



# Ecclesiastes: God's Recipe for the Good Life

## Introduction

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Are you weary? As the new day dawns do you find yourself thinking, “here we go again”? As you meet a deadline only to have a new one replace it, do you sigh with exhaustion? Do you find the joys of a new device, product, experience, opportunity, or relationship fade far too quickly and you need something new or seemingly better to replace it? Does the weight of trying to prove that you are worthy of love and acceptance online wear you out? Does life sometimes feel like toil without progress? I can relate.

We can all at times agree with the words of the Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, “All things are wearisome, more than anyone can say” (Eccl. 1:8 CSB). We all experience these difficulties to varying degrees “under the sun”—in this fallen world where toil, trials, and trouble abound. Because of the presence of sin these frustrations affect us all. But we also at times have our own special brand of weariness that we choose for ourselves when we pursue meaning, purpose, fulfillment, significance, and satisfaction in the things of this world. This often leads to the refrain, “Absolute futility. Everything is futile” (Eccl. 1:2). Our efforts amount to nothing because, “The eye is not satisfied by seeing or the ear filled with hearing” (Eccl. 1:8). But rather than take this truth to heart we deceive ourselves by thinking that all we need is something new or better.

If any of this has struck a chord with you then I’ve got some good news: you’re going to die (Eccl. 1:4, 11). Not the good news you were expecting? Sorry. The reality of death is a given, but we rarely, if ever, truly reflect on this reality or allow ourselves to feel the weight of it. We know our days are numbered but we live as if our future on this earth will stretch out forever. But the brevity of our lives is good news. Not because our weary toil will come to an end, but because recognizing the reality of death will give us a better perspective of how to live our life. David Gibson in his recent book on Ecclesiastes calls this “Living life backward.”

Our lives on this earth are but a breath—short and elusive. We don’t have much time and we can’t seem to find meaning, significance, and satisfaction in this world. Think of the smoke that exists for a moment after a candle is blown out. We can see and touch it, but we cannot grasp it, and before we know it, it is gone. Life is like this. But recognizing that we will die one day helps us to wisely live our lives today (Ps. 90:12).

It helps us to stop focusing on life “under the sun” and look to life “beyond the sun.” Because even though life at times seems pointless or meaningless (and the Teacher in Ecclesiastes will point this out frequently), it isn’t. But we must look to the One who created the sun and all things to find meaning. We must look to Him who has promised us that this world will not always be like this because He will make all things new (Rev. 21:5). We must find eternal hope in the only One who can give it. We must look to Christ who alone can provide the meaning, purpose, fulfillment, significance, and satisfaction that we long for. Recognizing that we will die helps us to find answers to the “big questions” of life and existence, which will always lead us to Jesus. And knowing the truth of the gospel and the full, eternal life that Christ brings helps us to better live our lives in the present, and to enjoy the things this world has to offer as good gifts from a loving heavenly Father instead of treating them like little gods, asking them to fulfill desires they were never meant to fulfill.

Knowing Christ replaces our weariness with joy and our toil with eternal purpose. It can help us to truly enjoy the things of this world instead of worshipping them, because we can only truly enjoy them when they point us to the One who alone is worthy of worship. It allows us to make the most of our short lives for the cause of Christ instead of pretending like we will never die. It helps us to stop trying to control life and make it give us something it was never designed to give us and relinquish control to our good Father who was already in control. And instead of trying to gain anything by our efforts under the sun (Eccl. 1:3), we can shift our gaze from what is temporary to what is eternal and rejoice that "our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17).<sup>1</sup>

## Open It

1. **Solomon uses one word "vanity" to describe his life. What word would those closest to you use to describe your life? What word would you like your life to be described as?**

## Read It

**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

## Explore It

2. **How does the author introduce himself to us?**
3. **How does the author view life?**
4. **What examples does he use to back up his claim regarding life?**
5. **If this passage is any indication of the rest of the book, how would you describe it?**

---

<sup>1</sup> Devotional From Redeemer Church found @ <https://www.redeemerstillwater.com/blog/categories/ecclesiastes-devotional-guides>

## Apply It

As we open this Old Testament book, we are confronted with what seems to be a crotchety old man who is angry at the world because of missed opportunities and misplaced priorities. This book seems to be far too earthy and human of a book to be inspired by God and yet as we get beyond the languish and laments it becomes clear that there is a greater purpose to the book. Through Ecclesiastes we see the world's wisest fool show us over and over again that putting your trust and significance in the things of this world instead of Christ is utterly meaningless or vain. So, before us is a cautionary tale that sheds good news within its grumpy prose. Stop pursuing life on your own and instead do as the writer says in Ecclesiastes 12:13 which says "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." It is here and here alone that you and I can find what we all are looking for. Over the next twelve lessons we will look at this book with the end in sight, living life in light of what is above the sun (Christ) will make everything we do under the sun have meaning and purpose. **In short, this book gives us the recipe for The Good Life!!!<sup>2</sup>**

**6. How does viewing life only through the lens of the here and now bring disappointment and despair? If you are a Christian, how does the meaning of your life differ from the meaning of life to non-Christians you know?**

**7. What might happen if we created a wall of separation between the words of Ecclesiastes and the rest of the Bible? What wrong conclusion might we come to?**

---

<sup>2</sup> Study notes by author

## A Word From our Author

In Ecclesiastes we find a guy faced with the monotony of life who tried to find meaning in all of those things and more, and in the end he concludes that everything is meaningless. Ecclesiastes was written by the “Teacher” or “Preacher.” The Hebrew word denotes the leader of a congregation—a Pastor (Eswine, Recovering Eden, 3). Who is he? He is the “Son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Solomon is the only candidate because he is the only one of David’s sons who ruled over a united Israel from Jerusalem (see Eccl 1:12; 1 Chr 29:25). Plus, Solomon’s life experience matches the experience of the author. Solomon’s responsibility for this work should not be surprising.

When David died, he handed the kingdom of Israel over to his son Solomon. God came to Solomon in a dream and told him that anything he asked of God would be granted to him. Solomon was young and inexperienced, so he asked for wisdom in order to have the ability to rule the nation well and uphold justice (1 Kgs 3:5-15). God granted Solomon’s request, and Solomon used his great wisdom to rule the kingdom. One of the ways Solomon established a glorious kingdom was through his thousands of wise sayings and songs that people from all over the world came to hear (1 Kgs 4:29-34). Much of his wisdom is now contained in Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes.

However, the wisest man in the ancient world became a greedy, lustful, power-hungry, idolatrous fool. He violated the kingly commands of Deuteronomy 17 and accumulated possessions as well as women for himself. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kgs 11:3). The foreign women he married pulled his heart away from Yahweh to false gods (1 Kgs 11:1-8). He did not deny himself anything he wanted. As a result he ruined his kingdom, and God told Solomon that following his death his kingdom would be divided during his son’s reign (1 Kgs 11:9-13). Tradition says that Ecclesiastes reveals an older, repentant Solomon contemplating his mistakes and what he has learned. Johnny Hunt says Ecclesiastes appears to be the kind of book a person would write near the close of life, reflecting on life’s experiences and the lessons learned (Hunt, Ecclesiastes, 2).<sup>3</sup>

**8. What about Solomon’s life story do you find most interesting? How might Solomon be the perfect Preacher for this subject matter?**

---

<sup>3</sup> Akin, Dr. Daniel L.; Akin, Jonathan; Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (pp. 5-6). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

9. **What lessons have you learned as you have aged? How would knowing these truths earlier in life impacted your past decisions and direction?**

10. **What is one area where you could use some wisdom? In what area do you feel comfortable in giving someone wisdom?**

**What does it all mean?**

Vanity of vanities," lamented Solomon, "all is vanity!" Solomon liked that word vanity; he used it thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about life "under the sun."<sup>4</sup>

11. **Vanity of vanities. What does it mean and what would be some modern-day equivalent for this word? Where would you say this phrase rings true in your own life?**

---

<sup>4</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Satisfied (Ecclesiastes): Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life: OT Commentary: Ecclesiastes (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 15). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 gives the main point of the book when it states that everything in human existence is “hevel of hevels.” To say that life is as meaningless as it could possibly be, it uses the Hebrew superlative form. For example, the “holy of holies” is the most holy place on the planet. The “Song of Songs” is the greatest song Solomon ever wrote. Thus, hevel of hevels means “as meaningless as possible.” The word is used more than 30 times in the book, and it literally means “breath” or “vapor.” The vapor connotation carries the idea of fleeting. When you breathe on a cold day, you can see your breath for a moment, and then it vanishes. James gets at a similar idea when he says life is mist that vanishes tomorrow (Jas 4:14).

Metaphorically the word hevel is used over and over again in Ecclesiastes to express the idea that life is vain or meaningless or futile or absurd. So basically the word carries the concept that life is meaningless, pointless, worthless, or frustrating because it is frail and fleeting. It can carry all of these connotations, and context really must determine which specific nuance of the word the interpreter chooses (see Garrett, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, 282–83).

Often in the Bible, the word is used in connection with idols (Jer 16:19; Zech 10:2), and that is something of the meaning here in Ecclesiastes. People try to find satisfaction in created things rather than the Creator and seeking satisfaction in anything or anyone other than God is idolatry. The search does not work because created things cannot bring ultimate satisfaction. It’s not that pleasure, money, stuff, sex, or success are bad things in and of themselves, but when they become ultimate things to us, they let us down. You see, a good thing turned into a God thing becomes a bad thing. It becomes an idol. We will see throughout this book that success, possessions, pleasure, and even religion are ultimately meaningless. They look like they can bring us true happiness, but it is a mirage. The problem is that none of these things is ever enough, and they do not last. Again, hevel carries the idea of fleeting and meaningless. Whatever you try to build your life on other than Jesus is ultimately utterly meaningless.<sup>5</sup>

**12. As you look to those around you, what things are they pursuing with hopes that they will find ultimate meaning and purpose? How are they faring in those pursuits?**

**13. Are there any signs or evidences with culture today that shows that people are living lives without purpose and hope?**

---

<sup>5</sup> Akin, Dr. Daniel L.; Akin, Jonathan; Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (pp. 6-7). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

- 14. What is it about the things of this world that make them attractive even though they have a way of letting us down in the end?**

### **Under the sun**

You will find this important phrase twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and with it the phrase “under heaven” (1:13; 2:3; 3:1). It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and not necessarily from heaven’s point of view. He applies his own wisdom and experience to the complex human situation and tries to make some sense out of life. Solomon wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (12:10–11; 2 Tim. 3:16), so what he wrote was what God wanted His people to have.

But as we study, we must keep Solomon’s viewpoint in mind: he is examining life “under the sun.” In his *Unfolding Message of the Bible*, G. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarized Solomon’s outlook: “This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun ... until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light” (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1961, p. 229).<sup>6</sup>

- 15. In Ecclesiastes 1:4-11 Solomon shows us again and again that life is like a playlist on a continuous loop. Does life feel like this to you? When you look at the world, and history and the news, does it seem like there really is “nothing new under the sun”?**

---

<sup>6</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W.. *Be Satisfied (Ecclesiastes): Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life: OT Commentary: Ecclesiastes (The BE Series Commentary)* (pp. 19-20). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

**16. Have you ever had a season of your life where it felt like everything was dark and meaningless? What did you learn about yourself and God during that experience?**

**The Better Way!!**

Read 2 Corinthians 5:15-18.

**17. What reason does Paul give for Jesus' death? The "worldly point of view" Paul described was living for self. In what areas are you living for self instead of for Christ? How can such living leave us dissatisfied?**

**18. Discuss with your group: how do we find purpose and meaning in our walk with Christ even in the most mundane and repetitive moments of life?**