

AS GOOD AS IT GETS?

THE SEARCH FOR SOMETHING MORE...



6 STUDIES IN ECCLESIASTES

As Good As It Gets?

Ecclesiastes and the search for something more...

Is this as good as it gets? Work, rest, play. Repeat. Or is there something more? What is life all about? Is it to achieve things in your career or business? Is it to accumulate lots of possessions? Is it to leave some kind of lasting legacy? Is it to make the world a better place? Is it to enjoy yourself as much as possible? Is it to build a family? How you answer these will determine how you live your life.

This series explores the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes, a book which tries to find the point of life. It's a difficult topic, so Ecclesiastes is a difficult book to read. But one of the benefits of reading it in a group is that we can help each other! Another help will be to consider a few important issues first before jumping straight in...

Author

Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 12:9-14 make clear that what we have in the book is a presentation by a later writer of the earlier "words of the Teacher." So who was the Teacher? When he says, "I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem," (1:13) and, "I became greater by far than all in Jerusalem before me," (2:9) he sounds a lot like Solomon (compare 1 Kings 10) who authored some of the other wisdom books in the Bible e.g. Proverbs 1:1. But then why isn't Solomon named here like he is there? And Solomon was only the *second* king in Jerusalem after David, so the "all" that the Teacher was greater than would be an "all" of one! In fact, as the book progresses it seems the Teacher is not so much a king himself as a critic of all kings (e.g. 4:13-15, 5:8-9, 8:2-4, 9:13-17). Perhaps then the Teacher is not Solomon himself but someone who has put himself in Solomon's shoes, learnt from all of Solomon's great wisdom... and learnt from Solomon's huge mistakes as well.

Background

You'll notice when you read Ecclesiastes that it talks a lot about the world God has made, the effect of death on life, the benefit (or otherwise) of human wisdom and achievement, and the importance (or otherwise) of obeying God and gratefully receiving his gifts. These themes suggest Ecclesiastes is really an extended reflection on Genesis 2-3. That's the part of the Bible that tells us the original point of life and why it all went wrong. That's why we start the series not with Ecclesiastes itself but with a brief look at human life and work in Genesis 2-3.

Method

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve broke their relationship with God by disobeying God's command and grasping at a kind of independent human wisdom outside relationship with God. So the Teacher effectively says: OK, now that we've broken our relationship with God, how far can this human-powered wisdom get us in finding a point to life? Whereas Proverbs begins, "The fear of the *LORD* is the beginning of knowledge," (1:7), Ecclesiastes begins, "I applied *my mind* to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens" (1:13). He's exploring whether there's any point to life based only on what a human can observe during "life under the sun" i.e. life from birth to death. The Teacher wants to see how far we can get with human wisdom outside relationship with God.

Message

So the Teacher asks what humans like us can "gain" from life, that is: What can we build up, grasp hold of and hold on to? But after repeatedly trying to find a positive answer... he can't! That's because anything you can build and grasp onto in the short term – work, money, pleasure, achievements, legacy, relationships – they're all ultimately taken from you by death. So, at the end of each of the sections we'll look at together, the Teacher concludes: there's no point in trying to gain anything, because everything is "vapour" (hevel), trying to grasp and hold onto it is like "chasing the wind." The NIV translates the Hebrew word "hevel" as "meaningless", which isn't a bad interpretation of what the Teacher means by it. But throughout the series, whenever you see the word "meaningless," it's better to think of the more literal translation, "vapour," to remind you of the *reason* life can seem meaningless and pointless: you can't gain or grasp anything. Why? Because the inevitability of death makes everything an ungraspable "vapour," like "chasing the wind."

Gospel

Instead of finding the point of life in "gaining" things, the Teacher falls back on the idea that life must simply be enjoyed gratefully as a "gift" from God. Gift, not gain. Grateful, not grasping. For the Teacher, that "gift" is still marred by sin and death, but you may as well gratefully enjoy what's still good about it while you can! Yet for people living now, thousands of years after the Teacher, God offers a far greater gift, the gift of his Son Jesus.

Keeping this big picture in mind will help us navigate some of the tricky bits in Ecclesiastes. Our prayer is that the series will show all of us the wisdom of *enjoying new life as a gift from Jesus*.

Stu Atkinson

Phil Campbell

Peter Kutuzov

Matt Viney

Jeremy Wales

Doug Wannenburg

Dan Wilton

JULY, 2018

STUDY 1 - GENESIS 2-3

CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION

PAGE 1

STUDY 2 - ECCLESIASTES 1-2

GRASPING AT GAIN

PAGE 5

STUDY 3 - ECCLESIASTES 3

ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS

PAGE 9

STUDY 4 - ECCLESIASTES 4-5

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

PAGE 13

STUDY 5 - ECCLESIASTES 6-8

EVEN THE EXPERTS CAN'T SOLVE LIFE

PAGE 17

STUDY 6 - ECCLESIASTES 9-12

REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR

PAGE 21

STUDY 1 || GENESIS 2&3

CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION

How satisfying would you rank each of the following areas of your life:

Family	1 _____	10
Friendships	1 _____	10
Work	1 _____	10
Holidays	1 _____	10
Studies	1 _____	10
Church	1 _____	10
Connection to God	1 _____	10

The modern world seems to constantly be grasping for something more. More money, more relationships, more spirituality, more satisfaction, more success. Deep down we're all searching for something more. In a recent book, Christian author Matt Chandler says: *"no matter how much we do, no matter how much we try filling our life with more, nothing will satisfy... Everybody knows something's broken in this world. But illogically, foolishly, we are looking for fixes from broken people with broken ideas in broken places."* (***The Explicit Gospel***)

Where do your friends search for meaning and satisfaction?

What measure of satisfaction have they found in these things?

PURPOSE OF LIFE

Over the next few weeks we'll be exploring the book of Ecclesiastes, which grapples with the age old questions of the meaning of life and where to find satisfaction. But before jumping into Ecclesiastes, we need some context to understand where the book is coming from. And for that we're going back to the very beginning. The beginning of life, the universe and everything. Back to creation itself. To see how life should have been. And what went wrong.

Read Genesis 1:26-31; 2:4-25.

1. What task did God create Adam and Eve to do? (1:27-28, 2:5,15)

2. Often people associate work with hardship and being tedious. But here we find work being essential to what humanity was created for. How might this change our understanding of work?

3. Going back to our opening question. How satisfying would you rate each of the following areas of *Adam and Eve's* life in the garden?

Family	1 _____	10
Friendships	1 _____	10
Work	1 _____	10
Relationship with God	1 _____	10

Compare with your own. What's the difference?

Adam and Eve are made/created to represent God by ruling over and looking after the rest of creation. Work, therefore is a gift from God that was to be enjoyable and satisfying. However, that all changes in Genesis 3 as Adam and Eve disobey God's instructions.

CREATION FRUSTRATED

Read Genesis 3:1-11.

4. The serpent gives the impression that God's command about the one tree they shouldn't eat from (2:17) is because he's mean and withholding something from them (3:5). Based on Adam's and Eve's previous experience in 2:16,18-19,22-23, is this a fair impression of God?

5. The fruit in v6 is 'desirable for gaining wisdom'. What kind of wisdom do they gain by eating it? (v7) What kind of wisdom could they have learned by *refusing* to eat it?

6. As a result, what happens to humanity's relationship with God? (v8) What does this look like for people today?

In Genesis 3, for the first time we see people distrusting the goodness and faithfulness of God. Instead of trusting their Creator and believing his way to be the best, the man and the woman choose to go their own way. They go their own way in grasping for 'wisdom' without God, and the consequences are catastrophic... the relationship between God and humanity is tarnished with distrust and shame. And life becomes hard and dissatisfying.

7. Read Genesis 3:16-19. What are the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience? What does it do to the tasks for which they were created?

Genesis 3 leaves us in a depressing place. All hope seems lost for humanity and God's creation. Work, instead of feeling like 'this is what I was made for!', is often now frustrating. Instead of feeling like 'I'm making a real difference in the world!' it often feels like 'what difference does it all really make in the end?' Work feels like it should be fruitful and meaningful, but it's frustrating during life, and made ultimately pointless by death.

Ecclesiastes Reflections on Life Post-Genesis

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was vapour, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:5-6,10-11

I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals." Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is vapour. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.

Ecclesiastes 3:18-20

Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins... This only have I found: God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes."

Ecclesiastes 7:20,29

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"... Remember him — before... the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Ecclesiastes 12:1,6-7

Ecclesiastes is a thoughtful reflection on this human situation (see the *sidebar on previous page*; can you spot the references to Genesis?). The Teacher explores how far human-centred wisdom (the same as in Genesis 3:6) can get us, as opposed to wisdom that begins and ends with God. And - spoiler alert - human wisdom will always come to nothing because death is inescapable. The only hope in Ecclesiastes comes when the Teacher departs from his usual method of exploring wisdom without God, and he remembers God. He realises work can still be enjoyed as a gift from God in the short term even if death means nothing can be gained from it in the end.

GOSPEL WISDOM

- In a recent book, Canadian Psychologist Jordan Peterson acknowledges this reality. "Life sucks," says Peterson - so "pick up something heavy." The most satisfying thing anyone can do is "lifting a worthwhile burden", even if that means a difficult and painful life. Point your phone camera at the link in the side bar to watch a short clip. Do you agree with Peterson's assessment?



Point your phone camera at this link (if that doesn't work, it's at <https://youtu.be/OD-VCRNIp-U?t=53m20s>).

What do you think makes for a satisfying life?

There's still something dissatisfying about Peterson's conclusions about life - however promising his answer sounds to millions of fans around the world. Death frustrates everything we invest in. However as we turn to the New Testament we do find hope for a deeper satisfaction.

1 Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:58.

- How is Paul's assessment of 'work' and 'labour' different to the conclusions of Peterson and 'the Teacher' in Ecclesiastes? What's the source of this difference?

As we explore Ecclesiastes over the coming weeks, we'll follow the Teacher as he explores life in a post-Genesis world. Each week we'll take a fresh look at his conclusions in light of Jesus. What questions do you hope this series might answer for you? The point of life? The point of work? How to live well in light of reality? Others? Keep a list and check it at the end of the series to see if we missed any!