TRUE FULFILLMENT

A Study in Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes

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How to Use this Guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Lesson 1 | Life Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

By Steve Jones

"Everything is meaningless!" That is a phrase you expect to be shouted by an atheist philosophy professor or a disillusioned person struggling through a midlife crisis. It's not something you expect to find in the pages of Scripture. But that is precisely where the book of Ecclesiastes starts.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to be looking closely at Ecclesiastes. It is a difficult book to read because it is written from the perspective of a person who literally had it all and realized he had nothing. He had accomplished, acquired, and achieved everything a person could in this world, and he was just as hollow as he was when he started. He was the living embodiment of the quote: "The loneliest moment in life is when you have just experienced that which you thought would deliver the ultimate and it has let you down."

Before we dive in, though, a little background about the book might be useful.

Where Ecclesiastes Fits in the Bible:

Here is where to find Ecclesiastes in the roadmap of the Bible:

- The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament
    - o The Old Testament is written primarily in Hebrew and is about God choosing the people of Israel.
    - o The New Testament is written in Greek and is about Jesus and the Church.
    - o Ecclesiastes is in the Old Testament.
- The Old Testament is broken down into 4 groups:
    - o Law, History, Writings, Prophets.
        - • One of the biggest obstacles to reading and navigating the Old Testament is not understanding this 4-fold division. So, take out your bible, open it to the Table of Contents, and label the Old Testament books in these groups.
    - o Law – (Also Called the Torah, Pentateuch, and the 5 Books of Moses) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

o History – Joshua through Esther; These books tell the story of the formation, division, collapse, exile, and restoration of the nation of Israel.
o Writing – Job through Song of Songs; These books are a collection of wisdom literature (Proverbs), Worship Songs (Psalms), Philosophy (Job, Ecclesiastes), and Love Poetry (Song of Songs).
o Prophets – The rest of the Old Testament contains the writings of the prophets. They are divided into two groups, Major and Minor Prophets. This had nothing to do with the importance of each work. It has mainly to do with length. The Major Prophets wrote longer works.

- Major Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (We include Lamentations, which was written by Jeremiah, in the list of the Major Prophets, though in the Hebrew Bible it is listed in the writings with Proverbs, Psalms, etc.)
- Minor Prophets – Hosea through Malachi

The Words of the Preacher (Ecc.1:1)

It is not altogether clear who wrote Ecclesiastes. The author isn't named. The book starts off by saying that it contains "the words of the Preacher." The Hebrew word is "Qohelet (pronounced koh-HEL-et)." Many people simply refer to the author as either the Preacher or Qohelet (sometimes also spelled Kohelet).

Others try to figure out who the anonymous philosopher-king is. The rest of verse 1 says that the preacher is "the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Some interpret this rigidly and insist that son of David means Solomon. Other evidence from the book that supports Solomonic authorship include: his declared resolve "to study and to explore by wisdom" (1:12), as well as the claim to have superior wisdom (1:16); references to his great wealth (2:4–10); the mention of his building projects (2:4–6); the reference to his harem (2:8).

Problems arise, though, when we look closer. First, it is odd that if the author is Solomon, he did not just come out and say so. Both Proverbs and Song of Songs have Solomon's name attached to them. Another problem comes from Ecclesiastes 1:12, which says, "I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem." The verb is past tense. Literally, "I was the king." The author is saying he was the king but no longer is. The problem is that we know that there was never a time when Solomon abdicated his throne. Also, Ecclesiastes 1:16 claims to have increased in wisdom "more than all who were over Jerusalem before me." Solomon was only the third king of Israel, and only the second to rule from Jerusalem.

In addition, many scholars notice that the book seems to be the work of two people. The core of the work contains the words of the Preacher, but that work was organized by an editor who added a prologue (Ecc. 1:1-11) and a conclusion (Ecc. 12:8-14).

So, what's the answer? First: we have to remember that writing in Biblical times didn't happen the way it happens now. We come up with words in our heads and immediately commit them to writing via computers or pen and ink. In the New Testament, Paul dictated all his letters. Someone else wrote them down. We still say Paul wrote them. The book of Jeremiah contains the words spoken by Jeremiah, but they were written down by someone else, Baruch. In Jeremiah 36:1-3, God told Jeremiah to have Baruch write down all the oracles He had spoken "from the day I first spoke to you…even to this day." So, chapters 1-35 of Jeremiah was spoken by Jeremiah but written down by Baruch afterward, in some cases many, many years afterward.

When we factor that in, we are left with the idea that Ecclesiastes contains the words of a wise king, probably Solomon, but that those words were written down at a later date by someone else who edited the work.

Looking for Meaning…Under the Sun (Ecc. 1:2-3)

Everything is meaningless. That is how the book of Ecclesiastes opens. It seems like an odd statement for a book of the Bible to declare. There is a pessimism that pervades this book that many have a difficult time reconciling with the God revealed in the rest of Scripture. So, what is going on?

The clue is the phrase "under the sun" which gets used for this first time in verse 3, but which is used repeatedly in this book (29 times to be exact), but nowhere else in scripture. Sometimes we read over phrases like this one as simply a poetic phrase used by the author. But I think under the sun points us to the area of focus for the author. Looking "under the sun" means seeking meaning, purpose, and significance in this world only. It is an outlook that considers this world as all there is, and that doesn't factor in the existence of a transcendent God who is active in His creation and calls people into relationship.

The reason this book is included in scripture is to show us the futility and pointlessness of the search for meaning apart from God. If the only place you are looking for meaning is "under the sun" all you will find is heartache, despair, and meaninglessness.

Attributes of Life "Under the Sun" (Ecc. 1:3-11)

This first section is almost a hymn to meaninglessness. The preacher describes how life looks:

• Life "Under the Sun" Seems… Purposeless (v3-7): The preacher can decern no purpose in all of creation. There is not reward for labor (v3). What life we do have seems too brief and passing to do anything worthwhile (v4). Nothing seems to endure. The work that people do comes and goes with each passing generation. Everything seems repetitive. Nothing changes. The sun rises and sets. The rivers flow to the sea, but the sea isn't full. Everything just keeps going on as it always has, while humans are born and die and make no difference to everything else that stays the same.

• Life "Under the Sun" Seems… Unfulfilling (v8): The preacher moves from the purposelessness of the world to its effect on him. It is "wearisome." Nothing is worth doing. Everything is exhausting. Why? Because nothing is able to fill you up or satisfy you. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing." The work that we do "under the sun" takes from us without giving us anything lasting to fill us up.

• Life "Under the Sun" Seems… Hopeless (v9-11): The preacher ends his description of life "under the sun" with general hopelessness. There is nothing to look forward to. Nothing new ever comes. Nothing from the past endures. He has no hope of anything enduring in the future.

Conclusion

It is hard to read the preachers description of how his life feels to him and not be moved by a sense of sadness and dread. But the reason his words are included in scripture is to remind us of what life looks like when we take God out of the picture. In the rest of scripture, all creation proclaims the glory of God and gives evidence of His blessing, His power, and His control. Take God away, and all nature reveals is the weariness of mankind. In the rest of scripture, history is the outworking of God's plan and evidence of His faithfulness. Under the sun, the works of man are pointless and exhausting. Under the sun, history offers no hope, no guidance, no direction. Under the sun, there can be no redemption, for no new factor can be introduced.

If we find ourselves living lives that feel purposeless, unfulfilling, and hopeless, perhaps it is because our focus is only on what is "under the sun." It is to heaven that we have to learn to look. God is the source of what is really new. It is God who puts a "new song" in the psalmist's heart (Psalm 40:3; 96:1). It is God who tells the prophet He is doing a "new thing" (Isa. 43:19). We will only be able to see and experience it if we learn to expand our focus beyond only what is "under the sun."

Discussion Questions:

1. What was your first response to reading "everything is meaningless" in the pages of Scripture?

2. What are the 4 main divisions of the Old Testament? Where does Ecclesiastes fit in that division?

3. Who wrote Ecclesiastes?

4. How does understanding the concept of living life "under the sun" change our understanding of this book? What would you call the opposite of "under the sun?"

5. How does the preacher describe life "under the sun?" Have you ever felt that way? How can we learn to change our perspective?

Lesson 2 | Four Dead Ends

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:9

By Steve Jones

St. Augustine once famously wrote, "God made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Him." Humans continually seek for things to fill the God-shaped hole that is inside each of us. The problem is that only God can fill it. When we try to find meaning apart from God, we end up taking good things that God created and turning them into idols or demons.

We are the people described by Jeremiah 2:13 about whom God says, "My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." God is the source of living water, but instead of continually receiving life from the source, we dig wells for ourselves, looking for life from secondhand sources that dry up.

In our first lesson on Ecclesiastes, we saw how the preacher found only meaninglessness when his focus on life was only what was "under the sun." Today's study goes deeper down that road and looks closely at four dead ends that the Preacher tried in his search for fulfillment apart from God. It tells of the broken cisterns that he dug for himself that he soon realized couldn't hold any water.

Before we look closely at each one, it is first worth saying that none of these are bad on their own. They only become dead ends and broken cisterns when we stop seeing them as a blessing from God and start to look to them as the supreme source of meaning and fulfillment in our lives.

Failure of Wisdom (Ecc. 1:12-18)

The first dead end the preacher tries is wisdom and knowledge. Gaining understanding seems like a worthwhile endeavor, and it is, but exalt it to the highest thing in life and you will end up like the preacher, who realized in v14 that "all is vanity and striving after wind." Why? For a couple of reasons.

First: Trying to find the meaning of life only by focusing on what is "under the sun" is a futile task. It is like trying to describe the point of football by saying it is to score touchdowns. Explaining the game requires a larger focus than just the game. Explaining life requires a focus larger than just this life. Or it's like looking for the reason for why a building was built by looking at the blueprints. The blueprints will show you how it was built, but never why or by whom.

Second: the search for knowledge is endless. Facts are like numbers; you can always add one more to it. And even if you knew everything "under the sun" you still wouldn't know why anything was here to start with. That is why the preacher calls this kind of search for wisdom "chasing after wind." You never catch it, and even if you do catch it, you don't have anything.

Third: the search for knowledge is complicated. Verse 15 says, "What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted." That which is "crooked" refers to problems that cannot be solved, and that which is "lacking" refers to missing information. Some questions cannot be answered. Some information can never be found. You will never have all the information.

Finally, knowing some things may help you solve some problems, but the truth is that we all reach a point in our learning where we realize that the problems of man are too hard for us and the brokenness of this world is beyond our ability to repair. That is why he concludes in verse 18 with "Because in much wisdom there is much grief and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain." Seeing all that is wrong with the world and being unable to do anything about it leaves one feeling hopeless. His wisdom may help in some things, but it cannot solve the fundamental problem of life. When we limit our focus to living under the sun and try to find meaning in a life that excludes God, we will be faced with problems which we won't be able to solve. The world will seem repetitive and without hope.

Failure of Pleasure (Ecc. 2:1-3)

He next pursues all sorts of pleasures. Our bodies have appetites. Because of sin, those appetites are out of whack and out of control. The exaltation of pleasure turns us into the people described by Paul in Philippians 3:19 "whose god is their appetite." We think we can find meaning in new experiences. There are some obvious places where this error is easy to notice, like in the over-indulging of food, or drink, or sex. But there are some other places where the error is more difficult to discern; like in the pursuit of hobbies, games, travel, or other forms of entertainment. Again, none of these are strictly bad. One of the reasons God created this world was so that it could be enjoyed by us.

But when we exalt pleasure, experience, and entertainment to the place where it is the chief thing we are pursuing in life, we have gone off the rails. We will end up finding a dead-end saying, like the preacher in verse 2, "What does it accomplish?" Pleasures don't fill you up. When they are gone, they leave you empty and wanting more.

Failure of Possessions (Ecc. 2:4-8)

The next step the preacher takes is in acquiring more possessions. He builds houses, plants vineyards, buys stuff and even people in the form of slaves, and amasses wealth. But to no avail. No matter how much you think you need to be happy, you will always be looking for a little more. An old Roman proverb says, "the world gives a lot to some people, but enough to no one." The world is full of shiny objects that distract and compete for our attention. Again, God gives us things to bless us. But when we focus on the thing and think it is this thing that will make us happy, then we are on dangerous ground. As one of the 10 commandments says, "Thou Shalt Not Covet." You aren't supposed to desire what God doesn't want you to have. A wise man once said, "Obituaries read differently than advertisements regarding what constitutes a blessed life." The world lies to us that we will be happier if we just had a bigger house, or nicer car, or better stuff. Focusing on possessions is just one more dead-end.

Failure of Success (Ecc. 2:9)

The last dead-end that the preacher tries is to elevate himself over others. Verse 9 says, "Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem." There is a common temptation to turn our quest for significance into a need to feel superior to or elevate ourselves over others. God does create positions of leadership and calls people to serve in them. But there are two words in that sentence that are important to remember. The first word is "calling." God calls each of us to play a role in His kingdom. It's a role that is for His glory and our good. The second important word is "serve." Leadership roles exist to allow us the opportunity to serve one another. Good leaders use their positions to give themselves to others. Toxic leaders use their positions to take from others. When arrogance and sin take over, we come to view ourselves as better than other people. Or perhaps we think that our life is unable to have meaning unless we are a CEO or some other visible position that will get us praise from others. We think ourselves or others are failures if they don't get promoted. We look down on others that don't have our degrees, or our connections, or our success.

Conclusion

The approach described by the preacher is summed up perfectly in the warning contained in 1 John 2:15-17, which says, "[15] Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. [17] The world is passing away and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God continues to live forever."

Don't love the world or the things in the world. This doesn't mean every Christian is required to live in such a way that they get no enjoyment out of life. Or that any possible joy they experience in the world is automatically to be considered evil and must be punished and eradicated. "Loving the world" is an attitude of the heart that sees the world in a specific sinful way and uses it is for sinful attempts to find meaning and fulfillment apart from God. What is passing away are those sinful attitudes that see God's creation as a tool to be used for our own sinful appetites rather than something to be stewarded, cared for, and loved the way He loved it. Loving the world that way is going to end one day. God's love endures forever. And those who love God and love the world like Him will likewise endure.

The "love of the world" is really the love of self. It sees the world as an instrument to get what it wants. That is why John contrasts it in v17 with "the one who does the will of God." That is the choice, between following your own sinful, selfish, broken will or following the will of God. One way leads to despair and death, the other leads to life.

The preacher chose self and ended up in a dead-end of meaninglessness. We would do well to avoid the same result by seeking to live focused on more than what is "under the sun."

Discussion Questions:

1. How do people look for meaning in the search for knowledge and wisdom? When/how does it become a dead-end? How can we learn to see it as a good thing, without thinking it's the highest good?

2. How do people look for meaning in pleasures? How can we learn to enjoy life without living for pleasure?

3. How do people look for meaning in possessions? How can we see things as blessings from God to be stewarded without placing our trust/hope/identity in them?

4. How do people look for meaning in success/promotion/positions of leadership? How do calling and service play a role in how we seek leadership roles?

5. What is the difference between God's love for the world and the sinful way of loving the world described by 1 John 2:15-17? How can we learn to do one and reject the other?

Lesson 3 | Wisdom Versus Foolishness

Ecclesiastes 7

By Claire Mummert

When I was a child, I was frequently prone to exaggerations of the truth in order to get out of a tight spot. One particular moment that sticks out in my mind even into the present is a day when a friend who had hurt my feelings told me that she had already spoken with her mom, who spoke to my mom, to secure us a play date later that week. In that moment, I did not want to play with her. I wanted to avoid her at all costs.

It never occurred to me to appeal to my mom about the situation or to tell my friend about the hurt I was feeling, keep in mind I was around 7 years old, but I knew I "had" to solve the problem right then and I had to solve it on my own. So, I lied. I told a lie that continued to pile new lies on top of it in order to free me from this moment. My friend was bewildered and sad but believed my ridiculous story in full. I walked away thinking I had dodged a bullet and that no one would ever know. Famous last words.

My friend proceeded to tell her mom, who called my mom, who spoke to me, and I got in a heap of trouble. I felt so confused because I truly thought I had made the wisest choice while my mom could clearly see that I acted like a fool. The writer of Ecclesiastes has many thoughts on the importance of wisdom and today we will look at the three major approaches to wisdom: wisdom under the sun, wisdom under heaven, wisdom under control.

Wisdom Under the Sun (Ecc. 2:12-17)

This passage begins by extoling the virtues of wisdom and how it "surpasses foolishness as light surpasses darkness" (v13) but quickly turns to a realization that even wisdom is "futility" because the wise and the fool both die in the end (v15-16). This is true when we consider another common theme of Ecclesiastes and that is the phrase *under the sun*. While we discussed this in more detail in a previous week, take a moment to remember that all things that exist *under the sun* are things that are from the world. That means that this wisdom is from the world as well. And what did we learn about those things? They are purposeless, unfulfilling, and hopeless. That is exactly what we see when Qohelet tries to parse out the difference between following foolishness and pleasure versus following the wisdom of the world.

The wise create "no lasting remembrance" or legacy because their wisdom is based on that which is temporary.

While deciding if the author is Solomon is not necessary to read this book, it tracks for him just as it would for any king or person. He pursued knowledge and while it started out as knowledge from God (1 Kings 3), he eventually turned to the knowledge of the world. Though we remember his name, he is not remembered mostly for his successes but his failures. His own children are evidence that the wisdom of God was not passed down either. His riches, his wisdom, and even his rule all passed away because the thing he pursued was for himself and was *under the sun*.

Instead, our focus should be on a wisdom that lasts. We see that wisdom from the world is truly vanity and that wisdom outside of God's framework is not worth having but wisdom from God is the opposite. It is not striving after the wind. It is not perishable. It leaves behind a lasting legacy and name that cannot be tarnished. It is not under the sun, but above it. Outside of it. The Preacher says that foolishness is like the dark while wisdom is like light. John 8:12 tells us that Jesus is the light and that when we follow after God's wisdom, He will light our path (Psalm 119:105). We also know from James 1 that God gives out His wisdom with generosity to anyone who asks.

Wisdom Under Heaven (Ecc. 7)

James 3:17 tells us that "wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." This is the opposite of what we just discussed above as the wisdom that comes from the world, the wisdom under the sun. Wisdom brings strength but it cannot perfect a person nor make them completely free from sin, so they need divine intervention. They need wisdom from the Lord and His Spirit working in them to produce that wisdom. Even the author of Ecclesiastes believes that God is the one who can make people upright (v29), but it is people who corrupt.

Offering our own righteousness to God and offering our worldly wisdom to Him is not what He is looking for from His people. We need to give our lives to God and trust in His righteousness (Phil. 2:4-9), wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18-25), and freedom (Rom. 6:1-14). He wants neither our excessive righteousness or wickedness (v16-17) but wants our obedience and trust so that He might work His wisdom through us. This step is found primarily in the work of Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than mankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than mankind" (1 Cor. 1:24-25).

Throughout Ecclesiastes, the Preacher thinks on his legacy, those who come after him, and the fate of the wise. Upon reflection, he feels like it is all vanity. However, we can see that when we trust in the wisdom of God, we make His name great and contribute to the legacy of His great work. This means that what we work for is not perishable but eternal. "Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Wisdom Under Control (Ecc. 10)

Ecclesiastes 10 begins with an excellent proverb: "Dead flies turn a perfumer's oil rancid, so a little foolishness is more potent than wisdom and honor" (v1). While the entire chapter deals with the difference between a fool and a wise man, this piece is a defining principle. It is the idea that even a little bit of sin can create destruction. In fact, we know that the enemy is one who comes to "steal, kill, and destroy" (Jn. 10:10), he is the author of chaos. He will use even the tiniest foothold to create a chasm. We see this become true in the lives of Esau, Moses, Aaron, and many others throughout the Bible. Even David starts with one moment of weakness when it comes to Bathsheba and ends the situation with a mountain of foolish decisions.

Over and over this chapter shows us that people can be easily corrupted and inspires toward wisdom. But don't miss this other moment. Many will read this chapter and think that the answer to all problems is wisdom itself. The truth is, however, that wisdom can become an idol in our lives just as easily as money, luxury, acceptance, and more. Trusting in wisdom alone can still lead to a fly in the oil that turns it rancid. Instead, we need to have wisdom that is under control. Wisdom that is in its proper place, "coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17) and implemented by one controlled by His Spirit is the true way. So, we start to see a direction connection between wisdom and the fear of the Lord. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7).

Fearing the Lord, not being afraid of Him but being in awe of Him, will lead to humility, trust, and even a hatred of evil (Prov. 8:13). It will even help believers to leave behind the focus on the world and its wisdom (Matt. 10:28). Even Qohelet will go further into the concept in chapter 12 verse 13, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

Wisdom can be a righteous thing that helps guide our steps and shows us the best path forward. However, wisdom that comes from under the sun and focuses on our own name, reputation, or legacy will falter. It is temporary and leads to a purposeless, unfulfilling, and hopeless life. However, wisdom from the Lord and controlled by Him will lead you down a path of understanding and righteousness.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is wisdom that is under the sun? Can you give any examples?

2. What is wisdom that is under God? Can you give any examples?

3. What do we mean by wisdom under control?

4. How is wisdom related to the fear of the Lord?

5. What is the difference between fearing the Lord and being afraid of Him?

Lesson 4 | Run to the Father

Ecclesiastes 9

By Claire Mummert

Several years ago, there was a book and subsequently a movie that took the world by storm called Eat, Pray, Love. In the book/movie, there is a woman who has the husband, the job, the dream life. She has everything she could ever want and yet she finds herself unfulfilled. She gets a divorce and begins to go on a trip around the world to try and find herself. She learns to eat in Italy, pray in India, and love in Indonesia. While many people were critical of the book/movie, it also inspired large groups of people to do similar things. People who have all they could want still find themselves completely unsatisfied.

Qohelet could easily be a part of this group. He has everything he could want or need as a former king, but he sees everything around him as empty. His epiphany in Ecclesiastes 9 is that, if all is vanity any way, you might as well eat, drink, and be merry. 'Follow your heart.' 'Follow your bliss.' 'Do you.' Our culture's mantras echo this same line of thinking. "Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. See that your clothes are white all the time, and that there is no lack of oil on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your futile life which He has given you under the sun, all the days of your futility; for this is your reward in life and in your work which you have labored under the sun" (v7-9).

We may be tempted to read this verse and think there is a discussion of God's sovereignty in the middle of all this while, in fact, the author's focus on sovereignty consistently turns to fatalism. There is almost an implied "I hope" after he states that God has approved. He has tried it all and has decided that the only conclusion is to make yourself happy until the end.

This is life under the sun.

Today, let's take time to contrast the work of Qohelet with the actions of the prodigal son to see how the story is meant to end. We will see the limits of living for pleasure, how we long for more, and how we should run to the Father.

The Limits of Living for Pleasure (Ecc. 9:7-9; Luke 15:11-16)

The author of Ecclesiastes has spent many chapters to this point discussing all the vanity of things. Not only are tangible things empty, but so is wisdom in his eyes. He is living for temporal purposes and cannot find meaning. So, he decides to live for pleasure. He decides to eat and drink "with a cheerful heart" (v7). He spends money on fine clothes and oil so that he may enjoy "all the days of [his] futility" (v9). This is his advice to the world and seemingly for himself as well.

The prodigal son also takes this idea to heart. He has worked hard on his father's land and decides that he wants to live for himself and for gratification. He asks for his share of his father's wealth and quickly spends every penny on "wild living" (Luke 15:13). But, he soon finds himself out of funds and unsure what to do next.

Longing for More (Ecc. 3, Luke 15:14-16)

What happens to you when you live for pleasure and you have your fill? The prodigal son hires himself out to do unclean work that would make him quite lowly indeed. There is definitely no pleasure in his position. Maybe you end up like the king and you can continue in pleasure only to find it empty or maybe you are like the son who squanders everything and finds himself hopeless. C.S. Lewis explains it this way: "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. ... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud."

When we come to the end or the fulfillment of all the pleasure we seek, we can choose to live a bored, pseudo-contented life like that modeled by Qohelet or we can realize that we were made for something much greater. In fact, in Ecclesiastes 3:11, Qohelet himself recognizes that God has put eternity into the hearts of man, and this means that nothing from the Earth will satisfy. It is natural to find the things of the world to be lacking, but it should push us toward eternity, toward God rather than away from Him.

Though the author finds himself at a dead end, this is not the model we should uphold. Instead, we should think like the prodigal son. In the middle of his lowest moment, he remembers something. He is not hopeless. He can come to his senses and go home.

Run to the Father (Luke 15:16-32)

Unlike Qohelet who throws up his hands in defeat and allows fatalism to overtake him, the prodigal son has a different thought. He remembers his father. He knows he can go back to him even if it is only as a hired servant and not a son. He heads home and prepares to abdicate his sonship even further but knows that he will at least have enough food to eat. But "when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 11:20).

The father was watching for the son. The father saw him, had compassion, and restored him to the family. The prodigal son had tried all that the world had to offer and knew when to go home. This should have been the path of Qohelet, and others like him. Life under the sun is not worth living but God watches for you. He wants to reconcile you to Himself and make you a part of His family.

Psalm 8:3-5 reminds us that God offers true fulfillment. "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place; What is man that You think of him, and a son of man that You are concerned about him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty" (vs 3-5). These verses remind us that life in God is one of fulfillment and purpose. It shows us that God has intended us for greater things. As Irenaeus said, "the glory of God is man fully alive."

So, while God has given you skills, talents, and desires that He wants you to follow, He wants you to do it within His framework. He knows that, in Him, you will find everything you need. He stands as the father to the prodigal son, waiting to welcome you home.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Qohelet's reasoning for his eat, drink, and be merry lifestyle?

2. How does the prodigal son respond differently to the emptiness of pleasures?

3. What is the significance of the father responding to his wayward son?

4. How do you see God responding to you like the father responds to the son?

5. How can you find true fulfillment in Christ?

Lesson 5 | The End of the Matter

Ecclesiastes 12:9-12

By Steve Jones

In 1969, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a swiss born American psychiatrist described what she called the 5 Stages of Grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. Initially developed to address how people cope with death and dying, people have rightly pointed out some inadequacies and shortcomings of Dr. Kübler-Ross's model. The 5 categories she describes, though, are a useful grid to understanding the basic approaches people take when encountering any bad news. Denial: pretending nothing happened and everything is ok. Anger: being mad about the situation. Bargaining: thinking there is something you can do to change the situation. Depression: sinking into sadness believing there is nothing you can do. Acceptance: coming to terms with the situation.

It's easy to read a book like Ecclesiastes and end up feeling down. We read the proclamation that everything is meaningless and begin to feel many of the emotions described above. Denial: Qohelet is wrong, he has to be missing something. Anger: Qohelet is stupid. Bargaining: He may be a little right, but I bet I could still find meaning if I tried harder or looked in some new places. Depression: Woe is me. He is right. Everything is meaningless. Acceptance: Whelp, what should I do to readjust my life to this new reality.

Qohelet isn't Eeyore. He isn't focusing on the negative in life and missing all the good. He is more like a doctor who is trying to get us to realize an important, if perhaps troubling, truth about our health. The sooner we come to terms with it, the sooner we can move on. But where is he trying to move us. What are we supposed to do next?

The answer to this question is provided by the conclusion or epilogue to Ecclesiastes. Remember, this book probably had two authors, the preacher (also called Qohelet), and the compiler who organized the work and added both an introduction and a conclusion.

Some people read the conclusion and claim it feels "tacked on." They claim it was added by a pious editor to take the sting out of the work. But if that were the case, why include it in scripture at all. Surely there are already plenty of depressing texts about the meaninglessness of life, even in the ancient world. No, the conclusion makes explicit the point that Qohelet was making so that we will not miss it or misunderstand it; and so that we will know what to do next.

So today, we are going to look at the conclusion to Ecclesiastes to make sure we don't.

The Preacher's Motivation (Ecc. 9-11)

It's easy to receive bad news and respond first by blaming the one who delivered it. It's easy to fault find and say that Qohelet is just being a Debbie-downer, maybe diagnose him as depressed, or even dismiss him as stuck-up rich person who has everything and is greedy for more. To prevent us from shooting the messenger, the conclusion to Ecclesiastes begins by giving brief defense of the preacher's motivations and methods.

He was a Seeker (v9): Verse 9 says, "he pondered, searched out, and arranged many proverbs." He wanted to know. He was hungry to understand. He had a thirst for knowledge. He knew he was lacking and went looking for it.

He was a Servant (v10): But not only was He a seeker of knowledge, he was also a servant. He didn't hoard the knowledge he discovered, but rather gave it away. Verse 9 also says, "the Preacher also taught the people knowledge." But he didn't do it as someone who felt superior to others looking down from his ivory tower. Verse 10 says, "The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly." He spoke in ways that could be easily understood and accepted by his hearers. But he never compromised the message to make it accessible. His words were delightful, but they were also true.

He was an Inspirer (v11a): The words of the preacher weren't meant to cripple or demoralize. They were meant to inspire us, to move us in the direction we are supposed to be headed in. Verse 11 says, "The words of the wise are like goads, and masters of these collections are like driven nails." A goad is just a fancy word for a stick with a nail on it that you poke a cow with in order to make him head in the right direction. The preacher's words are supposed to make you uncomfortable, like getting poked, in order to move you in the direction you

are supposed to go. His words are also called "driven nails," unlike the goad which is outside the cow and only used when the farmer needs to redirect it. The words of the preacher are like a permanent goad, well driven, that don't easily come out. His carefully chosen words are designed to stick with you, to remain in your mind, to keep poking at you until you acknowledge their truth.

He was Inspired (v11b-12): The preacher has said some hard things. Some hard to understand others hard to accept. So, it's startling to read in v11 that his words are "given by one Shepherd." The idea here is that God inspired the preacher's words. The preacher himself was goaded by God in his search for truth in order that he might faithfully recount to us the full picture of what it means to search for meaning apart from God. The preacher's search was inspired so that we could learn second hand about the fruitlessness of it. That is the reason behind the warning in verse 12, which says, "But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive study is wearying to the body." We aren't supposed to read this and think we shouldn't read or write books. We are supposed to read this warning and remind ourselves that we won't find anything different. He tried everything, *everything*. He didn't miss anything. If we try to double-check his work, we will only find weariness.

The Preacher's Message (Ecc. 13-14)

Like the book of Job which takes 38 chapters before God speaks, Ecclesiastes takes a long time to get to the point.

Ecclesiastes reads like a complicated math problem. We have eleven and half chapters of equations, but the solution takes two lines to write out. Why is so much space dedicated to wrong answers and so little space to the correct one. Well, sometimes before we are ready to accept the one right answer, we have to realize the failure of all the other answers. Like Thomas Edison said when asked how it felt to fail 2000 times before he finally succeeded in inventing the lightbulb, "I didn't fail. I simply found 2000 ways not to make a lightbulb." Like in the New Testament, the prodigal son won't accept his place in his father's house until he tries everything else. Sometimes we aren't ready to hear the right answer until we have wrestled with all the other possibilities first. That is what the preacher does. Verse 13 gives the whole point of the book of Ecclesiastes: "The conclusion, when everything has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. "

The "meaninglessness" of life which the preacher so ruthlessly exposes would lead many of us to despair, depression, or nihilism. For the preacher, the exposure of the meaninglessness of life under the sun spurs him on to humility and dependence on God. His two answers are Fear God and Follow God.

Fear God – Fear of the Lord is one of those weird phrases that is easy to misunderstand. When someone says that we should fear God, people often think it means that we should be afraid of God. But that is not what it means. We are told that God loves us (John 3:16), and that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). So, the word fear must have a couple different but overlapping meanings. Fear can mean "to cower in terror at." This definition is often synonymous with "to be afraid of." But there is another definition of fear that means "to wonder and be amazed at." This definition is synonymous with "to be awed by." The difference is discerned in its effect on us. To be afraid of something makes you run away from it. To be awed by something makes you want to draw closer to it. Why is the word fear used? Most of the things that we are awe-struck and amazed by are powerful. Like a fire or a waterfall. We desire to be close, but we have to be careful because it's bigger, stronger, and more powerful than us. Fearing God is to be amazed by who God is and to desire to draw closer to Him. The call to fear God isn't a call to be afraid of God and live in terror of what He is able to do if we get on His bad side. Rather it is a call to be focused on and amazed by what He is able to accomplish. In the midst of our planning and dreaming, we can get consumed by ourselves, the obstacles, or other people. This is a reminder for us to center our attention on God, learning more about who He is, seeing the great things He has done, and being amazed at how His good plan unfolds in our midst.

Follow God – The natural realization of how big God is and how small you are leads to humility and obedience. He knows better than you what you should be doing with your life. That is why Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The key to skillful living is to remember God created you and knows better than you what will bring life. This realization will draw you into a life of obedience. Our understanding is shortsighted, broken, and incomplete. That is why Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us "[5] Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. [6] In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight." Obedience is our humble acceptance of what it means to be a human before God. We live by faith that His words are the source of true meaning.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is your initial response to the preacher saying everything is meaningless? Where are you in the 5 steps of grief?

2. How was the preacher a seeker? A servant? An inspirer? Inspired?

3. How does the meaninglessness of life "under the sun" drive us to fear God?

4. What does it mean to fear God? How is it misunderstood? What does it really mean?

5. How does the meaninglessness of life "under the sun" drive us to follow God?