

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

August 13, 2017

Herman Melville the novelist extraordinaire. He wrote the American classic, Moby Dick. As Captain Ahab stood on the deck enshrouded by darkness his musings wandered to consider Solomon and Ecclesiastes and he thinks,

“The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. "All is vanity." ALL.”

Captain Ahab has it right. Life here in this fallen world feels like fine hammered steel of woe sometimes, at least that is what the Preacher has said.

It is been his consistent refrain.

It was the first words we heard from him—

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Ecclesiastes 1:2

And they were the last words we heard from him as well.

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.” Ecclesiastes 12:8

We end where we started and the whole way through the Preacher has told us the “hammered steel of woe” straight-up truth.

The Preacher’s three-word summary comment about life in under this sun (apart from God) is ‘All is vanity.’ His hammer has pounded the same rhythm throughout this book.

The Preacher answers a question that everyone has—the question that rumbles beneath everything that everyone has their own way of pushing down.

The question: What is the point of this life?

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

Why am I here?

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

What am I supposed to do?

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

There is no point in this life under the sun. None.

The Preacher has tasted vanity in many forms. He has tasted all this life has to offer and has come back reporting,

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

If we were to summarize the message of the Preacher in a make-believe conversation it might go like this—

You pull up a chair across from an old man with sad urgent eyes at your local coffee shop to talk. Your friends thought it might be good for you to talk to the man they call the Preacher.

He makes you feel uncomfortable.
His eyes lock onto yours and he doesn't let go.

You stammer, “What do you think is the point of life?”

He says—with an uncomfortably loud outside voice—
“Point? Point? That is just it, there is no point. This life under the sun is empty. Vanity.”

You say, “How can you know?”

He says in his heavy raspy voice, “I have done it. I can tell you what the point of life isn't. I've searched and come back empty.”

I have worked callouses on my hands and my hands to the bones. And what do I have to show for it? Nothing. ‘this life under the sun is empty.’

I have earned, given and lost more money than most people see. And what do I have to show for it today? Nothing. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I have seen death snatch up fools and famous alike; the wealthy and poor; the beautiful and the common, the noble and the homeless. I have seen indomitable

men and women forgotten—erased by the power of all mighty death. None of them are here. They have nothing and are nothing. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I have partied with the best wines and the finest companions in designer clothes in the most exclusive clubs. How do those experiences leave me? Empty. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I have traveled to exotic far off lands only to find strife, trouble, oppression in lands of paradise. All of this land is vain—all of the land under the sun. Vain.

I have built my dream house two times over. They were both architectural marvels with all the modern and amenities. I lived in luxury. Those houses did not fill the emptiness. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I planted gardens of verdant green flush with exotic fruit and exquisite flowers. My property exploded with color and charm. That life growing from the ground did not cover the emptiness. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I got all the latest and vintage cars that anyone could want. I built warehouse building like stables to house my modern mechanical horses. Those cars could not drive me away from the emptiness. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I had money enough to open any door. I cavorted with super-models, I danced with princes & princesses, I entertained heads of state, I advised prime

ministers...The world came to my door and yet all of that attention did not drown out the emptiness. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I set myself to learning all there was to learn. I won awards and got multiple degrees. I knew and understood mysteries that confounded men and women of great learning. Despite all of my wisdom, I could not figure out how to get rid of the emptiness. ‘This life under the sun is empty.’

I looked into mysteries
I embarked on adventures
I crushed my adversaries
I struck out on safaris
I have worn the best clothes
I have sipped the best wine
I have earned the best grades
I have been judged the best and brightest
I have had loads of sparkling treasure
I have watched the sunrise after the party of the century
I have not just been to the top, I lived there
I did not envy, I was envied
I have been everywhere and found nothing
I have bought all I wanted except not meaning in life
I have

And I can report to you—there are no answers in this life under the sun. There is nothing out there that is going answer your question: ‘What is the point.’

There is no point.

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

And his eyes are riveted on yours. You blink away his cold stare and finally you come to yourself and say—

“What then? Is there no point to life?”

The sage old man says, “I have told you only where NOT to look—not where to look. Look to him. Your life will be empty (vain) if it is not focused on him.”

With that he stands up, throws a piece of paper down on the table and says, “here you go...start here,”

“Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. ¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

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

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Or in other words, your life will be empty—you will not find meaning—if your life is not centered on him. Where do I get that from?

Vs. 13,

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

In Hebrew it reads, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man.”

The whole what?

The whole point.

Here we find life’s great meaning. The Preacher has told us where NOT to look and finally we have in verse 13 our great purpose.

PROP: Your life will be empty (vain) if your life is not centered on God.

How?

Listen Carefully
&
Fear God

1. Listen Carefully (12:9-12)—

In verses 9 & 10 we are reminded about what the Preacher said and how he spoke. Then we read this in verse 11,

Vs. 11,

“The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.”

The words of the wise are compared to goads and nails.

What does that mean?

A goad is a long stick with a sharp end meant to poke into the flank of livestock to get them moving. Goads spur obstinate farm animals.

Goads spur the obstinate ones on.

Nails?

We know what nails do. Nails anchor things into place. Want to hang a picture of your family or your dog or your car in the hallway? Plunge a nail into the wall and your picture is anchored to the wall.

Nails anchor two things together.

What do goads and nails have to do with listening carefully?

Vs. ‘The words of the wise are like goads...’

Sometimes the best of us need to be spurred along. We all get sluggish and obstinate. Truth sometimes feels like a poke in the backside to get us going—

Truth spurs on obstinate saints.

- Consider others more important than yourself. (ouch)
- Don't just speak the truth speak it in love, if you can't do that don't say anything. (ouch)
- It is better to give than receive. (ouch)
- Do not return evil for evil but bless and do not curse. (ouch)
- Hold no grudge but forgive freely even as you have been freely forgiven. (ouch)

Truth spurs on obstinate saints.

Other times we need to anchor ourselves to truth. We have to take truth and nail it to our hearts so that it doesn't fly away.

- He will never leave me though everyone else does.
- He will preserve me through all manner of trial and suffer.
- The Lord causes all things—not just the good things—to work for my good.
- He gives grace when I am weakest and need it most.
- If I draw near to him, he will draw near to me.
- The Lord does not treat me as my sins deserve.

We need those truths and many other anchored to our hearts.

Sometimes truth spurs on and other times it anchors, but it comes from one place.

Where?

Vs. 11,

“The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.”

Do you see the kind of truth that we are looking at here? The truth given by one Shepherd.

We are not merely encouraged to believe true things but be goaded on by the truth of scripture and have the truth of scripture anchored in our lives from the ONE shepherd.

This is the first mention of a shepherd in all of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher mentioned nothing about a shepherd.

Who is it? God.

What does a shepherd do?

A shepherd watches over his flock protecting them from all manner of peril in the howling wilderness. A shepherd protects his sheep with his life.

Ezekiel promised a coming of the same Shepherd that Ecclesiastes is talking about,

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. [12] As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his

sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness....I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. [16] I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.” Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-16

Who is this great protector?
Who is this great shepherd?

Who is the one who later would say, “I am the Good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays his life down for the sheep.”

We know him. He is God in Christ.

You might say, ‘What does this have to do with centering our lives on God?’

Want to know the point of this life under the sun—what better to have a book from beyond the sun? The very words of the ONE shepherd.

Want to know your purpose? Know his book
Want to know his voice? Know his book
Want to find meaning? Know his book

Listen carefully to the voice of the shepherd. The Preacher didn’t, not until it was too late.

Beware!

Vs. 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.”

This is not a reason to swear off studying but you will get tired and disillusioned if you look for truth other places besides the word of God.

Verse 12 DOES not say don't listen to them—just beware. Listen carefully because if you take everything in as truth you will say,

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

We need to be careful who we listen to because we can and will wander off into vanity—but also we need to

2. Fear God (12:13-14)

Vs. 13,

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

We've already found out that to fear God is the whole of mankind. But what does it mean to fear God?

Does it mean to live in terror before God?

No.

If you read Christian books they will define the fear of God as 'reverential awe.' That is helpful but I don't find it illuminating.

Let's think about the fear of God from a different angle—what is the opposite of the fear of God?

Hating God? No.

Disregarding God.

Do you disregard God?

- You can disregard God and believe the Bible is true.
- You can disregard God and believe Jesus died and rose again.
- You can disregard God and go to church regularly.
- You can disregard God and believe in God.

When you disregard God, you treat him as unimportant.

Inconsequential

Unnecessary

Immaterial

Nice

Sweet

Christian Smith, a sociologist, has studied in detail the religious beliefs of American millennials. He said most:

- Believe there is a God
- Believe that God is good
- Believe that he created all things

How then, do they disregard God?

They don't take him and his word seriously. They don't fear God. In the daily, moment by moment choice of their lives they don't think about God.

They don't fear him.

I can do what I want and what God says doesn't matter.

You can disregard God and by saying,

- I believe in God and I can be greedy at the same time. So what?
- I believe in God and drink my sorrows away. So what?
- I believe in God and have a foul mouth. So what?
- I believe in God and sleep with my girlfriend. So what?
- I believe in God and I'm a man who loves a man. So what?
- I believe in God and consume pornography like candy. So what?
- I believe in God and take mind altering drugs. So what?

- I believe in God and can do what I want when I want if it doesn't hurt anyone else.

By saying, "So what?" What does it matter you are saying—I can do what I want.

And you are showing that you don't fear God.

Disregarding God is the exact opposite of fearing God. When you disregard him you are saying—you don't matter. I do.

What you say does not matter.

This is the kind of thinking that causes you to wander away and lose your way and say with the Preacher—

**"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity."
Ecclesiastes 12:8**

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Vs. 13,

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

The essence of fearing God is living like he matters. Like what he says matters. You fear God when you center your life on him.

How?

By living submitted to God and obeying his commandments. Don't think primarily of the 10 commandments—but obeying his word.

Am I saying that you are saved by the strength of your obedience? No. No, a thousand times no.

I am saying those who are forgiven will want to obey because they fear God and want to please him.

You see, the Preacher wrote Ecclesiastes to get our attention and tell us that we ought not merely trust our senses. This fallen world that we live in broadcasts that anyone can have meaning, fulfillment and satisfaction if they have the courage to follow their hearts.

The Preacher said—whatever you do don't follow your heart. You cannot trust your own desires—you must not trust yourself.

If you do, your refrain will be—“*Vanity of vanities... all is vanity.*”

Listen, none of us fear God as we ought to. None of us have a healthy enough fear of the Living God. We should be much more aware of him than we are.

But there is coming a day where no one will be able to ignore him. Today, you might be able to do live like God doesn't see.

You can get away with that for a while but that doesn't mean he is blind.

I can promise that you will continue to get away with doing whatever you want. You will be able to live and disregard God...for a while.

But not forever.

Vs. 14,

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

You might not live like he is real, but he lives like you and your choices are real. And there is an accounting. There is a day set, a day no one can know and a day no one can avoid.

That day God will call all those who disregard him before him and judge every secret thing whether good or evil. He will measure you.

You can walk away and ignore him today, but you won't be able to ignore him forever.

Some of you might be thinking—how can I tell if I fear God?

Here are some thoughts:

- You want to please God more than yourself.
- You want to love God more than you do.
- You don't (in general) sin and say, “God will forgive me.”

- You want to please God more than you want to be true to yourself.
- You are grieved by your sin, you don't make excuses for it.
- You get care more about what God thinks of you than others.
- You never use grace as an excuse for sin, you come to Jesus by grace despite your sin.

All the things you keep hidden will one day be uncovered.

Now, there are two ways that you can think about that day. You can shudder, push it out of your mind and pretend that God does not see and God does not know only to be exposed...OR

You can lay open your secrets today to the God who forgives and heals. This is where we can realize that judgment holds no terror for any who know Jesus.

If you are genuinely a Christian—every secret thing has already been dealt with. If you are a Christian, every deed has already been brought into judgment.

Even the secret things.

All things.

The good things that were not good enough (because of hidden agendas or mix motives) AND the evil things that are worse than we like to admit.

Why?

The deeds of the Christians—both good and bad (even the secret things)—have already been judged. Jesus—the One Shepherd has come already to be crushed for our good and evil deeds.

So that day holds no terror for those who have come to Jesus and ask him to be judged for every good and evil thing.

So, today, any sin you deal you are convicted of, that weighs you down, that makes you feel bad, is a forgiven sin.

It has already been brought into judgment.

The teaching of Ecclesiastes and the Preacher has come to a close for us, but the teaching of the Shepherd continues.

Let's go back to the coffee shop.

Imagine we look up in a daze after the Preacher has departed to someone else sitting the chair in front of us.

His eyes have a flicker of light like fire and his hair is as white as wool. When he speaks, your insides rumble with the sound of many waters though no one in the coffee shop seems to notice.

The Preacher can only take us so far. The Good Shepherd can take us the rest of way. The Preacher can tell us where NOT to look to find fulfillment.

The Good Shepherd can tell us where to look.

And in that moment, he opens his mouth and speaks in gentle, loving tones—simultaneously fierce and tender. He says,

Come again to me.

“Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.” Isaiah 55:1

You see the Preacher can tell us what does not satisfy—but we know who does satisfy. You know there is one who can and does satisfy the thirst of our souls.

The Preacher told what WASN'T the point of life—the Shepherd tells us what IS the point of life.

The Preacher might have said, “Vanity of Vanities all is vanity.”

The Shepherd tenderly might say—not everything dear Preacher. One from beyond the sun has come and brings meaning and satisfaction.

The Shepherd.

We can center our lives on him without regret.

Those that follow the Shepherd can do our 'work heartily as for the Lord and not for men' but our vocation need not be means to satisfaction.

Those that follow the Shepherd can pursue wisdom and learning but can know that Jesus is the true wisdom of God. And what we know need not be our satisfaction.

Those that follow the Shepherd can eat the best food and drink without living for food and drink seeing food and drink as a gift and not a way to find satisfaction.

Those that follow the Shepherd are to free the wield the power and influence the Lord gives them without looking for power and influence to give satisfaction.

Those that follow the Shepherd can enjoy their families without asking their family members to fill a hole of satisfaction that only God can fill.

Those that follow the Shepherd can face death knowing that it is not their end but merely a new beginning.

Those that follow the Shepherd know that nothing done for him is ever lost. He sees he knows and only he can satisfy.

You see, as we leave Ecclesiastes behind we can leave the Preacher behind I hope you realize that the

Preacher in his weird, quirky, caustic way has introduced us to the shepherd.

And we never leave him behind.

PRAY

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.” Revelation 1:5-6

