

The Only Thing We Have To Fear Is God Himself

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 December 18, 2024

Tom Wolfe is best known as the author of *The Bonfire Of The Vanities* and *The Right Stuff*. He won dozens of awards, played baseball at the semi-professional level, had his two most famous books adapted into major motion pictures - he even guest-starred on an episode of *The Simpsons*.

As Tom studied the world, he recognized the uniqueness of humanity. In fact, he concluded that Darwin's theory of evolution cannot possibly apply to human beings. In his mind, there is something absolutely different about us: *Language*. Among all the living creatures on earth, he noted how humans alone are able to use speech to combine communication, memory, code-making, and strategies for how to live life. These words we use set us apart.

Tom dedicated his *life* to language. He wrote five novels, more than a dozen non-fiction books, and a number of influential articles. He's credited with coining a number of phrases in the English lexicon (like 'Good ol' boy'), and he's responsible for significant changes in journalistic reporting.¹

This thoughtful lover of words once described Ecclesiastes this way: "*Of all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth – and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one I could say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.*"²

And yet, tragically, Tom Wolfe died an atheist. Despite being raised Presbyterian, his final book, he said, contained "*not a shred of whatever that depends at all on faith, [or] on belief in an extraterrestrial power.*"³

He may have loved Ecclesiastes - he may have appreciated its eloquence and poetry - but he missed the whole point. He didn't hear the inspiration. What's sad is that it isn't subtext. The point and purpose are explicitly laid out for us as we read the final page. There it is, for *everyone* to see: *This* is what your life is all about. *This* is where lasting truth is found. *This* is the answer you're seeking. This is the *right stuff* that your soul has been longing for.

Verses 9 through 14 are a final epilogue to the book. If we remember all the way back to the start of chapter 1, the *author* of Ecclesiastes (Solomon) introduced us to a character called *The Teacher*. The Teacher is *also* Solomon, but it was a character or persona he put on to speak to us as if he were a secular humanist - an agnostic who wanted to go through life as if believing in God or listening to God or having a relationship with Him were optional.⁴ The Teacher then gave us his

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Wolfe

² Robert Short *A Time To Be Born—A Time To Die*

³ <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/27/491492977/in-tom-wolfes-kingdom-speech-is-the-one-weird-trick>

⁴ Tim Chaddick *Better*

lecture about the *hevel* futility of trying to live life apart from God - how it leaves a person unfulfilled.

Instead, the Teacher showed how a relationship with God, Who gives you life on purpose, for a purpose, will not only help you make sense of the absurdities of the world we live in, but will also provide the only way for you to live a meaningful life with joy along the way.

The Teacher ended his speech and then left the stage. Now, the "author" picks back up with a final P.S. - a "one-more-thing" before we go.⁵ In the first part, he validates the Teacher and his message. In the second part, he warns and challenges us to take seriously what we've heard and act on it.

Ecclesiastes 12:9 - ⁹In addition to the Teacher being a wise man, he constantly taught the people knowledge; he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs.

It's important that we understand what the Teacher was all about. I think I told you before how the campus pastor at my college once taught a sermon on Ecclesiastes and his conclusion was that the Teacher was just wrong - that he didn't know what he was talking about. But that's not right.

We see here that the Teacher was *not* just a cynical old man, complaining about the world around us. He really was a *teacher* and he really cared about his pupils. He had a "pastoral" heart.⁶

His pupils were *whoever* wanted to listen. The term used for "people" here refers to the general public, *not* just a select few in a specific time.⁷ This book really is for you and me. And, in preparing it, the Teacher worked carefully, artfully, purposefully, so that he could best deliver what verse 9 calls "proverbs." It doesn't only mean the book of Proverbs or some of the passages in this book that feel very Proverb-like. This term used has a wide range of meaning. It can include fables and riddles, witticism and sayings, acrostics, allegories, questions, and other devices.⁸

These words don't only apply to Ecclesiastes. This book claims to have Divine Authorship, so what we see here becomes a wonderful description and defense of the inspiration of *all* Scripture.⁹

This tells us the Bible is not randomized or haphazard. It is carefully constructed - perfectly balanced. It is exactly what we need in its entirety. This is why it's essential for us to take in the *whole* counsel of God. It will not do to pick and choose. God has given us what we need and what we have in Scripture is *all* we need for life and Godliness.

Now, in this verse, the Teacher is labeled a "wise" man. It doesn't just mean he's smart. It implies the eternal wisdom of heaven.¹⁰ You see, in this ancient time there were three great institutions: The

⁵ David Hubbard *The Communicator's Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*

⁶ Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

⁷ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

⁸ Eaton

⁹ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

¹⁰ James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

prophet, the priest, and the sage.¹¹ Solomon was not a prophet or a priest, but he was a learned sage in the knowledge of heaven. If we come to Ecclesiastes and say, "This book is weird and confusing, so let's skip it to something more accessible," we're making a mistake. That's *always* a mistake for any book of the Bible we find challenging. The point is that we're supposed to dig into it, and discover the treasure within. As we read, we must allow the book to read us and teach us.

Ecclesiastes 12:10 - ¹⁰The Teacher sought to find delightful sayings and write words of truth accurately.

Some scholars say that the words of the Teacher are "free-wheeling and associative,"¹² but not according to this. There is *more* than meets the eye.¹³ This book and by extension the rest of Scripture are perfectly balanced and perfectly necessary. It is not only accurate, it is delicately designed. As we delve into the Word of God, we will discover and *keep* discovering life-giving, life-changing truth.

This is why we don't just read the Bible once and say, "Ok we've got it now." These words of truth *keep* working in us. In fact, "delightful sayings" can also be translated as "apt and timely."¹⁴ They are words for *today*. They are words for *you* and *me*. What the Teacher put down we need to know.

Certain truths we really need to know. Consider how the discoveries of Antonie Van Leeuwenhoek and Louis Pasteur changed life for everyone. We needed to know about germs and how they lead to disease. It will not do to ignore what they discovered and revealed.

To an infinitely greater degree, we *need* the discoveries, the explanations, the examples and revelation given to us in the Bible. In them we discover what life really is and Who the Lifegiver really is. They are a lamp to our feet, a light to our path. In the Word of God we find joy and peace and help and clarity. *But*, though they're given in grace, they aren't always easy for us to accept.

Ecclesiastes 12:11 - ¹¹The sayings of the wise are like cattle prods, and those from masters of collections are like firmly embedded nails. The sayings are given by one Shepherd.

Ecclesiastes had a lot of hard pills to swallow. There are *many* areas of Scripture than challenge our natural mindset, our ungodliness, our selfishness, our human pride. But the truth revealed in the Bible is the one thing that will help us nail down life.¹⁵ Isn't it interesting - the whole book has had this repeating chorus that life is *hevel*. It's all a wisp of vapor that you can't grab onto or hold in place. Then here comes God's Word. With it you can nail life down. It's secure and load-bearing.

But sometimes we want to go our own way. And then God's truth becomes like a cattle prod - a sharp reminder that we're headed the wrong way.

¹¹ Walter Kaiser Jr. *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*

¹² Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹³ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

¹⁴ Seow

¹⁵ Ryken

Rather than recoil, we should instead move in the right direction. That's what a goad is for, right? The rancher doesn't use the goad to *hurt* the cow, he uses it to *guide* the cow. The cow doesn't know which way it should go. Left on its own, the end will be lostness and death.

Jesus said to Saul, "It's hard for you to kick against the goads." Jesus didn't want to *hurt* Saul. He could've struck him dead any time He wanted to. But He *didn't* want to - He wanted to *save* Saul.

God's Word *is* full of comfort, but it does not exist to make us feel good or to stay as we are. It exists to move us in the right direction. It exists to reveal to us the Shepherd, capital S. If you have a CSB or NKJV or ESV or NASB or AMP or some NIV's, you'll notice that capitalization. Solomon is referring to the Lord Almighty.¹⁶ The Psalms, of course, call Him the Shepherd of Israel.¹⁷ And then Christ Jesus came and called Himself the Good Shepherd and He brought us Gentiles into His flock.¹⁸ These words reveal the Shepherd and teach us to hear His voice.

The question is, are we listening to our Shepherd? We know He's calling, we know He's directing, we know He's leading and commanding us. Are we living the sheep life? Does the wisdom we're living life by flow from our *Shepherd*? Not skeptics. Not celebrities. Not pundits. But our Shepherd.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 - ¹² But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body.

This is a cool reveal. The lens pulls back and it's kind of like *The Princess Bride* where the story is being told by the grandfather to the son. Here the "author" of Ecclesiastes is speaking to his child.

These truths of God, these secrets to life are *not* just for elite palace officials. They're not just for intellectuals or academics. They are meant to be shared with *everyone*, even at a young age. That these revelations would be passed down from life to life, heart to heart, to anyone who will listen.

In this verse the father gives a warning, and what he says is actually "admonish yourself."¹⁹ We each have a duty and responsibility when it comes to learning and applying truth to life.

UNESCO estimates that two million books are published a year.²⁰ Not *copies* of books, but two million new *titles* every year.

Is the author of Ecclesiastes saying it's bad to read? No. A clearer translation of verse 12 is, "Be warned, my son, of anything in *addition* to [the sayings given by our Shepherd]."²¹ There is no *new* revelation - no Third Testament - no new Gospel. And, there will be no philosophical discovery

¹⁶ Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

¹⁷ Psalm 23:1, 80:1

¹⁸ John 10:11-14

¹⁹ Eaton

²⁰ <https://isbndb.com/blog/how-many-books-are-in-the-world/>

²¹ *The NET Bible First Edition*

which invalidates the Word of God. So, by all means, read lots of books. But always evaluate and measure what you're learning against the immovable truth of Scripture, not the other way around.

But this isn't only a warning for those who are still trying to find God. As Christians, we *also* need to remember that the truth of Scripture does not change.

We live in a time when many churches and groups are saying, "Well, yes the Bible says *this*, but it's time for us to update our perspective on some of these things." That's not the case. And even if we're not involved with a group that is trying to progressively interpret the Bible, we can still make mistakes with truth if we're not careful.

For example, if you ever find yourself at a small group Bible study and the leader puts everyone in a circle and says, "Ok, what did this text mean *to you*?" Be careful. That's not the question we're to ask as we study God's Word. The question is, "What does this text *mean*?" Period.

God's truth is eternal. There's no new truth. There's no "my truth" and "your truth." God's truth is firm and established and presented for us to discover, not to develop. And, not only do we want to *know* the truth, but we must be sure we're moving from interpretation into real application.

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

Some translations add the word "duty" to the end of the verse: "This is the whole *duty* of man." But that's not what the Hebrew says. Fearing God is not simply a duty, it is the *wholeness* of humanity. As one source puts it, "To live in the fear of God is to be truly human."²²

When we don't live out verse 13, we fail to be what God made us to be. Duane Garrett writes, "[In the Garden] Humanity sought to become like God...but instead they lost the one thing that made them truly human."²³ And with that we lost so much of what God graciously gave them in life.

We can gain back the contentment and happiness and fulfillment and peace that God intended for us *only* if we live in a relationship with Him - one rooted in the fear of God and active obedience.

But it's not a cowering fear. The image here is not of a monster we must appease, it's of a Gentle and Caring Shepherd Who lays down His life for us to keep us safe and to show us the way home. Our obedience flows from *love*, not terror. If we love God we will keep His commands. But remember: God not only has *general* commands for all people, He has *specific* commands for you and others for me.

Look at the book of Acts. Philip, go here. Peter, go there. Paul and Silas, you're headed that way. We're being *Personally* Shepherded. And life is not about what you achieve or what you amass, it's

²² CSB Study Bible Notes

²³ Garrett

about *this*. Fearing God and walking with Him in a real relationship where He leads you along the specific path He has carved out for your life as He renews our lives and makes His face shine on us.

So some questions we should ask ourselves tonight are: How is God leading me right now? What commands of His am I obeying? What pasture is my Shepherd leading me into? Is He goading me in some direction that I really don't want to go? Don't be distracted by other pastures or far off calls from some worldly hireling who only wants to trap you or take advantage of you. *This* is life. Loving God and being loved by Him. Receiving life as *He* intends it.

Ecclesiastes 12:14 - ¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

People love a twist ending. What an amazing twist we have here. Again and again we kept hearing the Teacher say, "Nothing matters. Everything is futile. Nothing matters." And now it all comes together and the *real* truth comes out: "No, *everything* matters!" Every part of your life has meaning in God's eyes. We should take that seriously, but, again, God's goal isn't that we cower in anxiety about how He's going to be disappointed with us. No, we should be brimming with enthusiasm and anticipation about what He wants to do with our lives. With how He wants to flourish and beautify and satisfy our lives. How He wants to fill our temporal with His eternal.

Tom Wolfe didn't get it. Neither did Ernest Hemingway. His first novel was titled *The Sun Also Rises*. It's a phrase taken from Ecclesiastes. He even quotes chapter 1, verses 3-5 in one of the epigraphs. But his book, like his life, ended in hopelessness. Before his suicide, he was subjected to round after round of electroconvulsive therapy.²⁴ He spent a lifetime trying to fill the void in his life with drugs and alcohol and women and adventure. In the end, he even turned to electricity to try to *shock* his mind into peace. He was totally trapped under the sun. He wrote, "There is nothing else than now. There is neither yesterday, certainly, nor is there any tomorrow...A good life is not measured by any biblical span."²⁵

Meanwhile, the Good Shepherd was calling out to him. "Come to me, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."²⁶ Come and live forever. But Hemingway would not listen. He is famously quoted as saying, "All thinking men are atheists." He, of course, was wrong about that, but more importantly he was wrong about God and the life God wanted to give him. And so, in the end, he settled for a life under the sun and *that* life belongs to the grave.

We know what the real *Right Stuff* is. We know the Son has risen! We know what that the best pursuit of life is not wealth or experience or position or acclaim, but simply pursuing our Savior, the Shepherd of our souls, and the truth He has revealed so that we might have life *more abundantly*.

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Hemingway#Idaho_and_suicide

²⁵ Ernest Hemingway *For Whom The Bell Tolls*

²⁶ Matthew 11:28