

A Four-Part Conversational, Real World Bible Study based on Ecclesiastes

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How to Use this Study:

The author has composed this study in a conversational tone, lacking the typical “student handout” or “leader’s guide.” Hence, the study can be used in a conversational Bible class setting, or even in personal devotion and study. Use the left column as the “Monologue” of the author, either read it verbatim or use it to develop your own talk as the teacher of the class. Whenever the author makes a direct reference to scripture, consider leading students to open the Word and do likewise. The right hand column provides “Asides” to the primary monologue, interesting tidbits as if the author were seated next to you during his own lecture, sharing added insights.

Enjoy this unique study from thESource.

Lesson 1: Wisdom Literature Overview

Wisdom and literature. Two attention grabbing, iPod popping, Xbox dropping words guaranteed to stir interest, right? Right. Wisdom. Connected with old people, life experience (both of which we'll see are very true!), and the three guys who brought gifts to baby Jesus. Literature. Greatly dreaded in the high school and college ranks, associated with long, warm, gazing-out-the-window afternoon classes and DWMs (dead white males). Who wants to read about wisdom literature?

Let's try another approach. As a Christian, what questions do you have about life? Sure, you've covered the basics in a variety of settings and know the Law (we're hopeless, helpless, condemned sinners) and Gospel (Jesus, saved-by-faith-alone story) by heart. So while the salvation question may not really be a big issue, what big questions remain?

How do I live my life as a Christian? How should my life be different due to my relationship with God? How should I behave in the workplace, while flipping burgers, while assisting customers, while running my own business? How should my Christianity be evident in those places? How does God run this world? Why do bad things happen to faithful believers? Why do those who blatantly cheat, cut corners, and are downright not nice always seem to win, to get ahead, to get the better grade, to get the pay raise and promotion? How should I relate to my family, friends, roommates, co-workers? Where should I look for meaning, for significance in life? What is the point of this life?

These are a sampling of the big questions that pop up as people begin to sort out their lives, and to live their faith, as the Holy Spirit opens up every aspect of their lives to God's influence. Since time began, as believers have sincerely come to grips with their relationship with the divine, and the divine's relationship with them, they have been asking these questions.

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Writing developed in the fourth millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia, the area encompassed by modern Iraq, to record commercial transactions. When the writing system was adapted to recording literature, history, and correspondence some of the first documents written involved theological questions, in particular, the question of why the righteous suffer, or why the gods neglect those who serve them the most faithfully.

Google the "Righteous Sufferer and the Instruction or Wisdom of Amenemope" to find examples of non-Israelite wisdom literature.

The Righteous Sufferer (Ludlul bel nemeqi), dated to around 1000 B.C., was written in Babylonian, circulated in Mesopotamia, and addressed the issue of why the gods let suffering happen to those people who are the most faithful. The Instruction/Wisdom of Amenemope was written during the Ramesside period of New Kingdom Egypt (the thirteenth to twelfth centuries B.C.), and contains the words of advice passed on from a noble to all who will listen. Some of Amenemope's proverbs were adapted by the Israelites to fit their worship of Yahweh and can be found in Prov. 22-23. This influence of one culture on another is not unexpected, as collections of proverbs were circulated between the courts of the ancient Near East from Mesopotamia to Egypt, and all points in between. Proverb wisdom literature was royal, court-centered, set in the framework of a wise old king and queen passing on their years of experience to their successor, usually their oldest son, so that he would rule wisely. This convention is found in Proverbs – see Prov. 1:8, 2:1, 3:1, 4:1-4, 31:1. Because it addressed universal concerns, Wisdom Literature was a very cosmopolitan type of literature.

For additional information on wisdom literature, consult anything written by Derek Kidner, a conservative theologian from the Reformed tradition. For a secularized but highly academic view of wisdom literature, consult James L. Crenshaw's Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction.

Lesson 1: Wisdom Literature Overview

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As you can tell from the questions asked, wisdom literature does not deal with issues of salvation, of what makes us right with God, of justification. Wisdom literature is written for people already in the club, for those already in a faith relationship with God, for those already justified. Wisdom literature deals with issues of living our faith, with issues of sanctification, and assumes the reader is a believer. Wisdom begins with a faith relationship, as Prov. 1:7 and Job 28:28 say quite well.

Don't expect to find a lot of Gospel in wisdom literature books, but instead look for the third use of the law and a realistic, gritty portrayal of life as we know it. The general principle in the Old Testament as found in Deuteronomy and other books is to be faithful to God so that you will receive his rewards – covenant theology (Ex. 19:3-6, Dt. 4:1, 5:33, and so on). If faithful, you get the Promised Land! You win against-all-odds, smashing military victories! You bask, like a lizard on a sun-warmed rock, in the favor of the Creator of the Universe! But as you and I know, this is not how life for us goes on a day-to-day basis, no matter how faithful we are. Sure, we know that in the end we will be vindicated for our faith and will participate in the eternal banquet catered by God (Is. 25:6-8). Wisdom literature takes a look at life in the meantime, life in the real world, where we live right now, and tries to make sense of life in the midst of a muddled, sin-ridden, fallen world. Wisdom literature is not pie in the sky, but is realistic, here and now, what we experience every day.

The three pre-eminent wisdom literature books in the Old Testament are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, although wisdom literature themes appear in many other Old Testament books.

Wisdom literature has several traits that keep it real. First, wisdom literature is relational. Wisdom literature spells out how Christians should relate to other people, how God relates to his creation, and how Christians should relate to the world. As we are all involved in

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these three types of relationships, wisdom literature hits the nail on the head for many of us.

Proverbs discusses how we relate to each other as we go through life as believers.

Job addresses the question of how God relates to his creation, how he runs this world. To us it often seems that God is quite the hands-off manager. Where is he in the tsunami, in the roadside bomb, in the blown up bus? Where is he as thousands of Christians starve or are butchered in Sudan? The book of Job provides some answers to these questions.

Ecclesiastes discusses the third type of relationship that we have - how should Christians relate to the world, and specifically, where should Christians look to find meaning in life? What should I do with my life? Should I sell all, move to India, and assist the dying in Mother Theresa's hospital? Should I move to Seattle and put my computer expertise in the hands of Bill Gates? Or, should I throw in the towel with this Christian thing and do whatever feels good – sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll? Will that bring meaning, purpose, fulfillment to me and my life? Make me happy?

Wisdom literature is also experiential, based on the experiences of others. As we go through life, we generate, but not on a biblical scale, our own body of wisdom literature. Which CD or DVD to buy, what game to purchase, what teacher to take for what class, what it's like to be in love – we often ask those who have already purchased the CD/DVD, played the game, taken the class, been in love, so that we can repeat their success or avoid their bad mistakes.

List some examples of your own where you benefit from someone's experience, or they from yours. That, in a

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simple sense, is the basis of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature moves from the mundane to the esoteric and theological. We don't need to make the same mistakes as those before us; we don't need to re-invent the wheel, so wisdom literature tries to tell us what does not work for believers, and what does. Wisdom literature taps into the experiences of generations of believers who faced the same struggles, temptations, and choices that we face every day, and allows us to profit from their trail blazing.

Easy to say and write, however, but very difficult to do. Our parents constantly try to guide us through the pitfalls of life, try to keep us from hurting ourselves by imposing limits on our behavior. But do we listen? Nope. What do they know? We have to find out for ourselves, to learn the hard way, to accumulate our own cache of experiences, sometimes at great cost to ourselves. If we had only listened. The same holds true for what we find in the Bible. We read and see the value of those statements, but do we put them into practice? If we had only listened. Wisdom literature tries to guide us through life in a God-pleasing healthy way based on the experiences of generations of believers.

Wisdom literature is also practical. Wisdom literature does not contain ivory tower philosophizing, and is not full of pointless intellectual exercises. Wisdom literature is rooted in street smarts, conventional wisdom, and real life lessons. You can read wisdom literature and immediately put what you read into practice; you can apply it right now, no waiting. Wisdom literature retains its value after you take its lessons out of the classroom, the Bible Study, the church, and with you into school, your home, your job.

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All three wisdom literature books are based on believers' experiences. The book of Proverbs in particular, though, is packed with a wide variety of life lessons. A proverb can be defined as compressed experience, often with a lifetime of living packed into one verse. This makes reading big chunks of Proverbs very difficult. Proverbs are best sipped, not gulped. Read a few, mull them over, and then move on. From Confucius to Benjamin Franklin to Oscar Wilde, the proverb formula has remained a popular one over the centuries.

Lesson 1: Wisdom Literature Overview

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There. Enough to whet your appetite? Wisdom literature is a rather amazing genre of biblical literature because of its stark realism and its focus on living one's faith. In the next couple lessons, we will look at Ecclesiastes in particular to find out what its author has to say about the Christian's experience in the Real World and about the emptiness of the human experience without God.

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Have the participants skim through the wisdom literature books and find the different themes, experiences, and types of relationships mentioned above. Have them determine if justification or sanctification themes predominate.

Lesson 2: Ecclesiastes, Tom Cruise, & Scientology

What's the point of it all? Where is the significance in my life outside my little sphere of family and friends? What can I do that will be talked about ten years, twenty years after I die? I'm never happy with what I have and always want something else. The DVDs I saved so hard to purchase five years ago I never watch today, or have swapped for something newer. The games that thrilled me when they were new seem antiquated with bad graphics and silly plot lines today. What satisfied me ten years ago seems trite and pointless now.

Think back to something that you REALLY wanted ten years ago, would die to have. Did you get it? Where is that item today? What role does it play in your life now?

We always want something more: can't wait until I get into high school, get my driver's license, graduate from high school, get into college, can vote and drink, graduate from college, have a real job and make real money, get married, have kids, own a house, retire, travel, have grandkids...the list goes on and on, with numerous important milestones along the path of life. We look forward to attaining these things, always looking ahead to the next one, working for that goal, seldom stopping to enjoy what we have right now. Notice that what we want always revolves around me, what makes me happy, and involves things here and now. More on that later.

People have always pondered the meaning of life, what life is all about, and what we should strive for in life. Often we get into boring ruts, the daily grind, the repetition of human existence, which lead us to question the point of it all. I get up, shower, eat breakfast, go to school, hang out with my friends, go to work, come home, eat dinner ("How was your day, dear?"), do homework/watch TV, surf the net, see who is on-line,

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As a first step for this lesson, ask the participants to make several lists of and/or discuss in a small group some of the following: some things or activities really wanted in the past, and what those mean now; things or activities that are really anticipated right now, and how they will view them in ten years (and how will their lives be different in ten years?); what fears or worries you have about life; what makes you happy, satisfied, content; what goals you have for your life; how you would like to be remembered if you had to move away today. Tailor the lists to suit your group or create your own; use them to start the process of thinking about this life and what pleases us here, where our priorities are, how we leave our mark here.

Lesson 2: Ecclesiastes, Tom Cruise, & Scientology

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go to bed. Next day, same thing. Weekends provide some respite, as does moving on to the next stage of life, but once that real job is attained after your final graduation and you settle in for the long haul, yikes! Imagine, doing the same job for over forty years! The same commute, the same boss, the same two-week vacation, over and over again, year after year.

We begin to question the point of it all, the value of it all. Sure, you're providing for your family or yourself, but day after day, week after week, month after month of the same thing for the rest of your career. It seems so pointless since what most of us do rarely leaves a lasting impression on the history of the world after we die. "Who was she? Why, she was the best pizza-deliverer the world has ever known, and she lived two hundred years ago!" What do you know about your great-grandparents? Your great-great-grandparents? Can you name them? Your own relatives, forgotten after only a century or less. Will members of your own family know anything about you after your children die?

Because of the improbability of leaving a lasting mark in the history of the world, many conclude, "What is the point of it all, unless we look for the thrill in the here and now?" We look for excitement, contentment, satisfaction, a sense of well-being in things and experiences. We look for the break in our daily grind by escaping on Friday night, the hot date, the rendezvous with friends, the going to the bar with our colleagues after work, TGIF! We look for meaning in what pleases me, what makes me happy. We become the center of our world, and our striving for meaning revolves around my needs and wants. But does this type of life satisfy, ultimately? Provide meaning? Where's the thrill, the morning after the night before? Does this lead to a lasting sense of well-being, or just a bad hangover and regrets?

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Qobeleth, the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, expresses this sense of smallness against the backdrop of infinity and the universe in the first chapter of his book. Read Eccl. 1:2-11. Nature and time march on, paying little attention to us as individuals. Have you ever felt this sense of insignificance? If so, when? Also, give some examples of 1:10, something new that has been around before. Green Day, building on the punk legacy of the Clash from the late seventies, and bell-bottoms from the sixties come to mind. The word translated as vanity or futility in 1:2 and used frequently by Qobeleth has the sense of grabbing wind, smoke, or steam...something that appears to have substance, but when latched on to it is found to be nothing. That's life for Qobeleth, lots of promise of substance, but when attained nothing is there. Contrary to appearances, you're empty.

Lesson 2: Ecclesiastes, Tom Cruise, & Scientology

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Perhaps meaning is found in longevity, living a long life, cheating death, prolonging our experience on earth. Most people fear death and attempt to postpone their encounter with it as long as possible. As filled with routine and suffering as this world is, at least we are familiar with this world. Death? Who knows what happens there? As people grow older, they begin to worry about their approaching end, and begin to take action to delay it. Watch your parents and teachers, aunts and uncles, yourselves count calories, keep tabs on cholesterol points, take up cycling or running, botox wrinkles, diet, all in an attempt to postpone the inevitable and to prolong the stay in this life, to extend youth. Have you seen the movie *The Island*? A company built a clone farm to supply organs and tissue to wealthy individuals in order to prolong their lives. “The longer I’m here the longer I can enjoy what this world has to offer, the longer I have to make my mark on the world.” Again, the focus is on what I want, what I can experience, what satisfies me. Is that the only source for meaning that we have?

Some people conclude that there is no meaning, no purpose for us. We are surrounded by misery, our lives are full of suffering, with brief flashes of happiness, and then we die. That’s it. Don’t expect anything else. We can amuse ourselves with things for a little while, but they only serve to distract us temporarily from the greater horrors of the world. London subway bombings, cancer victims, heart attacks, starving children all over the world, the AIDS epidemic in Africa, boring jobs, our own deaths – this is the reality of the world. Who wants to be a part of that? We may as well end it all now and be done with it. This impulse was felt at times by biblical writers as well – see Jer. 20:14-18; Job 3:1-16; Eccl. 4:1-3. Is that all the meaning we can find if we look for satisfaction in this world, in what surrounds us?

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Notice that all of these quests for meaning, for purpose, focus on material goods or life experiences designed to please me. As Christians, we find meaning not in ourselves or our own happiness – the egocentric approach – but in God, as we live theocentric/god-centered lives.

A strong theme that runs throughout the Bible is that everything in this life, especially people, will fail you. Every leader in the Bible failed his people. Name some of these and list how they failed.

Friends, family, your body, teachers, pastors, youth leaders – every one of these will let you down, fail you, abandon you during your life. Don’t look to them for purpose or meaning – you’ll only be disappointed. That purpose/meaning will vanish with them. Invest in the one thing that will survive your death and be eternal, the one constant in life, the one thing that will never fail and will always be there – God and your relationship with him.

We’ll develop this theme more fully in the lessons that follow, but for now, check out the following passages: Ps. 118:8-9, Ps. 146:3-7; Mt. 6:19-21; Lk. 12:15-21; Prov. 3:4-10, 11:28.

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*People who hold to this view are called Nihilists, from the Latin word *nihil*, which means nothing. Nothing has value. If interested, google nihilism to find a more complete discussion of this philosophy and its connection with the famous “God is dead” philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. As a side note, graffiti from a university bathroom stall – “God is dead. Nietzsche.” “Nietzsche is dead. God.”*

Lesson 2: Ecclesiastes, Tom Cruise, & Scientology

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We are not alone. We are not the first ones to wrestle with the meaning of life and its apparent banality. In particular as Christians, we tend to phrase our questions a bit differently than our non-Christian brothers and sisters, but nevertheless, the quest for meaning is there in all humans. The author of Ecclesiastes addressed these issues; it is to his experiences that we now turn our attention.

First, a little background on the book. Read Eccl. 1:1, 12, & 16. The title of the book is Ecclesiastes, a Greek version of the Hebrew word (qoheleth) found in v. 1, often translated preacher or teacher. Qoheleth is a participle based on the denominative Hebrew verbal root which means to gather or assemble something, derived from the noun which means congregation or assembly, hence the translation preacher/teacher – someone who assembles/gathers the congregation.

Are you with me so far? Good.

Although following the standard name formula (Qoheleth ben/son of David, with ben/son of David being the person's "last name," not necessarily indicating a direct father-son relationship) and lacking the definite article in Hebrew, Qoheleth is usually taken as the person's title, and not his first name or his nom de plume (pen name). To make a long story short, either the name of the author of this book was Qoheleth or he was a qoheleth.

Clear? It just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?

The author was either Solomon, as Jewish and Christian tradition holds, or a royal member of the Davidic line – a descendant of David who was king in Jerusalem. Either is justifiable from the Hebrew text. Although many scholars date the book rather late (the third

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Ecclesiastes had a tough time making it into the canon, the inspired books collected in the Bible. There was a great deal of debate about whether Ecclesiastes was too pessimistic and not edifying enough, made no mention of God's saving acts, that the book contained apparent agnostic skepticism, and did not reflect mainstream theology as derived from the accepted inspired texts. These questions may have reflected more of a difficulty in dealing with certain features of the text than a questioning of the entire text. What tipped the scales and led to the book's inclusion in the Old Testament (that is, the recognition of its inspired nature by humans) was the orthodox epilogue found at the end of chapter 12 and the regular, wide use of the book in first century B.C. synagogues.

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entury B.C.) due to the various influences the book exhibits, the Hebrew of the book dates definitively to the period before the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 B.C., as recent grammatical studies have shown. So far we have a descendant of David (whom we will call Qoheleth from now on) writing before 586 B.C.

This guy Qoheleth had seen it all. He was rich, he had whatever he wanted, the world was his oyster, and yet he felt empty, as if he were living a meaningless existence. This is not an uncommon experience for the rich and famous. Many feel that same sense of emptiness once they have it made, and try to fill that void with something of their own devising – scientology if you're Tom Cruise, Jewish mysticism if you're Madonna, more money if you're Donald Trump, charity if you're Bill Gates. Give some examples that you can think of.

Many performers turn to drugs to keep that on-stage rush going when there is no one around, no audience to feed the ego. There must be something to live for besides success, wealth, the next performance, and those that have those things often know it. Qoheleth was no exception. He wanted meaning, immortality, his name to live forever, and he tried various ways of accomplishing this. (Giving his name as the author of his book would have helped!) He recorded his story, kept track of his experiences in good wisdom literature fashion so that we can learn from his life. In our next session, we will follow the life adventures of Qoheleth in his search for meaning.

Lesson 3: Ecclesiastes and Life Under the Sun

Qoheleth sat at the top of his class. He was a rich king and had it made! Yet, he lacked something, was curiously empty, and so began rooting around for something that would make sense of it all, take the randomness out of life, provide meaning or purpose to his existence, fulfill him. He recorded his own experiences and his observations of human nature and the world as he saw it. His search began “under the sun,” in the material world, the earthly plain, apart from God. What is life like without God? Where can meaning be found if one looks only to oneself, only to Me, only to the here and now?

Qoheleth tried to find meaning in life under the sun in at least three ways in 1:16-2:24...what are they?

One of the ways Qoheleth tried to find purpose in life was through being wise, figuring it out intellectually (1:16-18 and 2:12-17). Discuss his quest and what he discovered, using the previous passages.

Did wisdom solve his problem? No, it did not. Many today find that academics, a life of study, of reading and writing books, will provide fame and fortune. Yet, as Qoheleth concluded, even though wisdom is superior to stupidity (“Duh!” as Homer Simpson, our leading spokesman for the latter, would say), wisdom does not add years to your life, does not protect you from random chance and misfortune in life, from death. Your scholarly contributions, impressive while you are alive, will be outdated and forgotten when you die. Really encourages you to press on with school and homework, right? Wisdom, by itself, failed to provide meaning, to satisfy Qoheleth.

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Qoheleth provides an interesting contrast to Job in that Qoheleth had money and tried to find meaning with it, while Job had lost his money and tried to find meaning without it. Those who know the Job story, explain this to the others. Reading Job 1-2 will help, and should raise some extremely important questions.

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Qoheleth put in several gentle digs at educators...students, arm yourselves with these passages and save them for that rainy day or hard test...Eccl. 1:18b and 12:12.

Lesson 3: Ecclesiastes and Life Under the Sun

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Qoheleth also tried work, a career (2:18-23). A lot of people today devote their entire energies post high school (often at the expense of family and friends) to their careers, trying define their self-worth by their job and bank account. “If you want to keep this job and move up the corporate ladder, expect to put in 60-70 hours per week. Weekends off? Forget it!” Qoheleth noted this workaholic ethic in his day, too and wryly commented on such a course of action in 4:7-8 and 5:10-11. A job cannot add years to your life (and often has the opposite effect!), cannot provide you with anything that lasts beyond the grave. In fact, whatever your job brings your way goes to someone else after you die; someone who may not even deserve it, and is of no benefit to you whatsoever (6:1-6). Why waste your life and sacrifice yourself only for the good of someone else? A career, and what a successful career brings, by itself, cannot fulfill, cannot make you complete.

The last course of action that Qoheleth tried was pleasure. Aha! Here is something that will provide the answer. How can anyone argue the benefits of being happy, physically satisfied, sated, feeling fine? “If it feels good, do it.” And he did (read 2:1-11). He used his wealth to satisfy all his senses – his artistic sense, his creative sense, his senses of taste and smell, his musical sense, and his physical senses.

Read 2:10. Isn't this what life should be all about? Isn't this the often confessed creed, the repeated mantra of humankind? To have enough money that you can buy whatever you want, meet your every need, satisfy your every whim? Having an unlimited account at Best Buy? If that can't make you happy, what can? But even eating lobster or steak for every meal can grow old and become mundane, and that is exactly what Qoheleth finds to be true. Physical satisfaction, while pleasing and fun in the short term, gets boring and routine if that is your constant diet.

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A pastor once noted that people on their deathbed rarely say, “I wish I would have spent more time at the office.” Rather, he often heard, “I wish I would have spent more time with my family and friends.” Death and old age often bring matters into sharper focus and provide people with a more balanced perspective. A recurring theme in wisdom literature is, “Listen to what your elders have to say!” There are good reasons God put in a commandment about this.

Lesson 3: Ecclesiastes and Life Under the Sun

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Qoheleth included many other cynical observations on life under the sun as well. Note both his sense of wonder and frustration in 3:11. God has given us the capability to know of such a thing as eternity, but has not given us the mental firepower to comprehend it or to know how it works. Therefore we can't figure out just what God, an eternal being, is up to, but we can sense his existence (8:16-17)! Frustrating!

Check out 3:16-18. Qoheleth commented on the corruption present in places where we expect to find justice (the legal system) and righteousness (the church). Even these highly exalted, much respected, and self-proclaimed pillars of a moral society have been twisted by sin into places of evil and corruption (8:10). Crooked judges? Fallen church leaders? Hypocrisy? Oh yes, we can still find these in our world.

Another aspect of the pointless existence under the sun is the same end that befalls both humans and animals – you all die, and that's it (3:19-21). In the material world there is only life and death; no heaven, no hell. Science has not found these, cannot reproduce them in laboratory conditions, so they cannot exist (the materialist view).

Qoheleth also lamented the oppression often practiced by the rich and powerful over the less fortunate and powerless (4:1), the lack of justice or fairness that we too often witness and perhaps have experienced. These situations/conditions sound familiar, don't they? People have not changed much, if at all, from the time of Qoheleth, validating his famous statement in 1:9b.

A character in a western movie remarked, "Fair comes to town only once a year," in response to a whined, "It ain't fair!" In his homespun manner, the cowboy was commenting that life in the Real World is rarely fair,

Lesson 3: Ecclesiastes and Life Under the Sun

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and it should not be expected to be. Qoheleth found this to be true as well and stated his views in 7:15, 8:14, 9:11-12; 10:5-7. Maybe that cowboy was an avid reader of Qoheleth, or perhaps just an astute observer of the human condition.

Because those who break God's law get away with it (8:11-13), with nothing bad happening to them, with no punishment coming their way, people figure there is no point in following the rules, in obeying God. Where's the benefit in being the good boy/girl? Have you ever seen someone get ahead; have a good time, while behaving themselves? Break the law, cheat, bend the rules to suit your needs; nothing's going to happen to you and you will be the one to win, get the promotion, score the high grade!

Give some examples of this that you have seen in your life, family, or school (perhaps the names Lucius and Draco Malfoy, popular antagonists from the Harry Potter series, will pop up.)

Okay, so we have Qoheleth, an accurate observer of the world, of people, and of how the world works. What he saw in his day, we see in ours. What was true for him is true for us. What he tried, and what left him empty and unfulfilled will leave us the same way. He has established his credentials, convinced us that what he has to say is valid, that what he has to say bears listening to. But so far everything we've heard from him is rather pessimistic. What is his point?

Qoheleth came to the conclusion reached by the nihilists. If you are searching for meaning entirely in the material world (this keeps sounding a bit like Material Girl, for all you Madonna fans), looking for purpose only in yourself, you are out of luck. There is none.

Lesson 3: Ecclesiastes and Life Under the Sun

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Qoheleth's search for meaning under the sun came up empty, leaving him to draw the conclusion that he states in 4:2-3. Qoheleth decided that if you live your life in a purely egocentric way, you will have a hard time finding any fulfillment, satisfaction of your wants and needs, emotionally and physically. There's a nice happy ending for you, right?

Remember though, so far we have only addressed the human condition under the sun, apart from God. As Christians know, great meaning and fulfillment come from one's relationship with God, and cannot be found in things alone. Will Qoheleth reach the same conclusion? Tune in next lesson to find out.

Lesson 4: There is Meaning in Life

Can we glean any message from Ecclesiastes apart from Qoheleth's pessimistic assessment of life under the sun? Yes! The answer is to look beyond the material world, beyond ourselves, to a relationship with God. Once we are in that relationship, everything changes. It's like being in love – everything is different. The grass is greener, the sky more blue. As the loving relationship changes everything, so does a relationship with God. No longer are we limited to life under the sun. Qoheleth found meaning in the rather simple things in life once he was in a faith relationship with the Creator of the Universe.

Qoheleth's chief conclusion is that a relationship with God is essential to provide meaning for life and for death. Rather than scurrying around and slaving away, searching for answers and happiness in things or experiences that will die with us, that are finite, that will vanish with the passing of time and memory, Qoheleth found that investing in the one thing that would last beyond his physical existence was the way to go. Why work for the finite when you can have the infinite? Dedicate yourself to the one thing that will last forever, that will exist beyond the grave – your relationship with God. When you look at life that way, doesn't it make sense? The most valuable item in the world, eternal life, immortality, is the prize for which we should all be striving, the aspect of life here on which we should be working. Attend worship, study the Scripture – the Holy Spirit will use these opportunities to draw you closer to God. What Qoheleth looked for in all of his pursuits - meaning, permanence, something beyond the grave - is present in our relationship with God.

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The belief in resurrection and eternal life for the faithful provides meaning for the one event in life that we all have to face, the event that stymies many a search for meaning in the material world, and that often defies explanation – death. While death for unbelievers is the end of the story, the last line, and something to be avoided at all costs, death for Christians is merely a transition and is not to be feared or dreaded. Death is something that even Jesus experienced, and we will too at some point. Jesus stated this quite well in Jn. 12:24-25. Paul also had the outlook that death was necessary to gain the greater reward of heaven, as he stated in his last letter, his second letter to Timothy (read 2 Tim. 4:6-8).

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Once God and our relationship with him replaces Me First in our lives (a shift from the egocentric to theocentric view), our entire world view changes. Our primary focus becomes other-oriented. It shifts to Gospel proclamation: how can we further the Kingdom of God?

As Jesus says in Mt. 22:36-40, quoting Dt. 6:4-5 and Lev. 19:18, the most important thing in life is your relationship with God, to love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, and mind. The second is to love your neighbor as yourself. Not a lot of Me, of Ego, in those statements, is there? A relationship with God requires a radical re-ordering of priorities, a complete break from the egocentric sinful world, and a total subversion of what I want. The driving force in life is what God wants of me (theocentric), not of what I want of the world.

Paul described this shift in life-view from egocentric philosophy to a theocentric one in Rom 12:1-2. We offer every aspect of ourselves and our lives to God. We sacrifice them; they become his (for why we have this obligation to God, see 1 Cor. 6:19-20).

This sacrifice of ourselves changes us and how we see the world, as Qoheleth concluded (see Phil. 3:8 also). Paul emphasized the struggles brought on by this unnatural state of affairs (we are egocentric by nature), this battle raging within us between the demands of our relationship with God and the demands of our egocentric sinful nature, in some difficult prose in Rom. 7:14-20. Interesting, even Paul fought this fight. We are not alone! The first aspect of life to change when we believe is our relationship with ourselves.

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Our relationship to things in the world becomes different as well. No longer are they the ends in life, what we expend all our energies to obtain, but a means by which we live and sources of enjoyment and pleasure in life. Qoheleth repeats this over and over in his book – Eccl. 2:24-25, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-9, 11:9, 12:13-14 (discuss what these passages mean, what guidance we can gain from them as we go through life).

Enjoy the gifts God has given you, for everything is a gift from God, not an intrinsic right that humans somehow have. Eat and drink! Enjoy the vast richness and variety that surrounds us even in the supermarket. Enjoy the complexities and wonder of taste, smell, touch, and sight. God has made the world for us to enjoy as we serve him, not as the totality of life; icing on the cake, not the cake itself. Enjoy family and friends and the richness they bring to our lives. Enjoy the work God has given us while we are on earth. To a certain extent, Qoheleth sounds rather Lutheran here, advocating the teaching of vocation that was so stridently proclaimed by Luther. If our job or calling is a God-pleasing one (contract killer, for instance, is not), we serve God and love our neighbor as ourselves as we carry out our tasks, no matter what our job is. We serve our neighbor by cleaning tables at the Burger Palace, by being a good brother or sister, by studying hard, by teaching as best we can. In all of our tasks, whatever our calling may be, we serve God and our fellow beings, and God is pleased.

Qoheleth fully realized that the end of life, old age, may not be pleasant or enjoyable. Youth, with all of its health, vitality, and excitement as well as old age with its physical and mental decline, are both fleeting, are both transitional (read Eccl. 11:8-12:8).

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The teaching of vocation is one of the more liberating that Luther hit upon as he studied the Bible. With vocation, he undermined the entire system set up by the early Catholic Church that stated that certain professions, such as being a monk or priest, were more God-pleasing, scored more points with God, than others, such as being a farmer. Spiritual elitism entered the church professionals, while many believers lamented their low position with God due to their jobs. Luther countered this false notion with his teaching on vocation. For further reading, see the classic treatise Luther on Vocation by Gustaf Wingren, not to be confused with Luther's letters from the French Riviera found in Luther on Vacation. All of us have callings/vocations. Many of us have multiple callings – father/mother, sister/brother, son/daughter, wife/husband, student, employee. All of these are vocations from God through which we can show the love of God (Dt. 6:4-5), reflect the light of the Gospel that lives within each one of us (Is. 58:6-9, Mt. 5:16), and serve humanity (Lev. 19:18). As Qoheleth concluded, that is what God expects of us (Eccl. 12:13).

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He concluded his book with a series of poetic metaphors that describe the decline of the body in old age, a decline that ends in death. However, Qoheleth knew that death was not the end, but only the beginning of life. While he did not develop the themes of resurrection and eternal life, Qoheleth talked about judgment (3:17, 8:11-12, 12:14) and the return of the spirit to God (3:21, 12:7).

The themes of death, resurrection, and judgment, while present in the Old Testament books, were more fully developed in the New Testament. Paul wrestled with the transition that death would bring in Phil. 1:20-25. Discuss this passage in the context of our own lives and note what Paul experienced for the sake of taking the Gospel to people like the Philippians (see 2 Cor. 11:23-28).

If you saw Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* and were horrified by the flogging that Jesus experienced, know that Paul went through that five times! Yet he hung in there to carry out the will of God (stated succinctly in Jn. 6:40). The proclamation of the Gospel brings meaning to life while the content of the Gospel brings meaning to death.

Since the focus of wisdom literature is not on the afterlife but on life, that is where Qoheleth keeps hammering away – the sanctified life, life as a child of God. He wrapped up his book nicely in two verses, in case you had missed his point (read 12:13-14).

If you squint your eyes a bit and look at the page sideways, the blurred words of 12:13 become the words of Jesus in Mt. 22:37-40. "Fear God" becomes "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind," while "Keep his commandments" reads, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Qoheleth's

final phrase, "This is the whole duty of humanity" becomes "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Qoheleth and Jesus in perfect agreement...what a great way to live and a great way to end.