

FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS
Ecclesiastes 12

(Read Ecclesiastes 12)

Intro: Whew!!! You may have noticed that the first 8 verses of the 14 that make up Ecclesiastes 12 are one complete sentence!

As for who wrote those words, there is no author indicated for this sobering book of wisdom but it is generally attributed to King Solomon. Two weeks ago, we looked at how, for all the wisdom Solomon was renowned for, he certainly didn't live up to his own teaching. But here in Ecclesiastes he is referred to as "The Preacher" and actually, more accurately, it could be rendered "The Teacher". You can tell by the way he concludes his words of wisdom that, if it is indeed Solomon, he is trying to redeem his folly and it's powerful as he does so. When my aunt and uncle started the work of Navajo Brethren in Christ Mission in the high desert of Northwestern New Mexico in 1947, they had a lot of help from a man by the name of Otis, who owned the trading Post on top of the small rise to the immediate Southwest of the Mission. A number of years later, Otis left the trading post buildings, and the 300 acres he owned, to the mission, either in his will, or upon his retirement, I'm not sure which. Suddenly the area the mission station covered had increased to over ten times its previous size.

The 300 acres Otis gave us were used for grazing the small herd of cattle that the mission owned, but the adobe trading post building just sat empty for many years. In the winter of 1978, which was the last year that I was at the mission, the maintenance staff of the mission began tearing the trading post down. In true Brethren in Christ fashion, they were instructed to salvage every usable thing they could find in the building.

I was on the staff at the mission school as a dorm supervisor and as the gym teacher, but I often helped with maintenance. That is why one cold morning when there was wispy snow floating in the air, I was at the building with the guys as they worked. Someone came up with the bright idea to have a doggie roast and I was dispatched to run drive quarter to a half mile down the hill to the mission where I dug up a couple of pounds of the truly terrible hot dogs that they sell in New Mexico, and some bread to act as rolls, and the necessary condiments one must have with hot dogs. We had our nice doggie roast, and then the guys continued tearing down the building as I returned to work at the mission and back to my duties by the time my Navajo boys came back to the dorm from their classes,

Fast-forward three or four hours later to when we came walking out of the school dining hall and looked up the hill and saw that the trading post building was fully engulfed in a huge fire. It was no doubt that our doggie roast fire had eaten inside the adobe to the wood frame and it was burning furiously. We quickly loaded the old Air Force fire extinguisher the mission owned but had never used (it was a contraption that looked not unlike a welding tank with big wagon wheels) into the mission four-wheel drive and flew up the hill to try to put the fire out.

Now, this was crazy on a number of levels. That fire extinguisher was like spitting on the sun on its best day, and truthfully, the building was already a loss. But we had to do what we had to do. So, we arrived at the building, pulled the fire apparatus out of the back of the Bronco, aimed it at the fire and pulled the trigger, and it went (POOF). Yes! And let me tell you (POOF) will not put out a fire. In fact, that particular, (POOF) would have barely extinguished a match.

That's not unlike the thinking of the preacher here in Ecclesiastes. He begins his teaching in Ecclesiastes with, *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,*

vanity of vanities! All is vanity. Ecclesiastes 1:2

Right out of the gate it's obvious that the teacher is not feeling very light-hearted. In fact, he is saying that life is futile. The word translated as "vanity" is from a Hebrew word that means "breath" or "vapor". Figuratively it means futility, meaninglessness, emptiness, and the idea of not being worthwhile. It implies that life is transitory at best and meaningless at worst. Yes, life is fleeting. Life is like our mission fire extinguisher aimed at a roaring structure fire, and only being able to go (POOF).

But the Preacher has a plan. Fortunately, he ends on a better note in the text that I just read, even though he again says *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.* Ecclesiastes 12:8. Yes, he says it again, but with what he says on both sides indicates that he's not as negative as he was at the beginning of his teaching.

Let's look at it now and see how significance, meaningfulness, and worthwhileness come from fearing God and keeping his commandments.

First . . .

You are born and then you get old

- That theme we were just talking about, *vanity, vanity, all is vanity*, is a theme that runs all the way through Ecclesiastes. It's the idea that nothing in life adds up to anything. A person's work, everything they learn, and anything that gives them pleasure, has no lasting result. Further, significance in life is not in a person's possessions or their attainments. Goals amount to nothing. Life is all in vain. Stay with me. Don't go into depression and tune me out – there is a point here.
- The Preacher points out that we should *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"* Ecclesiastes 12:1 because life begins to seem to be pretty meaningless. Our eyes grow dim and our joints get creaky. Our hearing begins to fade and we have balance issues. Depressingly, he goes on and on.
- Wisdom, power, work, social injustice, property, righteousness, youth, age, and even folly, just to name but a few, are vain from humanity's point of view. This is because they do not show us a way in which we can solve the problem of our own situation. The Preacher concludes that, humanly speaking, there is no solution at all to the futility of life.
- BUT here is what redeems his entire message: he has no doubt that God has a solution. Earlier in Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) he points out that God knows the time for everything and that includes humanity. In the final analysis, when all is said and done, humanity cannot save itself. Only God can do that. It comes down to this . . .

We can't save ourselves and we can surely do a lot to destroy ourselves – BUT God's got this!

- Remember your Creator! If you forget everything else, don't forget that. The Preacher shows his hand here. The prospect of age and death and the futility of human effort and how we can muddle and demolish things, doesn't cause him to give up – instead it brings to mind his great Creator. In fact, if you forget everything, the one thing you must hang on to is to remember your Creator. One of my commentaries put it this way, *"By this here he clearly distinguishes himself from all skeptics, cynics, epicureans, or just plain old wet blankets with whom he is often been confused."* This isn't a depressing message – it's a message of hope!

Conclusion: The Preacher, who very possibly could have been Solomon, gets to the end of his teaching and says, *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.* Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. He had stumbled, and he had fell. But in the end to fear God and keep his commandments is the way to entering into God's presence.

The other day I finished a wonderful book by Philip Yancey entitled WHAT GOOD IS GOD? In it he recounts a talk he gave to a meeting of Alcohol Anonymous groups in Chicago where he told them, *"You cannot fall out of range of God's grace. No matter how far we plunge, God's grace goes lower still. The beginning of grace, is that it does not leave us there."* We can have all the opportunities like Solomon and we can still plummet into lostness just as spectacularly as he did. But God's grace can find us in the squalor of our own making so that we can fear God and keep his commandments once more.

What will your legacy be? What will people say of your life when they stand at your graveside? Robin Mark and Don Moen both do a wonderful job of singing a powerful prayer entitled *When It's All Been Said and Done*.

Listen to the words of the song as my talk concludes:

*When it's all been said and done
There is just one thing that matters
Did I do my best to live for truth?
Did I live my life for you?
When it's all been said and done
All my treasures will mean nothing
Only what I've done for love's reward*

*Will stand the test of time
Lord, your mercy is so great
That you look beyond our weakness
And find purest gold in miry clay
Turning sinners into saints
And I will always sing Your praise
Here on Earth and ever after
For You've shown me heaven's, my true home
When it's all been said and done
You're my life when life is gone
Songwriter: Jim Cowan*

One final question: will your life be one of obedient impact, or will it be a mere (POOF)? Amen.