



Chasing Life

A SOUL'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

A Reading Guide on the **Book of Ecclesiastes**

Chasing Life: A Soul's Search for Meaning

© 2017 City Bible Forum (First Edition)

Editors Craig Broman, Elaine Tham

Photography 123RF.com, istock.com, alamy.com, shutterstock.com, Shiloh Longbottom,

Bruce Doran

Layout Shiloh Longbottom

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®

Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.



Introduction

We are constantly looking for meaning in life—a sense of purpose or identity that has lasting value. Am I defined by my job, possessions and relationships? Am I amusing myself with frivolous activity? The book of Ecclesiastes resonates because it is realistic. It gives an honest description of what frustrates us in life, a life that often feels hollow and futile. Some conclude that Ecclesiastes seems depressing, but can we find hope in this honest description of our deepest frustrations?

This reading guide aims to:

- Help you search beyond the day-to-day of work and relationships to enjoy the pleasures and gifts graciously given through a living God of hope.
- Help you explore an answer to life's questions in view of God and eternity.

Ecclesiastes forms part of the Bible's wisdom books. Through observation, it discovers the patterns and rhythms of life. The author wants us to face up to hard realities: death and sorrow, despair and grief, sameness and repetition. He searches to see if there is any wisdom to live by.

Repeated throughout the book is the phrase: 'Meaningless, meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' It's a translation from a single word 'hebel' meaning vapour, mist or fog. We can't clutch a mist, we can't hold a vapour. In the end, what do we gain? What in life can be truly possessed? It is 'a chasing after the wind'.

Mark Twain says, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why". Maybe there is something to learn from the monotony of life, the tattered edges, the funerals, the perplexities. Should I fear and worship God? Maybe if I feared and worshipped God more I would learn to hold to the world less tightly. Read on if you are curious.

Craig Broman & Elaine Tham
Editors

Contents

- Searching for Meaning 5
Ecclesiastes 1:1-18—Sam Chan
- Pursuing Pleasure 9
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11—Kate Bracks
- Working Hard 13
Ecclesiastes 2:12-26—Ian Harper
- Life's Beauty 17
Ecclesiastes 3:1-14—Anna McGahan
- Accumulating Wealth 21
Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:2—Walter Lewin
- Finding Wisdom 25
Ecclesiastes 7:10-8:1—Craig Broman
- Investing Wisely 29
Ecclesiastes 10:18-11:6—Jacky Hodges
- Staying Young 33
Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8—Bob Beaumont
- The Key to it All 37
Ecclesiastes 12:9-14—Al Stewart

SEARCHING FOR MEANING

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

“Man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain
but rather to see a meaning in his life.”

- Victor E Frankl

“Well, it’s nothing very special. Try to be nice to people,
avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then,
get some walking in, and try to live together in peace
and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.”

- Monty Python, The Meaning of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

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

² “Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”

³ What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?

⁴ Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

⁷ All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

⁸ All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

⁹ What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

¹¹ No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.

¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in
Jerusalem. ¹³ I applied my mind to study and
to explore by wisdom all that is done under
the heavens. What a heavy burden God has
laid on mankind! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things
that are done under the sun; all of them are
meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said to myself, “Look, I have increased
in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled
over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced
much of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ Then
I applied myself to the understanding of
wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but
I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the
wind.

¹⁸ For with much wisdom comes much
sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

Romans 8:20-21

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

Questions

What frustration is expressed in this view of life?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover? See also Romans: 8:20-21

How do these words resonate with your own life?

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

*Turn over to read what Sam Chan
thinks about searching for meaning ...*



Sam Chan

Sam Chan works both as a medical doctor and a national communicator for City Bible Forum.

What frustration is expressed in this view of life?

The main frustration is that we don't seem to be getting anywhere, despite our flurry of activity. We work, but we're barely making a dent in the mortgage, answering emails from an overflowing inbox, exercising but the scales never change. We're doing exactly the same thing as we were doing yesterday, but it doesn't seem like we're making headway. Then we have a haunting feeling that the next 20-40 years are going to be exactly the same, and we ask ourselves, what's the point of it all? What have I gained? Where am I going?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover? See also Romans 8:20-21.

Instead of being frustrated that we're doing the same thing everyday (i.e. paying the mortgage, answering emails and exercising), we should see it as a blessing from God. It's good to know that there is a loving, dependable God who gives us the routine we crave. In most other world religions, the gods are mischievous and unreliable. But the God of the Bible loves us, showing this through a rhythm and beauty in the regularity of his universe (v5-7). But what's the point of doing the same thing, day after day? Even if we can't see it, this loving God has a purpose for his world and us.

How do these words resonate with your own life?

I need to see the wonder and beauty in my daily routine. When I work as a doctor, there is joy when each operation goes like clockwork—just like the operation before that, and the one before that. When I have my morning coffee, there is excitement that each cup of coffee tastes as good as the last. I need to thank God for the routine in my life.

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

Sometimes for me, many of my daily actions don't seem purposeful. If there is no God, then everything that happens in my life is a series of events, but that's all they are. There is no deeper meaning behind what happens—I'm left to fill in the blank for myself: "I'm living for ____?" If there is a loving God, then there is wisdom in what happens. And my daily routine, seemingly mundane, is part of a bigger plan that God has for bringing love, justice and redemption to our world (Romans 8:21). It's living for God that gets me out of bed each morning.

PURSUING PLEASURE

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

“Pleasure is the only thing one should live for,
nothing ages like happiness.”

- Oscar Wilde

“We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink
and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.
We are far too easily pleased.”

- C.S. Lewis

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

¹I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. ²“Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” ³I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

⁴I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my labor,
and this was the reward for all my toil.

¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.

Questions

What attitude to life is being challenged?

What frustration does the writer find?

How do these words resonate with your own life?

When do you think pleasure crosses over the line to become an addiction?

*Turn over to read what Kate Bracks
thinks about pursuing pleasure ...*



Kate Bracks

Kate Bracks has a great passion for food and believes it's one of God's good gifts. She won Masterchef in 2011 and has been promoting her love of food and God around the nation ever since.

What attitude to life is being challenged?

The writer is challenging everything we, as modern Australian society, define as 'the good life'! Whether it is a nice wine to cheer ourselves (v3), a sense of accomplishment from our work (v4-6), the comfort of desirable possessions (v7), wealth to enjoy (v8) or sexual freedom (v8), the writer's conclusion is that "nothing was gained" (v11). He is clearly challenging our notion of 'the good life'!

What frustration does the writer find?

The writer has relentlessly pursued 'the good life'. Most of us only dream of being able to achieve, accumulate and enjoy all that this writer has and so we often fool ourselves into thinking that we just haven't made it yet. From the perspective of a person who has 'made it' the writer shares with us his frustration that it doesn't actually deliver what he hoped it would. He not only pursued 'the good life' but he found it! And when he did, he deemed it to be "meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (v11).

How do these words resonate with your own life?

We are bombarded with messages about what it means to live 'the good life'. From our interactions with social media, our absorption of advertising and in our conversations with other people, we create a picture in our minds and desires in our hearts that chase after the same things that this writer did. I have seen it in myself, I have seen it in my friends and family, and I have had the privilege to see it in the celebrity world, where many of us assume that those people have 'made it' too. In no situation that I have witnessed have I seen it deliver the fulfillment that the person had hoped for.

When do you think pleasure crosses over the line to become an addiction?

Pleasure is a good thing—created for us by a good God. He was the one who created us to enjoy good food and wine, a sense of accomplishment, wealth and prosperity from the land and sexual freedom within marriage. These are good things to be enjoyed according to God's good purposes for them. However, as soon as we make them the goal of our lives, we shift our focus away from the One who created them and who has the power and generous love to keep on giving them! In our endless pursuit of fulfillment outside of a relationship with God, we mistakenly think we need more good things to be happy, which drives a creeping addiction to 'the good life'. Addiction to 'the good life' creeps up on us with the result being that we fail to see true fulfillment in God.

WORKING HARD

Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

“Working hard for something we don’t care about is called stress:
Working hard for something we love is called passion.”

- Simon Sinek

“When work feels overwhelming,
remember that you’re going to die.”

- someecards.com

“I put my heart and my soul into my work,
and have lost my mind in the process.”

- Vincent Van Gogh

Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

¹²Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,

and also madness and folly.

What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?

¹³I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

¹⁵Then I said to myself,

“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.

What then do I gain by being wise?”

I said to myself,

“This too is meaningless.”

¹⁶For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;

the days have already come when both have been forgotten.

Like the fool, the wise too must die!

¹⁷So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.¹⁸I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun,

because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.

²⁰So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²²What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?

²³All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Questions

Why is work so frustrating?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

How do these words resonate with your own life?

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

*Turn over to read what Ian Harper
thinks about working hard ...*



Ian Harper

Ian Harper is an Australian economist best known for his work in public policy. In May 2016 he was appointed to the board of the Reserve Bank of Australia. Ian is also Dean, Melbourne Business School.

Why is work so frustrating?

The writer sees that a lifetime of work often leaves little or nothing to show for it. Even people who amass great wealth through their working lives relinquish control over it once they die, only to have it squandered by those who inherit it. “Clogs to clogs in three generations”, as the saying goes. People who hold high office during their working lives soon see their proudest accomplishments undone by their successors, sometimes no sooner than they have left office. For others who achieve neither great wealth nor high office through their working lives, work can seem pointless, merely a means of putting bread on the table each week. The realisation that nothing lasts after years of hard work leads the author to conclude that work is frustrating.

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

Viewing work as a gift from God changes one’s perspective, allowing workers to avoid frustration by finding satisfaction in their daily toil. Working “as if for the Lord”, to quote St Paul (Ephesians 6:7), gives purpose and meaning even to menial tasks, and shifts the focus away from the material fruits of one’s work. If work is ordained by God, even work that seems to serve no great purpose or carry significant reward, it can become a means of worshiping God and hence a source of deep satisfaction. This, at least, is the hope the writer finds in what otherwise appears to be pointless expenditure of time and effort.

How do these words resonate with your own life?

My working life has been marked by both success and failure. I have seen achievements I regarded as successes at the time be overturned by successors or turn sour with the passage of time. I could well ask, with the writer of Ecclesiastes, “So what was the point of all that effort?” As to failures, some happened in spite of my best efforts—my best just wasn’t good enough—and this left me feeling very frustrated. I often learned more from my failures than my successes but this made them no less frustrating at the time!

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

Ecclesiastes challenges me to keep my work in proper perspective. Viewed in purely worldly terms, work will often be a source of frustration, not satisfaction, and success will be fleeting. If I try to see my work as a gift from God for His glory, then I have a very different lens through which to view the world of work, with its joys, its challenges and its trials. It’s not that work doesn’t matter because it obviously does. Most people instinctively know that we have been built to work, which is why many find work so fulfilling and those without work find it hard to avoid falling into despair. The Bible helps me to see that my work has lasting significance in God’s sight even if the results in this world are hard to see or simply fade from view over time. Our God is constantly at work and, being made in His image, we too should find work fulfilling, whether or not it brings worldly fame or fortune.

A night scene with a campfire and trees. The background is a dark blue twilight sky with a bright, glowing light source, possibly the moon or a star, shining through the branches of a large tree on the left. In the foreground, a campfire is burning brightly, casting a warm, orange glow. The silhouettes of people sitting around the fire are visible. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

LIFE'S BEAUTY

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
its loveliness increases; it will never
pass into nothingness."

- John Keats

"Religious people find God useful.
Christians find God beautiful."

- Jonathan Edwards

"Exterior beauty without the depth
of a kind soul is merely decoration."

- Vanessa Quintero

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

³ There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

² a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,

³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,

⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,

⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

⁹What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

Questions

How do these words resonate with you?

What is beautiful about life?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

*Turn over to read what Anna McGahan
thinks about life's beauty ...*



Anna McGahan

Anna is an Australian actress and playwright, appearing in television programs and short films. She is best known for playing the role of Nellie Cameron in the Australian television series, *Underbelly: Razor* in 2011 and *Lucy* in *House Husbands*.

How do these words resonate with you?

I am moved by the depth and breadth of God in these words. Every part of my life is deemed worthy to Him, even the harder parts, when we aren't 'achieving' or making ground—in fact, even in our deepest suffering or hopelessness, our experiences are still valid and actually called beautiful. God shows us His acceptance of all human experience, and that He is with us through each one.

What is beautiful about life?

Satisfaction is in the action, not in its result. Goodness and joy are found in the present (our daily rhythms of eating, drinking, going to work). Each simple or complex experience has its season, and will be found beautiful. Sometimes, when my life is confusing me, I'll read this list of 'a time to's'. Invariably, what I'm going through fits into that list, no matter how extreme or 'ungodly' it may be. It comforts me, I feel God has taken everything into account.

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

God gets it. He knows what is happening and is far more powerful than our circumstances or fears. We cannot understand eternity (though we sense it) so we cannot fully understand God. However, we can begin to comprehend His goodness through the beauty of time, and the simple joy of the present. As we learn about what purpose He has for us, we can see Him make even our most horrible experiences into things that reveal His love.

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

In my Bible (given to me five years ago), I have a note scrawled next to the scripture 'He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.' The note says 'Wait for him'—a hopeful declaration that a certain man I loved would come back to me. My interpretation of those words at the time, was that God would make that particular relationship beautiful the way I wanted it to be beautiful. Now, many years later, I know how God has made it beautiful and it certainly wasn't by us getting back together! God slowly healed my heart, and my perspective on unhealthy love. Now I can love freely. I couldn't always understand what He was doing, but time has revealed a little more of the picture to me. It reminds me that the way I want God to shape my life isn't always the most beautiful thing He can do. With Him, we can safely release expectations, embrace the unknown, and enjoy the present day, knowing it is His gift to us.

ACCUMULATING WEALTH

Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:2

“Money has never made man happy, nor will it,
there is nothing in its nature to produce happiness.

The more of it one has the more one wants.”

- Benjamin Franklin

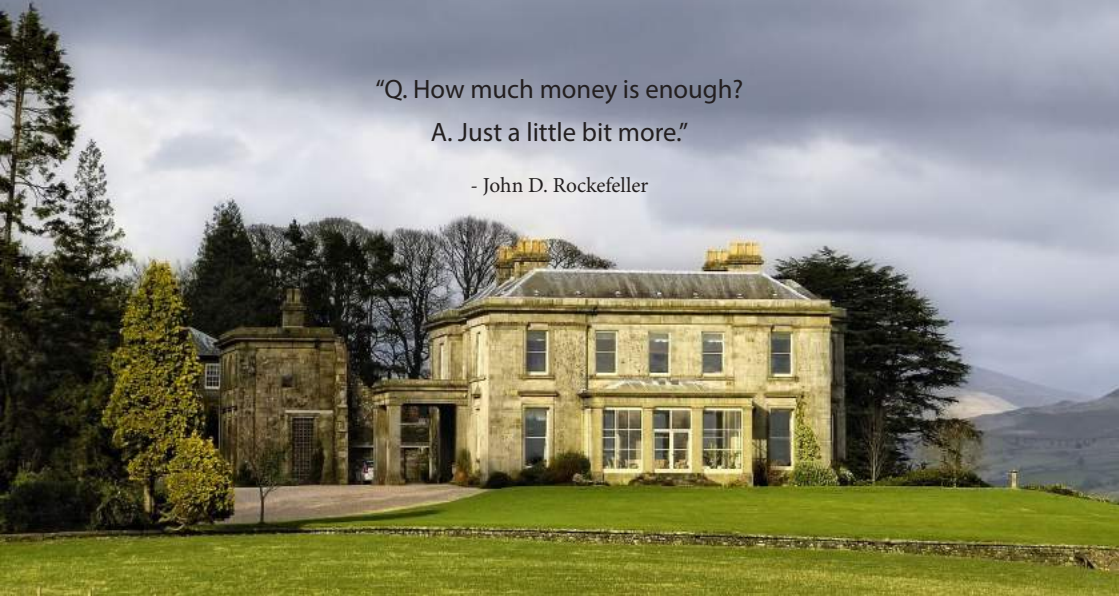
“While money can’t buy happiness,
it certainly lets you choose your own form of misery.”

- Groucho Marx

“Q. How much money is enough?

A. Just a little bit more.”

- John D. Rockefeller



Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:2

¹⁰Whoever loves money never has enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with
their income.
This too is meaningless.

¹¹As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.
And what benefit are they to the owners
except to feast their eyes on them?

¹²The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether they eat little or much,
but as for the rich, their abundance
permits them no sleep.

¹³I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:
Wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,

¹⁴or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when they have children
there is nothing left for them to inherit.

¹⁵Everyone comes naked from their mother's
womb,
and as everyone comes, so they depart.
They take nothing from their toil
that they can carry in their hands.

¹⁶This too is a grievous evil:
As everyone comes, so they depart,
and what do they gain,
since they toil for the wind?

¹⁷All their days they eat in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.

¹⁸This is what I have observed to be good: that
it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink
and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor
under the sun during the few days of life God
has given them—for this is their lot.¹⁹More-
over, when God gives someone wealth and
possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to
accept their lot and be happy in their toil—
this is a gift of God.²⁰They seldom reflect on
the days of their life, because God keeps them
occupied with gladness of heart.

6 I have seen another evil under the sun,
and it weighs heavily on mankind: ²God
gives some people wealth, possessions and
honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts
desire, but God does not grant them the abil-
ity to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them
instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

Questions

Jesus says in Luke 12:15, “Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” What makes your life abundant?

What frustration is expressed in this view of life?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

*Turn over to read what Walter Lewin
thinks about accumulating wealth ...*



Walter Lewin

Walter is Chairman of OneVentures, a leading venture capital firm based in Australia, and a member of the Advisory Board of VGI Partners, a leading global investment firm based in Australia and New York.

Jesus says in Luke 12:15, “Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” What makes your life abundant?

I am fortunate to be sharing my life with an amazing wife and three wonderful sons who I love dearly and who love me. I have a loving extended family and I have great and caring friends. I enjoy good health. I have an engaging, enjoyable and rewarding career and a certain amount of material wealth. Most importantly, I am by grace reconciled with my Creator and God. In short, I am blessed and thankful for the abundance in my life. The writers in Ecclesiastes and Luke are warning about all kinds of greed. All of the good things in our life are gifts from God and can make our life abundant. However, they can all become a focus of greed. Greed is needing more, feeling that you never have enough. This is placing those good and abundant things, not God, at the centre of your life. The warning in Ecclesiastes and Luke is related to material wealth but it can equally apply to the other good gifts in life.

What frustration is expressed in this view of life?

Money and material wealth never satisfy and don't bring peace. The desire or need for more material possessions, no matter what you already have, often leads to actions that hurt the person pursuing more wealth, e.g. a breakdown in a marriage or difficulties in family or business relationships. Money doesn't deliver the security in life that we all want—it provides only the illusion of security and control. Money is fleeting—you can't take it with you.

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

The hope is that those who have wealth and standing in life have also been given by God the ability to be happy with what they have. Secondly, they find satisfaction in their work and enjoy all this as a gift from God. This gift allows them “gladness of heart” (v20). In contrast, for those who lack nothing but are restless with their lot, sadly they can find their life lacks real meaning, precisely because of their money, possessions and power.

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

Being content with what I have and dealing with the desire to pursue more material wealth is a challenge for me. It isn't that having money or a financially rewarding career is bad, after all, the writer tells us it is a gift! The challenge for me is to live my life as I am advised to in Matthew 6:3, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

FINDING WISDOM

Ecclesiastes 7:10-8:1

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

- Serenity Prayer



Ecclesiastes 7:10-8:1

¹⁰Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?”

For it is not wise to ask such questions.

¹¹Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun.

¹²Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: Wisdom preserves those who have it.

¹³Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten what he has made crooked?

¹⁴When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other.

Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future.

¹⁵In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

¹⁶Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?

¹⁷Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool— why die before your time?

¹⁸It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.

¹⁹Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city.

²⁰Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.

²¹Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—

²²for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

²³All this I tested by wisdom and I said,

“I am determined to be wise”— but this was beyond me.

²⁴Whatever exists is far off and most profound— who can discover it?

²⁵So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.

²⁶I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

²⁷“Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered:

“Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—

²⁸while I was still searching but not finding— I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all.

²⁹This only have I found: God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.”

8 Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person’s wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance.

Questions

Can you recall a time when you searched for wisdom? Did you find it?

What frustration is expressed in this view of life?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

How do these words resonate with your own life?

*Turn over to read what Craig Broman
thinks about finding wisdom...*



Craig Broman

Craig Broman directs the work of City Bible Forum in Adelaide and is currently studying workplace coaching.

Can you recall a time when you searched for wisdom? Did you find it?

Wisdom is often sought when you are under the greatest pressure. Several years ago, my mum was diagnosed with inoperable cancer and given six months to live. At the time we lived and worked about 20 minutes away from her. Within days of this tragic news, my boss told me that I needed to relocate for my job which would involve working and living approximately 2 hours from Mum. There were no other jobs on the table. My wife was 7 months pregnant with our first child and after much soul searching I wrote a letter of resignation, knowing it would result in the loss of income which included provision of housing. I've needed wisdom many times in life, but that was the standout: provide for my family or be close to my dying mum. In the end, the decision was made for us—mum died within days of sending the resignation letter. My boss came to the funeral and I relocated soon after.

What frustration is expressed in this view of life?

The big frustration cycled through here is never being able to quite grasp, locate and pin down the wisdom to navigate life. This quest for wisdom best resembles a search leaving no rock unturned! The philosopher's search starts with nostalgia and then realising you can't keep pining for the past. He sees the lack of control we have over the cards we get dealt in life. He notes how wildly the pendulum swings in our assessment of people; he expresses what we often think: "the person who does the right thing is rarely better off than the person who does the unthinkable in life." No matter how intentional, how diligent, how earnest, his search does not unearth the sort of wisdom he needs for this life! This is what plunges us into despair, cynicism or settling for far less.

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

Every time the writer focuses on humanity the needle dips towards despair, every time he moves to God the hope begins to rise! He looks at what people do and eventually, along with them, hope perishes. Focus on God and you encounter permanence, "who can straighten what He bends?" He takes us on a tour of the extremes of lifestyle choices, good and bad, and decides that if you fear God you'll avoid these extremes. He knows that having wisdom preserves and empowers. There is an ironic hope embedded in v29, God created humanity upright. The glimmer of light is that we were good material to start with and can possibly be salvaged in the future.

How do these words resonate with your own life?

Though made properly or upright, human creatures have gone in search of many schemes. That's the story of many, including myself. I've embarked on my own minor quests for fame, eternal youth, goodness, power and found them wanting and often dead ends. The truth is that Wisdom is scarce in the world because people are flawed. We need a re-run, a perfect human, with flawless wisdom who can make the perfect, right and honourable call each and every time. It's no accident that the New Testament refers to Jesus as becoming for us Wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1:30). This wisdom is to reinstate us with our Creator through His sacrificial and perfect death—embark on a search to fathom this truth and you will return strangely humbled and wiser than after any other bright idea you might pursue in life.

INVESTING WISELY

Ecclesiastes 10:18-11:6

“Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap
but by the seeds that you plant.”

- Robert Louis Stevenson

“Society is indeed a contract ...

It is a partnership not only between those who are living,
but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”

- Edmund Burke



Ecclesiastes 10:18-11:6

¹⁸Through laziness, the rafters sag;
because of idle hands, the house leaks.

¹⁹A feast is made for laughter,
wine makes life merry,
and money is the answer for everything.

²⁰Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,
because a bird in the sky may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

11 Ship your grain across the sea;
after many days you may receive a return.

²Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;
you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

³If clouds are full of water,
they pour rain on the earth.
Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where it falls, there it will lie.

⁴Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

⁵As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a mother's womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things.

⁶Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.

Questions

What attitude to life is described?

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

How do these words resonate with you?

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

*Turn over to read what Jacky Hodges
thinks about investing wisely ...*



Jacky Hodges

Jacky is currently Chair of the City Bible Forum Board and has nearly 20 years professional experience undertaking roles within the Australian Bureau of Statistics and in support of organisations in the not-for-profit sector.

What attitude to life is described?

We are constantly reminded of what society sees as being successful, i.e. stories of riches and glamour, debates on where we should be investing our money. We are often conflicted in our decisions in life as we float with the tide of other people's opinions. It can immobilise you, causing you to curse those who are successful.

What hope, if any, does the writer discover?

The writer warns of the risks of being lazy. He goes on to say that things are as they are. We don't know what disaster will come and cannot understand the work of God so we should not be idle and worry about what others are up to but whatever we find to do we should "do it with all our might" and put in place plans and back up plans as needed.

How do these words resonate with you?

At times, I feel pressure to compare myself to others and to feel like there are more or different things I should be doing rather than realising that no two peoples' circumstances are exactly the same and that I do not know God's overarching plan. While the writer might present a picture of meaninglessness, being able to realise that you have your own path and God has a plan is quite liberating.

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

It challenges me to reassess what I consider important and why I am investing time, money and energy into particular pursuits.

STAYING YOUNG

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8

“Youth is wasted on the young.”

- George Bernard Shaw

“There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age.”

- Sophia Loren

“Ageing gracefully is all about finding a good plastic surgeon, a skilled hairdresser and a flattering little black dress.”

- Pamela Robinson

“It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

-Woody Allen

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8

⁹You who are young, be happy while you are young,
let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.

Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you into judgment

¹⁰So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigor are meaningless.

12 Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them”—

²before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;

³when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through

the windows grow dim;
⁴when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
⁵when people are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags itself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.

⁶Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
and the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
and the wheel broken at the well,
⁷and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

⁸“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Everything is meaningless!”

Questions

What attitude to life is being challenged?

What frustration does the writer find?

How do these words resonate with you?

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

*Turn over to read what Bob Beaumont
thinks about staying young ...*



Bob Beaumont

Bob is Executive Chairman for Beaumont Tiles, a South Australian family owned business with over 100 stores across the country. The company's goal is "looking good... but being great!"

What attitude to life is being challenged?

In so much of the busyness of life we are obsessed with accumulating power, wealth and what the world tells us is "pleasure". We are self-interested and self-obsessed but as life starts to draw towards its final decades we realise, "hang on, what was the point of all of that work and effort to beat the other team, to climb the corporate ladder and to succeed?" "What was the point of the pursuit of that fleeting pleasure?" The whole of Ecclesiastes is a build up to the last few sentences and is about challenging the real value of all we do and pursue in this life.

What frustration does the writer find?

The writer finds the same frustration we all do at some stage (if we are honest with ourselves). We realise at some point we have been acting out a play whose script has been dictated by the media, friends, family, academics etc. It isn't the script we would have chosen to write ourselves. At some point, we are confronted with the reality that for so many on this planet, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players (Shakespeare)". Unless we live intentionally by writing our own script we'll end up old and dissatisfied.

How do these words resonate with you?

Verses 9 and 10 of chapter 11 remind me that we tend to waste our youth because we don't have the wisdom and perspective we need to make the best use of them. As I have become older I have identified more and more with the saying "youth is wasted on the young". But really that is unfair. Whatever we do we cannot put old heads on young shoulders. Some learn faster than others and some never learn but life is a university course which begins at birth and progresses until the day we die. It is our role to be the best we can on the way to become the best we can be.

How does this challenge your view on what you are living for at present?

What does "being the best we can" really mean? I believe it is doing the right thing and doing the best I can in whatever circumstances I find myself. God has made it pretty clear what He expects of us, not legalistically but as people, and if I use every talent and circumstance He has given me in the pursuit of what I know I need to become, I cannot ask any more of myself than that. Once I have done my best that is all I need to do. God won't ask any more of us because Jesus, through His death, has already done the rest! That doesn't give us permission to slack off, but it does give us the comfort and confidence that it will be enough. As a Christian, I believe God guides me each day, and I reckon that's a pretty good deal.

THE KEY TO IT ALL

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

“It is a sign of intellectual maturity to always crawl to conclusions.”

- Mokokoma Mokhonoana

“Exactly!” said Deep Thought.

“So once you do know what the question actually is,
you’ll know what the answer means.”

- Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy

“There are a dozen views about everything until you know the answer.
Then there’s never more than one”

- C. S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

⁹Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.¹⁰The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

¹¹The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd.¹²Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

¹³Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,

for this is the duty of all mankind.

¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment,

including every hidden thing,

whether it is good or evil.

Questions

What is the writer claiming about the book he has written and what is its purpose?

What is the new, significant element the writer has introduced in verse 13?

How does verse 14 change the way we see life, meaning and purpose?

Would you consider living your life differently?

*Turn over to read what Al Stewart
thinks about the key to it all ...*



Al Stewart

Al is the Chief Operating Officer of City Bible Forum and enjoys running and time in the bush.

What is the writer claiming about the book he has written and what is its purpose?

The writer of Ecclesiastes has spent 12 chapters showing us that life “under the sun” is just like a mist. The Hebrew word ‘hebel’—in this translation “meaningless”—literally means “a mist or vapour”. From the beginning of the book (1:2) to the end of the argument in 12:8, he has shown that life under the sun—life without knowing God—is ultimately meaningless because when the tide of time comes in, it will be as if we were never here. Nothing lasts—our achievements, our wealth, our reputations, our strength—nothing lasts because we are ‘hebel’. We are a mist or a vapour.

What is the new, significant element the writer has introduced in verse 13?

The Teacher tells us a fact that changes everything. It changes the way that we see ourselves, the world, life and eternity. His words are meant to be goads, i.e. the pointy stick that prods an ox to pull the plough. They are meant to goad us, push us into thinking and acting. They are also nails (v11); anchor points to be grasped from the One who would shepherd us. He reminds us not to live just “under the sun”, i.e. without a word from God, trying to navigate by mere common sense. God has spoken to us, making Himself clear through His prophets and the Bible’s words. The message is simple—“fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of all humankind”. Honour and respect God, trust Him in the way that we live, understand that He is good and wise and wants what’s best for us, and so obey Him.

How does verse 14 change the way we see life, meaning and purpose?

Why is this so important? “For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing whether good or evil.” Our lives are not just hebel or vapour. What we do in this life will echo in eternity. How we live, what we value, how we love people and how we respond to God will have eternal consequences. How we have acted in this life will determine where we spend eternity.

Would you consider living your life differently?

This book (and all of the Old Testament) pushes us to consider what is truly valuable in our life and what will truly last in view of eternity. God has spoken to us, and we find God’s forgiveness and the promise of eternal life ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. In fact, God became one of us to show us how we should live and ultimately to win forgiveness for us. It is this understanding that gives my life meaning and purpose. How I respond to God day by day, how I treat people, my daily routines may sometimes feel like “Groundhog Day”, but I know it has value in eternity because God has spoken to us.

My thoughts

What's next...

We hope that you have really enjoyed reading through this guide. Maybe you would like to read more on Ecclesiastes or explore Jesus or Christianity further. Here are some options:

I'd like to read more on Ecclesiastes...

- "Ecclesiastes and work" Commentary | www.theologyofwork.org
- "Stop and Enjoy the Ordinary" | www.desiringgod.org
- "The daily grind/The search for knowledge/The pursuit of pleasure/The drudgery of work" | Talks by Sam Chan, City Bible Forum, Sydney, 2016 | citybibleforum.org/library

I'd like to explore Jesus or Christianity further...

For more reading guides like "The Week that Changed the World" (The Easter story) and "Sayings for Life" (Sayings from Jesus and Proverbs), visit our website at citybibleforum.org/adelaide.

- For the Christian message in a nutshell, visit www.matthiasmedia.com.au/2wtl
- For forums and answers to many questions about Christianity, visit www.publicchristianity.org
- To read more of the Bible online, in many languages and various styles, visit www.biblegateway.com

Reading one of the accounts of Jesus, ideally with a Christian friend, is the best way to understand Jesus and Christianity. Why not read an eyewitness account of Jesus' life such as Luke's Gospel or John's Gospel? If you would prefer, City Bible Forum offers one-on-one and small group reading opportunities to discuss the story of Jesus.

If you would like to read another book, these are good options:

"Mere Christianity" C.S. Lewis

"Reason for God" Tim Keller

I'd like to chat with someone...

We would love to speak with you and talk through your questions. Just email or call us at City Bible Forum and we can arrange a time.

City Bible Forum also run a number of events throughout the year where people are invited to investigate Jesus in a relaxed atmosphere and also to hear some great speakers. Contact us to find out more.



**CITY BIBLE
FORUM**
Ask the bigger questions

Get in touch
info@citybibleforum.org
citybibleforum.org