

CHASE

"THE CIRCLE OF LIFE" ECCLESIASTES 1:1-11

This Week's Core Competency

Humanity – I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior. John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

In good times people seldom reflect on the meaning of life; most are content to simply enjoy life. In bad times things change. Many doubt in the darkness what they took for granted in the light. Some question whether life is worth living; a few flatly deny that it is. The book of Ecclesiastes owns up to the elephant in the room and addresses this vexing issue directly. Solomon introduces his take on things with these words: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" His assertion sounds almost too pessimistic to be biblical, but his words must be understood in context. The former king of Israel speaks to the issue as a teacher. He addresses the matter as a sage rather than a theologian, and like all good wisdom teachers, his goal is to provide people with realistic, practical advice on living. Ecclesiastes is to be read like Proverbs rather than Romans.

According to Solomon, the meaning of life cannot be found in work (1:14; 2:11, 17; 4:4, 7-8), wisdom (2:15), righteousness (8:14), wealth (2:26; 5:10; 6:2), prestige (4:16), pleasure (2:1-2), youth and vigor (11:10), not even in the future after death (11:8). He doesn't mean to say that life has no

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.
— the Teacher

meaning at all, but only that the meaning of life cannot be found in anything "under the sun." He admits that wisdom has a decisive advantage over folly (2:13-14), wealth (7:11-12), and physical strength or military might (9:16, 18; 7:19). And having wisdom makes it easier to succeed (8:1-6; 10:8-10), but it doesn't guarantee success. It is meaningful in a relative sense, but in an absolute sense, it, too, is meaningless in that a wise man is subject to the same unpredictable misfortunes as a wicked person (9:1-2, 12) and attaining wisdom is hardly his *raison d'être*, i.e., reason for being.

But Solomon was no skeptic. One author explains: "The dominant mood of the book is pessimism, but the author, Solomon, was no pessimist, cynic, or skeptic as some critics have claimed. He was a believer who sought to destroy people's confidence in their own efforts, their own abilities, their own righteousness and to direct them to faith in God as the only possible basis for meaning, value, and significance to life 'under the sun.' However, Solomon did not say that a person's efforts had no value whatever. One's labor can accomplish great things and gain him some pleasure (2:10). Skill can make it easier to succeed (10:10). Righteousness can give more security than wickedness (8:12-13). But in the light of the Fall (7:29), the inscrutability of providence (6:12), the imminence of death (12:1-7), and the obscurity of life after death (3:19-21; 11:8), labor, skill, and righteousness hold little promise of security or ultimate value" (Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 976, 77). The overall meaning of life is found in none of these.

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So what is one to do? How is one to live? Solomon concludes with the answer to this question. "Fear God and keep his commandments," he writes, "for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14). Evidently, one doesn't have to know the meaning of life in order to know how to live.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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

2 *"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.*

*"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."*

3 *What does man gain from all his labor
at which he toils 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 *There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow.*

Cf., another translation

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

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

3 *What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?*

4 *A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

5 *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

6 *The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.*

7 *All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.*

8 *All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.*

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

10 *Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?*

*It has been already
in the ages before us.*

11 *There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after. (ESV)*

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

* Underline "the Teacher" in vv. 1, 2.

* Bracket "king in Jerusalem" in v. 1.

* Highlight "meaningless" (4x) in v. 2.

* Circle "gain" in v. 3.

* Bracket "under the sun" in vv. 3, 9.

* Draw an arrow from "labor" to "toils" in v. 3.

* Circle "generations" in v. 4.

* Box "but" indicating contrast in v. 4.

* Circle "hurries" in v. 5.

* Box "yet" indicating contrast in v. 7a.

* Bracket v. 7b.

* Circle "wearisome" in v. 8.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Identify "the Teacher" (*Qohelet*) from references to him in 1:1, 12; 2:4-9; 12:9-10.
2. Describe your initial reaction to the Teacher's thesis in verse 2.
3. Change the rhetorical question in verse 3 into a direct statement that conveys its meaning.
4. Describe the relationship of verses 4-11 to verse 3.
5. Explain the *contrast* in verse 4.
6. All four points on the compass are alluded to in verses 5 and 6. How so?
7. Contrast the translation of verse 7 in the NIV with that in the ESV. Which better fits the context?
8. According to verse 8, "All things are wearisome" (or "are weary"). Put what that means in your own words.
9. Modern advances in medicine and technology undermine the Teacher's assertion in verse 9. Right?
10. **Discussion:** Talk about how well you think the Teacher defends his thesis: "Everything is meaningless." Does he make his case or not in your opinion?

day 3 **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a difficult read—perhaps not the Bible book anyone should read first. About it one author writes: "Ecclesiastes is often looked upon as the Bible's resident alien. Other books may be considered perplexing (Job) or as superseded by New Testament revelation (Leviticus). Many read Ecclesiastes, however, with the distinct feeling that this book does not belong in the Bible. What other book immediately meets the reader with such pessimism and despair: 'Everything is meaningless' (1:2)? What other book challenges the idea of afterlife (3:19-21)? The poetic power of 3:1-8 is evident to all, but the meaning of the words is far less clear. Furthermore, it is not helpful that almost every aspect of the book's origin and background is hotly debated. The authorship, date of composition, purpose, message, and even the original language of the book have all been disputed. In what sense can Ecclesiastes be called a word of God?" (Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 254). Nevertheless, Ecclesiastes is *scripture* and therefore is *profitable* (2Ti 3:16) to any reader willing to lean into its interpretive headwinds.

In the opening introduction (1:1-11), the author identifies himself (v. 1), states the theme of his book (v. 2), and defends it in general terms (vv. 3-11). In verse 1 the author calls himself *Qohelet*, which is probably not his name but his title and is either transliterated "Qoheleth" (NJB), or variously translated "Teacher" (NIV), "Preacher" (ESV), "Leader of the assembly" (NIV marg.), and even "Philosopher" (GNT). In fact, the book never refers to him by name. Even so, the third person allusions to him in 1:1, 12; 12:8, 9, as well as the first person description of his own accomplishments in 2:1-9 have led many, but not all, Jewish and Christian interpreters to identify him as Solomon. No matter, "regardless of who wrote it, whether Solomon or a later Jewish sage, the presence of this book in the Bible indicates that it is God's Word" (Glenn, 976).

In verse 2, Solomon states the theme of his book, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." The sense of the Hebrew word *hebel* translated "meaningless" in the NIV is difficult to express through any one English word, which explains why it's translated so differently in our English versions: "vanity" in the NKJV, "futile" in the NET, "useless" in the GNT, and "emptiness" in the NEB, to give just a

few examples. The word seems to bear any one of three different nuances depending on the context. It may refer to that which is "transitory," that which is "absurd," or that which is "useless." If it carries the third nuance in verse 2, the theme of Ecclesiastes may be put this way: When it comes to identifying the meaning of life, don't bother looking for it in any earthly, human activity because "everything is meaningless;" i.e., everything is *useless* in that regard. One writer explains: "All life is vanity in this sense, that it is unable to give us the key to itself. The book is the record of a search for the key to life. It is an endeavor to give a meaning to life, to see it as a whole. And there is no key under the sun. Life has lost the key to itself. 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' If you want the key, you must go to the locksmith who made the lock. 'God holds the key of all unknown.' *And He will not give it to you.* Since then you cannot get the key, you must trust the locksmith to open the doors" (J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., 140).

In verses 3-11 Solomon defends his thesis in general terms. He begins by asserting that people net nothing from all their hard work in life. Their toil brings them no closer to understanding the meaning of life; what's more, they neither leave an enduring impression nor make a permanent difference on the world. They pass having changed nothing. Then nothing changes; life goes on. Later he observes, "Everyone 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. This too is a grievous evil: As everyone comes, so they depart, and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind?" (5:15, 16, NIV 2011). He goes on to illustrate that people's labor, like the ceaseless rounds of generations and ceaseless rounds of nature, produces nothing lasting or satisfying. "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever," he says in verse 4. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west then returns wearily to do it all over again (v. 5). The wind blows out of the north and then out of the south. Round and round it blows aimlessly (v. 6). The Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, but does that desert sea ever fill up? Day and night the river flows; it keeps on flowing with

no effect (v. 7). Clearly, all these things grow weary trapped in their cycles of monotonous and meaningless motion. It's all too much for words—a world apparently designed by Rube Goldberg (v. 8). To make matters worse, history goes nowhere; it, too, inevitably repeats itself. "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again" (v. 9). There is *really* nothing new under the sun. The costumes and sets may change, but the foibles of characters and twists and turns of plots "under the sun" remain the same. Skeptical? Consider the following remarks of one commentator: "The Teacher's words are not contradicted by technological advances or by the

fact that we can remember the names of famous people such as Homer, Caesar, and Shakespeare. The fundamental events of life (birth, marriage, work, death, etc.) remain unchanged. The desire for something new is the desire for something that alters the nature of life in the world. Cars, computers, and jet airplanes may have made some things easier and faster. For us, however, as for our ancient predecessors, the sun rises and sets; the rivers run their courses; and people continue their endless quest for fame, power, and happiness even as they move steadily toward death. The majority of people never achieve lasting fame, while those who do gain nothing by it" (Garrett, 288).

The Message of the Passage

The true meaning of life cannot be found in anything under the sun because everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James suggests in James 1:22. Try some of the challenges below to apply what you have learned this week.

• **Journal your thoughts on the passage:**

–Write about what God wants you to know . . .

–Write about how God wants you to feel . . .

–Write about what God wants you to do . . .

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **the Teacher** "The author of Ecclesiastes identified himself, in Hebrew, as Qohelet (1:1-2; cf. 1:12; 7:27; 12:8-10). Though this is sometimes treated as a proper name and hence transliterated, the presence of the article on the Hebrew word in 12:8 (and probably also 7:27) shows that it is a title . . . The exact meaning of the term is in doubt. Suggestions for its significance are generally drawn from the related Hebrew noun 'assembly.' For example, the Septuagint entitles the book Ekklesiastes ('one who calls an assembly'), whence the English word 'Ecclesiastes.' Several English versions of the Bible translate Qohelet in relation to the function he supposedly played in the assembly (e.g., 'The Teacher,' NIV; 'The Preacher,' KJV; 'The Leader of the Assembly,' NIV marg.)" (Glenn, 975).

v. 1 **son of David** "The author also identified himself as 'son of David' (1:1), a 'king in Jerusalem' (1:1), and 'king over Israel in Jerusalem' (1:12) [cf., 1:16; 2:4-9] . . . These descriptions have led many Jewish and Christian interpreters to identify the author as Solomon though his name is never explicitly used in the book" (975).

v. 2 **meaningless** Lit., "meaningless of meaningless." "Solomon declared most emphatically that everything is futile or meaningless. Five times in this one verse he used *hebel*, the Hebrew word for 'meaningless.' Four of those times are in a twofold repetition of a Hebrew superlative construction which the KJV renders 'Vanity of vanities' and the NIV renders Meaningless! Meaningless! and Utterly meaningless!" (979); cf., "Holy of holies" (Ex 26:33), "Song of Songs" (SS 1:1), and "God of gods and Lord of lords" (Dt 10:17). The meaning of the Hebrew term *hebel* is key to understanding the book; unfortunately, the term has a field of meaning that cannot be adequately expressed by any one English word. It can refer to that which is insubstantial or transitory. With this sense it might be translated (1) "vapid." It can also refer to that which doesn't make sense or is offensive to reason. With this sense it might be translated (2) "absurd." Finally, it can refer to that which is useless (cf., GNT) or is a waste of time. With this sense it might be translated (3) "meaningless" (see discussion in Garrett, 282, 83; cf., Tremper Longman, III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 61-64). "Metaphorically this Hebrew word means what is insubstantial or without real value. Occasionally it also refers metaphorically to some other characteristic of wind or vapor: (a) what is fleeting or transitory . . . (b) what is enigmatic or perplexing . . . or (c) what is unseen and obscure" (Glenn, 976).

v. 3 **gain** Or perhaps "net" as in "net profit." "Profit (*yitron*) is a key word in Ecclesiastes, appearing nine times (1:3; 2:11, 13; 3:9; 5:8, 15 [English 5:9, 16]; 7:12; 10:10, 11). Strikingly, it occurs nowhere else in the OT. The term derives from the common verb *ytr* 'to be left over,' 'to remain'" (65). "After a life of hard labor, no one can show a *net gain*; everything one has is vapid" (Garrett, 284, italics added). "Solomon affirmed at the outset that people gain no ultimate advantage or profit from all their toil" (Glenn, 980).

v. 3 **labor** The same word in the next line is translated "toil" in the NIV. "While the word can mean simply 'work' or 'labor,' it more often carries a negative connotation, 'hard work,' 'drudgery,' or even 'misery' (Num 23:21; Isa. 59:4; Jer. 20:18; Ps. 7:15 [English 7:14])" (Longman, 65).

v. 3 **under the sun** Perhaps "in this life" (cf. v. 14) or "down here on the earth" (Glenn, 980); cf., "under heaven" (Ex 17:14; Dt 7:24; 9:14; Ecc 2:3; 3:1), "on earth" (Ecc 5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2).

v. 4 **generations** "The transitory nature of human generations contrasts with the permanence and apparent immutability of the physical world" (Garrett, 284). Or perhaps, the contrast is between the cyclic movement within nature and the earth's permanence; in other words, nature constantly changes but the earth remains unchanged (see Longman, 67). "James Crenshaw is probably correct in saying that *dor* ["generations"] has both human and natural cycles in mind" (Longman, 68). The point is this: "People's labor, like these ceaseless rounds, produces nothing permanent or satisfying" (Glenn 980).

v. 6 **hurries** Lit., "pants;" cf., "going wearily back to where it must start all over again" (GNT). "The sun toils across the sky, only to reach its destination and achieve no rest, no closure, but needing to rush back and do the whole meaningless task over again" (Longman, 69).

v. 7 **return again** "The last phrase does not refer to the cycle of evaporation and rainfall as implied in the NIV translation. Gordis correctly calls such an interpretation 'linguistically forced.' It should read, 'To the place where the rivers go, there they continually go' (Garrett, 284; cf., NET, ESV, NRSV).

v. 8 **wearisome** "The sense of the statement is that the weariness of all things is so mind-boggling that it exceeds human ability to describe it" (Longman, 71). Garrett arranges the verse differently. He connects v. 8a to vv. 4-6 in summary fashion, and then translates 8b, c, d to reflect their parallel structure: "8a All things are weary. 8b No one is able to speak, 8c the eye is not satisfied by seeing, and 8d the ear is not filled by hearing." He writes, "no one can speak meaningfully to or about the world; that is, no one can explain, influence, or control it . . . Lines c and d carry this concept further. Part of the 'vanity' of this world is that it does not satisfy. The eyes cannot be satisfied, not even by wealth (cf. 4:8). People keenly feel this sensation of deficiency (3:9-11). The ear also cannot be filled; no amount of learning can answer people's needs (8:17; 12:12)" (Garrett, 286, 87).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

Special note to parents: Our summer series in the book of Ecclesiastes is called Life on Mission. We will be studying the same scripture as adults and will be adding an exciting missionary story each week. We are looking forward to learning about these heroes who did not chase the wind but lived life on mission!

The author of Ecclesiastes begins his book by proclaiming that everything is meaningless, there is nothing new under the sun. As summertime approaches and school is coming to a close, I wonder how long it will take my kids to start complaining that their schedules are meaningless. I am guessing that by week three I will hear "I'm bored" and "There's nothing to do!" or "I've already done that!" To combat the summer boredom that is sure to invade our homes, we need a plan. One suggestion is to make this a summer of learning about new places. Pick 10 different countries around the globe. Each week focus on one. Get on the internet to discover interesting things about the location. Find out if there are interesting customs or celebrations. Make a craft that will remind you of your journey. Look for a recipe and have a special dinner that is unique to that country. Lastly, use it as an opportunity to pray for the people who live there. Have fun "traveling the world" and teaching your kids to love and embrace others.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1. According to verse 1, who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes?
2. In verse 2, how does he describe everything?
3. In verse 11, what does he say will not be remembered?

What Do You Think

Solomon was a rich and powerful king who had everything he could possibly want. Why do you think he thought everything was meaningless?

What R U Going To Do

Make a list with your family of things that are meaningful to you. This can be both things you see (your dog) and things you can't see (love). Post the list so your family is reminded of things that are important.

MEMORY TIME

Core Comp

Humanity- I believe God loves everyone and we all need Jesus as our Savior

Memory Verse

Colossians 1:15 - "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized CC ____ and Verse _____. Family completed **Say** _____ **Think** _____ **Do** _____

Child's name _____ Grade ____ Parent's signature _____

Earn tokens by completing the Bible study portion of this page.
Questions: Kids@pantego.org

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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