

Live in Light of the End

Westview Church | Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 | Pastor Brett Toney | January 11, 2026

The Habsburg Knocking Ritual

Knock *Knock* *Knock* The royal herald knocks at the door of the Capuchin Church in Vienna, Austria, where the Imperial Crypt is located. The friar inside calls out, “Who seeks entry?” The herald, leading the funeral procession of the late king, declares his list of titles: Emperor of these countries, King of these lands, His Royal Highness of such and such, Supreme Commander of Armies, Archduke of those places, and on and on. The friar responds, “We do not know him.” The herald knocks again. “Who seeks entry?” This time the herald reads the list of all the accomplishments of the deceased, all his great deeds: Protector of the royal city, conqueror of enemy lands, defender of these countries, and on and on. The friar responds, “We do not know him.” The herald knocks a third time. “Who seeks entry?” To this, the herald now replies, “A mortal and sinful man,” to which the friar says, “He may come in!”

On what basis will you be granted entry into the rest your soul longs for amid all the toil and futility of this life? These have been a heavy four months of wading through Ecclesiastes. They are heavy because we have had our noses pressed into the foul stench of death. Why? So that we might *live*. So that we might live in light of the end. In view of *that* coming day, we need words to live by *this* day. Delightful words, good words, true words, orienting words, trustworthy words. What words? Fear God and keep his commandments. So, here at the end of the matter, Solomon’s farewell wisdom is to exhort us to live in light of the end by trusting the Shepherd’s words and fearing and obeying God.

Trust the Shepherd’s Words (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12)

Solomon directs us to live in light of the end by first calling us to trust the Shepherd’s words in v.9-12. Solomon didn’t keep his wisdom to himself, he used it for God’s people. He set

himself to weigh and study all the wisdom in the world available to him. And he arranged, or made straight—he aligned wisdom with a biblical worldview with great care. And he has labored to capture good, true, and beautiful words. Verses 9-10 are his evaluation of this book of Ecclesiastes. And like the Apostle Peter finding Paul’s words hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), Solomon recognizes the difficulty of his own words. They aren’t candy-coated. They “are like goads,” sharp sticks provoking discomfort in big animals to keep them going the right direction. They are “like nails firmly fixed.” We’ve got a bench on our deck that was left on the curb by a neighbor to be trashed. The top boards are secured with small, finishing nails. The boards wiggle, and the nails raise up. Not so with Solomon’s words. They are firmly fixed nails that keep those boards in the right place, not allowing for wiggle and deviation. His words captured in Ecclesiastes are to be wise guidance for us.

But more important than Solomon’s filtering and crafting of wisdom is its source. These words, the proverbs and wisdom captured here—v.11, “They are given by one Shepherd.” The ESV capitalizes “Shepherd” to indicate an understanding that Solomon is referring to God. That is confirmed by his inclusion of “one.” If he was referring to himself, he could have just said the words were given by *a* shepherd. These words are of God, the One Shepherd. Throughout the Scriptures God is referred to as the Shepherd of his people.¹ It’s not ultimately about Solomon’s wisdom or craftiness. These words are reliable and trustworthy because they are *God’s* words.

When you open Ecclesiastes, or any book of the sixty-six God has given us in his Holy Word, you are reading what has been given by the Good Shepherd. They will challenge you. They will wreck you. They will encourage you. They will build you up when you feel crushed. They will instill hope and victory. One implication of trusting the Shepherd’s words given here in Ecclesiastes or any book of the Bible is to come to these words expectantly. What does trust

look like as you sat down in that pew? In part, you fully *expected* that pew to hold you, to not crush to the ground. There was expectation in that trust. When you come to the Shepherd's words, you demonstrate trust by coming with expectation. You expect to be convicted or encouraged or surprised by God's character. You may be experiencing great difficulty in reading Ecclesiastes or making progress in your devotions because you either have no expectations or wrong expectations. You just read because someone told you that's what Christians do. Or you expect every time to be a Mount-of-Transfiguration-type experience. Read the Word expecting to hear from the Shepherd.

If you are going to live in light of the end, you need to trust the Shepherd's words. He knows the beginning from the end. Solomon warns against a mistrust of the Shepherd's words that would lead you to looking for more, of doubting the wisdom of the Shepherd to provide the guidance you need. There are many books and much study available—how much more so with so much available at our fingertips 24/7. When challenges arise, when life is perplexing, “beware of anything beyond [the words given by the one Shepherd].” God's Word is authoritative and sufficient. Trust the Shepherd's words.

Fear & Obey God (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

The summary words of the Shepherd are captured in v.13-14. We live in light of the end by fearing and obeying God. This is a strongly stated summary. We miss the cadence here in English with the words “all,” “whole,” and “every” translating the same word. Solomon writes, “*All* has been heard … this is *all* of man … *all* deeds will be judged … *all* hidden things.” And in that driving rhythm to bring his words to a close, the sticky summary to be imprinted on our souls is, “Fear God and keep his commandments.” Fear and obedience can get a bad rap out of fear of legalism. The Bible's call to obedience though is never “just obey.” We saw in Malachi a

couple weeks ago how that is *not* what God wanted. God wants obedience that is the overflow of faith. And that is why the fear of God and obedience must be tied together. The reverent fear in view leads us to promises of deliverance which are embraced by faith. The two naturally go together. If God is one to be feared, it is folly to disobey.

Solomon may have Deuteronomy 5 in mind. There Moses recounted how Israel responded rightly to the glory and greatness of God displayed at Mt Sinai. They beheld their God is one who is feared. They knew they needed an intermediary, someone to go to God on their behalf. And when that one, Moses, told them God's commandments, they readily affirmed they would obey. And God's response? "Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29). The fear of and commandments from a holy God to mortal and sinful men and women drive us *to* God. We know our frame and cast ourselves upon his mercy. Solomon says this is not just the duty of Israel. He says this is for *all* mankind. All of humanity is bound to fear and obey God. Why? Because God-given wisdom would have us live in light of the end. Solomon is most evidently pointing us to that end in v.14. His final words are left ringing in our ears. Your days are numbered. Your deeds will be held to account. Judgment is coming.

What fears keep you from embracing the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, from fearing God and keeping his commandments, from living in light of the end? Is it the fear of death itself? There is the fear of the unknown. I have never traversed that River. I have promises. I have the resurrection. But it is still a vast unknown. As *I* reflect on this, I realize that statistically, I'm halfway there. There's no guarantee of the second half. I'm on borrowed time. What if my days are already drawing to an end? That fear can be paralyzing and can overshadow the fear of God.

Or related, maybe it's the fears associated with anticipatory grief that cripple obedience in despair. If the Lord has appointed 2026 as the last year for me, my wife, or my children—the loss is not only of them but of all that could have been. The loss of growing old together, of accomplishing things that might outlast me, of birthdays, graduations, weddings, grandchildren. We can get lost in such spiraling.

But those fears point to a fear of another sort. The fear of loss of control. Man knows not his time (9:12), and that ultimate lack of control disorients, unsettles, and disrupts. If you can't control *that*, we're just playing around with calendars, parenting, projects, timelines, and goals. I get things done. But my agency is a veil that will get torn down in a hurry if not submitted to the Lordship of Jesus, the One Shepherd, the All-Wise King. And as that idol of control gets toppled, it pulls up the roots of the fear of futility. I'm not in control like I thought, and this world is marked by futility. Yet I think I deserve things to go smoothly.

Maybe like me you can think, "I'm trying to pour out my life, to pull the plow or be sacrificed on it, to labor for good. God, doesn't that mean anything?" This hit me as I set out Monday afternoon to pray in the woods while skiing. My skis weren't gliding and then my boots ripped. "Shouldn't I be able to ski and pray without futility?" It's the *quid pro quo* of the prosperity gospel. "I pray for the church and the preaching of the Word, and, God, you give me refreshment in communion with you, in nature, and in exercise." It is pride that rejects that I am in fact a creature Hell-bent on rebellion. O how little I fear God and keep his commandments.

Live in Light of the End

The day is coming when I will knock—when you will knock at Death's door. Are you living in light of the end? When asked, "Who seeks entry?" will your response be to exalt your titles, accomplishments, inheritance, and legacy, or one marked by the humility to say, "A mortal

and sinful man”? Yet that humility itself is not enough. You will not gain entry into that eternal rest because of your meekness or purity of heart. No, but only by a response of, “A mortal and sinful man whose only hope is the One Shepherd who went before me into the grave and rose from it in victory.” Church, we come to the Table to look death in the face, to be chastened by it, but not to fear it. No, we do not fear death. We fear King Jesus, the One Shepherd, the one greater than Solomon, who gave his body and blood in death in our place.

And by his all-wise grace, he has given us words to live by. *Hard* words but *good* words: Fear God and keep his commandments. It is simple, but it is not easy. Yet if we will fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Hell (Matthew 10:28)—fear him who will sit on the great white throne of judgment to do right by all deeds, all hidden things, whether good or evil If we will fear King Jesus and in faith obey all he has commanded, we will wade through the futility of this life *in hope*. That, Church, is how we live in light of the end.

¹Gen 48:15, 49:24; Isa 40:11; Ezk 34:12ff; Amos 3:12; Zech 10:3; Ps 23, 80:1