

"The Man Comes Around"
Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Intro:

Before I jump into our text, I want to look back at last Sunday's sermon. Last Sunday we worked through **Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8**. The points of my sermon were: how to live with the uncertainties of life and how to live with the certainty of death. The text is Solomon's summary and application of Ecclesiastes. Yet, as I mentioned last Sunday, Solomon had yet to drive his main point home. He had talked about it in the sermon, he had applied it in many different ways, he had given us a lot of wisdom as he cycled through his points over and over trying to help us get wisdom but he had not clearly given his main point—*fear God and keep His commandments, this is man's whole duty. In addition, God is going to bring every deed into judgment—all will be revealed.*

After hearing his main point and working through Ecclesiastes, it might easy to conclude Solomon was a cynic or some negative preacher but he was not. Neither was he a nihilist or a hedonist or a stoic. **Solomon was a lover of God** who was a realist. His entire message was to help us open our eyes and to look without blinders or rose colored glasses at the delights and distresses of life under the sun. **His goal** is to give us wisdom so that as we journey through life under the sun that we are not caught off guard by the days of adversity and fall into the pit of despair. **He wants** to protect us from denial and resist trite and simplistic responses to the horrific wreckage of what was once Eden. **He wants** us to hate the brokenness of this life under the sun but also understand that while death comes to all that it cannot destroy the ordinary joys that God has given us. **He wants** us to be empowered by God to enjoy our work, our food and our drink and to refuse to quit.¹

So as we come to the end of Ecclesiastes, I want to look back at **v. 1 of Ecclesiastes 12**. Remember Ecclesiastes is closely connected to the Creation account in Genesis. Solomon concluded his sermon by taking us back to the beginning when he calls young people to remember their "Creator" in the days of their youth. He is not using the title of Creator for God as a generic title. He has been recovering life in the Garden of Eden this whole sermon.

The poem he gave in **vv. 1-8** is descriptive of the body wearing out. He is showing us that death comes to all; life comes from God's word. Death does not have the last word, God has the last word and it is by His word that we have life. The good news is that God has not left us without hope.

Main point: Trust in Jesus and joyfully keep His word because this will prepare you to meet God on the Day of Judgment.

I. Words of Perfection (v. 9) *"Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care."*

I believe if we are not careful, when we consider **vv. 9-12**, we can focus on Solomon's activity as the primary point. The *Preacher* certainly studied and taught people words of knowledge and carefully arranged wisdom but the primary focus should not be on Solomon's activity. Instead it should be on the perfections of the word of God.

The reason Solomon gave such careful attention to teaching the truths of God's word and arranging the proverbs with great care is because he was handling God's word. Now he was not handling the word of God like teachers and preachers do in my day, he was actually inspired by God to write the words of God.

Teachers and preachers like me still have a high standard as we teach and preach. However, we are not imparting new revelation. We are simply proclaiming and explaining the words God has already given us through His inspired messengers.

¹ Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, 212.

Solomon carefully handled the word of God because he was familiar with **Psalm 19**. He knew the beauty, majesty and power of the word of God. Listen to **Psalm 19:7-11**:

⁷ *"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;*

the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;

⁸ *the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;*

the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;

⁹ *the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;*

the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.

¹⁰ *More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;*

sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹ *Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."*

I believe this to be true, do you?

Application:

1. **God has given us His perfect word and we are to handle it with care.** Preachers & teachers should carefully and fearfully teach the word of God. Teaching and preaching should not be approached lightly. Studying and preparing to teach should come with great care.

The word *weighing in v. 9* is the image of a pair of scales where one seeks to make the scales balance. It also carries the idea of testing to prove and make sure they are right. *Studying* is the idea of exploration. We are weighing and studying NOT for new revelation but to test, prove and show God's word to be accurate and true because it is. We are handling something much more precious than fine gold. It is not to be minimized or discounted but handled with great care and obeyed. This is one of the reasons James says that not many should be teachers and preachers because they will be held to a higher standard (James 3:1). Teachers and preacher show they truly believe not in the talent they have in their teaching and preacher but in how they obey and live out the word of God. They weigh not only the word, they study their lives to make sure they have applied the word to their own lives first.

2. **God's words of perfection are a reflection of His perfect nature and character.** Some people believe that it is impossible for us to have God's word given to us without any mixture of error. The perfections of the word of God are a reflection of the perfections of the nature and character of God Himself. God's word is what it is because it is a display of the perfect character and nature of God. It is no big thing for God to provide us with accurate manuscripts of His word for His word flows from who He is. God's word is powerful, living and active (Hebrews 4:12) and by His word He spoke the world into existence and so it is nothing for Him to preserve His word for us through manuscripts throughout the ages. The question is do you believe God has given us a perfect word?
3. **Since God's word is perfect we are to obey it perfectly but the problem is we are not perfect.** It takes One who is perfect to perfectly obey God's word. **Here is the problem**—you are not perfect. I am going to let the problem stand for now and come back to it later.

II. Words of Pleasure (v. 10) *"The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth."*

Let me ask a question: How do you view the book of Ecclesiastes now that you have worked through it? Many of you may have been confused by the book of Ecclesiastes. It can be a challenge to read. It seems to jump around and not have a coherent theme to hold it together. On top of everything, the book seems kind of depressing to many people.

Yet, what I hope you have found to be true is that Solomon intended the book to be—words of delight. Solomon labored under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to give us words of delight. He did not want to make us frown but make us smile and give us pleasure with his words.

This really is what truth does for those who love truth. Solomon was a realist. He pulled no punches but gave an accurate depiction of what life under the sun was like for all people and then reminded us that the gifts God gave in the Garden are still for us to enjoy. He strove to help us see the balance between the disquiet of life's troubles and the delights of God's gifts. We are to enjoy days of blessings as a gift from God and consider God in the days of adversity. Solomon loved truth—he was a realist.

The reason why Solomon can paint a realistic picture of how the body wears out and eventually dies is because he delighted in God. Solomon, the realist, was preparing us for our day of death. **He calls** us to remember our Creator in our youth. **He calls** us to consider God in our day of adversity. **He calls** us to remember that all things are arranged according to God's timetable. **He speaks** to words of delight to us that are designed to teach us what we need to know so we will trust Him when the seasons of life change. **He wants** to prepare us for every matter under heaven. **He speaks** words of delight to us so we will smile and be joyful for there is nothing better for us as long as we live.

III. Words of Pain (v. 11) *"The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd."*

God's word does give pleasure but it also can cause pain. Goads were tools used by shepherds to drive herds in the right direction and keep them on the right path. They were shafts with sharp nails firmly fixed in them and were used to poke and prod the animals. So if the animal drifted to the left or to the right the goad would prick the animal and cause pain. It would remind the animal to keep on the straight path. If the animal stopped, pain again would come. The only way the animal could avoid pain was to go in the direction the shepherd wanted it to go.

The Preacher's words are like goads, nails anchored in a stick and placed in the right place in order to prick and wound the hearer's conscience. They are to awaken the conscience and make it tender to the word of God. The goads of the word of God have very sharp tips. The writer of Hebrews says they are sometimes like a two-edged sword that pierces deep into the hearer's heart and soul.

The goads of the word of God are from the One Shepherd who knows us best. His words keep us from going astray. You see the goads of the word of God are precisely placed in our lives to stop us in our tracks. They awaken us to what is truly important and set us on the right path or keep us on the right path. Consider some of the words of the Preacher from Ecclesiastes:

- **Ecclesiastes 4:2**, *"And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive."*
- **Ecclesiastes 7:1**, *"A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth."*
- **Ecclesiastes 11:8**, *"So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity."*

Who talks like this? Hardly anyone talks like this but these words are true and when you read them you stop in your tracks because you know they are true. The painful words of God clear the fog of life so that we can see what is truly important.

The good news is that these words are words from the One Shepherd who loves His sheep. This is the One Shepherd who is leading us back to Eden to where He gave His sheep good gifts and they enjoyed all the nourishment of His pasture. The problem is we struggle to keep following our Shepherd.

Adam and Eve veered off the path of life and took us with them and now our Shepherd comes to find His lost sheep and take us back to His pasture that we were created to enjoy. The problem is we are like Adam and Eve and we want to wander off the straight and narrow path. **We think** we know what we want, but we don't. **We think** we know what is best for our lives, but we don't.

Writer and pastor David Gibson says about v. 10, *"Remember your Creator by letting his Word dispel your illusions and confronting your folly even if it hurts—and it may often hurt. Left to your own devices, you will not choose what is right. Left to wander along myself, I'll end up going in the opposite direction to where I should be. There is no satellite navigation for our souls other than the words from our one Shepherd. The Bible is supreme."*²

Application:

1. **Does God's cause both pleasure and pain in your life?** Faithful are the wounds of a friend Proverbs 27:6 says. It takes a good friend to tell you what you need to hear instead of what you want to hear. These words give us both pleasure and pain at the same time because we know we are loved enough to be told hard things. Remember also that God's word does give comfort to the broken hearted. It is like soothing medicine for the hurting soul.
2. **Let me give you a little assignment for the summer months.** We are beginning a new sermon series for the summer on **Psalm 119**. Learn how to read and pray through **Psalm 119**. Take an eight-verse stanza a day and pray through it. Give careful attention to the words. Consider the emphasis of each stanza and then think about the overall emphasis of the whole Psalm. Think on the pleasure the words give and the pain they might cause.

IV. Word of Protection (v. 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."*

Verse 12 is a tricky verse. It almost sounds like Solomon contradicted himself. After all **1 Kings 4:29-34** says, *"And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore,³⁰ so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.³¹ For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.³² He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.³³ He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.³⁴ And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom."*

Solomon was the prolific writer of his day. Solomon knew the value of words for he had said himself, *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver."* (Proverbs 25:11) He knew it was hard work to develop a *word fitly spoken*.

So what does Solomon mean? Verse 12 is indeed a warning but what does this tender warning mean? There are a couple of positions as to what this verse means. **The first one** says that the words of God are sufficient and there is no need to read anything other than Scripture. I agree the word of God is sufficient for all things but I do not believe it means it is wrong to write books about Scripture or read other books or study anything other than Scripture.

² David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards: How Ecclesiastes Teachers Us To Live in Light of the End*, 157.

Application:

1. **However, we must consider the warning. Solomon is giving us a word of protection because we need to be careful what we read and what we study.** All things must stand the test of Scripture.

You can get on the Internet and search for any topic in the world and find lots of information and most of it will be wrong or bad. There is no shortage of words but there is a shortage of wisdom when it comes to knowing what is true and what is not. Ideas gathered from books, magazines and the Internet have consequences and bad ideas have victims. *[Illst: Several years ago a gentleman was challenging a theological position I was teaching on and he came up with his information from some guy who was writing a self-published blog in his basement.]*

2. It is a word of protection because gathering wisdom is hard work. We will never know it all. We will never have all wisdom. We must beware of going beyond the wisdom of God. The eyes are never satisfied with seeing because they can always take in more. The ear can continue to hear and likewise the mouth can keep speaking. The tongue is but a small part of the body but it will set the whole world on fire if not controlled.
3. **It is a word of protection because the reading and studying he is referring to is a reading and studying that goes beyond the wisdom of God and there is no end.** You will spend your whole life searching for the wisdom that gives meaning and satisfaction to your life if you are not searching for Christ. Jesus is the wisdom of God. The Hebrew word **end** in **v. 13** means destination. In other words, there is NO DESTINATION for wisdom, meaning in life, satisfaction, and gain outside of God. So here is the destination in **v. 13**.

V. Word of Purpose (v. 13) *"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."*

We now come to the destination of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. This is the purpose for which he has been writing and it is also the purpose for which he desires you to have in your life. He has been inductively cycling through many experiences of life and taking us on this journey back to Eden and in the end this was his destination. This was Adam and Eve's purpose and it is also ours. Adam and Eve did not fear God and so they did not keep His commands. This was their whole duty and it is still a good thing for to truly enjoy life one must fear God and keep His commands. Our whole duty is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors in the same way we love ourselves.

Now you don't have to wonder what your purpose in life under the sun is for it is the same for all whether believer or unbeliever. This is the standard to which we will be held. But the charge to fear God is not some dour and dark thing but it is for us to pursue our joy. Everything in Ecclesiastes has been teaching us about how to recover the good gifts of Eden that God has given and it all boils down to fearing God and keeping His commandments.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes now lines up with the writer of Proverbs and they line up because they are one in the same person—Solomon. In **Proverbs 9:10**, Solomon says, *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."* To fear the Lord is to remember your Creator in the days of your youth, it is to consider God in the days of adversity; it is to enjoy your work, your food, and your drink in this life under sun. To fear the Lord is to remember your life is but a vapor and even because it is a vapor it still has significance because it is a gift from God.

The wonderful 17th century pastor Charles Bridges said the fear of the Lord *"is that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law."*³ So here very succinctly and very profoundly we find the purpose of Ecclesiastes and the purpose of our lives.

Application:

But here is our problem; our problem is that none of us have ever perfectly fulfilled our created purpose to fear God or kept His commands. We have all failed in one way or another to love God or keep His law. This is the reason we read corporate prayers of confession together. They help us think through how we sin every day and as we begin worship we are reminded to confess our sins. Listen again to what we confessed this morning:

*Sovereign Lord,
you have anointed us with your Spirit,
yet we have not shared your great gift.
Create in us a clean heart, O God.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation.*

*We have not proclaimed your good news to the poor.
We have not bound up the brokenhearted.
Create in us a clean heart, O God.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation.*

*We have not proclaimed your freedom to the captives.
We have not comforted those who mourn.
Create in us a clean heart, O God.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation.*

*Forgive us for closing our eyes to the needs of others.
Forgive us for limiting your abundance.
Create in us a clean heart, O God.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation.*

*Open our minds, Lord. Open our hearts, Lord.
Open our hands, Lord. Open our lips, Lord.
Give us a willing spirit to show your love to your world.
Amen. ^{SEP}*

There are many more sins we could confess than only those mentioned in this confession. Yet notice the bold font we read in our confession. The bold font is a way of reminding all the ways we display our fear of the Lord. To confess our sin and ask God to change us helps us learn to fear the Lord in our lives.

VI. Word of Preparation (v. 14) *"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."*

I believe Zack Eswine is right when he says that **v. 14** means that the judgment is intended to be good news. As Eswine says, *there is no screaming or yelling here. Solomon is not some red-faced, intense preacher standing in front of the congregation yelling with exclamation points at the end of every sentence.*

The fact is God will judge all people and render his verdict like the good, just Judge that He is. **At the end of all** that Solomon has said about all of the injustices done under the sun; **after all** of the good deeds that are over looked and all the crimes

³ Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs*, 3-4.

that go unpunished, and **after all** the wicked people that seem to escape justice and, in reality prosper while they oppress and abuse the righteous, **it is good news** that none of these things have escaped the eyes of the Sovereign Creator.

Verse 14 is good news because God will give justice. He will defend the victims of abuse whether financial, sexual, or physical. **The person** who has been abused will be vindicated. **The wicked** who made people's lives unbearable, who oppressed, cheated, stole, ripped off and committed all kinds of sins against the weak and the righteous will now be judged. All of this abuse will come to an end.

The wicked may think they have gotten away with their crimes. They may believe they will never be caught by the "#metoo" movement and indeed the "#metoo" movement may not catch them but the "#metoo" movement is not the Ultimate Judge. God is the Ultimate Judge and nothing escapes His justice and this is good news for the abused and oppressed.

The fact that nothing escapes God's judgment is good news for those who are overlooked. Have you ever been overlooked in life? It is an empty feeling. You give of yourself and yet no one notices or someone else gets the credit for all of your hard work. This is a vexing experience and can create much dissatisfaction in life. The good news that God will bring every secret thing into judgment is that all of the good that you may have done and no one noticed, God noticed and He will reward accordingly. While it may have been overlooked intentionally or unintentionally by others, it is not overlooked by God and it will be revealed. In this life under the sun, we must learn to simply enjoy the smile of God when we are overlooked.

The bad news about judgment is that the duplicity of our lives will be revealed as well. We will be judged and let's face it, we are all a mixture of good and evil. **We have all** been duplicitous in our heart or in our deeds.⁴

Our last song in the Sad Songs Say So Much series is, of course, a Johnny Cash song. Cash captured the truth of the judgment that is to come in his song *The Man Comes Around*. Cash, after living a hard, rebellious life, came to faith in Christ. He lived with many regrets but the coming judgment was good news for him and he knew it would be bad news for others unless they repented and turned to Christ. In light of that, he penned the song. Listen to some of the lyrics:

*"And I heard, as it were, the noise of thunder
One of the four beasts saying, 'Come and see.' and I saw, and behold a white horse"*

*There's a man goin' 'round takin' names
And he decides who to free and who to blame
Everybody won't be treated all the same
There'll be a golden ladder reachin' down
When the man comes around*

*The hairs on your arm will stand up
At the terror in each sip and in each sup
Will you partake of that last offered cup
Or disappear into the potter's ground?
When the man comes around*

*Hear the trumpets hear the pipers
One hundred million angels singin'
Multitudes are marchin' to the big kettledrum
Voices callin', voices cryin'
Some are born and some are dyin'*

⁴ Zack Eswine lectures on Ecclesiastes at Grace Theological College in New Zealand, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyKSBGWyx24&index=9&list=PLyNDhKdg-He3NLNx-ga2FvezbmoGovgV>. This resource was extremely valuable for preparing for this whole series on Ecclesiastes.

*It's alpha and omega's kingdom come
And the whirlwind is in the thorn tree
The virgins are all trimming their wicks
The whirlwind is in the thorn tree
It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks*

[He concluded his songs with these words}
*"And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts
And I looked, and behold a pale horse
And his name that sat on him was death, and hell followed with him"⁵*

This is sobering and brings me back to my original question: What are we to do since judgment is coming? What are we to do since death is coming?

Conclusion

Illst: There is a new movie that recently came out called *The Quiet Place*. I don't know if you have seen it but spoiler alert, I am about to talk about it. It is consider a horror movie but to me it is more like a sci-fi-thriller. I usually don't go see movies like this or even like movies like this. First I don't like horror movies and second suspense movies like this make me too jumpy.

Well Eric and Jenny Schumacher and Stacy talked me in to seeing the movie. It stars John Krazynski. Anyway, in this movie aliens have invaded earth and they have supersonic hearing and they kill anything that makes a noise. There is no way to kill these monsters. They are impervious to bullets, fire, and bombs. Nothing could stop them or kill them. Earth's population was almost wiped out.

Krazynski's family lived out in the country where they had created sandy paths to walk because they did not make any noise. The family had learned to not make noises and always obey their father's commands. A one point in the movie Krazynski's oldest daughter disobeyed her father and gave her younger brother a toy to play with that made a noise and little boy was killed while walking home. The distraught daughter ran away because she thought her father did not love her anymore. He finally found his daughter but when he found her she was about to be attacked and in order to save her he sacrificed himself. Yet, in her father's sacrifice, salvation was found.

The amazing thing about the narrative of this movie is that audiences loved it because the father sacrificed himself at the end in order to save the daughter who had actually disobeyed her father and brought death into their family. What is also amazing is that the narrative of the movie is actually based on a true narrative—the gospel narrative.

God gave us Himself and His commands and yet we disobeyed. We strayed to the left and to the right of the path and now death pursues us. By our disobedience we brought death into the world. It chases us our whole lives and what we need to realize is that God came in Christ and paid for our sin and sacrificed Himself on the cross to save us from the death we brought in this world.

But here is where the gospel narrative is different from the movie. Christ did not stay dead. He rose from the dead on the third day and not only is death defeated but He reverses the curse and is leading us back to Eden. In the gospel narrative, God

⁵ Songwriters: Johnny Cash, The Man Comes Around lyrics © BMG Rights Management US, LLC.

will bring death and evil to an end. No longer will death pursue us. No longer is death popping up everywhere but instead, in Christ, grace and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives. You see, in Christ, the curse has been reversed.⁶

The question you need to answer this morning is if Jesus is your Rescuer? Have you turned from your sin and placed your trust Him as your Rescuer today? Friend, death is coming and judgment is coming, this can be good news for you or it can be bad news for you? I would love to speak with you today at the conclusion of our service if you have questions.

⁶ This illustration was adapted from Zack Eswine's zombie illustration. Thanks Zack for your wonder book Recovering Eden: The Gospel in the Book of Ecclesiastes!
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