

## 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) Read 1:12-2:26. How would you describe the Preacher's tone/message? What is at the root of his perceived frustration in this passage?

2) Why do you think the Preacher is re-introduced in 1:12-18? Why might his role as a wealthy King over Israel in Jerusalem who is reflecting over his experiences be important for our application of this passage?

3) The Preacher speaks of three categories of life by which he pursued ultimate meaning and happiness: pleasure, wisdom, and work. How do you see that same pursuit, in those same ways, at work in the world?

4) Where/how are you most tempted to seek ultimate happiness and meaning in the temporal things of life? Another way to consider that could be: what, if taken away from your life, would cause you to despair?

5) Many of these pursuits the Preacher described are not, inherently, sinful. Why do you think we, as humans, tend to elevate good things to the place of ultimate things in our lives? How have you found that to be a damaging experience in your life?

6) How might regularly expressing gratitude for the good things in life as gifts from God help us to fight against the temptation to make good things ultimate things? How do you practice gratitude in your life? How can/should you grow in that?