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## *Ecclesiastes*

### **General Introduction**

This is the first study of 7 weeks in Ecclesiastes. It's an interesting book, part of the wisdom literature, helping us to understand life and live God's way here. We've called the series "Finding meaning in a meaningless world" which is what we are all trying to do these days. The Preacher will tell us that this world is meaningless, but we know that if we look beyond it to Christ, then we can find meaning.

The way the book works is interesting. The book quotes the Preacher from 1:2 to 12:8 but the writer distances himself from his message, especially in 12:9-14, where the writer reminds us of God and the future. The problem is that the Preacher's perspective is just life in this world, life "under the sun". He knows nothing certain about the future, and also nothing certain about God. He only knows what he can see in this world. That is why he concludes life is meaningless.

That means we need to read this book rightly. The Preacher's words aren't directly applicable to us in the same way as most books. Otherwise we'd have a bunch of contradictions, in that e.g. Proverbs tells us to become wise, but the Preacher says wisdom is pointless. But that's due to his limited perspective. In a way it is similar to Job's friends in the book of Job. The friends' view of God is distorted and a foil to what Job is going through. Likewise the Preacher's words about life in this world are 100% true if this world is indeed all there is. But, we know from the rest of the Bible, and the epilogue in 12:9-14, that there is more than just this life. The Preacher's words are a foil, and are quoted to stop us finding meaning in just this world, which is what we're often tempted to do. It makes clear that this world is a dead-end street.



## Week 1 - Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1:1-11 is an introductory poem. 1:1 is the heading for the book, 1:2-3 summarises the Preacher's overall message, and then 1:4-11 is a poem about nature and history showing how life just never changes despite all the activity going on, which is a great metaphor for our lives. All the work we do, at home and outside, doesn't bring any change. So there's no point, right?

True, not in this world, but through Jesus we are part of something eternal, which makes all the difference.

### Study

There will probably be a lot to discuss so be selective in what questions you ask.

1. Have you read Ecclesiastes much in the past? How do you find the book?

Just some sharing at the start

2. Think of some of the key terms in 1:2-3. Maybe split into four groups, what does each mean? Particularly, what does it mean that Ecclesiastes looks at life "under the sun"?
  - a. Vanity
  - b. Gain
  - c. Toil
  - d. Under the sun

**Vanity** – literally vapour. Disappears and you have nothing left, hence the translation meaningless or pointless in many versions.

**Gain** – profit. Means you have something left at the end of your work. If not, it's not worth doing of course.

**Toil** – not just work but generally our activities here. So include taking care of children, admin and cleaning etc, not just our paid jobs.

**Under the sun** – life now in this world, which is the Preacher's perspective. He does not consider the future, eternity, God etc beyond what happens in this life here.

3. What is the Preacher trying to say with his poem about nature and history in 1:4-11? Do you agree with him? Why/why not?



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*Everything is meaningless. Particularly here, there is no change because of all we do, so there is no point in doing it. So much activity going on in nature, everything goes round and round, but nothing really changes. History just repeats itself in different ways. The world remains fallen.*

*Good for people to really engage with – do I really think this is true for my job and 95% of my life?*

4. How do you feel about the futility of life here? How do you usually respond to these feelings, and why?

*Hopefully the passage feels depressing. A few responses were mentioned in the sermon, e.g. discouragement, but for others e.g. trying to work harder or looking for a change in circumstances. Depends on our temperament, our self-confidence etc.*

5. Which is the one thing that you think “If I just have/change this then my life will be great.”? Why? And how does this passage challenge you?

*Third option from previous question. Maybe a different job, a change in marital status etc, then things will go well for me. But these things will not bring us out of a fallen world.*

6. How does Jesus’ coming mean we can make a lasting difference? In what kind of ways? How do you feel about this in light of the meaningless life we would live otherwise?

*Jesus is changing the world, building an eternal kingdom as people come to him and receive eternal life. As citizens of that kingdom what we do lasts forever, particularly as far as he uses us for the growth of his kingdom.*

*- The work we do for Jesus receives an eternal reward (Col 3:23-24), we store up treasure in heaven (Matt 6:19-20). Or think of the parable of the talents.*



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- As such the results of evangelism and discipleship are eternal, as people receive eternal life and grow so that they will work more for Jesus and work for the kingdom in turn. This is 'the work of the Lord' which is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

*A good question is, will this make any difference 1000 years from now?*

*Given the meaningless of life here, to know that what I'm doing makes a difference for all eternity should be so encouraging. And given we don't deserve any of this, we should be so grateful to Jesus for graciously including us.*

7. What are you going to do differently next week as a result of this study?

*Practically what will you change. Maybe a change in priorities, spending more time on what really matters, praying for an opportunity to share the gospel, doing some good work that displays the gospel etc*



## Week 2 - Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

The second sermon covers 1:12-2:26. It is the Preacher's quest for meaning and lasting happiness in various things. After introducing himself as someone who has used his wisdom to search out the meaning of things (1:12-18), and his conclusion that it is all vanity, he then looks at three areas. Pleasure (2:1-11), wisdom (2:12-17), toil (2:18-26).

- Pleasure is vanity as it doesn't last. It's over when it's over.
- Wisdom is vanity as it won't change your fate - you will still die.
- Toil is vanity because your work gets passed to someone else.

The message is that nothing in this world can provide meaning, as is the Preacher's consistent message.

An unusual feature is that he presents himself as Solomon. I don't think this is because he really is Solomon, but more because as the most powerful king they knew he would be able to achieve anything. But if with all his wealth and power he can't find meaning in pleasure, no one can.

The Preacher leaves it at that, but as Christians we know that a relationship with Jesus is the only thing that can give meaning to our lives.

### Study

1. If you were Solomon and could have anything you wanted, what would you go for?

#### *Icebreaker*

2. Split into three. For one theme each (pleasure, wisdom and toil)
  - a. How does the Preacher argue that it is vanity?
  - b. Would you agree? What objection would people have?

*See above for details on each section. Good to engage with it though - maybe we don't really care about what happens to us in 1000 years. Or work can still be enjoyable despite the frustrations.*



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3. In which areas do the Preacher's words resonate with you and perhaps your frustrations? How does it make you feel?

*Some of us are feeling the vanity of areas of life, and it's encouraging that Jesus knows. E.g. frustrations at work, or feeling unhappy in a relationship etc.*

4. In which areas do the Preacher's words challenge where you are currently looking for meaning?

*The flipside. E.g. we are focussing a lot on work, perhaps too much, and we have forgotten that it is vanity. Or we live for the weekend and the joy of going out. The Preacher should be challenging that.*

5. How does Jesus compare with Solomon? How does it help you love him more?

*This was part of the sermon. Jesus is greater than Solomon but the beautiful thing in light of this passage is how Jesus is the opposite of Solomon. The Preacher is focussed on himself, what he can get, while Jesus gives in love, and is willing to live a seemingly pointless life. He gives up pleasure, dies like a fool, and leaves his work to others. Given our frustrations with life this is beautiful, and the fact that Jesus loves us that much means we know our relationship with him won't be fleeting.*

6. That knowing Jesus gives meaning to our lives is easy to say. In what situations do you struggle to believe this or put it into practice? Why?

*Sharing about our struggles. We know Jesus is the answer but we struggle to believe it in practice. E.g. Jesus can seem distant, this world is so much more visible, the Bible doesn't speak to me, the world offers pleasure more quickly etc.*

7. How can we imitate Jesus in sacrificial love? How does knowing him enable us to do so freely?

*A great way we can follow Jesus is by being willing to give up things when needed. Maybe we endure a meaningless job out of love - providing for our family or for the gospel opportunities. If our hope is in Jesus we should be able to give up the things that we don't need to give our lives meaning.*



## Week 3 - Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

### Introduction

The third sermon in our series covered Ecclesiastes 3:1-22 and the teacher/ preacher is grappling with the “times and seasons” of our lives. He says that life is like a ‘tapestry’ consisting of various seasons in our lives. But while it's good to recognize that; it is also frustrating because life is not predictable; it's not linear or simplistic, and sometimes it is full of injustice. He concludes with the key question “*Who can bring man to see what will be after him*” (v22).

#### Optional Ice-Breaker:

- Describe your ‘ideal 24 hours’. If you had 24 hours with no commitments, no obligations, no limitations, no frustrations, where you could do whatever you want: what would you do? What would that look like?

#### Read the poem of verse 1-8:

1. The poem consists of 14 pairs (2x7 pairs). Why is that significant? What do you think the teacher is trying to say?
2. William Ernest Henley famously wrote: *It matters not how strait the gate / How charged with punishments the scroll / I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul.* What does the teacher think? Would he agree? Are we really as in control of our lives as Henley suggests?

#### Read verse 9-15:

3. The teacher speaks about ‘*God putting eternity in our hearts*’ (v11). What is frustrating about that for the teacher? Do you feel the struggle that there must be more to life than this and yet cannot seem to attain it? How so?



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4. Between verse 9-22, count how many times the teacher uses the phrase “I have seen / I perceived / I saw” or “I said in my heart”? What is the significance of this? How does this relate to the phrase “Life under the sun?”. How many of us – even as Christians – live life based purely on what we can see or perceived

*The point to make here is the teacher is speaking from the perspective of what he can see: “Life under the Sun.” The point of Ecclesiastes is to help us lift our eyes off of our immediate perceptions and to see God, and life from his perspective. Colossians 3:2-3 is the corollary to Ecclesiastes <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup>For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

5. Verse 12-13 is another one of the teacher’s famous “*carpe diem* passages’. How are we to understand these verses: is this how God wants us to live?

*We shouldn’t understand this verse as God’s absolute wisdom for us. This is what the teacher comes to, because he lives ‘under the sun’. He knows nothing certain about the future, and also nothing certain about God. He only knows what he can see in this world. The wisdom for us then is that while it is good to do what we can to be joyful and to do good in our lives – this is not the sum-total of our lives. This is a good starting point, but there is more to life than this.*

6. Look at verse 18-21: What is the teacher grappling with? If the author of Ecclesiastes is using these words of the teacher to ‘goad’ us into seeing life differently, what does the author want us to see?

*Looking at the injustice in the world, the teacher is wondering if we’re all that different from the beasts, that by ourselves; we’re just like the beasts (v18), and that our fate is the same as theirs – nothingness, meaningless, emptiness.*

*How does the rest of Scripture speak to this idea? What does it mean that we’re image-bearers of God?*





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7. How does Jesus' change the way that we view life and correct the teachers' point of view? In what kind of ways? Speaking personally, how does Jesus' character and his work on the cross speak hope to the frustrations of life?

*Think about Jesus' eternal perspective and wisdom: He knows how the story ends and he sees the big picture? When we listen to him and take his words seriously we are able to transcend the 'I see / I perceived' limitations of 'life under the sun'.*

*Think about Jesus' gentleness, compassion and tenderness in the face of frustrations, agony, tears and difficulties: that we are not left to figure it out on our own but he promises to be with us.*

*Think about Jesus' humility that 'though he was God, he did not grasp at his God-ness but humbled himself' to enter the brokenness of our time-bound world to bring us into eternity – to a real world in which there will be no more tears, pain, agony or frustrations. For every human being, God has put eternity into our hearts: for those in Christ, God will bring us into eternity himself.*

8. **Response: (This is extremely important:** We don't just read or study God's Word, we need to respond to it, otherwise it is *meaningless*).
- a. In light of this passage, how are you going to live differently this week?
  - b. The passage is meant to lead us to Jesus: Jesus has come to us, to not only give us an eternal perspective but to invite us to come and be with him. Jesus has come to us: now we need to come to him. What does that look like? How are you going to come to Jesus today and this week and respond to his grace?



## Week 4 - Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9

### Read the Passage Together

Ask God to speak to you in this passage: (A great prayer to prayer is Psalm 119:18 “*Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things out of your law.*”)

1. **High level overview:** If you had to summarise your initial understanding of this passage into one sentence, what do you think the teacher is trying to say?

This is how Kevin describe it on Sunday: (Wait for people to discuss first before offering this suggestion).

*“Money can be a blessing or a curse, a gift or disaster depending on how you relate to it. “Wealth” say the teacher, “has the ability to control you or serve you.” If you look to wealth to give you meaning and purpose, if you give it the power of attorney over your heart, or give you satisfaction and peace: not only will you be bitterly disappointed, will be utterly impoverished: It is the one treasures which is able to make you poor.*

***But if you will master the love of money, if you will regain control of whether it rules your heart, your fears, your joys and your anxieties; if you will allow it to serve you rather than rule you: it can be a great blessing. “Wealth is a terrible master, but a decent servant” – says the teacher.***

Do you see where Kevin gets this from the text of Scripture? Do you think this is a good summary? Why or why not?



2. In 5:10 the teacher introduces the idea of the 'love of money'. In v13 the teacher notices how the love of money and wealth causes 'hurt to its owner'.
  - a. In what ways does the passage describe money causing hurt to its owner?
  - b. How have you seen this in modern day life, either in your life, your family or those around you?
  - c. In 5:11 he says "When goods increase, so do those who consume them." He could be talking about those who suddenly flock to your life because of your wealth. But he could also be talking about bills and creditors – ie. we increase our lifestyles to match our increased income? Where have you seen this happen?
3. 5:18-20 stands out in stark contrast to the rest of the passage. It is almost identical with 6:2, except that it says that God does allow man to enjoy his gifts, whereas 6:2 says that God does **not** allow the person to enjoy his gifts.

This word-for-word contrast is not a coincidence: the author is trying to tell us something: What do you think the point of the contrast is?

*Leaders Note: The author is contrasting being wealthy and being content! He says "having much money doesn't mean you're going to be content or satisfied or at peace in your life. One person gets rich and get to enjoy his wealth. Another man gets rich and loses his ability to enjoy it. And the lesson for both is: Don't set your heart, don't set your hope on becoming rich because having riches cannot provide contentment or meaning in life."*

#### 4. **Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10:**

What does this passage say about contentment? What does it say about the danger of the love of money?

**Read the corresponding verses in 1 Timothy 6:17-19:** What do these verses say about our attitude towards money?

These verses talk about 'talking hold of life that is truly life': What does that look like? What does that actually mean?



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5. On Sunday Kevin quoted the famous words of Thomas Chalmers in which he said “...A man’s desire is not to be gotten rid of, simply by destroying it. It must be gotten rid of, by substituting it with another desire in its place. The most effective way of withdrawing the [heart] from one object of desire, is not by turning it to ‘nothingness’ – but by presenting to it, another object which is more alluring. The heart is so constituted; the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.”

What is Chalmer’s point?

*Leaders Note: Chalmers point is that you cannot just tell yourself to stop loving money. You need to become more enamoured, more in love with something else. In order to stop being mastered by money, you need to love another master even more. Jesus Christ is the one master who will master you without suffocating you.*

What do you think about this? What does this mean for you?

6. On Sunday Kevin also quoted Robert Murray McCheyne who said “So **For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.** He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief!”

How can you do that in your day to day realities? What does it look like to look to Jesus more than money, to love Jesus more than wealth, and to treasure Jesus more than anything else in this world?

**Maybe get into smaller groups and end in prayer!**



## Week 6 - Ecclesiastes 9-10

**Leader:** Make sure you get to question 5 as it is the most important question of the CG Guide.

In Ecclesiastes 9 and 10 the Teacher wrestles with two main ideas:

1. In the universality and inevitability of death, and
2. The benefits and shortcomings of wisdom.

Both are ultimately meant to lead us to Jesus, the One who defeated death (John 14:6, 8:52) and One in whom are all the treasures of wisdom (Col 2:4).

### Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-6

The author is talking about the inevitability of death: the fact that it will come to all of us, irrespective of our background, social status, or education.

1. How often do you think about your mortality? How much does it shape your decisions or how you live your life? And how can knowing that you're going to die (or that Jesus will soon return), help you to live well?
2. Jesus said that we should live expectant of his imminent return: If we think Jesus is going to return next week, we may do crazy and foolish things. But if we think Jesus is only going to return in 100 or 1000 years from now, we may become complacent and self-absorbed.
  - a. How would you go about your life if you had just **two years** to live or if you knew Jesus would return two years from now? What would you do differently?
3. Wisdom is not a word that we frequently use in our day and age. Biblical scholars often define *wisdom* as "the skill of living life well". In contemporary language we might say the skill of knowing how to flourish. It has been said that "*Wisdom is the skill of knowing how to make life work, when you don't have all the answers in front of you: the skill of being able to find out what is the right thing to do, when you don't know what to do*".
  - a. In what areas of life, or in what ways do you desire to flourish? In what areas of life are you seeking wisdom or the answers or seeking to make life work?
  - b. How have you gone about this? What does it look like for you to search out those answers? Do you go online? Do you seek out the advice of family or a mentor?



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4. In Ecclesiastes 9-10, the author espouses several benefits of wisdom, but also a number of ‘failings’ – ways in which wisdom doesn’t seem to ‘work’. This is the beauty of the Bible’s Wisdom literature. Life is seldom black and white: it is often-times grey. Wisdom helps us to navigate the greyness of life. Look at the passage and see what are benefits and what are short-comings.

**Leader:** Here are some ideas but let the group dive into the passage and search for themselves, before giving too many answers:

Benefits of Wisdom		The shortcomings of Wisdom	
9:13-15	It can save lives	9:16	It is short-lived and quickly forgotten
10:10	It can lead to flourishing or success in your endeavours	10:1	It gets cancelled by one foolish act
10:12	It is a source of blessing and grace, both to those who possess it and others	10:5-7	It isn’t immediately obvious (The point here is that many people in high positions, who are honoured by society, are actually fools. While some middle-class average citizen, whom no one really knows or honours or esteems possess more wisdom than the ruler – but no one recognizes it)
10:18	It can sometimes guard against disaster		
10:20	It can forestall / protect you against getting yourself in trouble, particularly teaching what to say and what not to say (see James 3:2-12 for how important this is)		
10:4	It can overcome strong emotions and diffuse difficult situations	10:8-9	It cannot save you from the unpredictability of life
		9:1-6, 11-12	It cannot save you from death

5. In James 4, the apostle James says that there are two kinds of wisdom: wisdom from above and wisdom from ‘under the sun’.

Scripture seems to suggest that the true wisdom (skill at making life work) that comes from above is actually **NOT** found by focusing on making life work – it’s by focusing on Jesus. Focus on making life work, and you’ll fail and making life work. Focus on Jesus, set your heart on Jesus and you will probably find that you’ll end up being a wise person who knows how to make life work.



- a. What does this mean for you?
- b. How can you be short-circuiting your life by focusing on trying to make your life work apart from Jesus?
- c. What can you do this week to re-orientate your life from yourself to Christ?

## Response

What does it look like to respond to God's Word? What do you need to praise and thank God for? Where do you need to confess or ask for forgiveness? For what can you give thanks? What do you want to ask God to help you with?



## Week 7 - Ecclesiastes 12:8-9

### Introduction

This last Sunday we came to the end of Ecclesiastes. Well done for pushing through and for working your way through this very difficult book of the Bible. Our hope and prayer is that it has been challenging and yet encouraging for us: in particular, encouraging us to look to Jesus who is our Wisdom, our Hope and Joy and our Purpose.

### Additional Material (if you so desire, but don't get stuck on this)

If you want to read other sections of Ecclesiastes that we skipped over this week, here is a brief summary:

Eccl 11:1-6 comprises 6 proverbs which essentially say “You don't know what is going to happen into the future; but don't let your ignorance lead you to inactivity. Be active, give it a go and be active anyway”.

Eccl 11:7-12:8 is dramatic language, the teacher paints a word-picture of things falling apart: it is a word of warning to young people telling that old-age is a reality that they can't avoid. One day, even the healthiest and very strongest of us are going to get old and eventually die. In v8, the *teacher* ends where he started by saying “Meaningless, meaningless; everything is meaningless!”

### CG Study

1. Eccl 12:8 is the last sentence in which the teacher (Qoheleth) speaks. Compare this final sentence with his opening sentence in 1:2.
  - a. What stands out to you about the fact that he ends up where he began?
  - b. Does the author's sentence in 12:12 have any relation to this?
  - c. Where have you seen yourself getting lost down a 'rabbit-trail' of endless searching, wondering, exploring, gaining knowledge only to get nowhere? Think of things like YouTube Video or other formats that keep us entertained but don't give us anything concrete or solid to build our lives upon.





2. Eccl 12:13 is the high point of the entire book. It is the one thing that the author wants us to hear and discover and think about. The Hebrew is emphatic: “End Matter!”

a. How do you understand the *fear of the Lord*? How do you feel about the idea of fearing God? (Get people to talk about this idea before explaining it to much)

b. Sinclair Ferguson describes the fear of the Lord in the following way:

To fear God is to know him and love him wholeheartedly and unreservedly, because of who he is and what he has done and to know that you are known by him. It is to have a profound sense of being in his majestic presence. It is a thrilling awareness that we have this greatest of all privileges, ***mingled with the realization that now the only thing that really matters is his opinion. To have the assurance of his smile is everything: to feel that he frowns on what we do is desolation [anguish].*** To fear God is to be sensitive to both his greatness and his graciousness. (Emphasis added).

Have you experienced God like that?

What do you make of this description that when you live in the fear of God you realizes that *‘the only thing that really matters is his opinion. To have the assurance of his smile is everything: to feel that he frowns on what we do is desolation [anguish].’*

c. What do you think your day-to-day life would look like if you lived life ‘in the fear of the Lord’ (with the realization that *‘the only thing that really matters is his opinion’*)? Does that sound liberating or constricting?

3. How is the fear of the Lord the anti-dote to *‘meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless’*?

4. Throughout Ecclesiastes there are these *‘Carpe Diem* passages’ that say things like “Make merry, drink and be happy, enjoy your spouse”. (*‘Carpe Diem’* is Latin for “Seize the Day” or “Make the most of life”). We find them in Eccl 2:24, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18 and 8:15. How does the fear of God help us to enjoy God’s gifts without becoming ensnared or mastered by them? How have you seen this reality in your life?

5. On Sunday we spoke about four ways to grow in the ‘fear of the Lord’: 1) To regularly read God’s Word humbly, 2) To feed our souls on the majesty and grandeur of God’s



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sovereignty, 3) to prayerfully surrender your live to God, acknowledging that he is God and you are not, 4) to feed our hearts on the wonder and the horror of the cross. Another way to grow in the fear of the Lord is to surround yourself with people who fear God.

- a. Which stands out to you? Which do you think you can actively pursue?
  - b. What can you do about it this week to try and grow in your reverence and awe of God's majesty?
  - c. How can you help one another grow in the fear of the Lord?
6. 12:14 talks about the fact that we are going to be accountable for every deed we do *'whether good or evil'*. How does this transform the way we live our lives?

### End in prayer

Maybe get your CG to read Psalm 86v8-11 and pray specifically around 11, asking God to give you an *'undivided heart which fears his name'*.