

“The End of the Matter”

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Writers will tell you that if there is anything they struggle with more than the beginning of a book, it is the end of one. Endings are very important, even more so than beginnings. If you're a good writer, you've captured your reader's attention. You've kept him following you for the entire journey, and now all of your hard work comes down to one final scene that will make or break his reading experience. How will the matter end? That's the million dollar question.

Good endings are those that make sense. They evoke emotion. They open the mind to new ideas. They do not confuse the reader. Good endings bring the hero—and, more importantly, the reader—to some kind of destination. Good endings highlight how the protagonist has changed from the beginning of the book. If the protagonist is the same person as he was in the beginning, then the story lacks a crucial dimension of character development. There are different types of endings:

The Fairy Tale Ending. The journey is over, the hero has completed his quest. He has learned what he needed to learn and is now moving on. This ending can be happy, sad, or something in between.

The Cliffhanger. Cliffhanger endings, as their name suggests, leave the hero dangling in the jaws of some unsolved danger. Open endings, the ones where the hero's true fate is left to the reader's imagination, can also be argued to fall under this classification.

The Shocker. These endings are created by introducing a final twist to the plot, one that transforms the reader's understanding of the events of the story so far. Horror, crime, and thrillers make use of these endings a lot.

The Terrible Ending. This type of ending leaves the reader with a sense of let down. Things don't turn out for the main character the way we hoped they would. Unlike the cliffhanger where there is no plot resolution, the resolution is one that we don't like.

The Philosophical Ending. Occasionally, a story ends with an invitation to wonder and keep exploring its themes. The hero's journey concludes, but not quite. The reader is still left to wonder about the hero's fate, though not always in a cliffhanger or shocker sense.

Endings are important. Well, we've come to the end of our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes. All throughout these twelve chapters, Solomon has made his case that no satisfaction can be found under the sun. In the first six chapters, he told us the story of his own quest to find meaning in life. Then, to help us know how to live for God in this vain world, he showed us the difference between wisdom and foolishness in chapters 7-11. He ends it all in chapter 12 by talking about death and the fleeting nature of youth. In verse 8, he comes back to his original statement:

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.”

It is the exact same statement he made back in chapter 1, verse 2. His last words are the same as his first words. It is literary device known as 'inclusio' which simply refers to the repetition of identical language at the beginning and the end of a section of literature so that it forms a bookend. It tells the reader what is in the middle of the two bookends is an explanation.

You can find this used throughout the Old Testament:

Genesis 39:2—“The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man...”

Genesis 39:21-23—“But the Lord was with Joseph...the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.”

Psalm 118:1—“Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!”

Psalm 118:29—“Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!”

By beginning and ending with the same statement like this, the whole structure of Ecclesiastes reinforces the point that there is nothing new under the sun. We end up right where we started off. “*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity.*” We didn’t quite understand what that meant way back in chapter 1, but by the time we get to chapter 12, it hits us with greater force. We know that under the sun...

knowledge is vanity (1:16-18)

pleasure is vanity (2:1-3)

work is vanity (3:9-11)

money is vanity (5:10-13)

youth is vanity (11:10)

Solomon has made his point—without God at the center, life is meaningless and empty. Trying to leave the Creator out of His universe is like trying to tell time on a watch that has no mainspring. God is the One who holds life together and brings purpose to it all. Without Him, there can be no lasting joy or ultimate meaning.

It is intended to leave the reader scratching his head. If the book were to end with verse 8, you and I would assume that vanity has the last word—but it doesn't.

Solomon sums up the end of the matter for us in these final verses of chapter 12 which serve as a necessary epilogue to the book. If you want to live above the 'vanity' of a life without God at the center, then pay close attention to what he says here in these last few verses. Notice it involves:

1. Instruction in the SCHOOL of life (12:9-10)

“Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.”

Notice the language shifts from first person to third person. It could very well be that someone else wrote these closing verses. Or, it could simply be Solomon's poetic way of explaining how and why he wrote what he did. He's simply applying his teaching in a practical way to the life that we live before God. As he sums up the book, he says that the words he wrote are:

Insightful words (v. 9a)

“Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge...”

Solomon's wisdom wasn't kept to himself, but he used his God-given wisdom to teach others. He took the time to pass along rich, spiritual insight to other people. He did this through the use of proverbs, many of which are in these chapters we've looked at in Ecclesiastes. 1 Kings 4:32 says that he arranged more than three thousand proverbs, many of which no doubt make up the book of Proverbs. Think of a proverb as a simple 'sound bite' of godly wisdom. It is wisdom in its purest form, distilled in a practical and down-to-earth way for life in a complicated world. That is their purpose.

Proverbs 1:1-6—“The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—let the wise hear and increase learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.”

You and I need the insightful words of Solomon, as well all of the Bible’s instruction. Without it, there’s no way we can be wise. Solomon has said throughout Ecclesiastes that we need ‘above the sun’ wisdom for ‘under the sun’ living. Real wisdom is seeing life from God’s perspective.

Careful words (v. 9b)

“...weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.”

Solomon evaluated all of the wise sayings he had heard and included those that were powerful enough to demand our attention. He had heard many wise sayings over the course of his lifetime, but he only included those that were wise and true.

He has arranged his material with great care. This is no sloppy argument that he has made, but one that is carefully and well thought out.

Delightful words (v. 10a)

“The Preacher sought to find words of delight...”

Solomon has given us insightful words, careful words, and he has given us delightful words. This is a powerful phrase that testifies to the beauty of Scripture. The Word of God is beautiful and rich. It sheds light into the darkness of our world and points us to the promise of salvation in Christ.

“Delight”—*word is ‘chephets’ and refers to something to be desired*

Psalm 1:1-2—**“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.”**

Truthful words (v. 10b)

“...and uprightly he wrote words of truth.”

These words are not merely the opinion of some king from antiquity. Rather, these are the words of truth. Solomon has not held back in telling us the truth. He hasn't painted some rosy picture of life that doesn't correspond with reality and the way things really are. He has told us the truth. All the words of Scripture are true and trustworthy. They are infallible. And in an age of moral relativism, you and I need to live with the faith that recognizes this.

Remember that truth is 'T.R.U.E.'—transcendent, revealed, universal, and exclusive.

2. Inspiration from the SHEPHERD of life (12:11-12)

“The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”

Not only has Solomon given us instruction for the school of life, but notice that verse 11 says these words are inspired by one Shepherd. The 'Shepherd' mentioned here is none other than God Himself. The point being made is that God has inspired the wise words of Scripture. He is the Source of these true and

faithful words. As such, they have a very important purpose. The inspired Word of God:

Guides my life (v. 11a)

“The words of the wise are like goads...”

Do you know what a ‘goad’ is? It is one of the tools that a shepherd or a farmer uses. A ‘goad’ is a sharp stick that moves an animal into action and keeps it moving. Sheep can be stubborn. If a shepherd is moving his flock to some greener pasture, he will often have to ‘goad’ his little sheep along. Farmers who are plowing a field will use a ‘goad’ to keep their oxen moving in the right direction.

The words of the wise are like ‘goads.’ As the Shepherd of my soul, God uses this book to prod me into spiritual action and bring me to Jesus. That’s the idea behind this word.

An example of this is seen in the conversion of Saul:

Acts 9:4-5—“Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’” (NKJV)

The Lord was pursuing Saul of Tarsus and using the truth of His Word like a goad in his heart. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God like a goad in a person’s life, not to inflict pain, but to motivate that person to obedience. The truth of God’s Word goads the conscience, making us uncomfortable enough to turn away from our sin. It is a stimulus for the soul, steering us back onto the right path when we’ve drifted in the wrong direction.

Everything that the Preacher has said in these 12 chapters has been like a ‘cattle prod’ in the hand of God. Consider:

Whenever I find myself tempted to find fulfillment in making a lot of money, I’m pricked by the truth of 5:10...

5:10—“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.”

When I’m tempted to forget about God and do my own thing, I’m pricked by the truth 12:1...

12:1—“Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come.”

When I’m tempted to live as if death will never come, thinking that I have a long time in front of me to take spiritual matters seriously, I’m pricked by the truth of 12:5...

12:5—“Man is going to his eternal home...and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

Grounds my life (11b)

“...and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.”

The inspired truth of God’s Word is intended to guide my life, and it is intended to ground my life as well. It brings me stability in the midst of a vain and chaotic world. The Preacher says that the words of truth are like nails that are ‘firmly fixed.’ That means that they are fastened down.

They keep the wind of life’s adversity from blowing me away. Has God’s Word done that for you lately?

Governs my life (v. 12)

“My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh.”

The Word of God guides my life, keeps me grounded, and it also governs me. That’s what Solomon essentially tells us when he says ‘beware of anything beyond these.’ The truth of Scripture is sufficient as the basis for our authority.

We’re warned in verse 12 against studying too many books to the exclusion of God’s Word. Other books may be good for information, but the Bible was given for transformation.

There are plenty of books in my library, but none of them come even remotely close to the Bible. Spurgeon once said, “Visit many good books, but live in the Bible.”

3. Insight into the STEWARDSHIP of life (12:13-14)

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

The Preacher has given us some instructions for the school of life, claimed inspiration from the Shepherd of life, and he now offers some insight into the stewardship of life.

Obedience to God (v. 13)

After everything has been heard, he says that the end of the matter is this—fear God and keep His commandments. I find it interesting that Ecclesiastes ends where Proverbs begins. For instance:

Proverbs 1:7—“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

In fact, the course of Solomon’s life can be traced in the three books of the Old Testament that are his legacy—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Songs reveals the passion of his youth; sunrise

Proverbs reveals the wisdom of his life; noontime

Ecclesiastes reveals regretful retrospect; sunset

In the autumn sunset of his life, Solomon looks back on all that he had accumulated, all of his decisions both good and bad, and in somber tones he says, “The end of the matter is this—fear God and keep His commandments.”

Most of us think of fear as being terror, meaning that we run from God because He is a threat. Yet this is not the biblical meaning of the word. True fear of God doesn’t mean we run from Him. It means we run to Him. Ray Stedman once gave an acrostic to help us remember what is mean by the fear of God. It involves:

Faith in His existence

The fear of God means that a person has faith in who God has revealed Himself to be. It means that I have come to trust in His Word.

Hebrews 11:6—“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

The fear of God begins with faith in who He is and that He exists. The whole created universe around us shouts this!

Experience of His grace

You can never properly fear God until you've learned for yourself what kind of God He is. He is a holy God, yet One who is full of mercy, grace, and forgiveness. His grace is available to us through Jesus Christ. Taste and see!

Awe of His majesty

True fear of God is reverential awe of His majesty as one considers His perfect wisdom and power. To think that He upholds all things by His omnipotence. To think that He is everywhere at the same time, and you can't run from Him. To think that He is the Source of all truth and knowledge and nothing is hidden from His omniscience.

Resolve to do His will

To fear God is to obey Him, to keep His commands. It is to love Him with all of your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Solomon says that the fear of God and obedience to His commands is the whole duty of man. It literally reads in Hebrew, "the whole of man." Do you want to be a whole person, having the eternal void of your soul filled? Then know that it can only be filled with the eternal Spirit and life of God.

Accountability to God (v. 14)

"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."

You ought to underline this verse, memorize it, and keep it front and center of your life. God will bring every deed into judgment. No one can hide from Him. No matter where you go, He's already there. He knows everything that goes on. He knows every thought of the heart, every word on the tip of the tongue, and every single motive that leads us to do what we do. God sees through duplicity

and the thin veneer of religious hypocrisy. He has a record of it all, and nothing can be hidden from Him. Every deed and every secret thing, whether good or evil, God will bring it into judgment. We must run to Jesus! He died on the cross for our sins, was buried in the grave of death, but rose again triumphantly. Only He can rescue sinners from the vanity of life under the sun.

Of all the wisdom that Solomon has written with here in Ecclesiastes, he tells us that the end of the matter is really simple. It isn't complicated, and you don't have to have a college degree to grasp it. He says the conclusion of all he is written is this—Fear God and keep His commandments. To enjoy life and be truly be happy, keep God at the center.

Alexander Grigolia was an immigrant who came to America from eastern Europe, fleeing communism under the former Soviet Union. He learned English, earned three doctoral degrees, and even became a successful professor at the University of Pennsylvania. But despite his achievements, there was misery in his heart that he couldn't quite put his finger on. One day, while getting his shoes shined, he noticed that the fellow who was doing the shining was whistling and happy as if he didn't have a care in the world. In a thick Russian accent, Dr. Grigolia asked him, "Why are you so happy?" Looking up, the shoeshine paused and gave a simple reply, "Jesus loves me. He died so God could forgive me of my sin. He makes me happy!" Grigolia scoffed and snapped his newspaper back in front of his face, and the shoeshine went back to work. However, Alexander Grigolia never forgot those words, and they kept 'goaded' him until they eventually led him to the Savior. He later became a professor of anthropology at Wheaton College and made a profound impact on a young student there at the time, whose name was Billy Graham...

The end of the matter? There is no lasting happiness apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Trying to find your purpose and meaning under the sun apart from Him is like chasing the wind. But the one who has come to the end of himself and has found his or her life in Christ—this is the one who is truly happy. It was not until the end of the journey, after all the dust had settled, that Solomon returned to this most basic of all truths. The conclusion he comes to here can be your introduction to a life you didn't even know was possible—one of joy, forgiveness, and lasting satisfaction.