

**“THE END OF THE MATTER”**

Today we come to the end of our study of this great book. And in this last chapter of Ecclesiastes, we see the conclusion that the Preacher has drawn from all of the observations that he has made about life under the sun. In a sense, he has ended up right where he began, as he declares once again that “all is vanity.” All has been heard, and he has found no reason to change the assessment that he made all the way back at the beginning of the book. His words have proven true. There is nothing solid or lasting in this life under the sun.

But this does not mean that the book ends on a note of despair. As we have noted all along, Ecclesiastes is not intended to depress us, but to confront us with the way life really is. Recall the words of commentator Derek Kidner, which I cited back at the beginning of this sermon series. Kidner writes,

“The searching questions [the Preacher] has asked are those that life itself puts to us, if we will only listen. He can afford to ask them, because in the final chapters he has good news for us, once we can stop pretending that what is mortal is enough for us, who have been given a capacity for the eternal.” [*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 19]

It is here, in this final chapter of the book, that we most clearly see the good news that the Preacher has for us. But, as Kidner notes, we will only be able to accept it as good if we

are willing to stop looking for ultimate satisfaction in the things of this world. This does not mean, however, that the Preacher is not concerned with life in this world. On the contrary, he wants to show us how to make the most of this life. He wants us to sense the attractiveness of a grateful and contented life, a life that is well-spent in the service of God. This is a point that is made very clear in this passage, as the Preacher continues to develop the theme that he began to address in the previous chapter. Once again, he tells us that our mortality should rouse us to action in the present. *The fact that our days on this earth are numbered should cause us to seize the present as the time of opportunity.*

The passage begins with a word of instruction: “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth.” To remember your Creator is to honor and serve him with your life. It is to recognize your indebtedness to him, and to use your life to express your gratitude to him. Too often, we spend our youth, the years of our strength, upon ourselves rather than upon the Lord. We seek our own pleasure first, and then we give God whatever is left over, if we give him anything at all. This is what the Preacher is confronting in these verses. He wants us to spend our best years in the service of the Lord. Every day that we fail to spend for God is a day that is lost forever, because the only thing in this world that is not vanity is the work that is done in the name of the Lord.

The Preacher reminds us once again that our days of pleasure and strength will not last. The evil days will come. The sun will be darkened. The point of the vivid imagery contained in verses 2-7 is to impress this truth upon us. Here we have a metaphorical description of the aging process and of death itself, with a special emphasis upon the

unpleasantness of the physical deterioration that comes with old age. The “keepers of the house” are the hands that tremble with old age. The “strong men” are the major muscle groups of the back and legs that become weak and bent over with age. The “grinders” are the teeth that become fewer and fewer. “Those who look through the windows” are the eyes that grow dim. “The doors on the street” are the ears that become shut up with hardness of hearing. When we are old we are often disturbed in our sleep by the slightest sound, by the voice of a bird. Yet the irony is that our sense of hearing grows weaker. Our hair grows white, like the blossoms of the almond tree. The body that used to be full of life and vigor is slowed down, like a grasshopper dragging itself along instead of exuberantly hopping about. And eventually, the cord of life is snapped; the bowl that contains the water of life is broken. We return to the dust from which we were made.

Now the Preacher’s point in all of this is not to be insensitive about the infirmities that come with old age. His purpose is not to depress us. He simply wants to rouse us from our slumber. He is telling us not to wait for the darkening days of life before we begin serving God. Who can say that he will be able to begin serving the Lord in his later years? Do not delude yourself into thinking that you will get serious about following Christ later on in life. While it is true that the Lord can work his transforming power in a person’s life at any age, we are extremely unwise to presume that he will grant us his grace according to our timetable. Experience tells us that most people are fairly set in their ways by the time they reach their later years. Again, this is not to deny that the Lord can work whenever he pleases in a person’s life. Nor should it discourage older

Christians from continuing to look to the Lord for their ongoing sanctification and growth in grace. But it is a warning against waiting until you are old to remember your Creator. You might not be able to do so. As Charles Bridges puts it, “Is it time to begin the service of God, when we have scarcely power to serve ourselves?” [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 293]

Another reason why it is so important to seek the Lord and serve him in the days of our youth is because none of us knows how much time we have left in this world. Jonathan Edwards emphasized this in his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards said in that sermon that we walk through this life like a man walking on slippery ground. At any moment we could slip and fall. Edwards writes,

“It is no security to a natural man, that he is now in health, and that he does not see which way he should now immediately go out of the world by any accident, and that there is no visible danger in any respect of his circumstances. The manifold and continual experience of the world in all ages shows this is no evidence that a man is not on the very brink of eternity, and that the next step will not be into another world.” [*On Knowing Christ*, 187]

The fact of the matter is that we are all on the brink of eternity. It may be our next step, it may be a step at some time in the future, but at some point each and every one of us will

step out of this world and into the next. Remember the Lord now. Worship and serve him while you can.

After driving this point home in verses 1-7, the Preacher restates the basic theme of the book in verse 8: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.” Life in this present age is indeed a vanity. It will not last. It cannot provide us with any lasting satisfaction. As Derek Kidner comments,

“we come back to the initial cry, ‘Vanity of vanities,’ and find it justified.

Nothing in our search has led us home; nothing that we are offered under the sun is ours to keep.” [104]

And if nothing in this life is ours to keep, we begin to see the wisdom of the counsel that the Preacher gave us back in chapter 11. Do not try to squeeze all that you can out of this life in your search for happiness. Such an approach to life will always end in frustration. Instead, cast your bread on the waters. Lose your life for Christ. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Only then will you surely save your life.

The last section of chapter 12, verses 9-14, serves as an epilogue, containing a statement about the Preacher’s wisdom and his concluding words of instruction. These verses tell us that the Preacher was extremely diligent in his search for wisdom. But he did not search for wisdom because it was his private hobby. He did not study and ponder and arrange proverbs because he wanted to be considered smart. He sought wisdom so

that he could help people. And the wise words of Ecclesiastes are of great benefit to those who will heed them. They are like the goads that are used to prod oxen and keep them moving in the right direction. They prick your conscience and keep you from going astray. They are like nails that have been driven into a board, providing stability for your life. They keep you anchored in the truth, truth that has the power to change your life.

The thing that makes the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, along with all biblical wisdom, so valuable is that it is not just the words of a human teacher. This is what the Preacher says at the end of verse 11. The words of wisdom conveyed to us in holy Scripture have been given by the one Shepherd, by the Lord himself. This is why we believe that the Bible is God's Word. God is the ultimate source of all true wisdom, and the Bible is his book of wisdom.

And the wisdom that God teaches us is not speculative or esoteric. It is wisdom for life, wisdom that is focused upon guiding us through this life by leading us into the truth. This is the point being made in verse 12, where the Preacher tells us to beware of anything beyond the sayings given by the one true Shepherd. He is warning us that the search for wisdom and insight can become an end in itself. The search for knowledge can become a snare. People can become so enraptured with inquiry and debate and expressing opinions that they lose interest in ever arriving at the truth. This is what the apostle Paul is talking about when he describes certain false teachers as always learning but never arriving at a knowledge of the truth. [2 Tim. 3:5-7] Such people may be interested in ideas and opinions, but they are not interested in the truth.

The last two verses of the book contain the Preacher's conclusion or, as he puts it, "The end of the matter." After reflecting upon all of the things that he has considered throughout this book, he says that it all comes down to two things of supreme importance: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." The fear of the Lord will enable you to keep life in proper perspective. It will help you to live a well-spent life. You and I were created to offer our lives in reverent and joyful service to our Creator. This is the sum of all Christian duty. But it is of the utmost importance that we understand the source of the fear and obedience to which the Preacher calls us. We cannot generate these things on our own. The fear of the Lord, and the obedience that accompanies it, are the fruit of faith. The writer of Hebrews shows us this when he writes these words about Noah:

"By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." [Heb. 11:7]

Noah's reverent fear and obedience were the fruit of his faith in God's Word. In the same way, those who truly believe the gospel will seek to honor and please God with their lives.

The last verse of our passage shows us why fearing God and keeping his commandments is so important. Hanging over each one of us is the reality of the coming day of judgment. God will bring every deed into judgment. There is nothing in our lives that goes unnoticed by the Lord. Even the hidden things lay exposed before him. This is something that should jolt us out of our complacency and our casual attitude towards sin. At the same time, though, it should not cause us to think that we will be able to depend upon ourselves and our works when we stand before the Lord on that great day. While it is true that genuine faith produces the fruit of godly fear and obedience, this does not mean that our works will be the basis of our acceptance before God on judgment day. As we read earlier from Hebrews 9, our only hope on that day is to be among those who are eagerly waiting for Christ as the one who paid the penalty for all of our sins. The only people who will be counted righteous on that day are those who have had the righteousness of Christ counted as their own by faith.

As we will sing in our closing hymn in just a few moments, the sands of time are sinking away with each passing day. But those of us whose lives are hid with Christ in God need not despair as life draws to its close. For us, the sun will break through the darkening clouds that gather at life's end. Our departure from this world of vanity will be our entrance into eternal rest. As the psalmist wrote, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." [Ps. 73:26] This is the hope of those who remember their Creator during their days on this earth. This world and

everything in it is but a vapor, but the children of God have a hope that is solid and secure. As a dying saint once wrote,

“The golden chain, which binds the believer’s heart to heaven, is waxing stronger. Its links are growing more firm and massive. All the powers of hell will not prevail to break them.” [cited in Bridges, 295]

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, it will only be this world of vanity that will fade away as the curtain begins to close on your life in this world. The solid joys and lasting treasure of heaven will wax stronger. Never lose sight of the great and glorious destination towards which your life is heading. Let that reality color and animate every aspect of your life for all the days that you are granted to live under the sun.