

Spoiler Alert: The End

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going back this evening for a short time together. And I entitled this sermon, Spoiler Alert, The End, because that's exactly really what I'm doing.

I'm spoiling the whole book by going to the end. And there is a reason for that, and it's important. It's kind of going to be a bit of a back-to-front series.

We're not doing it like an ordinary series where we're splitting into chunks and chapters and working through it. We're really looking at themes, and we'll look at different themes throughout the book.

But we're going to the end first, because really the conclusion that we read there from verse 9 really is the key to the book.

It's the key that helps us to understand the rest of the book. So when we understand the key, if we understand the end of the book, which is sometimes not the way you like to read books, but I think until we understand the end of it, it helps to make reading the rest of it easier.

[1 : 09] And I do believe that the book itself, Ecclesiastes, and it's definitely worth reading in one go. If you've got a spare hour, hour and a half, read the whole book.

Read it in the simplest translation you can. And I think that will also help you see the book a bit more clearly.

But I believe the book itself, the structure of the book, the way it's written, it reflects life actually, the book itself. It's confusing.

It's hard to grasp. We're not sure where God fits into everything in our lives. And that's sometimes true in this book as well.

We're not sure what it's all about sometimes, the book of Ecclesiastes. And that, I think we're meant to think that. I think it's meant to make us think of life itself.

[2 : 06] In that way, it's a very postmodern kind of book. But clearly it hints at the truth, and more than that. But it maybe hints more at what's in the rest of the Bible.

It is all truth, but it hints at what maybe we need to unpack from the rest of the Bible to help us understand it more fully. But it's like life itself as well, isn't it?

Because it's not until we reach the end of life in many ways that we have a much fuller understanding of what it's about, especially as Christians when we get to the end of life and meet with God, our maker, then we will begin to understand more clearly what our lives and what life is like.

And that's reflective in the structure of this book also. So slightly, it's going to be slightly, we're going to do things slightly differently when we're looking at this book.

And I'm going to do another different thing, and this is something you're not supposed to do. I'm really breaking all the rules today. I'm making up a new English word. I know you know I make up words, but I'm making up a new English word.

[3 : 16] And it's one that John mentioned last week actually. So I'm borrowing a Hebrew word and making it an English word. John talked a lot about heavily, okay, not heaven, but heavily.

And that's the word that recurs a lot in the book and is translated either vanity or meaningless in most of the translations.

And John expressed its meaning as almost like vapor, something that can't be grasped, like the wind can't be grasped, can't be controlled. Things are seemingly meaningless or vanity because we can't control them or grasp them.

Heav'l, that's what it is. Now we do that with a lot of other words, don't we, from other languages we adopt them or phrases. Selavie, that's life in French, or hasta la vista, you know, see you later.

And so we're going to do that with Heav'l. I'm going to use that occasionally because it's just an easy word. It's an easy word to say and it helps to just remind us of what is being spoken of

throughout this book.

[4 : 23] I think this best understanding is meaningless or vanity or Heav'l is something that can't really be grasped or controlled, can't make real sense of it.

And that's what the teacher is saying throughout this book. They're so much, he can't make sense of, can't control.

So the book itself, just recalling a little bit of what John was saying, the teacher is observing the injustice, a lot of the time the injustice of life.

Ecclesiastes is just a Latin for teacher. And so, co-haleth is what John used last week. I'm quite happy to, I know maybe modern scholars don't so much, but I'm quite happy to attribute Solomon, King Solomon to be the teacher in this book clearly.

But he's talking about what seems to be observing the injustices of life, the fact that we can't control things that happen.

[5 : 36] You know, the wiser some people are, the more sorrow they seem to have. Pleasure, pursuit of pleasure never seems to satisfy, never seems to bring meaning to life.

Fools and wise people seem to have their lives and their roles reversed so often. People work to possess and to gain and to have material things, then they die and go back to the womb naked and leave it all behind.

Maybe to someone else who hasn't worked for it. He talks about the irrationality of evil and the many things that don't make sense, that time and chance happen to all.

There's a routine that is relentless, but it doesn't seem to make a great deal of sense. He speaks a lot about foolishness, that the world seems to have ingrained foolishness and injustice.

And throughout the book, and John and I discussed this after the sermon last week, that John felt quite heavy after preaching and studying the book.

[6 : 36] And there is a sense, it does give you that sense of heaviness, because there's a depressing certainty of death that comes right through the book from beginning to end. Why bother?

Why bother? Because whatever happens, whatever you achieve, whatever you're able to do, everything gets left behind and death is the great leveler.

It strikes at any time. No respecter of age or wealth, and all our pursuits, all our achievements, it seems to cast a great shadow over the book and over life itself.

And when you read that, and you read some of the struggles that the teacher has, it reflects, you know, I guess it reflects your own life and my own life.

You know, because we see, I see my life and I see, you know, what I do, what I experience, what I go through is very important.

[7 : 38] And I feel the significance of my life because I, from a human point of view, and you'll be the same, you're the center of your own existence, and I'm the center of mine.

And we live with this sort of importance of everything that's going around us from our perspective. But we live in a world of another seven billion people, and we die, and before a couple of generations are gone, no one will remember us.

There's that paradox of importance and life and being alive and everything revolving around us, and yet, insignificance of the world which we live in and the death that will come to us all and being forgotten.

And so Solomon is saying, is that the case? Does death ruin everything? Is that the end of everything?

Is our lives insignificant? However important they seem to us, well, I think the answer lies in the key to the book, The Last Few Verses, The Last Four Verses.

[8 : 46] But that in itself, and I'm giving layer upon layer of enigma in many ways, the conclusion itself highlights really the problem of this world and what Solomon is saying.

The conclusion is the end of the matter always been heard, fear God, and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of humanity.

We can't do it. The end of the matter, the conclusion is something we can't do unless we deal with the problem of sin, of evil, and of our mortality.

And really all these issues are at the core of the book, so that even the key, the conclusion isn't the answer ultimately, or there's a way, there's another step to take before we're able to fear God and keep His commandments.

You see, sin is at the core of the vanity, the meaninglessness, the heaval, the inability to grasp all that's happening in life, because what sin has done is driven God out of the picture and it's introduced despair and separation and selfishness into the human story.

[10:11] So all that the teacher speaks about in the Ecclesiastes highlights what sin has brought into the world and into our own experience, the irrationality, hatred, arbitrariness of life and the mess of trying to live without Him, because we make lousy gods and the book of Ecclesiastes highlights that, highlights the fact that we make really lousy gods ourselves when we have rejected the author of life who alone can give meaning.

He's the one that gives meaning. And in a sense, I think what the teacher is saying is we can paper over that for so long. We can live lives and seek significance and take on board lots of important tasks in life, but if we silence that spiritual reality of being separated from God, if we deny it or if we're deceived by it, we will never find life in its fullness.

We will always be separated from God and the consequences of that. So the first step of recognizing we are out of control is to recognize that it's happened because we have left God out of the picture.

And therefore, injustice, poverty, illness, loss, betrayal, life over which we have no control, the experiences that hit us that we can't model and control and manufacture and change, it's all a spiritual consequence of humanity turning its back on God.

And then we die. So it does deal with big issues and it deals with, in a sense, the mess, the judgment, the reality of separation from God.

[12:20] But what it clearly does, not in its fullness, but it clearly points to his answer. It gives us these great summary keywords that the end of the matter has been heard, fear God and his commandments.

But I believe there's an important hint towards recognizing how we do that when we recognize what he says in verse 11.

And he attributes the wisdom he gets from God. The words of the wise are like goads, they are like nails, firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

They are given by one shepherd. My son beware of anything beyond these. They are given by one shepherd. And the direction of what is being taught there is that the one shepherd is not Solomon, is not the teacher, is not Koh-Haleth, the one shepherd in a capital, is God.

God is the shepherd. He is the teacher here. And he wants us to feel the despair of the book.

[13:42] He wants us to connect with that sense of vanity or not grasping or not being able to control everything, because if he wants us to grasp that in order to drive us towards him, because he is the key to truth, he is the understanding to life and to the defeat of death and to wisdom.

And that's a very strong Old Testament picture, God being the shepherd. And it's a great picture. And of course, with taking the Bible as God's word, as one contained book, we are able to recognize Jesus taking that image himself.

The image of the shepherd, the Old Testament shepherd of, even David the Shepard King pointing forward to the coming of the Messiah who himself claimed in John 10, 10, I am the good shepherd. So that what we have pointing towards Jesus here is the ultimate direction by which we can fear God and keep His commands.

It will only be through understanding and knowing the divine work of God in the person of Jesus Christ the Messiah. He's the answer. He is God revealed.

[15:09] He is who Ecclesiastes and all the Old Testament points towards. The futility in this book, the lack of control, the grasping of the wind is, it only makes sense when we find sense and we find hope and we find direction in Jesus Christ who came to seek and to save the lost, who lay the great shepherd of the sheep, who lays down his life for them, who loves them, who loves us, who died for us in order to restore meaning and wisdom and hope and pleasure and work.

All the themes that come in this book giving them great purpose and great perspective and great significance. Nothing, nothing, even the most senseless evil of the crucifixion which is, which if the teacher had seen the crucifixion, he would have written of its calamity.

He would have written of the innocent one nailed as a young man to a tree unjustly. But even that most senseless evil comes under God's sovereign purpose and plan that of Jesus, the great shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

And in experiencing death, he also brings about its destruction for all who trust in him through his resurrection and his victory over its curse.

So the image points towards Christ and I think there's a very interesting link here in this book to us because in pointing to Jesus, it gently reminds us why we fail.

[16:56] Now let me try and explain this. And if you go back to Ecclesiastes chapter 1 and verse 14, we have these words. I have seen everything that is done under the sun and behold, all is vanity, a striving after the wind.

Now that's a great picture of the Hevel that he's speaking about. It's a chasing after the wind. And that phrase is used eight other times in the book of Ecclesiastes.

It's an important theme, it's an important motif throughout the book in highlighting the sense of despair. It's a chasing after the wind. It's trying to put the wind in a sheep pen, trying to control it and grasp it and have power over it.

Now that phrase can be translated, and I think it's a justifiable translation, shepherding the wind. And I think there's a play on the words and a play on the concept and a play on the idea here throughout that runs through the whole book. It's the whole idea of that Hevel again.

[18:06] It's trying to grasp what can't be grasped, understanding what can't be understood in order to have control, in order to be in control of it. We just can't do it.

We can't shepherd the wind. We can't control what is uncontrollable. And really the point of life under the sun as the teacher explains it is that trying to find purpose and meaning and answers to life without God is like shepherding the wind.

It's like chasing after the wind. It's like trying to control the wind. It's not our job to do that. It is His work to be the one shepherd.

And the disciples on the boat when they were afraid of dying. Jesus spoke in the midst of the storm. They were amazed that even the wind and the sea obey Him.

So there's that sense in which even that physical miracle of God controlling the wind points us to His creative genius and His sovereign place to be the one shepherd.

[19:20] No one else has that right to be the one shepherd. None of us can take God's place. None of us can control our lives divinely.

None of us can deal with death on our own. None of us can overcome the evil and the confusion and the irrationality and the brutality and the illness and the things that happen in life that Ecclesiastes speaks about.

Our job, our life begins and never ends when we worship.

When we recognize that through Jesus Christ, through putting our trust in the great shepherd of the sheep, we can fear the Lord, honor the Lord, worship the Lord, adore the Lord and keep His commandments.

We're empowered to do that by the life He gives us as believers. That's what the fear of the Lord really just means, the ability to worship Him and make Him our Lord.

[20:29] It's that step, that new birth, that new way of living where we confess our own inability.

We give up the control of our own destiny and of our own lives at that level and there need to be autonomous beings going our own way, to be little gods, to be in control, to take our accusations against Him, deal with them and understanding His rightful place, His generous grace, His fatherly open arms, His being the mother hen that we looked at this morning.

He is the Creator. He is the infinite and eternal one. We patently are not. And Ecclesiastes brings that out again and again. And so the key to the book is understanding, God is the one shepherd, ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ, He says, I am the great shepherd of the sheep.

And as we come to Him to deal with the sin that causes all the vanity and the meaninglessness and the out of controlled nature of life, then we can enjoy life because that is the whole duty of why we were created.

So worship is the fear of the Lord and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We see that, and I will speak about that again in a minute.

[22:05] Now as we live our lives in Christ, and I'm taking Christ right into this passage, right into this book, it helps us to understand God who holds the mysteries.

So when we come to this with Christ focused or Christ perspective eyes, we see that He knows and understands that we cry out.

He's verbalizing them in this book as He does in many of the Psalms. And we can rest in the reality that we don't need to know everything.

And we don't need to have all the answers. I love verse 12 of this book, my son beware of anything beyond these of making many books that is no end and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

Students, divinity students, PhD students, think of that just for a moment. There's great weariness in looking to find all the answers in books. It can be a great weariness.

[23 : 07] We understand God who holds the mysteries. And we don't seek to control our destiny simply by trying to unpack what is not known and revealed.

We understand more of God and can only understand God through Christ the great shepherd, but also understanding ourselves, understanding that there is mystery, that we are asked to trust, that we are not God, that He does love us, that the core of sin is seeking self-control, that is control without God, to be in control by ourselves without God.

As we understand our place before God and Christ, it gives significance, and we'll see that in Ecclesiastes, significance and joy to the simplest acts of life, eating and drinking and working and laughing and enjoying what God has made us, to enjoy as created people, not creators at that foundational level.

It reminds us that we will stand before Him in judgment. Every secret thing, good or evil, will be taken into judgment. That helps us understand ourselves and God and understands that nothing therefore, nothing is ultimately meaningless or random, because all will be held to account.

Every single part of life is significant. It helps us when we see that to understand the key. Again, I've mentioned this is wisdom, not intelligence.

[24 : 50] There are so many smart people around the world, and it's great, what a gift from God.

But we do seem to be in a world that's increasingly surrounded by experts on everything, those who find the answers and have the answers to every conceivable problem in the world.

Now, I'm not decrying intelligence for a moment or the pursuit of knowledge, but we look for that intelligence and that knowledge to submit, to subordinate to the great divine and penetrable, infinite intelligence of God.

Then it becomes truly useful. And that wisdom's key, as I said, the fear of the Lord, the companion book to Ecclesiastes is Proverbs.

And of course, Proverbs in chapter 9. We can look this up, and it's so much the theme of the book of Proverbs, Proverbs chapter 9 and verse 10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

So we find that the deepest wisdom that will help us to understand the world we live in is relational before it is intellectual.

[26 : 05] It's worshiping and knowing God that enables us to understand who we are in this world.

And to understand His commands, which we're asked to keep, is to understand that they are commands of love, the outworking of love.

We need a new heart to love God and to love one another. It's much more than black and white moralism. To worship and the fear of the Lord in keeping His commandments is a life practice, a life reality, a life transforming existence that so much in Ecclesiastes signposts pointing us towards recognizing the... there's many things that are upside down, recognizing we don't and won't find the answers to everything, and the pulpit will never have the answers and preaching, and not even the Bible is the answers to everything because not everything God reveals and much is secret.

But it signposts us to finding wisdom and finding life and finding meaning and hope and celebration even in the simplest of human acts.

There's a really interesting phrase that Tim Keller uses when he talks about our prayer life, and he says, God will only give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything He knows.

That's a very profound statement. And it reflects the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, that even our prayer lives recognize that sometimes we don't know what to ask for, and sometimes if we knew everything God knows, in our prayers would be very, very different.

[27 : 59] So it's a book that does challenges. It's a book that requires effort and work, and we struggle to find it easy, and that's okay.

That's okay. It's that kind of book. But take that key and recognize that God is interspersed throughout the book in many different ways, and the wisdom of knowing God is interspersed.

The key to all of the book as it reflects the messiness and the confusion and the inability of us to control life as we would want is in the fear of the Lord being the beginning and keeping His commandments through the one shepherd, Jesus Christ.

So questions and the confusion and the difficulties, and your life not turning out the way you wanted it to turn out, being disappointed with God, being disappointed with yourself, disappointed with others.

Take these things. Take them to the living God, and remember that in Him He's going to shepherd us towards a completely new existence to which we're heading in Christ, the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwells righteousness, where there will be no grasping, the wind, no vanity, no vapors, no inabilities that will frustrate or confuse or destroy us or cause us to cry, because in Christ we will know life in all its fullness.

[29 : 34] I think that begins to unpack the teaching of Ecclesiastes. Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand you.

Help us for making you very simple sometimes and very black and white and very easy to control and very easy to ignore.

Help us to worship you. You are worthy of our worship. You are worth us falling down in our knees because you're infinite and you're eternal. And we simply are not.

Our lives are a vapor that are passing, swifter than a weaver's shuttle. As we hit beyond the half century, we sense that and feel that more and more, and we ask many questions.

But we find answers in Jesus. And we pray that the young and the congregation would find that at a young age, the deep wisdom of age before they're old, as they trust in Jesus.

[30 : 40] And that the middle-aged among us would not get so caught up in life that we forget the frustrations or just learn to live with them without committing them to God and reminding ourselves that our times are in His hands.

And may those who are in the evening of their days rejoice that the best is yet to come. So help us, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.