

Ecclesiastes

Escaping the
Meaningless

Notes and Comments by John Sullivan



Moline, IL
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Ecclesiastes

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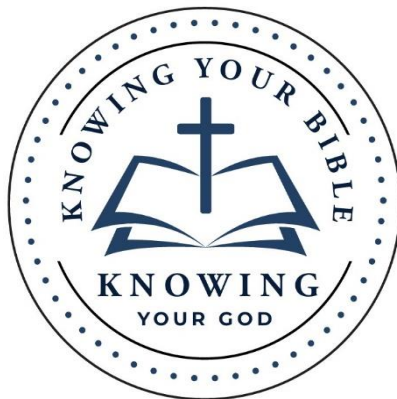
Escaping the Meaningless

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Ecclesiastes

Escaping the Meaningless

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Ecclesiastes

Escaping the Meaningless

Introduction

The word *Ecclesiastes* means *teacher* or *preacher*. Although the Bible itself does not clearly state that the author is Solomon, it obviously fits his life. The first verse does say: “*The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.*” That clearly could refer to Solomon, but it also could refer to another king who was a descendant of David. Throughout this study we will usually refer to the author of *Ecclesiastes* as “*the Teacher*” with the idea in mind that it was either written directly by Solomon or by someone writing with Solomon’s life’s experiences in mind. (**NOTE:** King Solomon’s reign is described in **1 Kings 1 – 11** and **2 Chronicles 1 – 9**. We will refer to sections of these Scriptures throughout this study as they apply to the Teacher’s recollections about pursuits that end up being meaningless.)

The author does not claim to be inspired by God the way the prophets do. Nowhere does he say something like “*The Lord appeared to me and said . . .*” The gloom and pessimism of the author are in sharp contrast to the hopeful outlook found so often in Scripture. So why is *Ecclesiastes* in the Bible, and what is the value of us studying it today? One answer is that we need negative examples as well as positive ones. We can study the lives of faithful people like Naomi, Joshua, Caleb, and Paul and see how they ended their lives on a strong, positive note. There is obviously much to be learned from them. But we can also study the life of someone like Solomon who wasted much of his life with meaningless pursuits and ended up bitter and regretful, yet willing to share his mistakes with us to help us avoid some of those mistakes; i.e. to *escape the meaningless*. So keep in mind that not everything the author of *Ecclesiastes* (again, whether that is actually Solomon or another King of Israel writing with Solomon’s experiences in mind) says is a direct teaching from God. But they are the author’s reflections on life and provide valuable insight to help us choose to either pursue meaninglessness with the same regrets that he experienced or escape the meaningless life by following God.

This journal is not designed to be a detailed commentary on each verse, but is set up in a way that will hopefully help you know your Bible and know your God better. It is set up with the idea in mind of spending one week on each of the four sections and spreading each section out over as many days as you prefer during that week, but you can obviously go at whatever pace fits you. Regardless of your pace, the main focus is on reading these Scriptures – repeatedly as much as possible – and praying for God to give you insight.

Resources

- Alexander, David and Pat (editors) *Erdmans' Handbook of the Bible*, Lion Publishing, 1973
- Halley, Henry *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Zondervan, 2000.
- Hamilton, Mark (editor) *The Transforming Word*, Abilene Christian University Press, 2009.

Here are just a few thoughts that you can focus on from this book:

1. The idea is expressed three times that the lover and the beloved belong to each other (2:16; 6:3; 7:10).
 - How does that apply to all of us in our relationship with the Lord?
 - How does that also help those who are married?
2. What does the phrase “*his banner over me is love*” mean to you (2:4)? [Learn the song by that title.]
 - How does that apply to all of us in our relationship with the Lord?
 - How does that also help those who are married?
3. How did the man and the woman feel about each other and how did they express it?
 - How does that apply to all of us in our relationship with the Lord?
 - How does that also help those who are married?
4. What else stands out to you from this book?

*I am the Lord's
and He is mine!*

If you do this with a group, the thought questions can be used as some of the discussion questions for your group. Hopefully, you will have much to share about from this study.

The Appendix of these notes is about the beautiful book *The Song of Songs*. Hope you enjoy reading and studying that wonderful little book also.

Get ready to dig deeply into this part of God's word. May you know this part of the Bible better and know God better as a result of your study!

John Sullivan
January 2020

NOTE: Here are two suggestions before you start the chapter-by-chapter analysis of this book:

- 1) Read the whole book in one setting. You might enjoy having a Bible App read it to you out loud while you follow along in your Bible (NOT just while driving in your car).
- 2) Study the brief "*Background of Ecclesiastes*" in the **Preliminary Study** on the next page, as well as look at the background information from sources such as the ones listed on page 27.

Preliminary Study

Background to Ecclesiastes

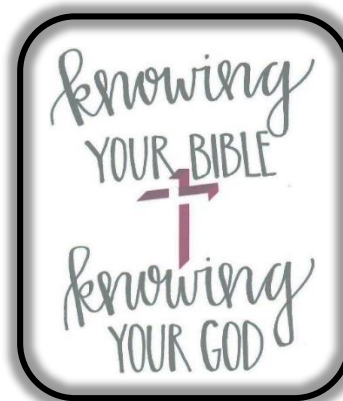
As stated in the introduction to these quiet times, the Bible does not clearly state that the author of *Ecclesiastes* is Solomon, but it certainly fits his life. So here are four passages about Solomon that will give a brief introduction to our study.

- **2 Samuel 12:24 – 25.** Solomon's name is similar to the Hebrew word for *peace*. God, however, called him Jedidiah, which means "loved by God." Peace and Love – not a bad way to be thought of when your name is mentioned! How do you think that could have influenced Solomon in his life?
- **1 Chronicles 22:6 – 10.** God would grant Israel a time of peace under Solomon's rule, a contrast to the prevalence of war in his father David's reign.
- **1 Chronicles 28:9.** Meditate on this amazing charge from David to his son Solomon. It is full of great wisdom for all of us today.
- **2 Chronicles 1:7 – 10.** Solomon was most likely a very young man when he ascended to the throne. What was his one request from God?

For more details about Solomon's life, read **1 Kings 1 – 11** and **2 Chronicles 1 – 9**.

From reading the four passages above, you certainly do not get any indication that he would become so bitter and regretful at the end of his life. The tragedy of that downfall is the very reason that the experiences and words of advice found in *Ecclesiastes* are so powerful. Spend some time praying that God will use this study to make it clear to you how to escape the regretfulness of meaningless pursuits.

Appendix



Song of Songs

"His banner over me is love."

This unusual book of the Bible contains many beautiful poems extolling the love between a man and a woman. Throughout the years, both Jewish and Christian readers have seen it as an analogy of the Lord's love for his people and their love for him. See **Isaiah 54:4** and **2 Corinthians 11:2** for examples of Scriptures referring to the Lord's relationship with his people as a marriage. There is evidence that the Jews read it during the Passover to remind them of God's love when he rescued them out of Egypt. However, the literal meaning of the poems is valuable also, showing that the physical attraction between a man and a woman has godly approval when it is in the context of marriage. Some historians think these poems were read during the week-long celebration of a wedding.

Try to read it in one setting. If you are married, read it out loud together.

NOTE TO SINGLES:	NOTE TO MARRIEDS:
You are married to a loving God. He really does adore you and you really do adore him. Married or single, God wants us to be more secure in that love than any other. He expresses it over and over again in Scripture. Pray for the ability to express it back to him.	Remind yourself that you love each other the way these lovers did. Pray for the ability to express it the way they did. Focus first on the security of God's love, but realize also the power of the security that you feel from each other's love.

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A Meaningless Life

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”
Ecclesiastes 1:2*

What an encouraging way to start off a Bible study, right? The author states his thesis in this gloomy introduction and then follows up with 12 (sometimes depressing) chapters of reflections from his life that prove his point that his life was meaningless, which can also be translated as a life of vanity, emptiness, or absurdity. It is a life of frustration and a life without value. He openly shares the regrets he has of years of pursuing meaning in all the wrong places. However, as you may already know from previously studying this book, or would guess from the fact that this writing is in the Holy Scriptures, the author ends with a more positive note of how it is only in following God wholeheartedly that one escapes the meaningless life. Hence our theme and the value of studying this otherwise depressing book: *Escaping the Meaningless!*

Evidences of Meaninglessness (Chapters 1 & 2)

After his gloomy thesis found in verse 2, the Teacher presents evidences to prove his point.

I. **Exhibit I:** The endless cycle of life (1:3 – 11)

The Teacher concludes that there is nothing new under the sun (verse 9).

When you do your routines such as mowing the yard, cleaning the house, paying the bills, maintaining the car, changing diapers, etc., what happens? You have to do them all over again, right?

- How can endless routines make your life seem meaningless?
- What can we do to escape the meaninglessness of routine activities? **HINT:** unfortunately, the solution is NOT to just avoid doing them! See **Colossians 3:23**, for a much better solution.

(continued on the next page)

2. **Exhibit 2:** The meaningless pursuit of wisdom (1:12 – 18)

We read in the Preliminary Study about Solomon's request for wisdom, which of course is a good thing. Read **I Kings 4:29 – 34** to see a summary of his wisdom. How many proverbs did he write? He also wrote **Psalms 72 and 127**.

- While wisdom is obviously a good thing, how can the pursuit of wisdom be only “a chasing after wind” (verse 17) and just lead to more misery (verse 18)?
- How can it be more meaningful? (See Solomon's own words, for instance, in **Proverbs 1:7**.)

The point is not to turn us into grumpy old men and women who give up on the routines of life or the pursuit of wisdom because they can be meaningless, but to make sure we escape that meaninglessness by putting God at the forefront of everything we pursue. Meditate and continue to pray about that.

3. **Exhibit 3:** The meaningless pursuit of pleasure (2:1 – 11)

- One of the pleasures that Solomon pursued was sexual pleasure. Read **I Kings 11:1 – 6**. How many women did he have in his harem? _____ What else did that lead him to do?
- Other pleasures that Solomon pursued were his building projects (verse 4) and amassing great wealth (verse 8), both of which will be discussed in more detail later.
- What was the Teacher's conclusion about the pursuit of pleasure (verse 11)?

Before he presents his fourth example of why he feels the way he does, he revisits his thoughts from Exhibit 2 about the meaningless pursuit of wisdom (2:12 – 16).

While he agrees that wisdom is better than folly, what is his conclusion about both?

4. **Exhibit 4:** The meaningless pursuit of labor (2:17 – 26)

Besides his famous wisdom, Solomon was known for his numerous building projects. He spent 20 years overseeing the building of the temple and his palace. Read **2 Chronicles 8:1 – 6** to see a summary of his building projects, concluding with the statement that he built whatever he desired.

even better than the beginning because this “memory verse” has been more than just something you memorized; it has been who you are and what you do.

Escaping the Meaningless Life

Summary

1. What were some of the Teacher's frustrations about life that led him to his thoughts about meaninglessness?
2. How much do you think his own life of sin led him to that point, in comparison to people like Naomi, Joshua, Caleb, and Paul?
3. What has Jesus said and done that has helped you escape the meaningless life?
4. How has your study of *Ecclesiastes* helped you in your resolve to do your part to escape the meaningless life?

Thought Questions

(Use the Summary questions listed above.)

Notes

3. *Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body* (12:12). Can every student say “Amen”?

Meditate on these wise sayings and make your decision: will I love God’s truth or kick against it? Which one would I regret in later life, and which one would I thank my younger self for choosing?

The Final Conclusion (Chapter 12:13 – 14)

*Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
Ecclesiastes 12:13*

1. *Fearing God*

- We saw this advice from the Teacher in chapter 5: *Stand in awe of God.*
- Solomon said that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (**Proverbs 1:7** and **9:10**). Among other things, that could mean that if you ever have deep questions, start by being in awe of the Creator. Never be afraid of asking him the tough questions, but start with acknowledging the fact that He knows more than we do. If we don’t understand something, it’s a good idea to start with the assumption that we probably don’t know everything God does about the subject and that he probably has reasons that we know nothing about.
- While that reverent awe is the beginning of wisdom, we see in *Ecclesiastes* that it is also the end of the matter. What does that mean to you?

2. *Keeping his commandments*

- Don’t just stand in awe; actively and purposefully respect what he says enough to do what he says.
- This is the final word on escaping the meaningless life. No one who closes out life by thinking that they have given their heart to fearing God and obeying him will conclude that their life was meaningless.

This is not only a good verse to memorize, it should be the motto of our whole life. Pray about your desire to live your life so that the end of it will be

- Recall also **Ecclesiastes 2:10**. What boundaries did the Teacher have in his life?
- How did that work out for him?

Even during the times of selfish pursuits, the Teacher says that his wisdom did not completely leave him (verse 3). It is possible that he, just like us, knew in the back of his mind what was right and wrong even when he was choosing to do what was wrong.

Meditate on the value of boundaries that God places in your life to keep you from meaningless pursuits.

Eternity in Our Hearts (Chapter 3)

In Chapter 3, the Teacher takes a break (yeah!) from his gloomy observations about meaninglessness to think about some deep issues of mortal life and eternity.

1. The time and season for everything in this life (3:1 – 8)

- **Musical history side note:** This poem formed the lyrics to a number one hit song *Turn, Turn, Turn* in 1965, sung by the folk-rock group *The Byrds*. Pete Seeger wrote the song, although he says he only wrote 6 words in the song, the rest coming from Solomon, making it the oldest lyrics to ever become a modern hit song. (Look it up on YouTube! It’s a beautiful song.)
- Each line in this poem contains opposites: *a time to be born and a time to die*, etc. He says there is a time for each of the opposites. Knowing that the Teacher is reflecting on life and whether it is meaningless or meaningful, what do you think is his point from this amazing poem?

2. Eternity and the mysteries of the next life (3:9 – 21)

- Verse 11 is a great verse to memorize. What do you think it means that God has placed eternity in our hearts?
- Recall that all of this was centuries before Christ. The Teacher wondered (verses 18 – 22) what would happen to us after death, but he didn’t know what we know now from the New Testament. While some concept of eternity is in everyone’s heart, some details about it, even after the revelations on it found in the New Testament, remain a mystery. What does what you know now about eternity do to give your life more meaning?

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- The Teacher did know that everything God does will endure forever (verse 14). What is the one goal stated in that verse that God has for us?

Meditate about the Teacher's conclusion (verse 22), and the meaningful life God has given you today.

Escaping the Meaningless Life

NOTE: Each week of this 4-week study, we will take one day to reflect on the Teacher's gloomy perspective of the meaninglessness of many pursuits in life and consider what other Scriptures say about meaningful pursuits and what Jesus did to help us escape the meaningless life.

1. Read **John 10:10**.

The thief, of course, is Satan. How did Satan steal the Teacher's joy, kill his divinely ordained purpose in life, and destroy his peace; i.e. make his life empty?

Jesus, on the other hand, gives life to the full – not an empty, meaningless life. He is not trying to rob us of joy by pointing out the meaninglessness of pursuing pleasures without any boundaries. Rather, he shows us how to have life to the full. How does Solomon's example illustrate that for us?

2. Read **Matthew 6:19 – 21**.

Sounds like the Teacher came to this same conclusion the hard way. How do Jesus' words in verse 21 compare with **Proverbs 4:23**, one of Solomon's proverbs that was probably written before he lost himself in meaningless pursuits?

3. Read **1 Peter 1:18 – 19**.

This could easily be one of the most important thoughts to keep in mind as we are studying *Ecclesiastes*. Jesus redeemed us from the empty (i.e. meaningless) way of life handed down to us! How do you think the Teacher would emphasize the value of that point?

Meditate and pray about how thankful you are that Jesus helps you escape the meaninglessness of life by placing the concepts of eternity in your heart.

3. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle. (verse 6)

- The Bible also says a great deal about the importance of rest, but this proverb reminds us of the obvious meaninglessness of laziness. That's when being IDLE can become an IDOL.
- This verse goes on to extol the benefits of diversifying your efforts and being creative in all endeavors.

Meditate on and pray about these teachings. Do something today for which your future self will thank you

Advice for the Young (Chapter 11:9 – 12:12)

An old man's advice to the young can be valuable or boring. We have seen that *Ecclesiastes* is certainly not boring! No matter how old we are, we're probably younger than the Teacher was at that time, so let's value what he said.

1. Remember the Creator (12:1).

- There are many disadvantages of old age, as seen in verses 2 – 7 of chapter 12. Verse 3 talks about the "grinders" becoming few, which sounds like a reference to losing my teeth! One of the disadvantages of youth, though, is the tendency to not take the time to meditate on God. It's easy to be too busy to do that. The Teacher, in his old age, is advising those who are younger to resist that tendency. You don't want to look back later and say, "I wish I would have taken more time for God."
- Read **Psalms 119:9 – 16**. What insight into this topic do you get from these verses?

2. The words of the wise are like goads (12:11). A goad is a sharp stick used to prod animals.

- Sometimes truth can rub us the wrong way. Both young and old are capable of resisting the truth because it hurts. Paul was reminded of the futility of kicking against the goads (**Acts 16:14**). Truth may hurt, but it hurts even more to try to resist it. Imagine kicking the pointed end of a goad out of anger: "I'll show you!" That would hurt even more than the prodding of the goad in the first place!
- The words of the wise are like firmly embedded nails. What does that mean to you?

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- The Teacher's point about gossip here in *Ecclesiastes* is more of a practical one than an ethical one: what you think you are saying behind someone's back may reach their ears. Recall also what he said in 7:21 – 22.
- What do you learn from all of this?

Meditate and pray about your desire to escape the meaningless pursuit of folly.

More Proverbs from the Teacher (Chapter 11:1 – 8)

In this short section, the Teacher gives some great advice that actually helps us escape the meaningless life.

1. "Cast your bread upon the waters" (verse 1) is one of the most unusual sayings in the Bible, but it has become the theme of many encouraging songs. (Look them up on YouTube.) From a practical point of view, it is obviously a bad idea to throw bread on the waters. The bread, if it does come back to you, will be soggy and ruined. So what is he saying?
 - The usual interpretation, which is one that makes a lot of sense, is that the Teacher is referring to doing something good or kind for people without expecting anything in return or worrying about what the people will do with what you give them. In that sense, it's similar to dozens of Scriptures on helping people in need. See **Deuteronomy 15:10** and **Proverbs 19:17**, for instance.
 - It could also be referring to the ships that kings, like Solomon, would send out on the waters full of their grain and returning with all kinds of treasures. That's why some versions of the Bible translate this verse as: *Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.*
2. *Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.* (verse 4)
 - Scriptures teach us the wisdom of caution and preparation, but they also encourage us to not allow our fears to become our excuses. See what Solomon said about that in **Proverbs 22:13** and **26:13**.
 - Always giving in to excuses can certainly lead to a life of regret. The old Teacher would probably tell us what most of us know about regrets: *I never regret overcoming my excuses; I always regret giving in to them.*

Thought Questions

1. Which of Solomon's four "exhibits of the meaningless life" stand out to you personally?
2. What do you learn from the poem about seasons in life found in 3:1 – 8?
3. How can you focus on meaningful pursuits to escape the meaningless life?

Notes

The Conclusion of the Matter

Once again, the author of *Ecclesiastes* turns to the proverb style of teaching.

Escaping Meaningless Folly (Chapter 10)

The frequent theme in this chapter is also a frequent theme in the book of *Proverbs*: the warning against folly. **NOTE:** the word “*folly*” in Scripture refers more to spiritual blindness than to intellectual stupidity. While we need to observe which actions are foolish so that we can avoid them, Jesus commanded us to not judge another person as a fool (**Matthew 5:22**).

We would all agree that the Teacher is not the most optimistic elder we have ever seen. He is not like Naomi, Caleb, Joshua, or Paul at the end of their lives. However, he has valuable advice, such as the three listed below, to help his readers avoid wasting their lives in folly.

1. **The power of folly:** *A little folly outweighs wisdom and honor (10:1).*
 - We know that a good apple placed in a bowl of bad apples will not make the bad apples good, but a rotten apple placed in a bowl of good apples could ruin the good apples.
 - Does that mean that a positive influence is worthless or at least not as powerful as a negative influence?
2. **Foolish talking:** *The fool multiplies words (10:12 – 14).*
 - We have seen this topic earlier in *Ecclesiastes*. Recall the instruction to listen more than we talk when we come near to God (5:1). He also warned us against the meaningless repetition of words in our relationships in general (6:11). Now he says it is foolish to multiply words (10:14).
 - What do you learn from this?
3. **The foolishness of gossip:** *A bird of the air may carry your words (10:20).*
 - Solomon discussed the topic of gossip frequently in the book of *Proverbs*. Read, for instance, **Proverbs 18:6 – 8**, which begins by describing the foolishness of an uncontrolled mouth and ends with a description of the universal temptation of gossip. There is obviously a connection between an uncontrolled tongue and gossip. Both are folly.

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Principles for Escaping Meaninglessness

Chapters 4 – 6 of *Ecclesiastes* continue the theme of the meaninglessness of life “*under the sun*,” that is, life without focus on God. The Teacher’s observations that led him to his conclusion at an old age are repeated at various times, as you can see in verses 1 – 6 of chapter 4. However, rather than just complaining about the miserable absurdity of life, the Teacher also offers four principles that help us escape meaninglessness.

Principle #1 for Escaping Meaningless: Godly Relationships (Chapter 4)

Read again verses 7 – 12 of chapter 4.

1. First, the Teacher states the harsh truth of the miserableness of loneliness. It can be depressing to even think about how depressing that is! If anyone is ever tempted to think that God is trying to rob us of our joy by demanding that we obey him, here is one area to bring us back to our senses. It is Satan who is trying to rob us of the joy of relationships, and it is God who is helping us escape the meaninglessness of loneliness.
2. “*Two are better than one.*” (verse 9) Even the grumpy old Teacher who is almost overcome with bitterness and regrets recognizes the beauty of godly relationships. This Scripture is often read at weddings, and it is a good description of the friendship that should be present in marriage. However, it is not referring to marriage specifically, but to relationships in general.
 - Spend some time right now thanking God for the relationships you have in him.
 - At the same time pray for others (and yourself) who have not escaped the loneliness misery.

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3. "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (verse 12) This parable-like statement does not explain itself, so what follows is only on possible application: two of the strands could refer to the friends and the third strand is God. God is not only the giver of the relationship, but he is also the one who makes the relationship strong.

- How does God, as the third strand, make the cord so difficult to break?
- What happens if God is not in the relationship?



Meditate and pray about how thankful you are for godly relationships.

Principle #2 for Escaping Meaningless: Be in Awe of God (Chapter 5:1 – 7)

This principle involves both our heart and our practical disciplines or strategies.

1. From the heart point of view, it is good to take a quiet, in-depth look at our awe of God.
 - Why do you stand in awe of God?
 - How does that help you escape the meaningless life? Or, putting it another way, how does being too much in awe of the wrong things or wrong people contribute to meaninglessness?

This can be a huge turning point in life: your awe of God who is present in your life at all times has a great impact on the meaningfulness of your life! Spend some time wrestling with those thoughts.

2. From a strategic point of view, we see here two practical ideas about the way we approach God. True religion is founded on an awe of God. That's why false religion, religion that is only based on routine and tradition without an awe of God, is one of the worst contributors to meaninglessness.
 - Come near to God to listen and not just to talk (verse 1). Jesus emphasized that also. See **Matthew 6:7 – 8**. We will see more about controlling the tongue in general in the next chapter, but here the emphasis is on how our awe of God keeps us from running off at the mouth before him. The Teacher's words "sacrifice of fools" (verse 1) may seem a little harsh to us. I don't

How does that inspire you to want to finish strong?

2. *Caleb*

Read **Joshua 14:6 – 15**. At age 85, he was still full of vigorous and wholehearted devotion to God.

What are some things you learn from his example?

3. *Joshua*

Read **Joshua 24:14 – 15; 29 – 31**. Dying at the age of 110 and still not only faithful himself, but also devoted to encouraging others to make the decision to follow God.

What do you want to imitate from his finish?

4. *Paul*

Read **2 Timothy 4:6 – 8**. At the end of Paul's life, he knew that he had fought the good fight. He also knew, unlike the Teacher, that there was a new and even better life awaiting him.

Imagine what the author of *Ecclesiastes* would say if he knew what we now know about heaven. How much stronger do you think his warning would be about avoiding the meaningless pursuits?

Meditate and pray about how thankful you are that Jesus helps you escape the meaningless life.

Thought Questions

1. What do you want to do to make sure you finish strong?
2. How can you make sure you enjoy this life while not ignoring its injustices?
3. How does your view of heaven affect the meaningfulness of your life?

Notes

The Common Destiny (Chapter 9)

*All share a common destiny . . .
The same destiny overtakes all.*
Ecclesiastes 9:2. 3

1. *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly* (to borrow a title from an old Clint Eastwood movie) (9:1 – 3)
 - No matter how wise or foolish, good or bad, everyone will die someday.
 - That could lead us to conclude that it doesn't matter then how we live. Or it could lead us to conclude that the theme of 7:8 is of utmost importance – we need to finish our life faithfully strong. Which is your conclusion?
2. *Even a live dog is better than a dead lion.* (9:4 – 6)
 - Only in this life there is hope.
 - Compare that with **1 Corinthians 13:13**. Why is hope only applicable in this life?
3. How to get the best out of this life. (9:7 – 10)
 - Enjoy it (verses 7 – 9). We have seen the Teacher emphasize this before. While he stressed the meaninglessness of living for pleasure, he also stressed how much God wants us to find joy in this life.
 - *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might* (verse 10). Compare that with the New Testament teaching that we looked at in week one: **Colossians 3:23**.
4. What else stands out to you from the rest of this chapter?

Continue to meditate on the statement in 7:8 about the importance of finishing well. Since death is our common destiny, meditate and pray about how you want to finish this life in a strong way, and how thankful you are for the next life to be with God.

Escaping the Meaningless Life

Let's consider some examples of lives with a strong finish, who clearly escaped the meaningless life.

1. **Naomi**

Read **Ruth 1:19 – 21** and **4:13 – 17**. At one point Naomi did experience bitterness. So much so that she even changed her name to reflect it. But she ended her life in a strong, faithful way.

recommend that you describe someone else's prayer as a *sacrifice of a fool* just because it seems a little long to you! However, it is appropriate for us to say, realistically, that babbling before the great God of the universe, rather than listening to him, is rather foolish. Amen?

- Be careful about what we promise God ("vow", verse 2). We fully know and rely on the grace of God to help us when we fail. On the other hand, hopefully, our awe of God makes us not want to promise things that we don't intend to keep. If we're really in awe of him, we won't try to impress him or others with our promises. Be impressed with him, and stick with that.

How do you think putting these strategies into practice in the way you approach God will help you escape the meaninglessness of religion that is really not in awe of God?

Go outside and just stand in awe of God. Spend some time with him trying to listen more than you talk.

Principle #3 for Escaping the Meaningless: Be Content (Chapter 5:8 – 20)

1. These verses repeat what the Teacher said in chapter 2 about the meaningless pursuit of wealth.
 - One reason it is meaningless is because the lover of money is never satisfied (verse 10).
 - Another reason involves the increased worries that accompany abundant wealth (verse 12).
 - The third reason is the fact that you can't take it with you when you die (verse 15).
2. His solution involves recognizing that it is God who gives you both what you have and, perhaps more importantly, the ability to actually enjoy what you have (verse 19). It is tempting to think that the gifts are the more important part of that statement. But, in reality, it is the ability to enjoy the gifts that is more important. God gives us both. This verse can be another turning point in our lives. Do you see how important it is to the meaningfulness of your life?

Meditate on God the giver and the enabler. He gives us whatever blessings we have and he enables us to enjoy whatever blessings we have. Continue to stand in awe of him and thank him for what he gives you and enables you to enjoy.

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Principle #4 for Escaping the Meaningless: Control Your Tongue (Chapter 6:II)

This short chapter has a variety of observations, most of which repeat earlier themes. So we'll focus on verse 11, which deals with the subject of unnecessary repetition of words and how that can contribute to meaninglessness. Recall what was said about that in chapter 5 about the way we approach God. This verse applies to controlling our tongue in other areas of our life as well.

1. *The more the words, the less the meaning.*
 - How have you seen that to be true?
 - What can you do to avoid that?
2. *How does that profit anyone?*
 - Again, how have you seen that to be true? That is, what good does multiplying words accomplish?
 - What can you do to avoid that?
3. Many other Scriptures refer to the subject of controlling the tongue. Read the following examples, one of which is from Solomon, and reflect on what they are saying about controlling your tongue.
 - **Proverbs 10:19**
 - **James 1:19 – 20**
3. What else stands out to you from this chapter?

Meditate and pray about these thoughts. Continue to stand in awe of God, and thank him for the way he is showing us how to escape meaninglessness.

Escaping the Meaningless Life

Let's continue what we started last week and consider what Jesus said about meaningful pursuits and what he did to help us escape the meaningless.

1. Read **John 14:23**.

The internal dwelling of God Almighty in every Christian is something that the Teacher did not teach. It is the unique promise of Jesus Christ to his followers. Can you imagine what the Teacher would say to us about the meaningful life that comes from knowing that the Lord is living inside you?

Meaningless Justice (Chapter 8)

The author of *Ecclesiastes* often refers to the distortion of justice that was so prevalent in his day. Sometimes the righteous got what the wicked deserved, and the wicked got what the righteous deserved (verse 14). This discouraged him a great deal and was one of the reasons that led him to his conclusion about the meaninglessness of life. To add to his frustrations, he may have also realized that he himself was an example of the injustice he stated in 8:9. Of course, similar injustices have been seen in every generation including our own, and they are very discouraging, to say the least.

1. One of the Teacher's recommendations, in light of everything that we see that can lead us to discouragement, was to simply enjoy life (verse 15).
 - In spite of the Teacher's frequent gloomy attitude, this recommendation to enjoy life is often repeated in his book. (See 2:24, 3:13, 3:22, 5:18, and 9:7.) We certainly know from many other Scriptures that God does not advocate that we ignore the injustices of our world and just focus on our own little joys. But the point here may be that we don't want to be so gloomy that we can't enjoy life.
 - Recall his opinion in 7:3, where he said that sorrow is better than laughter. We can see that that was not a desire to have no joy at all in life. In fact, he highly recommends it and points out that there are many meaningful joys in this life. His earlier point stands however: a life that only pursues pleasure will not be meaningful. There is a time for both: joy and sorrow (3:4)
2. He closes this chapter with some very deep observations (8:16 – 17).
 - Recall the instruction to *consider what God has done* (7:13). Now the Teacher says that when he applied his mind to consider what God has done, he came to the conclusion that there are some things that are just beyond our understanding. Compare that with **Isaiah 55:8 – 9**.
 - As was stated above, that could be viewed pessimistically or humbly. How do you see it?

Meditate on the justice and wisdom of God. We don't want to ignore the horrible injustices that we see in our world and just focus on our own happiness. We also don't want to become cynics and gloomy complainers. Pray that God will give us the wisdom to do our part in making this world as safe and just as possible, while spreading the news about the gospel of God's love and the peace that are only possible through Jesus Christ.

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3. *The end is better than the beginning* (7:8 – 12).

- “*And patience is better than pride*” (verse 8). It’s easy to start things. Sometimes our pride can even cause us to boast in the beginning about what we are doing. But patience and perseverance are needed to finish a good work. A meaningful life finishes strong.
- How does that compare with what Jesus said about counting the cost to see if we have enough to complete what we start (**Luke 14:28 – 30**)?

Meditate and pray about how you want your life to end with a strong finish.

No One is Righteous. (Chapter 7:13 – 29)

Chapter 7 continues with some proverb style of teachings and reflections.

1. Good times and bad times (7:13 – 14).

- God allows both.
- How does that help you escape the worries and frustrations of the meaningless life?

2. A balanced view of life (7:15 – 18).

- This is not saying that it is OK to have a little wickedness in your life. The point is to avoid extremes.
- The Pharisees of Jesus’ day are an example of people who took legalistic righteousness to an extreme. How do you think their extreme view of legalistic righteousness led them to a meaningless way of life?

3. The difficulty of finding a righteous person (7:19 – 29).

- Verse 20 is similar to other Scriptural teachings. See **Romans 3:19 – 26**, **Psalms 14:1 – 3** and **Proverbs 20:9**, for instance.
- That can either be viewed pessimistically (i.e. what’s the use of even trying to be righteous) or humbly (i.e. don’t try to be righteous on your own). How do you see it?

Meditate about the statement in verse 13: *consider what God has done*. Pray about the gratitude that you have for God giving you righteousness, instead of you needing to earn it by righteous perfection.

The following question is a no-brainer, but it is worth putting our brain into it: *Do you want the meaningless life without God’s indwelling presence, or do you want the meaningful life of his presence?*

2. Read **Hebrews 4:16**.

This is the truly meaningful way of approaching God. The Teacher reminded us to not approach God with babbling of words. Because of Jesus, however, we can approach God with confidence. How is it possible to have both awe and confidence in our approach to God?

3. Read **Philippians 4:12 – 13**.

Paul knew the secret of contentment, through Jesus Christ who gave him strength. How do you think the Teacher would emphasize the value of that point?

Meditate about what Jesus has done to help you escape the meaningless life. Stand in awe of God for that blessing. Then pray about what your part is in making that a reality.

Thought Questions

1. Why do you stand in awe of God and how does that give meaning to your life?
2. How do godly relationships give more meaning to your life and what do you want to do to make sure you have the “*cord of three strands*” in your relationships?
3. How does Jesus’ work that enables you to approach the throne of grace with confidence (*Hebrews 4:16*) give meaning to your life?

Notes

The Strong Finish of a Meaningful Life

Recall that Solomon wrote 3000 proverbs, which are short sayings that usually present their ideas by a comparison or a contrast. He wrote most of the book known as *Proverbs*. In this section of *Ecclesiastes*, the author turns to that style of writing. You can see that his tendency towards bitterness and regret flavor these proverbs, but you can also gain much wisdom from looking at them. First, we will look at some of his proverbs about what is better.

What is Better? (Chapter 7:1 – 12)

1. *A good name is better than fine perfume (7:1).*
 - That makes sense and agrees with what Solomon himself said in some of his proverbs. (See **Proverbs 22:1**, for instance.) How are godly qualities in our character more valuable than any amount of riches?
 - But then he says, “*the day of death better than the day of birth.*” We might not all agree with that one, at least not at first. As we have seen before, the Teacher may have been more influenced by his negative view of this life than by a positive outlook about the afterlife. But as Christians we have many reasons to be hopeful about our home in heaven. How do you think that our day of death is actually better than our day of birth?
2. *Sorrow is better than laughter (7:1 – 6).*
 - “*A sad face is good for the heart*” (verse 3). What? That seems to contradict what Solomon himself said in some of his proverbs. (See **Proverbs 15:30** and **17:22**, for instance.) Is this the grumpy old man talking? Is this another example of the meaningless way of life from which Jesus has rescued us?
 - It is not likely that the Teacher is advocating gloom and pessimism as the best way of life. The *joy of the Lord* is a prevalent thought throughout the Scriptures. But it is also clear that there is often more to be learned and gained from adversity than there is from pleasure. (See **Psalms 119:67**, for instance.) What do you think are some ways that adversity can help us even more than pleasure?

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