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# BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

**s t u d y g u i d e : p a r t s i x**





# Being Human?

## How **Not** to Be *Immortals*

By David Fields

### Being Human | The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes | (How **Not** to be Immortals) Part 6

#### Ecclesiastes 3:18-22

**18** I also said to myself, “As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. **19** Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath[c]; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. **20** All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. **21** Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”

**22** So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

#### What do we Learn about Living through a text about Dying?

“[I]f there is one thing that we do not find in this book, it is the joy of resurrection. Perhaps this is one reason why Ecclesiastes is seldom read or preached in modern churches.”

- Iain Provan

This text tells us that God “tests humans” so that we’ll see that we are “like the animals.” In what sense?

#### The big point is simple: We all die.

**31** Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. **32** You will be driven away from people and **will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox.** Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.”...- *Daniel 4:31-32*

God makes Nebuchadnezzar like an “animal” in order to learn how to be human. Recognizing what we have in common with the animals, of our creaturely limitations, that’s one way of addressing our god-pretensions.

#### 1. Ordinariness isn’t bad but good

This text on the inevitability of death is couched between these two statements:

“**12** I know that there is nothing better for people than to **be happy** and **to do good** while they live. **13** That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil—**this is the gift of God.**” - *Ecc 3:12-13*



“**22** So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to *enjoy their work*, because that is their lot”  
- Ecc 3:22a

“Whereas we might privilege the spectacular over the simple, Qohelet doesn’t see a dualism between the simple, earthly blessings of God and the spectacular. He sees both as coming from the hand of God.”  
- Jacob Harder

By recognizing our commonality with the animals, we are liberated to truly enjoy what God has given us without an anxious heart, and without a striving for ‘something more.’

“We are to live life not in the hope of gaining some advantage over the rest of creation with which we share dust and breath, but simply for its own sake, finding joy in it and receiving that joy as itself the reward that living brings us. We are in that sense, too, to be “like the animals,” who rejoice only in the moment and do not make great plans for their lives.”  
- Provan.

### **This is why Jesus tells us:**

“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” - Matthew 6:26-27

## **2. Suffering and death are unavoidable. But God dignifies them both; is even present in them both.**

“If I make my bed in Sheol [that is the Hebrew word for the realm of the dead], you are there!”  
- Psalm 139:8

The very high-point of the whole of God’s saving plan is that God the Son, Jesus, enters our humanity and the whole human condition – including *death*. Jesus faces death head on in order to unite us to himself. That doesn’t mean that we now somehow ‘dodge death’ or can avoid suffering. No. But we know that our death can be transformed – can be like Jesus’ death. *That death is not final*. Not ultimate. That because we are united to Jesus in his death, we will be like him in resurrection too.

### **The Keys are in His Hands**

Jesus says: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.”- I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”- Revelation 1:17-18

Darrel Johnson summarizes: “Because Jesus Christ has walked into the gaping jaws of the greatest enemy there is. On the cross he let all the powers that threaten to undo us have their unrestrained way with him. He let death take him captive. And then he burst out of the prison and carried away the prison keys!”

### 3. Live with joyful receptivity to the good gift of life

The Teacher's "carpe diem is an expression of faith, not of self-fulfillment. It is not the greedy consumption of experiences and pleasures before oblivion consumes us. It is, rather, the patient and joyful embrace of daily life as it comes to us as a gift from God. The biblical carpe diem, then, is not a self-centered response to the uncertainties surrounding life after death, but a worshipful response to the God of creation, who is also the God of new creation and resurrection."

– *Iain Provan*

One day we will eat and drink and enjoy friendship at the King's table, where death will vanish forever. And yet, this world, and these meals, are pointers to that coming future.

"Those without Christ often abandon themselves to eating and drinking because sometimes it looks as if that's all there is to do before we die. But those who love Christ cherish eating and drinking because it looks a little like what we will do after we die...They smell and taste and feel like home."

– *David Gibson*

### Life Group Discussion and Reflection

**Open Up:** What are some of the most common approaches to the reality of death do you observe in our world? Why do you think people think/feel this way?

#### Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

1. We find that God is the sovereign over time, not humans. We are subject to the world that is, not what we want it to be. How does this text (especially 3:18-22) confront the ways we often want to avoid the topic of death?



2. In his message, Pastor Dave made the point that the writer of Ecclesiastes does not know as much about resurrection hope as we now do, on the other side of Jesus' resurrection. But that does not make his message less relevant for us. How does death address our propensity to try and live beyond the boundaries of being human? Consider the example of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:28-37. What did this king need to learn? How do we need to learn it as well?

3. Look at Psalm 90:12. How have you experienced that to be true for you? How does thinking about our mortality help us live with wisdom?

4. Pastor Dave pointed to the reality that Ecclesiastes encourages us to "enjoy life" and our work. In what ways does this challenge you this week? Are there ways you are embracing a 'grumpy' posture toward life? How does Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:1 help you reorient your heart toward 'rejoicing'?

**Prayer:** Take some time to pray for your group members, especially in light of what you shared in your discussion. Give thanks to God that he made the world to be enjoyed, moment by moment. Ask God to give you a renewed perspective on his goodness – to be able to receive with joy the good gifts, and even the challenges you face.