

Fear God and keep His commandments

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[0 : 00] Our loving Heavenly Father, as we come to your Word now, we thank you for the song that you've placed in our heart to this point, singing these great songs, these great truths. Lord, we come now to your Word. Will you speak to us? Lord, you know us by name. We are yours. Lord, we pray that you'll speak to us by name, that we will know that you're speaking directly to us. So, Father, encourage us, challenge us, we pray, even rebuke us. But, Father, do not leave us to ourself. Come and speak, we ask. Give us ears to hear what you would say to us. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. We end our series in the book of Ecclesiastes, and I've enjoyed this wee series. If you could choose an image of the book of Ecclesiastes and what it might look like, it might be something like this, chasing after something and thinking, well, where am I going? What is the point of of life just chasing things, but never quite getting there, never quite being satisfied?

And in a moment or two, we'll remind ourselves of some of the things that the teacher has as he's looked at life and as he's tried to make sense of life. It's a very real book in that way. But right at the very end, he comes to the conclusion. He says this in verse 13, now all has been heard.

But here is the conclusion of the matter. If this was a novel, you'd be excited to get to this bit. What is the conclusion of everything that he said? And that's what we're going to look at. But he ends the book in the exact same way that he began the book. In chapter one, in this very second verse, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

And then in verse eight, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, everything is meaningless. In other words, he's looked at life and he says, what is the point of it all? In many ways, without God, what is the point of life? It's meaningless. It's like chasing after a carrot in the end of a stick.

[2 : 01] But because we have the rest of the Bible, we know that, and that the preacher has taught us on this, that there is hope, there is purpose, and this lies with God. So I want to look at three things this evening very briefly. First of all then, what he said. In other words, all things considered what he said. That's the first thing I want us to look at this evening. He begins to sum up in this last part what he's been doing up until this point, what he's been saying. Look at verse nine.

Not only was the teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out. Some people say this isn't obviously the preacher's own words or the teacher's own words.

It's basically putting words in his mouth. But he's described as wise. He pondered. He searched out every aspect of life, and he tried to make sense of life. He experimented with so many things.

And he came to the conclusion it's meaningless. The Hebrew word actually means it's like a vapor.

It's like the air, a breath, like a steam coming out of a kettle. It's impossible to grasp it. It's impossible to get a hold of it. There's little substance in it. Before you know it, life is gone, and it vanishes into the air. And that's how he basically views life. Without God, everything is

meaningless. What is the point of it all? So he's looked at life. He's looked at life itself. He's tried to make sense of life and in and of itself. Many people do this today. They look at life and they think, well, what is the point? Why do you get up on a wet Monday morning? Why am I doing this?

Christmas cheers up a few folk. As we were driving here, Lucille was commenting just in Musselbrod, the twinkly lights are suddenly appearing, and it's getting a wee bit brighter, and there's fairy lights out and so forth. We try and cheer ourselves up with many things, but many people look at life sociologically. They look at what's it all about. They try and make the best of life, but one thing they cannot answer is why. Why are we existing in the first place? Some folks say it was a big bang, big accident, gases came together, boom, wee tadpole comes out, sprouts arms and legs, and we came from monkeys. And that's the best, sad to say, that the world can come up. They don't really stop to ask why. Why do people do? Why do we run after things? Why are we so dependent on

others? Why are we weak and frail? Is there life after this life? They do not take time to ask these big questions of life.

[4 : 54] The teacher did. He looked at life. He experimented. He looked at work. In Ecclesiastes 1 and 2, work is meaningless. What do we gain from all our efforts? We work hard, we toil, but we eventually die, and we leave it to somebody else. What is the point of that? Wisdom, he says. The more we try and figure it out, the more depressed we just make ourselves. It's too big. Life is too complicated.

Pleasure is meaningless. You remember he tried everything that people try, wine or drugs, if it was today. Women, song, building parks, projects, houses, silver and gold. And he came to the conclusion, it was meaningless. What was the point? It never really satisfies. No one is satisfied with money. It never really satisfies. You want the thing, and very soon after you have it, it soon loses its appeal. We are not wired to receive lasting pleasure or satisfaction in things and even in people, only in God. Money, he says, is meaningless too because it causes no end of trouble. People just desperate for money. It cannot satisfy. We never have enough money. Money is not the answer. Power is meaningless. It can be cruel. And then a couple of weeks ago, we looked at old age and death, didn't we? The indignities of growing old. And after this, we return to the ground. From the dust we came to the dust, we will return. These are some of the things that the teacher has wanted us to look at and say, look at these things. They do not really satisfy. But it's not all negative. He did look at life and he said there was joy. There are times of joy. He said, you should still rejoice in life's blessings.

Eat, drink, and find your satisfaction in work and in while you're young. It's not all doom and gloom. There are things that can bring a certain amount of joy. He says there's different times in our life. A time for healing, a time for harvesting, a time for laughing, a time for crying, a time for dancing, a time for loving, a time for making peace. There are many things in life. We had a wee grandson, as you know, so that was a time of joy for us. And I couldn't help but look at him and say, that's a great wee responsibility there. Just kind of, you suddenly realize, wow, another, I need to really help this wee fella grow up. Times of joy. There are many times of joy. You know this yourself.

And the preacher has told us that we are to rejoice in God, ultimately, who gives us these things to enjoy. Our God is a good God. And Christians acknowledge this. It's not just what we have achieved for ourself, but what we can rejoice in, what God has done. Nevertheless, although there are times of joy in life, he basically tells us life is meaningless. Without God, these things do not make sense. There are grasping after a vapor, tangible. And when you get to the end of Ecclesiastes, if you've stuck with us in this journey, you can't help. If you know anything of life, that people disappoint, things disappoint, or hell, anything in life disappoints. And it's only when we have God at the center of our life can we cope in every age of him. So that's basically what he said. When he's considered all things meaningless, everything is meaningless in and of itself.

[8 : 31] Secondly, how he said it. All sayings collected. How did he go about this? He gathered loads of sayings. Look at verse 9 and 10. Not only was the teacher wise, imparting knowledge, and people he pondered and searched out. What else did he do? He set in order many proverbs. The teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. Now, if Solomon is the teacher here, if he's the one who's written this, he wrote thousands of proverbs. He was very wise. You remember when God said, what do you want me to give you? He could have said money and wealth and power. He said, give me wisdom. God gave him wisdom, and therefore he would be well qualified if he is indeed the author to write these things. He was trying to find the right words. What he wrote was wisdom and wisdom from God, trying to find the right words. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and that is true of the whole Bible, isn't it? What are the right words? 2 Timothy 3 says this about the scripture. All scripture is God-breathed, useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteous, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. The scriptures are some of the best pieces of literature,

Isaiah especially, great pieces of literature, surpassing Shakespeare in anything like this. And Phil Riken in his commentary says this of Ecclesiastes, it's safe to say that Ecclesiastes was not thrown together, but constructed as a complete work of literature. In addition to writing with logical clarity, in other words, well-ordered, the teacher also wrote with literary artistry. And if you're reading verse 10 in Ecclesiastes 12 in ESV, it's not just to write words, it says words of delight. And the scriptures are words of delight.

Let me quote Phil Riken again. The famous American writer Tom Wolfe described Ecclesiastes as the highest flower of poetry, eloquence and truth, the greatest single piece of writing I have known. This is the book that gave us phrases like, the sun also rises, to everything there is a season, eternity in the hearts of men, cast your bread upon the waters, and man does not know his time. Many sayings have come from Ecclesiastes. It's a book of great literature. He wasn't thrown together, but as the writer was led by God. It really fires our imagination. I just wish when I was preaching through this, there were more people who wouldn't call themselves Christians here, so they could go, you know, that is dead right. Yeah, what is the point? Why am I doing this? Why am I thinking this way? Why do I run after all these things? I'm preaching to the converted. Most of you would go, yeah, you're dead right, John. Yeah, I've come to realize that money can't benefit or anything.

[11 : 53] People disappoint and so forth. But if you're not a Christian, this is a book for our day. It really is. When people are constantly striving after anything, I've got weary going to Costco, just Costco. The queues you get in Costco, unbelievable. I used to go to Sheffield and I used to go to Wembley, Costco there. It's a barn wilderness, but you come to Scotland, you come to Edinburgh and you're queuing up to have petrol and you think, wow, crazy. And these are the folk that need to read this. You need to stand outside Costco and Tesco and read Ecclesiastes. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. That new thing that you bought, your trolley that's bulging will not answer all your needs. It is a great book. It causes us to question life and to imagine life without God.

It talks about hope. What is our hope? But it also speaks with not only beautiful literature, as beautiful literature, but intellectual integrity. What he wrote is true and that is why we can rely on God's word. Truth about God, truth about this life in a fallen world. Truth is so important. I was having a conversation with somebody just recently on this. What is truth and where do you find truth?

That's a big question. At the end of the day, if the Bible is not true, then Ecclesiastes is just a waste of time. But if it's true, we can use this to regulate our thinking, to adjust our behavior and what we believe. I mentioned a wee book this morning, didn't I, called Time to Mourn.

And it talks about grieving the loss of those whose eternity is uncertain. It's people who die and you don't know where they stand spiritually. How do you cope with this? Are they lost? What happened to them?

And right at the very start of the book, I think it's in the introduction, that the author quotes C.S. Lewis. And I just love this quote. C.S. Lewis said this, Comfort. Comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for comfort, you will get neither comfort nor truth, only wishful thinking, and in the end despair. The world looks after, looks for comfort. Comfort is only found in truth. So in times of uncertainty, times of doubt, as Christians, we go to God's Word, and God speaks to us a verse, and that is truth. And the truth, Jesus said, sets you free from wishful thinking. The world is just getting by on wishful thinking, that tomorrow might be better than today, and that maybe there is a heaven, and maybe they'll go. It's just wishful thinking.

[14 : 54] The scriptures are true. Ecclesiastes is true, and that makes all the difference. It's truth we need above all else. And that is the purpose. What is the purpose of Ecclesiastes?

This is verse 11 tells us, the words of the wise are like goads. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. So the preacher here is telling us how he has put this together, and his words have come like goads. And here is a picture of some goads. These are goads for goading Oxford. You know, we use the expression, I goaded me into it. Didn't want to do it, but I was goaded.

Instead, a goad is just used for animals. You'll see in all of the goads, there's a wee pointy thing. Most of them look like the thing in the bottom, where you poke them, and they go forward, and you might hook them, and they come back. It's not designed to hurt the animal. It's just designed to get its cooperation. You want the ox to go in a particular way. You're not out to hurt the animal, you're there to help the animal. But it needs a wee goad. It needs a wee jab with something to go, okay, yep, fair enough. I'll go the way you want me to go. And the book of Ecclesiastes isn't given to drive us to despair. It is to drive us to God. It's not to depress us. It's not to go, well, what is the point of that? That was cheery. I mean, we've looked at some things in the book of Ecclesiastes, but without God, yes, it's miserable, but it's to point us to God. It's to point us to Jesus and the gospel. It's God's cattle prod, or people prod, to get us to realize, to wake up to, yeah, life is like that. What is there

that's better? And to lead us to the Lord. Jesus is the saviour of the world. This morning I was talking about when we share the good news. People aren't really interested in some great big theological argument. They just don't want it. I know we rock up thinking people need to know about election and predestination and stuff. They can't think anything less interesting to them. Jesus spoke to a woman at the well. He didn't come up with some deep theological stuff. He simply spoke about water. She could relate to water. Here are some things that describe Jesus as he meets us at our felt needs. Eternal life. God so loved the world he gave his only son. Whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. The world needs to hear that. If they want to know if there's life beyond the grave, that's what they need to hear. Matthew 28. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. I will give you rest. If Ecclesiastes makes us feel weary and burdened, it points us. It's like a goad that points us to Jesus. John 4. Whoever drinks the water I give them will never indeed thirst. Indeed the water I give them will become a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. The woman at the well rejoiced to hear those words. Eternal life, a well of water. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to you will never go hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

The world needs to hear these felt need verses. John 8. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness. And then at funerals, I am the resurrection and the life. As when I've led funerals, I just love reading those words. It's the greatest thing. I am the resurrection and the life.

[18:32] Whoever believes in me will live even though they die. There's hardly a better verse than the whole of scripture. But in that verse, John 14, 6. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is very much the end of Ecclesiastes. I have come that they may have life, true life, satisfying life, eternal life, and have it to the full. That is, Jesus is the answer to Ecclesiastes in every way. And we know we get this through the gospel, through his death on the cross, his atonement, his reconciliation. We have fellowship with God. We have hope. We have heaven. And Ecclesiastes is basically the goads that point us toward Jesus. He is the meaning of life. He is the giver of life. That's why it says in verse 11, given by one shepherd. He is that one shepherd, capital S, that leads us to the Lord.

So the sayings in Ecclesiastes are like goads. They fire our imagination. They are very colorfully written, but also they are truth, and they drive us to Jesus. And we need to realize this. We need to come to him. Let me remind you of Psalm 23, because that's really what we need. Ecclesiastes really points to Ecclesiastes. Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. Everything that Ecclesiastes destroys in that way. He guides me in paths of righteousness. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

And here is a verse for life. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That is a verse that we have made true for us because of that one shepherd. And Ecclesiastes causes us to want him, to desire him above all else.

More than money, more than projects, more than wine, more than anything. And we need to realize this. That's why he says here, don't add anything to them, his teachings. We need to see this as God's world pointing us to Jesus. So what we said, what did he write? He wrote that life is meaningless without God. How did he write it? He wrote it beautifully and he wrote it truthfully. We can trust his word to point us to Jesus. And finally, why he said it. We've already touched on this. What's his conclusion? He comes now to the conclusion and it's this. Here is the conclusion of the matter.

[21:42] Fear God and keep his commandments. That is the duty of all mankind. The Westminster Catechism says, what is man's chief end? It is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. What does it mean to fear God?

It's not to cower from him, to be afraid of him in that way. It's to respect him as creator, as the one who gives you life and breath and everything. And that's where we must begin.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If we would be wise in this life. My wee nephew will grow up, God willing, young Theo, even his name is quite, I remember thinking, wow, that's a name to give to a child. God, it's just Theo, theology and all these things. And I thought, hopefully, you'll realize the significance of his name. Or if you call your child Grace, we have a daughter, and her

middle name is Grace. And she's already a Christian. But at some point, why did you call me Grace? Wow, there's an opportunity to tell people about the Lord. Everybody at some point needs to acknowledge God. Many people go through life, there is no God. I do what I want. Their whole life has been meaningless. There have been times of joy. But what is the point? They return to the dust.

But one day they will be raised back to life and meet the God that they didn't believe in. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. And at some point, I hope that young Theo will show an interest in this God and commit his life to him. We leave him in the hands of the Lord. It basically means to believe in him, to know who he is. And if we do not do this, we are foolish, foolish beyond belief. And the preacher has wasted his words on us. The whole 12 chapters has been a waste. If we do not fear God, nothing will change. So we are to fear him. We are to respect him. Secondly, keep his commandments. If you believe in God, who is holy and just, and a loving God, you will acknowledge that he knows best. That he has written the manual. This is the human manual for life. [23 : 58] This is what we need to know. And so therefore, his commands are not burdensome in that way. We follow his rule book. The teacher's not saying anything new here. Deuteronomy 10, Now hear, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul? That is what God wants of every person, to acknowledge that he is there and to love him and to serve him. Jesus said this to the rich young ruler, if you want to enter into life, obey the commandments. He's not saying by obedience you'll have eternal life. But if you know and trust God as your savior, you will want to obey him.

If you love me, Jesus says, you will obey what I command. Obedience is a sign that we love God and that we have been changed by him. And he gives us, the teacher ends by giving us strong motivation.

Look at the very last words. For God will bring into, bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. We all have to give an account for the life that we have lived. Whatever your view of life is, whether I don't believe in God, I'm not fearing him, we will have to stand before him. And even if you do believe everything Ecclesiastes has said, whether we are trusting in Jesus or not is the ultimate test. We will have to give an account.

God has set a day in which he will judge the world by, with justice by the man he has appointed, Jesus. He has given proof of all this by all men by raising him from the dead. Because he is raised from the dead, we too will rise from the dead. And he's already mentioned this. Chapter 11, he mentioned this to young folk, you remember, know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

[26 : 05] In other words, what he's saying here is, it's not a case of nothing matters. He's saying everything matters. Everything, every wee hidden thing that you think, I'm sitting here and folk think I'm purer than the driven snow. If my thoughts were flashed up on the screen, I would be ashamed. The thoughts I've had, the deeds that I've done throughout my life, I would be ashamed. Every hidden thing, all things are laid bare before God. He sees all things. The God before whom we must give an account.

So regardless of what people think of God, they will meet him one day. And the \$64,000 question is this, what did you think of my son? Did you realize you were a sinner? And I had provided a solution for your sins. That's why Jesus, we read right at the start, repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. It's nearer now than it's ever been. So Ecclesiastes is not a book about nothing matters.

Everything matters. Everything matters. So in this life, we will never find satisfaction without God, but only in God. And because of that, everything matters. Everything matters before him. What we did, how we did it, why we did it, and do we have eternal life. So that is Ecclesiastes. It's like a goad that all the time points us to Jesus, points us back to God, fear God, keep his commandments, love the son, love the son, understand his great plan of salvation to save you and me. Without Jesus, life does not make sense. The world is lost and without hope. So as Christmas comes, it's the saddest thing that even if the people know that Jesus comes, and they might not come to church, and they might not be interested, they still know the wee phrase, Jesus is the savior of the world, but it doesn't mean anything to them. They don't really feel they need to be saved from anything.

We do need to be saved. We need a savior, and Jesus is indeed the savior of the world, who's come to take away our sins. We're going to stand and we're going to sing a closing song.

It's there as a redeemer, Jesus, God's own son.