

A young plant with serrated green leaves grows from the forest floor, illuminated by soft sunlight filtering through the trees. The background is a blurred forest with tall, thin tree trunks.

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Advanced

Bible Study

ADULTS • CSB

FALL 2024

THRIVE: LIVING ON PURPOSE • NAVIGATING FAMILY CONFLICT

RESTORED AND MADE NEW

Home improvement and car restoration. These topics remain some of the most popular TV shows and YouTube channels. We love to see old houses and cars given “a new lease on life.” Many of us watch these shows to give us ideas on what we can do to restore something of our own. And many of us know that to make such a restoration, we’re going to need outside help.

We are flawed human beings. Because of sin in our lives, we need restoration. We don’t just need “a new lease on life,” we need a full restoration. However, to be restored to the life and purpose God created us for requires outside help. None of us are capable of doing this on our own.

Thankfully, God Himself has stepped in to give us the restoration we need. Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, took our sin upon Himself, dying on a cross to remove and forgive our sin. He rose again to give us a new, eternal life.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

This restoration is for you, but it calls for belief and trust. If you would like to have a new life in Christ, repent of your sins and put your faith in Him. Admit to God that you are a sinner. Turn from the sin that has kept you from God and accept Jesus’s gift of forgiveness. Confess your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Express your repentance and faith by praying something like this:

“Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I believe Jesus died on the cross to forgive me of my sins. I’m sorry for all the wrong I’ve done and ask You to forgive me. I now accept Your gift of eternal life. Thank You for Your love, forgiveness, and a new life in Jesus Christ. From this day forward, I choose to follow You. In Jesus’s name, Amen.”

Share your decision to follow Jesus with a pastor or those in your Bible study group. Get involved in a church that will help you grow in your faith. Be baptized as an expression of your faith.

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Bible Studies for Life
Advanced Bible Study
Fall 2024 Volume 19 Number 1

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Advanced Bible Study® (ISSN: pending; Item: 005075005) is published quarterly by Lifeway Christian Resources, 200 Powell Place, Suite 100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7707, Ben Mandrell, President. © 2024 Lifeway Christian Resources.

Printed in the United States of America.

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Introduction

THRIVE: LIVING ON PURPOSE

Antique stores. Not everyone is a fan, but my wife and I like to walk the aisles of an antique store. I may find something I can refurbish or repurpose into something else. Occasionally, I'll see something that is new and unusual to me. "What is it?" I am not interested in simply knowing its name; I want to know what it does. What is its purpose? Knowing the purpose of some tool or instrument I pick up tells me why it was invented, who might use it, and how effective it was.

Too many of us go through life without purpose. Life can be mundane and even carry a sense of hopelessness, but that was never God's intent for us. God created us with purpose, and when we discover that purpose in Christ, life takes on a meaning and richness the world can't offer. Over these six Bible study sessions, we're going to see the purpose for which God created us, how we can recapture that purpose, and what it practically looks like to live life with purpose.

How this study supports the Discipleship Plan (p. 178)

Live Unashamed. Knowing the purpose God has given us helps us live with confidence. When we are living out God's plan and desire for us, the reaction of the world around us is of little consequence.

Session 1 Purpose Questioned (Ecclesiastes 1:1-14)

Session 2 Purpose Abandoned (Psalm 8:1-6; 14:1-7)

Session 3 Purpose Restored (Acts 3:14-26)

Session 4 Purpose Lived (Galatians 5:16-26)

Session 5 Purpose Expressed (Galatians 6:1-10)

Session 6 Purpose Exemplified (Philippians 1:1-11)

Purpose Questioned

THE POINT

Apart from God, life is meaningless.

THE PASSAGE

Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The world claims that owning a lot of things, having certain position titles, and being popular in our field will give us security, happiness, and a sense of well-being. Chase any one of these, though, and even if we acquire them, we soon discover they fail to deliver all we had thought or hoped they would. Hence, we are still left with a feeling of futility. The Preacher in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes made that discovery centuries ago. As he continued his search, he reached this conclusion: When God is in the picture we see life from a better perspective; it takes on a deeper and more fulfilling meaning.

NOTES

THE SETTING

Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature, meaning biblical literature that helps readers in their struggle with practical and philosophical issues of life. Ecclesiastes confronts the issue of how we can find meaning in life despite the seemingly futile nature of everything we are prone to pursue. The writer, identified as the Preacher, provides no superficial answers to the struggle but goes to the core of the matter.

Though the writer is a king, the book is not a compilation of royal decrees. Rather it is a compendium of sage advice from a fellow struggler. The royal teacher writes from the perspective of his personal experience not his royal existence. Chapters 11 and 12 suggest he wrote to share his insight and experience with the younger men of his day.

Ecclesiastes needs to be studied with care. If we read only isolated verses, we might think the message is contradictory to the rest of Scripture. The writer wanted his readers to examine all the issues of life seriously; to think deeply. Thus, to guide them in their thinking, he first raised the common or popular views on a matter and challenged his readers to explore why that popular way of thinking was flawed. Things like personal accomplishments and possessions will pass away. Therefore, we need to look beyond them to find purpose; we need to look to God. God created us with purpose, and when we discover His purpose, our lives take on a meaning and richness the world cannot offer.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-7

How did the author of Ecclesiastes identify himself and who do we generally conclude he was? What is the theme of the book? What evidence did the Preacher cite for the validity of his thesis that life is vanity?

¹ **The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.**

² **“Absolute futility,” says the Teacher.**

“Absolute futility. Everything is futile.”

³ **What does a person gain for all his efforts
that he labors at under the sun?**

⁴ **A generation goes and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.**

⁵ **The sun rises and the sun sets;
panting, it hurries back to the place
where it rises.**

⁶ **Gusting to the south,
turning to the north,
turning, turning, goes the wind,
and the wind returns in its cycles.**

⁷ **All the streams flow to the sea,
yet the sea is never full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.**

A lot is happening, but there is no purpose. The heading of the book does not identify the writer, but verse 1 provides some hints. The book is a compilation of the **words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem**. *Words* denotes a “speech,” “collection of sayings,” even “a chronicle” or a “written record.” What he recorded was not a tome filled with impressive words; neither was it a volume of senseless drivel. The Hebrew word for *Teacher* is sometimes transliterated into English as *Koheleth* or *Qoheleth*. The word is a participial form of a verb meaning “to assemble, gather.”

NOTES

It can be rendered as *Teacher* (CSB, NIV, NRSV) or “Preacher” (ESV, KJV, NASB). Thus, the writer was someone who assembled a group together to share with them his collection of wisdom sayings or instructions.

Biblical scholars have debated the identity of this *Teacher*. The most immediate *son of David* who resided as *king of Israel in Jerusalem* would have been Solomon. Other internal evidence in the book alludes to circumstances that fit Solomon’s life and experience (chap. 2). We will avoid citing that evidence in detail but accept that such internal evidence supports the conclusion that Solomon is the *Teacher*. Even so, we will focus more on his message than his identity.

What a dismal message it appears to be, at least as it begins. **Absolute futility . . . Absolute futility. Everything is futile.** *Futility* means “emptiness.” It comes from a Hebrew word meaning “breath, vapor.” Figuratively, it refers to something “transitory, unsatisfactory, vain.” No single English word captures the many nuances of the Hebrew word. It may denote “lacking meaning or significance” or suggest “lack of endurance,” something that won’t last. The construction of the sentence intensifies the meaning of the word. *Absolute futility* can be rendered, “Meaningless! Meaningless! . . . Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (NIV) or “Vanity of vanities . . . vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (ESV). Not just some things or a few things, but *all* things—all possessions, endeavors, and anything else that comes to mind.

With that introduction, the Teacher sets the tone for what is to follow. Life is futile and brief. It is void of everything the Teacher truly desired, such as gain from his toil, enduring joy, freedom, and even the ability to understand God and the future. A subtheme of the book concerns how one should live in light of such a view of life. Where is meaning in life to be found if not in one’s very being, intellect, efforts, desires, or possessions? An answer is forthcoming to those who listen to the Teacher’s argument. Therefore, we need to engage in a careful examination of the Teacher’s message to the very end and not jump to premature conclusions based on his opening words.

The next several verses continue to expand on the theme. The question raised in verse 3 implies a negative answer. **What does a person gain for all his efforts?** “What does man gain by all his toil?” (ESV). “What profit hath a man of all his labour?” (KJV). The implied answer is *nothing*. *Efforts* denotes the common but difficult struggles one undertakes to accrue benefits that affect a person’s future. The Teacher concluded, however, that in the end painful labor does not return an enduring profit or gain.

The word rendered *gain* can refer to an increase that comes as the result of a successful business deal, but it is not limited to that understanding. The Teacher would also have in mind the emotional benefits that come from having engaged in honest toil; a sense of satisfaction, joy, and learning that might come from a job done well. Oh, those feelings or benefits might be there for a while, but the Teacher was not talking about engaging in a search for something temporary but for that which has an enduring quality.

The phrase **under the sun** is a recurring one in Ecclesiastes—repeated over two dozen times—but it is not found in any other book of the Bible. It is a way of speaking about human life on earth. Thus, the Teacher uses it in reference to what an individual does during his lifetime as opposed to a single occurrence or event. A person may find pleasure in accomplishing one task, but overall—looking at the big picture—nothing is fully satisfying.

Life has a certain monotonous cycle to it. **A generation goes and a generation comes.** Yes, **the earth remains forever**, or is constant, but people come and go. That has been the course of human history for millennia and will continue to be. We are intrigued by our family histories, but in the end, family histories are another stark reminder that no generation endures forever. Life even in its longest term is temporary. The oldest person on earth eventually dies.

Nature has a similar cycle. Every day **the sun rises and the sun sets. It hurries back to the place where it rises.** Of course, we know the earth rotates around the sun, but from appearances, the sun is the object moving across the sky. Each morning we look in the same easterly direction to see its rising and we follow it to its setting in the west.

NOTES

The wind also has a cycle. **Gusting to the south, turning to the north, turning, turning, goes the wind.** A southerly wind either blows so far south that it eventually circles the globe and heads north; or at some point, the wind reverses its course and starts blowing north. Whichever, it is an endless cycle. **The wind returns in its cycles.** “Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course” (NIV). The wind blows this way and that, day in and day out according to the weather cycles or patterns, which are beyond our control. Hence, the foolishness of “chasing after the wind” (See comments on v. 14).

And one more natural example: the streams. **All the streams flow to the sea, yet the sea is never full.** For example, the Mississippi River has been flowing from creation into the Gulf of Mexico, but the Gulf still has not been filled up. And if you go to the headwaters of the Mississippi River, the water is still flowing (though drought conditions have slowed that flow considerably). It is as if the place **where the streams flow, there they flow again.** “To the place the streams come from, there they return again” (NIV). The cycle does not end.

We might argue that we find some comfort in the recurring cycle of nature. It is good to know life is well-ordered; to know that the sun will come up in the morning even if today is dreary. That is all true. But that is not the point the Teacher was making. He was using exaggerated rhetoric to emphasize that nothing new exists under the sun; that humankind can be caught up in an endless cycle without meaning or that provides no lasting satisfaction. “Nature communicates this weary motion to man who in his endless talking, seeing, and hearing shares in this unprofitable activity.”¹ His life is filled with labor but no profit; thus, it is all vanity.

What are some lasting truths from Ecclesiastes 1:1-7?

- Without God, what we do in this life can feel pointless.
- Left to our own devices, we are trapped in a monotonous cycle of life, much like the created order, in constant motion but going nowhere.

Ecclesiastes 1:8-10

What three efforts did the Teacher identify that humankind may depend on to develop an understanding of the meaning of life? What word did he use to indicate those efforts are ineffective? How did the Teacher connect the past with the future? What did he conclude about the “new”?

**⁸ All things are wearisome,
more than anyone can say.
The eye is not satisfied by seeing
or the ear filled with hearing.**

**⁹ What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.**

**¹⁰ Can one say about anything,
“Look, this is new”?
It has already existed in the ages before us.**

No meaning, no satisfaction. These verses continue the development of the theme stated in verse 2 and the evidence from nature given in verses 5-7. Translations of verse 8 vary; thus, the meaning does as well. **All things are wearisome.** “All things are full of weariness” (ESV). The sense seems to be that the struggle to understand life from a secular worldview is *wearisome*. It is intellectually challenging and emotionally draining. **More than anyone can say.** The KJV reads, “man cannot utter it.” But about what? What is *it*? Duane Garrett suggests it refers to the content beginning in verse 3 about the monotonous, unfulfilling cycle of life. “Humans, confronted by the monotony and aimlessness of the situation in which they have been placed, have nothing to say . . . No one can speak meaningfully to or about the world; that is, no one can explain, influence, or control it. Humanity, for all its intellectual investigations, must accept life and death and the coming and going of generations in this world as an unexplained and inexplicable given . . . Language, the greatest power humans have, is of no advantage.”²

NOTES

Moreover, **the eye is not satisfied by seeing**. No matter how much a person sees of life or life events, he will not be *satisfied* or have enough information to feel fulfilled. Finally, no matter that **the ear filled with hearing**, the individual is left wanting. *Hearing* is more than the auditory sense; it is hearing intelligently, with discernment, with understanding. No amount of learning or human insight can provide the answers needed to unravel completely the complexity of life.

Verse 9 further reinforces the thought of the endless cycle of the created order and life on the earth described in the previous verses. **What has been is what will be**. “What has been is what will be” (CSB). Moreover, **what has been done is what will be done**. *Done* denotes that which has been accomplished, work that has been productive.

Why is this true? Because **there is nothing new under the sun**. Think about it, the Teacher says. **Can one say about anything, “Look, this is new”?** No, nothing is new. **It has already existed in the ages before us**. What is, has long existed. What appears to be new is only an extension or advancement of something that always has been. For example, fast cars and airplanes have made transportation easier, but humankind has always had some means of transportation, even if walking. Computers—as fancy, fast, and fantastic as they are—have only enhanced humankind’s ability to communicate or store information. The fundamental events of life, as described in verses 4-8, are not appreciably altered; they are constant. Each generation is convinced its life experiences are unique. But that is not so. As it has been with those who preceded us, so it is with us, and so it will be with those who come after us.

What are some lasting truths that come from Ecclesiastes 1:8-10?

- Without God, what we do in life does not satisfy.
- No explanations, experiences, or learning will completely satisfy our desire to find meaning in life.
- What we may think is new, is not; it is only an extension, advancement, or reworking of what has been in some other form at some other time.
- In a real sense, the future is the past done over.

Ecclesiastes 1:11-14

*What does the Teacher say is the eventual reality about the things and people in our past? What connection does the information in verse 12 have with the statement in verse 1? Did being king have any advantage in terms of searching out the meaning of life? Why did the Teacher describe the search for significance as a **miserable task**? What conclusion did the Teacher come to as stated in verse 14?*

¹¹ There is no remembrance of those who came before; and of those who will come after there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them.

¹² I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

¹³ I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied.

¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind.

Looking for purpose, finding futility. The present will, in a fleeting moment, be the past. **There is no remembrance of those who came before.** Before long, the past will be forgotten; it will fade from memory. **And of those who will come after there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them.** What seems so fresh and unforgettable to us now will be forgotten by those who follow us.

We study history; we subscribe to genealogical sites. Why? Because we need prompting and aid in remembering the events and the people of our past. Do you know what happened on this date 100 hundred years ago? Even one year ago? How often do you think about your great-great-grandparents? Do you even know who they were? I might wish I would be remembered by the generations to come, but I must swallow my pride and accept that somewhere out there, my descendants will not know about me. Lasting fame will escape most of us. And in truth, what gain comes to those who are remembered anyway? They are already gone from this earth, and we add nothing to them by our memories.

NOTES

How pitiful this all sounds; how bleak and dismal. Remember, however, the Teacher was building a case for his claim that life is more than things, events, achievements. He was raising questions that he was not ready to answer—yet. He had discovered that the world was in some sense in bondage to itself—and he in it. Human-kind cannot offer a complete explanation for why things are the way they are; people struggle to find satisfaction in possessions or achievements, and are unable to make lasting changes to the world.

The Preacher inserted a biographical note that takes us back to verse 1. **I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.** However, in this verse, he was speaking not as king but as *Teacher* or “Preacher” (KJV). His reference to his kingship would remind his readers he had ample resources—position, possessions, popularity—to fall back on in trying to find meaning in life. None of that mattered; none of it was effective.

He had devoted himself to acquiring wisdom and knowledge about the meaning of life and the course of this world. **I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven.** *Examine* can be rendered “study” (NIV) or “seek” (KJV). *Explore* can be translated “search out” (KJV, ESV). *All* could include acquiring wisdom and goods, constructing buildings and monuments, and celebrating victories and accomplishments. These items represent things Solomon would have known and experienced to the point of extravagance.

His effort was heartfelt, intense. He acted wisely. He took the task seriously. Yet, he described all he had done as a **miserable task**; “a heavy burden” (NIV) or an “unhappy business” (ESV). All that effort was extended, but what did he have to show for it? He came up with no answers. It was fruitless and hopeless. The wisdom and knowledge that gave meaning and purpose to life was not to be found within and could not be obtained from without no matter how diligent the effort. All this is from one whom we identify as one of the wisest men to ever live.

He went on to say this difficult, fruitless, hopeless search was something **God** had **given people this miserable task to keep them occupied**. “It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with” (ESV). Was the Teacher blaming God, accusing Him of an unfair burden, of giving an assignment with no means of accomplishing it?

The best reading of verse 13 is not as a statement assigning fault but as a declaration affirming God’s sovereignty. It is a reminder that God is in control. If humankind could determine the significance of life on its own, within itself, then God becomes unnecessary and in essence each person would become his or her own god. So, God has given humankind this impossible assignment as one means of helping people understand how much they need Him. He has given mankind enough wisdom to know that without God, they are doomed to frustration.

The Teacher knows by experience the truth of what he is saying. **I have seen all the things that are done under the sun**. “I have seen it all,” he said. Having seen it all and experienced it all, he came to this conclusion; he **found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind**. The phrase is translated in other English versions as “striving after wind” (NASB, ESV), “chasing after the wind” (NIV), “vexation of spirit” (KJV). It describes the pursuit of trying to capture the meaning of life apart from God. Chasing after the wind is constant exertion that produces nothing. Even if you catch it, what do you have? Try it sometime and see if what the Teacher said isn’t true.

What are some lasting truths that come from Ecclesiastes 1:11-14?

- Fame is fleeting, so don’t rely on it.
- Each generation convinces itself that its experiences, struggles, discoveries, and so forth are new, but they are not.
- Without God, what we do in life is a miserable task.
- Everything is under the control of the Sovereign God; we do not have the power, authority, or ability to change it.

NOTES

LIVE IT OUT

Look at some key words in the subheads for each section of this study: no purpose, no satisfaction, only futility. Those words do not generate much encouragement, do they? If they weigh heavy in your mind, that is just what they are intended to do. They aptly describe life without God. That is why this six-session study is critical. It will lead us to know the ultimate answer in our pursuit to find meaning in life. Apart from God, life is meaningless. Jesus would later contribute to the direction of our search when He said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you” (Matt. 6:33). Stay diligent in the search by joining faithfully in this study week by week. It will be worth it.

Can you recall a time in your life when you were like the Teacher, searching for meaning in life but coming up empty? What were your feelings during that time?

What is your personal testimony of having found meaning, satisfaction, and joy in life when you committed yourself to seeking God and the things of God rather than striving for the desires of your selfish heart?

How might this session help you to guide someone you know—perhaps a younger person—who is struggling with the question of purpose and meaning to life?

1. Wayne H. Peterson. "Ecclesiastes," in Proverbs-Isaiah, in The Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 108.
2. Duane A. Garrett. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, in The New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 287.