sorts of ideals that get held up as, you know, when you're really on track to live a well lived life.

Right? But a truly well lived life is a life lived in obedience to God's commands. Why is this the case?

Why obedience to God's commands? Well, because God is the creator of all things. He not only knows how our human lives work best, but He also knows how the very created order works best.

[20 : 09] Think of it this way. When a carpenter or a craftsman is working with a piece of wood, they have to pay very careful attention to what? To the grain of the wood.

To the direction and orientation of the fibers of the wood as it is grown in the tree. Right?

Woodworkers know that as they cut and as they plane and as they finish the wood, they have to work with the grain.

Otherwise, the wood will simply chip and splinter. Going against the grain is a recipe for ruining the wood and ruining the project.

But if you can learn to work with the grain, then you can create things of beauty and stability and integrity. And friends, that is true of our lives as a whole.

You see, God's commands describe, as it were, the very grain of the universe, the grain of created reality. And so, to obey God's commands is to live life with the grain of reality itself, to live life with the grain of God's created order.

[21 : 29] You see, what that means is that God's commands are not some sort of external dictates that are just imposed upon the foreign material of the world.

Right? No. Because God created all things. Because He called all things into being and fashioned them according to His will. Because of that, God's commands are His gracious description of the very grain of the reality He has made.

If it seems to us like God's commands are strange or counterintuitive or out of place or unrealistic, it is not because God's commands are out of step with reality, but because we are.

Keeping God's commands are the direction of a life well lived. But how do we keep His commands? How do we keep God's commandments?

Anyone who has tried to live according to God's commands set forth in Scripture will sooner rather than later be able to say what the Apostle Paul said in Romans chapter 7.

[22 : 44] The things I want to do, I don't do. And the things I don't want to do, those are the very things I keep on doing. You see, the human heart by itself cannot keep God's commands.

There's a power in us that seems to keep driving us to go against the grain of God's good commandments. And this power that drives us against the grain is what the Bible calls sin.

And because this power is inside of us, there is no outside-in approach that will fix it. We can try to learn more about the moral life.

We can try to learn more about virtue. We can try harder to put it into practice. You know, like Benjamin Franklin, we can keep a meticulous practice of sharpening our moral character, focusing on one virtue at a time, keeping track of it in our journal, charting how much progress we made each week, each month, each quarter.

And we can even join together in community with others who are striving for the same goals. But all of these things, while good in themselves, are outside-in attempts to fix an inside problem.

[24 : 11] It's sort of like painting the outside of a house house, when the real problem is that the foundation is cracked. The only hope we have of keeping God's commandments and living with a grain of reality is an inside-out solution.

We need the sin in our hearts to be dealt with on the inside so that then our outward actions can begin to change. And where does this inside-out solution come from?

It comes from God. God, in His grace, has made a way for a new power to begin inside of us that can liberate us and empower us to obey God's commands from the heart, that can subdue the power of sin.

Listen to how Paul describes it in Romans 8, just after confessing the things I want to do, I don't do, the things I don't want to do, I just keep on doing them. He says, where do I go for rescue?

He says in Romans 8, God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. You see, the law is the ultimate outside-in approach, trying to do better in our own willpower.

[25 : 35] But God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. How? By sending His own Son. In the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

What Paul is saying is this, God the Father sent His Son to take on our fully human nature in the Incarnation and united to our humanity. Jesus not only lived a perfect life for us, but also died to pay sin's penalty for us.

And on the third day, when Jesus rose again, He demonstrated that sin was defeated. And now, for everyone who admits that they can't beat sin on their own, and who turn and trust in Christ as the one who did, God not only promises to forgive their sins on account of what Jesus did, but He promises to give them new hearts through the Holy Spirit.

That is, everyone who trusts in Jesus as Lord is granted a new internal power by the Holy Spirit to enable them from the inside out now to obey God's commands.

Friend, do you know this inside-out power? that only comes through Jesus Christ, the one who condemned sin in the flesh so that you might be made alive to walk in His Spirit.

[27 : 13] Do you know that? Of course, Ecclesiastes,! right, only saw the need and the importance of keeping God's commands.

But today, we also see the lengths that God has gone to make us able to keep His commands, sending His own Son for us, pouring out His Spirit upon us.

So, have you trusted in the risen Lord Jesus to receive this enabling and empowering grace? us? Or are you still trying the outside-in approach?

And how much longer will you keep trying until you realize you need a much more radical solution? Not a new strategy, but a new heart that only God in Christ by His Spirit can give.

But friends, don't you see, don't you see what good news this is? God doesn't just create a world and then reveal His commands that describe the grain of that world and then say, good luck, have fun with that.

[28 : 36] God is willing to condescend to us, sinners though we are, willingly live and die and rise again so that we might be filled with His very Spirit and being able to live at last with the grain of His created world.

Of course, we'll never live that perfectly in this life. Sin still remains in our hearts even after becoming new creations. And it will remain there until the new creation when Christ returns.

But as we keep in step with His Spirit, as we depend upon His enabling grace, this new birth inside of us will surely work itself out and our lives will become lives well lived.

life. So Ecclesiastes ends by showing us the heart and the direction of a life well lived.

Fear God, keep His commandments. But there's one more thing. In the final verse of the book, we see the horizon of a life well lived.

[29 : 43] What is the horizon that we must look toward if we are to live the well lived life? Well, according to the last verse of this book, it is God's perfect and complete judgment.

This is really the only thing that can give life any lasting meaning. Arthur Miller wrote a play called *After the Fall*, and in that play, one of the characters, Quentin, sort of gets at this when he says, it's a long quote, but I think it's really meaningful.

This character in Arthur Miller's play says, you know, for many years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you're young, you prove how brave you are or smart.

Then, what a good lover. Then, a good father. And finally, how wise or powerful. But underlying it all, I see now there was a presumption that one moved on an upward path towards some elevation where, God knows what, I would be justified or even condemned, a verdict anyway.

And then the character says, I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day and the bench was empty. No judge in sight.

[31 : 09] And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself. The pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench.

Which, of course, is another way of saying despair. If the bench is empty, friends, then human life is just one long, despairing, pointless litigation of existence.

Because what you do or don't do really doesn't matter in the end. But what if the bench isn't empty? what if everything you do does matter? Down even to the little things, even the things no one else sees, every secret thing, as verse 14 says.

What if every dollar that you spend, and every word that you speak, and every simple act of kindness toward your spouse, or your child, or your neighbor, what if all of that mattered, and mattered for eternity?

[32 : 32] What if the whole of your life, every moment of it, wasn't a flicker on the blank screen of a pointless and meaningless universe, but what if it was a meaningful thread in a created order headed toward eternity with a holy God, a God who sees every deed, and who will vindicate or condemn every act in perfect righteousness?

What if the bench isn't empty? It's surprising how this book of Ecclesiastes ends, isn't it? For pages and pages we hear the book wrestle with the fleeting vanity of existence under the sun, exploring every dead-end path, and exhausting every earth-bound road, only to discover that creation leads us headlong to our Creator.

And in view of this God, no longer does nothing matter, but everything does. Everything matters. Everything has substance. Nothing is in vain, because a good and holy God has created all things, and this God will not allow His creation to go unnoticed.

[33 : 50] And He will call the entire story of creation and every work done within it to account. God will save us from the creation and God.

The reality of God as Creator and Judge saves us from the despair of meaningless. We're saved! But does it not simply introduce another despair in its place?

Who can stand before a perfect judge? I mean, think about it. every secret thought. That's pretty harrowing, isn't it?

Look at these stained glass windows. Imagine every secret thought was displayed on these stained glass windows. Who would stay in this sanctuary? We'd all be running for the door. If every deed, even our secret thoughts are exposed, who could possibly be justified?

But, friends, the good news of the gospel tells us that the one who sits on the bench is also the one who hung from the cross.

[35 : 10] The one shepherd, God, who utters the words of wisdom described in verse 11. That's what Ecclesiastes is talking about there.

These words of wisdom come from one shepherd ultimately, all true wisdom is God's wisdom. That one shepherd God who utters words of wisdom, the one judge God who renders perfect judgment in verse 14, is the same God who stood in the place of sinners and was condemned unto death so that all who trust in Him might be justified and live.

hope. And so there is not just meaning, but hope. The message of the apostles from the earliest days was this.

God has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed. And of this, He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.

And when that day comes, those who have trusted in Christ, as the Gospel of John says, will not come into judgment, but will pass from death to life.

[36 : 31] This is the horizon of a life well lived, to trust in Christ for our final justification, and to know that because Christ rose from the grave, our labors are not in vain, but that everything matters.

And so this is where the quest has led us. On this quest for a well lived life, we've discovered that on the one hand, it is true. All is vanity, vanity of vanities.

Yes, that's true, but only to those who refuse to look beyond the frame, only to those who remain on the dead end paths, only to those who persist in chasing the wind.

But for those who turn and come to know the God who raised Jesus from the dead, our Creator and our Redeemer, all their life is full with unspeakable meaning and purpose and lasting joy.

And as we fear God, and as we obey God, and as we look to God's judgment to make all things new, then we will live lives that are not in vain, but lives that will be meaningful, gloriously meaningful, now and for eternity.

[37 : 57] Let's pray. Christ, in you, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found.

Oh, by your Spirit will we turn to you, cling to you, receive you, follow you, receive your forgiveness, receive your power, and live lives that are truly full, full of your meaning, full of your purpose, full of your joy.

Amen.