

FINDING MEANING: WISDOM FROM ECCLESIASTES



What's the point?

If you've ever asked this question, Ecclesiastes is for you. Solomon, the one who penned this book, asked a similar question. And while he often may sound like he's throwing up his hands in exasperation, it's quite the opposite. Some people even prefer to skip over Ecclesiastes because "it's a bummer," but we can gain much insight from it. In fact, Ecclesiastes is an exciting and fascinating book to study.

In this study we're going to walk with the richest and smartest person in the world. Solomon built an enormous empire. He established trade with the surrounding nations. He was a living encyclopedia of knowledge. He lived a life of unrivaled luxury and pleasure. Yet with all he had, he shows us that all of it—every single bit of it—is nothing!

Nothing, that is, apart from God.

Let's join Solomon on his exploration of life "under the sun." We'll see clues along the way of the purpose and meaning God provides when we live life keeping our perspective "above the sun." We'll be both challenged and encouraged to see how wonderful our God is and how much He wants for us to enjoy this brief life He's given us.



Juan R. Sanchez

Juan serves as senior pastor of High Pointe Baptist Church in Austin, Texas. He is married to Jeanine, and they enjoy time with five daughters, two sons-in-law, and two grandchildren. Follow him on Twitter: @manorjuan.

Finding Meaning: Wisdom from Ecclesiastes

Session 1 ***When Life Feels Empty*** *Ecclesiastes 1:1-14*

Session 2 ***The Problem with Pleasure*** *Ecclesiastes 2:1-11*

Session 3 ***The Problem with Wisdom*** *Ecclesiastes 2:12-17; 7:23-29*

Session 4 ***The Problem with Work*** *Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 3:9-13*

Session 5 ***The Problem with Wealth*** *Ecclesiastes 5:10-20*

Session 6 ***Full Contentment*** *Ecclesiastes 11:7-10; 12:12-14*

BIBLE
STUDIES
FOR LIFE.

DISCIPLESHIP PLAN

How “Finding Meaning: Wisdom from Ecclesiastes” supports the Discipleship Plan (see page 129):

Exercising Faith. It’s natural for us to live in the here-and-now, based on what we see right in front of us. When we exercise faith to see life from God’s perspective—above the sun—we discover life can be far from futile. Exercising faith leads us to live with purpose, contentment, and an eternal perspective.

1

WHEN LIFE FEELS EMPTY



What's the most monotonous task you've ever had to do?

QUESTION #1

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **13**

Life without Christ is meaningless.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

My daughters asked for hamsters. My first thought was, *What do they do?* My next thought was, *What do you do with them?* Hamsters live in a cage. You give them food and water. They eat. You clean their cage. You repeat the cycle. What's the point?

And hamsters are nocturnal, which means they're active at night. So, while we're trying to sleep, we hear that squeaky hamster wheel going round and round for hours. It's pointless!

Sadly, life can feel like that sometimes. Now and then we may feel like hamsters in a cage, running hard and fast on the wheel of life, making a lot of noise, but going nowhere fast! And we might wonder: does it all really mean anything?

The Book of Ecclesiastes answers questions about meaning in this life by exposing the absurd futility of viewing life only from a secular perspective. As Christians, we must understand that, apart from Christ, our lives are no more meaningful than living in a cage and running on a hamster wheel.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Ecclesiastes 1:1-7

¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ³ What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. ⁶ The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. ⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.

“Vanity of vanities.” OK, that may not seem the best way to start a book, especially a book of the Bible. It sounds more like a depressed philosopher who has come to the end of life and announces, “All is pointless!” But this is not just any book nor just any philosopher. We’re in the Book of Ecclesiastes—in God’s Word!—and Solomon, “the Preacher,” was David’s son and the reigning king in Jerusalem.

What had gotten Solomon so worked up that he would declare, “All is vanity”? Why would he, of all people, say life is pointless? After all, Solomon was the wisest person in the world. If Solomon had given up on the meaning of life, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Solomon began Ecclesiastes with an important question that he’ll try to answer as the book unfolds. “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” Solomon would struggle again and again to find life’s key, to no avail (2:11,22; 3:9; 5:16). Life “under the sun” is life apart from God. It is life viewed through the lens of someone who believes there is nothing above the sun, in the heavens.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon placed himself in the shoes of the atheist and tried to explain this world from that perspective. Solomon wanted us to know that, apart from God, this life has no meaning.

Where do you see futility in our world today?

QUESTION #2

As Christians, we believe God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-4). But even as believers, we can still struggle with the seeming futility of our day-to-day lives. We live and we die, generations come and go, but the earth keeps going through its endless natural cycles. Solomon used three pictures from nature to make this point:

- ▶ **Life can seem like the repetitive cycles of the sun (v. 5).** “The sun rises, and the sun goes down,” up and down, and it always returns to its place in a hurry. Do you work hard all the time, but feel like you always end up back where you started?
- ▶ **Life can seem like the directionless flow of the winds (v. 6).** The wind goes around and around without any apparent purpose or direction. Do you ever feel like, no matter how fast you go, you’re getting nowhere?
- ▶ **Life can seem like the never-ending flow of the rivers into the oceans (v. 7).** Rivers and streams continue to flow into the ocean without ever filling it. Does it often feel like, the harder you work at some things, you never get done?

We never really seem to change or accomplish anything. The cycle never ends! If you’ve ever felt like your life was pointless, hang on. It’s about to get worse before it gets better.

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

⁸ All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. ¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

What are some things that people do in an attempt to leave a legacy?

QUESTION #3

FILLING THE EMPTY SPACES

Rank (1-5) the following daily, often boring, routines by how meaningless they feel sometimes. Then answer the questions.

- ___ Making the bed
- ___ Preparing a meal
- ___ Commuting to work/school
- ___ Attending meetings
- ___ Cleaning (house, office desk, etc.)

How could your relationship with Christ make one of these mundane tasks more meaningful?

What could you do to bring your relationship with Christ into alignment in other areas of life?

"God never said that the journey
would be easy, but He did say that
the arrival would be worthwhile."

— MAX LUCADO

It's bad enough that what we do in life feels pointless, but we often find those "pointless activities" don't bring us satisfaction either. The bottom line is, when we try to find meaning and purpose in this life apart from Christ, we'll discover that nothing satisfies. As Solomon said, the very pursuit of these things will wear us out.

Look at entertainment and culture. So many of our songs and movies are simply a remaking of the old. And what about today's fashion trends? They're mostly recycled styles too. Unfortunately, we also see this "repeating of the old" in far more serious ways. Humanity never has moved beyond poverty, injustice, wars, famine, or disease.

Jesus, however, promised to bring us into a new home: His "Father's house" (John 14:2-3). History is unfolding toward the culmination of all things. We are looking forward to that day when there will be no more sorrow, no more pain, and no more sin (Rev. 21:3-4).

One way many people try to bring meaning into their lives is by building a strong reputation and leaving a legacy. We want to be remembered! Sorry, but it doesn't matter what we've done or who we are; we will be forgotten.

That was Solomon's sad point in verse 11. Not only do we forget the things that came before us, we'll forget the things that are yet to come—and the things after that. Apart from Christ, all the work we do in this life adds nothing new and is quickly forgotten.

It's all meaningless! So, where do we go from here?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

¹² I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.



The search for life's meaning is a noble task. God has hard-wired us for it. After all, no one wants to live a pointless life. When we search for the answers to life's ultimate questions apart from looking for them in Christ, we'll find it to be an "unhappy business." But this is precisely what Solomon set out to expose.

- ▶ **Solomon was wiser than anyone else in the world.** He could speak and write confidently on any number of subjects (1 Kings 4:29-31).
- ▶ **Solomon was more productive than anyone else.** He spoke three thousand proverbs and wrote more than a thousand songs (v. 32).
- ▶ **Solomon had more wealth than all the other kings in the world (10:14-29).** In fact, he didn't even use silver, "[since] silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon" (v. 21).

From his vast wisdom, knowledge, wealth, and experience, he set out to expose the emptiness of a secular worldview by trying to find meaning to "all that is done under heaven"; that is, apart from God. His conclusion? It's all meaningless, "a striving after wind."

The good news is that our perspective isn't limited just to what is "under the sun." Our heavenly Father created this world through Christ and for Christ (Col. 1:15-17). We can enjoy this world, and we can have confidence that history is moving toward God's appointed end. Our search for meaning is not a miserable task when we find our purpose in Christ (Matt. 6:33).

How does Christ bring meaning and purpose to our lives?

QUESTION #4

What are some ways our group can help clarify meaning and purpose for our lives?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

What will you do this week to view life from a Christian worldview, a view from above the sun, where our Creator God dwells? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Go for a walk.** Go outside to a place where you can enjoy God's creation. Give thanks to God for what you see. God wants His people to enjoy His creation.
- ▶ **Set personal goals.** One reason life may seem meaningless is because we have no goals. Think about what you want to accomplish over the next twelve months and write it down.
- ▶ **Share the gospel.** Lots of people around us have no meaning in life. Point them to Christ, the One who gives meaning to this world and to our lives.



If we fall into the trap of seeing life merely from a secular viewpoint, life will feel like an endless, monotonous hamster wheel. Reset your perspective and view life from above the sun instead!

My thoughts