

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 22

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Well, we have come to the End. Now, we have the work of an editor whose words opened, and here close, the story that the Preacher has told us. We shall look at the text under four headings. First, what I will call a literary biography of the Preacher in verses 9 and 10. Second, a commendation of the preacher's work in verse 11. Third, a warning in verse 12. And, finally, the conclusion in verses 13 and 14.

I. Literary Biography

First then, the literary biography. Verses 9 and 10 function in much the way an endorsement might function on the back of a modern book. Only here we also gain a sort of behind-the-scenes insight into the process by which the Preacher came to give us this book.

Verse 9: Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge. He has a recognized public status as a wise man. Thus, he cannot be viewed as a cynic, or a skeptic, or a subverter of Israel's wisdom traditions. As different as this work is, it is the work of a sage of Israel. The preacher was wise. But it is possible to be wise and to not be pastoral. Some wise men, apparently, did not instruct the people at large. Notice the text: **BESIDES** being wise, the Preacher **ALSO** taught. He was wise **AND** he was a teacher of Israel.

In the second half of verse 9 we are taken, if you will, into his study, where the arduous work that led to his literary productions – including, especially, this book – was wrought. To teach the people knowledge the preacher spent his life weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The word for proverbs here is a very broad word. It includes riddles, fables, sayings, parables. Thus, much of Ecclesiastes is, in this sense, proverbial. This text tells us a number of vital things.

First, the preacher interacted with a wide range of wisdom literature. Not only Israel's literature but the literature of the surrounding ANE cultures is in view here. Notice the extent of the Preacher's literary engagement: he interacted, the text says, with **MANY** proverbs. Faithful scholarship is not, and cannot be, an insular or provincial affair. The truth sets us free, and one thing it sets us free

from is the fear of engaging the wide-world of thought. The whole book of Ecclesiastes is stamped by this broad, multi-cultural, literary engagement.

Secondly, the Preacher did this, the text says, with great care. This speaks of an arduous, exacting, labor of love. Wise men cherish texts. They love words. They honor their beauty and culture-shaping power. They engage them with reverence, passion and respect. They work not only with care, but with GREAT care.

Third, we are given three words in this verse which describe the Preacher's labor of love. He spent his life weighing, studying, and arranging the wide range of wisdom texts. Let's take these one at a time.

He sifts the various texts carefully. He extracts the precious from the worthless. He makes careful and nuanced judgments so that his own literary productions benefit from, but are not corrupted by, the broader literature. Texts cannot simply be counted, like noses. They must be WEIGHED. Heretics lack the internal scales to weigh texts. This sort of internal calibration, which enables one to properly weigh texts, is the work of a lifetime. The texts do not come pre-labeled. They must be carefully weighed for there is, even in Scripture, a carefully graded hierarchy of truth.

The word for weighed here can mean ponder or listened to. Both ideas are crucial. Texts need to be pondered. They need meditation, which means they need time. They will not yield their secrets to quick devotional, "what's in it for me," types of reading.

And Texts must be HEARD. They must be listened to. They must be read and re-read as if you've never read them before. The text must maintain its commanding supremacy over the reader. It must continually perform its critical work on OUR assumptions, our traditions, and our pre-conceived ideas.

The preacher thus, secondly, STUDIED the wisdom texts. Study here implies long, serious and sustained engagement. The text not only questions us, but provokes our questions. Which we then bring back to the text in a continual spiraling and deepening movement of enrichment. To study means to engage in patient and submissive dialogue with the text.

The third word describing the Preacher's work is arranging. Out of his vast royal library and his life's labor he creates literary units, one of which is the book of Ecclesiastes. This word "arranging" also means he edited the texts. The Hebrew means he "straightened out the text." The idea is he sought out the meaning, he engaged in what we call hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. All this was done with a view to teaching Israel knowledge.

Verse 10 continues the glimpse into the Preacher's craft. He sought to find words of delight. Notice the labor implied here – he SOUGHT to find the right words. His whole quest is about seeking and finding, and no less arduous and exacting is the task of WRITING about his journey. He sought to find words of delight, or pleasant words. He cares deeply about the FORM of his literary productions. He cares about the aesthetics of his writing.

He writes a magnificent poem on futility in chapter 1, a carefully constructed poem on time in chapter 3, another beautiful poem on aging in the first half of this chapter. He has two whole chapters of proverbs, endless metaphors and pithy aphoristic sayings. He worked long and hard on HOW to communicate beautifully. The American writer, Tom Wolfe, said Ecclesiastes is “the highest flower of poetry, eloquence and truth....the greatest single piece of writing I have known.”

But, the Preacher was not just concerned about form. He cared deeply about content. Uprightly, the end of v.10 says, he wrote words of truth. Uprightly, or plainly, he wrote – he wrote to be understood. He wrote, in all his varied and lovely forms, with simplicity, and an earnest concern for truth. Form and content must be wedded. Truth and beauty must kiss in faithful writing. In the words of one scholar: “to be upright but unpleasant is to be a fool, to be pleasant but not upright is to be a charlatan.”

Out of this glorious cauldron of beauty and truth the Preacher WROTE. And the fact that he wrote shows his solicitude for the nation and its posterity. Writing is how wisdom, in God's providence, is transmitted widely and across time. For this text alone, the Preacher should be the patron saint of writers. That is the literary biography.

II. Commendation

Our second point is commendation. Three points on this commendation.

First, the words of the wise are like goads. Goads were ancient cattle prods. They were long pointed sticks used to move and direct the herd in the right way. They are not the shepherds rod and staff, they are more painful. The point is — goads hurt. And, I hope you agree, Ecclesiastes hurts. In Moby Dick, Melville said that the book of Ecclesiastes is the “fine-hammered steel of woe.”

These words shock and disturb, they slap you awake and strip away your illusions about life. All, not some, all, is vapor. Death is brutal, cruel, indiscriminate and pervasive. Injustice abounds, wicked men prosper, the righteous are condemned, providence is inscrutable. The world is bent and you can't straighten it. The business given to men is grievous business. But the goads are good for us. Better the rebuke of a wise man, the Preacher has told

us, then the siren song of fools. These truths set us free. We can now, I pray, live more soberly in the real world.

Second, like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings. The collected sayings of wise men, among which the Preacher's book now stands, are like nails firmly fixed. They are places of stability and security. You can hang the hat of your life, all your convictions, on these firmly fixed nails. So stunning are these words that they are able to drive nails into the vapor. They are fixed firmly, riveted, in the mist. The firmly fixed nature of these written words means they establish themselves in our memory. Now, hopefully, the shape of the whole has been nailed into your memory.

Third, these words, these goads, these firmly fixed nails, are given by one Shepherd. The one Shepherd is the Lord God. He is Israel's shepherd. The phrase, "one Shepherd" is used only three times in the OT (in Ezek 34 and 37) and it always refers to the coming Davidic Messiah-King, the greater Solomon, Jesus Christ; the One Shepherd of his flock. Thus, we can say that we have here are not only divinely inspired words, but the words of the pre-existent Christ. The arduous human labor which yields the words of the wise is, at the same time, mysteriously, the work of the living God. These fully human words are nonetheless, the text says, GIVEN by one Shepherd. These words are the means by which the Shepherd-King gathers and directs his flock. That is the commendation.

III. The Warning

Our third point is the warning. And this warning in v. 12 comes as something of a surprise after all the commendation and praise of the preachers studying and sifting of many proverbs. My son, the editor says, beware of anything beyond these. We see that the writer of the epilogue is presenting the Preacher's book to his son. And he tells him to beware, be on guard, of anything beyond these. Then he goes on: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. This is often read as an ancient polemic against Amazon dot com.

Now it is certainly true that book making seems to have no end. Over a million books are published per year now. And it is true that serious study is exhausting. But the text is NOT warning against future publishing and studying. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, as I mentioned, the text has just praised the Preacher at length for his engagement with, his study of, and his writing of many words.

Second, the text warns of anything BEYOND these words of the wise. The point is that the collected sayings of wisdom in Israel's tradition are sufficient. The Preacher's labor, like that of other wise men in Israel, is the definitive word on

godly wisdom. So the warning is to not go beyond the written text of Scripture in seeking further wisdom OF THIS STATUS. Be careful – notice, you don't need to entirely avoid- but you need to beware of other wisdom literature, now that the Preacher and the wise men have done their arduous work. So, this warning functions much like the warnings not to “add to or take away from” God's Word in Dt. and Rev. Other books after Ecclesiastes were added to Scripture in due time, so no one took the warning here as an absolute prohibition on future book making.

The point then is this: there is a lot of useless literature out there pretending to give wisdom. Be cautious about it and beware of anything beyond the wisdom of Israel's texts. With the writing of Ecclesiastes, the canon of Israel's wisdom literature is closed.

IV. The Conclusion

Our fourth and final point is the conclusion. Verse 13: The end of the matter; all has been heard. T.S. Eliot said: to make an end is to make a beginning. We begin at the end. And this end is also a new, and hopefully enriched, beginning. A beginning of wisdom, and this a beginning at the very heart of Israel's tradition wisdom. Fear God, the text says, and keep His commandments. The fear of the Lord, which the preacher here commends for the seventh time in the book, is the BEGINNING of wisdom.

You can find this idea right at the... um... BEGINNING of the book of Proverbs. But now, my dear hope, is that it means something much more profound. This end of the matter is a return to the beginning of wisdom in the fear of God. Eliot went on to say:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

We have arrived at the end of our explorations in Ecclesiastes right where Israel's proverbial wisdom starts – with the fear of the Lord. Hopefully, we will find, in Eliot's words, that we know the place for the first time.

Now, we know that ALL is vapor, we know the grief, the vexation and the fragility of wisdom itself. Now we are commanded anew: Fear the eternal God. He alone transcends the vapor. And this fear of God, which includes love, is shown by keeping His commandments. If you love me, Jesus said, you will keep my commandments.

This is, strikingly, the only reference to the commandments of God in the book. This is very important. The preacher has shown us, at great cost to himself, the limitations of seeing and observing the world. He has engaged in a kind of empirical experiment with creation and history and providence and found the whole thing to be inscrutable.

Now the editor directs us back to the text, back to the Torah, back to the firmly fixed nails of the Preacher's writing, back to the commandments of God. We should now know the indispensable place of the Word, perhaps for the first time. So, fear God and keep His commandments.

There are two grounds given for this exhortation. The first is the end of v.13 which says, FOR THIS is the whole duty of man. The word "duty" is not in the original text. It says literally: this is the whole of man. Fearing God and keeping his commandments is the fullest way to be human. As Irenaeus said: the glory of God is man fully alive. To be a human being is to be in and with God.

In v.14 we are given the second ground for fearing and obeying God. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. It is important to affirm here what the Preacher could not. Namely, that those who trust Christ, as the apostle John says, do not come into judgment in the sense of condemnation. They have passed from death to life. It is also important to state that our secrets will be judged, Paul says in Rom 2, according to the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ. It is the judgment seat of CHRIST, Paul says in 2 Cor 5, that we will appear before.

We shall be judged by the good Shepherd King who laid His life down for His sheep. Yet, we SHALL be judged. Our lives will be evaluated. And the review shall be thorough.

Notice the exhaustiveness here: every deed, every secret thing, all the good and all the evil. This is, perhaps counter-intuitively, very good news. It means the Shepherd-King, the Judge, takes you and your life, your thoughts, words and deeds with deep seriousness. If everything is to be judged, it means, surprisingly, in a world where EVERYTHING is vapor, that EVERYTHING matters. EVERYTHING MATTERS. Everything is vapor and everything matters. There may be no better summation of Ecclesiastes than that. Amen.

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