

“God is Good”

Ecclesiastes: The Good Life

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

05/28/2023

Introduction

Pray.

Pepsi Where's My Jet. A few weeks ago Lindsay and I watched through a documentary series on Netflix called *Pepsi, Where's My Jet*. If you haven't seen it, it's about a campaign Pepsi ran in the 90s where you could buy Pepsi products, collect points, and then trade those points in for various swag - t-shirts, bags, etc. As a joke, one of the commercials they ran for the campaign said if you could collect 7,000,000 points you could win a military fighter jet. Well long story short, a teenager found a way to game the system, got that many points, and it became this long legal battle over whether Pepsi was going to actually give him the jet or not.

And so the whole series sets up this whole tension of whether or not the kid will get the jet. And I won't spoil it for you mainly because I don't know how it ends. It's a 4-part series and Lindsay and I fell asleep during the 4th part. No idea how the tension finally got resolved.

That's a little bit of how Ecclesiastes can be if you miss these last 6 verses of the book. If you miss the ending, you will never have the tension of Ecclesiastes resolved. In fact you will probably misread and misunderstand the entire rest of the book. The ending is crucial.

Because it's important to remember – the Preacher, whose words we've been studying in this series, is not the author of Ecclesiastes. We established this week 1. The author is someone reflecting on the words of the preacher and using it as he mentions in this passage as a teaching moment for his son.

And so here at the end, the author inserts himself back into the book. You see this switch clearly in verses 8-9...

8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

This is a word for word repetition of Eccl 1:2 – the Preacher's teachings start and end with this same phrase – “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” And then it switches back to the author to close out the book...

9 Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

The author is coming back into the narrative to give us his 30,000 foot summary of what the goal of the preacher was and what our primary takeaways should be.

Here's what he's going to give us, and where I want to go today:

- 1. Purposes of Ecclesiastes**
- 2. Summarizing Conclusion of Ecclesiastes**

Purposes of Ecclesiastes

Why was this book written and what should it do for us? He's going to give us 3, the first is found in verse 10...

10 The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

1. Satisfy

The Preacher sought to find words of delight. Or more literally translated - **words of pleasure**. Good, pleasing, delightful. That's what this book, Ecclesiastes, is according to the author – it's here for our **delight**, our satisfaction.

These 12 chapters are meant to lead us further into joy.

Which you might immediately think – what? Are you serious? I've been showing up for this series, it has not been a book of joy, delight, or satisfaction. It's been more about evil, vanity, injustice and death.

But that's what we've been trying to show each and every week – how Ecclesiastes lands us back in joy.

That underlying all of these painful words (and they are painful, more on that in a second), is a deeper invitation to joy that is truly joy. Christian Joy. Joy, as one pastor describes it, that is **a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as he causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the word and in the world.**

There's a lot of false joys offered to us in the world today. A lot of things and ideologies and worldviews that want to promise us "the good life". False promises that the satisfaction and peace our hearts crave can be found in more success, more control, more wealth, more security, more time on earth, fill in the blank.

And so one of the gifts of this book, how it leads to deeper satisfaction is by forcing us to realize how empty those promises are, and ground us back in the reality of God. TO help us see the beauty of Christ in God's Word, but also in the world. Joy that comes from the ability to receive and embrace the true good life of a place, people, profession and the presence of God.

But that wasn't without its pain points. And that's the second purpose.

2. Sting

11 The words of the wise are like goads,

A goad was a tool used in ancient agriculture. It was typically a long rod with some sort of sharp pointed edge or edges. And it was used by farmers to direct cattle. So to make sure a cattle didn't veer to the left or to the right or didn't stop too soon while they were plowing the crops, farmers would poke their cattle with a goad.

It was a tool meant to induce just enough pain to a foolish stubborn animal to keep it going in the right direction.

This is part of the purpose of Ecclesiastes. To help us, who can so often be foolish and stubborn, going in the right direction. But to do that, we've gotta get hurt a little bit.

There are words in this book that made us wince. That made us grimace. That made us say "ouch". That made us have hard honest looks at the painful side of life under the sun.

I've had a number of pastoral conversations with folks in our church over the past 7 weeks who have shared this sort of disorienting experience from the book. Who felt a sort of heaviness from this book as it made them wrestle with their own quest for a good life apart from God, as it made them see their own sin and the vanity of parts of their own life.

This has been painful for me too. One of the key lessons I've been learning through studying this book is how much I want to transcend my own limits. How much I don't want to let myself be human. I want to be like God in controlling things,

dictating how the future is supposed to go, to know the purposes of what's happening in my life and how it's all going to work out.

And so the Holy Spirit's been using this book to poke and prod and press on some sinful desires for control in my heart.

And while that's a hard thing, a painful thing, I believe that's part of the benefit and blessing of this book. It's a goad. We as humans can be sinful and stubborn. Jesus Himself calls us sheep. Sheep are stupid. They get lost, they run away, they get themselves into so much danger and trouble. And we can be the same.

And one of the painful realities you have to learn as you start to follow Jesus for any length of time is this – **if you want to know and love and follow Jesus more and more for the rest of your life, then the Bible has to challenge you, not just comfort you.**

This is what the author Hebrews addresses in Hebrews 4:

Heb 4:12-13 – 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

There's supposed to be some words in here that make you sit up and take notice. Words to stop you in your tracks and to turn you around and get you going in the right direction. The words of this book are meant to, at times, be painful for us to receive, because God uses His Word, by the power of His spirit, to convict His people and shape His people and lead us further into spiritual maturity.

And so part of the good of Ecclesiastes is that, even when it hurts, God can use it to poke and prod us to keep us on the path of flourishing with Him.

3. Stabilize

11 The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings;

You live too long under the sun, things get to be a bit, in the words of my toddler – wibbly wobbly. You know what I mean? There's something keenly disorienting about life under the sun. The world draws you ever so subtly to chase after the wrong thing, you start to miss God's presence in your life, you forget your true identity in Christ Jesus, you are not grounded in what God speaks over you and declares as your identity... **and inevitably you start living in unreality.**

You start viewing the world upside down and thinking it's rightside up. You start thinking maybe the world is right and God is wrong.

- Maybe the Bible's sexual ethic is outdated.
- Maybe the world does revolve around me.
- Maybe I can find satisfaction on earth without God.
- Maybe suffering is meaningless.
- Maybe God is absent or not good.
- Maybe the purpose of life is to simply eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.

So the 3rd purpose the author tells us is that the words of the Preacher stabilize us. They turn us rightside up again. They ground us in what is true about God and what is true about the world.

Walkthrough of Each Week

Satisfy. Sting. Stabilize. These words are a gift.

A gift not just from the preacher. These are not just the musings of some skeptical, cynical philosopher king we can choose to take or leave – they are from God Himself. Look at verse 11...

11...they are given by one Shepherd. 12 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 shepherd here is not the preacher, it's God. God is called the true shepherd in numerous places in the Old Testament, most notably the famous Psalm 23.

So the fact that these words of wisdom are given by the one Shepherd, means it's not just that the Preacher who gives us these words, but he's writing as one who writes on behalf of God.

Ecclesiastes, like the rest of the Bible, the rest of the Holy Scriptures – are from God. These are His words. He has revealed Himself to us and spoken to us. So we receive Ecclesiastes, as difficult as this may be, as the Word of God and we let it do what God says all of the Bible does – shape us, direct us, convict us, discipline us, stabilize us – all for our joy and flourishing *with Him*.

We've seen this, right?

- **Week 1** – Life under the sun without God is meaningless. Ouch. That hurts. It stings to be honest that life under the sun is painful, cyclical, elusive, monotonous, mundane, and short. But we're stabilized as we remember God is here. He's present. He's come from life outside the sun, to enter into life under the sun to give us a true and deeper joy in the monotony and mundanity of everyday life with Him.
- **Week 2** – As we looked at the vanity of an endless search for more, it stung. It was painful to think about all the ways we're grasping for life that seems just out of reach. But it stabilizes us into contentment. To stop grasping for more but to be invited into a deeper joy that comes through contentment in the gifts God has given us.
- **Week 3** – The seasons of your life, good and bad, are going to come. Your desire for control is vanity. Ah. That's painful, it stings...I want to be in control. But it stabilizes us back into a trust of the God who lives and dwells outside of our seasons. A deeper joy that comes from fearing God and learning to trust Him in all seasons of our life because He's working them out in His time to make them beautiful.
- **Week 4** – The vanity of a me-centric life. Sacrificial, forgiving relationships are painful and difficult. But we're grounded back in God's design from the beginning – a deeper joy that comes with sacrificial community and belonging.
- **Week 5** – Life is unfair. When you follow Jesus you're not signing up for a pain-free, trouble-free life. In fact, you'll probably suffer more if you're truly following Him. Ah. That stings. But it grounds us back in the reality that our hope is not in fairness here on earth, but in the God who will judge all things in eternity.
- **Week 6** – We're all going to die. Vanity of vanities, it all ends in death. That's painful. Nothing lasts forever. And yet once again through that sting, we were invited into a deeper joy that comes from the reality that though life ends in death, death for the Christian ends in eternal life with God. So death has no final sting. It has no final victory.

I hope you see the gift that this book has been, is, and can be for you through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Summarizing Conclusion of Ecclesiastes

So in light of all of that, where do we land? Let's tie the bow on this book, put it all in one grabbable thing.

Here's the summary conclusion from the author. Here's the way to summarize the Good Life. Do you want to know where all of this was leading? One statement. Two commands.

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Do you want to know what the good life is? Do you want to know how to live well in the finite years God gives you?

Fear God and do what He says.

This whole "living for God thing" is not complicated. Sure there's some times that need some nuance, and some wisdom and some areas where we have to ask and discern – what do I do here, or how do I respond to this thing, or whatever the case may be – but at the end of the day it's incredibly simple...

Want to live as a Christian? Want to live a robust life with God? Even a book that can be confusing like Ecclesiastes ends up with this same concluding reality:

Fear God and do what He says.

Abundantly simple...Incredibly difficult.

This is the battle of the Christian life. Fear and obedience. Abundantly simple...incredibly difficult.

Because we much prefer, in the world we live in which placates to the fleshly desires within us – not fear and obedience but freedom and independence.

That's the good life our sinful nature wants and our world preaches.

The ability to do what I want, when I want, where I want, with who I want. Freedom and independence. Don't tell me what to do. Don't hold me back. Autonomy is the law of our day - auto meaning self, nomos meaning law – a law unto myself. I'm king. I'm in charge. I obey one person – me. My whims, my desires, whatever my heart wants in that moment. My dreams.

Total freedom, autonomy, and independence – that's the good life.

And the author of Ecclesiastes would tell us – no. It's not. It's a lie. The whole duty of man, the true good life with God – is one fear and obedience.

FEAR

This fear, as theologian Sinclair Ferguson describes it, is a *familial fear*. It's the fear that corresponds with the reverence, awe, love, and protection a child has for the best of earthly fathers. It's not fear that makes us run *from*, it's fear that makes us run *to*.

It's fear that learns to see God rightly and therefore have no choice but to be stopped in our tracks.

- To fear the Lord is to be stunned by His presence.
- To fear the Lord is to be captured by just how awesome and big and mighty He is.
- To fear the Lord is to know that every single breath you take is only taken because God has given you the gift to take it.
- To fear the Lord is to know His ways are righteous, and pure, and true and good.
- To fear the Lord is to know that his wisdom is so infinite that one drop of it would make your head explode.

And that's what Ecclesiastes has been pointing us to all along. God is God. Fear Him! There's been that prevailing current we've seen time and time again - life under the sun is vanity, life under the sun is vanity – but going right alongside of that has been this other prominent theme that God is big and huge and awesome.

2:25 – 25 for apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

3:14 – I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

5:2 – Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

7:13-14 – Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

9:1 – But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

11:5 – As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

Do you see the author's point? The end of all matters – the summary of this book – God is bigger than you, so fear Him.

If Ecclesiastes has not driven you further into the awe-struck fear of God then you missed it.

Do you see how big the Preacher tell us He is? Do you see how in control the preacher tells us He is? Do you see how God does what He pleases? Do you see how God gives what He wants to give?

And do you see how this bigness drives you to run away from vanity and towards life with Him?

- How do you stop striving for more? You fear the one who provides for those who seek Him.
- How do you relinquish your grasping for control? You fear the one who stands outside of time and orders all things.
- How do you press on when life seems unfair? You fear the one who will right all wrongs and took the ultimate wrong on the cross in your place.
- How do you face death and stop living for the temporal? You fear the one who will judge in eternity and who alone holds the power to grant eternal life.

This is the whole duty of man. This is everything – Fear the Lord. Do what He says. Why?

14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Here's the picture – On the day you were born, God hit the RECORD button, and on the day you die, he'll hit STOP and REWIND and then PLAY. Each and every thought, word, and action (even those you will take the secrets of to your grave) will be judged by Him. Just let that sit with all of its frightening reality. God will bring every deed into judgment.

Therefore, what's the implication? Every single deed matters more than we know.

This brings us all the way back to week 1 – if there is no God, if there is no life outside or after this life under the sun – then we shout the loudest with the preacher – “all is vanity! Nothing matters!” We say with the cynic and the hedonist – eat, drink, be merry for tomorrow we die.

BUT, the author says – there is a God. This life is not all there is. There is a God in heaven who rules and reigns. There is a life to come. One day the dead will be raised and every person who has ever lived will stand before God and he will judge.

So therefore, it's not that nothing matters, but rather everything matters.

He will bring every deed into judgment. Which means every single thing you do matters.

- Those 10 minutes you spend with the toddler, to get down on the floor and play and laugh.
- That conversation you paused your work to have with your coworker as you listened and cared for them.
- The friendship you started and cultivated.
- The offhanded sarcastic comment you made at someone else's expense.
- The text you knew you should've sent to encourage someone but never did.
- The household chore or piece of homework.
- The sex you initiated or withheld from your spouse.

It all matters!

The final message of Ecclesiastes is not that nothing matters, but that *everything* does. What we did, how we did it, and why we did it will all have eternal significance. Every deed in the universe is subject to the final verdict of a righteous God who knows every secret. The things we do (and do not do) *today* will all be seen in light of the final judgment.

Which means it is desperately important that we give ourselves fully to what we have received from God.

But it is also desperately important to make sure that we will be justified on that day of judgment.

If God will look at every deed and declare righteous and unrighteous, then there is nothing more important than to make sure he would declare over us – **“righteous and worthy of the kingdom”**.

And the Bible is clear – the only way to be sure that God will declare over us “righteous and welcome in His Kingdom” is to entrust our lives to Jesus Christ. If you stand before God as you face eternity under your own merit, banking on you being good enough or doing good enough, you will fail 100% of the time, every time.

So what is our hope? That there was one who was truly righteous - Jesus the Son of God. And that God has made a way for us, through faith in Him, to be welcomed into eternity with God.

On that day of judgment, all who trust in Christ will pass the test. Not because we're awesome. Not because we did enough good deeds. Not because we made this life "truly count". Not because we're worthy of God's kingdom or worthy of being justified – but because Jesus stood in our place.

Jesus, on the cross, took the judgment of God on our behalf.

Though He was righteous, holy, without sin, perfect. No secret sinful thought, word, or deed in his entire life. He became sin for us. He took our wickedness, our unrighteousness. Our secret thoughts we'd rather no one know. Our secret deeds we will never tell a soul. Everything we have thought, said, or done contrary to God's design got nailed to the cross with Jesus. He became sin, took our sin, and bore the full punishment and judgment of God so that if we believe in Him, trust in Him, surrender our lives to Him – fear Him with that familial fear of reverence and awe – God will declare over us on that day, not guilty and unrighteousness but RIGHTEOUS. JUSTIFIED. WELCOME IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

So trust Him. Fear Him. Stand in awe of Him.

And out of that salvation trust and fear – **do what He says.**

Trust Him not just for your salvation and your eternal destiny – but trust Him enough to receive what He has given you as the Good Life from Him. To receive that He is present with you. God is here. He stands over your life. He is working in your life. He goes before you, He comes alongside beside you. He is in you.

Do not resign yourself to life under the sun. Do not give in to cynicism, naivete, autonomy. Do not rebel against the mundane gifts of God. Receive them. Embrace them. Put Him always before you, fear Him – and then give yourself to faithful labor in the people, places, and work He has given you.

Because God is here. He is present. And your whole duty as a human is to fear God and keep his commandments. That is the Good Life.

HYMN:

When we walk with the Lord
In the light of His word
What a glory He sheds on our way
While we do His good will
He abides with us still
And with all who will trust and obey

Trust and obey
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus
But to trust and obey

Not a shadow can rise
Not a cloud in the skies
But His smile quickly drives it away
Not a doubt nor a fear
Not a sigh nor a tear
Can abide while we trust and obey

Trust and obey
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus
But to trust and obey

Then in fellowship sweet
We will sit at His feet
Or we'll walk by His side in the way
What He says we will do
Where He sends we will go
Never doubt only trust and obey

Trust and obey
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus
But to trust and obey
Trust and obey

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus
Just to take him at His word
Just to rest upon His promise
Just to know thus saith the Lord
Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus
Oh for grace to trust Him more
Oh for grace to trust Him more