



INTRODUCTION

We spend countless hours and resources putting all of our efforts into climbing to the top of the proverbial mountain. And at some point in your life, perhaps multiple times, you'll likely ask yourself, "Is this all there is in life? Is this all that's worth living for? Does any of this really matter?" ***Have you been there before?***

We all seek lasting significance of some kind, but no matter how great our accomplishments, we are unable to achieve the significance we desire. What spoils life, according to Ecclesiastes, is the attempt to get more out of life—out of work, pleasure, money, food, or knowledge—than life itself can provide. This is not fulfilling and leads to weariness, which is why the book begins and ends with the exclamation "All is vanity." This refrain is repeated throughout the entire book.

Ecclesiastes states powerfully and repeatedly that life, and our preoccupation with material and temporary things, is meaningless ("vanity") without a single-minded focus on God. Tremper Longman suggests that the book of Ecclesiastes is "an idol buster." It teaches us that if we try to find the meaning of life in things such as wisdom, pleasure, wealth, work, etc. they will ultimately let us down. They are merely false gods. Ecclesiastes encourages us to put God first, and when we do, everything else finds its proper place in life. The book aims to show that there is no contradiction between living life to its fullest and living a life of obedience to God.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes warns against a life caught in the pursuit of empty pleasures that have no lasting value. He reminds us that life without God at the center is meaningless. No matter how wise or rich or successful one may be, one cannot find meaning in life apart from God. Rather than striving to gain meaning on our own terms, what truly is significant is taking pleasure in God and his gifts and being content with what little life has to offer and what God provides.

So why study Ecclesiastes? It asks some of the hard questions that people still have today. It is honest about the troubles of life, and the Teacher's honesty helps us to also deal honestly with the reality of life. It teaches us how to live for God and not just for ourselves. And at the end of the book we realize that there is more to life and our existence than what is experienced "under the sun" — where nothing seems to matter. Once we are able to look beyond the sun — and live "above the sun" — we realize that "everything matters." As we go through this study together, I pray that our lives and our pursuit of Jesus will be filled with this reality.

OUTLINE

- I. Prologue (1:1–11)
- II. The Pursuit of Vanities and Solution (1:12–2:26)
- III. God’s Design for Time and Life (3:1–15)
- IV. Wickedness and Oppression Under the Sun (3:16–4:16)
- V. Fear God (5:1–7)
- VI. Life “Under the Sun” (5:8–8:15)
 - a. Futility of Suffering (5:8–20)
 - b. Futility of Riches (6:1–12)
 - c. Wisdom v. Folly (7:1–14)
 - d. Limitations of Wisdom (7:15–24)
 - e. The Heart of the Problem: Sin (7:25–29)
 - f. Foolish authorities v. Godly Authority (8:1–15)
- VII. Summary of the Preacher’s Conquest (8:16–9:10)
- VIII. Lessons from Wisdom (9:11–11:8)
- IX. Instructions for the Young (11:9–12:7)
- X. The Epilogue (12:8–14)

AUTHOR

Ecclesiastes is named after its central character, **Qoheleth** (translated “the Preacher” or “Teacher”). Qoheleth is the Hebrew title translated *Ecclesiastes* in Greek. At the beginning of the book, the author identifies himself as “son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Other than this, the book is largely anonymous with no specific name given. Jewish and Christian tradition attribute the writing to Solomon in light of the author’s description of his life and unrivaled wisdom (1:16), relentless pursuit of pleasure (2:3), empire building (2:4) and wealth (2:7).

As we study the book of Ecclesiastes, it is important to note that there are two speakers within the book, not just one. One of the speakers is referred to as the Teacher (Qoheleth). We see this person speak in 1:12–12:7, occupying the bulk of the book. The other person in the book speaks about the teacher. We see them introduce the book and the speaker in 1:1–11 and provide an epilogue at the end of the book in 12:8–14. This second speaker goes unnamed, but it is clear that he’s speaking to his son (12:12).

THE MESSAGE OF “THE TEACHER”

Longman writes, “The Teacher’s message boiled down to a single phrase ***‘Life is difficult, and then you die.’*** Or equally true, stated from the opposite perspective, ***‘Because you die, there is no meaning in life, so nothing really matters.’***”

The Teacher’s thinking may be illustrated by looking at 2:12–17. Here he brings up wisdom as something that may provide meaning in life. He was, after all, a wisdom teacher, so one would expect that this area might prove fruitful to him. As the passage opens, he affirms the value of wisdom over folly. Wisdom allows us to live life with eyes open as opposed to stumbling around blindly like fools do. However, in verse 14 he remembers death. Death comes to both the wise and the foolish, so the Teacher sees that wisdom has no advantage over folly in the long run. Thus, “All is meaningless.”

The Teacher's failure to find meaning "under the sun" leads him occasionally to advocate enjoying what measure of pleasure one can find in the world. In reading these passages, sometimes called *carpe diem* texts since they encourage grabbing whatever gusto one can out of life (2:24-26; 3:12-14; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10). We should, however, hear a tone of resignation. Even when a person is able to find such enjoyment in life (and this is rare), the benefit of the joy is to temporarily blot out the pain of the harshness of life as it truly is (5:20).

Life "under the sun" is hard, then you die, end of story. With its many allusions to Genesis 3, we rightly read the Teacher's speech as reflecting the truth of a fallen world. **Even so, the conclusion of the book does not just affirm the Teacher's analysis; it points beyond it to what is truly important.** In spite of or even because of the darkness of the fallen world, the final words of the father call his son beyond living 'under the sun' to fear and obey God in the light of the expected judgment (12:13-14).

MAJOR THEMES OF ECCLESIASTES

VANITY. The word *vanity* (*hebel*) and the longer refrain *vanity of vanities* occurs at least 38 times. In other Old Testament books, the word *hebel* has a meaning of vapor, breath, emptiness, and frustration. Life does not last long despite one's efforts to extend it. Life is unpredictable, out of our control and nonsensical. We cannot fully grasp it or control it. We try to build meaning and purpose in life apart from God, investing in pursuits and things that have no lasting meaning, but time marches on, we all die and bad things happen to good people.

ENJOYMENT. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil." The "calls to enjoyment" are frequent (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-10). The Teacher encourages us to enjoy the life God has given us and embrace whatever joys we can in the midst of a painful "under the sun" existence. That is the best course of action for us.

TOIL. Frequently, the Teacher asks a thematic question (1:3; 3:9; 5:16): "What does one gain from all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" along with other occurrences of the word "gain" (2:11, 13, 15; 3:19; 6:8, 11). No matter how hard we work, or how much we strive and make an effort, all that we receive is much like the wind, something we cannot control, nor something we can hold onto. And we all die! Death is the great equalizer that renders most of our daily activities meaningless.

UNDER THE SUN. This phrase occurs 29 times in the Teacher's writing and shows that he is conducting his search for meaning in the realm of earthly activity. "It's a way of saying that for as long as the earth lasts, in this period of time, this is how things are" (Gibson). The search for meaning in life "under the sun" ends up empty. As we will see, the conclusion moves us beyond "under the sun" thinking and points us to God (12:13).

PURPOSE. Without ever using the word "idol," the Teacher understands that abstract concepts and objects such as wealth, status, power, pleasure, wisdom, and even religion itself can achieve idolatrous status in a person's life. It is here that Ecclesiastes has enormous value for our thinking about spiritual formation. The Teacher becomes the ultimate critic, overturning every object of ultimate trust. Money, sex, power, position, human wisdom, even our attempts to become righteous (see 7:15)—all are "utterly meaningless" (1:2). Nothing satisfies. Nothing fulfills. It is only when we have given up on everything, absolutely everything, that we can become candidates for growth in grace. Then, and only then, are we prepared to truly hear the "end of the matter," which is, "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12:13).

PLACING ECCLESIASTES IN THE LARGER STORY¹

Like the other Wisdom Literature in the Bible, Ecclesiastes is concerned with imparting wisdom and teaching people to fear the Lord. However, Ecclesiastes serves as a balance for the practical wisdom of Proverbs. Although Ecclesiastes finds practical wisdom beneficial, it comes to it through a more reflective path. Whereas Job asks for personal vindication, Ecclesiastes shares in Job's intensity but searches for happiness and something that will endure. Ecclesiastes is consistent with the rest of Scripture in its explanation that true wisdom is to fear God even when we cannot see all that God is doing.

The New Testament never explicitly quotes or comments on Ecclesiastes. However, it is interesting to read Ecclesiastes in light of Paul's comments in Romans 8:18-25. Paul here talks about how God has subjected the creation to "futility," using the same word for "meaningless" in Greek translations of Ecclesiastes.

It appears that Paul is reflecting on the effects of the fall (Genesis 3) when he describes the "sufferings of the present time," — and we have already noted that the Teacher's view of life "under the sun" may be understood as life affected by the curse. The recognition that life is "futile" or "meaningless" deeply discouraged the Teacher, but it provides for Paul the foundation for hope, because he recognizes that God subjected the world to futility "in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage of decay" and that it "will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Paul's comments invite us to read Jesus' story in light of Ecclesiastes. When we do so, we see that Jesus subjected himself to a meaningless world in order to free us from it. The hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 describes how Jesus "emptied himself" and subjected himself to the life of a "slave," even dying on the cross.

As we meditate on the life of Christ, we see that he experienced the "meaninglessness" of life "under the sun." He was the very Word of God but the world did not honor him as such (John 1:10). The Gospels tell us he was born in a manger, not a palace. Toward the end of his life, not only the crowds but also those to whom he was closest abandoned him. Judas betrayed him, and Peter denied him. However, it was when he was on the cross that he experienced the "meaninglessness" of a fallen world in a way that the Teacher could only have imagined.

Using the language of Galatians 3:13, Jesus became a curse to redeem us from the curse of the law. Jesus defeated death by dying on a cross and being resurrected (1 Cor 15). Jesus, in other words, defeated death, the very thing that most disturbed the Teacher's confidence in the meaning of life,

Reading Ecclesiastes in light of the New Testament suggests that ultimate meaning is found in God through Christ, who defeats death and thus brings meaning to life.

When Christ is above all else, the One in whom we find our meaning, then other aspects of our life, including our work, pleasure, and wealth, can occupy appropriate places of significance.

¹ Temper Longman III, "Reading Ecclesiastes from a New Testament Perspective"

LESSON 1 | THE SEARCH FOR MEANING (1:1-11)

Someone once said that “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Although this is a cynical quote, the philosophy behind it warrants discussion. From the beginning of time humans have asked the question, “What is the meaning of life?” Is meaning found in accomplishments? Is it found in gaining wisdom? Is it found in accumulating wealth? Are we just here to pay taxes and die? Where is the meaning of life found? This is an age old question that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes seeks to answer as he considers the pursuit of meaning and purpose.

The Teacher and His Motto (1:1-2)

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” (1:1-2)

With these words, the “Teacher” begins his writing we call “Ecclesiastes” and sets forth a theme of the entire book. **The Hebrew word translated as “meaningless” is *hebel***, but precisely what it means is debated, as it is notoriously difficult to render in English. It literally means a “warm breath” or “vapor” but its usage signifies multiple meanings. The ESV translates it as “vanity.” The NIV, NLT, and others translate it as “meaningless.” The Amplified Bible uses two words “vapor” and “futile,” while the Common English Bible states, “Perfectly pointless...Everything is pointless.”

At any rate, we get the best idea of the word’s meaning by reading through Ecclesiastes, as **the Teacher uses *hebel* to assert that all things in life are *short-lived* and *temporary***. In the New Testament, James uses a similar image. He writes, **“You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14)**. Ask older people about their life and, even when they are ninety years old, many will agree that their life was like “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” Here today, and gone tomorrow.

That is what the Teacher is after, to teach Israel and us that our life on this earth is extremely brief; it’s like our breath on a cold winter morning: we see it for a moment, and then it’s gone. But there’s more to this image than brevity. If you breathe out on a cold winter morning and try to grab the vapor, there’s nothing to hold on to. Not only does it disappear quickly, but even during its short life span there seems to be no substance to it; it’s elusive. Our life is transitory and elusive, the Teacher says.

At the end of verse 2, the Teacher concludes by saying that “Everything is meaningless.” Everything we see on this earth is short-lived and lacks substance. The clothes we wear will soon wear out and we have to buy new ones. The car we buy will soon go to the scrap yard and we have to get another one. The house we live in lasts longer but will eventually be torn down and replaced by a new building. “All is meaningless.” To prove his point, the Teacher will look at life from different angles. He begins to tell us the futility, and brevity of life in the next set of verses.

The Question (1:3-4)

“Everything is meaningless,” the Teacher says. But what is “everything”? Does it include God? Or is it everything apart from God? The Teacher is in no hurry to answer. He will give hints along the way, but he wants us to look closely at the world we can see and at the answers it seems to give. **The first hint comes immediately in his question about life “under the sun.”**

“What do people gain from all the labors at which they toil under the sun?” (1:3)

This phrase “under the sun” will be repeated nearly thirty times throughout the book, and it makes it clear that the scene in mind is exclusively the world we can observe, and that our observation is at the ground level.

It is the human perspective of the world. It is not God’s view but the contrasting human view of life — similar to what the New Testament calls “the world.” It refers to living in this world without taking God into account. In this area, there is a constant pattern that occurs: Things happen over and over. There is no ultimate accomplishment, nor is there anything new. The same things repeat themselves over and over.

The Teacher calls us to think about it through the lens of work: Humans work, but they eventually die and another generation comes in and works. Then that generation dies and another comes in and works. No generation finishes the work, nor does any generation last (1:4).

So what do people gain from all their toil under the sun? The short answer is *nothing*. From a worldly perspective, apart from God, people gain nothing from all their toil. In the New Testament Jesus raises a similar question: “What will it profit [people] if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Matt 16:26). If they forfeit their life, their soul, the essence of their being, they have nothing left.

The Answer Expanded (1:4-11)

The Teacher continues by observing the things of nature—the earth, sun, wind, and water—and sees no real change anywhere. Generations come and go, but the earth does not move. **The sun** rises and sets, only to do it again and again, day in and day out. It never accomplishes anything permanent where it no longer needs to cycle through rising and setting (1:5). So also **the wind**—it blows south then blows north. Over and over, it blows through its circles. It never “finishes” (1:6). **Streams run to the sea, but never fill it up.** They just keep flowing (1:7). It is all the same as it ever was.

In verses 8 to 11, the Teacher moves from the natural world to the human experience and sees the same thing that he saw in nature: things are done over and over again without any real profit or genuine progress. **The eye** never reaches a point where it has seen all that is needed, nor does **the ear** ever hear all that is to be heard. Both just keep at it, never being satisfied (1:8).

What Ecclesiastes says is still true: ‘The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing’ (1:8). We’re insatiable in appetite. Even if we have seen before, we want to see more. But what do we really gain? What progress do we make in life, spiritually or otherwise?

The Teacher concludes that the natural world is something that is on constant repeat. The same things happen over and over again: *‘What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun’* (1:9).

He makes such sweeping claims about future futility that we are tempted to try and think of a counter-example. Surely there must be at least one thing that is new under the sun. For a moment, the writer considers that possibility and asks, *“Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new?’”* But just as quickly, he denies it. Whatever seems new *“was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.”* (1:10).

All of this holds up a mirror to the human condition. Like the ocean, our senses are fed and fed, but never filled. And like the wheel of nature, our history is always turning back on itself. The journey goes on; we never arrive. Under the sun there is nothing finally satisfying or really new. As for pinning our hopes on future generations, in the end those generations will have lost the faintest memory of us. “No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them” (1:11).

Examining the Teacher’s Initial Conclusion²

The opening verses of chapter one set up the Teacher’s struggle. As he reflects on his life, he finds himself questioning the meaning of it. What was it all for? What was the point of it all? This is quite a statement coming from someone who, as we will learn, was incredibly wise, wealthy, and well-known. So often we feel that if we could get the one thing we think is missing in our lives (a significant other, more money, a bigger house, a better job, etc), we would find happiness and satisfaction. But here we have a man who appeared to have everything, and he still saw life as being empty.

Much of what we find within Ecclesiastes is not necessarily a list of imperatives (statements on how to live), but rather an honest description of how we experience our time on earth. Within this section of the book, the Teacher communicates how life is nothing but a brief (yet repetitive) blip on the radar while we seek to find meaning in countless things. Ultimately, only in God can we find our lives to be satisfying and fulfilling.

The Teacher concludes this passage: *“The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them”* (1:11). Here he expands on a point made in verse 4, *“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”*

Even though the going and coming of generations makes no difference to the earth, is it possible for a generation of people or for individuals to stand out somehow and show some gain? Is it possible for people to make such an impact on history that they will be remembered and at least gain recognition? His pessimistic answer is, No, “the people of long ago are not remembered.” Human memory is too short.

The Teacher is not so much claiming that humans are oblivious to the past as he is undercutting our deepest aspirations to secure some permanent place or ‘remembrance’ in history. A life oriented toward ensuring its legacy for future generations only chases the wind. The future cannot be controlled any more than the past can be fully remembered.

People have had mountains named after them, but a following generation changes the names. People have had their names etched into buildings, but in time the buildings will be demolished and the names forgotten. People write books to be remembered, but in time the books will be replaced by other books and the authors will be forgotten. It makes no difference what one has accomplished. When death comes, no one is better off than others. Death ends all hopes of immortality, including the ‘immortality’ of being remembered.

The Teacher has clearly made his point that people gain nothing from all the work at which they toil under the sun; that is, they gain nothing from the work at which they toil apart from God. He will reinforce this point later with other images. Later he writes,

² Excerpted from Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (598-603).

I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and hard work under the sun. How meaningless! (2:18-19, NLT)

This, too, is a very serious problem. People leave this world no better off than when they came. All their hard work is for nothing—like working for the wind. (5:16, NLT)

In the New Testament Jesus makes the same point. Jesus asks, "For what will it profit [people] if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" (Matt 16:26). When people forfeit their life, they have gained nothing - no profit. Jesus makes the same point as Ecclesiastes with a simple story, a parable:

"The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

When the rich man died, he had gained nothing from all his work. There was nothing left over: no profit. Jesus concludes this parable, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-20). Apart from God, people gain nothing from all their work.

Is there then nothing to be gained from our life on earth? Nothing left over when we die? No meaning? Yes, Jesus says, there can be a meaning, but then we ought not to store up treasures for ourselves but be rich toward God. Therefore Jesus encourages us in Matthew 6:19-21,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"

Jesus' message is clear: We gain nothing if we store up treasures on earth. We gain nothing if we work apart from God. But our lives can have a profit if we are, in Jesus' words, "rich toward God," if we "store up treasures in heaven," if we "serve God" with our lives.

Paul confirms Jesus' words. In 1 Corinthians he writes, "**Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain**" (15:58). However, if our labor is not "in the Lord," if our work is apart from God, we gain nothing. Therefore Jesus warns us, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven....For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

DISCUSSION

1. When you were younger, did you consider yourself an optimist, a realist or a pessimist? What are you now and why? What do you think makes people grow cynical?
2. A word repeated throughout Ecclesiastes is “meaningless,” “pointless,” or “vanity.” It comes from the Hebrew word *hevel*, meaning “breath” or “vapor.” Think of some characteristics of a vapor. Why is this an appropriate word for what the author is trying to convey about life?
3. Another way to frame the Teacher’s quest is found in 1:3, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” In other words, what’s the point of working so hard? What are some answers you have heard people give to such a question? What are other ways that you see people looking for meaning in their lives?
4. In verses 4 to 11, the Teacher highlights the ultimate cycle of how life happens. Think about the way that your life works. What are some of the “meaningless cycles” that you’ve observed in life?
 - *For example, our weekdays are often cyclical: get up, breakfast, work, lunch, more work, home, dinner, bed. And, again the next day. Or our laundry—whenever it’s finished, it begins to pile up again. Washing dishes. Home repair. Mowing the lawn. It seems that all we do, we will need to do again.*
 - Have you found ways to give these repeated cycles meaning, and if so, how?
5. Our reading this week gives the notion that nothing ever really changes in life. Do you agree?
 - ➔ Follow up: If the Teacher’s words are true, do you find it liberating or frustrating to know that life is repetitive?
6. In what ways does a relationship with Christ change the perspective on life that we see from the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11?