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# BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

**study guide : part one**





# Being Human? The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes for Today

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## The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes for Today

### Part 1: Space (How Not to be Airbenders)

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

- Ecclesiastes 1:2

From the above passage alone, the book of Ecclesiastes appears to be the most depressing book in the Bible. But Ecclesiastes, despite being one of the most overlooked books in the Bible, might be one of the most relevant books for our time. It offers a sobering perspective on what life in the real world is really like, and what it really feels like to be human and to be faced with real limitations. It’s a book that wants to show us *how to be a human being in the real world*.

### I. Who is “the Teacher”?

There are two voices in the book of Ecclesiastes. One is the voice that introduces the speaker at the very beginning (1:1) and summarizes his message at the end (12:9-14). The other voice is the voice we hear from 1:2 onwards, the main voice in the book. Some think this main speaker is Solomon. But what scholars think is more likely is that the speaker is merely using Solomon as a character in his story - a persona he’s adopting to explore what life is like. The author is anonymous. So, we’ll refer to him simply as the Teacher.

### II. Can we trust this Teacher?

Some people think we can’t trust the Teacher because he seems to contradict everything we know about Biblical faith. But when we look closer at his words, we see that’s not the case.



The Teacher agrees with what the Scriptures as a whole teach. And we see that clearly when we take a closer look at what seems to be his most used word – ‘meaningless.’

In Hebrew, the word translated in the NIV as meaningless, is the word *hebel* – a word meaning smoke or vapour or breath. It’s the same word we get in Psalm 39 where the psalmist says: “everyone is but a breath (*hebel*).” (Ps. 39:5).

So, a more accurate translation of the Teacher’s opening words would say this. “The merest of breaths,” says the Teacher, “The merest of breaths. Everything is a breath.”

And so, the Teacher’s message is not that everything in life has no meaning, but that life is fleeting, like a breath.

And like smoke, it’s confusing and disorientating when you’re caught in the thick of it. It’s not that life has no meaning, but that its meaning is often unclear and escapes our grasp.

That might still sound depressing, but it doesn’t need to be. The Teacher wants us to see the real world for what it is and to face it. And he wants us to see that embracing the reality that everything is a breath can lead us to a life of thankfulness and enjoyment if we only see the world and our place within it in the right way.

So, we want to ask 3 questions to better understand the stance the Teacher is teaching us to adopt.

1. *Know what?* - What do we need to know about the world we live in?
2. *So what?* - What does that matter for us?
3. *Now what?* - What should we do about it?



## 1. Know What – Everything is Ordered by God

*The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.*

- Ecclesiastes 1:5-7

The Teacher wants us to see that we live in a cosmos. In Biblical understanding, the word cosmos refers to a world ordered by God – and that’s what our world is. That means there’s a rhythm and flow to the way the world works, observable in the cyclical patterns in creation. It also means there are certain boundaries that God has ordained to allow life to flourish.

The problem is that we as humans don’t often see creation in this way. Instead we often see the world the way the modern, secular world does, as an empty universe with no purpose governing it. And when we adopt this view of the world, we will always be looking at the order and limits in the world not as good boundaries purposefully ordained by a good God, but as obstacles to our enjoyment; problems that need to be solved or avoided. That’s what leads us to seek out vacations, and pleasures of various kinds. We’re not satisfied with simply following the order and rhythm that all creation does. We want more than what the world is. But when we insist that there should be more in that way, we miss the beauty of the world as God has created it to be.

## 2. So What? - Everything is beyond your control

Not only are we as humans frequently dissatisfied with the way the world is, with all its limits, but we are often completely intolerant of them. And this leads us to think we must engage in a kind of quest to make the world the way we think it ought to be.

But this is futile. We can't change the order that God has set in the cosmos. As the Teacher puts it:

*What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.*

- Ecclesiastes 1:15

If God has made something crooked, it is beyond human power to make it straight. This means that all of our efforts to take control of life are like chasing after the wind. Of course, we have some control (for instance the self-control Paul speaks of in Gal 5:22-23), but in the grand scheme of things we don't get to control the way life works.

And not only is chasing after the wind futile; it is also evil. Because when we ignore God's ordained boundaries and chase after the wind – after our own definition of what life ought to be – we dehumanize others and ourselves. Maybe you can think of an example of how you have felt dehumanized when you've tried to define life on your own terms, or when someone has wronged you by seeking control.



And that is why Qohelet is so insistent on telling us that everything is a breath. That everything is beyond our control. Because he wants to spare you and I the great pain that results from seeking control.

## 3. Now What? – Everything is a Gift... So, Receive It... Enjoy It!

So, what do we do instead? If this world is a breath – a beautiful place that we can't control or take hold of – then how are we to respond? What is the 'Now what?'

Here is what you do: open your hands and receive life as a gift from God. You can't control it, so stop trying to. Instead, learn to receive it, to enjoy life for what it is right now.

And not to cling to things desperately as if they were ours forever, but to hold things with an open hand, since everything belongs to God. Everything is his gift to us.

As the Teacher puts it...

*A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?*

- Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

In other words, learn to enjoy the simple things in life. A good conversation with a friend, or the sun on your face, or a good meal with people that you care about. These simple things in life that we often take for granted are rich gifts from God.

This doesn't mean we give up longing for the vision of life God has promised us. The book of Ecclesiastes ends by telling us that the proper response to all of this is to "fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind." (Ecclesiastes 12:13).



It's telling us that along with fearing God – that means showing reverence for God and the boundaries he has set in the cosmos – we also engage the world as he has commanded us: by praying your kingdom come, being peacemakers who act for justice, mourning with those who mourn, and more.

And although we have failed to live this out because of our desire for control, there is one who came and kept all of God's commands perfectly and did not grasp for control, or to get beyond his humanity, but became a human and embraced human limits, as Paul puts it, "becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." In that act, he killed all of our sin and paid the penalty we deserved to pay for all of our sinful control-seeking.

And he rose again to new life. And he did this so that despite all the ways we've dehumanized ourselves and others on the quest for control, we can be a part of a new redeemed humanity. In fact, that is what Paul tells us the whole creation is longing for. It "waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed." (Rom. 8:19)

That means you don't have to choose between trying to escape your life or being miserable about it. Jesus wants to give you a full and meaningful life with him at the centre. And he wants you to embrace and to enjoy that gift.

So, if you are struggling in life, the solution is not to just suck it up and keep going. It's not to try to escape your situation. It's to embrace life with Jesus at the centre. Only that kind of life will enable you to find real joy in the real world.

The goal of Ecclesiastes is not to make you hopeless. It's to make you humble. And to make you thankful for the life that God has given to you.

So, will you choose right now to stop chasing control and instead to embrace him – to open your hands and receive the life God has given you, enjoying it and giving thanks to God for it moment by moment?

Perhaps, this Thanksgiving, one practical way you could commit to doing that would be to spend some time journaling at the end of each day and making a list of 10-20 things you are thankful to God for about the life he has given you.



## Life Group Questions:

Open Up: Read *Ecclesiastes 1* together. What is your overall impression of this passage? What surprises you? Depresses you? Encourages you?

**1. In the message, Jacob pointed out that the word translated in the NIV as meaningless, is the word 'hebel' – a word meaning smoke or vapour or breath. So we could translate the opening words of Ecclesiastes this way: “The merest of breaths,” says the Teacher, “The merest of breaths. Everything is a breath.”**

1. What do you think of the idea that “Everything is a breath?” How does it change and even challenge the way you look at life?
2. In the message Jacob shared that “In saying everything is a breath, the Teacher is not saying everything in life has no meaning, but that life is fleeting, like a breath. And like smoke, it’s confusing and disorientating when you’re caught in the thick of it. It’s not that life has no meaning, but that its meaning is often unclear and escapes our grasp.” How have you experienced this in your own life? Share specific examples.

**2. Ecclesiastes 1:12-14 says this:**

**I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless (hebel), a chasing after the wind.**

1. What are some ways that people you know “chase after the wind” by trying to control life? What are some ways that you have tried to control life? What happened?

**3. Iain Provan, an Old Testament professor at Regent college, argues that “Right at the heart of the human problem lies a refusal to live life within the confines that God has ordained for mortal beings, even though this may involve living in a paradise where joy abounds.”**

1. Do you think what Iain Provan says is true? What are some of the good boundaries God created in life that people you know find restrictive?
2. Jacob shared how stepping outside the boundaries God has ordained leads to dehumanization. What are some ways you have seen dehumanization result from people stepping outside God’s good boundaries? (Read Psalm 22:6-8 to see an interesting example. Where do you see dehumanization language occur in this passage?)
3. Read *Ecclesiastes 2:24-25*. What would you say is the writer of Ecclesiastes’ perspective on how we can relate to God’s divinely-ordained boundaries in a way that leads to real joy?



## Life Group Questions (continued...)

The next 2 questions will be more personal. These questions will be the most helpful if everyone answers as honestly and transparently as possible. Then you can pray specifically for each other about the areas you find yourself struggling with.

4. What are some of the areas in your everyday life that you tend to define as mundane (eg. your job). What are some limits that you are bumping up against and find yourself wishing you could get beyond (eg. I wish I had more energy; I wish I could get my work done faster; I wish there was more time in a day; I wish I had the answer to this; I wish I were better at this). How have you been responding to those areas of your life?

5. Jacob talked about the decision that we all have to either try to control life or to "embrace life's givenness," including its limits. What would it look like for you to receive life as a gift and to enjoy it instead of trying to control it? What is one specific, practical step you could take this week to make this your response?

Pray: Take time to pray together that God would help each person to resist the temptation to take control and to instead embrace his good boundaries and enjoy life under his loving leadership this week