

When the Smoke Clears

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[0:00] How many of you have ever heard the shaggy dog story?! In military academy, one of the officers had kept them up till all hours in the morning when they were dead tired.

And because he was an officer, they couldn't go to sleep. And so he kept them awake during this fascinating tale about Johnny. Never mind, I'm not going to tell y'all what it is because I tell the RA boys at camp every year this story and I don't want to spoil it for you.

But listen, how many of you heard of the pink ping pong ball? Anybody? None of you. How about the purple gorilla? I know Jared has because I just told him that one.

And the shaggy dog. Some of you are looking at me like, where are you going with any of this? There's a point. And the point is that there's no point.

The point of the shaggy dog story is somebody, a rich person puts out an ad in the paper saying, I lost my dog. Huge reward for whoever finds him.

[1:26] Incredibly shaggy dog. Please find my shaggy dog and bring him to me. And then the story takes about 15, 20 minutes to tell. And you go through this crazy journey all around the world with somebody who finds a very shaggy dog.

And finally tracks down the owner, gets to them. They open the door. And the butler comes to the door and says, that dog's not very shaggy. That's it.

That's it. That's it. The pink ping pong ball. The boy is dying. He... No, I'm sorry. Skip to the end. A little boy only wants a pink ping pong ball.

For his birthday, for Christmas, for anything that anyone ever wants to give him a toy or a present, he says, please just get me a pink ping pong ball. He collects hundreds and hundreds of pink ping pong balls.

And then, sadly, he contracts a terrible disease. He's on his deathbed. His dad finally says, son, why did you want the pink ping pong balls? What was that all about? You've got to tell me.

[2:29] And he says, dad, I wanted the pink ping pong balls because... And then he dies. It's a morbid story. Purple gorilla.

I am spoiling all the shaggy dog stories for all of y'all right now. The purple gorilla story. Guy pulls over for gas. He orders food inside while he's getting gas.

And he sees a special. If you order the combo meal, you get a purple gorilla. And he thinks it's a toy. But in the corner, it's a large, beefy gorilla painted purple.

And the guy says, that's yours to keep. And so, the gorilla goes out. And he says, but wait, don't touch the purple gorilla. Never, ever, ever touch the purple gorilla.

He says, why? He says, just trust me. Just don't touch the purple gorilla. So, story goes on a long time, as all these stories do. And fast forward to the end. The guy can't get over the idea of why can't I touch it.

[3:32] The fact that he can't touch it makes him want to do it more. None of y'all are like that. But finally, he reaches out at home. And he touches the purple gorilla. And the gorilla just goes nuts. Beating his chest.

Roaring. Chasing after the guy. The guy thinks he's going to die. He's running. Runs for his life.

Finally, he's running through the forest. Gets to the edge of a cliff. And he's like, do I jump and see my end that way?

Or do I let this gorilla just tear me to pieces? And while he's trying to decide, the gorilla catches up. Roars. Jumps. Or reaches his hand out. Touches the guy.

And says, tag, you're it. So, it's great. These are called shaggy dog stories. I don't know where they came from. Or who the awful person was who started this genre.

But anyway. When you tell them right, they are amazing stories. Fascinating. Rope you in. And then you get to the end, which is an anticlimax. There is no point.

[4:31] It's ridiculous. And that is a little bit of the feeling that I get reading through Ecclesiastes. Over and over and over again, he just paints this bleak, dismal view of life.

He's like, it's all meaningless. Everything's a disappointment. It doesn't matter what you chase. It's all terrible. And I'm kind of sitting there like, all right, but what's the point then?

Like, get to the good part. Are you ever going to resolve this tension that you've created for us? Go to Ecclesiastes chapter 12, would you? The very last chapter of Ecclesiastes.

We have been in this series. For some reason, this thing is not playing ball with me. Would you take me to the next slide?

It's on. It has batteries. The light is on. I'm going to turn it off and turn it back on. Because you know with technology, that's all you got to do, right? Back up one to the road.

[5:42] Come on. Here we go. Did I do that or did you do that? I think I did it. I think I'm doing it. Yes, it worked. All right, here we go. Technology makes our life better.

Okay, here we go. We have been in this series called Catching Smoke. This is week 10. Can y'all believe we have spent 10 Sundays diving into Solomon's teaching in Ecclesiastes?

It has been fascinating. But I don't know about y'all, but I couldn't go another two weeks. Sometimes we go a chapter a week. I had to just sort of skip ahead. We're going to review.

We left off in chapter 9 last Sunday. Today, we're going to look at 10 and 11 and the first part of 12 because they're somewhat similar. It's almost, he almost goes back to his Proverbs ways.

How many of y'all know the same guy who wrote Proverbs? Same guy who wrote Ecclesiastes. King Solomon. Called the wisest man who ever lived. Called the wealthiest man who ever lived. Certainly, arguably the most powerful king who ever lived.

[6:39] King of Israel a long, long time ago. But we have been in this series and we called it Catching Smoke because it gives us teaching wisdom for how to live life.

What he calls under the sun. Because we're all under the sun, aren't we? The same sun shines down on the rich and the poor. The famous, the non-famous, the successful, the unsuccessful, the white, the black, the Asian, the Hispanic.

It doesn't matter what you are. If you have blood running in your veins, the same sun is shining down on all of us. He says, how do we live this life under the same sun?

And this theme is catching smoke. You ever try to catch smoke in your hand? It's hard. You can't hold it. You think you've got it and you open your hand. There's nothing there. You ever chased the wind?

It's another illustration he uses. You can't ever catch up with the wind, right? They have storm chasers out there, but they never really catch the storm. You can't catch it. It seems hopeless.

[7:50] And that is a theme that we get from Ecclesiastes. Solomon, after achieving all he achieved, gets to the end and says, it's hopeless. That's why I want him to resolve this tension.

I want him to get to the good part. Only you could say that the good part never really comes. He never really resolves it.

So let's go to Ecclesiastes chapter 12. Chapters 10, 11, and the first part of 12 teach us that life is temporary.

Now we could go and we could spend weeks breaking all these down, but I would encourage you to read through them and you'll see a common theme, a common thread throughout these chapters that teach us that life is temporary.

He's looked at wisdom and foolishness. He says these shape everything. Small foolish decisions can wreck a life.

[8:53] That's chapter 10. He says that life is uncertain, so act courageously while you can. Chapter 12, he says youth fades, strength fades, life fades.

So remember your creator in the days of your youth. Life moves quickly toward the grave and Ecclesiastes doesn't soft soap that. It doesn't gloss over it. It tells the truth. Life is fragile. All of life is temporary. So the teacher arrives at the best conclusion he possibly can.

He says verse 13. You ready? Pick it up in verse 8, would you? We're going to get to verse 13. That's the one we're really going to focus on today. But let's pick it up in verse 8. Concluding thoughts from the teacher. Everything is meaningless, says the teacher. Completely meaningless. [9:49] Keep this in mind. The teacher was considered wise, and he taught the people everything he knew. This is a little autobiography from Solomon here, talking about himself.

He listened carefully to many proverbs, studying and classifying them. The teacher sought to find just the right words to express truths clearly. The words of the wise are like cattle prods, painful but helpful.

Their collected sayings are like a nail-studded stick with which a shepherd drives the sheep. Ouch. But helpful. Verse 12. Well, but my child, let me give you some further advice.

Be careful, for writing books is endless, and much study wears you out. True. Now here we go. That's the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion.

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty.

[10:55] God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad. Can we pray together? God, would you give us enlightenment through your spirit from your word today?

We're grateful for this book that you gave us, compiled from the teachings of Solomon, of David, the prophets, the words of your son, Paul, Peter, James, so many.

John worked together to compile this book that is so indispensable for life. I pray that you would teach us not only the wisdom that Ecclesiastes teach us, but frame it with the whole picture of Jesus coming that we get to have now.

Reveal to us exactly what we need to walk away from this place with today. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. All right. So look back at verse 13. This is the whole conclusion.

This is the final conclusion, everything he's written up to. We have been waiting to get to this. As I've preached through other sermons, he's covered a lot of topics. Work, pleasure, wisdom, success, failure, youth, aging, death.

[12:04] All of this he's covered throughout the book. And I've just been waiting and dying for him to get to the end. The final conclusion. Well, we're here now. Truth number one.

Here we go. Fear God. And what does fear God mean? So I tried to break down our perspective of when he says, here's the conclusion.

Fear God. Keep his commands. This is what we can take away from that. When he says fear God, I believe our takeaway should be trust the one who holds your life.

Trust the one who holds your life. Why? Why do we phrase it that way? Would you go over to Matthew chapter 10? As you turn there, realize that Ecclesiastes, Solomon never totally reveals what he means by fear God.

A lot of people fear God because they're afraid of God. They recognize that God is the master of the universe. God is all powerful. And so they're naturally afraid of a being more powerful than they are.

[13:16] How many of you grew up with maybe some version of a fear-based Christianity? You better obey God or else he's going to get you. Anybody? Yep. Thank you for being honest.

Some of you. Some of that wormed its way into some of the Christianity I grew up with. And if you're not paying close attention, sometimes that's the takeaway you can be left with.

We've got to be careful how we teach fear of God. Sometimes Solomon almost sounds overwhelmed by life. Life is vapor.

Life is unfair. Death eventually wins. But we get to see what Jesus had to say about it. Jesus came along. We have that advantage.

And in Matthew 10, 28, he says, Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

[14:20] Now, Jesus says the same thing as Solomon, doesn't he? Fear God. But then Jesus immediately keeps talking. Don't stop in verse 28. Keep going.

He says, Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your father's consent. Even the hairs of your head have all been counted.

So don't be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows. I'm glad to hear that. I'm worth more than a lot of birds. Not just one bird.

Many birds. And so are you. So are you. Of course we are. God values the human soul more than anything else in his creation.

That is what he saved for the end. And then he said it was good. So. So. Fearing God. Doesn't mean living in terror.

[15:19] It means trusting the one. Who holds your life. And cares about it. Recognizing that God holds the keys to death. To the grave.

And to life itself. And showing him enough honor and respect. To say. I trust him. With my life. I trust him. With my death. I trust him. With my destiny. I trust him. With everything. That's what fearing God is.

Recognizing he's the one who holds it in his hands. And so I will trust him. Because of that. Jesus shows us. Right after he gets done saying. You need to fear God.

Then he goes on. To paint God. As loving and caring. Like a parent. Who pays close attention. To the fingers and toes.

[16:15] Of their kid. And their eyes. And their hair. And their ears. They pay close attention. To those little newborn baby. All the little details.

Making sure everything's how it should be. And everything's healthy. If there's anything wrong. We got to get him to the doctor. And see what's going on. They're paying very close attention. That's the picture that God paints.

He cares so deeply. Even the hairs of your head. Are numbered. I'm thinking back to Daniel chapter 3. Because the God of the Old Testament. Is the exact same God of the New Testament.

Sometimes when you read through. Some of the stories of the Old Testament. You get this idea. That the Old Testament God. Was angry and mad all the time. And always looking for justice. And wiping out people groups. And just this horrible ogre in the sky.

And then Jesus was the nice one. And he came along. And it's the good cop, bad cop version of God. That's absolutely not correct. God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus.

[17:13] There's never been a time when God was not like Jesus. They are one and the same. And Jesus said if you've seen me. You've seen the father. You know how I am. That's what the father is like. They've always been that way.

So you look back in Daniel chapter 3. And we find this amazing story of Shadrach. Meshach. And what was the third guy's name? Abednego. If you didn't know the answer to that. Don't feel bad. Hang around. You'll learn stuff like that. Shadrach. Meshach. And Abednego. Now those were their Babylonian names. We're not going to get into their Hebrew names. Because I forgot to write them down.

But you can look them up. There's homework assignment. What were the Hebrew names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Does anybody know that off the top of their head? Exactly. I used to know. And then I didn't. Yes.

It doesn't matter. It's not pertinent to the story. Let's stop wasting time on it. All right. Daniel 3. Here we go. The Babylonian king sentenced these three guys to death. Why? He didn't like that they wouldn't bow down to him.

[18:12] Babylonian kings back in the day. They were different than our leaders today. They really wanted to be seen as God. The leaders today pretend like they don't want to be seen like God. But many of them do. They get a little God complex.

Well, back then, you could be just wide out in the open with your God complex. And so he had a big idol erected. And he wanted everybody to bow down to it. And these three guys worshiped the one true God.

They were Hebrews. They had been brought as captives from the Jewish people. They were in exile in Babylon. And so they were serving this king. They said, no, we'll serve you because that's our duty that we've been given to do.

But we're not going to bow down to you because we know you're not God. Look, sometimes you have to live in this world. Sometimes you have to obey the laws of the land. But it doesn't mean that you recognize that as God over God.

Jesus is always God. And these men took a stand on that. And they paid the ultimate price for it. At least that was Nebuchadnezzar's plan. So he sentenced them to death.

[19:13] But not just any death. This wasn't like a guillotine, chop their head off, and then it's over. This was death in a blazing furnace. And then he wanted it even hotter because he was so mad.

His pride was so hurt. His ego was wounded. How dare these captives, these slaves of mine, how dare they, of all the people, why would they not be willing to bow down to me?

So he had them thrown into the blazing furnace. And then he looked a little closer. And he says, guards, how many people did we throw in there?

He said, three, sir. So that's what I thought. I see a fourth one. I see a fourth one in there. And he looks like a son of God. Now maybe that was Jesus.

Maybe it was an angel that God sent. We don't know exactly because the Bible doesn't tell us. But regardless, God showed up with them in the furnace. God rescued those guys. He came in.

[20:17] And not only did he show up with them, he called them out of the furnace. And what does it say? Not one hair on their head was singed.

Now I have had enough accidents at the grill to know that the hair goes fast.

Your forearm, you know, and there's that smell, that acrid burning hair smell. Jesus didn't even let one little hair get singed. There was no burning hair smell that day.

God cares about the hairs on your head. He counts them. He wouldn't even let them get singed.

The God of all power, the ruler of the universe, the most powerful being that could ever be, is the same father who counts the hairs on your head.

He cares about you like we try to care for our little babies. We can trust him.

[21:37] We fear him that way. That's how Jesus framed it. Solomon says, fear God, keep his commandments.

This is the whole duty of man. Jesus comes along and says, fear God, because he cares about you. Fear God, because he knows all the intimate details about you.

He can protect you. He can keep you safe. Verse 27 tells us that God literally joined the three Hebrew boys in the fire that day. Whether it was his angel, whether it was Jesus himself, he saved their lives.

He can save you. He can save you. Now we're back in Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes chapter 12.

Verse 13. Fear God, and then what? Keep his, what is it? Commands. Keep his commands. But once again, Solomon doesn't give us the whole picture here.

[22:40] So we got to go to Jesus to understand how do we do this. In Matthew 22. We were in Matthew chapter 10. Let's go over to Matthew 22.

Matthew 22, verse 37. Matthew 22 and verse 37.

Jesus replied, you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.

This is the first and the greatest commandment. The second one is equally important.

Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments. So he says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind.

Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and all the prophets depend on these two commands.

Do you understand? Do you understand? That they didn't have the full picture until Jesus came and fleshed it out.

[23:46] Now some of them were able to see by the power of the Holy Spirit in advance. Like you look at King David and you see how much he loved God and how much he understood God's love for him.

It's hard to see that in Solomon's writings. Seems like David, the father, and then Solomon, the son, maybe had somewhat of a different understanding of the relationship with God.

Both gave us valuable wisdom. Both gave us insight that can help us. But David had an unusual understanding and grasp of God's love. And Jesus, all those centuries later, is teaching us in Matthew 22 that it's that understanding of God's love that makes all the difference.

It makes all the difference. Because here's the principle. When Ecclesiastes says keep his commands, Jesus comes along and tells us what that really means.

It means love God fully, love people faithfully. Because something deeper is happening here. We don't obey God to earn his love.

[24:52] We obey him because we've seen his love. We've tasted his love. When Jesus came, people began to see something.

People who had followed God for generations to the best that they could. They had read what Solomon said. Fear God. Keep his commandments. It's our duty.

And they tried to do it. They began to see something they'd never seen before. They saw the heart of God. A God who heals the sick. Even if it's on the Sabbath.

A God who welcomes sinners and goes and eats with them and lives life with them. A God who forgives his enemies even when they're in the wrong and not deserving of forgiveness.

A God who laid down his life for them. None of the religious teachers they had encountered would ever do that. They saw God really is good.

[25:54] He really is kind. He really is loving. His ways really are better. When you see that kind of love, obedience is not a burden anymore.

Now it's a response. And that's what we get to. Obedience is not the price of God's love. It's the response to it. He's not calling you to say obey me and I'll love you.

He's saying obey me because I love you. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, right? You've heard that before? Matthew 7 24.

Would you go back a few chapters or you can just listen and I'll read it to you. Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

There's so much wisdom in Proverbs. There's so much wisdom in Ecclesiastes from Solomon.

Especially the parts we summarize today.

[26:56] Chapters 10, 11, 12. But even all throughout the book there's nuggets of wisdom that are true. But what do you do with that wisdom? Do you remember? I think it was week two.

We said you can be right. But that doesn't necessarily make it better. You can win something and still lose. You can win an argument and still ultimately win the war.

Has anybody ever been married? You can win an argument and still lose the war, right? Do you feel better that you won? Not really. So what good does the wisdom do you?

Unless we get the context of Jesus. So Jesus says, if you hear these words of mine, this upside down kingdom.

We've been talking about this kingdom of God since last summer in this church. When we looked at all the stories of the kingdom that Jesus told. When you start to understand the principle. The last shall be first.

[27:54] You're kind to those who are unkind to you. You forgive even when you're not being forgiven yourself. It's an upside down universe.

When Jesus says, when you hear these words of mine. And you act on them. Then you'll be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the storms came. And they attacked the house.

But it stood firm. Because it was founded on a firm foundation. But when you're not applying these words. These teachings. Then all the wisdom that you have.

Will be like a house planted on the sand. And when the winds came and the rains came. The house fell. And I almost feel like that's where Solomon was.

He had all the wisdom. But he didn't have it in the context of the teaching of Jesus. So he recognized.

[28:51] Yeah. Our duty. Is to fear God. And to keep his commands. Jesus says. You do it because I love you.

You do it because I sacrifice for you. You do it because I care for you more than anyone else ever will. So I want to challenge us. I'm reminded by this quote from David Jeremiah.

Great Bible teacher. He said. Devotion is not a duty. It's a joy. Devotion is not a duty. It's a joy. Is it our duty to fear God.

And to keep his commands? Yes. But we've got to move past duty. We've got to move from duty. To devotion. Ecclesiastes says.

Fear God. Keep his commandments. This is everyone's duty. John 14, 15. Jesus says. If you love me. You will keep my commands.

[29:52] That's the shift. And I pray. That there are not still long time Christians. In this room. Who are thinking. Well I've got to do this.

Because it's my duty. But it's not coming. From a heart of devotion. It's not coming from. I love him. Because he first loved me.

It's not coming from. Jesus gave everything to me. So I'll happily give. Anything I can. To him. So. The teacher ends Ecclesiastes.

With a conclusion that's true. It's good wisdom. But Jesus takes us much deeper. Back in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus almost gives his own book of Proverbs. His own wisdom. Read through it. You'll see what I'm talking about. He talks about treasures in heaven. He talks about trusting the Father for daily needs.

[30:51] Not worrying about tomorrow. Building your life on the rock. We looked at that. But then in Matthew 6, 33. He says this. Right in the middle of this sermon.

He gives us the compass for life. Your life ever feel like it's spiraling off track. Go back to this compass. Matthew 6, 33. Seek first.

The kingdom of God. And his righteousness. And all these things. Will be provided. For you. When he says all these things.

He's talking about our daily needs. The things that we need. The things that we know we need. The things we fight hard and work hard to achieve. To get stability in.

Security in. He says all of this will be added to you. If you seek first. The kingdom of God. It's not the idea of God saying.

[31:48] Well you're not seeking first. So I'm not going to reward you with this. It's if you seek it. You'll find it. If you seek the kingdom of God.

You'll find it. And it's like a treasure hidden in a field. And then you stumble upon it. Because you were looking for it. And then you find it. And the treasure is. All these things that you were seeking. And so much more. The treasure is all the fulfillment. All the peace. All the hope. All the love. All the joy. All the things that we know we actually need. You will find. If you seek first.

The kingdom of God. All the things that Solomon was searching for. All the things that he couldn't find. And he said. Then life is meaningless. It's hopeless. I can't find what really matters.

Even wisdom. Left me wanting more. Jesus says. Yeah. It's because I'm the treasure. My love.

[32:46] Is what was missing. So if you love me. Because I love you. Then you'll keep my commandments. And then you'll be doing your duty as a person.

Life will make sense. Even when things aren't the best on the outside. Even when all the circumstances aren't perfect. You're not somebody then who needs all the circumstances to be perfect.

Good thing. Because life's never going to be that way. Is it? So are you somebody who can't be content. Can't be happy. Can't find joy. Unless everything is in its slot. And everything is as it's supposed to be.

Don't be that weak of a person. Don't be that fragile or shallow of a person. Be someone who's strong enough to make it through the storms. Because your life is built on the rock.

Of God's love. That's what we mean. When we say. How do we live. Under the sun.

[33:44] We look above the sun. Yes Solomon. Under this sun. Everything is ultimately going to fail. Under this sun.

It's hard to find meaning. But when you look above the sun. You find love. You find meaning. You find purpose.

You find Jesus. You find the one who can truly make the difference. And if you haven't found him. Then let today be the day.

Then next week. Palm Sunday will mean a whole lot more to you. The week after that. Easter will mean a whole lot more to you. We're about to enter into this wonderful time in the life of a church. When we pause as we should throughout the year.

And remember the death, burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we intentionally set aside this time on the calendar. To think about it. To spend specific intentional time.

[34:41] Giving attention and respect and honor and celebration. To the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. And doing that he proved he was different than all of us. All his claims.

Were verified in that moment. So as we enter into this time. Would you pause right now today. And say have I looked above the sun? Have I encountered Jesus Christ?

The son of God. He's the one who gives the perspectives. Otherwise you'll end up at the same conclusions that Solomon did. You say man it's hard to fear God and keep his commandments.

It's because you're missing the love of God himself. Would you bow your heads with me right now? God we're finishing up this series. And we're grateful for what you've taught us during it.

But in this moment. Would you meet with us?

[35:44] Would you break through our crusty exteriors? And find the soft hearts inside? Would you mold and shape those?

Would you change us? Would you impact us? With your sacrifice of love? You don't just say you loved us.

You proved it. You died on our behalf. You offer forgiveness. You offer freedom.