

The End of the Matter – Fear God

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- [0 : 00] Let's pray again and let's keep our Bibles open even as we pray. Father, I just pray Lord that you'll help us to focus now on your word.
- Help us to open our hearts to let your word achieve its purposes in us. I pray that you would give us attentive ears and readiness to let your word work out in our lives.
- All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I love you. I hate you. What kind of friend are you? I'm sorry.
- Just words, but those are never just words, are they? Words have power. They impact people. They can even change lives. Some of us can still remember words from decades ago, spoken to us by a teacher who refused to let us give up, or shouted in anger by a family member.
- And to this day, those words still influence how we act. Words don't just inform, they can wound, they can heal. That's how words often work. They do things to us.
- [1 : 23] Indeed, that simple fact is central to the way God works among us. Think of what the Gospel is. What is the Gospel? It is a message given in words.
- And through this message, God does things to us. He pronounces forgiveness. He adopts us as sons and daughters. He makes Jesus our Lord.
- He saves us. But of course, for the word of the Gospel to transform our lives, we have to believe it. We have to accept it and trust it.
- In other words, it's not just a matter of what words do to us, but what we do with those words. It's why Romans 10, verse 9 tells us, in order to be saved, we must declare with our mouths, Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts, God raised him from the dead.
- What we do with these words matter. Today, the teacher of Ecclesiastes has said all his words.
- [2 : 33] As verse 13 puts it, Now all has been heard. So the teacher is done. But God's not yet done with us. This morning, he's like the chief justice, who has listened to all the facts and testimonies and arguments laid before him.
- And having done all that, he shuffles his papers and says, The matter has come to an end. It's time to draw conclusions. But then he leans in, looks at us, and asks, Actually, I've got two questions for you.
- What has the teacher's words done to you? You've just spent three months listening to him wax eloquently. What has it done to you?
- And just as importantly, what are you going to do with his words? Now that you've heard, what are you going to do with the words of Ecclesiastes?
- Well, this morning, we're going to see that there are four things we should do. Firstly, recognize these words for what they really are.
- [3 : 44] Now, it's completely understandable if you've forgotten, but actually, the teacher is not the only voice in this book. There's been another voice in the background, whom we briefly met right at the beginning.

Turn back with me to Ecclesiastes 1, verse 1 to 2 on the screen. The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem, meaningless.

Meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. So that is not the teacher speaking. Rather, that's the person whom we shall call the narrator.

He's the one who has been reporting the words of the teacher. But he's largely kept himself in the background, content to let the words of the teacher take center stage from 1, verse 3, all the way to 12, verse 8.

And it is only now that he re-emerges. And now that he has the mic, what does he say? Well, he endorses the teacher.

[4 : 56] He endorses his words. He's like a referee on a job application form. And he urges us, recognize the teacher's words for what they really are.

Okay, we say, what are they? Well, look down with me to the end of verse 11. And notice, these words are given by God himself.

If Ecclesiastes was just a product of a rambling old man, then we can safely set it aside as interesting, but optional. But these are no ordinary words.

These are the words of the shepherd. And that's good news. Because in the Old Testament, what does the shepherd do?

Psalm 23 tells us. He leads his people through the valley of the shadow of death. He takes us down the right paths. And so in his kindness, God doesn't leave us on our own to navigate this hebele world entirely by guesswork or vague impressions.

[6 : 16] Instead, he leads us via his words. Just imagine if we didn't have Ecclesiastes. We would, I think, underestimate just how thoroughly this present world is subject to the curse of sin.

We would try to get more out of life than what this life under the sun is capable of providing. And so we would trap ourselves in this cycle of weariness, locked in an empty and endless pursuit of what is beyond our reach.

But God gives us the words of the teacher to get us off that cycle. That's what his word does to us. That's how kind he is.

You see, God's so different to us, isn't he? We naturally seek gain, but as the theologian Scott Swain points out, God never acts in order to gain.

God always acts in order to give. That's what he's been doing all throughout Ecclesiastes, hasn't he? Even though we live in a Genesis 3 world, he's been giving us the Genesis 2 gifts of food and drink and work and relationships.

[7 : 41] And now we discover he gives us another gift from the world of Genesis 1 and 2. His very word.

The presence of sin has not silenced him. The stench of sin has not put him off. In spite of sin, he still wants to communicate with us.

Now just imagine that the person you hurt still wants to communicate with you. He still wants to reach out to you. That's God.

How different he is to us. So my brothers and sisters, when we read Ecclesiastes, know that we are not just reading the random musings of an Israelite king.

We are listening to our shepherd who wants to speak to us, who wants to bring us back from our wanderings.

[8 : 41] We are listening to him guide us so that we can experience his goodness and his love all the days of our lives, even while we live in a Hebel world.

So that's what his word does to us. That's why he's given us Ecclesiastes. That's why he's given us all of scripture. It is God's way, as Psalm 19 puts it, of refreshing your soul and making the simple wise.

It is his way of giving light to our eyes and joy to our hearts. That's the impact it can have. But you must recognize these words for what they really are.

If you come to the word of God merely to satisfy your intellectual curiosity, or if you come to them just to achieve your purposes rather than to relate to our shepherd and to listen to him, you will experience what Psalm 19 describes.

These words won't come alive for you. So are you someone today who needs to recognize God's words for what they really are? Well, delay no more.

[10 : 02] Humble yourselves. Stop blocking his word out and come and listen. And if you recognize these words for what they really are, then you would rely on these words as what you really need.

That's the second thing we should do today. Rely on these words as what you really need. Notice in verse 9 what the teacher gets up to.

He pondered and searched out and said in order many proverbs. He put in many hours of study. He thought hard about what he observed.

He examined the world carefully. He tested his hypothesis. And once he did that, he structured his words carefully. He developed a well-rounded lesson plan.

Why did he do that? Because, verse 9 again, he wants to impart knowledge to the people. And why does he want to impart knowledge to the people?

[11 : 11] Because, end of verse 10, what he wrote was upright and true. Because, verses 9 and 11, the words of Ecclesiastes are the words of the wise.

In short, they are what we really need. And that is still true centuries later. In a world of tweets, memes, and conspiracy theories, we need upright, true, and wise words.

We need words that name reality as it truly is. That's what Ecclesiastes does. It brings us up close and personal with the inevitability of death.

It doesn't gloss over how unpredictable life can be. It's told us to expect that right people won't always get into the right positions.

So, in short, Ecclesiastes reveals life to us as we really experience it. The teacher's not been dishonest. The teacher's not been dishonest. And that's how the whole Bible works.

[12 : 28] It names reality for us. But it doesn't just name what we see, but what we cannot see. It tells us that despite appearances to the contrary, it is only fools who don't acknowledge God.

That no matter what you see around you, God never loses control. And no matter your circumstances, those in Christ never lose His presence.

And we need words that make us truly wise. You see, in the end, wisdom is not really about acquiring enough skill and knowledge to exercise mastery over our lives.

I hope Ecclesiastes has made that clear over the last three months. Rather, wisdom is ultimately about being so on the same wavelength as our Creator that we instinctively know what direction He wants us to take.

It's really about developing godly character. That's why elsewhere in the Bible, we discover being wise goes hand in hand with being upright and true.

[13 : 51] In Proverbs 8, verse 6 to 7, wisdom is imagined as a lady speaking. And this is what Lady Wisdom says on the screen. Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say.

I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true. For my lips detest wickedness. So notice, being wise goes hand in hand with godliness.

So we need wise words because we need godliness. So what should we do with the teacher's words?

See them as what we really need. Take them as words which, because they are wise and upright and true, will form you into someone who is wise and upright and true.

Listen to them as words which can conform you to the image of Christ, the one who is completely wise and upright and true. as the counselor Paul Tripp once said, it is spiritual insanity to say that you believe in the one who is the ultimate source of all wisdom yet never crack open his word.

[15 : 22] So, when the teacher shares his observations with you, as for example in 5 verse 12, the sleep of a laborer is sweet whether they eat little or much but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep.

So let's just take this as an example. If you see these words, don't just let these words pass you by. Take them as formative words.

Consider as you read them, are you becoming someone who keeps saying, oh, I just need a little bit more. I'm not asking for a million dollars, but just a little bit more wealth.

And do you realise you are therefore actually becoming an insomniac? It's foolishness. And so take seriously the teacher's words whenever you encounter them, and by extension of scripture as words which form you.

Don't listen to them as mere information just to pass an examination. Don't listen to them in order to apply them to someone other than yourself.

[16 : 39] Listen to them instead as the teacher does by pondering and meditating upon them to be convicted and challenged and changed.

See them as necessary. And rely on these words as your ultimate source of authority. You see, in our world there are many voices.

That's what the second half of verse 12 tells us. Of making many books, there is no end. Even in the ancient world, there were plenty of libraries.

What more today? But the narrator is not just making the observation that there is an endless storehouse of information available to us. Rather, his big point is found in what he says next.

And much study worries the body. So this is what the narrator is really saying. Yes, there are many, many voices out there, and certainly some of it is helpful.

[17 : 48] He is not saying, don't read any books. He is not saying, don't ever study anything. But he is saying, in the end, they are not God given the way Ecclesiastes is.

They are not God given the way the entire Bible is. So don't let their voice carry more authority than the shepherd.

Don't be seduced into thinking that any voice out there will give you more than he can. So don't spend more time studying the work of ancient philosophers, modern day psychologists, or even learned theologians than you do the word of God.

If you do, all you will find is yourself being locked back into that cycle of wariness, exactly what our good shepherd has come to set you free from.

So yes, read many books. I certainly try to. But recognize there's only one book you truly need. There is no need to add to the wisdom that's already found in there.

[19 : 10] Are you convinced of that? is this what you truly rely on? How do you know? Well, here are some questions to ask yourselves.

Are you more familiar with the good news of the gospel or the news of the day? Do you know more about the life of Jesus or the life of celebrities?

Are you able to articulate the storyline of scripture from Genesis to Revelation better than the storyline of your favourite K-drama?

If not, it's time to remedy that. If you need help, as we all do, why not take advantage of some of the Bible classes we offer?

Consider taking that Old Testament class that's coming up, or Bible overview when we offer it again. Rely on these words as what you really need.

[20 : 10] Thirdly, receive these words as they are meant to be taken. We've just thought about what these words are.

God-given, wise, upright, and true. But how exactly are they to be taken? How are we to receive them?

Look at verse 11. the words of the wise are like goats. Now, goats are sharp sticks used by farmers and shepherds to keep cattle and oxen moving in the right direction.

They are not designed to injure the animal, but to inflict just enough pain to gain his full cooperation. So, if the animal went too far to the left, poke, there would be pain.

And if it goes too far to the right, there would be pain. Same result if it stops when it shouldn't. More pain. The only way an animal could avoid pain was to go the way of the shepherd.

[21 : 24] And that's how the teacher's words are meant to work. They are wise and true, but they also bring pain.

In fact, it might be more accurate to say that they bring pain precisely because they are wise and true, while we are so often the opposite. As we've been listening to Ecclesiastes over this past three months, I wonder, has the teacher wounded you?

Has his words caused us occasional pain? pain. That's a good thing because as the doctors in our congregation will tell you, pain tells us something is wrong.

Pain tells us something needs fixing. So perhaps you are someone who has made achievement the cornerstone of your life. You've worked hard, you've done well, you've completed your projects, you feel great.

how does it feel then to hear 2 verse 11 on the screen? Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was habelled, a chasing after the wind, nothing was gained under the sun.

[22 : 50] Painful, isn't it? Yet true, we needed those pain inducing words. Because deep down we know that that rush of euphoria we get won't last forever.

We know that those achievements aren't enough to provide us with a secure identity. Or perhaps you did all you can to make sure that you're the best at some particular thing so that you can gain a certain reward.

So you've read the right books or underwent the right training regime or got the best advice. But someone who didn't do half of what you did got promoted over you.

Or someone who isn't the best looking or charming still beat you to that particular girl. And you're left with the words of 9 verse 11 ringing in your ears.

The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favour to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.

[24 : 03] That's painful. And yet that's reality, not fantasy. You see, God's word is designed to be sharp.

And Ecclesiastes especially is designed to be God's cattle prawn. These words steer us away from the foolish paths of thinking we can control every part of our lives onto the life-giving paths of humility and contentment.

You see, what does God know about us? He knows we are gullible. He knows that we too easily buy into the false hopes that the world sells to us.

We exchange truth for a lie, thinking that if we just gain enough knowledge or if we attain just enough success or if we just gain the admiration of our peers, then we can live life to the full.

But again and again, the words of Ecclesiastes dispel that illusion. They deliberately shock us back to reality.

[25 : 15] They are meant to be goats, stopping us from going left or right, down dead ends, instead keeping us on the straight path.

That's why the teacher is always holding death before us, painful as that is. That way our minds are more focused.

So here's another question for you. When was the last time you allowed the Bible to poke you hard? God's word gave you a command, or it told you to give something up, or it asked you to take a different perspective, or it interrogated your motivations, and you didn't like it.

It hurt. And your temptation was to reinterpret those words, to explain it all away, so that you could say to yourself, oh, God didn't really mean that.

God wasn't really saying that. Well, that is sin, lying to you. Because it is only when you allow his word to humble your pride, upset your expectations, and challenge your thinking, that you really have an authentic relationship with God.

[26 : 36] But God's words are not just goats. In verse 10, we're told that the teachers search to find just the right words.

Now, more literally, it actually says what he was looking for was words of delight. He's looking for words of pleasure. We can see that in the form of the words we've read, haven't we?

Think of the poems that we've encountered in this book over the last three months. Think, for instance, of that poem in chapter three? There's a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to uproot, and so on.

It's a beautiful poem, one that has left such an impression that thousands of years later, it still hits home for us.

It was even made into a pop song in the 1960s. You see, God uses beauty to communicate truth to us. But it is not just the form, but the content as well.

[27 : 49] I was speaking with one of you last week during refreshments time, and you told me that one of your happy discoveries over the past few months was that Ecclesiastes was actually nowhere as depressing as you thought.

You felt liberated to know that you can enjoy good food without guilt, that you can take pleasure in a fulfilling job, that you are free to find happiness in all that as you acknowledge that these are all good gifts from God.

That's how God wants us to receive his words. As painful sometimes, yes, but really in the end as delightful people, because they are designed to drive you back to the good shepherd, the source of all delight.

So let these words, verse 11, be like firmly embedded nails. Now, it's possible that could simply be another way of saying they are like goats, they wound, they bring pain, but perhaps they're invoking a slightly different image.

Firmly fixed nails, you see, can hold something in place well. And if so, then perhaps what God is saying to us is to hold these words firmly in place in our minds.

[29 : 19] Hide them in our hearts and let them bear the weight of whatever this hebal world throws at us. that way you can stand firm.

And that way you can resolve to live out the purpose of these words. That's our fourth and final thing to do today. Resolve to live out the purpose of these words.

For in the end, what is the end goal of the teacher? In the end, why does God give us the book of Ecclesiastes?

Well, here's why. Come back with me first of all to 12 verse 8. Here we find the teacher's conclusion and what is it?

Hebal, says the teacher. Everything is hebal. There is nothing you can finally gain while you live under the sun. So that's his conclusion.

[30 : 21] But that is not the end. Because what is the significance of this conclusion? What implication can we draw from how he sums up his journey?

Answer? If this world is hebal, then by implication, we should therefore hold on to what is not hebal.

we should look only to what is of eternal significance. And so the conclusion of 12 verse 8 should then lead us to the further conclusion of 12 verse 13.

Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the duty of all mankind. Now actually in the Hebrew, the word duty is not there.

More literally, it says this is the whole of man. This is the essence of humanity. Want to know how to be an authentic human?

[31 : 32] This is it. Fear God and keep his commandments. fear God and keep God and keep God and keep God and keep God and keep love God and keep God.

That's the essence. And wait a minute, doesn't the Bible tell us over and over, do not be afraid. But you see, the Bible distinguishes between different kinds of fear.

There is an ungodly fear, a fear that flows from sin, a fear that is at odds with the love of God, because it is a fear that sees God not as he truly is, but as harsh, hostile, heartless.

It is the fear displayed by the unfaithful servant in Jesus' parable of the ten minas, where he complains to his master, I was afraid of you because you are a hard man.

And when people fear God this way, ironically, it breeds disobedience rather than obedience. Because if we see God as a severe slave master and not as a sympathetic shepherd, we will fully trust him.

[33 : 04] And we won't fully give ourselves over to him. But the Bible says that is not the fear we want. What we want is a godly fear.

We can see the distinguishing of such fears, for example, in Exodus 20. Let me just give you the context. There God has just appeared in fire and smoke and he's given the ten commandments.

And so the people are absolutely terrified. But listen to what Moses says to them, 20 verse 20 on the screen. Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.

So notice, on the one hand, Moses says, don't be afraid, don't fear God. And yet he also says, let the fear of God be in you. So clearly there is a distinction between ungodly and godly fear.

But what is that difference? It is this. Godly fear of the Lord comes from seeing him as he truly, truly is.

[34 : 22] It's to feel the awesome wake of his holiness. It's to be silenced by his majesty. It is to be overwhelmed by his undeserved mercy. And it's to be astounded by his love.

Fearing God is simply the other side of the coin of loving God. For as we see him as he really is, we rejoice and fall down and tremble that such a magnificent God wants to know us, love us, and be our shepherd.

It's why in Mark chapters 4 and 5, that as soon as Jesus calmed the storm and cast away the impure spirit that tortured the man, people fell in fear of him.

For was Jesus doing something awesome? Yes. That's why people were terrified. But was he at the same time also doing something loving?

Yes. And that is why Jesus asked them then to exercise a fear born out of faith to recognize who he really is.

[35 : 43] And it is this kind of fear in the end that will lead us to true obedience. The two go together. It is the kind of fear you have when you want to please the one you love.

That you don't want to fall short of pleasing that person. It's the kind of mindset that, as the theologian John Calvin puts it, restrains itself from sinning.

Not out of dread of punishment alone, but because it loves and reveres God as father. It worships and adores him as lord.

Even if there were no hell, it would still shudder at offending him alone. And so this fear alone, as Proverbs 1 verse 7 famously puts it, is the beginning of wisdom.

This fear is the motivator of obedience. For this fear, verse 14, recognizes God as the chief justice of the entire universe.

[36 : 56] God knows all we do, and one day, he will bring it to light. But if we hold on to God's word, well, that is not a fear that will be a terror to us.

Why not? Because according to God's word, Jesus has the last word. And this is what Jesus says in John 5 verse 22 to 24.

The father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the son, that all may honor the son just as they honor the father.

Whoever does not honor the son does not honor the father who sent him. And very truly, I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.

And when we know this is Jesus' last word, all ungodly fear is banished. God is replaced instead by a godly, loving fear, one who recognizes who Jesus is and one in which we resolve to live out the purpose of the teacher's words.

[38 : 26] Because we discover the chief justice is our chief shepherd who loves us. And our chief shepherd is the chief justice who makes all things right.

And in the end, only his judgment matters. Not the judgments of those who mock your faith. Not the judgments of those who wonder why you're not in the rat race.

Only his judgment matters. Is that not good? Nils. So this is the message of Ecclesiastes.

Life under the sun is hebel. Yet it still comes to us as a gift. You can enjoy whatever pleasure it brings you. But more than that, it should cause us to look up beyond the sun to the one who alone can give you eternal life.

life is too short for us not to invest in eternity. So my brothers and sisters, what will you do with the words of Ecclesiastes?

[39 : 49] Fear God, keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. time. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you that you speak to us. And I pray now that you will help us to soak these words in. May your spirit bring these words and plant them deep inside of us.

and we pray, Lord, that we would see you as you truly are, the holy, awesome, majestic God who loves us, who will bring every deed into judgment, and who has covered us by the blood of Christ.

So we pray that we would live all our lives to the glory of your name, to fear you, to keep your commandments, and to rejoice as we look forward to that day when we can see you face to face.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.