



Eternity in Our Hearts

How the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes
Frees Us to a Richer Reality

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Eternity in Our Hearts

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Eternity in Our Hearts

Dear Reader,

As I write these words, summer is slowly letting go. Autumn is spreading her golden hues over New Hampshire, tossing the trees in blustery breezes as the leaves fall in circles. I have always been drawn to autumn, and, in the same way, I am drawn to Ecclesiastes. They both teach us to let go, to die to self, and to see the beauty of the temporary and eternal. They point to death, reminding us that this life is precious, short, and beautiful. And they both show us the artistry, character, and glory of our God who is with us for eternity.

I first studied Ecclesiastes the summer before my health fell apart. I marveled at its literary genius and steeped my heart in the truth and wisdom it brings to every inch of life. My friends and I dissected it chapter by chapter, hungry for a life of richness and meaning. That fall, when my illness worsened to a breaking point, I remembered the words of Ecclesiastes and took courage, for health is vapor—only the Lord is steady. Then in the spring, when I had to let go of so many things I loved in order to rest, I remembered the Preacher's words that pleasures and accomplishments are "a striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11 ESV). God prepared my heart for these big changes by bringing me through

The background of the page is a soft, painterly illustration of a landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of tall grasses and small, delicate flowers in shades of blue, purple, and white. The field appears to be on a gentle slope. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains, their details softened by a thick mist or fog. The overall color palette is muted and atmospheric, with a lot of grey, blue, and green tones. The lighting is diffused, creating a sense of depth and tranquility.

Eternity in Our Hearts

Introduction

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Introduction

He 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.

ECCLESIASTES 3:11 NIV

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. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.¹

C. S. LEWIS

Ecclesiastes is a book for today's age. The corporate world is described as a "rat race," depression and anxiety plague us, and social media perpetuates "FOMO," body image problems, and lifestyle comparison. We are dissatisfied. We always want just a little bit more as we look for the meaning of life in promotions, waistlines, or entertainment. It is no wonder that many of us echo the Preacher's cry: "Meaningless!" But deep in the middle of our Bibles is an often forgotten little book that addresses these things. My hope is to take us on a journey into the rich wisdom of Ecclesiastes so that we may discover together that "chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:17 NIV) only leads to disillusionment, but that chasing after God leads to eternal life, and life to the full.²

Ecclesiastes, at first glance, may seem confusing or depressing. But, if we look closely, we will see that it is a work of art from beginning to end, using rich imagery, poetry, and timeless aspects of life to point readers to our source of hope: Christ. The Preacher sketches a picture of life in black and white that looks bleak, pointless, and fleeting. But when we look at this life through the lens of eternity, with Christ's gift of redemption and his promise of life to the fullest, it is as if an artist dips a brush in paint and colors life in the most vivid of hues.

The overarching message of Ecclesiastes is that life without Christ is futile. The Preacher grapples with life's randomness, suffering, and cyclical nature by asking hard questions. He has lived with incredible

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ed. First HarperCollins Paperback Edition, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 136-137.

2 John 10:10.

wealth, power, and pleasure, but they weren't enough to satisfy him. This is a message for all of humanity in every era. Without Christ, we will never be satisfied because we were created for a relationship with him. In Christ, we find supreme satisfaction—no matter our circumstances—because God is the best thing, and he brings meaning to life.

Ecclesiastes explains that if we are living only for this lifetime, we are missing out. Only Jesus can bring true meaning, and Jesus brings meaning to *everything*, even the most mundane of days. This has incredible implications, because not only does it mean that life's joys can be truly enjoyed with God, but also the lows and boring things; with Jesus, vacuuming the floor has meaning.

Part of the beauty of Ecclesiastes is that it asks all the questions we want to but might be too scared to ask. It expresses all the frustrations we want to but perhaps don't feel like we should. Ecclesiastes is important because it lets us know that God can handle our big questions, our depression, our frustration, and our hopelessness. In fact, just expressing these things to God can make us aware of how much we need him. It is often when we are most disillusioned with this world that we turn to our heavenly Father.

And so, as we explore the wisdom this book holds, we will learn to hold the things of this earth loosely and cling tightly to the things of eternity. We will see that death without eternity makes life pointless, and that life apart from Christ is devoid of purpose. Thankfully, we all have the option to live life close to Christ, enjoying his presence and a hope that spans eternity.

The Wisdom Books

The wisdom books ask some of life's biggest questions: *Is God just? How do I live a fulfilling life? Is life worth living?* The three wisdom books in the Bible are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.³ Proverbs is seen as the most cheerful of the books, with observations about what is usually true of life: i.e., if you work hard, you will profit.⁴ Proverbs teaches that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10 NIV), and that righteousness leads to flourishing.⁵ However, Job shows us that the righteous do not always prosper in the short run by telling the story of a man who followed God but lost everything in a season of testing. Job asks questions about God's sovereignty and justice in a world filled with suffering. Ecclesiastes explores the ideas of meaning and permanence, concluding that these things can only be found with God. The wisdom books are gifts, showing us that the Bible speaks to all corners of life—including the confusing and devastating ones.

These three books work together to guide us in a wise way of living. I encourage you to listen to the words of Job and Proverbs in addition to Ecclesiastes to gain a well-rounded view of God's wisdom. You might read through the other two books alongside this study or after you finish. It is always beautiful to learn firsthand, as we read and study, how all parts of the Bible work together to point to Christ and to edify our whole lives.

3 Psalms and Song of Solomon are sometimes included in this list, but they are most often categorized as poetry.

4 Proverbs 14:23.

5 Proverbs 11:28.

Who wrote Ecclesiastes?

The first words we read as we open Ecclesiastes are, “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1 ESV). The word “Preacher” here is literally *Qôhelet*, which can refer to a collector of words, gatherer, preacher, or speaker in an assembly.⁶ Many have assumed that *Qôhelet* (the Preacher) is Solomon, the son of David, not only because of the title in verse 1, but also because of the list of achievements in chapter 2 that are strongly reminiscent of his life. However, since *Qôhelet* is never named, the writing style doesn’t mirror Solomon’s other works, and “son of David” could refer to any of David’s descendants who sat on the throne, there is no way to know.⁷

Adding to these layers of mystery is the idea that the Preacher is probably not the author at all. He is referred to in the third person, and, after the Preacher’s words end in chapter 12, the author describes the Preacher’s life and character in the third person *and* the past tense. This makes it seem as though the author collected the Preacher’s words of wisdom to write into the book of Ecclesiastes.

Whatever the case, the timelessness of the book does not require clarity on authorship or even the date it was written. These words are ultimately from God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and written by man.

6 Blue Letter Bible, s.v. “Strong’s H6953 - *qôhelet* (n.)” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h6953/esv/wlc/0-1>, accessed January 27, 2022.

7 ZA Blog, “Who Wrote Ecclesiastes and What Does It Mean?” *Zondervan Academic*, HarperCollins Publishers, October 21, 2017, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/who-wrote-ecclesiastes-and-what-does-it-mean>, accessed January 27, 2022.

The anonymity of both the Preacher and the author gives this book even more of a timelessness. Ecclesiastes describes life for everyone at every time in history.

What to Expect

As we work our way through the book of Ecclesiastes, there will be daily reflections on the passage that answer questions we may have, connect the passage to other parts of God's Word, and apply the passage to our daily lives. Occasionally, we will read the same passage two days in a row, reflecting on different elements of the text each day. Passage length for any given day will range from a whole chapter to just one verse, and will often include secondary passages outside of the book of Ecclesiastes that help us connect the Preacher's ideas to all of Scripture and Jesus Christ's finished work of redemption.

Throughout each day's reading, you will have the chance to reflect on the passage. You can write the answers to your questions in the space provided or in a journal, call a friend to tell them what you are learning, or talk through the questions with God. The idea is to reflect in the way that helps you best process, understand, and retain God's Word. Do you best process internally or externally? Does writing answers down make you think, or is it more daunting than helpful? Do you retain things best when you teach them to someone else? There is freedom to reflect in the way that helps you digest the text, and if you aren't sure, try a different tactic every day until you find something that works well.

This study is divided into seven weeks, but my prayer is that you feel the freedom to take it at your own pace. Jesus came to free us from the heavy weight of religious tasks and free us *to* the abundant love of God. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone, and I hope that you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can put aside any shameful duty you feel surrounding Bible study to simply sit at the feet of your Savior like Mary, enjoying his presence and listening to his voice.⁸

Why All the Different Translations?

I'm not fluent in reading ancient Hebrew, and I'm guessing you aren't either. However, we have the privilege of selecting an English translation of the Bible to read from. You will see four different translations used throughout this book: English Standard Version (ESV), Christian Standard Bible (CSB), New International Version (NIV), and New Living Translation (NLT). Each translation brings something different and valuable to the table. The ESV is incredibly accurate in its translation of each specific word. The NLT and NIV are thought-for-thought translations, meaning they focus on conveying the meaning of phrases in the best possible way and are easier to read. The CSB is neither word-for-word or thought-for-thought, but instead tries to stay faithful to the original meaning of the text in a translation philosophy called "optimal equivalence." Each translation has different strengths, and each will be used in different circumstances depending on our needs.

⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9; Luke 10:38-42.

The other reason for using four different translations—sometimes at the same time—is that we can get a better feel for the text. Let's say your personal Bible translation is ESV. You may read a passage in the ESV and not quite understand it. The first thing to turn to, always, is the Holy Spirit as you ask him to open your eyes to Scripture (we get to do this *anytime* we read God's Word, not just when we don't understand something!), but you can also look up another translation online to read it in a different way. Sometimes our brains just need that.

Reading in a different translation with slightly different wording also challenges our brains to re-comprehend the passage and its truth. If we are very familiar with certain passages, they can lose their potency or meaning in our mind. Our eyes glaze over. Reading in other translations may bring new life to Scripture to which we have grown hardened or blind.

The background of the page is a soft, painterly illustration of a landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of tall grasses and small blue and white flowers. The middle ground shows rolling hills and mountains shrouded in a thick, white mist or fog. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Eternity in Our Hearts

Prologue

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Prologue

A book like Ecclesiastes is best read all at once since reading just one verse or section by itself can be confusing. Context is important in all of Scripture and serves us well here in Ecclesiastes. By nature of close study, our journey into this book will be in smaller sections, but a full read through now will help us get our bearings in this unique wisdom book. (Note: As you read through, you might encounter sections that send off alarms in your head. It is important to understand that the Preacher sometimes paints an incomplete picture on purpose to show us what life under the sun looks like without the hope we have in God. Make note of these sections—they are very interesting!)

Pray,
*asking God to teach you
through his Word.*

Read
*or listen to the entire book of
Ecclesiastes. This will take the
average reader approximately
30 minutes. Brew a cup of your
favorite tea or coffee, sit in your
comfiest chair, and enjoy!*

Reflect

You may not know how to answer all of these questions after just one read through, and that is okay (and expected)! Don't put pressure on yourself; these questions are just to get us thinking. We will revisit these at the end of our time in Ecclesiastes, so answering them now in whatever capacity you can will help us look back at what God has revealed to us in his Word.

What stood out to you on your first read through? What ideas did you connect with?

What questions do you have about the text? What confused you?

Did you notice any repeated words or phrases?

What are the main ideas of Ecclesiastes?

What does Ecclesiastes say about God?

What does Ecclesiastes say about humanity?

How does Ecclesiastes point to Christ?

Speak or write out a prayer to God, letting him know your fears or uncertainties about this study, what you hope to learn, and what you want him to do in your heart as you study the book of Ecclesiastes.

The background is a painting of a vast, misty landscape. In the foreground, a field of tall grasses and small flowers in shades of blue, pink, and white is visible. The middle ground shows rolling hills and valleys shrouded in a thick, white mist. The background features more distant, hazy mountain ranges under a soft, grey sky. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Eternity in Our Hearts

Week 1

Week One — Day One

Vapor

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2 ESV

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

“Absolute futility,” says the Teacher.
“Absolute futility. Everything is futile.”

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2 CSB

Pray,
asking God to teach you
through his Word.

Read
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

There is a road in rural New Hampshire I drive a few times each summer that winds up a small mountain. At the top sits an old farmhouse with low stone walls looking down on pockets of valley between evergreens. I've watched the sun rise and set from this spot, but my favorite time to pull my car over to marvel here is at dawn or right after a rainstorm, when the mist rises in fragile white tendrils from the deep green valleys—like incense rising to heaven.

When was the last time you saw mist? Was it steam from your tea kettle? Was it in a field after a rainstorm? Was it your breath outside on a cold day? Fix that image in your mind as you read the first verse of Ecclesiastes.

The word “vanity,” “futility,” or whatever English noun your Bible translation uses appears many times throughout Ecclesiastes, a theme echoing through all twelve chapters. But looking at the original text, the Hebrew word *hebel* here means “vapor, breath.”¹ Any literal translation of *hebel* seems elusive, which is fitting for its meaning, but readers

1 Blue Letter Bible, s.v. “Strong’s H1892 - *hebel* (adv., n.),” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1892/esv/wlc/0-1>, accessed January 27, 2022.

can grasp the Preacher's idea.² Everything is *hebel*—slipping through fingers like mist, evaporating like vapor, and fragile like breath.

The word *hebel* is used heavily in Psalms and all three wisdom books. Clearly, there is wisdom in knowing that life is but a vapor. Because this is such an important word in Ecclesiastes, understanding its meaning will help us interpret the text correctly. So, to grasp the use of *hebel* in the Old Testament, let's look at a few passages.

“How then will you comfort me
with empty nothings [*hebel*]?

There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.”

JOB 21:34 ESV

If you are familiar with the book of Job, you will remember that in Job's intense suffering, his friends give long speeches blaming Job under the false belief that personal sin is always the cause for one's hardships. Here in Job's reply, we see him call their long-winded admonishments “empty nothings.” Job's words might remind us of Paul's when he writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1 ESV).

“I give up! I will not live forever.

Leave me alone, for my days are a breath [*hebel*].”

JOB 7:16 CSB

² Michael V. Fox, “The Meaning of *hebel* for *Qohelet*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (1986), 409-27.

In an earlier passage from the same book, Job tells his friends that his life is *hebel*. This idea that our lives are fleeting is expressed many times in the Bible, and it is true. Life slips quickly away, and, in the vastness of eternity, our time on earth is infinitely short. That is not to say that our life is devoid of purpose—recognizing how short and fragile life is can actually be a step toward truly finding purpose in life.

Thus says the LORD:

“What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness [*hebel*],
and became worthless?”

JEREMIAH 2:5 ESV

Jeremiah’s words from the Lord are a clear indicator that life apart from God is *hebel*, and this truth is the backbone of Ecclesiastes. Every earthly thing we chase and worship is incomparable to the God who created everything, who is infinitely satisfying, and who knows us better than we know ourselves.

So, how does this inform our study of Ecclesiastes? When we see “vanity,” “meaningless,” “futility,” or whatever word our Bible translation uses, we can think of the mist rising out of deep valleys, the steam from our coffee cup, or our breath curling into December air—here only for a moment before the sun rises, the coffee cools, or our breath dissipates. And then, gone.

The Preacher says that “everything” is *hebel*, and we will see as we venture further into his argument that he means everything of this temporary world. The more we see the impermanence of this life and the futility of activities under the sun, the more we will long for eternity. As Ecclesiastes unfolds, the Preacher laments the futility of living for this life, and as we realize that we were made to live for so much more, we will desire things eternal. We will desire God.

Do you ever feel like life is *hebel*? When do you usually feel this way? How does it feel to see this expressed in the Bible?

What verse from Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 was most interesting? What does this verse mean, and what does it contribute to the passage?

What questions do you have about the passage? What confused you or piqued your curiosity? Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your understanding of his Word. You might also consult a commentary (in print if you have one, or online if you don't) or talk it through with someone you trust.

Read Hebrews 13:8. How does this verse connect to our passage? What does this truth mean for your daily life?



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