

## 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 Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. What observations stand out? What is the Preacher saying here about the nature of life?

2) Ecclesiastes 3:11 introduces a specific challenge for the Preacher. What do you think it means that God has put eternity into the hearts of humanity? How might this present a challenge when placed beside the fact that we also “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end?”

3) Recall a time when you realized that you were not ultimately in control of the seasons of your life (i.e. an untimely death, some unexpected news, etc.). How did that make you feel? Where did you seek/find comfort?

4) In Ecclesiastes 3:14-15, the Preacher reminds us that God alone is sovereign and unaffected by time. Name some specific attributes or activities of God that might help make this fact a source of comfort for believers. Recount specific ways that God met you in the darkest seasons/moments of life.

5) Throughout Ecclesiastes 3:9-22 there is a general call to, in light of humanity's limitations, “seize the day,” enjoying things like meals and relationships. Based on what the Preacher has said thus far in Ecclesiastes, how might his encouragement to enjoy these things differ from the worship of self that is so pervasive in our culture?

6) Consider the rhythms of your life. What might need to change in light of the Preacher's call to enjoy the good gifts of God without worshipping the good gifts of God?