

Vanity, Words of Delight, and the End of the Matter
Ecclesiastes 12
December 19, 2021
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Read Ecclesiastes 12

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction

Will Smith just came out with an autobiography simply titled *Will*. I bought a copy for one of my brothers for Christmas, but before I wrapped it, I skimmed through it. (Anybody else do that with books they buy as gifts?) Now the book as a whole is not what we call “youth group appropriate,” definitely not a Christian book, not a recommendation; but it’s very honest. I wanted to read a couple of passages, see if they sound like anything else that we’ve been studying over the past few months.¹

“The thing about money, (women), and success is that when you don’t have them, you can justify your misery... [you think] *if I had money, (women), and success, I’d feel great!* However misguided that may be, it psychologically permeates as hope. But once you *are* rich, famous, successful – and you’re still insecure and unhappy – the terrifying thought begins to lurk: *Maybe the problem is me.*”

“I was unstoppable. It was the greatest streak of smash hits of any movie actor in Hollywood history. I became the highest-grossing film actor *ever*. And I still wasn’t even forty years old. The problem was, I’d conflated being successful with being loved and being happy. These are three separate things. And since I’d conflated them, I ended up suffering from... [a] ‘subtle sickness,’ which I can best describe as ‘more, more, more, more.’ *If I am more successful, I’ll be happier, and people will love me more.* I was trying to fill an emotional hole with external, material achievements. Ultimately, this kind of obsession is unsatiable. The more you get, the more you want, all the time never quite scratching the itch. You end up with a mind consumed by what it *doesn’t* have and what it *didn’t* get, and in a spiraling inability to enjoy what it *has.*”

“How many more consecutive #1 movies do I need? How much money would it take for me to feel safe and secure? How many Grammys or Academy Awards do I need to feel loved and approved of? How much healthier do my kids need to be? How many more times does Jada need to say, ‘I love you’? When will enough be enough?” The problem is, the more you get, the more you want. It’s like drinking salt water to quench your thirst... I started to recognize the game, the trick, the insanity... the attempt to fill a spiritual hole with external things. If unparalleled winning and achieving everything I’ve ever dreamed of does not secure perfect happiness and ultimate bliss, then what does?”

Now Will Smith is no King like Solomon, he’s just a “Fresh Prince,” but he is a bit of a modern-day searcher for meaning and significance. He’s someone who has accomplished an amazing amount, who has all the money, fame, and triumphs you could ask for. And yet, it’s as if the themes of Ecclesiastes “*all is vanity, chasing after the wind*” scream off the pages of his life story. And he’s not the only one. A man who knows Michael Jordan said that he is the most unhappy person he knows: “His worth was so wrapped up in playing basketball, and now that he can’t play anymore, he’s deeply unhappy.” When Tom Brady was interviewed on 60 Minutes by Charlie Rose after winning his third Super Bowl (2005), he said this: “I reached my goal, my dream, my life. I think it’s gotta be more than this. I mean, this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be. I mean, I’ve done it. I’m 27. And what else is there for me?”

¹ Will Smith with Mark Manson, *Will* (New York: Penguin, 2021), pp. 151, 333, 368.

Charlie asks him, “What’s the answer?” “I wish I knew, I wish I knew.”² Now, you could dismiss these guys as just hyper-competitive men who would never be satisfied with anything, but it’s worth pondering whether getting everything in life that you wanted from accomplishments won’t bring you the deep soul satisfaction that you think it will.³

As we come to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, I hope that we’ve gotten beyond seeing it as just the Biblical version of Eeyore and Oscar the Grouch – just pessimistic and gloomy. I hope we see its depth, its complexity, its timelessness. And its joy, its constant reminder to enjoy God’s gifts as a way to find sanity and meaning. At first, we are uncomfortable with Solomon being so bleak – believers in God shouldn’t admit all that disillusionment, we might think. And then we’re uncomfortable with his constantly telling us to eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of our toil – Christians shouldn’t get so excited about kicking back and feasting. But we have to face truth head on, that life is not going to be a steady stream of excitement and fun, but it’s also not going to be a joyless struggle until we die.

Let’s turn to our text, where the first section in this chapter is some advice for the reader before:

I. The End of Your Life (vv. 1-8)

¹ Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, ³ in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, ⁴ and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— ⁵ they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— ⁶ before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷ and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. ⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

“Remember your Creator” is the opening phrase, and there’s urgency to that phrase because we have the word “before” three times: before the evil days come (v. 1), before the heavenly bodies are darkened and everything wears out (vv. 2-5), and before the end of all things comes (vv. 6-7). When it says “Remember your Creator,” it doesn’t mean it in the way that you would recall your 10th birthday party or your glory days in high school or your wedding day. It’s not asking you to just think back to the fact that you have a Creator and hopefully you’ll get a warm feeling from that. No, this is an active remembering, a call to keep the Creator in your mind as you go about your days. The fact that He is your Creator means that everything about you was designed by Him. If you are an intelligent person, thank God that He gave you a sharp mind. If you are an athlete, thank Him for your natural talent. If you are a creative person, thank Him for hardwiring you with those sensibilities. If you are an introvert, thank Him that you feel things deeply. All the ways that God made you who you are a source of thanksgiving to Him; and also a way for you to take those innate gifts and talents and develop them for His glory.

“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth” - statistically, most people who come to faith in Jesus Christ will have done so before they turn 18. In fact, Barna surveys⁴ say that almost half of people who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before the age of 13. Only 23% of Christians

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TA4_fVkv3c

³ Mike Donehey, *Finding God’s Life for my Will* (New York: WaterBrook, 2019), pp. 36, 38.

⁴ <https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>

embraced Christ after the age of 21. We should look to bring young people to faith in Christ, but not only because they're more likely to make that decision early in life, but also for the simple fact that we have no idea how long people will live. No one should put off following God until they are older because we have no guarantee that we will live beyond today, much less many years from now.

But don't just follow God because you might die and not get a chance later, but follow God now, even as a youth, because you will live a life that you will be proud of; you will not have the kinds of regrets that people who live for themselves and for pleasure have. I heard a guy's testimony of the very wild hedonistic life he lived before coming to faith in Christ, and I said something flippant like, "Man, I wish I had a 'cool' testimony like that." And he said something to the effect of, "I would give anything to have your testimony – that you grew up in a Christian family, your parents loved you and shared Jesus with you, and you got to see God work in your life and not make the terrible decisions that I did." I'll never forget that. Of course, I have regrets and things I wished that I hadn't done in life, but I was reminded that I was so blessed to know God from an early age. I'm also so grateful for my 15 years in youth ministry that I got to pour into teens, and I'm so grateful for youth leaders and nursery workers here at CenterPoint who love our kids.

The majority of these verses are a vivid description of the opposite of creation. Verse 7 – *"the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it"* is a reversal of the description of Adam's creation. So remember your Creator who gave all of these things a beginning because He is also the One who will give these things an ending. Philip Ryken calls verses 2-6 "one of the most beautiful poems ever written about aging."⁵ He maintains that all of the images in those verses – the strong men, the grinders, the windows, the doors, etc. – are parts of the body that break down with age (the grinders are the teeth, the windows are the eyes, etc). Other commentators say that's a bit of a stretch, that they are images of the natural world decaying. Still others have seen these images as all of the activity in a village stopping when there is a funeral procession. Specifically, your funeral procession. Be ready for it because it will be here before you know it. Follow God when you are young before you get old and everything starts to shut down.

The end of 2 Corinthians 4 (4:16-5:1) talks about our earthly bodies breaking down:

"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Yes, our bodies break down, but our spirits will live on into eternity and be given heavenly bodies. Do not neglect the things that are eternal, don't worry so much about your earthly tent, your body, and neglect your relationship with your Creator, who has promised a heavenly body and home for those who are His. I have a friend who works in finance, this was his Facebook post last week: "From time to time, people ask me for financial/investing/retirement advice. All that is well and good, but make sure you spend more time thinking about your eternity than your retirement. It lasts quite a bit longer."

In verse 8, we have the final time that Solomon declares *"Vanity of vanity... all is vanity."* He has used the word vanity 38 times in the book! This is somewhat of a bookend with the very second verse in the book, as they are almost word-for-word the same. We'll come back to this word at the end, but I'm

⁵ Philip G. Ryken, *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes* (Glasgow, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015), p. 118.

so glad that Ecclesiastes didn't end with the "*all is vanity*" declaration. The next section has some practical reflections on how Solomon's writings should be taken, since we are at

II. The End of This Book (vv. 9-12)

⁹ 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.

The Preacher's aim throughout this book has been to give its readers knowledge to help them face life intelligently and honestly. Verse 10 says that he sought "words of delight" – the Hebrew word translated "delight" (*chephets*) can also mean matter or purpose. Benjamin Shaw says, "perhaps the idea is really that of words that are suitable, words that fit the situation. It gives the reader the image of a writer who has carefully sorted out all his thoughts, who has searched for the right words to express his thinking."⁶ This book has words that were carefully selected to carry an impact. For example, Solomon could have said, "Life feels empty," but how much more memorable when he says, it's like "striving after wind"?⁷ Solomon was a skillful thinker and writer.

"*The words of the wise are like goads*" – do you know what goads are? They are staffs or long sticks that are between 5 and 7 feet long with pointed ends used to get animals moving in the right direction.⁸ The Preacher's words, as is true of all of Scripture, have sharp edges that poke us to get us moving and redirect us when we go the wrong way. What happened to the words of delight? When did they become sharp sticks? They can be both a comfort and a prod. Everyone loves verses that make us feel good, but how do you feel about the Bible's instructions that makes you feel like you just got poked by a stick in the hindquarters? Do you dismiss anything that would make you feel pain or guilt? Would we rather ignore and explain away the difficult parts of the Bible that we don't want to exist, that we don't want to challenge us? Would we rather bury our heads in the sand and pretend that they are not true? We would be foolish to do so; better to face the truth in all its beauty and pain head on, and allow its heavenly Author to mold and shape us by renewing our minds.

Verse 11 says the words are given by one Shepherd, and it's capitalized because it's referring to God the Shepherd. Because all Scripture is God-breathed and written by men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Verse 12 essentially says that anything beyond the Scriptures should be handled with a little bit of skepticism. People are always writing and studying, there are over a million new books published every year! Now, we are not anti-study, anti-intellectual, as is sometimes the caricature of Christians – we just want to burn books, right? No way! Readers are leaders; if you want a deeper, richer thought life put the video games away, stop tweeting, and get back to reading real books. I have a goal of reading 50 books a year. Don't be impressed, some of them are like "Great Places to Play Golf in Scotland" and Will Smith's autobiography, not exactly "War and Peace." Reading is good, it develops our minds, but Solomon reminds us that it's not an end to itself. The Bible is the greatest thing to read, it trumps everything else, always reminding us what's important.

III. The End of the Matter (vv. 13-14)

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.

⁶ Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2019), p. 154.

⁷ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), p. 213.

⁸ Edward M. Curtis, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2013), p. 110.

Wow, we're at the end of this long, perplexing, enlightening, brilliant book. Solomon has worked through all of his ideas and experiments, he's coming to his big summary. And he lands at a pair of commands: "*Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*" Chuck Swindoll wrote, "I love the anti-climactic ending to this incredible journey. We've been with him through every conceivable emotion, but now he finishes the entire work by saying that there are two things we need to pay attention to – two 'musts.' First, we must *take God seriously*. Hold Him in highest regard. Respect and revere Him. Second, we must *do what He says*. Obey Him."⁹

"*This is the whole duty of man*" – interesting fact: the word "duty" is not actually in the original Hebrew, but almost every translation uses it. It reads more like "this is the whole (or wholeness) of man."¹⁰ If you desire to be whole, not broken, not fragmented, not divided, there is the secret: your Creator has wired you in a way that when you respond to Him in the ways that He asks, you will be most complete and fulfilled. We search our whole lives for the meaning of life and it's just too simple to be believed; too good to be true. The bumper sticker version of this is: "When all else fails, read the directions" (meaning the Scriptures). Get back to basics, God is God, you are not. If you truly believe that, then orient your life around knowing and pleasing Him.

The last verse of this book is about judgement. Because God will judge all things, all that we do has meaning and weight. It will matter what we did with our time, it will matter how we spent our money, how we treated other people, what we did with our bodies and what we said with our tongues. What we did in front of people and what we did when no one else was around. The sacrifice no one knew about will be exposed in the same way that the manipulative lie that we got away with will be exposed. "The final message of Ecclesiastes is not that nothing matters... but that everything does."¹¹

Solomon was the King over Israel when it was at the height of its influence. God gave Him more wisdom, wealth, and influence than any other king the world had ever seen. But Solomon had a restless heart and needed to search and find things out on his own. He ultimately wrecked his relationship with God as he married foreign wives and adopted their false gods. Roughly a thousand years later, another king was born. He also was a descendent of David and was promised the throne of David just like Solomon. But His life looked completely different than Solomon's, hardly anyone even knew He had been born. He wasn't born in a palace, He was born in a barn to a pair of unwed, peasant teenagers. He grew up in a section of the country that people looked down on, doing manual labor. But all the while, this Child, this future King grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. And He didn't need to experiment with all of life's pleasures and distractions. He remembered His Creator from the days of His youth, He obeyed His heavenly Father all of His life, never once straying or breaking the law of God. At the end of His life, He took on the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, allowing Himself to be killed to save other people. His unjust sentence of death put Him up on a cross where He died in the place of His people. His whole life was lived to bring salvation and forgiveness to people who had gone their own way. "*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls*" (1 Peter 2:24-25).

⁹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Finding Joy in a World Gone Mad* (Dallas: Word, 1985), p. 372.

¹⁰ Ray C. Stedman, *Is This All There Is? Finding Wisdom for Life in Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1999), p. 167.

¹¹ Ryken, p. 140.

Conclusion

Ecclesiastes has been about trying to make sense of life, finding some answers for how to invest our lives in things that give us meaning and purpose. And Solomon has explored a lot of different areas and said, "that's not it," but he's also found some places where he said, "maybe there's something there." If you've been with us or listened online for all fourteen sermons, you bless this pastor's heart. If you've missed some, that's OK. I hope that you've seen yourself in the pages and in the verses of this book. I know I recognize my own tendencies to run after things in life and think (even if it's subconscious), "that's it, that's got to be the thing that's going to make me feel whole and fulfilled and satisfied!" Whether it's other people or a sport or a hobby or achievements or living my life through my kids or getting the right house and making the right investments, we all just chase things that we think will unlock life's happiness. But Solomon has told us, "It's not going to work. You can spend decades trying to get it right, trying to chase down and conquer the things that you think will make you whole, but it's a fruitless effort, because they are not designed to do that."

You see, running after things to make them fill you up is to turn them into idols. And idols, by their very definition, are false gods. They promise so much but they deliver so little. And yet, they're so seductive, so alluring that we just keep chasing them; one after the other. You can waste your life running and striving, but you'll have very little to show for it in the end. The goads of Solomon, the wise words of delight and knowledge, are a gift to you and to me, to orient us to the right thing. Our Creator designed us to find our ultimate fulfillment and delight and purpose in Him. We are most satisfied and whole when we stop chasing after the wind and start living with His Spirit inside of us.

Significance cannot ultimately be found in anything we do or achieve; it is found in our standing as children of God adopted into His family because of Christ's intercession on our behalf. Security is not found in a bank account or real estate investments, but in knowing that our eternal destiny is secure in Christ. Comfort cannot ultimately be found in a bottle, a needle, or in the arms of another human being, but in the arms of the Father. Christ is the Man of Sorrows who suffered on our behalf, and in Him we can face the troubles and trials of the world. Christ is our delight and our satisfaction, knowing Him gives us abundant life. You cannot ultimately find meaning in life outside of your Creator!

Vanity means empty and meaningless. There's another word similar to it: Verity means truth and substance. Vanity is a chasing after wind. Verity is arriving at what can be trusted. The world has offerings of hope and meaning and identity and salvation, but God makes it clear that our hope is not found under the sun in anything the world has to offer. Our hope is found in the truth of the abundant and eternal life available through Jesus Christ."¹² Amen.

Benediction - Jude 24-25 – "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

¹² Stanley D. Gale, *Making Sanity Out of Vanity: Christian Realism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Carlisle, PA: EP Books, 2011), p. 170.