



The Meaning of Life

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for November 22, 2020

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Summary: In these final verses of Ecclesiastes, Solomon reflects on his journey to find truth, describes where that truth comes from, and then shares some final wisdom for his son from his life experience. As Stephen opens Solomon's journal for the final time in this series, he shares why these life truths are just as important today as they were when King Solomon sat on the throne of Israel.

One of our church members sent me this email a few weeks ago.

A massive passenger airplane, the Airbus 380, was crossing the Pacific Ocean one afternoon, cruising along on autopilot at 30,000 feet with suddenly a Eurofighter jet capable of breaking the sound barrier with Mach 2 speed appeared alongside.

The young pilot of the fighter jet slows down, flies alongside the Airbus and greets the pilot of the passenger plane by radio, "Airbus, your flight must really be boring to have to travel along so slowly — watch this." And with that, he rolled his jet over a few times, accelerated, breaking through the sound barrier with a crashing boom, then he flew to a dizzying height, only to swoop down toward the ocean in a breathtaking dive. Eventually

he lopped back next to the Airbus and asked, "Now what'd you think of that?"

The Airbus pilot answered, "Impressive, but watch this."

And the jet pilot watched the Airbus as nothing happened. It continued flying straight and at the same speed. After 5 minutes, the Airbus pilot radioed the jet pilot, "Now what'd you think of that?"

He responded, "I didn't see you do anything."

The other pilot laughed and said, "Oh I got up, stretched my legs, walked back to the kitchen and got a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll."

The moral of this story is:

When you're young, speed and adrenalin is the best, but when you get older, getting a cup of coffee and a cinnamon role is much better.

Actually, there's nothing wrong with enjoying either experience.

Based on his private journal, it's obvious that Solomon has slowed down quite a bit — and for the better. His early years had been all about speed and adrenaline, and frankly, rebellion.

He had spent many years of his life, deep in the ocean of sin, and he came up for air only when he realized that he was desperate for meaning and purpose.

Adapted from John Phillips, *Exploring Ecclesiastes* (Kregel, 2019), p. 346

By the goodness of God, Solomon was brought back to repentance. Proven here by his final journal entries, Solomon returned to his earlier walk with God and with the wisdom of God in mind.

Written primarily to his son, Solomon has been setting the record straight. He doesn't want his son — nor does God want any of us — to dive into that same deep ocean of sin where you will never touch bottom; you will never get anchored; you will drift along without any direction or satisfaction in life.

In the closing verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 12, you will read the final word on the meaning and purpose of life. Solomon begins by first reminiscing on his search for truth.

Solomon reminisces on his search for truth

Notice verse 9:

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

Ecclesiastes 12:9

It was common practice in ancient near Eastern literature for the writer to speak of himself in the third person. Moses, David and the Apostle John did the same.

Adapted from John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?* (EP Books, 2016), p.2016

Solomon refers to himself again as the preacher.

And he writes here that his collection of Proverbs was not just a hobby like collecting stamps or coins.

He **weighed** them — which means he pondered them with careful evaluation; he **studied** them which indicates diligent thoroughness, and thirdly, he tells us, he **arranged** them — that is — he skillfully ordered them.

Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 1983), p. 174

Why?

Verse 10 tells us it was because he wanted to teach people the knowledge and wisdom of God — notice:

The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and

uprightly he wrote words of truth.

Ecclesiastes 12:10

These weren't just a collection of words, but words of delight — you could render that “purpose” or “substance”.

They are words of truth; they are reliable and dependable words.

He goes on in verse 11 to describe them:

The words of the wise are like goads and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

Ecclesiastes 12:11a

The Old English “goad” was a word for a point, a spearhead, an arrowhead a pointed stick to drive along some cattle.

Phillips, p. 345

This journal was intended by God through Solomon to prod us and poke us and direct us; and God's word does just that at times — it humbles our pride and reverses our direction and upsets our plans and priorities and offends our behavior and challenges our thinking.

David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Crossway, 2017), p. 159



Describe a time in your life where God has used his Word to prod you into action

in a certain area of your life. How did He do that? What passages did He use?

The words of truth are intended, one author wrote, to pierce through the crust of indifference.

Eaton, p. 174

These words are also, he writes, ***like nails firmly fixed***. Solomon says that God's word is like a sharp goad and nails driven firmly in.

We use these same expressions to this day to talk about some verse of scripture that prods us — that goads us into action — it won't leave us alone; we read it and immediately know that we need to nail that truth down.

We need to nail it down as it were, in our mind and memory.

Adapted from Walter Kaiser Jr., *Coping With Change: Ecclesiastes* (Christian Focus, 2013), p. 186

These are words that have been shaped in such a way that they pass through our defenses and explode with meaning in our minds and hearts.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Ecclesiastes* (Insight for Living, 1983), p. 126

Why does this Book have that kind of impact and power in our hearts and lives? Ultimately, because it isn't man's word; it's God's.

And that's exactly what Solomon says next as he moves from reminiscing about his search for truth to introducing us to his source of wisdom.

Solomon introduces his source of wisdom

Notice verse 11 again:

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

Ecclesiastes 12:11

This is a reference to Yahweh, the God of Israel, the **Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 80:1)**; this is the God Solomon heard his father David sing about: **The Lord (Yahweh) is my shepherd I shall not want (Psalm 23:1)**.

These are ultimately His words. He is the source of wisdom.

This is a great text on the doctrine of inspiration. **God spoke through men who were moved by the Holy Spirit, Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:21.**

Solomon was conscious of his own activity — his own personality — his own study as he collated and organized and crafted the expressions and wrote them down, but he realized that God was supervising the entire project and moving through him so that, in the end, the finished product was the very word of God.

Adapted from Eaton, p. 175

Listen, if you want wisdom, go to the word of God. Be careful that you don't listen to preachers and teachers essentially delivering their own words,

their own opinions, their own insights, clever and interesting though they might be. What are they doing with the very words of God?



What do you look for in a church, and in pastor? Are you looking for a pastor who tells you what he wants you to hear, or what he thinks you want to hear? Or does he open the Word and preach that Word as God wrote it?

If you can listen to a preacher or a teacher and never really need to open your Bible, run.

It might sound wise; it might sound powerful, but it isn't the wisdom and power of God.

And Solomon essentially delivers that warning to his son — **notice verse 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.

Ecclesiastes 12:12

Solomon is basically warning us all, be careful what you read.

The average person is reading 2-3 hours a day from their smart phone. Now there's a real source of wisdom!

There are 3,000 books printed in America every single day. We're now right around 1 million new books every year.

Now Solomon isn't telling his son here that he can't read anything but inspired Scripture. There's nothing wrong with books.

I agree with Martin Luther, the Reformer who once said, "One book is good, but 1,000 are better."

Solomon is simply warning his son — and us — about everything outside of Scripture. Be careful what you read.

And above all, saturate your mind and heard with this Book — for it is the wisdom for your life from your true Shepherd, who will never lead you astray.

And with that, Solomon now delivers his closing summary on the meaning of life.

Solomon delivers his summary on life

What if you could summarize the purpose of your life in 2 sentences or less? In 30 words or less, if you wrote out the meaning of life, the purpose for your existence, what would it be?

Here's the answer: in fact, Solomon's two-sentence summary on life is really a three-fold plan of action:

The first action step is *worship*

Solomon writes in verse 13:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God.

Ecclesiastes 12:13a

Stop there for a moment.

What does that mean to fear the Lord? Solomon has already told us the same thing several times.

Let me suggest an acrostic I worked out in my study with this word **fear** that might help clarify it:

F: favor His presence

E: exalt His glory

A: acknowledge His sovereignty

R: remember His goodness

The letter F stands for this: favor His presence.

To fear God means you want to walk with God. You're more interested in His opinion than anyone else's.

The letter E stands for: exalt His glory.

You not only walk with Him; you desire to talk about Him. You're as excited about God as you are about your favorite football team.

The letter A stands for: acknowledge His sovereignty.

Trust Him; especially when He doesn't explain Himself. As we've learned in our

study through this Book, when you can't trace His hand, trust His heart.

And the letter R stands for: remember His goodness.

The unbeliever never thanks God for anything, and that's because whatever they have in life they got by their own initiative and skill and a pinch of good luck.

Romans 1 describes the unbeliever as someone unwilling to thank God for creation or anything else.

Fearing God is not a negative action point; it means that we honor and revere and worship and adore and exalt our God above everything else in life.

- Favor His presence
- Exalt His glory
- Acknowledge His sovereignty
- And Remember His goodness.

And that happens to be nothing less than true worship.

The first action step is worship.

The second action step is *obey*.

Solomon writes, verse 13 again:

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecclesiastes 12:13b

Notice the progression — it is worship *first* and then obedience; conduct flows out of worship and adoration.

Eaton, p. 177

Jesus said it this way: ***If you love Me you will keep my commandments (John 14:15).***

If you love Him and revere Him and love the things He loves and the people He loves and the word He loves, the last thing you would ever want to do is defy Him.

I fear we spend too much attention on obeying Him and not enough on loving Him.

Obeying Him flows out of loving Him.



Why do you obey God? Do you do it out of obligation, or out of love?

This is wholeness in life, Solomon is writing. This is fulfillment. This is the true meaning of life. You could paraphrase this to read, loving and obeying God is everything that ultimately matters in life.

Adapted from Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 1976), p. 107

Worship, obey, now:

The third action step is *prepare*

Verse 14:

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

Ecclesiastes 12:14

How's that for a final word!

For the believer, every sin, past present and future has already been nailed to the cross of Christ, Peter wrote: the certificate of debt — of sin — has already been canceled by faith in Christ.

One day you will stand at the Bema Seat and Christ will reward you for all that was profitably done for His glory.

Oh yes, we will all wish we had done more, but for us it will be a time of great joy and appreciation as we then take those crowns — those rewards — and cast them at His feet.

But for the unbeliever, that day of Judgment is at the Great White Throne where they will stand with their sins upon themselves, and their judgment will be tragic and eternal.

A day is coming when millions of people will discover that they are not ready for the most important event in all of life — and it won't be a dream. Their lives were one long effort to avoid the reality of what they knew was coming — death and an appointment with God.

Gibson, p. 160

One of the authors I've enjoyed reading during our study through Ecclesiastes tells of a man who began attending

church with his wife. They thought their 5-year-old daughter needed a little religious instruction at the time. And about the time they started attending, the pastor began a series on Genesis. This man would testify later that when the pastor got up and read Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," the hair stood up on the back of his neck, because he just knew it was true — and since it was true, he knew he was in big trouble. He soon gave his life to Jesus Christ.

Benjamin Shaw, [Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World](#) (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), p. 156

Solomon's journal is like a hand on the shoulder that shakes us and says, "Wake up; take a good hard look at the reality of God, and the meaning and purpose of your life."

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, and any day is better than no day. Whether you're speeding along in your fighter jet, breaking the sound barrier, or just plodding along, looking for another cup of coffee.

Solomon invites us as believers to live this kind of life; this is life with meaning and purpose defined here in these closing verses:

- Remember who created your life.
- Resolve to walk with God through life.
- Follow the guidelines of God's word through life.
- Enjoy the gifts God has given you in life.

- Trust Him with what He has chosen not to give you in life.
- Prepare to stand before God when you leave this life.

There's a little prayer that I've memorized recently, written by a Puritan author that sounded a lot like Solomon's inspired advice. And with this I close:

Grant O Lord that we may:

Live in thy fear

Die in thy favor

Rise in thy power

Reign in thy glory

*For the sake of your
beloved Son,*

Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Kidner, p. 119

That is the meaning of a life well lived.
That's it! Let's go live it, for the glory and
honor of God.

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