

Ecclesiastes: Chasing the Wind
Part 5: Solving Chasing the Wind
Ecclesiastes 10-12

We need to hear what the author is not saying.

Wisdom: faith and obedience in context.

Dead Flies.

- *Ecclesiastes 10:1-15; Galatians 5:9; Matthew 12:36*

There are negative decisions that directly affect your life.

Casting Bread.

- *Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:7; Matthew 6:19-21*

There are positive actions that directly affect your life.

Fear God.

- *Ecclesiastes 12:8-14; Proverbs 9:10*



Ecclesiastes¹

Chasing the Wind, Part Five

Solving Chasing the Wind

Today we are concluding our series in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Earlier in the summer I was praying about what God wanted to say to us this fall, and I actually had another sermon series in mind, already charted it out for us. But as I was praying, God started to speak to me about the growing anxiety that we all feel today. So I set aside my plan and started praying about his. And the burden and concern that I began to feel for the anxiety that you carry – that we all carry – became quite heavy. And the Lord was clear: “I want to talk to our church about the weight of their anxiety because I know it and I feel it and I have the answers for them.” So I was finally in the right frame of mind to hear what the Lord wanted to say to us in this time, and he drew me to the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes – a book that is disturbing and depressing and seems to keep going on about how meaningless life is – like chasing the wind. I’ve read it several times, but I’ll admit I never really did a study in it. So I dusted off that section of my Bible and began to study and pray, and here we are today concluding this series.

In our time together we’ve realized some very important things from this book. Remember that the voice in the book is called “The Teacher.” We don’t really know who he is, although tradition says it was King Solomon. But he spends most of the book talking about how meaningless life is – that trying to find any meaning in the things that this life has to offer amounts to chasing the wind.

So remember the key to understanding this book is that...

We need to hear what the Teacher is *not* saying.

Since everything in this life is meaningless, he’s trying to get us to realize that there is a life that *is* meaningful. That the pointlessness of this life points us to the One who gives purpose and meaning. If everything ends in death, then there must be a life beyond death that makes this life matter. Stop chasing the wind and start chasing after the One who will give your life meaning.

This book is a part of what’s called “Wisdom Literature” in the Bible. The other two books are Proverbs and Job, and then there are some Psalms that are also in this literary style and

¹ Resources include: Stephen Bennet, *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes/Lamentations, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO, 2010)
Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, ed. J. Alec Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984)
Dennis Kinslaw, “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” in *Job-Song of Solomon*, vol. 2, *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968)
John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ecclesiastes
Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996)

content. The point of wisdom literature is that we would live wisely, and wisdom in the Bible means...

Faith and obedience in context.

(Say that with me: Wisdom is faith and obedience in context.)

Wisdom is faith in what? In God. It is having faith or confidence or trust in God's love and power and purpose for our lives. With that awareness of God, then it results in our being obedient to who? To God. Because we know his love and power and purpose and trust him, we will do what he asks of us; we will obey. So it's faith and obedience in whose context – in ours or God's? In God's. Even when our context seems meaningless and hopeless and full of grief and sorrow and pain, we will have faith in God and be obedient to him because we know that his context is much, much bigger than ours. He sees things we don't, and he sees things years down the road ahead of us that we can't see. So we trust him.

That's what wisdom is – trusting God and obeying what he tells us even when it seems scary or unsafe or doesn't make sense to us because he has a bigger context.

In Ecclesiastes, the Teacher is telling us over and over again, "This is exactly what your context looks like, the context of this life is meaningless whether you are willing to admit it or not!" So what he's desperate for us to hear is that we need to have enough wisdom to trust God and obey him from *his* context, and that is where you will begin to have a life of meaning and purpose. This, my friends, resolves so much of the anxiety that we feel and that is growing.

Listen; I'm aware that there are some degrees of anxiety that are brought about by chemical imbalances or trauma and so we need the help of capable and qualified professionals. But there is a significant amount of anxiety that we feel today that will be resolved when we become Christians and put our faith and trust in God and stop trying to control things ourselves. God doesn't want you to have to struggle with anxiety and you were never meant to be in control. God is the one you can trust, and you can let go of control and trust him. That's why Jesus – God's Son – left heaven and came to earth as one of us, and willingly allowed himself to be crucified and killed and then rose from the dead for us – so we could be forgiven of our selfishness and sinful desire to be in control and live brand new lives in him.

We've learned in this series that fixing our minds on Jesus fixes our minds. We've seen time and again in this series that Jesus is the answer for our anxiety, and we're going to see that again one last time today with an exclamation point. Today we will conclude by looking at chapters 10-12 of Ecclesiastes. We won't read it all because it's long, but I'll summarize what it is saying.

Remember, God is going to speak to us about the solution to the meaninglessness of life or chasing the wind, and the resolution of our anxiety. Are you ready to hear from God today? Me too. Let's see what he's going to tell us.

Starting in chapter ten, we're told about...

Dead flies. (10:1-15)

So if you haven't read this chapter yet, you are wondering what in the world this has to do anything. Well the first two verses describe the theme of the whole section:

As dead flies cause even a bottle of perfume to stink, so a little foolishness spoils great wisdom and honor. A wise person chooses the right road; a fool takes the wrong one. (Ecclesiastes 10:1-2, nlt)

I have a pastor friend who told me about a job he had when he was in high school. He started working at a local donut shop in his hometown. His job was to work late at night, making donuts for the next day. One summer night he came to work and noticed that the boss had hung one of those fly strips in the kitchen. You know the kind? It's a strip of sticky glue tape that you unroll and hang from the ceiling. Flies get attracted to it, land on it, and then get stuck and die. And most of them would stay stuck to the strip. Most of them, anyway. But not all of them. Some of them, as they die out and dry out, they fall off. The problem was that the boss hung this strip right over the mixer that was mixing the donut dough. When my friend walked in that giant mixer was mixing dough, with an occasional fly dropping in it. My friend said he made it a point to never eat raisin donuts there again.

A little dead fly can ruin a lot. The point is that...

There are negative decisions that directly affect your life.

It only takes one bad decision to tear down good things in your life. And one bad decision is typically followed by another and another until you've got a whole strip of dead flies falling into your dough!

We could resay this phrase in a different way: one bad apple spoils the whole bunch. Have you heard that?

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul was warning the church in Galatia about false teaching and how it can spread and infect the church, and he used a similar saying:

"This false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough!" (Galatians 5:9, nlt)

Here's the point: it only takes one or two foolish or bad decisions to undo even the best of plans or efforts. Each decision you and I make is important. Bad ones can immediately undo whatever good things we've been able to build in our lives, or else they add to another decision and another decision that will unravel us. No alcoholic will tell you that they took one drink and suddenly were addicted. Very few drug addicts will tell they suddenly woke up addicted.

Life is a series of decisions that are either wise or foolish.

There's an old saying that goes, "A moment of foolishness can undo a lifetime of preparation."²

A little folly from a wise person can have a lifetime of consequences.

² John Bennett (source unknown)

Jesus was very clear about how important our words and actions are, and he warned us that one day we will be held accountable for all of it – every flippant or careless thing we’ve said or done, no matter how big or small it was:

I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak. (Matthew 12:36, csb)

So yes, dead flies make a difference. Foolish choices have an impact on your life, on the lives of those around you, and in eternity one day.

The teacher is warning us that if we want to live a life without anxiety and stress and sin and its consequences, we need to make wise choices. Instead of dead flies, try...

Casting bread.

This is another unusual statement that might not make sense to us, but this is what that verse says:

Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.
(Ecclesiastes 11:1, esv)

I’ve thrown bread on the water when I’m feeding ducks, but I can promise you after they’ve eaten it, I really don’t want it back! So what does this mean? It was a phrase or idiom that made was common in those days, but not today. Here’s another translation that makes more sense to us:

Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return. Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. (Ecclesiastes 11:1-2, niv)

Does that make more sense? It’s telling us to be smart with our resources and investments and decisions. Be smart, and most of the time you should see good results.

But this is about more than monetary investments. Just like the dead flies statement was a warning about bad choices and actions, this is an encouragement to do the opposite...

There are positive actions that directly affect your life.

The teacher wants to encourage us to realize that not only are we accountable for our bad decisions – which have long lasting consequences, but our good decisions can also have a positive multiplying effect on our lives.

Then the teacher gives us some examples in this chapter of how to “cast bread,” telling us first to *be Generous* (vs. 1-2). One of the things that the teacher is telling us about living a meaningful life is to be generous with the resources that God has given us. This is the same idea Jesus had in mind when he told us in Luke 6:38 to “give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over.” The economy of God’s Kingdom is to be generous.

I spoke with a friend of mine last week in Colorado when I was there for some meetings, and he is one of the most generous people I know. He’s a millionaire. He easily gives away 30% of his income annually, across all his revenue streams. As we talked, he was

overwhelmed to tears and he said, “Mike, I just don’t understand God’s math. I keep giving money away, and he keeps giving me more.” This is what we do when we seek God first with our lives. It’s an answer to meaninglessness or chasing the wind of money and materialism – generosity. But here’s the thing: you might listen to the words of Jesus and my friend and think, “Well then I’ll start being generous so that I can get more money.” That’s what TV preachers will tell you and that is *not* in the Bible. God won’t trust you with more until you surrender it all to him. Any generosity with selfish or profit motives is just more chasing the wind.

That’s why Jesus said:

Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be. (Matthew 6:19-21, nlt)

If you have a kingdom perspective on money and material possessions, you’ll have a meaningful life.

Then the Teacher also tells us in 11:3-6 that another way to “cast bread” is to be smart; to observe things and learn from them and work hard to gain more understanding because it benefits us and helps us to make positive decisions. Yet even then he warns against getting full of pride because of what you know. Have you ever been around someone who thinks they know it all? No fun. Be smart, the teacher says, but always remember that knowledge is limited, so be humble.

And then the teacher says in verses 7-10 that casting bread means you don’t forget to enjoy life while you can! Life is to be enjoyed! You don’t need to be worried about stuff or try to control things. Let God be God and let him take care of those things, and you just enjoy it while you can. You’ve heard of the phrase, “Carpe Deim”? It’s Latin for “Seize the Day.” That’s the idea behind the Teacher’s counsel here; enjoy it and make the most of it! Listen to the Teacher’s words (it’s not on the screen, so just listen):

“However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all. But let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many.” (Ecclesiastes 11:8)

The Teacher’s saying, “accept the gift” of the days you have. Some will be dark to be sure, but, trusting God, you can live fully in *all* your days. That’s why the Teacher then tells us in 12:1-7 – to remember your creator. The teacher is reflecting on old age and death, which makes sense, since his focus in this book has been on our human limitations and how short life is, and he’s reminded us over and over that we all die. The teacher is right; Google it and do the research and you’ll find the death rate is still right at 100%. So the Teacher is reminding us again and again to keep our life focused on God. Live your life for him and in him. That’s where we will find true meaning and fulfillment and we won’t have all this anxiety about everything being out of our control. Live for God *especially* when you are young, the Teacher says, because if you can learn to live focused on God while you are young it will benefit your entire life.

Then there’s some really, really beautiful poetry in the last part of the Teacher’s comments that I’d strongly encourage you to read.

But all of this sets up the final passage of the entire book. Remember we said that the Teacher is the main voice in the book, but he's not the author. The author introduced the teacher in the first few verses, and now here at the end, the author summarizes all the teacher's thoughts, and that's what we want to see next, because it is the key to everything we've been learning in this entire book, and that is, once again...

Fear God.

We've talked about this a lot because it's the antidote to meaninglessness and anxiety. The book refers to this important priority over and over again. This phrase, "fear God," might seem strange to you if you're not familiar with it. It doesn't mean to be afraid of God as if he will hurt you. This entire book is about learning the antidote to fear and anxiety, so it doesn't make any sense that the answer would be to add *more* fear. Here's what it means: it means to be in awe of God and his power and love and holiness. When you turn to God and give your life to him and live for him, you have nothing to be afraid of. He loves you so much that he paid the highest price that could be paid for you: the life of his one and only Son. He could not possibly love you more than he does right now. If you will accept that love and live in that love, fearing God takes on an entirely different meaning; it means to be in awe of him. It means to be submitted to him in his power and love and holiness. It means for him to be God in your life and for you to stop trying to be God in your life.

Let me give you a bit of context to this from the Bible. In the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelites to build a Temple. This was the place where God's glory lived. When they were wandering in the wilderness it was called a "tabernacle" – a sort of portable "tent" temple. When they finally established their Kingdom, they built a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem. In the center of the Temple was a room that was called the Holy of Holies. It was the place where the very presence of God was. Once a year, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies to make a sacrifice for the sins of the entire Jewish people. But because this was the place where God dwelled, it was a sacred and holy place, so the priest had to do things *exactly* as God prescribed while he was in there. There was a ritual that had to be followed to the letter. It was so holy that if the priest did any of it wrong, he would be struck dead. That's how holy God is – there is no room for any error or sin. So before the priest went into the Holy of Holies, he would put on a robe that had little bells sewn into the bottom hem, and then also have a rope tied to his ankle. Here's why: there was a curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple, and the others would sit outside the curtain and listen. The people outside would know if the priest was still moving around in there if the bells were ringing. But if the bells stopped ringing, it meant that the priest had done something wrong and was struck dead. The problem was they couldn't just go into the Holy of Holies to get him, or they'd be struck dead too. So if the bells stopped ringing because the priest was struck dead, they would use the rope tied to the priest's ankle to drag him out.

When you are not a Christian, this is the God you know. He is holy and you are not. Do you get the picture that we need to fear God? But pay close attention here: Jesus is called our Great High Priest. The Bible tells us that Jesus made the final sacrifice necessary for all of us to be able to be forgiven of our sins. He went into the heavenly Holy of Holies when he died on the cross. There is something really interesting that happened in the narrative of events – you can read it in the Bible. The moment Jesus died, the Bible says that the curtain in the

Temple that separated people from the Holy of Holies, *that* curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom. Why? Because it is the curtain that separates people from God's presence. Because of what Jesus did for us, *we all* can now be in the very presence of God. You can be in God's loving presence, not being fearful of being struck dead.

But wait – there's more!

Not only did Jesus die for your sins and rise from the dead, not only did access to the presence of God open up to you and me, but it allowed the Holy Spirit himself to now reside in YOUR heart and life. That's the presence of God that was in the Temple who can be in your life. You don't have to be afraid of God; God will cleanse you and make you his temple. In fact that's exactly what the Bible says: when you are in Christ, you ARE the temple of the Holy Spirit. God dwells in you and *you* are made holy. You can now make wise decisions. So instead of being afraid of God if you mess up, you can live a holy life for God, living in awe of his power and love and holiness in your life.

Fearing God is *not* about being afraid of him, it's about recognizing who he is, being in awe of him and his holiness and power and love. A meaningful life of purpose comes from wisdom, and wisdom comes from fearing God. Watch this: the Bible tells us:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10, niv)

Take a good look at that: the fear of the Lord – recognizing who he is and being in awe of him for it – that's the beginning of wisdom. Why? Remember we said that wisdom is faith and obedience in context. It's having faith because we know who God is and what he can and will do for us. We can trust him. So fearing him means being in this right relationship with him through Jesus Christ, and it is the foundation of being able to be wise – to have faith and obey him no matter what our context is because we trust HIS context. And as we gain more of that knowledge of him and who he is, we gain more understanding for this life. The meaninglessness goes away and life gains meaning.

Doesn't that sound like a solution to anxiety? That's what the Teacher is trying to tell us. If we don't fear God, we'll be afraid of all kinds of things. If we do fear God, we know we are kept safe. That fixes our anxiety. Fixing our minds on God fixes our minds.

When I was in college, one of my mentors was my major professor, Dr. Laird. When I started college, I had only been a Christian for about a year and a half, and right away Doc began discipling me and mentoring me. At one point during my freshman year, I was really struggling with some decisions, so I called Doc and asked if we could talk. He said he'd come pick me up and we'd go for a drive that afternoon. He began to drive out of Nampa, where NNU is, and we were headed toward this little town called Marsing. I asked him where we were going, and he said we were going to Lizard Butte. The ground all around Lizard Butte is flat, and then this butte rises up out of the ground to over 350 feet high. You can see it from all over because it's so high, but it also stands out because the rock formation on it literally looks like a 75-foot lizard basking in the sun. Another thing about it is that at the top of the butte is a large cement cross. The local community gathers there at sunrise every Easter for a worship service.

Doc told me we were going to hike to the top, sit at the cross, and pray. Doc said, "Mike, you need to get your focus off your problems and remember what Jesus did for you on the cross. So we are going to hike to the top and pray."

The hike to the top is steep with very loose, rocky desert soil. As we started the steep climb, I kept my eyes on the cross – our destination. But the problem was I kept tripping on the loose soil and rocks. Finally, keeping the cross in mind, I started looking at where I was stepping, to avoid what was tripping me up. After doing that, before I knew it, we had arrived at the cross, we sat at the foot of it and looked at the amazing view of the valley below us, and we worshipped God and prayed.

Here's the point, and this is what the Teacher is telling us: wisdom means trusting God and obeying him in every moment – living in the moment fully present with him. While we do that, we also know that God is fully present in every moment in our future. If we keep our eyes on Jesus right now where we are stepping in this moment, he will direct our steps in order to get us where we need to go. No matter how big the rocks are, we can get through them day by day. That's why Proverbs 3:5-6 says:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and don't lean on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6, niv)

We are walking into a world that is filled with the rocks of despair and the loose soil of anxiety, worry, and fear. The solution is to fix your mind on Jesus. He will direct your steps into all the abundant life he has for you – whether you go through valleys or mountain tops. You'll be able to enjoy life no matter what you go through.

This is what God has been wanting to tell you. Can we take these moments and do that? Would you be willing to come forward and submit to God?

Prayer (*altar*)

Benediction:

(We are) convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels won't, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us. (Romans 8:38-39, tlb)

So in light of that, hear these two closing verses from Ecclesiastes:

The last and final word is this:

Fear God.

Do what he tells you.

And that's it. Eventually God will bring everything that we do out into the open and judge it according to its hidden intent, whether it's good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, tm)