

The Conclusion: Fearing God

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 *And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs.* ¹⁰ *The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright -- words of truth.* ¹¹ ¶ *The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.* ¹² *And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh.* ¹³ ¶ *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all.* ¹⁴ ¶ *For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.*

Not too long ago, a book was published with a very interesting title: *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*. To think that God, the deity, is manageable is what the world wants you to think. You can have Him when you want to. He can Shepherd you, satisfy you here and there. God is manageable. The book says that is a dangerous illusion. It is an illusion. Like the magician who makes you think something has disappeared when it really hasn't, so the world presents the illusion that God is a manageable deity. The writer says that's a dangerous illusion. Because in the end, that manageable deity you thought you could switch on and off will judge you and everyone else for every good and evil work. But that is really what Ecclesiastes has been arguing against: the illusion of a manageable deity. The false idea that God can be inconsequential to our lives.

As Solomon finishes this book, he writes something of an epilogue. He does a short review of his work. He rejects alternatives, and then He restates the conclusion of the book.

I. Review of His Work

And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright -- words of truth. ¶ The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.

Solomon closes up the book by telling you what he has told you.

Here he tells you that he was qualified to write this book. He was wise. Is he boasting? No. As Paul says,

1 Corinthians 4:7 *And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*

Who made Solomon wise? God Himself. Solomon asked for a heart of wisdom to govern the people of Israel wisely, and God answered his request.

He also tells you that he was diligent. You see three verbs in verse 9 – he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. Solomon meditated, and researched and then arranged his findings. This book of Ecclesiastes was not a slapdash, spontaneous recording of his random thoughts. This was a rigorously evaluated, carefully written and wisely arranged book of wisdom.

Verse 10 tells us that he had to find a balance between acceptable, that is pleasing words, and words of truth. He didn't want his words to be harsh and bitter, because no one would accept them. But he also didn't want his words to be so pleasing that they compromised the truth. So he wrote this book seeking to find the balance between words that are pleasing and hope-giving, with words that hit us

between the eyes.

Verse 11 reminds us of his method through this book. He used goads and he used well-driven nails given by the good shepherd. The goads were painful realities designed to push us to act, designed to move us out of the false comfort the world gives us. The nails were the eternal truths that he hammered down, establishing, stabilising, permanent truths to build your life on.

He did both. He poked us and pricked us and popped our bubbles and pulled off the pretty wrapping paper of the stinking garbage of sin. But he also built us a tent to weather this life and hammered in the stakes one by one. The goads are sometimes just truths that any unbeliever could figure out by honestly observing life. But the nails were given by the Shepherd. They are divine revelation of what life is about.

II. Rejection of Alternatives

12 And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh.

Solomon gives a warning. There is no end to the writing and making of books, and studying those books is wearisome. Now some people who don't like reading and don't like studying have tried to make this verse champion their cause. But Solomon is not criticising writing or studying. He is speaking specifically about the kind of wisdom books that he has just written. In Solomon's time, there was a huge amount of literature from Egypt and Assyria. When Daniel and his friends were taken in Babylon, they had to spend three years learning the literature and language and learning of the Chaldeans. Philosophy and wisdom literature was abounding. Solomon says, you can spend your life and weary your flesh chasing down every book which claims to have the final answer to what life is about and how to be happy and fulfilled, and all you will do is weary yourself. Solomon says – you have the very words of the Shepherd. This book is inspired. It is truthful. Don't look for alternative explanations about how to live life. Read His Word and believe it.

III. Restatement of the Conclusion

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter”

That can also be translated “When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is”

If somehow you have missed it throughout the book, he is going to repeat it and make it abundantly clear. This is where all roads lead. This is where the goads should have pushed you. This is what all the nails of truth have been saying:

Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all.

Fear God and obey Him, because that is the whole of man. This is the completion of man; this is man's whole duty; this is why you are here. Fear God and keep His commandments.

Now why does Solomon put it that way? Why does he say, fear God? Why does he not say like Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart, soul and mind?” Jesus said that is the first and greatest commandment: to love God.

So either we have a contradiction, or we have two ways of saying the same thing. Either Solomon says – the main aim of life is to fear God, and Jesus says, no, the main aim of life is to love God, or else Solomon and Jesus are saying the same thing. Since we believe Solomon was inspired by the

very same Shepherd who told us to love God, it seems that they are saying the same thing. In fact, fearing God and loving God are often said in the same breath:

Deuteronomy 10:12 ¶ " And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

Psalms 112:1 Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, Who delights greatly in His commandments.

So the big question is this: why did Solomon choose to use the word 'fear'? Why *fear* God?

Fearing God is the opposite of how the world wants you to experience God. It is the opposite of every type of thinking that Solomon has opposed in his book. When you fear God, God is a weighty and pressing reality to you. His Person and Presence affect you. He has power that is terrifying. He will judge in a way that should grip us with respect. He has kindness that ought to leave us hungering for more.

But the world we live in argues against that all the time. A secular world says this: God may or may not exist, but His existence makes no difference to my life. The world system says God doesn't matter. He may be true; He may not, so what? God is inconsequential. The idea of God is as unimportant as the idea of unicorns and griffins. Maybe, maybe not, who cares. I've got bigger fish to fry.

What you have to understand, Christian, is that is precisely the kind of thinking that the Bible is warning you about when it says, "Do not be conformed to this world" or "Love not the world". Worldliness is not necessarily the individual items or experiences. The mall itself is not necessarily worldly. A particular place, a particular thing you read or watch or hear, may not always be worldly. But the combined sum total of living in a world system controlled by Satan is to give you the impression God doesn't matter. The world system leaves you with the sense that you can live a perfectly happy and reasonable life without God at the centre.

When you walk away from a good hour or two of immersion in TV, radio or film, do you not often feel that you take this Christianity thing a bit too seriously? I mean really, it isn't that serious. We're all good, happy people, trying our best; God is a faceless genie up there somewhere who doesn't really care what we do.

Secularism makes you feel that anything more than a convenient God is fanatical. A thoroughly secular person thinks you are nothing short of hysterical in your religion if you go to church more than once a week, if you consistently read the Bible, if you try to worship God privately every day, if you tell others that they too need to be reconciled to God. When you do that, you're acting like God really matters. As if He is a reality that can change your life.

To be a part of this world system is to live as if God is manageable and disposable. You can call on Him when you are in a tight spot. You can call on Him when you need some cheering up or some encouragement. You can reference Him when you want to feel like there is a purpose to your life. But for the rest of the time, you can just switch Him off. Dismiss Him. He certainly doesn't need to be hovering around condemning your actions, does He? No.

Evolution fights hard to make God inconsequential. The creation shouts of the glory of God, and speaks to every heart of God's wise design. But evolution says all things exist because of slow and

steady adaptations that took place over millions of years. Life arose spontaneously from non-life. The universe began either from a previous universe, or from nothing. As absurd as those ideas are, it is the powerful religion of our day that keeps God from being of any consequence. If we can explain away apparent design, we don't need a Designer, so He doesn't matter.

You see, here's the interesting thing about this book. Solomon keeps using the word *vanity*, which means weightless, empty, wind. He has kept showing you how life lived apart from God is weightless. This is the irony: Those who treat God as weightless and inconsequential, end up experiencing life that way. If you remove the centre of life and make Him weightless, all of life loses its grounding, like a helium balloon cut free. Remove God as the solid iron anchor of life and all of life floats up, up and away.

On the other hand, to fear God is to be so deeply aware of the reality of God that you could never act as if He does not matter. I think that explains the use of the word *fear*. When we fear something, we don't dismiss it. When we fear something, we don't act as if it doesn't matter. When we fear something, we think about it, we respond to it, we react to it.

I think the word *love* can sound almost harmless when dealing with people who already treat God as weightless. Love God sounds like love kittens or love my chicken-soup. But fear God says God is bigger than you, older than you, holier than you, stronger than you and His reality must intrude upon your life in ways that cause you to respond.

The kind of people you tell to love God, are the kind of people who already know that loving God involves reverence and awe and deep commitment. But to people on the outside of that, you say, fear God. God must matter to you.

So what has this book taught us about fearing God?

God is the Supreme Sovereign:

Through the book, Solomon pricked you with painful thoughts if you want God to be nothing more than a pleasant thought now and then. In chapter 1, he said that life just seems to be an endless cycle. In chapter 3 he said there is a time for this and a time for that, and 1 minus 1 is zero, and the whole thing seems pointless and out of control.

You can't change or choose much of what goes on in your life. Not only that, but you can't understand why things happen the way they do. And worst of all, you are going to die without understanding it and often without having made much progress.

And if you want to live as if God is weightless, then life is vanity. Life is a huge chaotic mess of events and experiences and impressions that is impossible to sort through.

But to fear God is to believe God is the Supreme Sovereign.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.*

Ecclesiastes 3:14 *I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does it that men should fear before Him.*

Ecclesiastes 7:13 *Consider the work of God; For who can make straight what He has made crooked?*

God is working every event in the universe according to His perfect plan. Whether anyone realises it or not, God sits on a throne and He gives orders. And they are carried out infallibly. His throne is

not imaginary. It is not inconsequential. It is the centre point of all existence. That doesn't make you passive. It makes you confident to cast your bread upon the waters, make decisions that please God, knowing He is in control.

The only way the truth of God's Supreme sovereignty will rest upon you heavily is when Scriptures are deeply embedded in your consciousness, Scriptures like the ones we have read, or Scriptures like:

Psalm 115:3 *But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.*

Daniel 4:35 *All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"*

Isaiah 46:10 *Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,'*

We should have texts like that in our hearts, and we should rejoice with trembling. And sometimes, what will make those texts seem to glow, like ashes turning again to fire, is when suffering comes our way. When loved ones die, or are harmed. When disease strikes. When money grows short. When the shadows of life grow longer and death seems taller and nearer than before, that's when the God-fearing person can say, "**2 Samuel 10:12** *And may the LORD do what is good in His sight*"

We've seen something else in Ecclesiastes.

God is the Supreme Lord and Judge.

If you want a world where God is weightless and pointless, then Solomon showed you what a weightless and pointless life that becomes. He showed you again and again, in chapter 3 and chapter 4, and chapter 8 and chapter 10, that men oppress each other. People get into a place of power, and they use that power to pad their own pocket, to harm others, to perform all kinds of injustice and cruelty, and those that are under them can do nothing but suffer. Very often the laziest, least competent, most corrupt, cruelest people get into power. And for the most part, they get away with it. And then, on top of that, they die, and the people they harmed also die. And if God doesn't matter, then the whole thing is a big cruel joke. Life is pointless, weightless, if God is weightless. But to fear God is to believe He is the Supreme Lord and Judge.

Ecclesiastes 3:17 *I said in my heart, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."*

Ecclesiastes 12:14 ¹⁴ ¶ *For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil*

That means you believe that every word, thought and deed performed by every moral creature, human and angel is being recorded by God. It means you believe that God has a standard, a law, by which He perfectly judges good and evil. As the Supreme King and Lord, He calls on us to obey. To fear God is to feel my obligation to obey. It is to feel the seriousness of my sin. It is to feel the weight of my duty to God.

How easy is it for you to shrug off your obligations to God? How easy is it for you to rationalise your behaviour? Is it an easy thing for you to neglect the Word of God, prayer, corporate worship, the Lord's Supper? How easy is it for you to cancel on God? How easy is it for you to go truant on God? How easy is it for you to tell that 'white lie', to keep looking at what offends God, to fail to defend His name when it is being blasphemed?

It also means that you believe you will give an account for everything you do. So will everyone else. That sets you free to stop fretting about injustice, to submit to your earthly authorities and trust the final result to God. A God-fearing person accepts authority because he or she deeply feels God's authority.

One again, we need to hear texts like this in our minds:

Philippians 2:9-11 *Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Romans 14:7-9 *For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

Revelation records that when the Lord Jesus begins to pour out His wrath on this world, people will seek death and will not find it. They will call out on rocks to cover them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. On that day, Jesus will not be weightless to them anymore.

There is a third thing which this book has taught us about God

God is the Supreme Shepherd

This book has shown us what happens when you no longer want God to be your guide. If you dismiss God's wisdom to lead you through life, it becomes very confusing, very mysterious and quite depressing. If you turn to worldly wisdom, it doesn't provide the answers. If you try to comprehend all of life, it puzzles you. If you try to direct your own life, you can feel like a leaf tossed in the ocean.

Without God, life becomes like reading to the illiterate. There is a mass of figures everywhere, but it doesn't make sense. You cannot decode it. You can't understand it. It all becomes relative. Nothing has more meaning or weight than anything else. Life doesn't have a centre, and it doesn't have distinction. It's just a big soup of experiences.

The God-fearing person knows that God is the Supreme Shepherd, who gives wisdom, to make life sensible, and to guide through it. Ecclesiastes again and again exhorted us to seek wisdom, to seek God's mind.

Do you know how many people feel utterly and completely lost? Not now and then, all the time! They wake up feeling pointless. Life happens to them. They drift. They wander. They grope. They latch onto this and that to try to make sense of things. They distract themselves. But they know that they do not know where they are, how they got there, where they are going, or where they ought to go.

To fear God is to know Him as the Shepherd.

Psalms 25:14 *The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, And He will show them His covenant.*

Proverbs 9:10 *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

God-fearing believers think often on things like:

Psalm 32:8 *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.*

Proverbs 3:5-7 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. ⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil.*

Do you know Him as your Shepherd? Does the truth that He is a guiding, leading, helping, nourishing, feeding, protecting Shepherd rest heavily upon you? Does Psalm 23 resonate with you? Then you fear Him.

God is the Supreme Satisfier

Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon showed us the dead ends of seeking the things in life as ends in themselves. In chapter 2 he described having possessions, entertainment, sexual pleasure. He described getting wealthy and popular in chapter 5 and 6. He described being falsely religious in chapter 5. But if you try to make God weightless and peripheral, all these things turn to vapour in your mouth before you can even swallow. All the parties, pleasures, friends, fortunes and good times end and your stomach growls because it is hungrier for pleasure and satisfaction than it ever was before.

But what has Ecclesiastes shown us? God is the Supreme Satisfier. He will not be outstripped by His gifts. He cannot be found inferior to a work of His hands. He has shown again and again that He wants us to rejoice, but to rejoice through the gifts in Him.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 *Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. ¹⁹ As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor -- this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.*

Did you ever stop to think who created pleasure? Who made our taste buds to enjoy certain tastes, and then who made the foods that match those taste buds? Who made our ears to hear, and our minds to enjoy music, and then made music to match that? Who made the eye to delight in colour and beauty and symmetry, and then made millions of beautiful things to look at? Who made your skin to enjoy warmth, and then made warmth to be enjoyed? Who made your mind able to enjoy learning and discovery and then filled the universe with things to discover? Who made you capable of heights of joy you have not begun to realise?

The person who does not fear God is trying to squeeze joy out of a world where the Creator of these joys is absent. It is like a person scrounging around a bank to see if there are any coins that have been left on the ground by mistake. There is a world, no, an eternity of joy for the ones who will seek it in God Himself.

The God-fearing person thinks often on texts like this:

Psalm 16:11 *You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

John 15:11 *"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*

Psalm 63:3-5 *Because Your loving-kindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. ⁴ Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. ⁵ My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness,*

And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.

Proverbs 19:23 *The fear of the LORD leads to life, And he who has it will abide in satisfaction; He will not be visited with evil.*

If you fear God, you are gripped by the seriousness of showing God to be more valuable than anything else. You are pressed upon to avoid idolatry, and to be serious about pursuing joy in God. This is a God-fearing person: a born-again believer who believes that God is the Supreme Sovereign, the Supreme Lord and Judge, the Supreme Shepherd and the Supreme Satisfier. So you are gripped with a profound trust in His control, a deep sense of submission, obedience and accountability to His rule, a strong sense of peace and comfort and dependence on His Shepherding, and a rich rejoicing, delighting, thanking, praising joy in who He is to you.

You need to be gripped by a sense of how hard you have to fight to feel the weight of God's glory in a world which does everything to make it seem like He is weightless. If you do not fight for your faith, you will slowly succumb to worldliness, the essence of which is the belief that God doesn't matter. And you will come to church, and sing hymns and read the Bible here and there, but for the most part, your life will be secular. God will not really make a difference to you, or through you.

You must fight for faith. You must be in the Word. You must be learning and reading, and thinking, and memorizing. You must pray to God, often. You must gather with God's people, and come under the accountability and authority of His Word expressed in the church. You must give yourself to worship and fellowship and discipleship. You must want to spread the knowledge of God to others, instead of acting like they do – that He doesn't matter.

According to this 3000 year-old book that we have studied for the past seven months you ultimately have two choices in life: choose a weightless God with the resultant weightless, empty life, or choose the weighty God of Scripture, and experience the life of deep satisfaction, guidance, submission and trust.