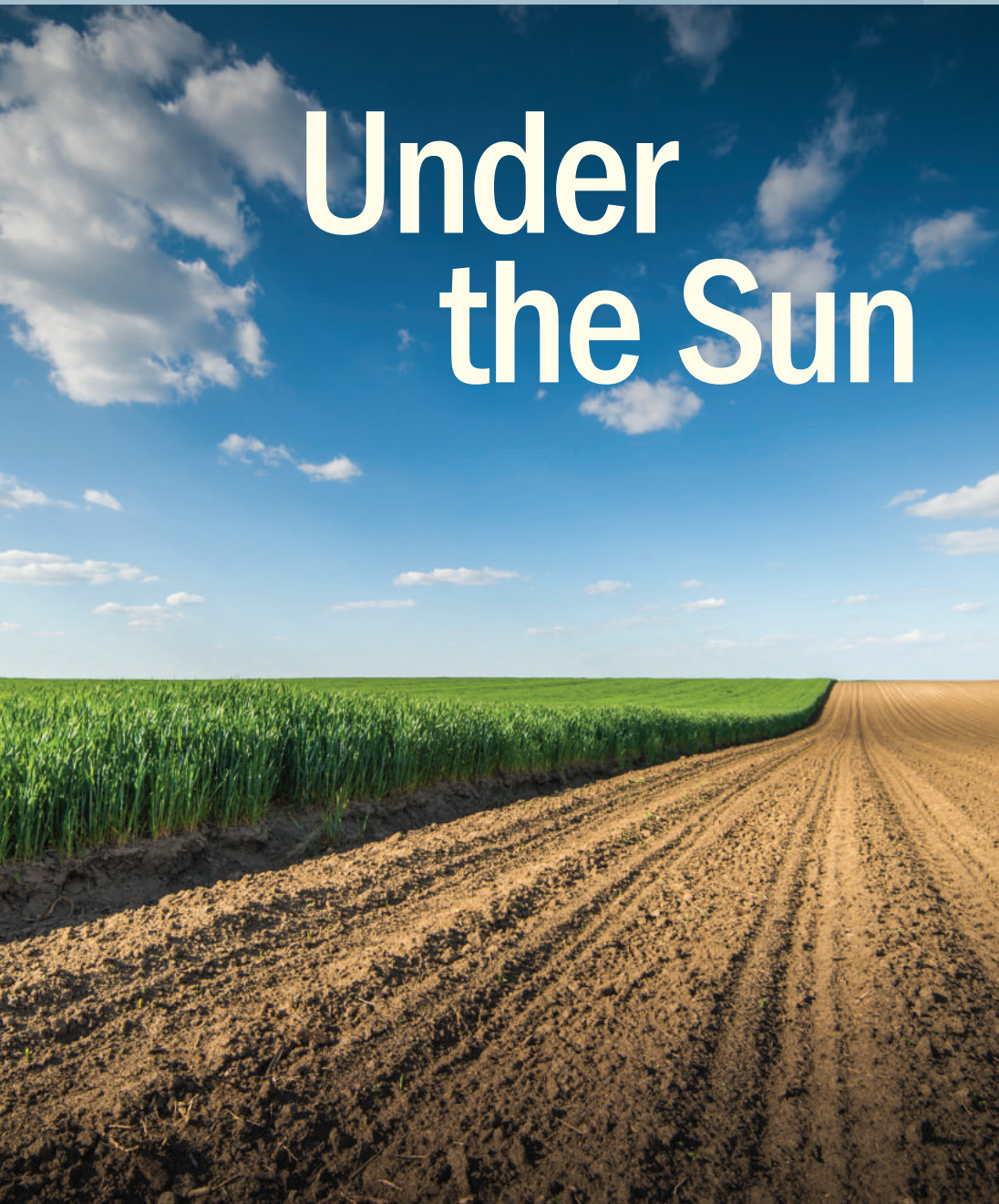




# PATHWAY BIBLE GUIDES

ECCLESIASTES

# Under the Sun





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# Under the Sun

**ECCLESIASTES**

**BY DES SMITH**



**matthiasmedia**

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

*Under the Sun*

Pathway Bible Guides: Ecclesiastes

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# BEFORE YOU BEGIN

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The word ‘Ecclesiastes’ means ‘one who gathers others together’. Preachers and teachers gather others together so that they can teach a class, congregation or assembly about the important things they have learned.

The book of Ecclesiastes is an investigation and a report on an experiment in thought and action—we might call it a ‘meditation’—on the big questions of life. What does life mean? Is there any point to it? You work all day, and you spend your time as best you can, and you make good money and wise decisions and you try to do the right thing, but in the end what does it matter? What will it gain you? In the end you’re going to die anyway, and time will march on relentlessly once you’re gone. Is there any point to life that makes living well now worthwhile? And what does ‘living well’ mean anyway? These are the questions the book of Ecclesiastes asks and (sort of) answers.

The way Ecclesiastes presents itself is fascinating. Just as an evening news program features stories that are also introduced by a host, so Ecclesiastes has two voices: the voice of the host (we’ll call him the Editor), who introduces and wraps up the story; and the reporter—called ‘The Preacher’—who prepares and files the story. And that story is a compelling one. The Preacher has spent his whole life looking at life

and trying to work out “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). His conclusion? Nothing is gained. “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity”, says the Preacher (1:2). Trying to gain anything in life is pointless. Not exactly what you’d call joyful, is it?

This is not because the Preacher believes there is no God. On the contrary, he talks about God all the time, and assumes that God is involved in his world, albeit mysteriously and at something of a distance. Furthermore, the Preacher’s Editor agrees with him: “The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (12:10). And yet the Preacher and Editor *still* think life is ‘vanity’ (more on what that word means later), even though *there is* a God! How can that be?

The answer lies in that little phrase ‘under the sun’. The Preacher is investigating what can be ‘gained’ in life as he can see it—from the evidence available to his senses. This is life ‘under the sun’. And from what he can see from life under the sun, nothing can be gained here: all is ‘vanity’. That doesn’t mean he thinks there’s no point in doing anything. Although he may think seeking *gain* under the sun is futile, he still thinks we can receive good things in life as a *gift*. That may be a consolation prize, but it’s better than nothing—and, according to the Preacher, it’s all we’re going to get.

But that doesn’t mean that’s the end of the matter. The Preacher may only be able to see and draw his conclusions from life ‘under the sun’, but this side of Jesus we can do much better. We know there’s nothing we can gain *under* the sun but, in Jesus, we’ve now seen someone enter our world from *beyond* the sun—and that makes all the difference.

*Des Smith*

March 2018

# 1. LIFE UNDER THE SUN

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Ecclesiastes 1 and 12:9-14



## Getting started

Do you ever feel the repetitive and boring nature of life? What does it make you wonder about life?





**Note:** The word translated as ‘vanity’ here is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which literally means ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’. It occurs more than 30 times in the book and is the Preacher’s favourite way to describe what trying to achieve ‘gain’ under the sun is like. In some contexts, *hebel* could mean ‘meaningless’, but it could also mean ‘fleeting’ or ‘absurd’. In my view, the writer of Ecclesiastes has deliberately used a vague term—the metaphor of ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’—because he wants us to let it have different meanings in different settings.

4. What is it about the world that makes life this way (vv. 4-11)?

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.

5. If this is what life is like according to the Preacher, what does that do to his ability to understand it?

Read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14.

6. What does the Editor think about the Preacher's conclusions?

7. What is "the end of the matter" for the Editor (v. 13)? What do you think this means?

Read Romans 8:18-21.

**Note:** The Greek word Paul uses in Romans 8:20 that our English Bibles translate as 'subjected to futility' is the same word the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) used to translate *hebel* in Ecclesiastes. So as you read the word 'futility' in Romans 8:20, you could insert the words 'vanity', 'meaninglessness', 'mistiness' or 'fleetingness' from Ecclesiastes and it would make just as much sense.

8. Who does Paul say is responsible for the ‘futility’ or ‘vanity’ of life?  
(See also Eccl 1:13.)

9. What hope is held out to those who are subject to that vanity/futility/  
frustration?



## To finish

Think of a current example of frustration in your life—a task or relationship that you really feel ought to be working but isn't. How might Ecclesiastes explain what is going on? How might this help you?



## Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for intervening in this world ‘under the sun’ and giving us something we really can gain: eternal life in Jesus Christ.
- Pray for patience with the frustrations of life, knowing that they are to be expected in a world under the judgement of God.



## Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks that death is not the end for Christians and that we have the hope of eternal life to look forward to.
- Pray all the same that we would still make the most of our lives now, and treasure our days even more, precisely because they are so few.

### **Feedback on this resource**

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## LEADER'S NOTES

# 1. LIFE UNDER THE SUN

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## Ecclesiastes 1 and 12:9-14

► Remember 60/40/20



### Getting started

The 'Getting started' question is designed to get people to feel the weight of what the Preacher is describing in 1:4-11: the cyclical, repetitious nature of life and the draining effect that has on our perceptions of life's meaning. For the Preacher, it's the repetitiousness of the course of the sun (1:5) or the water cycle (1:7). For us, it may be the monotony of a repetitive job or making lunch for the kids each day. But the effect is the same: life just seems to go around in circles, and that makes life seem pointless (quite literally, 'aimless').

### Studying the passage

'The Preacher' is an English translation of the Hebrew word *Qohelet*, which literally means 'one who assembles' (an assembly which, given the teaching-like nature of what *Qohelet* does, we assume to be the assembly of those gathered to learn what the Preacher has discovered and now announces to them).

The Preacher's identity is the subject of debate. On face value it would seem to be Solomon, since he was both one of David's sons and a king in Jerusalem. This would also fit given that Solomon was widely regarded in Israel as the wisest person who'd ever lived (1 Kings 10; cf. 1 Kgs 3:12 and Eccl 1:16). It is worth being aware, however, that many modern scholars believe the Preacher may be someone speaking in the voice of Solomon rather than Solomon himself. People have various reasons for taking this view, including the fact that the writer of Ecclesiastes uses a pseudonym instead of clearly identifying himself.

Don't feel you need to raise any of this in your group; it's just good to know in case someone asks.<sup>1</sup>

The Preacher asks "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (v. 3). That is, can a person make progress and achieve goals in life—things that most people see as important parts of what makes life meaningful? His answer is, "No, nothing can be gained under the sun". The world is 'vapour' and so it is impossible to firmly grasp hold of and do anything with it. It's here one day, gone the next. Chasing after gain in the world is like chasing after wind.

What makes it impossible to achieve gain in the world is that it's a closed, cyclical system. The Preacher uses the example of the water cycle: all streams flow into the sea, but the sea is never full (v. 7). There's a lot of water moving around, but after all that work, is there one more litre of water in existence on the earth? No. There's no *gain*. So, says the Preacher, there is no gain in life. We are trapped in the same closed, cyclical system.

The Preacher doesn't see the pointlessness of life as something natural and just to be accepted. Rather, he sees it as a consequence of the judgement of God (cf. Rom 8:18-21). It is an "unhappy business that *God* has given to the children of man" (1:13). As a result, if the world no longer makes sense in a way it was once meant to, this will make it a lot harder to understand. And if it's God who's made it that way, then there'll be no changing that fact: "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted" (1:15). Making sense of life in a world that God has deliberately cursed with absurdity will be hard, and in some cases impossible.

The Editor learned from, agrees with, and affirms both the Preacher and his conclusions (12:9-10). This doesn't mean that the Editor thinks all of those conclusions are pleasant. Rather, they are like "goads"—the pointy bit at the end of a shepherd's stick designed to get sheep moving. They hurt. But they're things that hurt being wielded by a shepherd, someone who cares for his sheep. Moreover, they're "nails". That is, they fix one thing to another; in this case, wisdom to the listener (12:11). All in all, the Preacher's words are not always pleasant, but they are always for our good.

The Editor concludes with, "Fear God and keep his commandments"

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1. If you would like to read more about the debate around the Preacher's identity, see DS O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, Reformed Expository Commentary, RD Phillips and PG Ryken (series eds), P & R Publishing, Phillipsburg, 2014; and T Longman III and RB Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2006, pp. 279-282.



(12:13). That is his summary of how best to live in a world cursed by God with *hebel*, ‘mistiness’. What this means is that since life is unpredictable and out of our control, and we often don’t know what’s going on, the wisest thing to do is put ourselves in the hands of the one who *does* know what’s going on and *is* in control of everything: God. Doing that is what it means to “fear God”.

Christians will be resurrected into a new world that is not subjected to futility/*hebel*. This is the logic: we are children of God *now*, because of the Spirit (Rom 8:14, 16). But we still suffer because we live in a world that is under the judgement of God, of which one manifestation is ‘frustration/*hebel*’—its absurdity and unpredictability (Rom 8:18, 20). But there is hope: one day our full status as God’s children will be revealed (Rom 8:21) because our bodies will be redeemed (i.e. resurrected; Rom 8:23). We won’t just *be* God’s children; we’ll also be *living like it*. That is the hope of the gospel for those living in a frustrated, pointless, cyclical, closed-system world—which is summed up in Ecclesiastes by the phrase ‘under the sun’. The good news is that someone has pierced our world from *beyond* the sun and has added something new to it: the resurrected body of the Lord Jesus Christ, who promises to give us resurrected bodies too.



## To finish

The aim of this question is get people to apply the principles they’ve learned to a real-life example. In particular, it is to give people the comfort that when things don’t work out the way we feel they should, this shouldn’t surprise us but rather it is exactly the sort of thing we should expect to see in a world burdened by God with *hebel*. This doesn’t necessarily make the frustration any less frustrating! But it does take away the anxiety of thinking, “If things aren’t going well, it must be because I’m doing something wrong, and if only I found the right way to do it, it would all be fine”. To this, the Preacher says: “No, you may be doing everything right; it’s just that this world is really good at giving absurd, unexpected results, even to really good attempts”.