

Ecclesiastes: The Search for Significance

A Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper

by Keith Stanglin

Before viewing each video episode, read the selected passage from Ecclesiastes aloud and reflect on its meaning. Then watch the video and answer the discussion questions.

Episode 1. Introduction to Ecclesiastes: Living Life Backward

Ecclesiastes is a book like no other in the biblical canon. It wrestles directly with the existential crisis of death and the implied absurdity of life, asking its readers to confront these challenges and consider the true meaning of life.

Discussion Questions

1. Before engaging in this study, what do you know about Ecclesiastes? What are your impressions of this book and its message? What are some of the book's memorable passages?
2. How does your version of Ecclesiastes translate the word *hebel* (Ecc. 1:2)? Vanity, meaninglessness (or something else)? How would you describe the various English translations?
3. What does it mean to say that everything is meaningless, or vanity? How do these meanings differ?
4. Read James 4:13-17. What is the message, and how might this relate to Ecc. 1:1-2?

Episode 2. To Gain the World (Ecc. 1:1-11)

Ecclesiastes, from its opening chapter, emphasizes the temporality of life and its emptiness in light of death. As such, gaining the world is, by itself, of no benefit.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Ecclesiastes is depressing or pessimistic? Why or why not?
2. Listen to Kansas, "Dust in the Wind," at <https://youtu.be/CVG4jO4ZJZQ?si=RaI6HcfjBvmar0v>. How do this song, its words, and its mood and style relate to the word *hebel* and the description of things in Ecc. 1?
3. Qoheleth says there is nothing new under the sun? Is he right? What does he mean by that?
4. How many of your 8 great-grandparents can you name by memory?

5. Read Mark 8:31-38. What is true gain, according to Jesus, and how does this relate to Ecclesiastes 1?

Episode 3. The American Dream (Ecc. 2)

Where do people seek fulfillment? Many pursue the so-called American dream. Ecclesiastes 2 speaks to the pursuit of pleasure that characterizes our society.

Discussion Questions

1. Before viewing the video, read Ecclesiastes 2. What do you think this chapter is about?
2. What do you think is meant by the “American dream”?
3. Where do you find meaning in life?
4. Is pleasure good? Why or why not?
5. Read Philippians 4:10-13. What is Paul’s message here, and what does it have to do with verse 13?

Episode 4. Perfect Timing (Ecc. 3)

Ecclesiastes 3 says there is a time for every matter on earth. Wisdom is necessary for knowing what is needed. Earthly time, in all its fluidity and instability, is transcended by the eternity that God has placed in our hearts.

Discussion Questions

1. Is there really a time for everything mentioned in Ecclesiastes 3? Is there a matter that seems always untimely or inappropriate?
2. What is this the right time for? Which of these points or matters is neglected today in our society, our churches, or our homes?
3. What makes it so difficult to strike the right balance?
4. Read Matthew 16:1-3. Why is it important to discern the “signs of the times”? What does that mean for us?

Episode 5. An Antidote to Futility (Ecc. 4:1–5:7)

Work and life can sometimes seem futile. Ecclesiastes recommends shouldering the burden with others in community, and attending to God in worship.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever tried to chase the wind? Or something else equally difficult or absurd?
2. What work do you do that sometimes seems futile?
3. Despite the apparent futility, what makes our work (or our lives) meaningful?
4. Can you think of an instance when many hands made light work?
5. Read John 3:1-15. How does this relate to Qoheleth's phrase about chasing/pursuing the wind?

Episode 6. Wanting More (Ecc. 5:8–6:12)

God made us to want more, but, sadly, our sinfulness inclines us to want more of the wrong things—things other than God. In this episode, the key to understanding and appreciating the message of Ecclesiastes is explained.

Discussion Questions

1. “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money.” Do you think this is true? Have you witnessed examples of this?
2. Read Luke 12:13-21. What was wrong with the rich man's attitude or action? Is it wrong to store up anything or save for retirement?
3. What is the key to understanding and appreciating the message of Ecclesiastes?
4. What “fillers” does our society recommend for filling the hole?
5. Do you think God made us to want more? In what way?

Episode 7. The School of Wisdom (Ecc. 7-8)

Like other books of wisdom literature, Qoheleth invites his students to seek wisdom and shun folly. This search involves, among others, considering the end of the journey and proceeding with appropriate epistemic humility, recognizing God's radical sovereignty and human limitations.

Discussion Questions

1. Before you watch the video, read Ecclesiastes 7-8. Do any unifying themes or threads stand out to you?
2. How does one grow in wisdom?
3. What does Ecc. 7:13 mean? How are we tempted to change what God has done?
4. If your younger self from 10 or 20 years ago could see yourself now, would he be impressed or disappointed? In what way?
5. Read Matthew 11:25-30. What does it mean that God has hidden his mysteries from the wise and understanding, but revealed them to children?

Episode 8. The Answer to Death (Ecc. 9)

Part of wisdom is to “remember to die.” Qoheleth has his own earthly answers to the problem of death. The answer to death is to accept being forgotten and then to live life to the fullest.

Discussion Questions

1. If you knew you had exactly 40 years left to live, what would you do? What about 5 years? 30 days?
2. How does it feel when you contemplate your mortality? Is it motivating? Depressing? Both or neither?
3. Why is life better than death? How should that affect us today, while we live?
4. What does it look like for you to make the most of your life, to live life to the fullest, here and now?
5. Read Philippians 1:18b-26. Paul says that “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” What does this mean? Do you agree?

Episode 9. A Little Folly Goes a Long Way (Ecc. 10-11)

The proverbs of Ecc. 10-11 continue the theme of wisdom and folly. Just as a wise heart produces wise actions, a little folly can bring ruin and destruction.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that the right decisions come easier to some people? Can you think of an example?

2. Have you personally witnessed how one bad decision or action can ruin something great?
3. In the event of a surprise home inspection on your life, what would the inspector find?
4. How can we live more wisely and better tomorrow than we did yesterday?
5. Read Matthew 7:24-27. How does Jesus describe wisdom and folly?

Episode 10. Creation's Futility (Ecc. 12:1-8)

Remember your Creator in youth, for the hard days leading to death are imminent. Qoheleth ends his teaching as he began: "All is *hebel*/vanity." But the Apostle Paul provides a follow up to the vanity and futility.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so important to remember your Creator in the days of your *youth*?
2. Who do you want to be in 10 years? How will you attain that?
3. How would you interpret the various images of old age in Ecc. 12:1-7?
4. Read Romans 8:18-25. How is this a further commentary on the subject matter of Ecclesiastes?

Episode 11. The End of the Matter (Ecc. 12:9-14)

The editor of Ecclesiastes adds an epilogue to Qoheleth's teachings. It is different from the content of the book, but not at all contradictory. The instruction to fear God and keep his commandments is a fitting summary and conclusion.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the concluding epilogue summarize Qoheleth's teaching?
2. To what does the editor compare Qoheleth's words? Do you think these are fitting metaphors?
3. What hard but true words in Ecclesiastes stood out to you? Throughout this study, which teachings challenged the way you think and act?
4. Read John 14:15-24. How do Jesus' words here relate to the editor's epilogue in Ecclesiastes?

A Concluding Word: Read Psalm 62. Psalm 62 is a beautiful and fitting complement to Ecclesiastes. It even emphasizes the word *hebel*, which offers some insight into the word's meaning. Specifically,

Psalms 62:9 says, literally, “*Hebel* the sons of Adam, a lie the sons of man.” (Compare with your translation.) The verse goes on to emphasize the lightness of *hebel*. And then, Psalm 62:10 uses the verbal form of *hebel*, usually translated as “set vain hopes on,” but more literally, to “act emptily.” How does Psalm 62 relate to or help you understand Ecclesiastes, the word *hebel*, and the entire message of this book?

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For Further Reading

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Dockery, Luke. *The Search for Significance: A Study of Ecclesiastes*. Austin: Regnum Media, 2023.

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