

An Empty Life? (14): Fear God and Keep His Commandments

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Lord, you have been our refuge from generation to generation, before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made. You are God from everlasting and world without end. You satisfy us with Your mercy and that soon. You comfort us in the years of adversity. You show Your servants Your work and their children Your glory and so we worship you. Let us worship God.

Lord and God you are our rock and our refuge and our eternal home and you are able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, that is Your power, the power of Your Holy Spirit. And so it is to you that belongs the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus in all generations forever and ever. We come this day as Your blood-bought servants, saved by the grace of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, into Your presence to worship and adore you, giving to you the glory due Your name. Receive it. Receive our prayers and praises. Speak to us by Your word. Steel our hearts for the living of these days. Prick our consciences, change our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word of God in Scripture, and get all the glory for it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you have Your bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 12 as we come to the end of this book. All summer long as we've looked at this book we've said that it's a very modern book in the sense of speaking to the dilemmas and frustrations that strike us as so contemporary to our own experience and giving a very practical and pastoral answers to those dilemmas. The answers that are given have a ring of currency to them and this is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that this book was given about 3000 years before our time.

Now, we have rehearsed some of the various problems of life that are addressed in this great book. The theme, the thesis of the preacher, that's what he calls himself, is that life is empty, to be specific, that life lived apart from God is empty, life in this world with all its troubles ending as it always does in death; this life is empty and meaningless and unfull. It is frustrating and void of delight apart from a relationship with the living God.

What is His solution then to the frustration of the emptiness of life? Well, he's

been hinting at it all along, hasn't he, ever since especially Ecclesiastes chapter 3. But today he gives us His conclusion. Really, last week he entered into what we called the end game of this book and began to press home to us a bold challenge to live the life of faith. He's put the life of unbelief, the life of indifference, life apart from God in the scales alongside the life of faith. And he's weighed them and he has found the life of unbelief and indifference lacking. It's lacking intellectually, it's lacking rationally and logically, it's lacking spiritually, it's lacking practically, and it doesn't work.

And now in chapter 12 he sets before us the alternative, a life of trust in the living God, a life that is a full life, a life of joy despite all the difficulties of life in a fallen world. Let's attend to God's word here in Ecclesiastes 12.

Remember also Your creator in the days of Your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; before the sun, the light, the moon, and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caper berry is ineffective. For man goes to His eternal home while mourners go about in the street. Remember him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. "Vanity of vanities," says the preacher, "all is vanity!" In addition to being a wise man, the preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Amen. This is God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May he add His blessing to it. Let's pray

Heavenly Father write the truth of this book on our hearts. Write the truth of this passage on our hearts that we would not merely think about it and understand it in some measure but that we would live it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, this is it. This is the end of this book. Really it's a big sermon, isn't it? The whole book is a sermon pressing home the life of faith and contrasting the empty life of unbelief. What's the conclusion then? Well, in this concluding part of his message, the Preacher wants to drive home three grand things. First, in verses one through eight, you'll see him call us, challenge us, exhort us to serve God early. Don't wait, serve God now. Serve Him early. Serve Him from your first days. That's the point of verses one through eight.

Then in verses nine through 12 a second exhortation, use knowledge rightly. Use knowledge wisely. Understand the use and the purpose of knowledge. Knowledge isn't just there so that you know a few more things, so that you're smarter, so that you're considered to be wise. It's there to be put into practice, it's there to work, and it's there for life.

And then thirdly, in verses 13 and 14, he summarizes the totality of the positive teaching of this book. He says that we must grasp that the key to living a life of joy in this fallen world, in this frustrating world, is to fear God and to keep His commandments. We'll elaborate on those things in just a moment.

I. In light of the brevity of life, we ought to serve God with joy and energy from the first of our days.

In verses one through eight, the preacher says to us, "In light of the brevity of life we ought to serve God with joy and energy from the very first of our days." Look at his words, "remember Your Creator in the days of Your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say I have no delight in Him." In these eight verses the preacher is putting before you two realities that we all face in one way or another: the realities of old age and deterioration of our bodies. Sometimes the reality of seeing a person lose the desire to live, and then, of course, the final reality that we all face unless the Lord comes in His glory before our time, the reality of death. Those three things he presses home. Then, verses two through seven describe to us the deteriorating human body.

Verse one describes to us that person who has lost the will to live. Look at the language. "I have no delight in my days." Have you, have you heard a person say that? I just don't want to live any more. And then of course verses seven and eight point out to us the grand finale, death. And in light of the deteriorating body, and in light of people who have come to the point that they no longer desire to live, and in light of the ultimate certainty of death, he presses home this call to live for God now. Live for God with joy and energy now.

Remember, behind this call is the assertion throughout the book of Ecclesiastes that the life of joy and fullness and happiness and true blessedness is the life of faith. The world doesn't believe that. The world believes that if you're really going

to have fun you've got to ditch this God stuff. And you've got to be free to do what you want in order to get pleasure and satisfaction and meaning in life, you have to ditch God. That's where you find the real marrow of life. When you leave behind this oppressive, strict religion and you're free to do whatever you want. And the whole point of Ecclesiastes is that is one of the biggest ruses that has ever been perpetrated on humanity. The whole point of Ecclesiastes is that no solid joys and lasting treasures are found in departing from God, in neglecting God, in living life for self and not worshipping the living God. But in fact, the only solid joys and lasting treasures that are to be experienced in this life are experienced by Zion's children, as we sing in the hymn. That's the life of joy, that's the life of fulfillment, that's the life of meaning.

And what the preacher is saying to us in verse one of chapter 12 is "Start that life now! Don't wait until the peak of your capacities and energies and abilities have left you. Start now living that life of joy with God." And he pictures for us old age in verses two through seven. Let's look at each of those pictures. "...before the sun, and the light, and the moon, and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain..." That's a picture of the loss of sight in old age. Things are getting darker and things are getting fuzzy. Even after the rain has stopped it still looks cloudy. The sight is dimming and becoming fuzzy.

Look at verse three. "...in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few..." You're losing your teeth. "...and those who look through the windows grow dim..." verse four. Now the hearing goes "...and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low..." Look at the last part of the verse. "...and all the daughters of song will sing softly." It doesn't matter how loud those kids are playing that music down the street it's softer than it used to be. And yet ironically at 3:30 a.m. when that bird starts chirping you're up and that's it, you're up for the day. So you can't hear all day but you sure can at night. And you can't sleep at night, waking up early in the morning.

And then in verse five, "furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road..." There's increased anxiety, maybe even old-age paranoia. The hair turns gray and white, said eloquently this way, "...the almond tree blossoms..." The movements are slow and awkward, kind of like a grasshopper.

Verses six and seven picture for us the deteriorating body and finally death. And the Preacher is saying, "Live for God before you get there." Live for God now at the peak of your powers. Live for God from the very earliest days. He's saying that a full life has to be lived in light of those realities coming. We're going to get old. We're going to die. Live for God now.

You know it's a statistical fact that most of those who won't live for their Creator in the days of their youth will never live for Him. What is it, something like 99% of people who ever become Christians are Christians before they're 28. If you won't

live for your Creator in the days of your youth, chances are you'll never, ever live for Him.

And the Preacher is saying, that's a timely word for us, isn't it, here in Jackson? When the attitude is to sow your wild oats when you're in high school and college. Go ahead, act like pagans while you're in high school and college. Go ahead, do all those things that you know are dishonoring to God while you're in high school and college. Get it out of your system. Live it up. Have some fun. Then you can come back from college and be a respectable, upstanding citizen and marry a nice girl and have a family and settle down. But, sow your wild oats now. Have fun. And here's the Preacher saying, "No. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Worship Him now in the way you live. Worship Him by honoring Him with your care of your body. Worship Him by honoring Him in living as an upstanding young woman or young man. Worship Him in all of life. Live life in light of the ugly realities to come, trouble and death. The difficult realities of life in this fallen world. Serve God and delight in Him now and thus experience the fullness of what this life can be."

You know, we older folks often say that youth is wasted on the young. And the Preacher is saying, "Waste your youth on God." Don't waste it on something that's denigrating to God and to your own dignity. Malcolm Muggeridge, the great journalist, famous writer and editor, for years a dedicated Marxist and atheist, a left-wing columnist for the liberal media. He came to Christ in the latter days of his life, and when he wrote his biography he titled it, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*. And the Preacher is saying, "Don't waste your life. Live if for God because the life lived for God is the only life of delight in this world and if you won't live for God then you will neither experience delight in this world or the next. But if you'll live for God now you'll know the only solid joy and the only lasting delight that can be experienced here or hereafter." That's the first thing that he says in verses one through eight.

II. The believer must understand the right use of knowledge.

And then he may seem to digress when he gets to verses 9 through 12. It may seem like he pauses to give you a brief biographical note and then a commendation on being wise and then a warning about the pitfalls. But this isn't one of those non-linear things going on. It makes perfect sense. You see, the Preacher is saying that the believer must understand the right use of knowledge if she, if he is to wield that knowledge effectively.

He's been talking about wisdom, he's contrasted wisdom and folly at numerous points in this book, but here he's pointing out to us the practical function of truth. We need to know what truth is for. We need to understand what wisdom's purpose is. And he tells us about himself in verse nine. It's not just that he was considered a wise man; it's that he had pursued wisdom in order to teach people

knowledge. The reason that he weighed diligently and arranged carefully his teaching is so that people's lives would be changed. He didn't learn what he learned just so that he could be considered smart. He didn't learn what he learned so that he could know a few more things. He learned it because he wanted to help people. He knew that God's truth is for God's people. It makes their lives better. Truth changes lives. And so he tells us in verse 10 that he chose His words carefully in order to have a maximal effect. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly because he knew that words which were well considered and words that were well aimed were more apt to have the maximal effect that would be lost with slap dash and ill-considered words. And so he was careful with the words. But the reason that he was careful was not to tickle your ears, but because he wanted your life to be changed by the truth conveyed in those words.

He goes on in verse 11 to say that His words were designed to do two things: to be goads and nails. Goads, prods. Not only to prod you in the right way but to prick your conscience, to goad your conscience, to convict the conscience. That's one thing. And then also to anchor the truth. Prods point you in the right direction. The prods convict and direct. Nails keep things in place. The nails anchor you in the truth.

And, of course, in verse 11 at the very end he says ultimately these words were not my words, they came from where? They came from one shepherd. The Preacher's father had said, "The Lord is my shepherd." And he said, my words are not my words, they're the shepherd's words. Here's the doctrine of inspiration, the inspiration of scripture that every word of this book proceeds from the mouth of God. It's all given by inspiration. It's breathed out from the word of God. They are ultimately God's words.

And then this strange warning in verse 12, "Be careful how you read, my son. Be warned, the writing of books is endless. Excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body." We're at the beginning of the semester and students here already know this. But this isn't just a practical, common sense observation about how writing books is hard and reading books is hard. It's something much deeper than that. He's warning his young son, his student, his disciple, about one of the dangers of study. He's saying, "Son be careful how you pursue the reading of books. Make sure you know why you're wanting to learn what you're learning."

Thomas Brooks, in his wonderful book, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, does something that I've never seen another author do. He warns certain readers not to read his book. I've never seen a writer, at the beginning of his book warn you that you might be better off not to read his book, but Thomas Brooks does. This is what he says in his word to the reader at the beginning of *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*.

"Remember it is not hasty reading but serious meditating upon holy and heavenly

truths that make them prove sweet and profitable to the soul. It is not the bees touching of the flower that gathers honey, but her abiding for a time upon the flower that draws out the sweet. It is not he that reads most but he that meditates most who will prove the choicest, sweetest, wisest and strongest Christian. Know that it is not the knowing nor the talking nor the reading man but the doing man that at last will be found the happiest man. 'If you know these things blest and happy are you if you do them,' said Jesus. Judas called Christ "Lord" and yet betrayed Him and is gone to his place. Ah, how many Judases have we in these days that kiss Christ and yet betray Him? In their words profess Him but in their works deny Him. That bow their knee to Him and yet in their hearts despise Him. That call Him, Jesus, and yet will not obey Him as Lord.

Reader, if it be not strong upon thy heart to practice what thou readeest, to what end dost thou read? To increase thine own condemnation? If thy light and knowledge be not turned into practice, the more knowing man thou art the more miserable man thou wilt be in the day of recompense. Thy light and knowledge will more torment thee than all the devils in hell. Thy knowledge will be that rod that will eternally lash thee, the scorpion that will forever bite thee, the worm that will everlasting gnaw thee. Therefore, read and labor to know in order that thou mayest do or else thou art undone forever. When Demosthenes was asked what is the first and second and third part of an orator? He answered, 'Action.' And if some may ask me what is the first and second and third part of a Christian I must answer, 'Action.' As that man that reads that he may know and that labors to know that he may do will have two heavens. A heaven of joy, peace and comfort on earth and a heaven of glory and happiness after death."

That's exactly what the Preacher is warning the young disciple about. The Preacher's words aren't meant to interest him or to amuse him or simply to make him smarter than other people around him. They are meant to change his life. God's words aren't meant to interest or amuse us but to change our lives. True knowledge of God is fellowship knowledge. It is both personal and propositional. It comes in a personal relationship with God, and God speaks it in words and sentences which are objectively true. It comes from God. It is spoken by God. It is therefore objectively meaningful and true but it can only be fully understood in a relationship with Him because it is designed not simply to be mind-expanding but life transforming. And that is what the preacher is saying in his warning in verse 12. But he's not done, is he.

III. Be in awe of God's power and justice, and walk by His word, for this is the secret to the blessed life.

In verses 13 and 14 he says this. The life of joy all boils down to the realization of the greatness of God and of the word of God. "Fear God and keep His commandments." Be in awe of God's justice and power. He will judge one day.

What did Paul say in Acts 17:31? We read it this morning. How is it that we all know that God will judge? Because He's raised His Son from the dead. He will judge. All men know. They have God's proof. He will judge the world in the resurrection of His Son. He's promised it. And we're to be in awe of this God who will judge and who will bring about everything which is hidden under His judgment. We're to be in awe of His power and justice and walk by His word because that is the key to the blessed life in this fallen and frustrated world. When all has been said and done, the Preacher's main message is that life apart from God is empty but the happy life, the blessed life is realized here by everyone who fears God.

What does it mean to fear God? To be in reverential and grateful awe of God and and keep God's commandments. Who live the way of life that he has appointed which is the only way of joy. And notice that it's the fear of God that leads to this way of life. Fear God and keep His commandments is the order. It is the worship of God which produces the Christian life. Conduct derives from worship and is the cultivation of an abiding fear of God which leads to obedience.

But there's a big difference between truly fearing God and being cravenly frightened of him. We've quoted it several times here but it's so perfect I don't hesitate to quote it again. C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, records this amazing dialogue between Lucy and Susan and Peter and Mr. And Mrs. Beaver and it goes like this:

Lucy's asking about Aslan, the lion, and she says "Is he a man?" "Aslan a man?" Said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not! I tell you he is the king of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion-*the* lion, the great lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" Said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you. Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe but he's good. He's the King I tell you." "I'm longing to see him," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point."

And then Lewis goes on to describe this. "People sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes and they found that they couldn't look at him and they went all trembly... His voice was deep and rich and somehow took the fidgets out of them and they now felt glad and quiet and it didn't seem awkward to them to stand and say nothing."

The Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silent before it. That's the fear of God. Awe and reverential respect for His majesty and this fear of the Lord

is the soul of religion and the soul of godliness. This controlling sense of the majesty and holiness of God and the profound reverence which this apprehension elicits is the thing that drives and brings joy in life in this fallen world. A joy-filled reverence and awe of the one true God which shakes one to the core and brings forth a response of faith and love and obedience.

This is the solution to an empty life and it is the only solution to an empty life and it is only found in relationship with Jesus Christ. He is the King, I tell you. And if you will trust Him and love Him you will know not emptiness but fullness twice, in this life and the life to come. Let's pray.

O Lord, there is fullness and delight for those who will trust and obey resting in the grace of Christ who brings meaning where there was before only emptiness. Grant this to every thirsting soul in Jesus' name. Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Sermon

Since the summer's beginning we have been looking together at the Book of Ecclesiastes. We have found it to be a very "modern" book in the sense of speaking to dilemmas and frustrations that strike us as very contemporary, and giving certain answers to those dilemmas that have a very current ring to them. This is all the more remarkable in light of the fact that Ecclesiastes forecasts these questions and answers 3000 years before our time.

So far, here's an outline of the argument of Ecclesiastes (chapters 1-11). The thesis of this book is stated in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, and the thesis is clear: Life is empty. That's how it's stated. It's stated that way not because that is Ecclesiastes' final verdict, but to shock all who are trying to live life apart from God, or without living trust in God, into the reality of what they are facing. To restate the thesis in light of the total teaching of Ecclesiastes: Life "under the sun" (that is, life lived apart from God) is empty. It is meaningless. It is futile. It's a bad joke. In this book, "the Preacher" (that's what the author calls himself) argues that every human avenue to meaning and fulfillment fails, apart from faith in the God of providence. All substitutes for finding true enjoyment and meaningful, well-grounded satisfaction in life, other than God Himself, end up empty. Throughout the book, especially in the early going, he explores ways that humans try to dig themselves out of this meaninglessness: through thinking about life hard and long, through the pursuit of pleasure, through work, family, and affluence, for instance.

In 1:12-18; 2:12-17, he measures the effectiveness of escape route #1—the idea that wisdom can supply meaning for us in this life. But he concludes that being wise, knowledgeable, savvy, smart, philosophically reflective, and astute can't

provide meaning/satisfaction. Indeed, it leads to despair. In 2:1-11, he discusses escape route #2—the belief that pleasure can provide meaning/satisfaction in this life. He says, in effect, “Well then, if wisdom brings grief/despair, what about pleasure/laughter? Maybe escape from grief via comedy and the satiation of the senses will suffice.” But it doesn't. Pleasure-seeking as a way of satisfaction fails because God has not built us to be satisfied that way. “It cannot quench man's spiritual thirst.”

In 2:18-26, he discusses escape route #3—the belief that work/vocation can provide meaning/satisfaction. But there the Preacher explains, first, why work won't work (18-19) as the provision of meaning/significance in life; second, why work alone (apart from relationship with God) leads to despair (20-23); and then tells us, third, about the kind of work that truly satisfies (24-26).

So where does one go from here? The best human wisdom can't supply meaning. Pleasure can't either. Work/vocation, apart from God, fails. Where to? That leads us to 3:1-22 and the Preacher's first full-scale attempt to give a positive, constructive answer to the depressing scenario of life under the sun. From the contemplative life, to the sensuous life, to the active life—in search of meaning and satisfaction—and he can't find it there, anywhere (apart from God). The solution: sovereignty and providence! The world is divided into two camps: those who believe in God's sovereignty and those who reject it. All else is a variation on one of those two themes.

Then, in a very difficult, somber, and sobering passage, Ecclesiastes 4, the Preacher contemplates all the rampant injustice and oppression in this world—the Preacher proves once again that “if we hope only for this life, we are of all men most miserable.”

Continuing his main argument, in 5:1-20, he touches on escape route #4—the idea, or rather the vain hope, that affluence, that lots of money and stuff, can provide meaning/satisfaction in this life. We learned there that though wealth can be a gift from God, it is an awful curse without Him and a major trial even with Him. There he shows the emptiness of wealth, prosperity, and affluence, without God.

In 6:1-12, we find the Preacher's summary of various escape routes from nihilism, vanity, and meaninglessness: wealth, long life, family, work, words; but we also find there that none of these can provide true satisfaction, significance, happiness, blessedness, meaning, fullness, fulfillment. The search for satisfaction, significance, happiness, blessedness, meaning, fullness, fulfillment is not wrong in itself, but often pursued wrongly. God has not built life for anything apart from Him to satisfy.

In 7:1-29, by presenting a series of opposites, dangers, and fallen-world life scenarios, the Preacher shows true wisdom and the folly of trying to make sense

of life apart from God. And in 8:1-17, he continues and confirms the point of chapter seven by pointing out the quandary of oppression in this life, the futilities that face us. This life, considered apart from God, has no cheering answer to give us about the meaning of life, and no hope to offer us—only frustration.

In 9:1-18, the Preacher emphasized that the person who knows God draws comfort from God's sovereignty, even in the face of death and life's difficulties, and views death in moral terms. 10:1-20 compares and contrasts wisdom and folly, and basically gives us a taxonomy of folly. The Preacher makes two basic points: a little folly can do a lot of damage, and folly is a heart problem, shows in character and conduct, is found in high places, has consequences, is especially apparent in speech and laziness, and has dreadful effects on a nation.

Last week, in 11:1-10, we learned how to respond to the uncertainties of life in light of an overarching trust in God's providence. It's the beginning of the Preacher's "end game." "The life of indifference and unbelief has been placed against [the life of faith] on the scales and been found wanting." Now the Preacher calls for a verdict. The whole section is a sustained call to decision. We must respond to God without delay, in wholehearted faith, whether life is adverse or comfortable, for we are marching towards the day of our death." (Eaton). We meet here a call to bold, confident, and joyous living, even in light of the uncertainties of life because of the certainties of God's providence. Today, we finish the book.

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