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The Conclusion of the Matter
Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series
Ecclesiastes 12:8-14
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So, at the end of the day, where exactly is meaning to be found...where is meaning to be found? That's the question, really, that has framed our study this summer in Ecclesiastes. We've joined the Preacher on this quest for meaning, and it is a critically important quest. A life without meaning, a life without purpose, is a life that ultimately will come, at the end of the day, to feel empty, and it will lead to a life that is floundering and that is withering. It will lead to a soul-crushing existence. A life without meaning is the exact opposite of what is intended by God for human beings. It makes this question, "Where exactly is meaning to be found?" into one of the most critical questions any person can ask, and it makes finding an answer to that question absolutely critical.

We've been looking at this book all summer, and now, today, we finally are concluding our study of Ecclesiastes. And today, as the author brings this book to a close, he is going to say, in crystal clear terms, how to find a life with deep meaning. So, let's look at what he has to say today as we finish the book. We're going to be in Ecclesiastes, Chapter 12, beginning in verse 8, where the author summarizes what the Preacher has been saying all summer. Verse 8:

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!" (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 12:8)

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." In verse 8, it seems that what we have is kind of a concluding statement, a summarizing statement by the author of Ecclesiastes. That author might be the Preacher himself. It might be someone different. We don't know exactly, but essentially what's happening here, is the author is now kind of zooming out and saying, "Here's kind of how we summarize all that the Preacher has said. **"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."**

I think we can agree that's a fairly depressing, concluding statement, a fairly depressing summarizing statement of the Preacher's words. But it does resonate with me because it seems as though, despite the highs that the Preacher has hit on a few moments, at a few different times, the recurring theme is vanity. It's smoke...vapor...chaos. The world is messy. It's also somewhat depressing as a summarizing statement, because it is precisely where the Preacher began. You might remember that all the way back in June, when we began this study in chapter 1, verse 2, this is precisely how the Preacher's reflections were introduced. Ecclesiastes 1:2 says:

**"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."**

That's where he began, and that's how the author summarizes his reflections—these bookends of vanity. The Preacher hit some high moments, and I was thankful last week as Matt walked through chapter 12, verses 1-7. In that moment, there was a little clarity about where the Preacher arrived. He understood that he had come from God, and He will return to God. So, he was saying, "Rejoice and remember that." And yet, the author of Ecclesiastes still steps back and says, "Yes, but the

overriding, overarching theme of your reflection is vanity." It's that the world is messy. We can't escape it. So that's what he summarizes in verse 8. And I guess the question is, "Where does that leave us? Is that where we have to end, right back where we started in June?" Thankfully, the author has 6 verses left, 6 verses to take us to a conclusion, and he's going to do it. He has summarized the Preacher's words, and now he kind of steps to the forefront, and he has a few thoughts of his own he would like to bring to us. He begins by kind of offering a description of what the Preacher has done, what his vocation, his job, has been. Verse 9:

In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. (Vs. 9-10)

So, in the concluding thoughts of the author, the first thing he does is describe what the Preacher has done. And we can affirm that he has been quite diligent in his search, as we've studied and walked with him throughout the summer. He possesses some wisdom, and he did acquire knowledge, and he sought to arrange wise thinking, and he has been incredibly persistent in that. We can affirm that he has not given up. In verse 10, though, we do find something of a claim that's hesitant on the part of the author, maybe a kind of hesitant affirmation of the Preacher, because he says that he **sought to find delightful words**. He **sought** to write words of truth correctly, essentially suggesting that his search was noble.

We can affirm his search, but it also raises the question, "Did he really answer his question suitably? Did he arrive at a good answer?" And the answer there that we have to say is, "Not really." He didn't get all the way there. He had great intentions. His quest was noble, but, at the end of the day, we can say that his tale is more of a cautionary tale for us. It's somewhat of a description of what not to do. As we look at the Preacher's life, I think we can say he asked some really hard questions. He was diligent in his search, but I don't know that I want to copy his method. I don't know that I want to follow his example.

For example, in chapter 2, we're told that he just said, "You know what? Maybe meaning is to be found in debauchery, so I'm going to pursue a life of foolishness and of drink. Let's see how that goes." I don't think anyone went home and suggested that to a friend or to your children and said, "Hey, here's what we'd recommend. We learned this in church today." Right? Not an example to follow but maybe a good example to learn from. And we can confirm that he was diligent in his pursuit, but what he was trying to do, essentially, was to figure out, "How do you find meaning"... and he kept repeating this phrase, "under the sun"? In so many ways that's just kind of a summary statement for doing it without God, doing the best *we* can possibly do.

Bryan has said over and over again that a good definition of wisdom is, "Wisdom is skillful living." Skillful living leads to a life that is deeply meaningful, a life that arrives at meaning and purpose. If I could describe the way the Preacher has gone about it, over the course of the summer, I think I would describe his pursuit of wisdom, his pursuit of a life of meaning, as a method or a strategy that was defined by trial and error. He'd try something, then realize it doesn't work. He'd try another thing, and realize it doesn't work. Over and over again, he'd turn to drink and to folly and to success and to money, and every time, essentially, it's like he would walk down a dead end. He'd hit his head against the wall, and then he'd have to turn around and try something else. And that is a

strategy, but it is incredibly painful. This trial and error methodology to discover meaning is a painful way to acquire wisdom, and perhaps that's why, as the author continues, he does issue a warning about wisdom. Verse 11:

The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd.

So, it's kind of a confusing metaphor. Wisdom is somehow **like goads** and like **well-driven nails**. A **goad** was essentially a tool that a shepherd would use. It would be a staff or a stick that he would use to prod the sheep as they veer off course. It would hurt them, but it drove them back onto the path that he wanted them to be on. We know, of course, what nails do, but the question is, "How are they similar?" I think the answer is, "Both a nail and a goad are very useful." They bring about a desired outcome, but they also are violent instruments. A nail can cut you. It certainly can hurt you. It's sharp and could be dangerous. and a goad is certainly painful. The sheep experiences the goad as something that is painful, but it is something that brings about a desired outcome. When a shepherd uses a goad to get a sheep back on track, I don't think, in that moment, the sheep is very thankful for that goad. It's not fun sometimes. The author is saying, "Wisdom can be that way. Learning to live skillfully can hurt at times, but the pain that occurs is worth it, if wisdom is acquired...if we land at a place where we have a life full of meaning."

So, I think we can all say that there have been parts of the summer that maybe have been a little painful. Some of the questions, the prodding, the exposing questions that the Preacher asked, maybe were a little difficult. He said something like this, "Hey, you think your work is meaningful? Give me a break. Someone's going to come after you, and they're going to do it better than you anyway, and you're going to be forgotten." Boy, happy Sunday morning! You know? That's painful; that's painful. But if you linger on that question, and you consider what that means, you might, (and this is what we tried to do all summer) ...you might arrive at a good conclusion, which is, "Work is no place to find our identity." Work does not provide ultimate meaning. There's a different place to seek ultimate meaning, but I think we can agree that process can be a little painful. That is what wisdom can be like.

One woman last night, said to me, "I'm so thankful we are done with this book!" (*laughter*) It's honest. Wisdom can be painful, especially if you try to acquire it with the method that the Preacher has used, constantly having to try everything...wisdom sought under the sun. But in verse 11, the author is reminding us that wisdom is intended to help. It is intended to bring about loving corrections. So, even though it might be painful, ultimately the author is saying that they've been given by the one shepherd God uses with these questions, this prodding, to bring us onto a right path, to know how to navigate life rightly. It's intended to bring about a good outcome, to pursue meaning where it can actually be found.

So, the question is, "What is the best way to acquire it?" Should we continue to do what the Preacher has done, and should we continue to listen to people like the Preacher? Is that the best method for the acquisition of wisdom? Verse 12:

But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body.

I don't like that verse, because I like to buy books. My wife always says, "Another book? Have you read the last one?" I say, "No, but I will, eventually." The seeking of wisdom through the questions, the prodding, it's not bad. It's a good thing to do. But I think we can all admit this experiential search for wisdom can really wear us out. It wore the Preacher out. Wisdom, particularly wisdom searched for under the sun, wisdom searched for and sought to be acquired simply by what I can muster on my own, can be a wearying journey.

If you were to go to a philosophy section in a bookstore, at a library, or maybe a self-help section, what you will find is everyone offering their strategy for skillful living. Here's the way you can find a life that is deeply meaningful. One author will say something different than the next author, and they'll say something different than the author that's about to write the book that's coming in two years. And if you keep following all these different gurus, so to speak, that are saying, "Hey, here's my experience; you can learn from it," and if you just keep taking strategy after strategy, you end up bumping your head against the wall over and over, and it can be an exhausting journey. That's why the author says, "**Be warned...be warned!**" Pursuing wisdom, in this way, can be an endlessly tiring experience. It can be exhausting. You keep bumping into a dead end, and yeah, you might make some progress, but you've got a lot of bruises on your forehead. Is that the way to go about finding meaning in life? Is that the best we can do? Well, as we come to the final 2 verses, the author offers us a better way. Verse 13:

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to every person.*

It's a universal statement. Universally, everyone needs to live a life of meaning. And here the author is saying, "This is a strategy that applies to **every single person.**" Verse 14:

For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Period! End of chapter! End of book! That's it! Abrupt, and to the point! Verse 13 couldn't come kind of more out of left field. He just jumps in, and he ends it. He brings it all to a close. It's a little bit like the author is saying to the Preacher, "Okay, we've heard from you. Let me summarize everything. Let me give the final answer...the bottom line." And what is the bottom line? "**Fear God and keep His commandments.**" Do that, knowing that a day is coming when the Lord will judge all things. He will set everything right. He will bring justice to the earth. He will separate good from evil. Two instructions: "**Fear God. Keep His commandments.**" And a motivation: "Do it because you have a God, and you serve a God that is going to sort things out in the end." And that's it...incredibly basic!

Last night, the same woman said, "Couldn't it just have been Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, and we call it a day?" I think the Lord knows we are apt to try to do it on our own, so we've watched that throughout this study. But here, in this moment, we get back to the basics. We get back to the bottom line. And the danger here is that these two statements and this motivation are so basic that we're bound to maybe just breeze right by them, and we can't do that! We have to do what we did all summer...where we stop, and we linger, and we think about the things he's saying.

He says, "**Fear God.**" We sing about that every week, and I think all of us would say, "Yes, we fear God." But all of us also need to just pause for a moment and say, "Do I? Do I fear God? Do I live in awe of Him? Do I cherish Him? Do I love Him? Do I think of Him as the greatest Being imaginable? The One who is all-wise? The One who is magnificent...all-powerful, all-good, all-loving?" Fear God. Cherish Him. Admire Him. "Do I do that?"

Now, if I do, it will lead me to the second instruction. The second instruction flows from the first, "**Keep His commandments.**" Now we are so bound, as people, to take that legalistically. That is what we have done over and over with that instruction. We are bound to think, "Well, I keep His commandments so that He'll be happy with me." But that is not the point. The point is that as I love God, as I am in awe of Him, I will come to cherish everything that flows from His mouth. I will come to cherish His thoughts. I will come to cherish His ways...His intentions. I'll be so, so caught up in admiring Him, that when He speaks, when He gives a commandment, I'll say, "Surely this is as good as Him, because He is the most magnificent Being imaginable."

My love of God and my obedience, or my keeping of His commandments, are intricately linked. I do what He says because I just think He's the greatest. The God who is the God of all wisdom has told us how to walk through life. Are we people that cherish that? Now there are moments, if I'm honest, where I do not. I do not cherish it as much as I wish I would. But when I don't, I don't beat myself up about my missteps. What I do, try to do, is drive back to the question, "Where am I not thinking highly enough about who God is?" Because if I don't follow His ways, it must mean that I think my way is better. But He is the all-wise One. It drives me back to fear of Him, to awe of God. The author is saying, at the end of the day, this is the only surefire solution, the only surefire strategy, for a life that is filled with meaning. Final answer: "**Fear God. Keep His commandments.**"

As I think about the Preacher's strategy throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, I kind of describe it as a trial and error, or a "do-it-yourself" method. You know what? Maybe I do know what's best. I'm going to do this on my own terms. I'm going to try this out for a while. I know God says this, but maybe I know better. Maybe He's not quite up to date. I'm going to try this on for size. And the astounding thing about God is, He lets us approach life with the "do-it-yourself" method. He lets us embrace a trial-and-error strategy. But my question for us this morning is, "Why? Why would we embrace that strategy?" Why would we have that be our method in life when we serve the one who is all-wise, all-knowing, all-good, who loves us more than we could possibly know, and He has spoken? He has told us how to walk through life. Why would we do it ourselves when there is a better way?

Now, if we do that, if we fear God and we keep His commandments, will there be people inevitably that will do it a different way, that will say, "You know what? You're kind of out to lunch. What are you thinking?" Of course, there will be, and so, what do we do about them? Well, verse 14 makes it abundantly clear: That is God's job. God is the One that will judge at the end of time. He will set all things right. That is His job. We can release that to Him. We have one job, and that is to seek a life of deep meaning, grounded in a deep love of God and a full embrace of His ways, because He is good, and He is the ultimate source of all that is wise. One job for us: "**Fear God. Keep His commandments.**" That's it. That is the conclusion of the matter. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do come to You as the all-wise One, the all-knowing One, the One who is all-good, the One who is more loving than we can possibly even comprehend. And, Lord, we say to You: Help us be people who are constantly stirred up to love You more, to be more in awe of You, so that we might cherish, love, and rejoice in Your ways. May we be people who keep what You say, so that we might be led, by You, into the fullness of life, into deep meaning, into the life that You made us for. Lord, we ask that You would do it. We pray these things in Your name. Amen.

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