

The Conclusion of The Matter

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, Psalms 23, John 3:16-17

Slide 1

School is a reality of life. Usually it's called the School of Hard Knocks because we usually learn the lessons after we fail the exam, which isn't good, but that's the way it is.

In our study of the book of Ecclesiastes, we had a teacher who gave us the life lessons before we had to take any exams.

In fact, he actually gave us the answer to life itself through the phrase *"Fear God and keep His commandments."*

Today we're going to look at the last six verses. Now, I believe Ecclesiastes 12:8, was possibly the last verse Solomon actually wrote, at least in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 12:8, *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. 'Everything is meaningless!'"*

If you have your Bible, turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 12, verse 9. Some commentators suggest that these remaining verses weren't written by Solomon but by an editor, so to speak.

It's easy to believe this passage was written by an editor because he refers to the Teacher in the third person.

Ecclesiastes 12:9, *"Not only was the Teacher wise, but also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs."*

Now, it was common, in the first century B.C., for somebody to write an epilogue following the end of a book as an endorsement.

Whatever the case, whether Solomon wrote it or not, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that Solomon would probably agree with what had been added.

Slide 2

We know that Solomon was the wisest individual in the known world. As I've said, wisdom isn't just an accumulation of knowledge, wisdom is knowledge applied to a certain circumstance.

Throughout the book, we learned that as Solomon observed the cycles of nature and the cycles of life and he was able to come up with some creative nuggets of truth that can be applied even today.

He had the power of observation and wrote those observations down, but he didn't hoard that knowledge, he "*imparted knowledge to the people.*"

Think about how much wisdom there has been, in the cumulative history of the world, that people never take the time to share.

Some people never impart what they've learned to others, and that's a shame.

The writer also talks about how Solomon "*Pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.*"

As a side note, when Solomon's talking about proverbs, he's not talking about what we consider the book of Proverbs.

He's talking about the collection of wise sayings that would've been found in Ecclesiastes.

All the illustrations, word plays, metaphors, and figures of speech found in Ecclesiastes could collectively be considered wise sayings or proverbs.

The editor said that Solomon pondered these proverbs. Pondered, in the sense of weighing them to see if they really have substance worthy of the book, then placed them in an order of importance.

We may not agree with the order in which he put them as it doesn't make sense to us, but I'm sure it made perfect sense to Solomon.

Slide 3

Then the editor goes on to say in verse 10, "*The Teacher searched out to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.*"

Solomon had a knack for choosing just the right words. Words that were aesthetically pleasing. Words that, maybe, caused a little pain, but the way he put them together made you think.

Remember chapter 3, verse 1, when he said, "*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.*"

What did he do? He took the next seven verses and strung together 14 life events with which we could all relate.

He talked about a time to plant, a time to uproot, a time to laugh, a time to cry, a time to keep, and a time to give away.

Solomon had a creative and delightful way of putting words together, so much so that 3,000 years later in 1965 a group, known as *The Byrds*, used Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 to write a song. (Turn! Turn! Turn!)

But he wasn't just stringing words together so they would be nice to our ears, he was interested in truth.

Ecclesiastes 12:10b, "*What he wrote was upright and true.*" Upright in the sense it was right in the eyes of God and true not just to Solomon but to life.

What he was able to do was find proverbs that were universally true across time and space. I think that's why Solomon's words ring so true today.

Yet, even though these words rang true, we also know that these words could be quite painful.

Slide 4

Ecclesiastes 12:11, *"The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails – given by one Shepherd."*

As an aside, there's speculation of who this shepherd, the editor refers to, is.

We don't know who it is for sure, but since the word Shepherd is capitalized, many believe it's Solomon himself because kings were considered Shepherds.

Others suspect that he could be referring to God. I suspect that most of you are familiar with the 23rd Psalm where David writes *"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want."*

Then he goes on to say, *"As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, his rod and his staff comfort me."*

Psalm 23 is a comforting psalm, especially during times of death. While the shepherd that David speaks of provides words of comfort, this shepherd seems to imply that words can also be quite painful.

He says, *"The words of the wise are like goads,"* but what's a goad?

Slide 5

This is a picture of a couple of goads. A goad was a pointed instrument that would move the livestock along the road and in some cases get them to turn in different directions.

How would you like to get that jabbed in your side a few times?

Slide 6

What he's saying is that the words of the Shepherd could be quite painful. They might be pleasant to the ear in some sense, but they could also be quite painful.

Passages like: *"It is better to be in a house of mourning than a house of feasting"* or *"The end is better than the beginning"* or *"The day of my death is better than the day of birth."*

Those are words that could be painful, especially during some form of grief. But remember, Solomon wasn't using his words to cause pain just for the sake of causing pain.

It was a method he used to get people to stop and think about things and, ideally, change the course of how they were doing life.

Jesus used this same method and also called Himself a Shepherd. He said, *"I am the good shepherd"* because sometimes He had to use words as goads, even on his Apostles.

Remember in Matthew 16, when Peter rebuked Jesus after He told the disciples about His forthcoming suffering and death.

Jesus was pretty stern in His words when He said, *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."*

He was basically goading Peter back to right thinking because he wasn't going in the same direction as Jesus.

Then you have the story of Paul. Paul, early on, was trying to get Christians arrested and put in jail to persecute them.

Then Jesus got ahold of him on the Damascus Road. Luke describes the scene in Acts 9.

Acts 9:3-5, "As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

What's Jesus saying? He's saying, *"Paul, you must quit resisting Me. It's just causing you a lot of pain. You're pushing Me away. I'm trying to take you in the right direction, but you keep pushing Me away."*

It's hard to kick against the goads. I suspect there are people here today that might be kicking against the goads.

Maybe God's calling you to put aside a certain sin, attitude, or possibly a prejudice. Maybe He's calling you into a deeper relationship with Him, or possibly even calling you into the ministry.

If you're not acting on what God's calling you to do, you're resisting those goads, resisting that prodding by God.

Anyway, the editor said that *"The words of the wise are like goads,"* but he also goes on to say they are like nails, too. He says, *"their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails – given by one Shepherd."*

Here again we don't know exactly what kind of nails he had in mind. Some suggest he was referring to tent pegs or something like that.

Whatever the case, we know that nails or tent pegs are used to secure something; to keep something from moving.

We know that wise words, such as the wise words of Solomon, if adhered to, can provide a sense of firmness and stability to our lives.

The words of the wise are like goads but they are also like firmly embedded nails, and then he gives the reader a warning.

Slide 7

Ecclesiastes 12:12, *“Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.”*

He’s not suggesting that we avoid studying or avoid books. He’s saying we should be careful of what we read because all of it isn’t wisdom.

There were a lot of books in Biblical time that were passed off as wisdom literature just like today where you can find self-help books on everything, like health, finances, and spirituality.

What he’s saying is we must measure the world’s wisdom against God’s wisdom and many times it doesn’t measure up.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul wrote, *“Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn’t God made the world’s wisdom foolish?”*

So again, be careful of the source from where you get what you think is wisdom.

Then he comes to the conclusion. Ecclesiastes 12:13, *“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.”*

What he's saying is, after everything Solomon wrote in these past 12 chapters, after all the perplexities of life that he tried to uncover, all the dark alleys that he visited, life and death, and all this kind of stuff, it all boils down to this: *"Fear God and keep His commandments."*

You read this and think this is all you have? All 12 chapters and this is what we're left with. It almost sounds too elementary.

But if you think about it, this is the heart of a relationship with God. This is what God wants. He wants us to fear Him and keep His commandments.

As I said earlier, the fear of God isn't something where you're terrified of God, he's talking about a reverent respect for Who God is; for His power and His authority.

It's not like a relationship between a master and a slave, but like a father and a son or a father and a daughter. That's what he's talking about.

A relationship where we understand that God has this incredible power and, at any second, He could squish us all like a bug, but at the same time, this Father has an unbelievable love for us.

The more we meditate on this idea of His power and His love, the more we begin to comprehend the whole character of God. What happens is we begin to really trust God.

In spite of all these perplexities and the things we don't understand like life and death and everything else, we can rise above it. We can say, *"It's going to be okay. I'm safe in God's kingdom."*

When I dwell in the shadow of the Almighty, I'm safe. It's an assurance that God's in control, so I don't have to be in control.

Therefore, the natural response of knowing we worship a God Who's powerful but loves us unconditionally is basically to obey His commandments.

Slide 8

When we talk about keeping His commandments, we're talking about obedience.

Not just the Ten Commandments, but the commandments that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount, i.e. Love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us. That type of obedience.

Yet, when people think about obedience, it generally has negative connotation, but that's because they're looking at their relationship with God as a master and a slave rather than a parent and a child.

When you look at it as a parent and a child relationship, obedience becomes an action of love.

It was John who wrote in 1 John, *"This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world."*

A child who loves a parent obeys not out of obligation but out of love. So, why do we need to obey His commands? Because He knows what's right for us.

When we obey His commands, we begin to come in line with the will of God. When we're in line with the will of God, the One who controls all things, we know that we're going to be protected.

We might not understand the perplexities of this world, but we know that we're safe with Him.

Then he goes on to give his reason why we should obey God and why we should fear Him. He says, *“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”*

I don't know how it reads in every different Bible translation, but you might see a couple brackets around that word *“duty.”*

This word *duty* was inserted by modern-day translators because they thought it would give more sense to the passage.

If you take out the word *duty*, you get *“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man”* which might not make sense to some people.

It only makes sense when you understand that what the editor's talking about here is that the fear of God and keeping His commandments is the whole essence of man.

From that first day that we were created in the garden, we were created to fear God and to keep His commandments; to have a reverent fear for Him and to live under submission to Him.

That's the whole essence of man. It's not just a duty. It's who we are. If we don't live a life of fearing God and keeping His commandments, we can honestly say that we're less than human.

This is how God designed us to be. Whole. Complete. Living in fear and submission to Him. Then he goes on to give a second reason.

Slide 9

Ecclesiastes 12:14, *“For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”*

This basically says that everybody's going to have to stand in front of the judgment seat of God.

In this world, we get a little frustrated because we see the wicked prosper and sometimes they live longer, while the innocent or the righteous live in poverty and sometimes their lives are taken away.

What this verse implies is that in the end everybody's going to get exactly what they deserve. There's going to be fairness dealt out because the lid is going to be taken off our entire life.

The people we thought were good could be bad. The people we thought were bad could be good. It doesn't matter. The bottom line is every hidden thing is going to become known.

I don't know about you, but this is the type of verse that, if you don't have Christ, can be scary. Think about it, someday everything, every thought, every deed is going to be exposed before God.

At the same time, as I've emphasized throughout this sermon series, Solomon didn't have the complete picture. He didn't have an understanding of Christ. In his mind, God was all about judgment.

But what do we learn in the New Testament? We learn through John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Now, most of the time we don't read verse 17, which I think is even more freeing. It says, *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

God did not send Jesus into the world to judge us. He sent Him for the primary purpose to save us.

Because of the cross, He took the judgment of God that was supposed to be upon us and basically set us free.

For the Christian, what occurs is that the One, Who at one time could be our judge, actually turns out to be our Savior. Isn't that amazing?

Slide 10

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope you were able to pick up a nugget or two that you'll apply to your life.

More importantly, what I want you to take away is that you can't live this life totally under the sun, meaning from man's perspective.

The only logical conclusion is that this life is meaningless with all its perplexities.

We don't have to live life under the sun, but we can live life to the full under the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The One Who didn't come to condemn us, but the One Who came to save us, now and forever.