

Everything's Meaning(less)ful Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

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This may be your first Sunday at Bethel Church. Great! You happen to be here on our last Sunday of a teaching series we began in February on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. So this is the grand finale and the book unexpectedly does end with a grand finale. It's 12 chapters and 12 verses of a main theme that everything's meaningless and two final verses that everything's meaningful and why.

Some people don't know this because they never make it to the end of the book. Somewhere around chapter 5 they think, *I don't need depression from the Bible; my life is depressing enough. I need uplifting and hopeful stuff.* And they quit Ecclesiastes and head for Philippians. But Ecclesiastes definitely saves the best for last and in two verses pulls all the strings of apparent human absurdity into a bundle of hope and purpose for living.

"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." (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 ESV)

Remember, we aren't totally sure who wrote Ecclesiastes. He calls himself throughout the book, the Preacher. He does it again here in verse 9. It may have been Solomon or someone writing as if they are Solomon. Scholars disagree. I think we are safe seeing it as Solomon writing and we've approached it this way.

Where did Solomon's wisdom come from? God came to Solomon in a dream and said, *"Ask what I shall give you."* (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon asked God for wisdom. God granted it and made him the wisest man of his day, perhaps ever. The Queen of Sheba and many others came from distant lands to hear his wisdom. Most of the chapters of the book of Proverbs come from Solomon. Read them and realize this man had real wisdom given to him by God.

"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." (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12)

Wisdom is like a goad or a nail. A goad is a long stick with a point. It's essentially a cattle prod. A rancher uses a prod to get the cattle's attention; to get them going in the right direction. It doesn't feel good but the effect is good. Hearing biblical wisdom is like being stuck with a cattle prod. It can confront or correct us, but it always helps us. Wisdom is also like a nail or a peg on the wall. You can cluster a lot of coats or towels on a peg and you can hang a lot of life on a nail of truth. Do you do that? You're thinking about a decision and a particular verse leads you toward one way or the other. You're hanging the decision on a biblical nail of truth.

He says that these wise words he's written actually come from one Shepherd. Notice that Shepherd is capitalized. He isn't referring to himself but to God as the source of his wisdom and writings. This is a very early statement on the inspiration of Scripture. Ecclesiastes isn't merely the words of Solomon but of God. That's what inspiration means. The words of the Bible are men's words, yes, but behind the writings of man is the purpose—the inspiration

of God. The Bible is the very word of God. This isn't like the writings of Plato or Aristotle or Confucius. This isn't a library of endless books. This is God speaking and therefore don't weary yourself with books and miss the wisdom of the one Shepherd of men's souls, God himself.

Libraries have man's wisdom. The Bible is God's wisdom. Let's be people of books but let's be people primarily of one book, the Word of God.

Everything's Meaningless! (Ecclesiastes 1:1 - 12:12)

The most repeated word and phrase in Ecclesiastes is found right from the beginning.

*"The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)

This is his main theme and as we've seen, he is explaining man's condition apart from God. Man's pursuit of meaning where all identity and purpose has to be derived from this world. The Hebrew word for "vanity" is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes. It means "vapor" or "smoke." Two things about vapor: it doesn't last long and it also has no substance even when it is there. Try catching your breath vapors on a cold morning. It gives an appearance of being something but there's nothing really to it.

Every atheist's favorite book of the Bible is Ecclesiastes except the last two verses. According to the evolutionist or naturalist worldview, life is merely random accidents and meaningless molecules. Solomon shows the futility of life's apparent purposes by walking through man's normal substitutes for God and shows them all to be empty from his own experience. Chapter 2 lists his accomplishments, wealth, fame, knowledge, artistic and aesthetic enjoyments, huge construction projects bearing his name, sensory and sexual pleasures with a harem of 300 wives and 700 concubines. In spite of having everything material a man could ever want, he says in 2:17, *"So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind."*

And that's where life takes us. That's not to say we don't love our family and enjoy things but there is an emptiness we feel—an ache—particularly on the other side of achieving or acquiring something we think will make us ultimately happy. Something is still missing. We looked at billionaires and movie stars and glamorous people who have famously committed suicide or numbed their pain with drugs so intensely that it cost them their life. It's an amazing list with Prince being the most recent example. Those of us who don't have their wealth or fame at least have the hope that if we did, we would feel complete and happy. But every Whitney or Robin Williams tragedy reminds us of the Ecclesiastes truth, *it's all vanity*. Life's pursuits are like smoke, there and gone. They don't satisfy.

Ecclesiastes says that compounding the vanity of life is the uncertainty of life. Life is precarious and the things we value can so quickly be lost. We don't know when we will die but we know that we will die (Chapter 9). At best we can say there is *"a time to be born and a time to die...a time to mourn and a time to dance."* (Chapter 3) Life has seasons which are great and utterly depressing because while I may be in a good season, devastating seasons are coming.

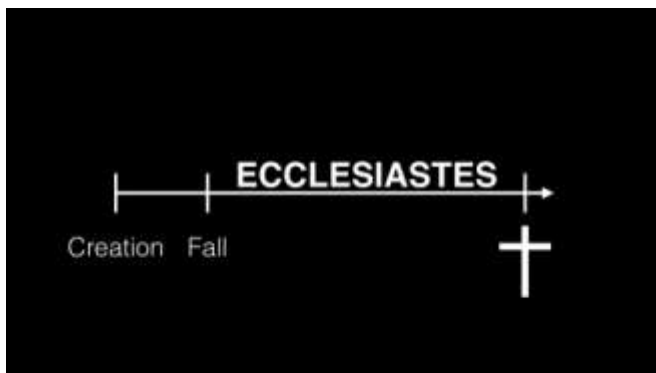
Sure, you can enjoy your wife and drink good coffee because life's too short for bad coffee. But in the end (Chapter 12), old age gets all of us. We could have been the star athlete in high school or ballerina in college but eventually we look as pathetic as a grasshopper limping along on one leg. His final statement on the absurdity of life is simply a repetition of

his first one, *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 12:8) This is no blogging rant; this is reality. This is God's wisdom explaining the harsh reality of our existence without him. Absolute absurdity. Final futility. Nothing matters. Everything's meaningless.

Then Ecclesiastes changes. You get to 12:13-14 and read this, *"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."*

What happened to Solomon? Did he get saved at a Billy Graham rally between verse 12 and verse 13? In two verses does he undo all his teaching and wisdom over 12 chapters of depression and futility? *Solomon, what got into you? What happened?*

What I've tried to explain throughout our series is what Solomon is actually doing.



Have you wanted to take Solomon to Matthew 1 and the birth of Jesus or Luke 23 and Jesus' resurrection or the book of Revelation and the glorious new heaven and earth awaiting us? In the course of progressive revelation (God's slow unveiling of his plan) none of that had happened in Solomon's day and it wasn't his point anyway. Solomon, inspired by God, masterfully writes a long gospel tract explaining what life feels like without God. His goal isn't to depress us. His goal is to get us to read these last two verses redemptively.

Everything's Meaning(less)ful! (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

What does he say? Here is the sum. Here is the bottom line and final conclusion. What should we do? Two things: fear God and obey his commands.

Fear God: the heart in submission to God

Solomon mentions fearing God six times in Ecclesiastes but this is the most important one. "To fear God is to take God seriously, to acknowledge him in our lives as the highest good, to revere him, to honor and worship him, to center our lives on him." (Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, p. 309) Fear is the attitude of the heart. This fear is not an emotion as much as a valuing. Worship. Treasure. Love. Since life is fleeting and so uncertain, live in the fear of the Lord. How would you know who does and who doesn't? Is the person walking around with their hands shaking or popping anti-anxiety pills? Fearing God inwardly looks like obedience to God outwardly.

Obey his commands: the life and lifestyle in submission to God

When God is on the throne of my heart, then what he wants me to do is at the top of my list. His priorities become my priorities. His moral desires shape my moral decisions. It starts in the heart. But people often start outwardly and hope it helps them inwardly. That's backwards. That's religion. Religion is man working his way to God. Christianity is God coming to man. He does it through the gospel by changing my heart inwardly. Obedience is the outward expression of inward change; inward I'm treasuring, loving, and fearing God.

Why should I fear God? It is not the reality of death or the existence of God that is primary. Look again at verse 14, *"For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* There is a final judgment coming where God will evaluate our lives right down to the secret things only we know. *"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* (Matthew 10:28)

You know what God's judgment means? It means God cares about our lives. God cares about our decisions. Our values. What we do and why we do it. God wouldn't waste his time judging things that don't matter. We judge things that do matter. Our lives matter to God. My family has thoroughly enjoyed the Olympics, especially gymnastics. My three-year-old daughter has jumped and twirled right along with the gymnasts. It's totally cute.

To watch the gymnastics is to see a very short event. The vault lasts maybe five seconds. Some events are longer. Floor exercise is like a minute or so. But then you have opinions. The people in the stands have opinions. Parents, cheering wildly, definitely have opinions. *Greatest vault ever!* You have the TV commentators weighing in, guessing what the scores might be. The people watching at home have their opinions. Even the gymnast has an opinion. But there's only one opinion that really matters—the judges' opinion.

We saw it over and over, the routine is done. "We are awaiting the judges' score." Was it good enough for gold? Everyone's anxious. The gymnast bites her lip looking up at the scoreboard. Why? A judgment is about to be made. That decision is final. It's the one that matters. It's the one that since she was a little girl she has worked and practiced and dreamed about. And it all comes down to what they say, how they evaluate her. What they say determines gold, silver, bronze, or nothing at all.

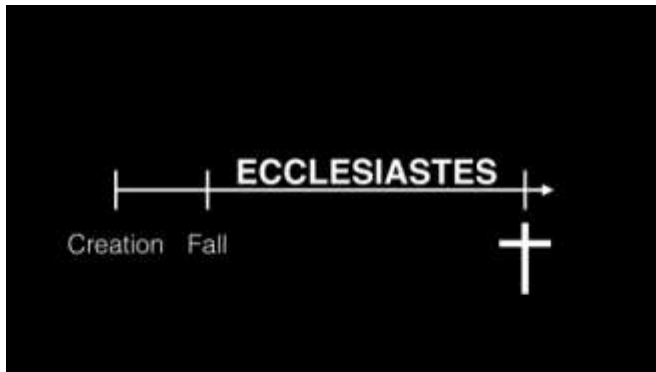
What do they call gymnastics meets with no judges and no medals? An exhibition. It's not real because it's not important enough to bring in the judges and the medals. It's like the preseason NFL games; nobody really cares because the scores don't count. This gives us a picture of what Solomon is urging upon us. For 12 chapters he explains how human life is like gymnastics with no judges and no medals. What is human life like if there is no God and there are no scores? Despair. Absurdity. A waste of time. Meaningless.

But wait! Look at verse 13. There is a God and there is a judgment. This means that my life isn't meaningless. It means my life really matters; so much so that God will judge even the details of my life. Every aspect of our lives, even the little or obscure things are important enough to God to evaluate.

Only Jesus makes possible a positive judgment from God (and rewards too)

If I may push my gymnastics illustration, how good do we have to be for God to judge us as "good"? Perfect. No deductions our whole life. Not one. We can't pull that performance off.

"None is righteous, no, not one." (Romans 3:10) What Ecclesiastes hints at, the gospel of Jesus brings to light. How can I be judged morally perfect with no deductions? *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Corinthians 5:21)



The cross is the answer to Solomon's search and yours and mine too. The only way we can receive a positive judgment from God, the only way for us to be perfect with no deductions, is for God to switch our scores. Morally, we are all failures. But there was one moral gymnast who blew everybody away. He did everything perfectly. They would never allow this in the Olympics, but God allows substitute scores. Jesus willingly allowed God to treat him like he was the failure and for his perfect scores and reward to be given to us. This is justification. God declares me to be the perfect moral gymnast which frees him to lavish eternal rewards upon me.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Corinthians 5:10) Look at Ecclesiastes 12:14 again: *"For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* These verses are almost the same!

On the Ecclesiastes side all we have is fear and obedience and the tepid hope of a positive judgment. After Christ and by faith in him, not only are we allowed the undeserved privilege of reconciliation with God, but we are now evaluated with the real possibility of eternal rewards for faithfulness and obedience in this life.

Because of Christ now everything we do in this life matters. God will reward us and just like that gold medal motivates the Olympic athlete to train and discipline himself, God intends his eternal rewards to motivate us to make our lives matter for him in this few years we have in this life.

So the first question is, whose performance will you be evaluated by God for—your performance or Jesus' performance? You can be reconciled to God by putting your faith in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior and of all the things Ecclesiastes should urge, that's the main one.

But let every Christian here see what Ecclesiastes powerfully reveals. Life is fleeting. We are all about to be forgotten in a grave. But with Jesus there is wonderful meaning possible because every day matters. Every day evaluated. Every faithfulness and obedience rewarded. And you have a future forever. Eternal life. No more Ecclesiastes despair there.

There all the seasons are for dancing and joy. Nobody gets old there. Nobody dies there. Nothing is vanity there.

Meaningless or meaningful, which eternal path are you on? In Christ our lives can be *meaningful, meaningful, all is meaningful*. Praise God for the book of Ecclesiastes.

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