

Why You Should Study Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes 12:8-12; Matthew 16:26

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There are so many how-to-books available in stores and on the internet: how to become a millionaire, how to influence people, how to make your marriage work, how to lose weight, how to develop good study habits, how to repair your car, plumbing, and lawnmower, etc. Millions and millions of dollars are spent each year trying to figure out how to do this or that or how to fix this or that. And yet Solomon in this inspired book of Ecclesiastes has given us the answer to one of the most asked questions of all time: How to be happy, content, and satisfied while you live upon this earth? He has essentially shown the folly and hopelessness of looking for happiness in the creature and the wisdom and meaningfulness in finding happiness in the Creator alone. What a gold mine of wisdom, insight, counsel, and truth that is found here in Ecclesiastes. We ignore it to our own destruction, and embrace it to our own salvation.

Solomon now concludes his divine treatise on how to enjoy heavenly contentment here upon the earth by summarizing his main point and by laying out reasons why you, the reader, should carefully study this book that has come to you from the wisest mere man that ever lived.

We might actually form a question at the conclusion of this book which Solomon provides answers to in Ecclesiastes 12:8-12: Why Should You Study the Book of Ecclesiastes? (1) Ecclesiastes Demonstrates the Utter Futility of Finding Happiness in This World apart from Christ (Ecclesiastes 12:8); (2) Ecclesiastes Is God's Inspired Wisdom to You (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12).

I. Why Should You Study the Book of Ecclesiastes? Ecclesiastes Demonstrates the Utter Futility of Finding Happiness in This World apart from Christ (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

A. In Ecclesiastes 1:2, Solomon began his study by citing at the outset the conclusion to which he had come from his study of the source of a lasting joy: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity." He then set out to prove this conclusion by many various arguments which we have now considered as we have worked our way through Solomon's discourse. As Solomon now draws to a close, he brings again to your attention this same conclusion having proved it from his previous arguments. Here is the simple conclusion Solomon has drawn from his personal search for happiness in the things of this world apart from Christ: "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Having set out this conclusion, Solomon then in succeeding verses and chapters begins to prove his conclusion by various arguments.

B. You will recall that the Hebrew word for "vanity" means "vapor." Why does Solomon call all the things of this life a vapor when considered apart from Christ?

1. Solomon calls the things of this life a vapor because the things of this world are temporal like a vapor and are passing away. You cannot hold on to the things in this life after death. Everything in this life will pass from your grasp no matter how tightly you have squeezed them and embraced them while you are alive. Even if you are the strongest of men in this world, your hands and arms will fall limp by our side and no longer be able to hold that which was most important to you as your eyelids close and as you breathe your last breath at death. Everything in this life is a passing vapor.

2. Solomon calls the things of this life a vapor because they do not satisfy to the quenching of a man's true thirst for joy and contentment. If you were dehydrating, your tongue parched, and your lips cracked, and someone offered to satisfy your thirst, which would you want: a glass of water or a glass of vapor? Dear ones, Solomon says that the things in this life are a vapor to those who thirst for true joy and

contentment. The things of this life make huge promises to satisfy your thirst, but they cannot do so. Only the living water which Christ gives can do so. That is not to say that you cannot enjoy the good things of this life that God has made and given to you (1 Timothy 6:17). It is simply to say that by themselves and without Christ, they are a vapor.

C. Solomon not only declares that all things in this life (without Christ) are vanity, futility, or vapor in bringing a lasting joy, but declares it in a superlative form (and twice for emphasis) when he says, “Vanity of vanities” (i.e. utter vanity). That’s like saying “the holy of holies” (i.e. the most holy) or “the king of kings” (i.e. the supreme king).

1. Thus, dear ones, let it be known today from the lips of him who was the wisest man that ever lived that doing what you want to do because you want to do it is utterly futile and hopeless in satisfying the deep longing of every man to have joy, peace, and contentment. Without Christ it is a mere vapor that cannot satisfy. But with Christ you will be able to enjoy to its fullest whatever God gives to you in this life.

2. Never forget that the New Testament parallel to “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” is found in the words of our Savior there in Matthew 16:26: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

II. Why Should You Study the Book of Ecclesiastes? Because Ecclesiastes Is God’s Inspired Wisdom to You (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12).

A. Solomon first addresses the human instrument (namely, himself) that God used in penning the inspired wisdom found in Ecclesiastes and gives reasons why this should move you to study it (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10). When I pick up a book to read on a subject (whether on health, marriage, theology, food preparation, or gardening), I want to know some things about the author—the credentials of the author. I also try to find books to read by people who have firsthand experience in dealing with the subject matter about which they write. They are not writing about mere theoretical ideas concerning which they have no personal experience. I prefer to read those authors who have tried and tested their ideas and propositions in the fiery furnace of their own practical experience. I would not likely take the time to read a book on health, exercise, and weight loss written by a person who did not eat right, who did not exercise, and who was grossly overweight, or read a book on a financial investment written by one who had failed in every investment he/she ever tried, was penniless, and in debt up to his/her eyes. However, to read a book by one who had failed, but had learned from his/her sins, errors, or mistakes and who had turned that failure into a success story, I would find that to be a very compelling reason to buy the book and read it. The personal credentials Solomon gives here in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 are like his resume for why you should study, believe, love, and obey the words of wisdom found in Ecclesiastes. The remarks here written by Solomon about himself are not written in pride as if he were robbing God of His glory or misrepresenting his own gifts/abilities. To the contrary, his personal remarks turn your attention to your Creator and Savior who amazingly uses such weak, frail, failing, sinful human beings as Solomon (as He uses you and me) to further His kingdom on earth for His glory. And He does so in order to demonstrate HIS power, HIS mercy, and HIS undeserved love to all who see you. Dear ones, you may not have written a single book yourself, but you who cling to Christ as your righteousness and as your only hope of eternal salvation are a living book whose experiences are being recorded in every chapter of your life for all to read (your experiences in failing and in rising again to take hold of Christ by faith, in putting off the old man and putting on the new man by faith, and in learning and growing through your trials, afflictions, and personal failures that without Christ you can do nothing, but with Christ, you can do all things through Him who strengthens you). What are Solomon’s credentials (here in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10)?

1. First, what was written in Ecclesiastes was written by “the preacher” (Ecclesiastes 12:9-

10). As we have noted before, this title taken by Solomon refers to His own backsliding and failure in marrying many wives and in going after the gods of those wives (1 Kings 11:1-13, especially verses 9-10). Solomon had turned His back upon the God who had graciously given to him unparalleled wisdom and had fallen into deep sin and even against the explicit commandments of God (clearly these were not sins of ignorance). In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon comes as a repentant Preacher proclaiming to us from the vast storehouse of all that he had learned where to find true happiness, lasting joy, and contentment in every circumstances of life. Solomon comes preaching to us by the Spirit of God to walk not in his sins and errors thinking that true happiness can be found in the creature alone (apart from Christ). This is not an ivory tower book, but a book of practical wisdom graciously learned from God in both his failures and his victories.

2. A second credential Solomon lists is his wisdom (“because the preacher was wise” Ecclesiastes 12:9). It is true that Solomon had also demonstrated the depths of foolishness in his backsliding, but there was no mere human being to match his wisdom in applying God’s truth to every area of life. This was not simply his own evaluation of himself, but this was God’s own evaluation as well (1 Kings 3:12). Now here is someone whose credentials merit a sound study of his work as the wisest mere man that ever lived. If I want to improve my playing of an instrument, do I listen to the person who took several lessons and quit or to the person who studied, mastered, and applied the knowledge of that instrument in performing for 30 years before audiences around the world? Do you want to be wise or foolish? The decision is yours and either life or death follow as consequences. Solomon says in effect that you are to learn from one who is wise if you would be wise. Spend time with those who are wise if you would be wise. Read those who are wise if you would be wise. For you will become like those with whom you spend the most time (whether in your music, your books, your magazines, your movies, or your friends).

3. A third credential Solomon lists for reading Ecclesiastes is that he taught what he learned to others (“he still taught the people knowledge” Ecclesiastes 12:9). This wisdom God gave Him was not used merely for his own benefit, but was taught to others for their benefit as well. Solomon was not one who desired to hide what he had learned from God’s people, but one who desired to impart that knowledge to all who had a hungering and thirsting to be wise. Do you desire to be wise? Solomon is your teacher, and he charges nothing financially to teach you. Where are you going to be able to take a course in wisdom and be taught by the wisest mere man that ever lived for nothing—nothing but your hungering and thirsting for God’s wisdom, nothing but your faith in God’s wisdom, nothing but your love for God’s wisdom, and nothing but your obedience to God’s wisdom?

4. A fourth credential Solomon mentions is his diligent pursuit to learn from God the wisdom gained from his own study of God and His creation and from his personal experience as well (“yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs” Ecclesiastes 12:9). For Solomon, the pursuit of God’s wisdom was not a casual or short-lived project. He did not pursue God’s wisdom as if it was just like any other discipline or subject he might study—the study of God’s wisdom was essential to life and nothing was more important to him. What is more important to you: what your favorite movie star, music star, financial star, sports star, or friend says or what God says? Nor did Solomon pursue God’s wisdom with a flash and then forget all about it, never to take it up again with any seriousness. Perhaps you at one time showed such a zeal in God’s wisdom, but your pursuit of God’s wisdom has been placed on the shelf in exchange for the pleasures of this life or the business of this life or the cares of this life. The pursuit of God’s wisdom must be with diligence if you would grow in it. Everything else you pursue in life is secondary to God’s wisdom. Do you hunger and thirst for God’s wisdom? Is God’s wisdom your necessary bread? If it is not, you will not be filled with it.

5. The fifth and final credential produced by Solomon for studying the book of Ecclesiastes is that what is written in it is God’s truth (“The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth” Ecclesiastes 12:10). Solomon was absolutely convinced that what he wrote in Ecclesiastes was completely and perfectly true (without any error in it). He self-consciously

knew that what he was writing was true because as we shall soon see, he self-consciously knew that he was writing Scripture and that God was ultimately the author of Ecclesiastes just as is said in Proverbs 30:5-6 and in 2 Timothy 3:15-17. Therefore, this book is not to be received and believed as true simply because Solomon (the wisest mere man who ever lived) wrote it, but it is to be received, believed, loved, and obeyed because God used Solomon to pen the exact words that He (God) wanted to communicate to us for your good, for your benefit, and for your eternal salvation (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

B. Solomon not only appeals to his credentials as a reason for you to study God's wisdom found in the book of Ecclesiastes, but secondly he appeals to the divine imprint upon the Book of Ecclesiastes as giving sufficient reasons why you should be moved to study it (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12). There is a divine imprint upon every passage of Scripture which declares that God Himself is the Creator of Scripture. Just as all of creation declares the glory of its Creator, from the most massive stars in the universe to the smallest micro-organism, from man who is made in the image of God to the plants and animals that are to serve man to the glory of God, so all Scripture likewise shouts to us that it is likewise God's creation. The Holy Scripture is no more the work of man or the work of chance than is all of creation itself. A deaf child may not hear the voice of his father who speaks to him, but that doesn't mean that the father has not spoken to him just because he could not hear him. And if you can't hear the shouts of creation declaring that God created it all, it is not because creation is not shouting, it is rather because you have through your own hatred for the truth placed your hands over your ears so that you will not hear what God's creation shouts to you about God. And likewise, dear ones, if you can't hear the shouts coming from Scripture, that it is the creation of God and that God Himself is speaking to you through every verse of Scripture, it is only because you hate the voice of God and have sinfully destroyed your own hearing through your sin in Adam, through the loss of original righteousness, through the corruption of your nature, and through your own personal transgressions of God's holy Law. And dear ones, if you can hear the voice of God speaking to you in Scripture, it is not due to your own ability to hear (for by nature you are as deaf). Your ability to hear God speaking in Scripture is due to His everlasting love and grace shown to you in Christ Jesus from the foundation of the earth (long before you were ever born) in determining that He would freely give you the ability to hear and receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope of eternal salvation. Consider the divine imprint in Holy Scripture as the most sufficient reason why you should study the book of Ecclesiastes.

1. First, the efficacy of Scripture (that is the power of God working through the Scripture in the lives of man) demonstrates the divine imprint upon it ("The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of the assemblies" Ecclesiastes 12:11).

a. Solomon likens the works of the Spirit of God in using Scripture (which he here calls "the words of the wise") to that of "a goad" ("The words of the wise are as goads"). Goads were sharp sticks that were used by farmers in the ancient world to poke oxen that strayed from their course in plowing or used by shepherds to keep the sheep from straying. God's Word likewise pricks your conscience when you stray, encourages you to repent and seek God's forgiveness and return in obedience to running the race that He has laid out for each of you (whether that course presently involves severe trial or refreshing comforts). To be pricked with the goad of Scripture is not a pleasant experience—it hurts. You may like the oxen of old kick against the goad of God as it is applied to you (Acts 26:14). But when you do so, you only do so to your own further misery. Dear ones, the goad is necessary because your loving obedience to the Lord is more important than your momentary pleasure. Have you felt the goad of Scripture pricking your conscience to flee this sin or that sin, to run into the loving arms of Christ, to sorrow over your offence against a holy and gracious God, to seek His forgiveness, and to endeavor new obedience? Then you know firsthand the divine imprint that is upon the words of the wise found in Scripture. Dear ones, rather than viewing the goad of Scripture as something negative, you should view it as something wonderful and miraculous. For you feel the divine imprint of God's voice speaking to you in your conscience as to what is true and what is false, what is right and

what is wrong, what is obedience and what is rebellion. Dear ones, rejoice in the goad of God's Word, for by your love and obedience to that goad, you evidence that God's imprint is found in Scripture and that you are a child of God.

b. Next, Solomon likens the work of the Spirit of God in using Scripture to that of "a nail" ("The words of the wise are as goads, AND AS NAILS FASTENED BY THE MASTERS OF ASSEMBLIES" Ecclesiastes 12:11). Just as nails or stakes were used to fasten a tent of the shepherd to the ground so that it did not fly away when the wind blew ferociously around it, so the Scripture fastens your life securely to Jesus Christ so that you are not blown away by every wind of doctrine that arises in the church or is promoted by those who defect from the truth. Dear ones, what ultimately nails you down in your faith is not the mere words of men (no matter how godly they may appear or close they may be to you), but rather is the Word of God that bears the divine imprint of God's authority in it ("Thus saith the Lord"). If you cannot reason from Scripture why you believe what you do, what you believe may still be true; however, you will not have the confidence and certainty that you are firmly fastened in your faith. You will feel more like a tent that is being blown all over the place. It is only the nail or stake of God's Word that gives you confidence and certainty (Proverbs 22:20-21). It is faithful ministers whom God uses in their office to drive the nail of God's Word into your heart ("as nails fastened BY THE MASTERS OF THE ASSEMBLIES"). Dear ones, from where does your certainty of truth come in regard to the Trinity, in regard to salvation, in regard to national covenanting, in regard to shunning occasional hearing? You will only be confused and perplexed if the nail of God's Word is not driven into your conscience and heart so that you have a divine faith and confidence in those truths.

2. Second, the authority of Scripture (that is the voice of God intrinsic in the very words of Scripture) demonstrates the divine imprint upon it ("which are given from one shepherd" Ecclesiastes 12:11). The efficacy of Scripture as a goad and as a nail comes from the very fact that God is the Good Shepherd speaking in Scripture. Scripture comes not from the fancy, mind, and ethical standards of mere men. Scripture derives its authority from God alone who alone is Lord of the conscience. That divine authority that is imprinted into all of Scripture is like the light of the sun that shines for everyone to see. However, many are blind to the light of God's authority in Scripture just as many are blind to the light of the sun. The fact that one cannot see the light of the sun does not disprove the sun exists and shines forth the power of its light. Nor does one's spiritual blindness to the light of God's authority in Scripture disprove God exists and is shining forth the authority of His light in Scripture. For man is without excuse. Man has gouged out his own eyes so that he cannot and will not see the light of God in Scripture. Man by nature loves the darkness of his own sin, the darkness of his own pleasures, the darkness of his own business, the darkness of his own desires and dreams. Man loves the darkness of his own independence and will not submit to the light of God's authority that shines upon him/her in the Scripture. Rejoice, dear ones, if you see the light of God's authority in Scripture and hunger and thirst in your weakness to submit to that authority. For though you had gouged out your eyes to the light of God's authority in Scripture, the Lord graciously healed your sight to behold His glory, power, holiness, promises and authority in His Word.

C. Solomon closes by pointing out how wearing the mere wisdom of this world is in comparison to the words of the wise found in Scripture ("And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" Ecclesiastes 12:12). It is not a sin to write a book or to study a book written by man. However, the world is filled with such a hungering and thirsting for the wisdom of man that it exhausts itself in mere human wisdom to the exclusion or minimizing of divine and heavenly wisdom. Do not weary yourself in studying man's wisdom—weary yourself in the study of God's wisdom. That is a wisdom that not only will serve you now, but will serve you for all eternity. That is a wisdom that alone will bring true happiness, true holiness, true peace and contentment that will last for all eternity.

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