

Shepherding Notes

Ecclesiastes

By Caleb Bunch

Perhaps you are wondering why a reading plan would begin with the relatively obscure book of wisdom literature called Ecclesiastes. The outset of the year is the time when our aspirations tend to get reset and our goals are often stated. We set benchmarks for our health, careers, family life, habits, and self-discipline. All of those can be good things. Ecclesiastes helps us ensure that we are viewing all that we do, all that we pursue, and all that we accrue through the lens of eternal reality. God has given us this book of wisdom in order to help us rightly prioritize life with Him at the center.

The Preacher

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by someone who refers to himself as "the Preacher" (or in some translations "the Teacher"). That word in Hebrew is Qoheleth. It literally means "a collector of sentences" and is an ancient Hebrew way of describing a scholar, a sage, or a philosopher. You will notice that he refers to himself as "Son of David, king in Jerusalem." Many take this to mean that Solomon is the author, and that would make sense since Solomon had more experience of almost everything imaginable and found it all to be unsatisfying. However, there are others who believe this was written by a philosopher after the life of Solomon who utilized Solomon's life as an extended illustration as to why all of life's pursuits are ultimately vain and worthless unless properly ordered around God Himself. Either way, we will reference the life of Solomon often as we make our way through the book.

Vanity

The chief refrain of the book will be the concept we read in vs. 14: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind." The word "vanity" is sometimes translated as "meaningless" (NIV) or "futility" (NASB). The Hebrew word literally means "breath" or "light breeze" — a reference both to something's temporal and insubstantial nature. Everything you do, pursue, or accrue is going to be spoken about in this book as nothing more than chasing wind — an impossible, pointless task.

Under the Sun

Another refrain that you will find 26 times in this book is the little phrase "under the sun." We naturally default to functioning as if this world is all that there is. Our schedule,

calendar, and wish lists are built without giving the Lord or eternity a single thought. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes is pointing out the absolute pointlessness of living an "under the sun" life. He is calling us to lift our eyes to see life through an eternal perspective so that our lives might be spent doing that which is of true worth.

Nothing Is New

In his excellent book *Living Life Backwards*, David Gibson says: "Read Ecclesiastes 1:4–10 aloud and feel the lyrical tilt with its tidal ebb and flow. That's the point. Everything either goes around and around, or comes and goes; it rises and sets; what has been will be again; what has been done will be done again; what is present will soon be past... He doesn't mean no 'new' things are ever invented in the world, for clearly that is not true. He means there is nothing new we can ever discover to break the cycle and satisfy us."

The good news is that Jesus is the one who breaks that cycle for us. He is the one who gives our life true meaning. Let us build our lives on the reality that building our own kingdom is nothing more than playing with sandcastles, waiting for the tide to come knock them down. But taking part in the kingdom of God is of inestimable, eternal value.

"There is nothing new we can ever discover to break the cycle and satisfy us." — David Gibson, Living Life Backwards

Homer is often credited with the earliest version of the phrase, "death is the great equalizer." He said it like this: "And they die an equal death — the idler and the man of mighty deeds." He wrote these words roughly 750 BC. But roughly 150–200 years earlier, the Bible had already made these claims powerfully through the book of Ecclesiastes. "How the wise dies just like the fool!" (vs. 16) This chapter provides a powerful examination of how the ever-present and ever-approaching reality of death renders all of our pursuits meaningless.

Reality check — you are going to die. Eventually you are going to be forgotten. Based on the average life expectancy in the United States, it is likely that you will outlive your own reputation. If that is true, then why do we do the things that we do? What is it that we are chasing? To state it simply and singularly: happiness. Blaise Pascal correctly observed that:

"All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both — to be happy. This is the motive of every action of every man, even those who hang themselves." — Blaise Pascal

What is it that you expect to make you happy? Chapter 2 presents three illustrations of failed attempts. The first looks at the indulgent aspect of King Solomon, who garnered to himself every imaginable opulent comfort of his day — his house, his servants, his storehouses overflowing with gold. None of it satisfied him. Your possessions will never make you truly happy.

The next illustration was the aspect of Solomon's life in which he committed himself to earthly wisdom. 1 Kings 4:31 tells us that "he was wiser than all other men," and verse 32 adds that "he also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005." There was a spiritual component lacking in his wisdom. Brilliant people are often miserable. Intelligence, great learning, degrees, and letters after your name don't make you happy.

The last example is of a man who loves his work. He is sold out to being excellent at his craft. He even rightly recognizes that it is a gift from God to be able to delight in seeing the work of your hands succeed and produce a living. (vs. 24) But this man has a restless heart. (vs. 23) He is not satisfied.

Mick Jagger sang, "I can't get no satisfaction. And I try, and I try, and I try, and I try..." Nothing on earth will satisfy you because it wasn't designed to. C.S. Lewis saw in this fact an argument for the existence of God: "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." It is Christ alone who satisfies. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4)

"If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." – C.S. Lewis

In 1959 Pete Seeger lifted the words of Ecclesiastes 3 and placed them into a song he called "Turn, Turn, Turn" (popularized in 1965 by the Byrds). The rather subtle point being made in that song is not stated in what was included from Ecclesiastes, but rather in what was left out. If you compare the lyrics to the Scripture, you will find that Seeger removed the phrase "a time for war," owing to his anti-war sentiments. As usual, the musical adaptation misses the point of the Bible passage entirely.

The theme of this poem is time. The word "time" is mentioned 30 times in the first 11 verses. The poem is not instructing us to do any of these things — it is simply stating that these seasons of life are part of our reality. Through various pagan practices, the nations were attempting to force "seasons" to change, believing they could somehow mystically alter the forces of time to bend toward their desired outcome.

The question is: are we modern people really that much different? Are you able to control times of war and peace? Are you able to control when times of mourning will come? Or times of sowing and reaping, birth and death? The key point is that "He has made everything beautiful in its time." (vs. 11) He is the one who controls time. Verse 14 adds, "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him." Phil Ryken puts it this way in his book *Why Everything Matters*: "Everything in this time-bound universe is under the authority of God in heaven. The sovereign God rules over time and over what happens in time... Nothing happens outside the will of God."

Reader, today you can rejoice in the fact that you are not in control. God is. And He has promised that He works all things together for the good of His people. On the one hand, this means that you and I should stop being overwhelmed when we feel as though we have no agency to change our circumstances. On the other hand, it means that we have the ability to go directly to the One person who does control everything and ask.

Final note: when God made Adam and Eve, He created them with life that would have continued if sin had never entered the picture. Mankind is designed to be eternal. Verse 11 reveals that all people are instinctually aware of this reality on a heart level — God "has put eternity into man's heart."

"The sovereign God rules over time and over what happens in time. Nothing happens outside the will of God." — Phil Ryken, Why Everything Matters

Envy-Based Toil

It never ceases to amaze me that there are professional leagues for almost every sort of competition imaginable — lawnmower racing, egg throwing, and hot dog eating among them. People are naturally competitive. Chapter 4 opens with an examination of the envy-trap. The Preacher tells us why most people work hard: "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor." This is more than just keeping up with the Joneses. This is the internal desire to prove our worth or value by making more money, having more stuff, getting better grades, getting a better position, or making a better point. Our motives matter to God. "Under the sun" living looks like attempting to validate ourselves and prove ourselves to others by making a name for ourselves with our toil. Not coincidentally, that was the exact same heart we find in the people who were building the Tower of Babel. (Gen. 11:4)

The alternative is to "work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ." (Col. 3:23–24) If your ultimate goal in toil is just to garner personal esteem by being more affluent, accomplished, or acclaimed than your neighbor, then your motive for work is identified by the Preacher as not only being evil, but also useless.

Two Are Better Than One

Another major theme in chapter 4 is that isolation and independent living are not good for anyone. Sidney Greidanus explains this well in his book *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*:

"God created human beings for companionship. In Paradise God declared, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' God created humans as social beings. They are made to work together and help each other... The Teacher echoes this law in Ecclesiastes 4 by calling solitary living 'vanity,' futile, and useless by illustrating that 'two are better than one.' Jesus acknowledged this wisdom by gathering disciples around him and sending them out 'two by two.' The early Christians gave expression to this love commandment by being together and having 'all things in common.'" — Sidney Greidanus

Dear reader, dedicate yourself to the life of the church. Life was designed to give and to serve one another — and the New Testament teaches us that this is to be done particularly within the household of faith. (Phil. 2:1-4, 1 Cor. 12-13, Gal. 6:10)

"Two are better than one." Isolation and independent living are not good for anyone. Life was designed to give and to serve one another.

Money

What is your relationship to money? Everyone has to have money in order to live. But not everyone lives to make money. What is the Preacher getting at in verse 12 when he says, "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep?" The first person mentioned works with his hands. Whether he can afford a steak or just beans and rice, he can go to bed and sleep sweetly. The rich man, however, is not tired out from a hard day of manual labor, and as Zack Eswine writes in *Recovering Eden*: "The rich without God is up at night because of his wealth and what it takes to keep it."

The Preacher takes aim at both institutional and personal problems with wealth. The institutional problems with wealth only exist because of the selfish, greedy, discontent people who run them. People who love money are controlled by it. Jesus noted that you must determine if you are going to serve God or money. (Matt. 6:24) Having money is necessary. Serving money is idolatry. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Tim. 6:10)

Do you love money? Here are some questions to ask. Are you generous? Are you faithfully giving to the church? Are you quick to want to help when a need arises? Do you spend money you don't have? Regardless of the dollar amount in your bank account, the heart of a believer should be to use money as a way to honor God and love others.

For those who identify a love of money, you need to know that "he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity." (vs. 10) It is like salt water when you are really thirsty — it gives the appearance of satisfaction, but the result is that you will end up thirstier than before. How can you stop loving money? Replace that love with a greater love, a love for Jesus. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." If Jesus was willing to lay down the riches of heaven, how much more should we hold loosely the fading and temporary wealth that this world provides?

"The rich without God is up at night because of his wealth and what it takes to keep it." — Zack Eswine, Recovering Eden

A couple of years ago I experienced something incredibly disturbing. I contracted Covid-19, and it hit my wife and me really hard at the same time. During that time, many of our church members displayed the love of Christ toward us by bringing us meals. I remember that someone brought us a meal from Five Guys. I love Five Guys burgers. Imagine my shock and horror when I realized that Covid had disrupted my taste buds to such an extent that the burger in my hands tasted absolutely disgusting. The taste buds that did work were apparently all the wrong ones, and it made what should have been a delicious meal into something completely repulsive.

Ecclesiastes 6 opens with the Preacher highlighting the terrible reality that people who reach their goals don't actually receive satisfaction. Living for the here and now is never satisfying. Just a couple of years ago, the catchphrase "YOLO" became a cultural phenomenon — "You Only Live Once." The idea was simple: get as much as you can because this is the only chance you are going to get. But anyone who has attained the mountain top of their pursuits will tell you their satisfaction is at best temporary and brief. One of the best examples is the life of Michael Jordan. He is without dispute the greatest basketball player of all time. He is a billionaire. Yet, after only being out of the league for three years, Jordan asked a reporter, "How can I enjoy the next 20 years without so much of this consuming me?" and "How can I find peace away from the game of basketball?"

Here is the key to understanding Ecclesiastes 6. If you hunger and thirst for earthly things of any kind, you will never be satisfied. That is why a disproportionately high number of lottery winners attempt suicide. Whatever you are chasing will not make you happy. What looks delicious will turn to sand in your mouth. But Jesus teaches us a better way: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." (Matthew 5:6)

What are you looking for to satisfy you? Is it possible that you have inadvertently built an idol in your heart? As a pastor, I have experienced this kind of dissatisfaction when I have sinfully allowed ministry itself to become an idol in my life. Idols are often built out of God's good gifts. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes is waving a warning flag: there is no satisfaction to be found there. If you want to be satisfied, then go to the source of satisfaction, Jesus Christ Himself.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." — Matthew 5:6. Whatever you are chasing will not make you happy. Go to the source of satisfaction: Jesus Christ Himself.

There is a quote attributed to Mark Twain: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." The last two verses of chapter 6 and the first fourteen verses of chapter 7 are all about wisdom and folly. This comical quote gives a sense of the foolishness of youth. Chapter 7 begins with 13 proverbs that young people do not generally understand, but if they live long enough, they will probably learn. Let's consider just a few examples.

Verse 3 speaks about how sorrow is better than laughter because, in some way that fools do not understand, a sad face tends to make the heart glad. The most impactful moments of your life are probably moments of sorrow — or moments that made you shed a tear or two. Laughter is typically cheap and leaves minimal impact on your life.

Verse 5 informs us that it is much better to have someone rebuke you for your foolishness than to "hear the song of fools." Our society has more choice than anyone in history regarding what we listen to, and with strong confidence I can say that most people choose the music of fools over wise rebuke.

Chief among all the proverbs in this list is the last: "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" If you have been paying close attention so far in Ecclesiastes, this should sound familiar. Chapter 1:15 says, "What is crooked cannot be made straight." Fools believe that they actually have the ability and authority to rule their own lives, and in some sense, rule the world around them. That is not only false — it is foolish.

There are two final thoughts to take away from this chapter. Verse 19 undermines the foolish thinking that you might as well balance out a little wisdom with a little foolishness in your life. Wisdom alone truly gives you strength for life. Folly destroys. And verse 20 makes it clear that all men are sinners — a reminder of the universality of depravity. This verse stood true until one day a baby was born who grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. That man lived a life surrounded by sinners, but never sinned. This chapter reminds us not only of our desperate need of wisdom from the Lord, but also of our desperate need of forgiveness from Him. And, by His grace, He gives it freely to sinners like you and me.

"There is no fear of God before their eyes." This is God's final indictment of human nature in Romans 3. And yet, by His grace, He gives wisdom and forgiveness freely to sinners.

Wisdom Has Limitations

Chapter 8 opens with a parable about a king and his servants. The servants are called to follow whatever orders the king gives because he has been given authority from the Lord to lead the people. Verse 4 goes so far as to say that the people shouldn't even question the king's decisions. But the parable quickly turns to the reality that there is no earthly king who is all-knowing and can make wise decisions all the time. People just don't have enough information to know what to do. We can't know the future (vs. 7), and we can't even predict our own deaths (vs. 8). Even the wisest of earthly kings is incredibly flawed. The conclusion of this parable is that, due to the limits of human wisdom, "man had power over man to his hurt." (vs. 9)

It is a good thing that we do have a good King who knows all things and who rules with perfect, heavenly wisdom. It is only with a perfect King, like Jesus, that we can actually apply the concept of never having to question the commands of a king. When dealing with earthly rulers, we must always filter their commands through the question of whether or not they have aligned their rules with God's commands. The Lord alone holds authority that is to be unquestioned, because He rules out of perfect wisdom at all times.

Wickedness Has Repercussions

There is a common question of injustice that arises in various places in the Old Testament — not injustice on man's part, but on God's. We see this in Psalm 73 and the book of Habakkuk. There is a question that troubles believers regarding the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. Asaph's complaint can be summarized: "Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence." (Psalm 73:12-13)

Ecclesiastes 8 makes it clear that the wicked will not escape judgment. Although they might live a very long time and experience many pleasures in life, they are eventually going to stand trial before the Lord. Verse 11 simply explains that the heavenly warrant for their arrest is "not executed quickly." And, as much as this perplexes Christians on many occasions, it is actually a very good thing — God is patient and longsuffering with sinners. Imagine if the Lord struck you dead the first time you sinned!

Ecclesiastes instructs us that the pursuit of wickedness might seem like a good idea to those who live with "under the sun" thinking. But every one of those wicked people will one day realize that every last sin will be punished with the wrath of God. The good news for those of us who are in Christ is that God's wrath is not poured out on us, because it was all spent on our Savior. Ecclesiastes 8:13 says that "it will not be well with the wicked." But because Christ bore the wrath for us, we can truly say that whatever our lot, it is well, it is well with my soul.

"God's wrath is not poured out on us, because it was all spent on our Savior. Because Christ bore the wrath for us, we can truly say – whatever our lot – it is well with my soul."

One of the chief principles that the book of Ecclesiastes is trying to get through to you is that you are not God. There is a mountain of evidence that you are not God, but your heart still likes to think that you are an independent, autonomous person who is unaccountable to anyone but yourself. The chief evidence that you are not God is the fact that you will die one day.

"Under the sun" thinking tells you that this life is all there is, so you should "eat, drink, and be merry." This examination of worldly philosophy is pressed even further in verses 11–12, which reveal that regardless of where you fall on the scale of wisdom, wealth, intelligence, or strength, you are just as prone to experience seemingly random troubles — like fish that accidentally swim into a net. But this life is not all that there is. And everything that you do right now counts for eternity. Let me close out today's notes with three reasons why.

First, the closing words of this chapter (vs. 13–18) are placed here to undercut all of the "under the sun" thinking presented earlier. Even from a temporary, earthly perspective, wisdom protects and sin destroys. Selfish and foolish actions will ruin your life, and also damage the lives of those around you. The blast radius is typically far larger than you would expect. But, just like the poor wise man who saved the city in the short parable at the end of this chapter, your wise decisions can radically impact the people around you for good, even if they don't recognize it. What you do matters here and now because it impacts those around you.

Secondly, notice that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes uses the word "sinner" in verse 18 — the first time in this chapter that he puts our decisions into a spiritual dimension. Prior to this point, everything is about experiences and emotions. Now he classifies these selfish, foolish decisions as sinful, indicating that the people who commit them are sinning against God. Jesus said in Matthew 12:36 that we are going to have to give an account for every word we have spoken. All of us are guilty to some extent of thinking of ourselves as God and pretending as though everything exists to serve us. We are all guilty.

The third reason that everything you do matters is simply this: if you are a Christian, you have been forgiven of all of your sin. The consequences you have earned will never be doled out on you because they were given to Jesus Christ. Now your life is to be given in service of worship to Him. Every action matters. Every word matters. Every thought matters. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (1

Cor. 10:31)

"Everything you do matters. If you are a Christian, you have been forgiven of all your sin — now your life is to be given in service of worship to Him. Do all to the glory of God."

If you are familiar with your Bible, this chapter may feel a little bit out of place to you. It looks and feels much more like the book of Proverbs. And it certainly is a list of proverbs. But these proverbs in particular are designed to summarize wise thinking directly related to the "under the sun" thinking presented in the previous nine chapters. It would be good for you to meditate upon these proverbs. For today, we will dive into a few of them with a little bit of explanation.

One foolish decision can completely ruin your life. You could get 99.99% of your choices right, but then make one wrong turn and your life is forever changed for the worse. Consider the Hollywood actor who commits a scandal, or the mayor who gets a DUI, or the pastor who has an affair. Verse 1 says, "Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor." You are one outrageous sin away from totally destroying your reputation, just like that little fly could destroy an entire expensive bottle of perfume.

Not every ruler has their position because they are worthy of it. The point of the extended proverb in verses 5–7 is that there are some people sitting on thrones who deserve to live in poverty, and some people in the lowest class of society who should, by any reasonable standard, be running the nation. Verses 16–17 revisit the idea of a ruler by saying, "Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child." In those days, it was not uncommon for a king to come to power very young. However, this is also probably speaking about having a ruler who acts like a child — a dangerous thing for the nation.

One of the underlying concepts simmering just under the surface of this book is the idea of laziness. Verse 18 continues an explanation of rulers who act like children: "Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks." True leaders are called to serve heartily with commitment. Stan Lee may have been the first to say, "With great power comes great responsibility," but that concept has been present right here in Scripture for millennia.

The last proverb we will examine is the easiest to misunderstand. In verse 19, "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything." This statement is a continuation of the previous verses about childish leaders — it is not stating that these things are true, but that childish kings live as if they are. Brothers and sisters, as much as we can learn the practical lessons of applying these leadership principles to our own lives, much more this chapter should cause us to see the contrast

between wicked, earthly rulers and the Leader we follow. We have a King who gave up His heavenly riches to come and live with us. He gave up comfort to save us. He is the quintessential opposite of the wicked leaders found here. He is worthy of your worship today.

"You are one outrageous sin away from totally destroying your reputation, just like that little fly could destroy an entire expensive bottle of perfume. One foolish decision can completely ruin your life."

Life is a series of calculated risks. I love watching children when they are just learning to walk. They have reached a point in their development where they can stand reasonably well. They are sturdy enough to self-correct when they begin to wobble. But for most kids, you can see on their face the visual evidence that they don't want to risk a face plant. The process of walking is a process of calculated risk. Eventually, kids realize that if they are ever going to imitate their parents in walking, it requires risking that first unsteady step.

Ecclesiastes 11 is communicating that there are people who look at the world around them and become paralyzed with fear, and therefore fail to accomplish what God has called them to do. Verses 3–4 give an illustration in the form of a very short poem about someone who lives through a storm powerful enough to knock down trees. There is a kind of person who sees such devastation and then refuses afterward to go out and plant or harvest crops — whether out of fear of the storm itself, or out of a belief that their crops will likely be destroyed by the next storm. It is probably a combination of both.

Verse 5 calls on us to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge that God alone controls the uncontrollable. He is the one who sends rain and storms. He is the one who protects or demolishes the crops. And to put it as bluntly as possible, the Preacher says: "You do not know the work of God who makes everything." You cannot predict His actions or His ordained plan. He compares it to the way nobody knows how the Lord gives babies a soul while they are in the womb. (As a side note, mark this verse as a reason for being pro-life. According to the Word, babies in utero do have souls and should be treated as human beings.)

So, considering we don't know what is coming tomorrow, what should we do? Verse 6 tells us simply to get up and plant your crops. You don't know if the Lord will prosper you, but you go anyway. This speaks to many aspects of life, both practical and spiritual. We are called to have a holy ambition to do whatever God has called us to do.

Jesus will later pick up on this very same imagery of sowing seeds to describe communicating the gospel to unbelievers. It is possible that all of your attempts to share your faith fall on stony ground. But we should be faithful to communicate the truth about Christ because God will bring some of those seeds to life. Just as we don't know what is coming tomorrow, we don't know who will hear and believe. So, we keep preaching the Word. As it says in Mark 4:27, "He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and

grows; he knows not how." God does the mysterious work of bringing sinners to life. We just have the joyful responsibility to tell them about Him.

Consider the fact that so many of the decisions you have made in your life have been decided by intentionally avoiding pain, inconvenience, suffering, or shame. But Jesus, our great Savior, knew what was coming at the cross and boldly walked toward it anyway. "For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame." His chief aim was to honor His Father. Gospel-centered living looks like living with the same kind of God-centered thinking in our decision-making. Honoring the Lord through obedience is never a risk. You might (and probably will) lose earthly things — but for eternity you will know it was worth it.

"God does the mysterious work of bringing sinners to life. We just have the joyful responsibility to tell them about Him. So we keep planting seeds and preaching the Word."

In my life, I have had the wonderful privilege of occasionally speaking with some brilliant theologians. Admittedly, there have been times where I have been in over my head and I didn't really understand what they were talking about. I am really thankful in conversations like that when the smart person will simply say, "Here is my point..." and proceed to provide me with the bottom line.

Today we have come to the conclusion of one of the most challenging books of the Bible to study and understand. Thankfully, as we land the plane, the Lord has provided us with a simple bottom line. If you have struggled to grasp anything else in this book so far, here is what you are supposed to take away and apply: "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." (vs. 13-14)

Notice that the word "Shepherd" is capitalized in verse 11. Rightly so! All of these proverbs and philosophy lessons are coming from someone far more intelligent and wiser than anyone you or I have ever met. You and I will be mining out the meaning of Ecclesiastes for the rest of our lives, but the underlying point that the Shepherd gives to us is simply to fear God and do what He says. It isn't about getting stuff, as Solomon learned.

Fear First, Then Obey

First, notice the order. Obedience to the Lord comes after our hearts look to Him with reverent submission and awe. At the center of genuine worship is a heart that sees God as being truly both holy and powerful, and therefore dangerous to sinful people like us. Consider the Lord's words to Moses on Mount Sinai: "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." (Exodus 33:20) Uzzah died when he touched the ark of the covenant. (2 Samuel 6) In 1 Samuel 6, 70 men were struck dead for looking at the ark of the Lord, and they responded with exactly the right question: "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" The correct answer: nobody. The final indictment in the long list of human nature in Romans 3 is the fact that "there is no fear of God before their eyes." According to Ecclesiastes, fearing God is our chief responsibility — and we failed. And because we failed at that, we also failed at our second responsibility: to obey His commands.

We Need God's Grace

Have you ever heard the phrase, "You had one job!" The Shepherd has told us that we ultimately have one job, and we failed to fear God and obey Him. But that is what makes the gospel good news. Jesus did what we did not and could not. Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence." Jesus is the only one who has ever fulfilled what Ecclesiastes says is the whole duty of man — perfect reverence and absolute obedience. Then Jesus died, taking our failure to complete this command on His shoulders, and giving us the gift of His righteousness. Because He died and rose again, all who have been born again are now able to live in such a way that we can fulfill the duty as described by Ecclesiastes. Not as a way to earn God's favor, but as new creation worshiping our Creator. So, brothers and sisters, children of God — fear the Lord and strive to obey Him.

*"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."
Jesus is the only one who has ever fulfilled this — and then died, taking our
failure on His shoulders, giving us the gift of His righteousness."*