

Ecclesiastes

Recall a birthday party you've recently attended. There was likely a moment when the cake was brought out, candles lit, and the gathered crowd stood around to celebrate and sing as the candles were blown out. For just a moment you could see the vapor trail of smoke rising from the wicks and then, in a breath, it was gone.

This is the portrait of life presented in the book of Ecclesiastes, the smoke from a just-extinguished birthday candle. Here and gone. The Preacher, our guide throughout the book, confronts the inexorable approach of death and the implications this has on our search for meaning in life. In that pursuit, questions begin to rise to the surface. *If I'm going to die just like everyone else, where do I find meaning? How can I live with hope and joy in the here and now? What really matters, and how does God fit into all of this?* In Ecclesiastes, we are invited to hear the reflections of a wise king (the Preacher) who has come before, who has sought answers to these (and other) questions of meaning and purpose, and found lacking the answers, achievements, and acclaim that he found.

Ecclesiastes compellingly offers a raw and honest account of life "under the sun." What does that mean, you might ask? It might be represented well by the dash between the date of birth and date of death on a headstone. It is the toil that defines our days, the rhythm that marks out the boundaries of seasons and years. Life "under the sun" is shaped, all too often, by the human tendency to look for ultimate purpose in people, places, pursuits, and things that cannot bear the weight of our search. That recognition leads the speaker in Ecclesiastes to say, *all is vanity*.

But is it? Is life without eternal substance? Is everything meaningless? Of course not. Nothing in *this* life can provide ultimate satisfaction, but our relationship with the Sovereign Lord imbues everything with eternal weight and purpose, so long as life is lived *for Him* (12:13-14).

Ecclesiastes is meant to serve as a catalyst for reflection, for honest self-evaluation, and for sober recognition of the ways in which we look for meaning apart from the Lord, especially as we are confronted by the fact that we will, one day, die. While that is a difficult reality, it is necessary. Honest confrontation with the reality of death, and its implications for finding meaning in life, sits at the very heart of the words of Ecclesiastes' Preacher. As David Gibson puts it, "Far from being something that makes life in the present completely pointless, future death is a light God shines on the present to change it. Death can radically enable us to enjoy life. By relativizing all that we do in our days under the sun, death can change us from people who want to control life for gain into people who find deep joy in receiving life as a gift. This is the main message of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell: *life in God's world is gift, not gain.*"

Discussion Questions

- 1) What is your perception of the Book of Ecclesiastes? What preconceptions, ideas, or questions do you have about it?
- 2) Read 1:1-11. What do you think the Preacher means when he says, *all is vanity*?
- 3) What is the primary challenge(s) that the Preacher introduces in 1:1-11? Read 1:3 again. How have you experienced, or thought about, the question that the Preacher asks here?
- 4) What are some ways that human beings tend to search for ultimate meaning and purpose in life? Can you name some examples from our culture? Where do you tend to look for these things in your life?
- 5) Read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14. How do these verses encourage readers to find ultimate meaning and purpose in life? Why might this be important for us to bear in mind as we read through Ecclesiastes?