

# The End of the Matter: Fear God and Keep His Commandments

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thanks very much, Stuart. As Stuart said, if you have managed to keep hold of a Bible, I do please keep it open at those short few verses to us as a church, as we seek to live wisely as God's people and for God's glory.

It's a book, if you've been with us over the last couple of months, it's a book that is perhaps different to what we might be used to finding in our Bibles or in general things that we read. It might have been a bit different to what we expect.

It's a book with unique things to offer, a unique book. And yet I do also hope that we've seen and will continue to see this morning it's a book that's message is entirely in line with the whole message of the Bible.

It's a book that calls us to face up to reality, to face up to God and to see our need of Jesus to make sense of and to live well the lives that we've been given.

That's what wisdom is. We've been saying Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book and as a wisdom book, it's also a gospel book because it points us to God and what he's done for us this morning.

[ 1 : 29 ] And that's what we're going to finish up with. Our passage this morning then is written, as we've just seen there, as a kind of a conclusion for everything that's gone so far. In some ways, think of a, you kind of, you get a book, you have the writing on the back cover, kind of the blurb or the recommendations.

That's almost what we've got here for Ecclesiastes. Do have a look, if you will, at verse 9. You see there, this is no longer the preacher who is speaking, the preacher whose words we've had in Ecclesiastes ever since chapter 1, verse 2.

Rather, what we have here at the close of the book are words about the preacher, words commending the preacher, words to encourage us to continue to listen to the wisdom the preacher has given us, even though we've come to the end of this book of his words.

So this is a conclusion not in the sense of a recap of everything we've already heard. That would take a really long time. It's not so much dealing with the what, but rather the how and the why of continuing to listen to God's wisdom that Ecclesiastes has taught us.

That's what we're going to be thinking about this morning. And just one more thing worth saying before we kind of get stuck into this here. Just do have a look at, again, if you've got a Bible at the end of verse 11, we're going to get back to this verse.

[ 2 : 41 ] But see how it says, these wise words are given by the one shepherd. And that's talking about God there. That's why most translations give you a capital S for shepherd.

We come to the end of this book and we're told that these are God's words. But we're also to remember that they have been spoken by God's king. If you remember right back to chapter one, verse one of this book, we read the words of the preacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem.

I think it's telling that the very start in the very end of Ecclesiastes, we're told these are God's words spoken by God's king. And so as we see that, we should be expecting the wisdom that we find here to find its ultimate demonstration in Jesus, God's eternal king, who came to God's world speaking God's word.

So this morning we're seeing how and why to respond to the wisdom that we have here in God's word. We can only fully grasp that as we look through the lens of Jesus, God's king.

And so I hope that will make sense as we get into that later on as well. But let's make a start. What does this conclusion teach us? What have we had? What are we to do with this wisdom that we've been given in Ecclesiastes?

[ 3 : 56 ] I think this conclusion here is three different little sections with three different emphases. You can see the three little mini kind of paragraph breaks in that. And the first one is this.

We read that Ecclesiastes is wisdom we can trust and delight in. Verses nine and 10, wisdom we can trust and delight in.

Why would we listen to all the previous 12 chapters of this book? Why would we try and remember that? Why would we want Ecclesiastes not just to be an interesting or perhaps a slightly strange book that we looked at for a few weeks at church, but actually really be something, really be words that we allow to shape the whole of our lives?

And well, this conclusion begins by stressing to us that the preacher whose words we've been hearing is someone who is really worth listening to. It says there, beside being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

The preacher sought to find words of delight and uprightly, he wrote words of truth. And so Ecclesiastes is not a rushed kind of I've got a deadline coming up and I need to hand something in kind of piece of writing.

[ 5 : 14 ] We're told here it is something like the whole of the Bible that we can trust as it contains just the right words. It is true wisdom. And not only that, these words aren't just true, but they're also, as it says there in verse 10, they are words of delight.

These are words written to bring us joy. These are words that we're able to rejoice in and that's been a big theme through Ecclesiastes, hasn't it? We saw in our verses last week, it said, so if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all.

We saw back in chapter nine, go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has approved already what you do. And loads of other places where we've read and places we could turn to about finding joy and about delighting in the world God has made and in the things that God has given us.

This is a book that encourages us to find delight in life. I think it might be fair to say that in our sort of church tradition, Presbyterian, Reformed church, that we would have a reputation of leaning more into truth than into delight.

And we absolutely want to hold on to that truth, the infallibility of the Bible, the very word of God. That as we've just said, these are words that can 100% be trusted as a foundation for a life well lived.

[ 6 : 44 ] But we need to remember that it's great news that these words are true because they are also words of delight. There's a huge difference between the truth that the green bins get taken every third Monday and the truth of a new baby being born.

Truth can be mundane or truth can be magnificent. And Ecclesiastes, the Bible, the gospel is the latter. That is why we gather around God's word.

That is why we celebrate good news because it is true and it is delightful. Again, we mentioned last week the opening question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, this historic document of the Christian faith.

It begins by saying, what is the chief end of man? And the answer, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Now, if you'd like, you can go home and you can Google the Westminster Divines.

So these are the guys who wrote this document in the 17th century. You'll see they were not kind of flaky, kind of light on the truth, just here for a good time kind of people.

[ 7 : 54 ] These were serious guys with serious beards and serious clothing who are serious about their theology, who are serious about the truth of the Bible. Committed years to kind of codifying that.

And it's precisely because of that commitment to truth that they wanted to begin that catechism with joy and enjoying God forever. And as we said, the best example of all of this, the kind of the epitome of this wisdom then is Jesus himself.

Jesus, God's king, speaking the very word of God who came. And he said, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. Those are the words of Jesus. Jesus who says, come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Those are the words of Jesus. Jesus who says, these things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

The Bible as it points us to Jesus gives us wisdom both to trust and to delight in. And so if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, we're so pleased as always that you are here.

[ 9 : 12 ] You might have various different ideas about what Christianity is or isn't. People here will have had various different positive or negative experiences of that. As a church, we are really excited about sharing Jesus with people, about sharing the gospel because we really believe it is true and that that truth is not just a kind of a straight jacket or just a huge burden to bear but it is a delight.

That it is the only way to true meaning, to real security, to eternal hope and that having that in place enables us to navigate this life that we live wisely.

And the reason why that is so delightful is because of what Jesus has done for us. That he suffered that we might have rest in him. That he came and experienced the hardships of our broken world that we could look forward to a perfect eternity with him.

That he died. That we might be forgiven and united to him. The message of Ecclesiastes has repeatedly brought us face to face with a fallen creation, a fallen world, the futility of work, the injustice all around us, even death itself.

And we'll get onto that again this evening. But still it's been able to call us to rejoice because we view all of that through the lens of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

[ 10 : 41 ] The truth that brings us delight. And for those of us who are Christians this morning, then the encouragement here in this conclusion, first off, is to stick with that.

Because there is no better way to live. There is no better alternative. We're offered countless other options. The world around us offers us various different promises. But it is sticking with Jesus alone and the wisdom of the Bible.

Directing ourselves, our family, our friends toward that. That is the true best way to live. That is the only place we can find that we can truly find wisdom to trust and delight in.

The book of Ecclesiastes has been pointing us to that throughout the book and directing us to keep living in light of that. So there's the first section of this conclusion, reminding us what we take from Ecclesiastes, especially as we put it into the big picture of the Bible with Jesus, the hero at the center of the story.

We have wisdom to trust and delight in. Okay, then secondly, second section of this brief conclusion, we see here that Ecclesiastes is wisdom to follow even though it's challenging.

[ 11 : 58 ] This is point number two, wisdom to follow even though it's challenging. We see this in verses 11 and 12. And again, this brings together what has been another significant and repeated feature throughout this book, which is that as we've kind of gathered together around Ecclesiastes, we've read some pretty stark things together.

Ecclesiastes is a no holds barred kind of book. See verse 11, the words of the wise are like goads and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

We mentioned this verse right back in our very first week in the book, I think. A goad was a tool that shepherds or farmers used to keep their animals going in the right direction.

Basically a stick with a nail in it or a point in the end and any animals kind of going off track will get a quick poke to bring them back to be going the right direction. And so this conclusion is saying, yes, some of these words that we've had in Ecclesiastes have been hard.

Certainly some of this wisdom has been counter-cultural. Some of it might have stung us a little bit or brought us kind of face-to-face with some painful realities.

[ 13 : 11 ] But actually moving forward, rather than ignoring that, rather than being offended by that, true wisdom actually embraces that. Because these challenging words, the end of verse 11, are given by the one shepherd.

These sharp words are given for our good from God. And so we're to follow them even when they challenge us. And that leads us then to verse 12.

My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books, there is no end, and much study is weariness of the flesh. The point there is that precisely because some of God's words are hard, we need to be aware of the danger and the temptation of looking elsewhere.

Of thinking, well maybe there's something new, maybe there's something different, maybe there's something which would just be a bit softer, maybe there's a kind of approach to life that would just fit a bit better around me and would keep me in charge.

The point of this conclusion is to say, yes, yes there will be. But following that wisdom will ultimately leave you getting lost, frustrated, and ultimately hurt in the world.

[ 14 : 27 ] It'll be like the sheep who says, you know, I think I'm going to find the shepherd who doesn't use that goad. I find that to be a little bit sharp. I prefer he just put that away. Well, that sheep might well find that shepherd, but that shepherd won't be able to keep him on the right track.

He'll end up lost. He'll end up falling off the path. Be careful who you listen to. This conclusion says, the words of Ecclesiastes, the words of the Bible might be sharp.

They might confront us with realities that our world or our culture might like to hide away or tuck behind something. But it's God's words. They're words to follow even when it's challenging.

A few examples of that. Really, I suppose throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the biggest challenge, the sharpest point has been to face up to our limitations, hasn't it? Has been to face up to the fact and we've seen this time and time again that ultimately we're not in control of what happens in our lives, of what happens in our world, of what will happen tomorrow.

That challenging truth that we've been both face to face with that says actually, despite what we might see in the films, we can't simply do anything we choose or be anything that we desire.

[ 15 : 42 ] And again, that ultimate stark truth, the ultimate limitation, the sharpest point of all, we've seen in Ecclesiastes time and time again that one day we will die, that our life is like a breath.

I found that most of the books of the Bible that you preach through, you occasionally end up speaking about death and you try and work out how to do that carefully. Going through Ecclesiastes, it feels like that's been a sort of a weekly occurrence and I'm sure you've felt that as well sitting and listening and so it might be really easy and really tempting to say, well, glad that's done.

Let's move on to another book, let's pick something a little bit more jolly or let's just imprint on our minds the delightful sections of Ecclesiastes we've spoken about, about joy and rejoicing and enjoying good things.

And yet, again, this conclusion is reminding us to be truly wise. We'll take that, that clarity on death that this book has given us and hold on to that, not in a morbid way, but in a way that allows us to shape our life and live the lives that we do have well.

Chapter 6 of Ecclesiastes, we read, it is better to go into the house of mourning than to go into the house of feasting for this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart.

[ 17 : 03 ] That idea that actually, not just to kind of laugh and enjoy and forget about the big things in life, but to face up to our ultimate destination and allow that to shape how we live, that the wise will lay that to heart.

This is wisdom to follow even though it's challenging and it confronts us again and again. Again, a great book on Ecclesiastes, I've recommended it a couple of times, called Eternity by a minister in Aberdeen called David Gibson that has the subtitle Learning to Live by Preparing to Die.

And our temptation will always be to kind of block out our weaknesses and instead to listen to the voices that say we can do anything. Our temptation will be to block out the reality of death to pretend it will never happen and just to distract ourselves with all the things that the world holds up in front of us.

But real wisdom faces up to these sharp and challenging truths and through that he's able to live wisely in the present. And again, that kind of challenging aspect of the Bible's wisdom is seen nowhere more clearly than in the words of Jesus himself.

Again, God's king who comes speaking God's word who absolutely, as we said, holds out good news but is also really honest about what following him looks like.

[ 18 : 26 ] If anyone, Jesus says, would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me for whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it.

Again, as Jesus speaks wisdom to us, it is challenging to deny ourselves, to take up our cross. This is serious language.

This is a counter-cultural message in a world that tells us not to deny ourselves anything or to quickly ditch anything that is causing us discomfort or not serving us well or not progressing our agenda.

And yet, that is not Jesus' model for following him. It is challenging and yet, it is wisdom to follow even when it's challenging because, as Jesus says, it's only giving our life to him and to the gospel which will ultimately and eternally save us.

And so here's a really, it's a practical way to get a handle on our approach to following Jesus and his word even when it's challenging. Again, this is from the book I just mentioned earlier. The author writes, ask yourself, when was the last time you submitted to the Bible and acted on what it says even when you found what it was saying offensive?

[ 19 : 48 ] Or we could add, even when you found it hard or even when you found it costly or challenging to your agenda. And he goes on to say, don't domesticate your Bible, live in God's world.

In Ecclesiastes and in the whole Bible and supremely in Jesus, we have wisdom to follow even though it's challenging because it is the wisdom that makes sense of the world.

It is the wisdom given by the very one who made our world. And that ultimately, like the shepherd's goats, leads us through his world with all its hardships into eternity with God, our creator, the God who speaks truth to us, that we might live with wisdom for him.

So wisdom to trust in and delight in, wisdom to follow even when it's challenging. Finally, the final two verses of this great book we see in Ecclesiastes we have wisdom to relate rightly to God.

Wisdom to relate rightly to God. And what could be more important than that as we close. Let me read again those last couple of verses and I suppose in some ways this could be the heading, this could be the strap line for the whole of Ecclesiastes.

[ 20 : 59 ] It says this, 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. So here's kind of the conclusion of the conclusion that true wisdom is to recognize who God is and so live according to his word in light of his future judgment.

Can we get that phrase there? Fear God. We've spoken about that. The fear of the Lord or fear God. We find that kind of peppered throughout Ecclesiastes and all the wisdom literature in the Bible.

To live with wisdom has to begin with God and who he is. That he is the ultimate reality and creator of our universe. To fear God is not to try and get away from him.

In the Bible to fear God is to rightly recognize his greatness and his glory to come with awe before him. To see that God is not a lucky charm to be pulled out when we find ourselves in a sticky situation.

[ 22 : 12 ] God is not a plasticine God to be molded by our imagination or shaped however it would conveniently fit around our lives and our plans. Rather the fear of the Lord means that we see God is holy.

God is the one who we build our lives around. God deserves and requires our complete obedience to his word. And God will one day judge every action.

God is the one who made our universe and so knows best how to live in our universe and one day will draw our universe to its final conclusion. God is the one who made our gospel habits about trying to pick up that habit of beginning and ending each day in prayer before and everything else even if it was just a very brief few words of prayer.

That's not just because it's a kind of a Christian sounding thing to do but it's a chance to practice the fear of the Lord a chance to begin each day recognizing that we exist in God's world and that he comes first and that we're called to live for his glory.

Again this conclusion is reminding us it's when we do that that we live with true wisdom rightly relating to our creator God seeking to keep his commandments and as verse 13 tells us this is the whole duty of man.

[ 23 : 37 ] I see the kind of all encompassing nature of that the whole duty of man that the picture is not of lots of little circles here's how to live wisely at work here's wisdom at home here's wisdom as a citizen with here's wisdom in relation to God here's wisdom as a Christian as just one of those circles.

I know the picture to have in our mind is this that wisdom in relation to God fear him and keep his commandments is the big circle as it were in which all these different elements and areas of life many of which we found in Ecclesiastes find their place and are contained.

Our wisdom toward God is our whole duty fear God and keep his commandments and then we've seen time and time again through that book how that shapes every area of life and of course this conclusion as is the case for the whole of Ecclesiastes is pushing us then to Jesus.

How do we respond to the fear of the Lord? Yes it makes us recognize that we must keep his commandments we see what our duty is but also through the fear of the Lord through rightly grasping God's holiness it makes us recognize again just how far short we fall of that perfect standard.

To fear God means grasping that we cannot just waltz into his presence that he is not a God who owes us anything but rather that we are people who need a rescue that there is this kind of cavernous gap between us and God and we need someone to bridge that gap we can't reach over there by ourselves and yet that is what we have in Jesus and in the gospel and so it's Jesus that enables us to delight in the fear of the Lord because that God that holy powerful awesome God is for us in the gospel and has shown us his great love in Jesus it's Jesus that enables us even in the challenging that the hard truth of the fear of the Lord it says actually all of us are not worthy that we're sinful people but to be able to keep on following because that sin is dealt with and we see that we are loved by God and that the fear of the Lord doesn't drive us from God but rather draws us to him in dependence on Jesus and Jesus will never let us down and so here's the really important end to the book of Ecclesiastes all about wisdom and it's so important we go away making sure we've got everything the right way around but here's the thing to remember wisdom is not a way of living not a way of making the right decisions which will then earn us

[ 26 : 19 ] God's favour and love and a place with him rather wisdom brings us to fear God and trust in Jesus and from that perfectly restored relationship made possible by his love for us to seek to live in every aspect of life as his people not fearing that judgment to come as Jesus on the cross has taken that in our place instead living in joyful relationship with the holy God who loves us who has given us our world and our lives even though they are just a breath even though they are fleeting but our fleeting lives which can be lived wisely for God's glory in anticipation of being with him for all eternity let's pray together heavenly father we see those words to fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man and we ask that that would be for each of us our approach to life to rightly recognise your greatness your power your holiness your call on every aspect of our lives and to seek to live according to your word

Lord we thank you that we do that not to earn your favour not because that gives us a certain number of points which we need to reach but rather we live as your people in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ that in him we are redeemed and restored to you even though we so often fail in our duty because Christ has fulfilled that for us and has reconciled us to you if our trust is not in our own efforts or our own works but in Jesus and what he has done we pray that that would be our motivation to obedience to you we pray that that would lead us on a path of wisdom throughout life Lord please help us more and more to trust in and rejoice in your word to us because it is good news that we would know that you are for us and not against us we ask that you would help us to follow your wisdom even when it's challenging and says things which pushes out of our comfort zone again that wisdom is not just going with the flow or choosing our own path but taking seriously what you say to us we thank you that sometimes you do poke us but that is done in love to keep us on the right track we thank you that you bring us face to face with reality and so that we are not living a lie but living according to the truth of the universe in which you have made

Lord as our takeaway from this great book will you please help us to live this breath of a life focused on you and your eternal glory might you make our whole approach to life be one of wisdom grounded in you and in the gospel and might that shape all the details how we relate to authority how we treat others how we speak how we work all these other topics that we've seen might we not be people seeking only our own personal and temporary gain but might we live with our eyes fixed on the promise of eternal joy and worship of you and the eternal home that you have promised us and pray all these things in Jesus precious name amen