

The End of All Things . . . The Gospel

August 30, 2026

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

Session Outline

1. The Teacher (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10)
2. The Sayings of the Wise (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12)
3. The Conclusion (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Theological Theme

The key to living well, even when it feels futile, is to fear God and keep His commands (v. 13).

Call to Action

How are you living to fear God and keep His commandments each day?

Leader Guide

The End of All Things ... The Gospel

Introduction

Have you ever watched a movie with an especially satisfying ending?

The 2016 movie *Hidden Figures* tells the story of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson, three African American women who overcame racial and gender discrimination to make a difference at NASA (and in the space race) and change the world of STEM for the women who came after them.

After watching each of these women struggle against unjust prejudice, movie viewers arrive at the very satisfying conclusion of the film: a touching overview of the impact they each were able to make despite everything (and everyone) working against them.

Dorothy Vaughan, a Fortran specialist recognized as one of the most brilliant minds at NASA, went on to become NASA's first African American supervisor.

Mary Jackson, America's first female African American aeronautical engineer, was appointed Langley's Women's Program Manager at NASA in 1979.

Katherine Johnson, nicknamed the "human computer,"¹ did valuable calculation work on NASA's Apollo projects and the Space Shuttle program. NASA named the Katherine G. Johnson Computational Building in her honor in 2016. In 2015, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.²



What is your favorite movie ending? Why do you enjoy it?



Why do you think endings feel significant to us?

Session Summary

Today, we'll read the final verses of the book of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon shared the grand conclusion he came to in his reflections on life "under the sun."

Known for his great wisdom, Solomon carefully crafted his writings on wisdom that have been preserved for us as a gift from the Lord—even now, thousands of years later. Following these wise teachings can help guide our lives on the right path.

The satisfying ending to Solomon's exploration? The key to living a good life is to fear God and keep his commands (v.13).

1. The Teacher (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10)

-  True wisdom comes not from man but from God. How does this inform our reading of Ecclesiastes?
-  What wisdom can we glean from the book of Ecclesiastes?

"The Teacher" in these verses refers to the author of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon. Verse 9 recalls "the Teacher" as a wise man, and Scripture agrees:

Now it pleased the Lord that Solomon had requested this. So God said to him, "Because you have requested this and did not ask for long life or riches for yourself, or the death of your enemies, but you asked discernment for yourself to administer justice, I will therefore do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has never been anyone like you before and never will be again. In addition, I will give you what you did not ask for: both riches and honor, so that no king will be your equal during your entire life. If you walk in my ways and keep my statutes and commands just as your father David did, I will give you a long life." —1 Kings 3:10-14

We know that Solomon didn't live perfectly. Later in his life, he gave in to idol worship after being tempted by his foreign wives, for whom he had built pagan shrines (1 Kings 11:1-13). However, despite his faults and failings, Solomon was wise, and he shared knowledge that still informs God's people today. Consider the book of Proverbs, which we still turn to for wise counsel today, thousands of years after Solomon wrote those words of wisdom.

The Source of Wisdom

True wisdom comes from God, the one Shepherd, and is worthy of acquiring. But one should be wary of endless academic pursuits. Ecclesiastes is not anti-intellectual; still, no one should try to build a meaningful life on the reading and writing of books.

Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone—wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, sons of Mahol. His reputation extended to all the surrounding nations. Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs numbered 1,005. —1 Kings 4:30-32

Ecclesiastes 12:10 tells us that not only was Solomon incredibly wise, but he also worked to carefully craft the nuggets of wisdom he shared with the world.



How is Solomon's life a reminder that God uses broken people for His purposes? How has He done this in your life?

2. The Sayings of the Wise (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12)



How have wise sayings been like cattle prods (v.11) for you?



Why do we need these types of prompts from God in daily life? What happens without them?

The sayings of Solomon are not only well-stated; they are incredibly useful. Like a cattle prod guides an aimless steer, the sayings of the wise (v. 11) guide us. In Solomon's time, a cattle prod was likely a stick with a point (1 Samuel 13:21). Consider what Scripture has to say about wise sayings and why we should allow them to “prod” us into right living:

*Listen to instruction and be wise;
don't ignore it. —Proverbs 8:33*

*The one who follows instruction is on the path to life,
but the one who rejects correction goes astray. —Proverbs 10:17*

*My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
listening closely to wisdom
and directing your heart to understanding;
furthermore, if you call out to insight
and lift your voice to understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it like hidden treasure,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and discover the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
—Proverbs 2:1-6*

Going back to Ecclesiastes 12:11, scholars aren't clear on the meaning of the firmly embedded nails reference. Perhaps these firmly embedded nails were featured on the end of the cattle prod, and Solomon continued that metaphor, or perhaps he referred to nails driven into a wall, fixed and dependable. In any case, we know the fixed truths of Proverbs to be dependable, even thousands of years later.³



How have you found God's Word to be fixed and dependable throughout your life?

God uses many metaphors in Scripture to describe His relationship with His people. The Shepherd and sheep metaphor is one He uses again and again. Perhaps most familiar to us is its use in Psalm 23. God also uses this metaphor elsewhere in the psalms, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, and beautifully in Ezekiel:

"For this is what the Lord GOD says: See, I myself will search for my flock and look for them. As a shepherd looks for his sheep on the day he is among his scattered flock, so I will look for my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and total darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples, gather them from the countries, and bring them to their own soil. I will shepherd them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I will tend them in good pasture, and their grazing place will be on Israel's lofty mountains. There they will lie down in a good grazing place; they will feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will tend my flock and let them lie down. This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, bring back the strays, bandage the injured, and strengthen the weak, but I will destroy the fat and the strong. I will shepherd them with justice."—Ezekiel 34:11-16

This is the Shepherd in view in Ecclesiastes 12:11. The Lord provides for all our needs, takes care of us, seeks us out and rescues us, brings us home when we wander, tends to us when we can't tend to ourselves, bandages us when we are injured, and strengthens us when we are weak. He cares so deeply about us living well, righteously, and wisely that, in His goodness, He gives us wise teaching to turn to in Scripture.

Yet as good as wise teachings are, Solomon warned in verse 12 that study for its own sake drains our lives of the joys that Ecclesiastes recommends cherishing. Rather, study should be approached with balance and humility.⁴

3. The Conclusion (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)



What conclusion did Solomon make in these verses?



How does this reality impact our lives today?

Solomon began this book by exploring the point of life. If we are destined not to contribute anything, and the people of the world will forget us in a few generations . . . how do we live well? Life may seem futile at times, but life lived in partnership with the Lord is always meaningful.

After Solomon's exploration of wealth, the pleasures of the flesh, and the cycles of life, he arrived at a simple and important conclusion: To live life well, we must fear God and keep his commands (v. 13).

Remember, "fearing" God in Scripture means holding Him with appropriate reverence and respect. The idea here isn't cowering in fear of what God might do to punish you. He's not waiting for you to mess up so He can strike you down. God loves you and wants what is best for you. But, like rebellious teenagers, we often throw that love and care back in His face by living outside of the ways He calls us to.



How does fearing God lead to obedience? If you know God but don't obey Him, what does that say to Him about the way you view Him and your relationship with Him?

Scholars debate what, exactly, Solomon meant by this is for all humanity (v. 13).

The literal translation of the Hebrew here is "for this [is] the whole of man."⁵ This could mean that Solomon's recommendation to fear God applies to everyone (this phrase is rendered in the NIV as, "this is the duty of all mankind").⁶

Alternatively, it could mean that obeying God is the role of every human in the universe (being human means fearing God, and apart from this obedience, we lose the core of our humanity).

Throughout the book, Solomon emphasized that we are only human and therefore limited. We don't know what the future holds, and we can't control everything. We are mortal and finite, a short breath on a cold day. But God is not. He is eternal. He always has been and always will be. He knows all and is sovereign over all. He will ultimately judge how we conduct our lives here on earth, good and bad. Nothing is hidden from Him.

As we enjoy the everyday joys of life as they come (as Solomon heartily recommended), we should do so while fearing God and obeying Him. This leads to peace, joy, and life that can be found no other way.

Conclusion

-  What does today's passage teach us about God and His character?
-  What does it mean to fear God and keep his commands (v. 13)? How are you pursuing this aim daily?
-  How might living as Solomon recommended give us opportunities to share Christ with others?

The words of Solomon remain useful to us. Like a steer prodded along the right path, wise teachings guide us. They are a gift from God, our Shepherd, lovingly guiding us through this finite human life. He desires for us to live righteous and full lives, and that requires pushing against our natural, sinful desires and instead choosing righteous living.

As we walk through this life, even in the moments that feel futile, we should seek to fear the Lord and follow the commands He has lovingly laid out for our good. This is the best way to live for “all humanity” (v. 13).

Prayer of Response

Thank God for His wisdom that has lasted for thousands of years and still applies to us today. Thank Him for walking with us unfailingly, and ask for His help as you seek to better follow His desires for your life. Ask Him to gently point out the areas of your life where you are not following His commands and guide you in taking the next right step.

Memory Verse

When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity. —Ecclesiastes 12:13

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* by Daniel Akin and Jonathan Akin
- *Ecclesiastes* by Philip Graham Ryken
- *Be Satisfied* by Warren Wiersbe



Historical Context of Ecclesiastes

Purpose

Ecclesiastes shows us that since we and our works are futile—that is, destined to perish—we must not waste our lives trying to justify our existence with pursuits that ultimately mean nothing. Put simply, Ecclesiastes examines major endeavors of life in light of the reality of death.

Author

According to 1:1 and 1:12, the author was David's son and a king over Israel from Jerusalem. Also, 12:9 speaks of the author as a writer of proverbs, so Solomon appears to be the author. Many scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was written too late in Israel's history for this to be true, and they want to date the book at least five hundred years after Solomon's time (later than 450 BC). However, strong evidence attests that the book does come from the age of Solomon. For instance, it displays a great knowledge of literature from early Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Setting

Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature, meaning that it is in the part of the Bible especially concerned with helping readers cope with the practical and philosophical issues of life. It has roots in the Wisdom literature of Egypt and Babylon. Books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the biblical answer to the search for truth. Proverbs is basic wisdom, giving the reader fundamental principles to live by. Ecclesiastes, by contrast, is for a more mature reader. It engages the question of whether death nullifies all purpose and meaning in life.

Special Features

The Bible is never shy about confronting painful truths or hard questions. The book of Ecclesiastes faces the issue of how we can find meaning in life in light of the seemingly futile nature of everything. It will not allow the reader to retreat into superficial answers. It does not answer this problem by comforting us with hollow slogans. To the contrary, its motto is "Everything Is Futile." But by forcing us to face the futility of human existence, it guides us to a life free of empty purpose and deceitful vindication.

Extended Commentary

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

12:9 This verse is consistent with the view that Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes (1Kg 4:30–32).

12:10 This verse indicates that the Teacher not only sought to give sound teaching, but to present it in a way that was appealing and appropriate. This suggests that there is more care in the wording and arrangement of books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes than first meets the eye.

12:11 The essential teaching of this verse—that God has given us wisdom in order to guide us through life—is clear. A pastoral metaphor governs at least part of the verse. God (the one Shepherd) prods us along just as shepherds prod animals with cattle prods—sticks with sharp points (Ac 26:14). It is not certain whether embedded nails refers to nails inserted at the ends of cattle prods (1Sm 13:21), or whether this is a different metaphor, describing proverbs as fixed and dependable, like nails driven in a wall. If the latter, it implies that we can hang our lives on these fixed truths.

12:12 Proverbs are important, but the Teacher warns against study done for its own sake. Too much study deprives a person of the joys that Ecclesiastes recommends. This verse does not oppose scholarship, but it does demand that scholars approach their work with humility and with balance in their lives.

12:13–14 The meaning of the phrase because this is for all humanity is much debated. The Hebrew literally says, “for this [is] the whole of man.” The phrase could mean, as the CSB renders it, that the rule to fear God applies to every person. Alternatively, it could mean obedience to God is the proper role for man in the universe. In other words, to live in the fear of God is to be truly human. To do otherwise is to lose the essence of our humanity. The conclusion of Ecclesiastes, to fear God, is in keeping with the message of the book—that we are mortal and weak but he is almighty. Although the book recommends, among other things, that we should enjoy our brief time under the sun, the advice to fear God trumps everything. The whole of the book has been focused on the brevity of earthly life and on how we should live in light of this reality. But at the end, the book looks beyond this life to the final judgment.⁷

References

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3. Duane A. Garrett, “Ecclesiastes,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1018.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.