



Ecclesiastes

(23) The End of the Matter

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

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So we've come to the last section of the book of Ecclesiastes. We made it. I have found it interesting. I hope that you have too. I've found it difficult at times, mostly because the same themes are repeated and it's hard not to say the same thing over and over again. There has been some of that. I hope that it has not been too repetitive. The book does look at the same basic theme from a variety of perspectives and it does say some very surprising things – things that seem out of place in the Bible. But as we have seen, that is exactly what is so helpful about this book. It dares to say things that we might think in our darker moments and the fact that God saw to it that they were included in his word shows us that God is mindful of how difficult it often is to cope with life and he gives us permission to express our darker thoughts to him. The key is that such thoughts are expressed with an attitude that acknowledges the godness of God.

Now this last section refers to the author in the third person. We find the same thing in the first verse of the book which reads, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Chapter 12:9 reads, "Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge." The rest of the book is in the first person. For most of the book, the author refers to himself as "I." I saw this, and I say that, and this is what I think about it. But the first verse of the book and this last section, the author of the book is referred to as the Preacher.

This has led some scholars to believe that there are actually two authors of this book. Many think that the first verse and the last few verses were written by someone else who is presenting the rest of the book for our consideration and then adding the final paragraph to sum up the

message and made sure that we get it. I have no idea if that is correct. It may be that the whole thing is the work of a single author and he refers to himself in the third person at the beginning and the end for literary reasons. What matters most is that it comes to us as part of the word of God and so the ultimate author is God.

So it may be that the verses that we are going to look at this evening are the words of someone else summing up the book or it may be that they are the words of whoever wrote the rest of the book. They are in the third person and they give some interesting perspectives on the wisdom literature in the Bible and they bring the whole book to its conclusion.

Just to make things as straightforward as possible, I'm going to present the teaching of these verses as the words of someone else who has brought the words of the Preacher to our attention and now is making some final comments. First he says something about the Preacher as a teacher of wisdom. Verses 9-10, "Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught to 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."

So these words affirm that all that has come before is true and valuable and a legitimate part of the wisdom teaching in Israel. That is important because of the many shocking things that the Preacher says in the book about wisdom, about God and about good and evil. Remember that much of the book questions things that are taught in the rest of the Bible.

So, Ecclesiastes 1:2 says, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." That is not what the rest of the Bible teaches. The rest of the Bible teaches that while the world is broken because of sin, God is working out his plan of salvation and he is going to bring everything to a glorious end and his people are servants of God in that great work. That is not vanity. It is the opposite of vanity. There are a number of other statements that do not fit well with the rest of the Bible. He even says, "I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive" (4:2). In chapter 7:15-16 he says, "In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who

prolongs his life in his evil doing. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?" These verses contradict traditional wisdom that is much more positive about life and that teaches that wisdom is more valuable than anything. Proverbs 3:13-14, "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit is more than gold."

So it is very significant that these final words of the book affirm the Preacher as a legitimate teacher of wisdom. "The Preacher sought to find words of delight and uprightly he wrote words of truth." The point is that wisdom is a multifaceted thing and the kind of questioning and agonizing that we find in this book are part of wisdom according to the Bible.

We find something similar in the book of Job. In Job 42:7 God is speaking, and he is angry with the friends of Job and he says that what Job has spoken was right. God says to Eliphaz, "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

Job's friends thought that they had God ways all figured out. The righteous are blessed. The wicked suffer. Life was straightforward and predictable. Job on the other hand, is not happy with how God is running his life and he says many things to God that we would not dare to say; at least not out loud. But God says that Job was right and that the friends were wrong.

Now the book as a whole makes it clear that Job was not literally correct in all his accusations against God and in the end Job does acknowledge that God's ways are inscrutable and that he must submit to that. But the point is that God approved of Job voicing his questions and working through those agonizing issues rather than the simplistic perspective of Job's friends.

And that is the point of these verses at the end of Ecclesiastes that affirm that the Preacher was a legitimate wisdom teacher. Working through and struggling with the things about life that do not make sense

and that seem to contradict much of what the Bible teaches in other places is part of wisdom according to the Bible.

Here is how Craig Bartholomew expresses this idea in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, “Pastorally this is significant, for Ecclesiastes, like Job, holds out hope for those struggling amid the mysteries of what God is up to in their lives and thus in his world. Such agonizing struggles are affirmed and shown to be integral to the Christian life. Job and Ecclesiastes also give us clues as to how to live with these struggles.” (371)

Here is another helpful quote by Edward Curtis in his commentary. He uses the word “tradition” to refer to our usual way of interpreting the world and he says, “While tradition is important, it cannot be allowed to obscure reality and the truth of what life in a fallen world is like.

Qoheleth’s observations make it clear that reality is often more complex than our traditions would lead us to believe. He believes that the life of faith must look reality square in the eye and engage in the struggle to integrate experience with faith. He sees little value in gaining worldview coherence by denying the realities of human experience in the world.” (2873-2877)

This is very important. A Christianity that does not honestly face the things about God’s way of running the world that seem problematic is ultimately not very convincing to outsiders and does not ring true to insiders. The real struggles of life are ignored when the real unfathomable things about life in this world are given simplistic explanations. Our faith and that of our children, in the truth of God’s word becomes vulnerable if the hard questions are never asked and questions reality raises about the goodness of God are never faced. This is where the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is so helpful. It is not the wisdom of easy answers. It is the wisdom of facing things for which there are no good answers and learning to live with such things without turning away from God and continuing to trust in him.

This is why these final verses of Ecclesiastes which affirm the Preacher as a wise teacher in Israel are so important. Whether they are the Preachers own words or the words of another wisdom teacher about him, we know they are God’s words about what he has written and as

such they are so valuable in encouraging us to face the painful realities of God's way of governing the world that are hard to take. There is more to be said about this question as we will see in a moment, but this point is a very important resource for dealing with things that God does or allows to happen that just seem wrong.

Verses 11 and 12 give us more insights concerning the wisdom literature of the Bible. "The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd." The phrase, "words of the wise" refers to wisdom sayings. There is a genre of literature which is called wisdom and some of Israel's wisdom literature is collected in the Bible. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and the Song of Solomon are considered to be the wisdom literature of the Bible. Besides that some of the Psalms and certain other sections are also in this category. In the New Testament some of the sayings of Jesus are wisdom sayings as well as the book of James. What sets wisdom literature apart is that it is very practical and is rooted in observations about life and the lessons that come from living life. It just has a different flavor from law and prophesy and history and doctrine.

Verse 11 says, "The words of the wise are like goads...." A goad is a stick with a point on the end that is used by shepherds to prod their sheep and keep them on the right path. This is an interesting and fruitful simile to teach how wisdom sayings are intended to function. The purpose of a goad is to inflict a little pain for the benefit of the animal that is prodded. A prod does not injure the sheep or the goat, but it does hurt a little and its purpose is to direct the animal to places of safety and nourishment instead of allowing it to wander to places of disaster and death.

That is what the wisdom of the Bible does. It can be a little bit painful. It can make us a little uncomfortable. But its purpose is to prod us towards life and fruitfulness rather than danger and brokenness and death. One of the things that this means for us is that walking the ways of life and fruitfulness involves opening ourselves up to the discomfort that comes when the words of wisdom of the Bible shine into our lives. There is an element of discomfort and pain that comes from the biblical instruction on how to live our lives because it exposes where we are not

living wisely. This point applies to the way the whole Bible is concerned to have us live wisely as one of the goals of our salvation. 2 Timothy 16-17 says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness....” Being reproved and corrected is not the most pleasant thing in the world, but it is necessary for our good.

So one of the functions of the Bible is to act as a goad in our lives – to inflict a little pain for the purpose of getting us to live in a way that tends towards fullness of life rather than living in a way that tends towards emptiness and futility and death.

And that means that wisdom involves responding to the prods of Scripture rather than hardening our hearts to avoid the pain and discomfort that comes from our sins and our weaknesses being exposed. I’m sure you know what I am talking about. We can resist the goads of Scripture. We can refuse to expose our hearts and lives to the correcting and reproofing function of wisdom because it makes us uncomfortable. When that happens we are resisting the shaping influence of the gospel and the word and the Spirit and we are insisting on a superficial comfort while resisting the deeper joy and satisfaction and growth that comes from being open to the goads of the words of wisdom. Goads hurt. But they keep the sheep from cliffs and lions and direct them to the green pastures and steams of water where growth and wellness happen.

The words of the wise are not only like goads, they are also like nails firmly fixed, says verse 11. The collected sayings of the wise give us stability in our lives. They anchor us to reality. By absorbing them and following them our lives are rooted in the true nature of things. The wise words of the Bible are like nails that keep the shingle from blowing away in the wind. Paul uses similar imagery when he says that one of the purposes of the teaching ministry of the church is that church members are equipped to build one another up “so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” (Ephesians 4:11-14)

Heeding the words of the wise that we find in Scripture give us stability in the light of the fact that the world is a place of instability and chaos. Ecclesiastes has described some of the chaotic nature of life in this world and this last section is reminding us that hearing and internalizing the words of the wise help us to stand firm when the conditions around us threaten to sweep us off our feet so that our faith in God is threatened. Ultimately it is faith in God which gives us stability in a world full of difficulties and things that are difficult to handle. A more complete statement of this principle is that it is **the faith that God gives** that gives us stability when we are faced with the winds that threaten to blow our faith away. Reading any part of the Bible in the light of the gospel reminds us that while we have a responsibility to trust and obey, it is only through the grace of God in Jesus Christ that we are able to do so.

We are reminded of that gospel by the last part of verse 11 which says that the words of the wise are “given by one Shepherd.” That Shepherd is the God who makes us “lie down in green pastures” and “leads [us] beside still waters.” The Shepherd who has the goad in his hand is the Shepherd who “leads [us] in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” As we think of this in the light of the New Testament we are reminded that Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and who came to give them abundant life. The words of wisdom show the way of life, and their overall biblical context shows that in order for us to live the life that they call us to live, the good shepherd had to die so that the sheep could live.

The wisdom literature of the Bible does not get into that, but their context in the Bible is that they are given to the covenant people of God who are the people delivered from Egypt and graciously installed in the Promised Land. The story in which the wisdom literature of the Bible is imbedded is a story that leads to Jesus Christ and they can only be rightly understood in the light of the abundant life that is given to the sheep by the Shepherd who gave his life that they might know the life and blessing that comes from responding to the prodding’s of the words of the wise.

Verse 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."

What this verse is saying is that we must beware of anything beyond the Bible. The reference in context is to the words of the wise or the wisdom literature of Israel. The situation that it is addressing is the fact that there is all kinds of wisdom literature in the world which is not rooted in the fear of the Lord. It was not only Israel that produced wisdom literature. There were lots of other wisdom collections around that had been produced by the wise men of Egypt and Babylon and other countries in Israel's neighborhood. This verse is referring to the fact that there is no end to the books that are out there. But we are to beware of any that are beyond the wisdom of Israel. And the reason is that the wisdom of Israel was based on the biblical worldview which will be expressed in the last two verses of the book.

The point is that we are to beware of the wisdom of the world. We are to beware of any purported wisdom that is not rooted in the biblical worldview. There is no end to the books that are produced by the world. And it is in this context that much study is a weariness of the flesh. The weariness of the flesh comes from trying to find truth and wisdom apart from the wisdom of Israel which is the revelation of God. Paul refers to this phenomenon when he speaks of people who are "always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth." (2 Timothy 3:7)

The weariness from much study that Ecclesiastes is speaking about is the weariness of the futility of seeking truth apart from God. The world is full of books that claim to seek truth apart from God, but that whole exercise is an exercising in always learning and never arriving at a knowledge of the truth. That is not to say that there is nothing of value in the literature of the world. The evidence of the Bible is that the wisdom teachers of Israel were well acquainted with the wisdom of other nations and sometimes borrowed from it. The point is to beware of seeking truth and wisdom apart from God. That is an exercise in futility and dangerous as well. Looking for truth apart from God is weariness because it is futile and hopeless.

And that perspective is what sums up the whole book of Ecclesiastes and puts the whole thing, and indeed the whole of life into the perspective of the biblical worldview. “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.”

All the questions that have been raised throughout the book of Ecclesiastes are put into perspective by these words, “God will bring every deed into judgment....” This is the only resting place in the turmoil that comes from the things of life that seem to contradict the goodness and the justice of God. Why do cheaters so often prosper? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do some people get away with murder? Why do some people get away with genocide? Why does life sometimes seem so empty and futile? God will bring every need into judgment.

In the words of D.A. Carson. “Justice will be done, and it will be seen to be done.” God is sovereign over all things. God is infinite in his power and knowledge. God is eternal in his being. And he is perfectly just. He knows all, and he sees all, and he remembers all, and he is from everlasting to everlasting and so it is incomprehensible in the biblical worldview that in the end anyone will get away with anything. Justice means that everyone will get their due. Everyone will get what they deserve. It means that there will be no loose ends when God is finished bringing every deed into judgment.

And so living wisely in a world in which God is going to bring every deed into judgment is very simple in its broad outlines. “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” There is a profound submission and trust in these words in the context of Ecclesiastes. He has explored things about the world that make him sad, that make him angry and that deeply trouble him. But along the way he has consistently acknowledged the sovereignty of God and has a number of times hinted that he knows God knows what he is doing. In chapter 3:11 he has written, “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” What this

implies is that **God** knows what he is doing from beginning to the end. And the whole book is moving to that conclusion even as it grapples honestly with how difficult it can be do deal with the things that make it seem that God is just not paying attention or is indifferent to good and evil.

There is a profound trust and submission behind recognizing that since God is who he is, it is impossible that in the end it will not all be beautiful and God's way with the world, what he did and what he allowed, will demonstrate "the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33) And so our job is to leave governing the universe to God and just focus on the only wise way of life in the light of who God is, "Fear God and keep his commandments."

We must understand those words in the light of the gospel. The people of God are the only ones who will not get what they deserve because Jesus took what we deserve. That we why can go free and God maintain his justice which is necessary for God to truly be God. If justice is not done in every single detail from the beginning of the world to its end, God is not God, and everything is chaos and meaningless. This is the message of Ecclesiastes.

The only thing that keeps everything from being meaningless, empty, futile and random is the truth of those few words. "For God will bring every deed into judgment." If that were not so, then those words, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" would be absolutely true. That describes life apart from God. Apart from the justice of God, nothing matters; life is a joke; it has no value; it has no meaning.

But the reality is that "God will bring every deed into judgment," and that means that everything matters, life is meaningful and valuable and every single thing that we say and do will be assessed by the one who made us. Apart from Christ that is a huge burden. But in Christ – clothed with his righteousness and seeking to fear God and keep his commandments by his grace, we can look forward to hearing God's evaluation of our lives, "Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." (Matthew 25:21). That, is worth living for.