

‘THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER’ ECCLESIASTES 12:9-14

[St Mark’s Northbridge, All Services, Sunday 19 June, 2022]

Introduction: The Words of the Reviewer.

I’ve often thought that being a reviewer would be an incredibly fun job. Imagine someone paying you to go to the movies and then write up your thoughts about the film. Imagine someone paying you to go to nice restaurants and then writing reviews of what you ate. Not a tough job, I wouldn’t have thought!

And it seems that even in Old Testament times there was work for a reviewer from time to time. Not a movie or restaurant reviewer of course. But a book reviewer- yes. And that’s what we have in the last six verses at the end of Ecclesiastes. After the introduction to the words of the Teacher in 1:1, everything we’ve read since has been a collection of the Teacher’s own words. But in 12:9 we find again that we’re listening to the voice of someone other than the Teacher, someone who is talking about the Teacher. Scholars have often referred to these final verses as the words of a narrator. But he’s more than a narrator isn’t he? He’s not just telling us what the Teacher said and did. Whoever writes these final words is actually reflecting on the Teacher’s teaching and considering the Teacher’s impact. They’re offering us a perspective through which we might view everything we’ve read. These are the words of a reviewer. And the reviewer’s words are a great help to us in drawing together the threads of what we’ve read in Ecclesiastes over the past couple of months. And the reviewer’s words also really help us in knowing what to do with this book. And so this morning/evening, I want to suggest that there are three things in particular that the reviewer leaves us with, three things he encourages us to embrace as we finish our journey.

1. Gratitude for Being Goaded.

Number 1- gratitude for being goaded. The review at the end of Ecclesiastes begins with an assessment of the Teacher’s wisdom- verses 9-10.

[Read 12:9-10]

The reviewer’s verdict is that the Teacher was wise and knowledgeable. He carefully gathered and thought about the proverbs he included in his book. So careful was he in trying to find the right words that the reviewer can declare that all his words are upright and true. And if you’re a wisdom literature author that’s a 5 star review!

But in verse 11 the reviewer himself gets all literary on us. He uses a simile to describe what the words of wise people are like. And it's not the kind of image we might have expected him to employ. You might predict that he'd say something like: "the words of the wise are like a light shining on your path", or "the words of the wise are like a map when you realise you're lost", or something like that. But no- he has something far more arresting to say. Verse 11.

[Read 12:11]

He says, the words of the wise are like the nails in a shepherd's goad. Now, modern city-slickers like us might find this hard to imagine. I suspect when we think of the tools shepherds use we might imagine a crook [a bit like this- SLIDE]. And apparently this useful apparatus is well-known to shepherds. But in ancient times, and perhaps in some places still today, shepherds also commonly used a goad [which looks like this- SLIDE]. A goad has a sharp bit on it, or even multiple sharp bits, and these were used by shepherds to prick and prod wayward sheep back onto the right path. And this is what the reviewer says the words of Ecclesiastes are like.

And whilst that might be a surprising image for him to use, I think we know what he means don't we? Because reading Ecclesiastes is certainly not a comfortable experience, is it? I don't think most of us would say that reading Ecclesiastes has been a consoling or inspiring exercise! Rather, we'd say, would we not, that we've been pushed and prodded by Ecclesiastes. It's made us think. It's made us question things. It's provoked us. And not in an altogether easy way. Last week Pat pondered whether we might be tempted to conclude that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes was a 'sad, strange, little man'. I think we agreed that that would be unfair. But nevertheless, he is annoying! Isn't he? One of the commentators I read this week described Ecclesiastes as a 'thoroughly irritating'¹ book. And I think that's a great description. Because an irritant always gets your attention. And it usually gets you to do something as well, even if it's just to relieve the irritation. If there's a rock in your shoe you'll probably stop and get it out. If someone's making a noise while you're trying to do some work, you'll eventually ask them to be quiet, or you'll move rooms, or you'll put on your noise-cancelling headphones. And if a parent is constantly at you to do a job they've asked you to do, you might eventually get up and do it.

And if you're a sheep who wants to wander off from the rest of the flock and the shepherd keeps pricking you with his goad nails, you'll probably rejoin the path the shepherd wants you to walk. It is irritating. But it's good for you. Of course, not everything irritating is good for you. But when the irritation is caused by a shepherd who cares about your welfare, then it always is. And when the goad is in the hand of

¹ Barry Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, p.83.

a wise Teacher who wants to push and prod you into a wise life, then it will be irritating. But it will be good for you. And according to the reviewer, that's what Ecclesiastes is. And I think that the last couple of months has given us lots of reasons to agree with his conclusion.

And of course, it's not just Ecclesiastes is it? Because what is true of the wisdom in this book, is also true of the wisdom we have throughout the Scriptures. Our experience of reading and meditating on the Bible can often be irritating can't it? Because the Bible shows us our faults. And challenges our assumptions. And questions our thinking. It rebukes us, corrects us, trains us in righteousness. And if all it is, is an irritating book then we'd better off leaving it on the shelf. But if it turns out that it's not just a book, but actually a tool in the hand of a Good Shepherd who loves us, then we'd foolish not to embrace its discipline and welcome its irritation. If, in fact, it's by reading this book that we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, then we would be wise not just to reluctantly accept it, but to love it. To love him, even as he loves us.

2. Satisfaction with Wise Words.

And that's really what the reviewer reminds us of in verse 12 as well.

[Read 12:12]

You see, the reviewer understands the temptation to avoid the prick of the shepherd's goad. And he knows that leaving the Teacher's words to collect dust on the shelf is not the only option. The other way that people can choose to avoid the irritation of wisdom is to seek out other words- words that are less irritating. So this is why he warns us about words 'in addition' to these words.

It seems that not much has changed in 3000 years, doesn't it? Back in the time when Ecclesiastes was written if people didn't like what the wise Teacher said, they could just try reading a different book, or listening to a different "sage"? And today, if you don't like what the Bible has to say, and if you don't care for the words of the Good Shepherd, you too could read a different book, or try a different guru, or check out a different podcast? There's no end of options, as the reviewer acknowledges here. You could wear yourself out just exploring them all. But, if God in his kindness has given you his words through his divinely appointed and inspired teachers, and if you know that these words drip and pulse with the wisdom of God himself, then you have no need of anything in addition to them. And the desire to chase after something additional is borne in sin. The reviewer urges us not just to be grateful for being goaded, but to be satisfied with the wise words we have.

This is the same exhortation Paul gave to his protégé Timothy when he urged him just to keep teaching God's word to people, come what may. Do you remember these words from 2 Timothy 4?

'For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.'²

That's no less true today than it was in Paul's day is it? People choosing to listen to what they want to hear, more than what they need to hear? So, we who seek faithfulness to Christ practice and nurture within our hearts a deep contentment with the truth we've been given. We delight to find satisfaction in the wisdom our good God has imparted.

3. Fear and Obedience.

And then, thirdly, the reviewer leaves us with his exhortation to fear and obedience. Verse 13.

[Read 12:13]

- the duty of all

Here the reviewer offers us a summary. Despite what some writers have claimed, this is not the reviewer offering his own answer to a question the Teacher merely posed. No- this is the reviewer underlining for us what the Teacher has already said. Fearing God has been a consistent refrain throughout the book.

3:14 [Read 3:14]

5:1-7 [Read 5:1, 4, 7]

7:18 [Read 7:18b]

8:12-13 [Read 8:12-13]

The reviewer is not innovating here. He's summarising. But he's summarising in such a way as to boil the message of the Teacher down to its very core. God is our Maker. And we are his creatures. Ours is a creature story, as Pat reminded us last week.

² 2 Timothy 4:3-4

The world is beyond our complete control. But it is not beyond His. So this is why we fear him. And as verse 14 reminds us here, we also fear him because he's our judge. He is responsible for the beginning of our existence, and it's to him we must give account at the end. The one we fear is the Alpha and the Omega. And as some of you have heard me say before, 'fear' means 'fear'. Yes- it's true that in Christ we don't need to be afraid of God. He loves us and we are safe because of Christ's blood and risen life. That's very important for us to understand. But, at the same time, it's not adequate to simply re-interpret the word fear as 'reverence' or 'respect' or something like that. Because the Bible uses this word- fear- to underline just how different we are to God. Creator, creatures. The judge, those judged. He is awesome in majesty. Faultless in righteousness. Pure in holiness. Limitless in power. He is fearsome. So "fear" is the right word! When the reviewer and the Teacher say that our duty as people is to fear him and keep his commands, they are asking us to see God for who he really is and to treat him as he deserves to be treated. So all of us must fear him. Whether we know Christ or not. This is not just an exhortation for those who aren't yet Christians.

But, of course, if you're not a Christian, if you don't have any assurance of being saved, then this is an especially sobering word. Because for those of us who live now, on the other side of Christ's death and resurrection, the primary obedience God seeks from us is not obedience to particular commands, but obedience to his gospel- the gospel that calls every human to turn from living for themselves and to turn instead to living for Jesus who died and rose again. The gospel of Jesus is a gospel to be obeyed. And God's judgement on those who refuse to obey the gospel is, undoubtedly, terrifying. In 2 Thessalonians 1 Paul talks very clearly about God's justice. He says that a day is coming when Jesus will return to the earth and 'he will punish those do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord'³. I hope everyone here today/tonight understands that and believes that. For some in particular, that is very, very scary. But it reminds all of us about who God is. The one who made us. And the one who will judge. So the duty of all is to fear and obey.

- something meaningful

But what we mustn't miss here is that a life of fear and obedience is something meaningful. So much of the irritation Ecclesiastes has given us has come from the repetition of the claim that everything is meaningless. That's how the words of the Teacher began in 1:2. And it's how his teaching ended in 12:8 as well. "Meaningless! Meaningless!", says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless". The things human beings pursue under the sun are fleeting and impermanent like a mist. When we

³ 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

chase them it's like we're trying to chase and catch the wind. This is what the Teacher has repeatedly said. He has wanted us to understand that the work and the pleasures of God's creatures have no enduring value.

But, and this is a very significant "but", the work of God does. And this is why at so many points through the book he has encouraged us to fear God. Because our work may be meaningless, but the work of God who made us is endued with lasting significance.

So what I think the reviewer is saying here is that this is the thing that is not meaningless. To fear God and to keep his commandments is meaningful.

And so, the final exhortation of the book couldn't be clearer. Don't look for meaning in pleasure. Don't look for it in wealth. Don't let yourself believe that meaning is in youth. Don't convince yourself that meaning is in your wisdom. And don't seek it in work. Seek God. Obey his words. Be content in the joy he gives. Embrace his wisdom. Watch to see him work. Fear him.

This exhortation to fear God is the constant refrain not just of Ecclesiastes but of all the wisdom literature we have in the Old Testament- perhaps especially Proverbs, and Job. And the other day I was reading a book in which the author was comparing the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and the wisdom of Job. And I came across this sentence which really got me thinking. The author writes: 'Job learned about the vanity of this world by *losing* it all; the Teacher saw it by *having* it all'⁴. And that strikes me as very insightful. And it caused me to see with fresh eyes just how much the book of Ecclesiastes is a book for our place and our time. Sure- some of us may have an experience more like Job's. And if so, the book of Job is a gift given by God to help reflect on that experience. But for most people living in Sydney in 2022, most of the time, our experience is more like that of the Teacher who wrote Ecclesiastes. Remember how he described himself back in chapter 2? He undertook great projects. He amassed silver and gold. He denied himself nothing his eyes desired. He did it all with wisdom. And by having all this he learnt the vanity of the world. He concluded that it was all meaningless. Job may've learnt about the vanity of the world by losing it all. But the Teacher saw it by having it all. And my question is: "are we?". Are we learning this lesson? Arguably, many of us have got it all. And what has "having it all" taught us?

The book of Ecclesiastes has taken us on a journey in which we've been invited to think deeply about that question. The Teacher has sought to show us that none of what we have lasts. Death robs us of everything. There are little pleasures and satisfactions along the way and we ought to thank God for them. But when it comes

⁴ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, p.536

to finding meaning, locating something of eternal value, these things all disappoint. Have we learnt that? Do we see that as clearly as we should? Or are we still consumed by our work? [Pause] Or addicted to our pleasures? [Pause] Or proud of our wisdom? [Pause] Or clutching at youth- or some semblance of youth? [Pause] Are we still chasing wealth like it will make us happy? [Pause] These are important questions. And we need to think hard about them, and challenge each other with them. They're irritating questions- yes. But in a really good way.

And what Ecclesiastes offers us, and what the gospel of Jesus offers us is an alternative. All these things we might work for and chase after may be meaningless. But the work of God is full of meaning. And when we fear God and obey his gospel- we find ourselves caught up in that work. Our lives become a part of his! This is why Jesus can talk about coming to him and finding life to the full⁵. This is why the apostle Paul can talk about physical training having some value, but godliness having for all things- holding promise for both the present life and the life to come⁶. And this is also why Paul can write about Christians giving themselves to the work of the Lord- the work of Christ's gospel- knowing that their labour in the Lord is not in vain⁷.

Ecclesiastes invites us to fear and obey the God who made us. With the promise that that this is meaningful. And Jesus invites us in the same way- to fear our Creator and to obey the gospel of our Saviour- and to know that when we do, we are most definitely not chasing after the wind. Rather, we are giving ourselves to the one who has placed eternity in our hearts and with whom we will live forever.

- held to account

And so finally, the reviewer of Ecclesiastes brings the book to its conclusion- with a reminder of how we'll all be held to account⁸. Verse 14.

[Read 12:14]

It's unnerving to say the least the God sees every hidden thing. Every secret sin we've committed, even those committed in the privacy of our hearts, he sees. And, by the same token, every act of quiet love, every moment of generosity without fanfare, every humble thought and deed- he sees.

And it's ultimately this reality that fills fearful obedience with meaning. Because God the judge makes it meaningful. On the day when Christ returns to judge the world, he will not ask how much money we left to those we love. He will have no interest in how

⁵ John 10:10

⁶ 1 Timothy 4:8

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:58

⁸ cf. 11:9

much pleasure we enjoyed while we lived. He will offer no reward for how hard we have worked. He will place no stock in what kind of reputation we had for wisdom. He will not inquire as to the state of our health or the youthfulness of our bodies. Seriously. He will not care about any of those things. But he will care deeply about whether we have feared the Lord. He will take a strong and searching interest in whether we have obeyed his gospel. And if we could only remember that- if we could constantly live in the awareness of how disinterested Jesus will be in so much of what seems significant in the world, and of how just how much he does care about the way we respond to him- if we could only remember that, then we would naturally steer clear of so many of the distractions that Ecclesiastes has warned us about, and we would live very joyfully in meaningful fear and obedience.'

For now we live in the frustration of much meaningless. But a day is coming when the things that really matter will be seen clearly by all. And we who have trusted Christ will be gloriously free- free to fear and obey him forever. I finish with these words from Romans 8:20-21.

[Read Romans 8:20-21]