

The Meaning of Life and Nothing Else Matters

Ecclesiastes 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.

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.

(Ecclesiastes 12:9-14)

Returning to the Meaning of Life

Summing up the Preacher's observations on life as seen through Ecclesiastes, Sinclair Ferguson notices,

The world is a sea of glass: a pageant of fond delight,
A theatre of vanity, a labyrinth of error,
A gulf of grief, a sty of filthiness, a vale of misery,
A spectacle of woe, a river of tears, a stage of deceit,
A cage full of devils, a den of scorpions,
A wilderness of wolves, a cabin of bears,
A whirlwind of passions, a fained comedy,
A delectable frenzy; where is false delight, assured grief;
certain sorrow, uncertain pleasure; lasting woe, fickle wealth;
long heaviness,
short joy.¹

We began our study of this book by looking at our world religions, philosophers, satirists, and comedians and their different thoughts on the “meaning of life.” From Islam to Hinduism, from Plato to Aristotle, from the hedonist to the utilitarian, from Douglas Adams to Monty Python, all had different takes on what the purpose of life is supposed to be. We then saw that for basically the first two chapters of this great OT sermon, Solomon went on his own quest.

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Pundit's Folly: Chronicles of an Empty Life* (Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), back cover.

That quest saw him seeking for the meaning of life through wisdom, folly, pleasure, and work.

He began to realize some things. The world is full of **folly and fools**, and he set his mind and heart to understand their quest. He discovered that fools live lives of such selfishness and sin that even though their pursuits are often exciting or entertaining or sensual or cerebral—and that there is a time and place for much of that, pursuing these things *as ends to themselves* leads to disaster. This **disaster** can affect politics, religion, families, cities, churches, nations, and lastly, the person himself. To the last, he has made several comments throughout the book about how **God is going to judge the living and the dead** (3:17; 5:6; 8:13; 11:9). You had better watch out what you choose as your own meaning to life, because you are not going to escape the judgment of God at the end.

But it wasn't just folly that he sought to understand. The wisest man of the OT also discovered that even the opposite, **pursuing great wisdom, cannot be the meaning of life**. For with much wisdom comes much grief and when you increase in knowledge, you also increase your sorrow and pain (1:18). Some people envy very smart or wise people. But again, while wisdom and knowledge are fine and have their

place, Solomon began to understand the problem. It related to [the limitations all humans possess](#). Specifically, wisdom and knowledge can lead to despair or pride, especially in relation to God's utter sovereignty and inscrutable designs in the plans he has for mankind. If disaster comes, who can understand why? If the wicked prosper while the righteous perish, who can know what God is doing? God is so "other" than us that even if the wisest man had ten million times more information, he still could not discover all that God was doing. And so, [knowledge becomes a burden](#), and increasing burdens is clearly not the meaning of life. One should never envy people, even those with great wisdom, for it can lead to their own downfall.

One group of people I did not look at before regarding the meaning of life, is [our singers](#), of whom we have seen many over our study of this book. I've deliberately used them as both comparisons and contrasts to Ecclesiastes' wisdom. I've also done it because these are people who have a most misunderstood but yet often unrealized power over our thoughts. Most people just parrot the lines not even thinking about what they are singing and learning. This ought not be.

As it regards the meaning of life, [Chicago](#) summed up well what I think most songs on this subject tell us. “[You’re the meaning in my life.](#)”² It’s about the personal love that we find with a woman or a man. The lyrics of that song are super positive and speak to the heart. It’s a classic 80’s tune. But of course, like all the other vapors of life, what happens when the love dies? What’s left to live for?

There are obviously many other things out there that our singers tell us about this topic, and many we’ve heard before. But here are a couple I want us to think about. Peter Cetera had originally written “[You’re the Inspiration](#)” not for Chicago, but [for Kenny Rogers](#). But Rogers, for whatever reason, didn’t want the song. Perhaps it was because he sang his own record on the meaning of life a few years prior.

His famous song tells about the narrator meeting up with the sage on [a train bound for nowhere](#). The wise man told him that he had *made a living out of reading people’s faces and knowin’ what the cards were*. He was a gambler. He could tell just by looking that the poor narrator had himself *run out of aces*, and so he offered up his version of the meaning of life. “[If you’re gonna play the game, you gotta learn to play it right. You’ve got to know when to hold ‘em. Know when](#)

² [Chicago](#), “You’re the Inspiration,” *Chicago 17*, Full Moon/Warner Bros. (1984).

to fold ‘em. Know when to walk away and know when to run ... ‘Cause every hand’s a winner and every hand’s a loser and the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.”³ In other words, the whole point of this game we call life is to stay alive and die peacefully.

Sounds an awful like parts of Ecclesiastes, according to some readings of the book. And, it sounds ok, and in some ways it’s fine. But then you start thinking about it more. This is actually right back to that kind of nihilistic outlook we saw in the philosophers which is stated so well in the *Bohemian Rhapsody*, “Nothing really matters. Anyone can see. Nothing really matters, to me.”⁴ This is really *the best you can hope for*? This is an outlook that many come away thinking is what Ecclesiastes is either saying or is *this close* to saying, but just can’t bring himself to do, because he is still tethered to his orthodoxy. As we are going to see, this isn’t how he ends the book, nor is it really how I think *all those cynical passages* about life scattered throughout it are ultimately meant to be read.

The second take is like a *handmaiden* to nihilism. This is the situation of someone like the narrator of the song “Reflections” by South African DJ Merlon. “I’m standing here

³ Kenny Rogers, “The Gambler,” *The Gambler*, Don Schlitz songwriter, United Artists (1978).

⁴ Queen, “Bohemian Rhapsody,” *A Night at the Opera*, Elektra (1975).

alone. Naked as a fool. I keep running away. I keep hiding away from whom I might have be. So what is the meaning of life if the existence of life is the truth that you can't face?"⁵

This is something we have not discussed before. Many people **just don't care about the meaning of life**, and it is because they can't face life itself. They are always running from what they have done and are, and are therefore much too busy to think on deep questions like this. This is a handmaiden to nihilism, because it does not see the point of life and has no time try to find it out.

I believe **the conclusion of Ecclesiastes can help** a person like this, even as it can speak final authoritative truth into this most perplexing of questions, the question he and we began by considering, and only now are ready to finally answer. In its answer, Ecclesiastes will show us how someone busy running from life *can* find the will to seek out the question and to know why it matters in deeply personal ways. But it will also **ground all our other pursuits** in a truth in full line with other parts of Scripture, and as such, its answer becomes the true meaning of life,⁶ which, like an umbrella for the person

⁵ DJ Merlon, "Reflections," Original Copy, DM.Recordings (2015).

⁶ The Open Bible literally says as much. "Chapter 12 resolves the book's extensive inquiry into the meaning of life with the single conclusion, 'Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all' (12:13)." **The Open Bible** KJV, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 660.

in the rain, shelters all other pursuits from being doused by the storms of life.

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 – Context and Structure

As is obvious by now, we are in the very last section of Ecclesiastes (**Ecc 12:9-14**). It is in some ways **the epilogue** of the book. It pairs with the book's **prologue** where we were introduced to “**the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem**” (**1:1**). The purpose of an epilogue in modern writing is **to move the setting to the future and explain what becomes of the central characters.**⁷ Indeed, we see this in **12: 9-10** where we learn that *the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care* and that he *sought to find words of delight, and uprightly wrote words of truth*. This also fits with the larger outline of the book, which begins right after **1:1** with its **initial observations of the world** saying, “**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity**” (**1:2**) and right before this epilogue ends in **12:8** on the same note: “**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.**”

⁷ **Jerry Jenkins**, “What Is an Epilogue? Everything You Need to Know,” *Jerry Jenkins* (March 16, 2020). <https://jerryjenkins.com/what-is-an-epilogue/#:~:text=The%20most%20important%20aspect%20of,sequel%20or%20even%20a%20series>.

1:2 and 12:8 bookend the book's main observation on *hebel*—vanity, breath, vapor. Its teachings come in between the observations on *hebel*. In my estimation, the book's final main *teaching* was the center of the last structure in 11:9 that “God will bring you into judgment,” a conclusion that was surrounded by the seventh and final “joy” of the book. What's strange is that our epilogue does something that a modern epilogue is never supposed to do. That is, “an Epilogue should never ... reiterate your theme or remind your reader of the moral of your story.”⁸ Yet, this is precisely what it does, even using in some translations the word “conclusion.” “The *conclusion*, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments...” (NAS). Thus, this last section of the book does not fit as neatly into an epilogue as we might like. It almost serves as a kind of double conclusion, something that is fitting for a book that has been read in two very different ways, with each way having its own merits. That's part of the brilliance of the book, part of its wisdom.

Ecc 12:9-14 can be divided into two main sections. First, we have a description of the Preacher (he was “wise”), followed by a much longer section telling us about his many

⁸ Jenkins, *ibid.*

works. (9b-10). These works involved his carefully thinking through this life and putting those thoughts just perfectly to pen and parchment. This is told to us for a very specific and personal reason—to goad (11) us into truly hearing the final conclusion of the matter. These words are a “delight” (10a) and were put down “with great care” (9c) and most of all, were given by “one Shepherd” for the sheep.

Second, we have three commands. These are “beware” (12), “fear” (13a), and “keep” (13b). These commands are followed by the final thought of the book which contains two motivations. This is our duty (13b) and we are going to be judged by God (14).

Outline of Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

1. The Preacher
 - a. His Person (9a)
 - b. His Works (9b-10)
 - c. Your motivation (11)
2. The Commands
 - a. Beware (12)
 - b. Fear (13a)
 - c. Keep (13b)
 - d. Your motivations (13b, 14)

Let's turn to the verses.

The Preacher: His Person and Works

We saw in **Ecc 1:1** that the author of our book was “**the Preacher**.” This is the Hebrew word after which the book takes its name (Heb: *Qoheleth*; Gk: *Ecclesiastes*). He was introduced as “**son of David, king in Jerusalem**.” All who have thought this refers to **Solomon** based this on three passages. 1. Solomon was **the wisest man** of the OT (**1Kg 4:29-30**; cf. **Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31**). 2. Solomon spoke **3,000 proverbs**, and his **songs** were 1,005 (**1Kg 4:32**). 3. These two points come together in **Ecc 12:9**.

This verse first describes the Preacher simply as “**being wise**” (**12:9a**). He himself had said this many times throughout the book. **Second**, it explains that he used his wisdom to “**teach the people knowledge**” (**9b**). **He did not use knowledge as an end to itself**, as he himself said was a bad thing early in the book. No. It must be shared so that the people can become knowledgeable themselves. Wisdom demands this.

Biblical knowledge is **not like that taught in secret societies** where only a few elites or a few specially chosen people are allowed to know the mysteries. Rather, God has his own chosen people, and the numbers are massive, millions and millions of people from every tribe, tongue, language, and

nation. They are **all to be taught wisdom and knowledge**. Now, this does not mean that everyone will be satisfied with the same level of information. Some will want to dig very deep and for the most precious nuggets; there are always treasures to be found at the great depths. Others will be satisfied with those they can pan out of the stream with little effort. True wisdom is satisfactory for the one and endlessly mineable for the other.

To learn the kind of wisdom we are talking about now, you must go to a place more special than even God's wonderful creation. We've gone to pains to discover that **many unbelievers have a kind of wisdom that emulates** that of Ecclesiastes. Sometimes their wisdom even surpasses that of some Christians. But never is their wisdom rooted in **worshiping their Creator through Christ**. For the kind of wisdom Ecclesiastes is ultimately talking about, we **must look to more than the natural order**, natural theology, or "**things under the sun**." We need **the Holy Scripture**. Cornelius Van Til once made the astute observation that, "**The two forms of revelation must ... be seen as presupposing and supplementing one another ... Revelation in nature and revelation in Scripture are mutually meaningless without one another**"

and mutually fruitful when taken together.”⁹ In other words, you need both for true wisdom.

This is precisely what vv. 9-10 now set out to show you. To teach the people, the Preacher went to great pains to do something very specific. He dealt with many proverbs (9c). This is not only a key link back to 2 Kings 4:32, but is a comment on his three books: Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and especially Ecclesiastes.

What did he do with them? Three things. He weighed them. He studied them. He arranged them. Now, some people think this means he did not create them, and therefore they think that this refers to someone other than Solomon, someone like Hezekiah whom the book of Proverbs says took the proverbs of Solomon and copied them (Prov 25:1).¹⁰ But other translations of these words include, “pondered ... searched out” and “arranged” (NAS) or “gave ear,” “sought out,” and “made right” (YLT). In other words, he not only listened to the wisdom of others and put their proverbs rightly, but he also pondered his own. Whatever the

⁹ Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” *The Infallible Word: A Symposium, by the members of the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Corporation, 1946), (New York, Labels Army Company, 1997), 267, 69.

¹⁰ I did not run across this idea in any of the commentaries, but in a sermon that said other scholars have said this. See Cole Newton, “Beware of Anything Beyond Scripture: Ecclesiastes 12:9-12,” *B. C. Newton* (June 5, 2018), <https://bcnewton.co/2018/06/05/beware-of-anything-beyond-scripture-ecclesiastes-129-12/>.

case, he took them and carefully crafted each one and then, even more, put them in a coherent order to tell a story.

I used to think that a proverb was a proverb. But this is only true when it is isolated by itself. When proverbs are put into a book form, then they are doing something more than what they can do alone. They are singing wisdom as a choir rather than as a solo. This is why I have gone to pains to try and understand the form and structure in which we find the proverbs of Ecclesiastes coming to us. Structure itself is theology! But it is more than Ecclesiastes. The entire Bible is written with purpose and intent, both in overt message and in the format of the books.

Add to this now vs. 10 that, “The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” and you get as Ryken notices, “Literary artistry.” “Words of delight” is “a marvelous phrase that expresses the beauty of the Bible.”¹¹ And of Ecclesiastes! The American writer Tom Wolfe called it “the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth”—“the greatest single piece of writing I have known.”¹² It gave us phrases like “the sun also rises” (Ecc 1:5, nkjv), “to everything there is a season” (3:1), “That

¹¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 276.

¹² Tom Wolfe, quoted in Robert Short, *A Time to Be Born—A Time to Die* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. ix.

which is crooked cannot be made straight” (1:15 kjv), “eternity in the hearts of men” (3:11, niv), “cast your bread upon the waters” (11:1), “Two are better than one ... a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (4:9, 12), “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong” (9:11), and “man does not know his time” (9:12). It penetrates because it is true. It lasts because it is a beautiful masterpiece, worthy of being guarded like a fine painting from generation to generation.

It is into this that we get the first motivation to listen in this epilogue—**vs. 11**. “The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.” It is interesting to compare words of delight with a goad and nails. They seem a jarring contrast. **Goads** are long sticks with a small spike on the end used by shepherds and ranchers to get their flocks and herds moving where they want them to go. Hardly delightful! Yet, their **sting or prick** is enough to fell and say, “**ouch**,” but not enough to inflict any serious injury. It’s just enough to get them to cooperate. “*Thy rod and they staff, they comfort me*” (**Ps 23:4**).

For the Christian, the words of Ecclesiastes are “**goads to our consciences, making us uncomfortable enough to turn away from sin. They are a stimulus to the soul, steering us**

back onto the right spiritual path.”¹³ In the same way, says Ambrose, a sermon should match the book. “If in the people, or in some persons, there is any stubbornness or any fault, let your sermons be such as to goad the listener, to sting the person with a guilty conscience” (Ambrose, *Letter 15, To Constantius*).¹⁴

Ryken tells you that Ecclesiastes has been a cattle prod. “The Preacher’s words push us not to expect lasting satisfaction in money or pleasure but only in the goodness of God. They steer us away from foolish rage and mocking laughter. They spur us on to patience, contentment, humility, and joy. When we forget about God, the Preacher prods us to remember our Creator, and the moment we begin to think that we will live forever, he pokes us in the ribs and reminds us that soon we will die.”¹⁵

But they are also nails. Gregory the Great said,

But their words are properly called nails, since they do not know how to handle the sins of offenders gently, but only how to pierce them. Were not the words of John nails when he said, “O generation of vipers, who has shown you to flee

¹³ Ryken, 277.

¹⁴ In. J. Robert Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 283.

¹⁵ Ryken, 277.

from the wrath to come?” Were not the words of Stephen nails when he said, “You have always resisted the Holy Spirit”?⁴ Were not the words of Paul nails when he said, “O senseless Galatians, who has bewitched you?” and again when saying to the Corinthians, “For while there is among you envying and strife, are you not carnal, and do you not walk according to man?”

(**Gregory the Great**, *Morals on the Book of Job* 5.24.41)

Some think these nails are *part of* the cattle prod. However, it may just be that the teachings of the Preacher are **driven into our minds and stay there**, like a nail pounded deep into a block of wood. Even though life is a vapor, wisdom can help us pin it down and find a way to truly understand our human experience.¹⁶

They do this, because “**They are given by one Shepherd**” (11b). This **amazing statement** is the first time that “Shepherd” appears in the book. **Who is this Shepherd?** It could be the king of Jerusalem, and that would fit with the goad he just spoke of. However, as the ESV’s capitalization shows you, it is more likely that it refers to **The Good Shepherd**, God himself. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive things. It can be both. I believe it is both, but more

¹⁶ Ryken, 278.

specifically, I believe that this divine Shepherd refers to the Second Person, the **Shepherd of Jacob** (**Gen 48:15-16**), the **Shepherd of David** (**Ps 23:1**), the son of God. As John says, “**Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep**” (**John 10:11**), and did so, by the way, as he was **fastened in place by nails** to the instrument of death and suffering that leads to your salvation. Think about that idea of him being nailed to the cross, fixed and unmovable, and how your own conscience is pricked by the goads of the law and the gospel, which show you how you are to live and why Christ died for you. Then think of how Ecclesiastes is itself nailed and fixed into your mind, there to goad you to proper action.

This implication of Christ as the author, of course, has implications for **the inspiration of Holy Scripture**. For these are no mere words of men. And as much as Solomon may have worked and worried over just how to arrange and say his proverbs, God himself was speaking through him and overshadowing him so that these words would themselves become perfect truth and life-giving. This is one of those verses that show us how **God inspired all of his Holy Word**, and as such, leads to the second half of our epilogue, which begins by talking about books.

The Preacher: His Person and Works

The second half begins with the first of three commands, “My son, beware.” It is a perfect way to follow up on the goad. You are about to feel the final pricks of the book. The first is, beware *of anything beyond these*. He is referring to other sources of wisdom besides those taught by the Shepherd. There were many back then, just as there are today. He gets specific and talks about books. “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12).

What does this mean? Of what are we to be wary? Some would have only the first half without the second. That is, they would suggest that no Christian should ever study anything other than the Bible. In fact, to look at any other “outside” source as by definition, sinful. I’ve seen many people take this approach with all kinds of secular books in the realms of science, history, philosophy, and religion. I’ve seen others do it with apocryphal books of both the OT and NT. I’ve rarely seen anyone do it with every single book, for that is literally impossible, thereby exposing the error.

The caution is not to never read another book, nor even to write one. The caution is that everyone has their own take on wisdom. We’ve seen this in the many secular poets we

have quoted throughout our study. To beware of other sources is not to avoid them altogether. It is not to shun them or boycott them because they aren't "Christian." Rather, **it is to always use wisdom** when listening to what they tell you. You must always have your mind working. A Christian does not have the luxury of stopping their thought. We live in the world. We cannot nor are we supposed to avoid it. Instead, we are to **take every thought captive** to the obedience of Christ (**2Co 10:5**). You are **always to be thinking** about what is going into your head from another source.

It isn't wrong to read or listen to other people expound their views of the world. In fact, you might learn something. But **if your goal is** to find wisdom from them, **beware**, this is a wearisome burden, and it never ends, for there is always someone else who will give another perspective or disagree. Sometimes, you might hear a nugget or two from them, because they are fellow image bearers, and they cannot help but stumble upon truth as they are forced to live in God's world too. This world works according to fixed laws, and those laws are not secrets, not even the moral laws.

But **when you come to God's word**, **you truly know** that you have come to The Bible, which means *The Book*. For it

alone contains his very words to you in the form of special revelation. Of the writing of many books, there is no end. But of the writing of **God's word**, it is final and has ended. It has told us all we need to know for faith and life in Christ. And this takes us to the conclusion of the matter.

Solomon says, “**The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments**” (**Ecc 12:13**). Here we have contained the last two commands: *fear* and *keep*. These are the last two goads.

The fear of God is **not terror** here. Terror only causes you to run from God, like a bank robber runs from the police. This does you no good. True fear is *a trembling before God*, like in the Negro spiritual made famous by Johnny and June Carter Cash. “**Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?**”¹⁷ Sinclair Ferguson explains,

The fear of God in some ways defies our attempts at definition, because it is really another way of saying ‘**knowing God**’. It is a **heart-felt love** for him because of who he is and what he has done; a sense of being in his majestic presence. It

¹⁷ **Johnny Cash** (with the Carter Family), “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord,” *Ring of Fire: The Best of Johnny Cash*, Columbia (1963, orig. 1962).

is a thrilling awareness that we have this greatest of all privileges, mingled with a realization that now the only thing that really matters is his opinion. To have the assurance of his smile is everything; to feel that he frowns on what we do is desolation. To fear God is to be sensitive to both his greatness and his graciousness. It is to know him and to love him wholeheartedly and unreservedly.¹⁸

When you fear God like this, rather than spurn and scorn his commands, you increasingly keep them. You could think of this in purely obedience/disobedience terms. The problem with that is we are always disobeying God, even as Christians we are always trying to obey him. This can cause unhealthy introspection.

I think a better way of looking at “keep” is through a synonym that appears in parallel with it at least 16 times in the OT.¹⁹ This is the word “walk.” Enoch “walked” with God (Gen 5:22). Noah “walked” with God (6:9). Abraham and Isaac “walked” with God (48:15). In this last instance, this is the same verse in which we find Jacob calling God his Shepherd! In the vast majority of times that this Hebrew verbal stem appears, it has God and a sanctuary or a king in

¹⁸ Ferguson, 74.

¹⁹ Lev 18:4; Dt 13:4; 26:17; 28:9; Josh 22:5; 1Kg 6:12; 8:25, 58; 2Kg 23:3; 2Ch 6:16; 34:31; Ps 78:10; Prov 2:20; Ezek 11:20; 20:18; Zech 3:7.

view.²⁰ In other words, to walk with God is to worship him and adore him as you gladly carry out his commandments as his servant. This is much more than bare obedience. It is love.

Some scholars who have a more cynical reading of Ecclesiastes say that this teaching is out of line with the rest of the book. But is it? We've seen it before. "For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but *God is the one you must fear*" (Ecc 5:7). "Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that *it will be well with those who fear God*, because they fear before him" (Ecc 8:12).

Not only is it not out of line with the rest of the book, this is the teaching of the whole Bible.²¹ Virtually the same thing is said by Moses. "And now, Israel, what does the

²⁰ Cory D. Crawford, "Noah's Architecture: The Role of Sacred Space In Ancient Near Eastern Flood Myths, in *Constructions of Space IV: Further Developments in Examining Ancient Israel's Social Space*, ed. Mark K. George (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 17. https://www.academia.edu/5112116/Noahs_Architecture_The_Role_of_Sacred_Space_in_Ancient_Near_Eastern_Flood_Myths.

²¹ One scholar makes this very point. "The sentence "Fear God and keep his commandments," designates the most important conceptual binomial in Qohelet and in the Hebrew Bible. From the Pentateuch to the book of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and prophetic texts, the theological synthesis written by Solomon in the twilight of his life can be considered the heart of biblical wisdom and of the ethical demands of God as Creator of man and the world." Allan Bornapé, "Fear God and Keep his Commandments": The Character of Man and the Judgment of God in the Epilogue of Ecclesiastes," *DavarLogos* XVII 2 (Julio-Diciembre 2018): 57. https://www.academia.edu/40799373/Fear_God_and_Keep_his_Commandments_The_Character_of_Man_and_the_Judgment_of_God_in_the_Epilogue_of_Ecclesiastes.

LORD your God require of you, but *to fear the LORD* your God, *to walk in all his ways*, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 10:12). We find it in the Psalms. “I am a companion of all *who fear you*, of those *who keep your precepts*” (Ps 119:63). We find it in the prophets, in the form of prophecy: “I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may *walk in my statutes* and *keep my rules* and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek 11:19-20).

We find it in the NT. Jesus said, “*Take my yoke* upon you, and *learn from me*, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:29-30). Don’t think this is the same thing? Jesus also said, “And his mercy is for *those who fear* him from generation to generation” (Lk 1:50). And John said, “For this is the love of God, that *we keep his commandments*. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1Jn 5:3).

This is, in a word, **the meaning of life**. But for who? This one might surprise some people. Merely for Christians? No. “For this is the whole duty of man (*‘adam*).” Which men? **All**

men. All men are obligated to this, but most do not realize it. In their classic metal ballad, Metallica sings,

So close, no matter how far
Couldn't be much more from the heart
Forever trusting who we are
And nothing else matters

Never opened myself this way
Life is ours, we live it our way
All these words, I don't just say
And nothing else matters

Trust I seek and I find in you
Every day for us something new
Open mind for a different view
*And nothing else matters*²²

Lead singer James Hetfield wrote the song while on tour as he was bummed out about being away from home. It was initially a song about a girlfriend. But for the band and their loyal followers, it *became* a song about the fans. That's the beauty of music, it can apply it each person individually. If

²² Metallica, "Nothing Else Matters," *Metallica*, Elektra (1992).

we applied this song to our relationship with God, then I would agree with them. Nothing. Else. Matters.

This is the whole duty of man. This is the meaning of life. In fact, the meaning of life is the duty of life, because “duty” here can be translated as “substance” or “material.” Our duty to God is the whole substance of man. It is why we were created. As one scholar has said, “Fearing God and keeping the commandments are ‘the substance, the ‘material’ of every person. There should be no alloy [no mixture of fearing and not fearing, keeping and not keeping].”²³

This should be done out of joy. We remember that the Larger Catechism begins, “What is the chief end of man?” A. To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Recall that joy appears seven times in this book. It is the structural center of Ecclesiastes. It sandwiches the very last main teaching in 11:9, “That for all these things God will bring you into judgment.” Structure is theology! We’ve seen even today how the Preacher’s words are words of delight (12:10). This is a vital theme to keep in mind as we turn to the very last verse, which is intimately related to all this.

²³ Michael V. Fox, “A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999),” 362, [http://palimpsest.stmarytx.edu/thanneken/th6313/content/Fox\(1999\)ATimeToTearDown.pdf](http://palimpsest.stmarytx.edu/thanneken/th6313/content/Fox(1999)ATimeToTearDown.pdf). Cited in Peter Enns, “Ecclesiastes 1: Book Of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 128.

The last verse gives all men the greatest of motivations for heeding the prod, feeling the goad, fastening the nails to their consciences, and moving where the Shepherd is driving them—to green pastures (Ps 23:2). “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecc 12:14). We just saw how this very teaching was the last central point of the book (11:9). He’s restating it.

Many unbelievers have not felt the prod and goad yet. They are too busy running to heed the Shepherd’s voice. Some who have heard it are in need of feeling a new goad. “Does it irritate you, or even anger you, to be told that unless you fear God you have missed the secret of life? ... If that is true, this ‘goad’ has had its intended effect; it has made you say ‘ouch!’.”²⁴ The acknowledgement of the pain can either be ignored or heeded. If ignored, you will still not escape God’s judgment.

That judgment will be fair and according to your works, for all your deeds and thoughts done in the body. The Apostle clarifies. God “will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;

²⁴ Ferguson, 72.

but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek” (Rom 2:6-9).

Some say that they are headed for the good life as they think about this judgment based on their works. But the Apostle continues, “If you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children ... you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast ... dishonor God by breaking the law” (Rom 2:19-23). It only takes one act. Just one. Just ask Adam. And as such, the verdict is rendered “as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’” (Rom 3:10-12).

Perhaps this is the first time you have really ever heard this, and you are cut to the quick. Or perhaps, you have heard it a hundred times and continually sit there in stubborn

rebellion, refusing to come to God through Christ. *You will not escape this judgment.* God knows even the secret things of your heart. He knows all you have done good *and bad*. What is your proper action? **Turn** now and leave everything else behind, and **become a disciple** of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep.

But someone might be sitting there, as a Christian, fearful as in terror, of this verse. “**God knows my secrets,**” you say, “**and he will judge me.**” You are the one who truly needs to understand the point anew today, because it can be deeply personal for you. To you I say, yes. **He will. And he already has.** And that is why Jesus was **nailed** to that cross. Fix those nails firmly in your mind. Stop your fear and terror of being punished for your deeds and rest that Jesus took that punishment for you. Then, **out of godly fear**, get up off the ground by the grace he has already given you in Christ, shake the dust from your clothes, in fact, put on the new clothing of his righteousness, and begin walking again in the fear of God and love of his commandments. For this is the meaning of life. And nothing else matters.

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