

LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: COMING TO TERMS WITH REALITY

WRAPPING UP A RAGGED-EDGE JOURNEY

ECCLESIASTES 12:8-14



The Heart of the Matter

Solomon's pilgrimage was quite a journey from the depths of despair through the slough of despond to the ragged edge of disillusionment. Caught in the jaws of his horizontal perspective, the man screamed his skepticism across life's landscape. He did not mince words as he declared his feelings about humanistic, empty philosophy: *vanity of vanities, all is vanity!* His key phrase, repeated numerous times, was "under the sun." But as he approached the end of the journey, a light started to shine. Hope emerged. Doubt dissolved. And Solomon exhorted the reader to *remember your Creator while you are still young*. Once God came back into view, Solomon's whole perspective changed. In fact, the Preacher started sounding like a preacher again! Relief returned as Solomon closed his journal. With the prodigal back in the pulpit, and with his heart and soul focused "above the sun," we can receive Solomon's wisdom and apply it to our lives.



Discovering the Way

1. Viewing the Book as a Sermon

In his sermon, Solomon never left us in doubt about the major proposition he expounded and defended: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Solomon then developed his central thesis by giving numerous examples of the empty life apart from God. He argued that if life has no purpose or meaning, then what are we doing here? Why go on living at all? Then the Preacher finally came full circle to his original question: How can we find meaning and joy under the sun? This time Solomon explained that we can only find joy in life by looking to our Creator and by obeying Him all the days of our lives (12:1, 13).



Tools for Digging Deeper



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2. Hearing the Conclusion of the Sermon (Ecclesiastes 12:8–14)

The closing seven verses of Solomon's sermon fall neatly into two sections. In the first section (12:8–12), Solomon identified himself as the Preacher, the one whom God had endowed with supernatural wisdom. He ministered the Word of God with clever illustrations so God's wisdom could penetrate lives with clear and powerful principles. And in the second section (12:13–14), Solomon concluded his sermon with a practical challenge that applies to everyone: fear God and obey His Word.

WINDOWS TO THE ANCIENT WORLD

Goads and Nails of Wisdom

Solomon used two items from the ancient world to illustrate the power of a teacher's wise words to a student. First, he compared the words of wise men to "goads" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). These long sticks have a sharp spike on one end to prod oxen along as they plow a field. On the other end is a small shovel-like tool used to remove built-up dirt from the plow itself.¹ Wise words prick the conscience and prod the hearer to righteousness and fear of the Lord (Acts 26:14). They also clean away the folly and sin that prevent us from moving in a straight line.

In another simile, Solomon likened those who have mastered the teaching of wisdom to "well-driven nails" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). Godly wisdom, which is fixed and immovable, provides stability in life. While the storms of life will overcome fools, wise God-fearers will be well-anchored.

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Starting Your Journey

Though Solomon's search for meaning and joy in life has ended, ours has only begun. Remember: God is the answer to our despair, and obedience to Him is the cure for our dissatisfaction. We can choose to believe or deny what He says, but all of us one day will have to face Him and give an account of our lives.

How will you apply Solomon's wisdom in your life? How will living with an "above-the-sun" perspective transform the mundane tasks you undertake each day?

ENDNOTE

1. J. A. Patch, "Goad," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, E–J, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 491.