



LESSON 12 | THE END OF THE MATTER (11:7–12:14)¹

“All has been heard.” The matter has come to its end. The time has come. The Teacher has let us hear the voices of the human experience *under the sun*. He has used his entire message to open our eyes so that we may look without blinders at the delights and distresses that we must endure under the sun. As he concludes, the Teacher has a word of wisdom learned from his own life: to spend our youth and prime years on gratifying ourselves sets us up for an empty life. It is better, he says, to dedicate our lives to the Lord from our early days and to live a life of joy from beginning to end.

The Teacher calls us to live a God-centered life. By wisdom he calls us to live well, to rejoice and remember our Creator, however old we happen to be. The reason we are able to rejoice throughout the time we have, whether young or old, is because every day is a gift from our Creator God. Life is to be lived now, and it is to be lived unto God, our Creator.

What is the conclusion we are meant to draw from this? That despite the many burdens that come from life “under the sun,” our fleeting lives retain a God-saturated purpose. God has the last word and God’s word is good. Following, trusting, and obeying this God describes our “whole duty” in life. We were created to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Rejoicing and Remembering (11:7–12:7)

This final section in the Teacher’s journey is very important for an understanding of his journey as a whole. “Rejoice” is the call that shapes 11:8–10, and the call to “remember” governs 12:1–7. The darkness and mystery of life remain present in both sections, but the proverb of 11:7 is significant, as is the fact that for the first time the mystery of life is set in the **context of joy (and remembrance)** rather than the other way around.

Like a beacon alerting us to a major shift in the Teacher’s perspective and struggle, 11:7 openly affirms life and raises the question of what could have shifted the Teacher from his tense struggle between the meaninglessness of life and the affirmation of joy — what is it that has brought such resolution? How has the contrast of these two opposing approaches to life yielded a positive affirmation of life? The answer is provided in 11:8–10 and 12:1–7.

11:7-10. Here we find a developing affirmation of joy.

- It’s important to observe that “youth” in this passage is a relative concept, for 11:8 says that enjoyment should be pursued throughout all of life, “however many years one may live.” In fact, by “youth,” the Teacher may mean anyone who has not yet entered the stage of life portrayed in 12:2-7, where body and mind are in decline. As we have seen throughout, the Teacher knows that this eventual return to dust is the reason to grab hold of life while the opportunity still exists. Joy is affirmed, but one must still “remember that the days of darkness will be many” (11:8).
- As it has been said, “*youth is wasted on the young.*” The reality of the human experience is that we usually do not learn to rejoice until it is too late. We take life for granted; we fail to enjoy the present, especially in our younger days. The Teacher, however, does not scold the young person in these verses for being young. His instruction is not “You’re young, but don’t forget you’ll be old one day,” but more so “You’re young, begin finding joy in God now, and make the most of life with every fiber of your being.”

¹ Lesson notes are excerpted from Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (349-372) and Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (220-231)

- Indeed we see in 11:9-10 that the call to joy is unrestrained, and it is identified as the deepest expression of one's heart. All that comes is no longer meaningless because judgment lies ahead—there will be a time for judgment, when the extent to which one has embraced life as God's gift will be accounted for. The following of the heart and the eyes is to be carried out in the sure knowledge that there is moral accountability in the universe: "God will bring you to judgment." Joy is to be pursued within the boundaries set by goodness and virtue—the boundaries set by God.
- Yet joy is indeed to be pursued. The young man is to make the most of his brief moment of youth. He is to banish from his heart "frustration." He is also to cast off "troubles" from his body. In other words, he is to embrace with his whole being the pathway through life that the Teacher has advocated throughout the book (e.g., 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:18-20; 9:7-10), rather than conforming himself to the world of frustration and evil that has also been described.

12:1-7. Now comes a further development in the Teacher's thought, because the object of "remember" is now no longer the "days of darkness" (as in 11:8), but "your Creator."

- This is a vital step in the resolution of the Teacher's struggle. Remembrance of God as Creator undermines the Teacher's search for meaning apart from God, because it is equivalent to making the fear of God (here = "remember your Creator") foundational to the Teacher's search for wisdom rather than the sort of methodology he had adopted as he tested things "under the sun." To "remember our Creator" reminds us that we are not the creators of our lives. As one writer observes: "Consider the phrase *Remember your Creator*. Only here does the Teacher call him by this name, and he does so by design! . . . You are a creature. . . . Our problems do not stem from our failure to stay in our garden. All the evils of the world stem from our taking ourselves to be the Creator."
- Although the reality of death is stronger than ever in this section, the observational language is absent. Remembrance thus presents the possibility of resolving the tension between the meaninglessness of life and the path toward a joyful existence. The Teacher's advice is to start early on this pathway of joyful existence before God in the sure knowledge that life will only ever become more challenging as time passes and as we move closer toward death.
- Whether death comes with or without the help of old age, it will come to us all, and the Teacher takes us by the hand gently asks: before that day comes, how will you live? It is possible to live so as to make old age very sad, and then it's possible to live so as to make it very beautiful. The important question is: "How can we live now so that our old age, when it comes, is beautiful and joyful?" Consciously or unconsciously, each day we are answering question.

We must remember our Creator, the gifts and purpose that God has given each of us. It is a command that begins in the days of our "youth," but it's also one that we must see through for as long as we have the capacity to do so. In his book *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, Zack Eswine gives a beautiful example of what this looks like as he recalls a conversation he had with his aging grandfather:

My grandpa and grandma on my Dad's side live in Camden, Tennessee. This little country town isn't far from the town of Bucksport. In that unknown place, they make a life, including expressing their love for Jesus through a little local church. In their mid eighties, I spoke to them on the telephone. They had just gone fishing and were cleaning the twenty-six fish they caught that day.

"How are you doing?" I asked my grandpa.

"Well, we got up this morning. It was a good day," he said lightly but seriously. Maybe my nervous laugh and then my quiet caused him to feel that he should explain what he meant.

"Zack, when your grandmother and I wake up, we give thanks to God, because at our age, waking up is not a promise. Then, if we have the strength to do what we had planned to do that day, we give thanks to God that we had the strength to do it; because at our age, strength and health comes and goes. If we get a nap in and we wake up, we give thanks. If it's dinnertime and we're sitting down to eat, we give thanks not only for our food, but also that we can eat it, and that we made it through the day that far. After that, when we go to bed at night, we look at each other and then back on the day and we thank God for another day that he gave us to live. So, today we went fishing, and what do you know, we have all of these fish! The Good Lord must still have a purpose for us."

Restatement of the Theme (12:8)

“Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Everything is meaningless!” (12:8). These were the Teacher’s first words and now his last words. Throughout Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew word for meaninglessness (*hevel*) has served as the Teacher’s multipurpose metaphor to express the futility of life in a fallen world. Taken literally, the word refers to a breath or vapor, like the steam rising from a warm lake on a chilly morning. Such is life: it vanishes into thin air. Everything is fleeting and momentary.

By beginning and ending with the same statement about life’s vanity, the structure of Ecclesiastes reinforces the point that there is ‘nothing new under the sun’ (Eccles. 1:9). We should not think, however, that the Teacher merely repeats himself. Ecclesiastes 12:8 brings us back to the place where we began, but we are not the same people that we were when we first started reading the book. Studying Ecclesiastes has given us a bigger perspective on life. So, when we hear the same statement at the end that we heard at the beginning, it strikes us with greater force.

Now we know that **human wisdom** is meaningless, because whether we are wise or foolish, we will all die in the end (2:15-16). We know as well that **pleasure** is meaningless: houses and vineyards; gold and silver—there is ‘nothing to be gained under the sun’ (2:11). **Power** is meaningless: there is no one to comfort the tears of the oppressed (4:1). **Money** is meaningless, too, because it cannot satisfy our souls (5:10). Then there is the last of all vanities, which is **death**. Dust we are, and to the dust we shall return (3:20).

It is no accident that these modern idols all receive focused attention in Ecclesiastes: knowledge, wealth, power, and pleasure. Ecclesiastes illuminates for us what happens if one tries to understand these entities apart from remembering our Creator, or what Proverbs calls the fear of the LORD: We simply cannot make sense of life and continually end up on the path toward despair.

These observations set the stage for what Ecclesiastes teaches us about joy and purpose. The Teacher has told us to **eat and drink and find satisfaction in our work** (e.g. 2:24). There is a time for **healing and harvesting**, a time for **laughing and dancing** (3:1-8). **Rejoice in the prosperity that God so richly provides**, the Teacher says (5:19; 7:14); **enjoy life with the one you love** (9:9). There is joy in the world under the blessing of a faithful God. Ecclesiastes mainly teaches us to see how meaningless life is without God, and how little joy there is under the sun if we try to live in the Creator’s universe apart from the Creator. By the time we get to the end of the book, we have to admit that the author has proved his case. “Nothing in our search has led us home,” writes Derek Kidner; “nothing that we are offered under the sun is ours to keep.”

The End of the Matter (12:9-14)

With the closing verses we once again hear the voice of the person who has been reporting the words of the Teacher to his “son” (v. 12) — and to us — but who has only occasionally and ambiguously indicated his presence throughout the book to this point (1:1-2; 7:27). Now he “adds” to the words of the Teacher his own more extended comments.

12:9 The words of the Teacher, as we noted in chapter 1, are inserted into a frame by a narrator. Central to the overall interpretation of Ecclesiastes, therefore, is to discern how the voice of the narrator relates to the voice of the Teacher. Here the narrator describes the Teacher as *wise*. This description indicates from the narrator’s perspective that the Teacher does indeed resolve his struggle and arrive at a position that fits with that of traditional wisdom. We could paraphrase verse 9a in the following way: *“I want to add my own perspective on all this: I consider the Teacher a wise man and someone who taught knowledge to the people.”* This is presumably the very reason why he has passed on the Teacher’s words in the first place. It is not likely that he would otherwise have done so.

12:10 *“He wrote words of truth plainly”* The narrator commends the Teacher to his son for the quality of his insight. It might be asked how the Teacher’s words could be seen as true. The answer is to be found in his limited perspective. Time and time again the Teacher stated that he was observing things “under the sun.” As he looked at the fallen world and how it worked, he rightly concluded that life is hard and then comes death. As we see, though, the narrator uses this conclusion to push his son beyond an “under the sun” perspective.

12:11 “*The words of the wise are like goads...*” Verse 11 expands on what the Teacher and other wisdom teachers have in common, namely that their words are like goads and nails and originate from one source, one shepherd — God. Such words prod us into wise action and, like nails firmly embedded, provide us with a place that holds us.

“Goads” were used by shepherds to move animals along the right route, and thus the shepherd imagery can be seen to progress naturally to God the shepherd as the one source of wisdom. Thus v. 11 not only positions the Teacher’s instruction among the wise but also traces the origin of such wisdom to one shepherd, namely God.

12:12 “*Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them*” Verse 12 therefore warns the reader of the danger of finding wisdom outside the wisdom traditions referred to in v. 11. “Be warned” is often used in the OT to refer to giving instruction. The context alone can determine whether this instruction is a warning. The context here indicates that the reader is being warned against going beyond the teaching of the wise. The reasons given for not wandering outside the wisdom tradition are that there is no end to the production of books and much study wearies the flesh. This does not rule out other books from being consulted but establishes the reliability of the respective text for its purpose. It is a remarkable affirmation of the Teacher’s journey by the narrator.

12:13-14 “*Now all has been heard; here is the end of the matter...*” The ‘end of the matter’ refers to the ultimate conclusion to the quest we have witnessed. The abruptness of these words gives the impression that the narrator now moves on to what is really important. Over and against the “under the sun” perspective of the Teacher, he encourages his son to have a proper relationship with God (“fear God”), maintain that relationship through obeying his will (“keep his commandments”), and live in the expectation of a future judgment. In a word, the final speaker affirms the Teacher’s conclusion that ultimate meaning cannot be found “under the sun.” And he uses that insight to guide his son toward a right relationship with God.

REFLECTION

- ◆ **Reasons to Remember:** The Irish rock star Bono offers an apt summary of Ecclesiastes, which happens to be one of his favorite books: “It’s a book about a character who wants to find out why he’s alive, why he was created. He tries knowledge. He tries wealth. He tries experience. He tries everything. You hurry to the end of the book to find out why, and it says, “Remember your Creator.” In a way, it’s such a letdown. Yet it isn’t.”
- The reason Ecclesiastes shows us all this—the reason it confronts us with the end of life—is because what happens in the future has implications for the way we live today. The Teacher is calling us to remember our Creator now, as we inevitably grow old and finally die. Remembering your Creator means remembering that God made a good world. It means taking our place in the world with a humble, self-giving spirit, not demanding more.
- We must *remember our Creator* because he is the source of life and strength. Today is a day to praise the God who made you. Celebrate the gifts that God has given you. Whatever capacity of knowledge you have, whatever skill in communication, whatever creativity in the arts, whatever rigor in science, whatever strength in your body, whatever compassion for people in need—these are all gifts from your Creator. Praise God for the life you’re given each day!
- We must *remember our Creator* because he is also our Savior, Jesus Christ. ‘*For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him*’ (Col. 1:16). When we look at Ecclesiastes in the full scope of redemptive history, we recognize the call to “remember your Creator” as a call to honor Jesus Christ with the way we live our lives.
- Another reason to *remember our Creator* is that the older we get, the more we forget. But if we make a lifelong practice of remembering our Creator — maintaining habits of daily prayer, dwelling in Scripture, and committing ourselves to a community of Christ-followers — we will never forget the most important thing in life. We will always remember who our Savior is, and we will know his faithfulness to us as we walk through the many seasons of life.

- ◆ **Moving “Above the Sun”:** The narrator has recognized the importance of the Teacher’s wisdom for his son’s spiritual growth. We see that the “words of the wise are like goads,” and wisdom must be allowed to do its painful work on our lives. As the goads bite, we must resist the temptation to reach for a painkiller. The conclusion of the book points beyond to what is truly important. In spite of the darkness of this world, the final words of the narrator call his son beyond “under the sun” to fear and obey God in light of the coming judgment.
- **Ecclesiastes was written to warn us against placing our hope in anyone or anything other than God.** It does so by pointing out the meaninglessness of life lived apart from God. For our lives to have any objective meaning that’s going to stand up to scrutiny; meaning that’s going to give us unshakeable comfort and hope even in our darkest days, even when we’re on our death beds—we must have assurance of these three things: that our lives have purpose, significance, and value. And we can only be assured of that if our purpose, significance, and value come from God. No matter how wise or rich or successful one may be, one cannot find meaning in life apart from God. What truly is significant is taking pleasure in God, keeping his commandments, and enjoying his gifts with contentment and gratitude for what is given.
- **As Christians we see the words of Ecclesiastes directing us to God, reminding us that we were made for God, for fellowship with him in Christ, by the Holy Spirit.** Ecclesiastes teaches us that we will only find our purpose, our significance, and our value in the Lord. The Psalmist writes that *God makes known the path of life to us* (Ps. 16:11). In other words, our Creator gives our lives meaning by teaching us to fear him and keep his commandments. As we do this, we receive *“the joy of [God’s] presence and the pleasures of living with [God] forever.”* That’s ultimately what Ecclesiastes is saying. **It points us away from ourselves and toward honoring God, serving God, and ultimately finding our deepest joy in God. That is our purpose.**

DISCUSSION

1. At the conclusion of Ecclesiastes we see the narrator passing the Teacher’s wisdom on to his son. In general, what wisdom would you share with someone younger than you? What do you wish you had known when you were younger?
2. Have you ever thought of following Jesus as drudgery or a chore you have to do but don’t expect to enjoy? In what ways has your perspective changed over time? Who or what helped you come to a new perspective?
3. What is the Teacher encouraging us to do when he says, “Remember your creator” (12:1)? How do you go about “remembering your creator” throughout the day?
 - In 12:2-7, the Teacher metaphorically describes the aging process. How does this support the Teacher’s point about remembering God in the days of your youth? Is it more difficult to do this later in life, especially for those who did not do this when young? If you are older, how have you learned to rejoice in God’s gifts and be thankful for gifts past?
 - Take a look at Paul’s perspective on life and death in Philippians 1:18-26. How does Paul’s attitude differ from the attitude given in Ecclesiastes 12 and the attitude of our world? What enables Paul to have this perspective?
4. What is the meaning of the statement in 12:8? Does it feel different to you now than it did when you read it first in 1:2?
5. “The words of the wise are like goads...” (12:11). The Teacher’s words have pushed us towards ultimate satisfaction in God — not wealth, possessions, status, etc. Why are these words painful to hear sometimes? During this study, has there been an area where you found yourself being poked or prodded in ways you weren’t anticipating?
6. What is your view now of the book of Ecclesiastes? Has it changed now that you have reached the end of this book? What has the teaching of Ecclesiastes challenged you to do?