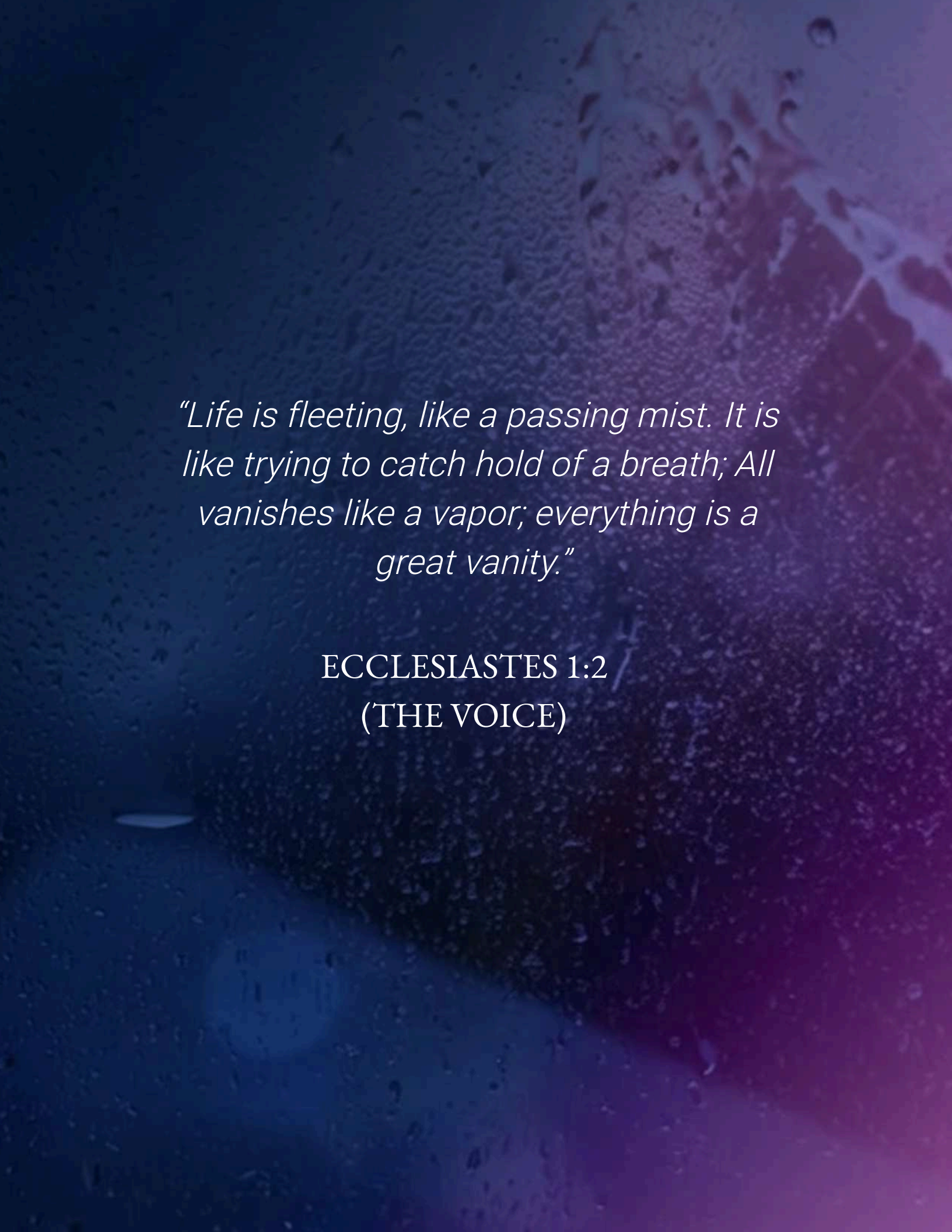


CHASING THE
VAPOR

A STUDY IN ECCLESIASTES



*"Life is fleeting, like a passing mist. It is
like trying to catch hold of a breath; All
vanishes like a vapor; everything is a
great vanity."*

ECCLESIASTES 1:2
(THE VOICE)



*"Life is short. Eternity is long. It is only
reasonable that this life be lived in
light of eternity."*

CHARLES SPURGEON

What are you chasing?

No matter what you want, this world has it. Life offers a plethora of pursuits we can devote ourselves to. You might decide to spend your life chasing after wealth. You can add zero after zero to your bank account hoping that more money will bring more security. If money's not your thing, pleasure can also make for a fine pursuit. There's another fix, another thrill, always waiting around the corner. If you've got a mind for business, you can spend your life chasing a better career. In our world's economy, more hours in the office means more respect and more influence. If you get burnt out chasing those things, you can always run after relationships. Why worry about finding meaning on your own when you can find it in another person?

On and on it goes. We chase, and we chase, and we chase. When one pursuit proves fruitless, we turn our attention to another. We convince ourselves that this next search will be the one that finally gets us there. Sure, the others didn't work. Our career fizzled out. The stock market crashed and destroyed our nest egg. Our significant other didn't make us feel more significant after all. But the next time will be different. The next time, maybe we'll actually catch the life we're looking for.

It never dawns on us that the game is rigged from the start. The world may offer us pursuits, but it can't give us anything permanent. All the things we're tempted to chase after are bound to let us down because they simply aren't built to last. As the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, trying to grab hold of the things of the world is like trying to grasp the morning fog. The mist dissipates in our hands as soon as we grab hold of it. No matter the pursuit – money, influence, pleasure, relationships – everything we see is fleeting.

Unfortunately, that also includes us. The things we pursue have a way of distracting us from the fact that there's something pursuing us. Death is running after each one of us. It may seem distant, but it never stops drawing closer. Even if we could grab hold of the mist this life offers, we would still discover that we ourselves are vapor. In the end, it doesn't matter what you chase. All that matters is what's chasing you.

Will what you're running toward still be there when everything else runs out?

WEEK ONE

A BRUTAL TEACHER





"I tend to make good decisions at funerals and poor ones in restaurants. I have made wise financial decisions while surrounded by starving children, and poor decisions from the suburbs. ...As difficult as it is, we need to be mindful of death. We must make decisions with our day of death in mind."

FRANCIS CHAN

We've all had teachers we couldn't stand. It might have started early with the impatient Kindergarten teacher who struggled to help you learn to tie your shoes. Maybe it was the P.E. teacher who made you climb an impossibly high rope. Or perhaps it happened later in life, with the college professor whose high expectations were only matched by their inflated ego. Whatever the case, we've all known what it's like to feel frustrated by a teacher. It can be hard for us to listen to instruction if we don't trust the heart of the instructor.

The Teacher of the book of Ecclesiastes (referred to in the Hebrew as "Qoheleth") stands as one of the most challenging teachers in history. From the opening verses of his book, he's clear on the fact that this isn't going to be some "feel-good" lesson. No, the truths he wants to unpack are some of the most uncomfortable and sobering lessons we will ever grapple with.



Yet, his intent isn't to stress us out or scare us. The Teacher simply wants us to know what's at stake here. We live in a world where things aren't quite the way they seem. The things we think will satisfy us ultimately leave us hungry. The things we think will last fade away without warning. He wants to warn us about the temporary nature of this life before we find out the hard way.

Because if he doesn't teach us this lesson, someone else will. It turns out there's another teacher waiting for us – the most brutal teacher of them all. Qoheleth may be tough, but death is the one who gives the final exam.

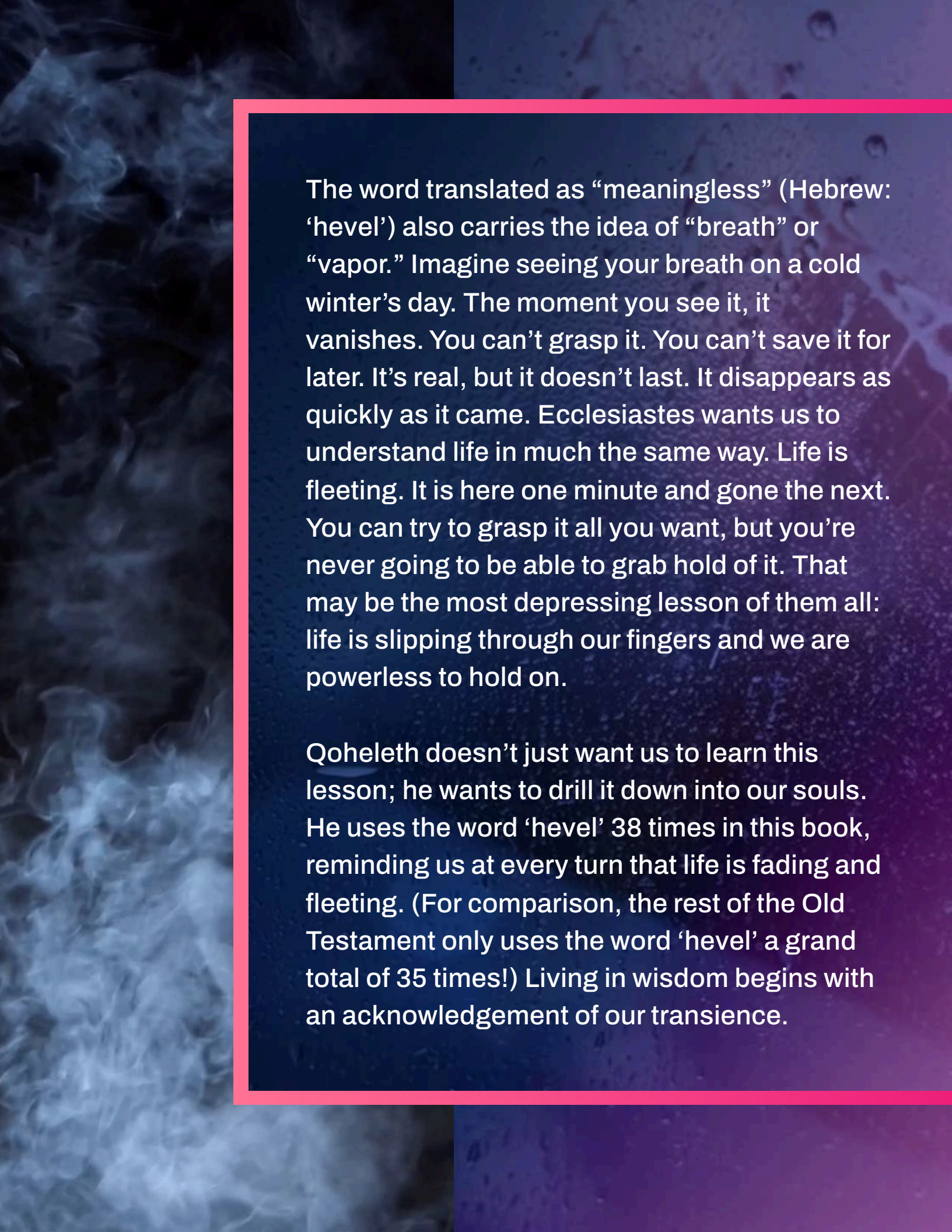
Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 (NLT): **“These are the words of the Teacher, King David’s son, who ruled in Jerusalem. ‘Everything is meaningless,’ says the Teacher, ‘completely meaningless!’”**

These aren't words you would expect to hear in the Bible. Everything is meaningless? The sentiment seems like it would be more comfortable on a 90's grunge album than it would be in Scripture. And yet, Ecclesiastes' refrain about the futility and pointlessness of life reminds us the world we live in has wandered far from the world as God created it. The perfection found in the first two chapters of Genesis didn't last very long. In Genesis 3, mankind's sin corrupted and warped the world God made. The consequences of our disobedience didn't just cause our deepest sorrows; they corrupted our greatest joys:

Genesis 3:16-19: “Then [God] said to the woman, ‘I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.’ And to the man he said, ‘Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return.”

Sin marred everything. It introduced tension and dissension into our relationships. It mingled pain with the pleasure of childbirth. It made our work frustrating and wearisome. The things God intended to be gifts suddenly became burdens. Sin corrupted our plans, our pleasures, and our purpose. With these opening words, Ecclesiastes reminds us that we live in a Genesis 3 world. Things aren't the way they were supposed to be. We aren't the way we were supposed to be. As a result, life is going to feel meaningless.

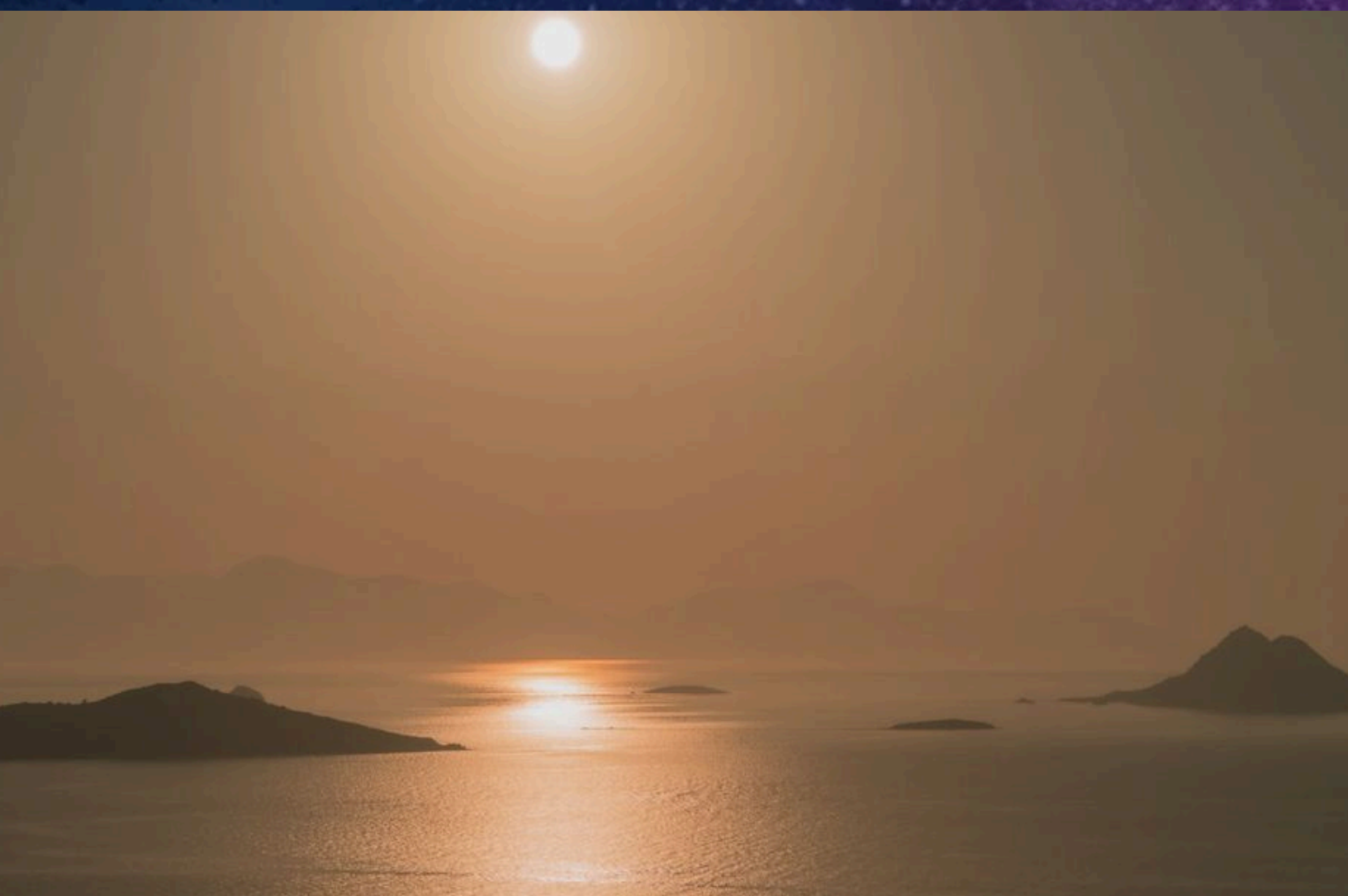
**But that's not even
the worst part.**



The word translated as “meaningless” (Hebrew: ‘hevel’) also carries the idea of “breath” or “vapor.” Imagine seeing your breath on a cold winter’s day. The moment you see it, it vanishes. You can’t grasp it. You can’t save it for later. It’s real, but it doesn’t last. It disappears as quickly as it came. Ecclesiastes wants us to understand life in much the same way. Life is fleeting. It is here one minute and gone the next. You can try to grasp it all you want, but you’re never going to be able to grab hold of it. That may be the most depressing lesson of them all: life is slipping through our fingers and we are powerless to hold on.

Qoheleth doesn’t just want us to learn this lesson; he wants to drill it down into our souls. He uses the word ‘hevel’ 38 times in this book, reminding us at every turn that life is fading and fleeting. (For comparison, the rest of the Old Testament only uses the word ‘hevel’ a grand total of 35 times!) Living in wisdom begins with an acknowledgement of our transience.

But there's another phrase Qoheleth returns to throughout this book that helps us understand his purposes here. He uses the phrase "under the sun" a total of 29 times in these pages. This phrase wants us to consider the world from a purely human perspective. It's almost as though he puts a frame around the world, asking us to take heaven out of the equation. If life could only be judged by what's "under the sun," what conclusions could we draw? By framing his argument this way, the Teacher gives us a great apologetic for faith. Life can be complicated even if we have an awareness of God. But if we imagine life without Him, it makes no sense at all. In a world full of the "meaningless," the only way to find meaning is to break the frame to consider what's beyond the sun.



WHO WROTE ECCLESIASTES?

The primary voice in Ecclesiastes identifies himself as **“the Teacher, King David’s son, who ruled in Jerusalem.”** Historically, this has led many interpreters to identify him as Solomon. Certainly, the breadth of wealth and experiences detailed here in Ecclesiastes would seem to confirm this presumption. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes says he was able to experience everything life has to offer – a boast only one of Israel’s greatest Kings could make! Though some scholars debate about whether the author is actually Solomon himself or a later writer using Solomon’s voice, the teachings of Ecclesiastes are consistent with Solomonic teaching and the broader context of biblical Wisdom Literature.

The title “Teacher” (Hebrew “Qoheleth”) denotes someone who gathers a group of people together. He has assembled an audience to hear these teachings and to take them out into the world. This reminds us that wisdom isn’t just a philosophical or personal enterprise. Wisdom is meant to be lived out in community. Indeed, the title “Ecclesiastes” originates from the Greek translation of the word “Qoheleth,” which shares a root with the Greek word for church (‘ekklesia’). The very name of the book reminds us that the wisdom of God is for the people of God.

LIFE UNDER THE **SUN**

As his initial illustration for the absurdity of life, Qoheleth points us towards the cyclical nature of the world we live in. Under the sun, life continually moves in cycles and patterns, each seemingly erasing the one that came before:

Ecclesiastes 1:3-11 (NIV): “What do people gain from all their labor, at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. 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. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new’? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.”

We like to think this world is advancing. Things aren't just progressing, they are improving. Life is getting better. The world is getting better. WE are getting better.

Yet, as Qoheleth looks out the world, he doesn't see any improvement. Rather, he sees that the things that happen always happen again. Over and over, the world repeats the same patterns and nothing ever changes. The sun rises and the sun sets. The rivers flow into the sea and the sea keeps taking. The wind blows without ever exhausting itself. Worst of all, generations come and generations go. People are born, they live, they die, and they are forgotten.

Such a thought sounds bleak to our modern ears. Unfortunately, our own experience bears out the truth of the Teacher's words. While we'd like to think our lives will be remembered, the world moves too quickly for that. Think about your own life. You probably know the names and some of the stories of your four grandparents. But what about your eight great-grandparents? What about your sixteen great-great-grandparents? How much do you know about them? It doesn't take too many generations for our stories to fade into the background. A century after our deaths, our stories will just be a footnote in the ever-moving story of the world.

Ecclesiastes immediately makes it clear why everything is "hevel." Under the sun, nothing is built to last. We aren't built to last. In a world full of cycles and seasons, our lives are just a temporary blip on the radar. Though we try to deny and deaden that truth, Qoheleth forces us to face it head-on. If this world is all there is, then what more could we expect? The world kept moving before we were born and it will keep moving long after we are gone. From a purely human perspective, our lives are just a part of the ebb and flow of history. Apart from heaven, everything is hevel.

LIFE UNDER THE SON

Just because life is cyclical doesn't mean we have to be cynical. While Ecclesiastes' framing of life "under the sun" leaves us searching for significance, the rest of Scripture gives us a place to look. The design of the seasons points us towards a Designer. Someone has built this world to run according to a pattern and a purpose. As Paul reminds us in Romans 1:20: "For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature." The intricacy and intentionality of the world we see around us shows us that there's something – there's Someone – beyond the sun.

If we believe there's a God who exists outside the frame of this world, how does that change the way we look at the world around us? The Bible talks about at least three ways recognizing God's power and control can help us face the seeming randomness of our world:



WE TRUST

Acts 17:24-27 (NIV): “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us.”

In his sermon before the Areopagus in Athens, Paul let us in on a wonderful truth. God wasn't just responsible for setting the world in motion; He set our individual lives in motion, as well. He determined the time and place in history we would live. He placed us here at this time and this place for a purpose. The brevity of our lives hides the eternal planning that went into them! We are not accidents. We are not here by happenstance. We are the intentional creations of an intentional Creator. If there is a God above the sun, then we can trust Him to watch over and guide our days – because He's the One who gave us these days in the first place!



More than that, we can trust Him with our days because He knows how fragile we are. He's seen the generations that have come before us. He already has a plan for the generations that will come after us. He knows our frailties and our faults. He knows our days are short. We can trust Him because He's proven Himself trustworthy to those who have come before. More than that, His hand will still be guiding this story long after our lives have faded off the scene.

Psalm 103:14-16: “For He knows how weak we are; He remembers we are only dust. Our days on earth are like grass; like wildflowers, we bloom and die. The wind blows, and we are gone – as though we had never been here.”

WE TEST

James 4:13-15: “Look here, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.’ How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, ‘If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.’”

When faced with the brevity of life, our first temptation is to try and take control. We think we can wrangle the vapor up and make it do what we want it to do. So, we schedule our days out to optimize our time. We procrastinate the important things we need to do, as if our delay gives the universe a reason to let us wake up tomorrow. We assume that tomorrow is a given, not recognizing that it is a gift without any guarantee. Control is just an illusion. It, too, is hevel.

That's why James encourages us to test our plans by giving them over to the Father. He alone sees tomorrow. He's the only One with control over time. That includes our time. We can plan, yes, but we do so with an awareness of God's calling on our lives. He has a plan for our lives. He has a plan for our days. Each new morning we receive gives us a new opportunity to ask God how He wants to meet us – and how He wants to use us – on this day!

WE TALLY

Psalm 90:12: **“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”**

How many days do you have left? It's a sobering question, to be sure. Yet, it's also a question each of us is powerless to answer. We have no idea how many days are left in this life. All we know is that today leaves us with one fewer day than we had yesterday. According to Qoheleth (and Psalm 90:12), wisdom begins with that acknowledgment. We don't have to know exactly how many days remain to know that we are running out of them. In a time of “life plans” and five-year goals, our greatest concern should be this day. We are all on borrowed time, and the balance is decreasing every day. As today's hours slide away, how will you use them? How will you allow God to use them? We don't gain wisdom by trying to create more time; we gain wisdom by recognizing the value of the time we already have. To make our days count, we need to learn how to count our days.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who was the toughest teacher you ever had? What made them so difficult to work with? Were you able to learn something from them? How do the most difficult teachers often have a way of teaching us the most important lessons?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11. As you read through these words, what are some of your first impressions of Ecclesiastes? What emotions do you feel as you hear the Teacher's opening words? In what ways does this paragraph immediately catch us off-guard?
3. In the video teaching, we talked about the terms "meaningless" (hevel) and "under the sun." How do these phrases help us understand the broader messages of Ecclesiastes? As you think about the multiple meanings of the term 'hevel,' how do they each help us understand the nature of this life?



4. Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is so much about life that is beyond our control. How have you learned this lesson over the course of your life? Why do we still struggle to try and take control for ourselves? What does it look like to give control over to God (James 4:13-15)?

5. Reminders of the reality of death are littered throughout Ecclesiastes. Why do you think Qoheleth wants to remind us of death? How can remembering the temporary nature of this life bring us wisdom? In what ways can death help focus our lives?

6. Close your group by reading Psalm 90:10-12. What does this Psalm say about the brevity of life? What does it look like for us to “number our days”? End your Group by praying that God would help you each to appreciate and anticipate the days He’s given you.



WEEK TWO

THE UNCEASING HUNGER





"All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both to be happy. This is the motive of every action of every man..."

BLAISE PASCAL

Have you ever eaten too much? You overindulge on some rich dessert and feel slightly sick for the rest of the day. You push your chair away from the Thanksgiving table and swear you're never going to eat another bite. But what inevitably happens? You have to eat again! It might take a couple of hours, but that feeling of hunger always finds its way back around. No matter how full you get, you're bound to get hungry again. You can't eat enough to permanently satisfy your hunger. You can't drink enough to perpetually quench your thirst. Those desires are never truly satisfied. You have to keep eating. You have to keep drinking. No matter what you have right now, you're always going to need more.

According to the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, this is especially true of our need for pleasure. In many regards, our quest for satisfaction is an unceasing hunger. We can't get enough of it. We're never quite able to satisfy that longing or to scratch that itch.



At best, indulging ourselves leaves us with a temporary feeling of satisfaction. At worst, it makes us addicts to pleasure, always chasing the next high. No matter what we get, we always want more. No matter how good we feel, we always seem to think that we're missing out on something better. The hunger for pleasure gnaws at our very souls.

Yet, this thirst for pleasure isn't just about feeling good. It's about being happy. We don't just want to feel happy for a moment; we want to be happy. We want a happiness that endures. So, we chase the next pleasure on the horizon, assuming it will be the one that finally hits the spot. But what if the problem is that we're trying to fill an eternal hunger with temporary things? Once again, Qoheleth forces us to confront a hard truth: there's nothing under the sun that can fill us. We'll never find happiness by looking for more. We're only going to find it when we make ourselves less.

Ecclesiastes 1:5-8: “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. All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.”

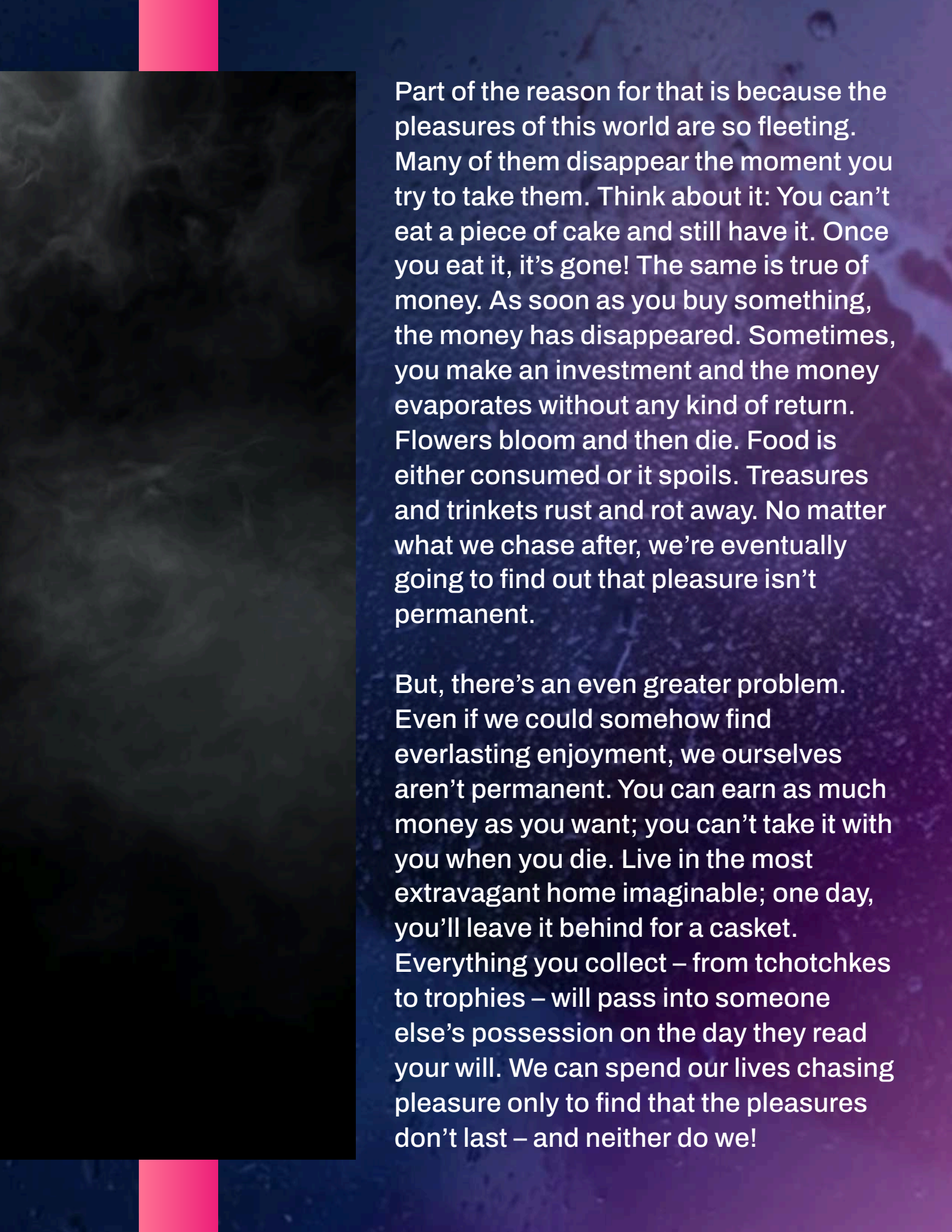
As we saw last week, these opening words of Ecclesiastes set us up to understand some of the broader themes of the book.

Life under the sun can be repetitious and cyclical.

These verses also set us up to understand Qoheleth's words on pleasure. Just as the sea never fills, our eyes and ears never get their fill of stimulation. No matter how much music we hear, we're always looking for the next hit song. No matter how many videos and movies we watch, we still line up for the next Hollywood blockbuster. Think about the millions of videos uploaded to YouTube every day! Our endless capacity to create is only matched by our endless capacity to consume.

Qoheleth decided to follow this hunger to its natural conclusion. Is there ever a point where our lives become full? Can the things of this world ever satiate our souls? According to his vigorous research (see sidebar) the answer is a resounding "No!" Just as the oceans never fill, our souls are always wanting more. We chase after pleasure only to want more pleasure. We earn more money only to find that it's never enough. We get the dream house only to discover there's an even nicer one across the street. It's not just that the grass is greener on the other side, it's that it looks more fulfilling! No matter what we get, we always want more. No matter what mountain we climb, there's always a bigger one out in the distance.

Part of the reason for that is because the pleasures of this world are so fleeting. Many of them disappear the moment you try to take them. Think about it: You can't eat a piece of cake and still have it. Once you eat it, it's gone! The same is true of money. As soon as you buy something, the money has disappeared. Sometimes, you make an investment and the money evaporates without any kind of return. Flowers bloom and then die. Food is either consumed or it spoils. Treasures and trinkets rust and rot away. **No matter what we chase after, we're eventually going to find out that pleasure isn't permanent.**



Part of the reason for that is because the pleasures of this world are so fleeting. Many of them disappear the moment you try to take them. Think about it: You can't eat a piece of cake and still have it. Once you eat it, it's gone! The same is true of money. As soon as you buy something, the money has disappeared. Sometimes, you make an investment and the money evaporates without any kind of return. Flowers bloom and then die. Food is either consumed or it spoils. Treasures and trinkets rust and rot away. No matter what we chase after, we're eventually going to find out that pleasure isn't permanent.

But, there's an even greater problem. Even if we could somehow find everlasting enjoyment, we ourselves aren't permanent. You can earn as much money as you want; you can't take it with you when you die. Live in the most extravagant home imaginable; one day, you'll leave it behind for a casket. Everything you collect – from tchotchkes to trophies – will pass into someone else's possession on the day they read your will. We can spend our lives chasing pleasure only to find that the pleasures don't last – and neither do we!

SOLOMON'S PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

"Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure..." (Ecclesiastes 2:10). We may be tempted to read these words as hyperbole. Yet, the Bible tells us that Solomon really was a man who relentlessly chased after pleasure. Indeed, the opulence of his kingdom would make even today's multimillionaires blush.

1 Kings 10:14-11:3: "The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents, not including the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and the governors of the territories... Then the king made a great throne covered with ivory and overlaid with fine gold... All King Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold... King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth... Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills... He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray."

In short, Solomon had everything anyone could ever want! He had power and prestige combined with wealth and women! His home, his stables, his kitchens, and his bank account were all full! And yet, Solomon still felt empty. No matter what he accumulated, he could never get enough. His words on the vanity of wealth are not theoretical. They are lessons he learned the hard way! Solomon's words, then, aren't philosophical warnings; they are personal pleas for us to avoid falling into the same traps that plagued his life!

LIFE UNDER THE **SUN**

Ecclesiastes 2:4-11: (NIV): “I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire! So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.”

Solomon lived the kind of life most of us only dream about. He had palaces, treasures, money, and power. His home was filled with people – wives, concubines, servants, and singers. Whatever you wanted, you could find it in Solomon’s palace! Still, all the fullness around him could not fill the emptiness within him. Everything he acquired left him longing for more. Those things brought no meaning or satisfaction.

You can't fill a bottomless pit.

Piling treasures and pleasures into our lives can only reveal the depth of our true needs. What we long for most cannot be purchased, possessed, or achieved.

The reasons for this become clear when we compare this passage to one earlier in the Bible. Back in Genesis 2, before our choice in Genesis 3 ruined everything, God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Solomon's description of his own wealth has some suspicious parallels with the ways Genesis describes our first home:

Genesis 2:8-10: "Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there He placed the man He had made. The Lord God made all sorts of trees grow up from the ground – trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit. In the middle of the garden He placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed from the land of Eden, watering the garden and then dividing into four branches."



Sound familiar? The language in Genesis 2 clearly finds its way into Ecclesiastes. Whether he's conscious of it or not, Solomon is trying to recreate Eden! He's trying to build his own version of paradise. He's filled his garden with trees. He's filled his garden with water. He's filled his garden with people – the slaves he bought for his pleasure. This isn't just about building a kingdom; Solomon wants to recreate paradise! In fact, when Solomon says he built “gardens and parks” (2:5), he uses Hebrew words that call back to the idea of a “garden and paradise.” Everything Solomon built reveals the echo of Eden that's in our souls.

Whether we realize it or not, we're all trying to recapture paradise. We want to get back what we lost in the Garden. Why do we chase happiness? Why do we long for more and more? Because we're chasing after Eden! We're not just looking for pleasure; we're looking for paradise! Within us, there's this reminder that God invited us to a place where every need was met and every desire fulfilled. But we messed it up. We sinned against God and got ourselves kicked out of the Garden. Now, our hearts long to recreate it. We spend our days chasing satisfaction. We try to find comfort and well-being. We want to feel like we felt in Eden. We spend our time trying to recreate it. Like Solomon, we want to get ourselves back to the Garden.

Solomon, in a much more literal sense than we have, tried to recreate Eden. He copied the form of the Garden down to the littlest detail. He had the trees of the Garden. He had the fruit of the Garden. He had the pleasure of the Garden. So, why did he fail? Why did Solomon search for Eden only to find emptiness? What was he missing?

LIFE UNDER THE SON

C.S. Lewis: “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death...”

What Solomon forgot was the God of the Garden. What made Eden so special wasn't the stuff. It wasn't paradise because of the trees. It wasn't paradise because of the pleasure. It was paradise because it was the place where God was with us. Genesis tells us that God came to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the afternoon (Gen. 3:8). In those moments, they enjoyed a face-to-face relationship with the God who created them. Eden was paradise for Adam and Eve - not because of the things they enjoyed, but because the infinite God who formed their souls was filling their hearts.

**Solomon thought he could recreate Eden.
That's a recipe for disaster.**

Without the Creator the things of Eden fall woefully short. Paradise can't be built or bought. It can't be earned. Without the God of Eden, Eden loses its meaning. It's just some trees. It's just some fruit. What makes Eden so special is the God who was there – the God who would walk with His people. You can chase Eden all you want. But, if you're not chasing the God of Eden, you'll never catch it!

We think we'll find happiness if we just get a little more. A little more stuff. A few more relationships. A couple more zeroes in the bank account. We operate under the assumption that all our problems would be fixed if we could just get a little bit more of what we already have. Qoheleth directly confronts that line of thinking a little later on in Ecclesiastes:

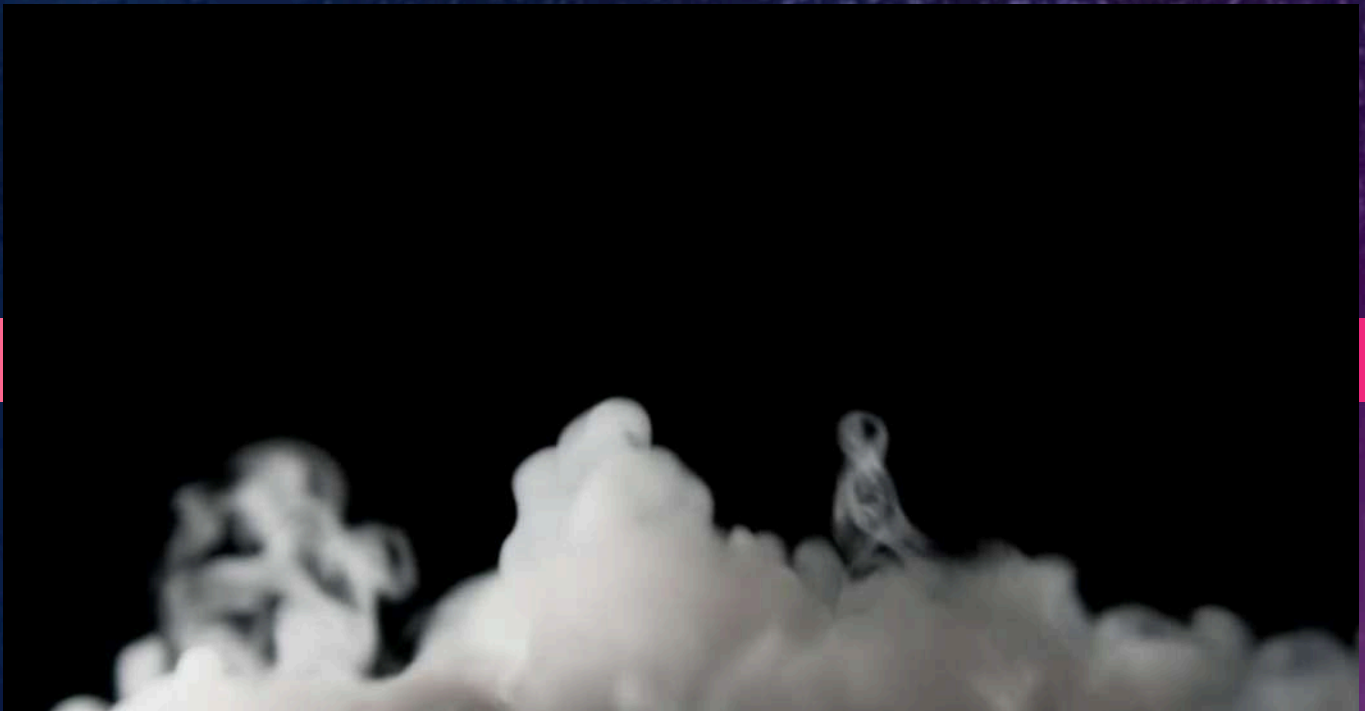
Ecclesiastes 5:10-11: “Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness! The more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what good is wealth – except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers!”



More, more, more.

The problem with more is that you can get it and still desire more of it. We don't need more; we need different! We don't need the gifts; we need the Giver. We think getting back to Eden will solve our problems. What our hearts truly desire is the God who dwells in Eden.

At the end of the day, the gifts are only a pale imitation of the Giver. Money promises provision, but it can never calm every fear or secure our future. Pleasure promises delight, but its joys are fleeting. Work promises satisfaction and significance, but achievements and accomplishments eventually fade and are quickly forgotten. These gifts may contain traces of goodness, but they are only echoes of a greater reality.



In Christ, we find what these things can only pretend to offer. What money can only temporarily provide, God supplies eternally. What pleasure can only briefly awaken, God fulfills completely. What work can only partially accomplish, God secures through His unchanging love and calling. This is why our greatest need is not for the gifts; our greatest need is for the Giver. The gifts were never meant to replace Him. They were intended to point us to Him. Every good thing we enjoy is ultimately a signpost directing our hearts toward the One from whom all goodness comes.

That's the ultimate problem with chasing things to make us happy. At the end of the day, we're asking created things to carry a weight they were never designed to bear. We look to gifts for meaning, identity, security, and joy when those things can only be found in the One who gives the gifts. The invitation of the Gospel is not simply to stop loving the gifts, but to love the Giver more. When our hearts find their home in Him, we can finally enjoy His gifts without being enslaved by them. We no longer need "more" because we have found the One who is enough. Instead of spending our lives chasing things that can never satisfy, we rest in the God who generously gives us all things and who alone can truly satisfy the deepest desires of our souls.

We weren't made to chase after the gifts. We were made to chase after the Giver. Our unceasing hunger for more will only be satisfied when He becomes the feast our hearts desire most.

Matthew 5:6 (NIV): “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you from the video teaching time? Why is pleasure such a tempting pursuit for us? What does this pursuit look like for people in our culture? Why do we still chase after these things even though we know they don't really satisfy?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. What were some of the ways Solomon tried to find pleasure in life? How do his pursuits compare/contrast to the things we run after today? What did Solomon ultimately realize about all of these pursuits?

3. Why does the pursuit of pleasure/possessions never satisfy us? Why do you think it always leaves us wanting? Thinking about your life, what are some of the obstacles that keep you from feeling satisfied? How do you wrestle with discontentment?



4. Think through the things Solomon was pursuing in Ecclesiastes. How do these pursuits promise us things that only God can give us? How do our unsatisfied longings point us back to Him? What happens when we chase after the gifts rather than the Giver?

5. Ecclesiastes' broad message is to enjoy God's gifts without enthroning them. How can we enjoy the gifts and still give thanks to the Giver? How does our temporary nature (and the temporary nature of the gifts) help us to enjoy life's pleasures rightly?

6. As you close, read Ecclesiastes 2:24-25. How does Solomon tell us to enjoy the pleasures of life? How should we show our gratitude to God for giving us some of these good things? Spend some time thanking God for the good gifts He's given each of you.



WEEK THREE

TRAPPED IN TIME





"Now I understand that every day I'm given is as real as life will ever get. Now I understand that we are guaranteed nothing, that our days are always running out. That they have always, always been running out."

MARGARET RENKL

Traveling through time is one of the quintessential human fantasies. Our shelves are filled with books and movies that imagine what it would be like to visit time periods other than our own. It's not difficult for us to think about the first thing we would do if we were suddenly gifted a time machine of our own. Maybe you'd hop into the future to see how things turn out for you and your family. Or, you might want to go back in your own lifetime to fix a mistake you made or see a loved one you lost too soon. Perhaps you're the sort of person who just wants to pop back in time to see a famous historical event (or save the Library at Alexandria!). Whatever – or whenever! – your destination, it wouldn't be hard to pick a place to go if you could travel through time.

But the truth of the matter is that we are already time travelers. Even in the time it will take you to read this paragraph, you have traveled through time.



The problem is that you can only go in one direction. You can't go back to the past. You can't skip ahead to the future.

All you can do is ride the wave of time as it passes second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour.

We may travel through time, but we are also trapped by it. With every moment that passes, we are inexorably and inevitably moving towards the future.

But that's not even the worst part! As Ecclesiastes reminds us, we can't control anything about our journey through time. We couldn't control when it started. We won't control when it ends. We don't even have all that much say about the times in which we live. Some times are good. Some times are bad. Life is full of moments we'd love to revisit and seasons we'd like to pretend never happened. Time isn't just relentless, it seems random. Still, Qoheleth holds out the hope that our situation might not be as desperate as it seems. What if there's a purpose to the ebb and flow of time? What if our lives aren't just careening from moment to moment, but are unfolding according to a glorious design? We may feel like prisoners of time, but the truth is that we are participants in a story – one that's being guided by Someone far greater than time.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end. And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God’s purpose is that people should fear him. What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again”



Qoheleth has already talked to us about the circular nature of time. In the opening words of his teachings, he spoke to us about how time repeats and recycles. It's not so much that those who can't learn from the past are destined to repeat it. It's that all of us are destined to repeat the past whether we want to or not:

Ecclesiastes 1:9-11: **“History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, ‘Here is something new!’ But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don’t remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.”**

There's a part of us that doubts Solomon's words here. Of course there are new things in this world! We live in the most technologically advanced age in history. There are new things happening every day! How could Solomon ever think that we never advance? Solomon might think that history is like a circle, but we know it's more like a timeline. It is advancing and improving in ways that a Bronze Age king of Israel couldn't possibly understand.

And yet, we all know the truth of what Solomon says here. Life has a way of circling back on itself. The more things change, the more they stay the same. While our problems wear a technological shimmer, they're not all that much different from the troubles faced by our ancestors. It's one of the reasons why we continue to resonate so much with characters from classic literature. A lot has changed in the years since Jane Austen wrote her novels, but people can still see themselves in her stories of the Dashwoods and Bennetts. Few of us will ever sail the open seas, but we can identify with the pride that threatened to sink Odysseus. The scenery changes. The props look different. But the human story remains the same.



TURN, TURN, TURN

Long before it became the basis for a 60s hit, the poem in Ecclesiastes 3 was one of the most famous passages in the book. An ode to the times and seasons we all walk through, the poem vividly illustrates the wide variety of experiences that comprise a life:

**A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.
A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.**

Though it may sound strange to say that there is a time for things like war and hate, we need to remember that the poem employs a rhetorical style known as a “merism.” By pairing opposites, the author intends for us to think of everything that lies between those two extremes (think about how we say we searched “high and low” for something). It’s not that God necessarily condones all these activities. It’s that these things give us the broadest view of life under the sun. Yet, even in this list, Qoheleth points us towards the meaninglessness of life. If we assume each of these pairs balances a positive experience with a negative one, then the result is a zero-sum equation. Every gain is matched by a loss. Every joy meets its corresponding sorrow. When all is said and done, our experiences add up to nothing.

LIFE UNDER THE SUN

Ecclesiastes 6:10-12: (NIV): “**Everything** has already been decided. It was known long ago what each person would be. So there’s no use arguing with God about your destiny. The more words you speak, the less they mean. So what good are they? In the few days of our meaningless lives, who knows how our days can best be spent? Our lives are like a shadow. Who can tell what will happen on this earth after we are gone?”

We live in time. No matter the climate of your hometown, time is your natural ecosystem. You move through it and navigate it without even thinking about it. We only notice time’s silent passage when the events of our life force us to. A medical emergency. A graduation. A birthday. Most days pass us by without a second thought. When we’re young, we mark time by what it gives. The older we get, the more we mark it by what it takes away.

One of the biggest challenges with living in time is that we’re almost always living in the wrong time. It’s not that we were born in the wrong decade. It’s that our minds are always wandering through time, unable (or even unwilling) to focus on the present. Most of the time, we’re either longing for the past or anticipating the future. This current moment is rarely enough. We either wish we could go back to the way things used to be or we long for some idealized future. By neglecting the time we’re in, we miss out on the only time we have. We long for the past, but it can’t be retrieved. We plan for the future, but it’s not guaranteed.

These unhealthy ways of relating to time are actually more connected than they appear. Both nostalgia and futurism share a common root: discontentment. We're not happy with the way things are now. We wish life was better. We wish things were different. So, we try to escape to another time. We look to the past and ache for the things we used to have. We romanticize the "good old days." Or, we look to the future and think that better days are just around the corner. Seldom do we appreciate this day for what it is.

These tendencies create a kind of "time sickness" within us. We don't feel at home in this moment because we're looking somewhere else – sometime else – to find our true purpose. Unfortunately for us, the past only exists in our memories.



The future only in our imaginations. So, we end up spending our lives places that technically don't exist, unable to fully grasp or be grateful for the moment we have right now. Worse, we spiral into the kind of cynicism we see in Ecclesiastes 6. Our nostalgia makes us numb. Our futurism turns into fatalism. That discontentment with the present can quickly turn into disappointment with life.

As children, we assume time is abundant. As adults, we discover it is finite. The older we get, the more we realize that time is not merely passing. It is being spent. We don't spend our time all at once. We spend it moment by moment, minute by minute, hour by hour. A person who spends every day wishing for yesterday or waiting for tomorrow slowly forfeits the only life available to them.

After all, life is always happening now.



LIFE UNDER THE SON

Qoheleth makes an uncharacteristic and unforced error in this section. Perhaps you caught it in the first line of chapter 3. Take another look and see if you notice it this time:

Ecclesiastes 3:1: **“For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven...”**

Did you see how he introduced his poem? He said that these activities all happen “under heaven.” Throughout the book, he’s talked about things happening “under the sun,” limiting our scope to only the physical world. Here, for the first and only time in the book, Qoheleth’s frame shows a crack. He permits us to think of time outside of the bounds of this natural world. Time isn’t just under the sun; it’s under heaven. When we think about time – when we consider how it moves around us and through us – it awakens something in us. We recognize that we weren’t meant to live a life trapped in time.

**We were meant for
something more.**

Indeed, this the point Qoheleth comes to at the end of his poem.

Ecclesiastes 3:11: “Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.”

Think about all the good news Ecclesiastes packs into that verse! It tells us that God will make everything beautiful in time. To be sure, it doesn’t tell us that everything in this life is beautiful. There are some seasons that are downright awful. There are times in our lives we would never want to experience again. Yet, Solomon promises us that God is doing something with those seasons. We don’t have to welcome those times of mourning and grief, but we can trust God to weave them into His beautiful tapestry.



Qoheleth also tells us that God has planted eternity in our very hearts. Our time wasn't meant to run out! God created us with a desire to live forever! That's why death feels like such a violation in our world. There's something in us that tells us we were meant to live forever! But just because we long for eternity doesn't mean we understand it. As much as we would love to have an endless supply of time, it's hard for us to imagine an everlasting life.

Perhaps the greatest news of all comes at the end of the verse. Ecclesiastes assures us that there is a God who has been working throughout our stories. Everything that has happened to us – everything that has happened since the dawn of history – has been guided by God's own hand. Our days aren't meaningless. Our lives aren't pointless. God has a plan and a purpose for us all. That purpose is Jesus.

God worked throughout history to bring Jesus to this earth. He is continuing to work throughout time to bring Jesus back. In Romans 5:6, Paul assured us with this truth: “Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.” In Ephesians 1:10, he uses some of the same language to talk about Jesus' return: “At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.”

The times we live in all find their focus and fulfillment in Him.

As Daniel Akin wrote:

“Ecclesiastes 3 says that God appointed the seasons, and Ephesians 1:10 tells us that all things will be summed up in Christ. There is a reason God wove the seasons into the fabric of creation. There is a reason why there are seedtime and harvest. There is a reason there are winter and spring... God created the seasons to point us to Christ. So when we look outside in the literal dead of winter at trees with no leaves and barrenness all around, we know that in a few months or even weeks everything will spring to life again. God wove winter and harvest into the fabric of creation to show humanity that Jesus would be raised from the dead... He is the One working out the ultimate plan to make all things new!”

**Jesus came at the right time.
He will return at the right time.
Though our times may feel
uncertain, His timing is not.**

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you could time travel to any point in history, what would you choose? Why? Would you be more likely to time travel to something historical or something personal? What is it about time travel that makes it such a powerful storytelling device?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. What stands out to you about the poem that comprises most of this passage? Of the “times” mentioned there, which season is your favorite? Which is the most difficult? If you could add “times” to the poem, what would you add?

3. We see time as clocks and calendars. Ecclesiastes talks about it in terms of seasons and sunrises? How does the way we view time affect the way we live? What difference would it make in your rhythms if you understood time in seasons? How would it change the ways we navigate the tougher seasons of life?

4. What are some of the unhealthy ways we relate to time? Are you more prone to struggle with feelings of nostalgia or with a longing for the future? Why is it so tempting to focus on a time other than now? How does focusing on the past or the future keep us from being truly present in the present?

5. Reread Ecclesiastes 3:11. What good news does Solomon tuck into this verse? How have you seen God make the times of your life beautiful? What do you think it means that God has put eternity in our hearts? Is eternity hard for you to imagine? Why or why not?

6. Read Psalm 139:13-16. How has God set the boundaries of our time? What assurance does this give us? How does it encourage us to entrust our days to Him? Close in prayer by asking God to give you each wisdom to know how to best use the time He has given.

WEEK FOUR

WORKING FOR A LIVING





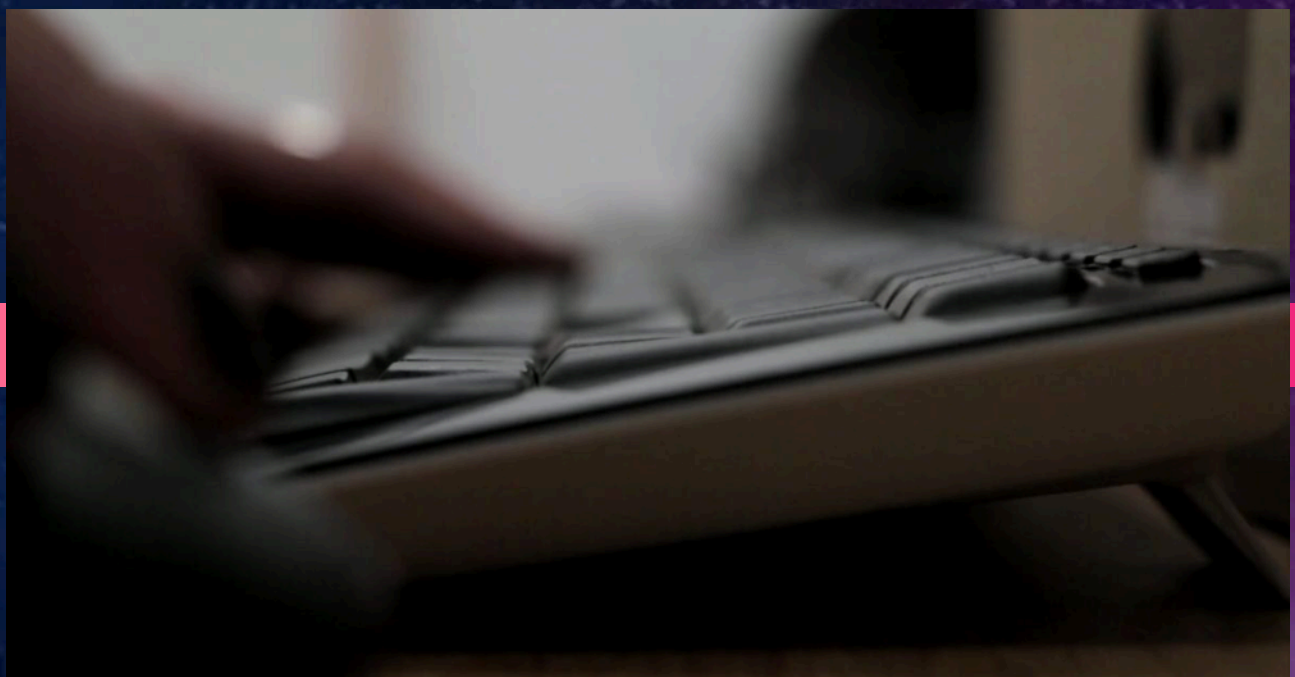
“Work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, and sexuality; it is not simply medicine but food for our soul. Without meaningful work we sense significant inner loss and emptiness. ... [We] need work to thrive emotionally, physically, and spiritually.”

TIMOTHY KELLER

“What do you do for a living?”

When you meet someone new, that’s usually one of the first questions, isn’t it? You might ask where they’re from or what their family is like, but chances are the conversation is quickly going to turn to their occupation. We want to know where they work. We want to know how they fill their days. After all, we spend nearly 50% of our waking hours in the workplace. It only makes sense to ask someone where they spend the bulk of their time.

Yet, there’s a terrible implication hiding behind that question. We’re assuming that what we do for work is what makes our life. Just asking the question in that way shows how we’ve blurred the line between our work and our identity. On some level, our vocation is tied to our value. We define ourselves by the skills we have and the credentials we hold. We equate our significance to our salaries. In our minds, work isn’t about improving the lives of others; it’s about proving my own value and worth in this world.



The teacher of Ecclesiastes wants to help us put work in its proper place. On the one hand, he elevates work. He reminds us that vocation isn't just about career – it's about calling! God has created us and commanded us to do work in this world. But, Qoheleth also cautions us about putting work on too high a pedestal. Work isn't meant to give our lives meaning. Only God can do that! If we try to put our significance in our work, we'll place a burden on it that it was never meant to carry. Work isn't about making a living or even building a life. It's about leveraging who we were created to be in order to do the work God created us to do.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26: “I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and hard work under the sun. How meaningless! So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world. Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn't worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy. So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless. So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him? God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those who please him. But if a sinner becomes wealthy, God takes the wealth away and gives it to those who please him. This, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind.”



Qoheleth writes this section of Scripture like someone who has the worst case of the “Mondays” ever. He doesn’t want anything to do with work. There’s no value in it. There’s no purpose to it. Work, like everything else he has investigated, is meaningless. It’s vapor! You work and you work and you work, and what do you have to show for it? If you’re lucky, eventually the day comes when you retire and they throw you a nice party. If you’re unlucky, they pack up your things and hand you a pink slip. Either way, your job isn’t going to last. The work we do might pay the bills, but it comes woefully short of giving our lives meaning.

In fact, work often seems like it takes far more from us than it gives. Consider this: if you spend 40 years in the workforce, it will consume at least 78,000 hours of your life!! That’s essentially nine full years you will spend at work! And that doesn’t even count the work you do once you’re off the clock! When you get home, there are still dishes to do, weeds to pick, and errands to run! There’s seemingly no end to the work we have to do!

That's not to say we can't find any satisfaction in our work. In fact, a couple of times throughout Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth takes a break from his extreme pessimism to tell us about how we can actually experience some measure of fulfillment in a job well done:

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25: "So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from Him?"

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13: "So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God."

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20: "Even so, I have noticed one thing, at least, that is good. It is good for people to eat, drink, and enjoy their work under the sun during the short life God has given them, and to accept their lot in life. And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life – this is indeed a gift from God."

Qoheleth is aware that work can feel like a grind; he asks us to see it as a gift. We struggle against work because we feel like our tasks are never done. Our “To Do” lists always have something on them. These verses encourage us to step back and appreciate the work we’ve already finished. We can stop and enjoy the sight of a freshly cut lawn. Before we scarf down our dinner, we can recognize everything it took to bring the meal to the table. At the end of a hard day of work, we can take a moment to exhale and thank God for the things we got done on this day.

Our frustrations with work, like so many other areas of life, come down to a matter of focus. Are we focused on the work that needs to be done or on the tasks we’ve completed? Are we more likely to grumble about the things we don’t have or to show gratitude for the things we do have? Do we feel overwhelmed by our own inadequacies or by the grace of the God who uses us despite our weaknesses? Whether you want to find satisfaction or dissatisfaction in your work, neither is hard to find. The difference often lies in where we look.

When we view our work through the lens of gratitude, we begin to recognize it not merely as an obligation, but as one of God’s good gifts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK

In our day and age, we're tempted to think of work as a necessary evil. Recent statistics have suggested that somewhere around 70% of people hate their jobs. But the Bible tells us that work was part of God's plan and purpose in designing us. In Genesis 1:28, God commissioned Adam and Eve to go out and continue His creative work in the world: "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." God created us to form and fill His creation.

While God gave us work to do that was fulfilling and freeing, the Fall changed all of that. Work became frustrating. The creation we were supposed to subdue began to rebel against us. Sin has warped and ruined everything, including work. As God told Adam after in the aftermath of his sin: "...the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground..." (Genesis 3:17-18)

Once again, we find that Ecclesiastes is describing life in a Genesis 3 world. God didn't create work to punish us. He gave us work as a gift. We were meant to do something with our lives – to contribute to something good and Godly to this world. We were each wired with unique gifts so that we could improve the lives of the people around us. Unfortunately, we live in a world where our work rarely gives us that satisfaction. If we could see work the way God intended, we wouldn't think of it merely as work; it would be worship!

LIFE UNDER THE **SUN**

One of Qoheleth's biggest concerns when it comes to work is what happens to all your work when you die. In Ecclesiastes 2:21, he said, **"Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn't worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy."** You work and you work and you work. But no matter how hard you work or how accomplished you become, death will take all of that away. Death comes for the expert and the apprentice alike. You spend a lifetime gaining experience and expertise. When you die, all that knowledge goes with you.

Worse, the advance of time will eventually leave your work behind. The inventor of the sundial probably thought he was leaving the world with an invention that would never be surpassed. Our days of digital clocks and smartwatches have made his contribution to the world obsolete.



Technology moves so quickly that some of us have purchased the same movie on VHS, DVD, Blu-ray, and now own it on a streaming service! Today's cutting age technology is tomorrow's antique. In the same way, the work that aggravates us today might be considered antiquated in only a few years' time.

This phenomenon bothers Qoheleth so much that he comes back to it only a few chapters later:

Ecclesiastes 6:1-2: "There is another serious tragedy I have seen under the sun, and it weighs heavily on humanity. God gives some people great wealth and honor and everything they could ever want, but then he doesn't give them the chance to enjoy these things. They die, and someone else, even a stranger, ends up enjoying their wealth! This is meaningless—a sickening tragedy."

No matter what we gain – whether in our career or our bank account – death will wipe it out. Once we die, the job we had will be given to someone else. The money we earned will pass to another person's ledger. We have no idea what will happen to it. We have no idea what they'll do with it.

This is especially heartbreaking if we view Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes. Solomon was a tremendous King of Israel. He ruled the nation with wisdom and led them into a time of unprecedented wealth. He expanded their territory, filled their treasury, and built a magnificent Temple. Solomon did everything he could to set the nation up for success. Yet, at his death, his son Rehoboam inherited the kingdom and immediately made a mess of things. He alienated the northern part of the Kingdom, causing the nation to split into two halves.

The divided nation was never as strong as the one Solomon left behind. Solomon's own son made choices that would ultimately lead to the nation's decline and death. Solomon's great kingdom fell apart because of the lesser men who followed him.

In this world, work can seem frustrating and futile. It disappoints us when we're alive and dissolves once we die. Given all of that, we might start to wonder why we bother with work at all.

But what if work is more than what we do to make a living?

What if work is part of how God created us to live?

Turns out that the Bible wants us to think less about our career and more about our calling.



LIFE UNDER THE SON

Phillip Jensen: “If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked for a just and noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter.”

It's pretty amazing to think that Jesus worked as a craftsman. The Bible tells us He spent most of His life toiling away in obscurity. In fact, people in His hometown had such a hard time believing in Him because of the simple work He did (Mark 6:3). When Jesus came down to this earth, He didn't lock Himself away in some ivory tower or live a life of luxury in an opulent palace. He lived among ordinary people and did ordinary work. He built. He created. While His focus always remained on the work He would do on the cross, Jesus wasn't beneath rolling up His sleeves and doing the same kind of work we do.

With that in mind, the apostle Paul's repeated commands about work take on a whole new meaning. Throughout his letters to the church, Paul would encourage slaves (a Greek word often used to describe any member of the “working class”) to view all their work as a task undertaken for the Lord. Because Jesus worked, we can trust Him with our work:

Ephesians 6:5-8: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free.”

Colossians 3:23-24: “Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and that the Master you are serving is Christ.”

Both of these passages encourage us to view Jesus as our ultimate boss. We're not working for a company, a supervisor, or even for a paycheck. We are working for the Lord Jesus. He's ultimately the One who gave us our job. He equipped us with certain skills and talents. He placed opportunities in front of us. If He put us in this time and place for a purpose (Acts 17:24-27), then certainly He has us in our workplaces for a reason! He has orchestrated our days and our desks!

**The way we work reveals
our trust in the One who
called us to our work.**

So, what does it look like to work with Christian distinctiveness? If Jesus really is our boss, how does that change our workweek? Take another look at some of the phrases Paul used:

"Serve them sincerely"

We often look at work as an opportunity to advance. Paul tells us to view it as an opportunity to serve. From our coworkers to customers to supervisors, God has given us endless opportunities for service.

"Work with enthusiasm"

We often look at work as an opportunity to advance. Paul tells us to view it as an opportunity to serve. From our coworkers to customers to supervisors, God has given us endless opportunities for service.

"Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance"

Where does your ultimate satisfaction in work come from? Your paycheck? A promotion? As Christians, we're not working for a raise; we're working for the eternal reward only Jesus can give.

Following Christ in the workplace isn't about finding a new job. It's about having a new Master.

We go to work trusting that our ultimate Boss can take our temporary efforts and use them to have an eternal impact.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

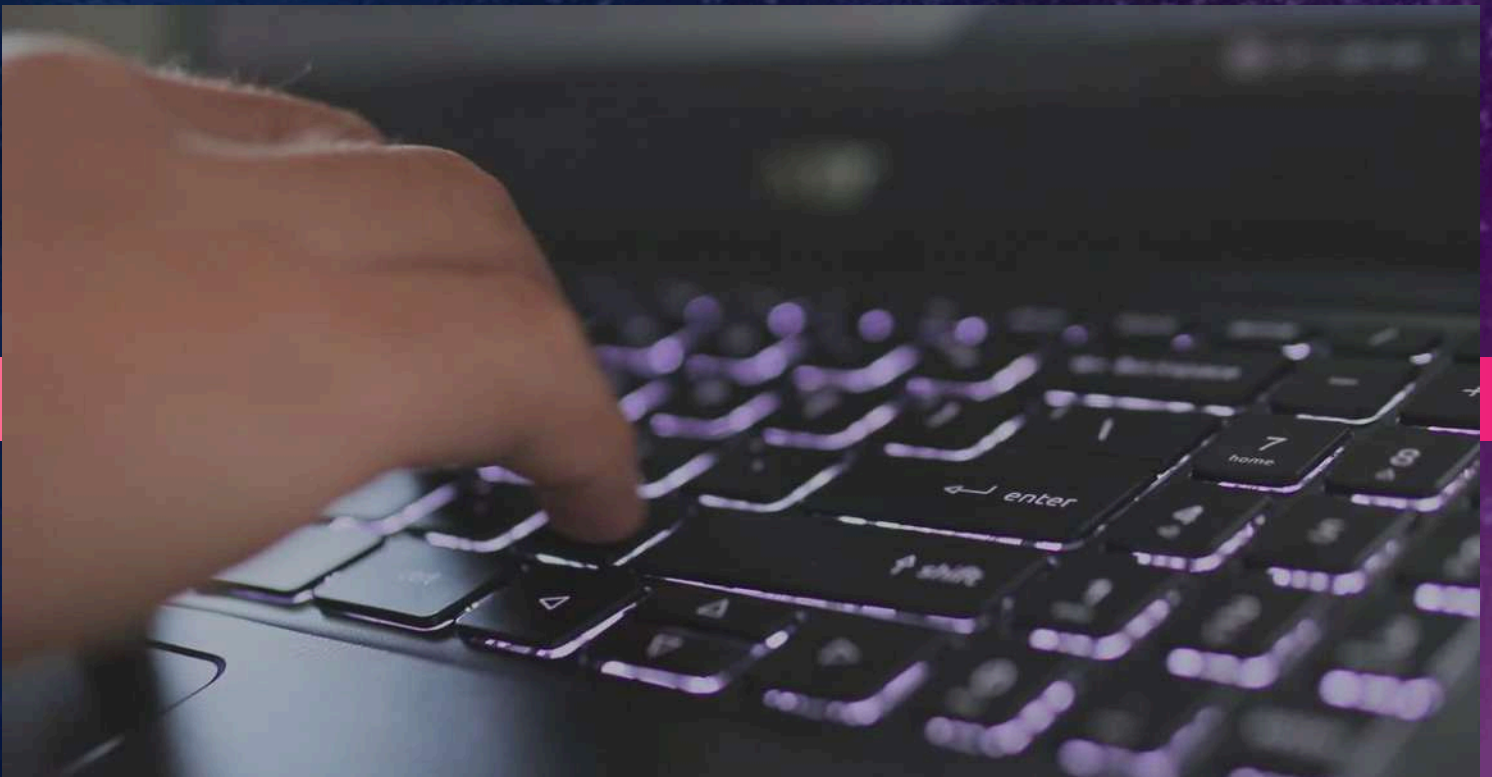
1. What resonated with you from the video teaching time? How do you normally view work? Is it a necessary evil? Is it something that gives you identity? How does the Bible's view of work balance out some of our unhealthy ideas about it?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 2:18-26. What does the Teacher have to say about work? What are some of his frustrations with it? What are some of the joys he finds in it? How do your personal experiences with work reflect what Qoheleth talks about here?
3. Do you typically think of work as a gift from God? Why or why not? How have the events of Genesis 3 warped our expectations of work (see Genesis 3:17-19)? In what ways have you found work to be fulfilling? In what ways have you found it to be frustrating?



4. Ecclesiastes repeatedly talks about our work being left for whoever comes behind us. How does this help us to understand work as a kind of stewardship? How does this help us strike a balance between doing a good job and not letting work dominate our lives?

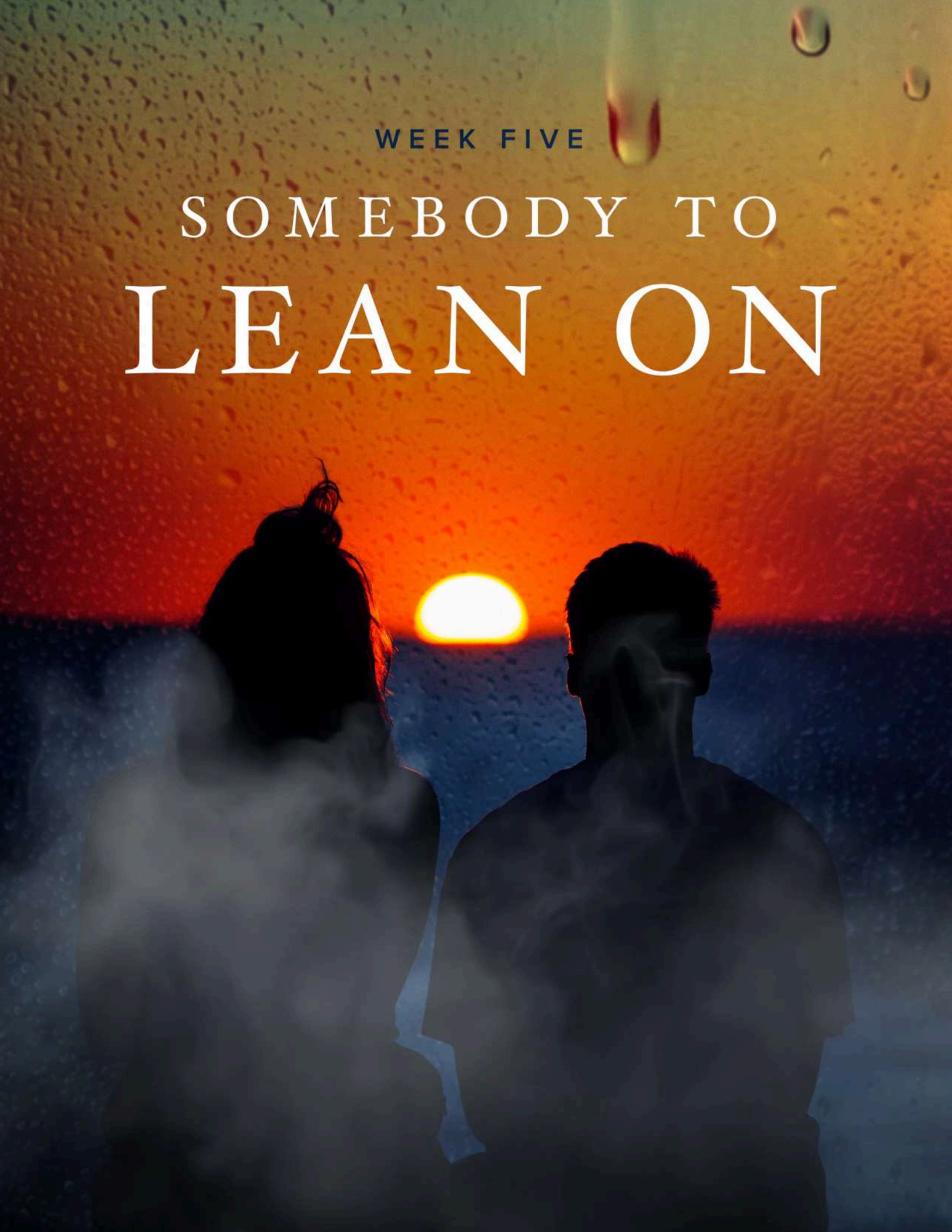
5. Read Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:23-24. What does the New Testament tell us about our attitudes towards work? Based on these passages, what would it look like for us to be faithful servants of God in our workplaces? In your own career, what would it look like to do your work as though you were serving Christ?

6. Because Jesus worked, we can trust Him with our work. How would you face your work differently if you lived as though Jesus was your boss? Close in prayer by asking God to show you what it looks like to work with Christian distinctiveness in your workplace.



WEEK FIVE

SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON





“Ecclesiastes starts decidedly with the truth that all of us are in the world no matter who we are and that all of us have this one thing in common: we are human and as such we must commonly navigate the same God-governed and maddening world together.”

ZACH ESWINE

It can be dangerous to travel alone. What if you're hiking through the woods and you fall down and get injured? What if you're driving through an unfamiliar city and suddenly get a flat tire? In those moments, you need someone. Whether it's a close friend traveling with you or a kind stranger who goes out of their way to help, you don't want to have to figure things out on your own. You need someone to stop and help. You need someone to help pick you up off the ground. Everyone needs a travelling companion.

What's true for travel is also true for life. Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, the teacher doesn't shy away from the fact that this world is full of some terrible things. There is pain. There is violence. There is oppression. He could see how the road could be. Life can be tough. Without someone to lean on, it can be even tougher. So, we need people to travel with us. We need others to support us and help us. Even the most introverted among us can't live in isolation. We aren't made to walk this road on our own.



As soon as we start talking about relationships, we're reminded that they can be difficult. Misery may love company, but company has a way of bringing misery of its own. Other people can hurt us in ways few other things can. We all know the sting of betrayal and bitterness. We all know what it's like to lose our travelling companions along the way. Relationships can bring comfort, but they can also cause chaos. They are essential, but they are not easy. And perhaps that's why we need them most.

Ecclesiastes 4:4-12: Then I observed that most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors. But this, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind... I observed yet another example of something meaningless under the sun. This is the case of a man who is all alone, without a child or a brother, yet who works hard to gain as much wealth as he can. But then he asks himself, 'Who am I working for? Why am I giving up so much pleasure now?' It is all so meaningless and depressing. Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken."

Qoheleth doesn't have a lot to say about relationships, but his teaching cuts right to the core of the issue. He begins by reminding us of the tension inherent in almost all of our relationships. Each and every one of us is motivated largely by selfishness.

There's a kind of envy and jealousy that drives us forward. We're motivated by what other people have. We see someone else's success and we want that for ourselves. It's not enough for us to celebrate with another person. There's something in us that longs to have that same sort of attention for ourselves. So, we get in the business of self-promotion. We jockey for position and fight for our own piece of the pie. There are times, in fact, when our world seems like one big competition. It's always us versus them. It doesn't matter who we have to step on so long as we get the kind of life we want.

Once again, we find the Teacher describing a Genesis 3 kind of world. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had everything they could possibly have imagined. They lived in a literal paradise! For all the splendor of the Garden, one of the most remarkable things about it was the relational intimacy they enjoyed – both with God and with one another! Genesis 2:25 tells us, “The man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame.” The text isn't just talking about physical nudity; it's also talking about vulnerability. Adam and Eve had nothing to hide from one another. There were no secrets. There was no manipulation. They were free to be who God created to be. They didn't have to hide anything from each other.

Better still, they didn't have to hide anything from God.



The opening chapters of the Bible tell us that the first man and woman enjoyed incredible fellowship with God. The Creator Himself would come down into the Garden to walk with them in the cool of the evening (Gen 3:8). They weren't just walking with God in a spiritual sense; they got to walk with Him standing by their side! The Garden was a place of the greatest intimacy and belonging. When you walked into the Garden, you knew you had found the place you were created to be – a place where you could walk freely with God and with others.

Unfortunately, sin wrecked the relationships God created us to have. The moment sin and disobedience entered the picture all our relationships started to fall apart:

Genesis 3:7-9: “At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees.”

Genesis 3:16: “Then He [God] said to the woman, ‘I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.’”



Adam and Eve's relationship had been defined by intimacy and transparency. Now, it would become a rivalry. They would desire not to know each other, but to dominate and control one another. Even the relationship between parent and child, one of our greatest sources of joy, would become one marked by pain. The relationships that once brought us life were radically altered by the introduction of death into our world. For as much as our relationship with each other suffered, our relationship with God took the biggest hit. This is clear from Adam and Eve's first interaction with Him. When they heard God approaching in the Garden, they didn't run to Him. They ran away from Him. Where we used to walk with God with joy and gladness, we began to approach Him with fear and suspicion. Worse, our sin cast us out of the Garden. We were meant to live in community with God and with others. Because of sin, that unity shattered.



OUR NEED FOR RELATIONSHIP

"It is not good for man to be alone..."

These words come as something of a surprise in Genesis 2. Up until this point in the creation narrative, everything God had made had been perfect. The sun, the moon, and the stars? "It was good." The oceans, mountains, and deserts? "It was good." The plants, the animals, and the birds? "It was good." But when He saw Adam all by himself, God recognized that something wasn't good. It wasn't good for the man to live in isolation. We weren't designed to do this life by ourselves. We were created to live in community.

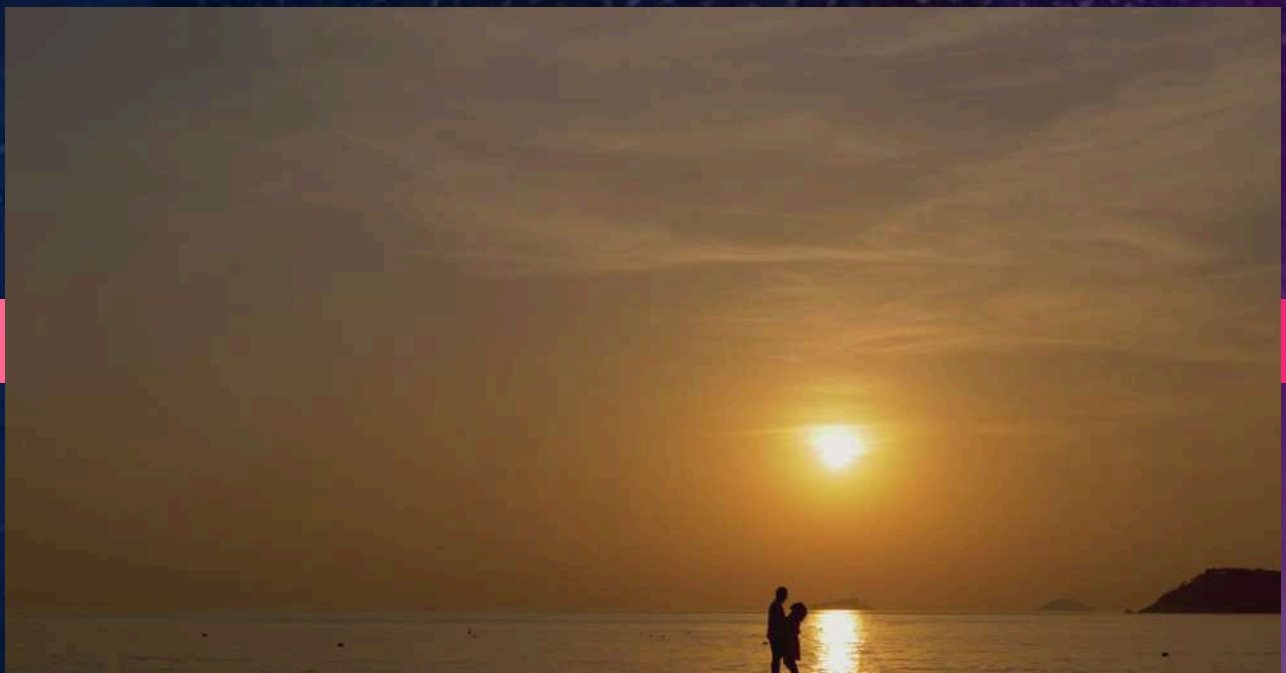
What makes this observation even more remarkable is that it occurs before the Fall. Adam was in Paradise. Adam enjoyed an unblemished relationship with creation. More importantly, he enjoyed an unblemished relationship with His Creator. Adam seemingly had everything! But he still needed a companion. He still needed a helper. We weren't meant to do this alone.

Even if the Bible didn't tell us this, our own experience would. We've all experienced the pain of loneliness. While we occasionally enjoy solitude, no one wants to live in it indefinitely. We need people around us. Even the most introverted among us require some level of community. Despite the fact that people can let us down, hurt us and reject us, we long for friendship. That's because we were created for it. It can be hard to live in community, but it's impossible to live without it!

LIFE UNDER THE **SUN**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: **“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.”**

Qoheleth echoes Genesis' assessment that it's not good for us to be alone. But his view on community is a little more pragmatic. He sees relationships as a matter of self-preservation. Life is full of peril. Without other people by our side, we can get ourselves into real trouble. What the Teacher seems to forget is that relationships themselves can be real trouble. We like the idea of someone who can help pull us back up when we fall. We don't like it so much when the people who should help us up are the very ones who knock us down. In a world where sin warps everything, our relationships seem especially susceptible to its corrupting influence. The same people who encourage us can disappoint us or betray us.



Ecclesiastes isn't blind to this reality. The Teacher hasn't shied away from the experiences we face outside of Eden. That's why Qoheleth returns to the subject of relationships in Ecclesiastes 7. In a flurry of quick-hitting advice, he alerts us to some of the greatest threats that can plague our relationships. If we want to navigate our relationships well, these are some of the potholes we need to avoid:

Ecclesiastes 7:5: **“Better to be criticized by a wise person than to be praised by a fool.”**

Ecclesiastes 7:7-9: **“Extortion turns wise people into fools, and bribes corrupt the heart. Finishing is better than starting. Patience is better than pride. Control your temper, for anger labels you a fool.”**

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22: **“Don't eavesdrop on others – you may hear your servant curse you. For you know how often you yourself have cursed others.”**



Notice the very practical advice Solomon gives us here. He warns us against seeking the approval of fools. He reminds us of the importance of perseverance and patience. He makes sure that we remember how the gossip we spread today can come back to haunt us tomorrow. He points out that our anger rarely accomplishes anything worthwhile. None of these exhortations are particularly remarkable. And yet, how much different would our lives be if we had perfectly lived out each of these pieces of wisdom? What if you hadn't said that word in anger? What if you hadn't chased approval from the wrong crowd? Following even the simplest of advice could have had an incredible impact. In theory, relationships should be simple. In reality, our own sinfulness and selfishness make them difficult.

In fact, Qoheleth cuts right to this point in Ecclesiastes 7:20: "Not a single person on earth is always good and never sins." Like so many of the other issues the Teacher has talked about, our trouble with relationships often comes down to a matter of control. He's already shown us that we can't control the times and seasons of our lives. Neither can we control what happens to our wealth or our work once we're gone. Now, he shows us that so much of our pain in relationships stems from this same limitation. We can't always control our own sinful nature, let alone how sin impacts the people closest to us.

Left to our own devices, this reality would leave us with little hope. How can broken people do life with other broken people? How can sinners live in fellowship with one another, let alone with God? But what if there was a person who was always good and never sinned? How could they help us live in fellowship with God and with others? Thankfully, the person Qoheleth knew we needed is exactly the person God provided for us in Jesus Christ!

LIFE UNDER THE SON

David Gibson: “If you can live in this world in such a way that the person or people beside you—your friend, your spouse, your children, your brother, your sister, the people God has put in your path—are your waking concern and your dominant focus, then you will find happiness. If your head hits the pillow at night full of questions about how you might help and serve someone else, and how you can be a certain kind of person for them, then you will find a gladness and contentment that nothing else can match.”

The New Testament repeatedly returns to the subject of relationships. Scholars estimate there are somewhere around 60 “one another” commands scattered throughout its pages. Each one casts a vision of community life. The apostle Paul, in particular, recognized that the Gospel changes the way we relate to the people around us. That’s not just because the Gospel shows us a new way of living; it’s because the example of Jesus shows us how to treat others.

As the perfect man, Jesus related perfectly to His fellow man. He was compassionate at the right time. He was patient at the right time. He was even angry at the right time. His life is the template for how we ought to live. Consider how consistently the New Testament calls back to Jesus as our model:

Philippians 2:3-5: “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.”

Colossians 3:13: “Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”

Ephesians 4:32: “Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”

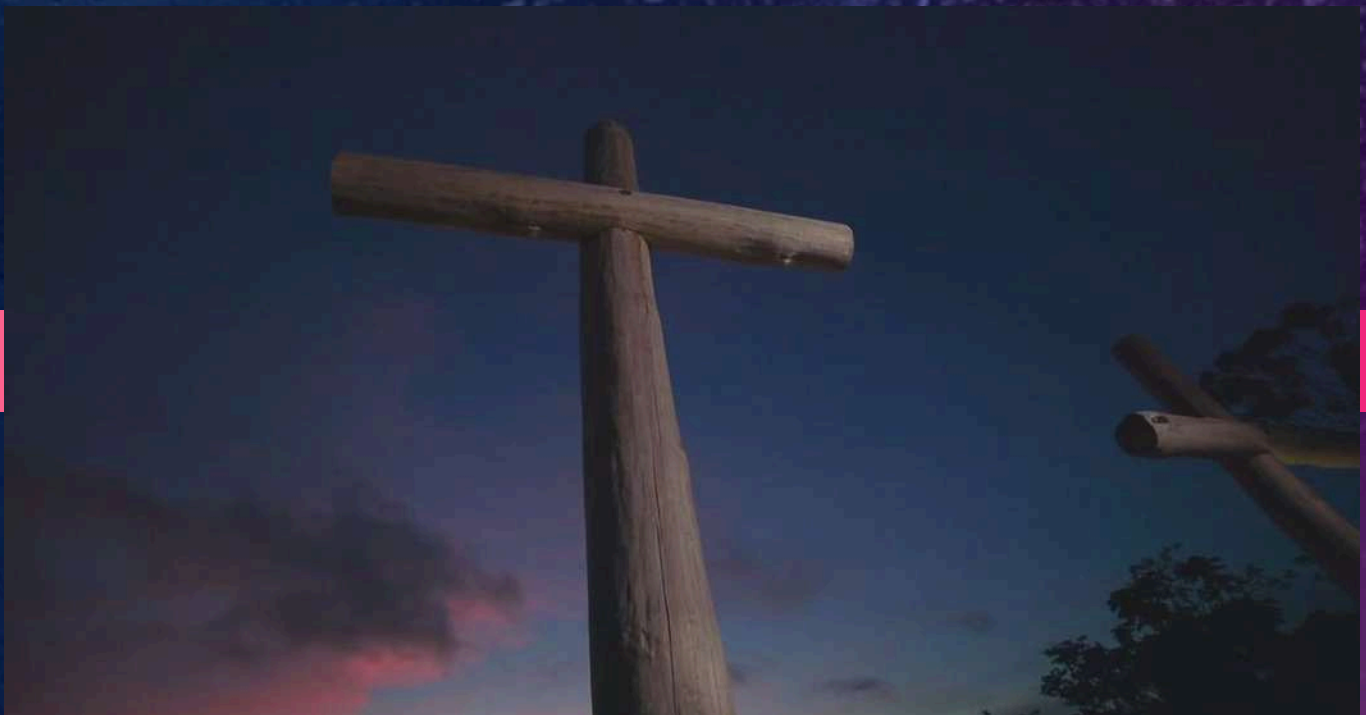
Ecclesiastes cautions us against the attitudes and behaviors that can destroy a relationship. Jesus models what right relationships actually look like. Rather than simply stating the negative, Jesus shows us the positive.

Living in community requires humility and sacrifice.

Good relationships ask us to extend kindness and compassion, treating other people the way we want to be treated. As we bump up against the rough edges of community life, it even calls for forgiveness and grace. These are not the natural responses of a sinful people. They are the responses of a people radically transformed by Christ.

Qoheleth mourned the fact that there was no perfect man. He looked everywhere and couldn't find anyone who always did the right thing. In Christ, however, we have seen perfection in action. His sacrifice didn't just make it possible for our relationship with God to be restored. On the cross, He paved the way for us to reconcile with one another. Our sin and selfishness created endless sources of division. Jesus brings unity and peace – both with God and with the people around us. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:13-14:

“Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.”



GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were some of your observations from the weekly reading/video discussion? How do relationships enrich and improve our lives? How do they complicate them? In our Genesis 3 world, why are relationships so important – and yet so difficult?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-12. Why does the Teacher speak so highly of relationships? Why do we need other people? What are some of the obstacles that keep us from this kind of true community? How does sin complicate how we relate to one another?
3. What is some of the best relationship advice you've ever received – whether from the Bible or from someone else? If you could offer someone your own piece of relationship advice, what would you say? What has been your biggest relationship regret?
4. Ecclesiastes reminds us that while life with others can be tough, it's tougher without them. Why do you think God created us with this need for community? What does that teach us about Him? What does it teach us about how He wants us to live in relationship with Him?
5. Read Philippians 2:3-11. What is some of the practical relationship advice Paul gives us in this passage? How is Jesus our ultimate example in relationships? How would your relationships look different if you lived with His attitude?
6. How do relationships ultimately define our lives? Which relationships have defined your life? In what ways has your relationship with God defined your life? Close in prayer by asking God to guide your relationships and help you reflect Christ in the ways you treat the people around you.

WEEK SIX

THE END OF THE MATTER





*"There comes a time in life when it's time
to stop writing your résumé and begin to
write your obituary."*

RON ROLHEISER

Every journey has a destination. When you sit down in your car to start a long road trip, you know you won't stop until you reach where you're going (or the nearest Buc-ee's). You begin your quest for a college degree knowing that the journey isn't over until you walk across the stage and pick up that diploma. If you're buying a house, you don't feel fully secure until all the paperwork is filled out and you hold that house key in your hand. Every journey worth taking has a destination in mind – an outcome that gives meaning to everything that came before it.

For all the destinations we may choose, there's one destination we cannot avoid. No matter what pitstops you make along the way, death is going to be your final stop on the journey of life. Whether you want to think about it or not, it is where your story is headed. On the day you reach that destination, how will you know if you actually made it? When all is said and done, what is going to have made the trip worthwhile?



In the closing chapters of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher returns to the subject that's been lurking in the background of the whole book. Death is on the horizon. Deny it, delay it, or distract yourself from it, it doesn't matter! Death is not a distant possibility—it is an approaching certainty. On the day it gets here, what will a life well-lived actually look like? When the end comes, what will that reveal about who we really were? True to form, Qoheleth pulls no punches at his conclusion. He wants us to know what's coming so that we can be ready for it. That's because when the story ends, it'll be time to meet the Author.

Ecclesiastes 12:6-14: “Yes, remember your Creator now while you are young, before the silver cord of life snaps and the golden bowl is broken. Don't wait until the water jar is smashed at the spring and the pulley is broken at the well. For then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. ‘Everything is meaningless,’ says the Teacher, ‘completely meaningless.’ Keep this in mind: The Teacher was considered wise, and he taught the people everything he knew. He listened carefully to many proverbs, studying and classifying them. The Teacher sought to find just the right words to express truths clearly. The words of the wise are like cattle prods—painful but helpful. Their collected sayings are like a nail-studded stick with which a shepherd drives the sheep. But, my child, let me give you some further advice: Be careful, for writing books is endless, and much study wears you out. That's the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.”

The end of Ecclesiastes brings us back around to the end of life. We started with the observation that life is 'hevel' – a quick breath and a fading vapor. We conclude by thinking about what the end of the story actually looks like. One day, our lives will end. The cord of life will be broken. The bowl will shatter. The well will run dry. On the day we die, all those things we spent our life chasing will cease to matter. We'll lose the possessions and pleasures we accumulated. Our work and strivings will cease. All our relationships will come to their sad and inevitable end. From a purely physical perspective, we all face death alone. We can't take anything – or anyone – with us when we go.



Herein lies the reality Qoheleth has tried to get us to wrestle with the entire book. We live in a Genesis 3 world. Our sin cursed the world in so many ways. It ruined our work. It took us out of a world of joy and left us chasing disappointing pleasures. It wrecked our relationships. While all those elements of the curse are terrible in their own right, they pale in comparison to what's coming for us. The worst part of the curse is death. Ecclesiastes 12 calls back to the words of Genesis 3:19, when God pronounced this final curse on mankind: **"You [will] return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."** The end is coming, and there is nothing that can hold it back.

Ecclesiastes forces us to sit with this truth one final time. But the Teacher doesn't remind us of this truth to scare us. He wants to wake us up! He doesn't want us to dwell on the macabre, but to motivate us to live in a different way! Qoheleth envisions these teachings as a cattle prod or a goad. He's trying to push us forward – to see the beauty in life while it's still here! Our days will pass quickly. Our death will arrive before we're ready. Armed with that knowledge, how should we live on this day? Acknowledging the presence of death ought to reshape how we understand the purpose of life.



THE END IS NEAR

The early chapters of Ecclesiastes contained a beautiful poem about time. It talked about the seasons of life and how we move through them. In the final chapter, Qoheleth shifts his perspective. Rather than describing how we move through time, he shows us how time moves through us:

Ecclesiastes 12:1-3: “Don’t let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and say, ‘Life is not pleasant anymore.’ Remember him before the light of the sun, moon, and stars is dim to your old eyes, and rain clouds continually darken your sky. Remember him before your legs—the guards of your house—start to tremble; and before your shoulders—the strong men—stoop. Remember him before your teeth—your few remaining servants—stop grinding; and before your eyes—the women looking through the windows—see dimly.”

Solomon describes our bodies as a house. As we age, that house begins to break down. Where once we moved with speed and ease, our joints begin to creak and crack. Our eyesight dims. Our teeth wear out. Our posture stoops. Where we once spent our childhood getting taller, we spend our old age getting shorter under gravity’s pull. These verses want us to understand that death doesn’t come all at once. The end is coming, and it arrives bit by bit.

The language is incredibly poetic. It’s also very apocalyptic. The Teacher borrows some of his imagery from the prophets and how they describe the end of the world. The dimming of the heavenly bodies recalls prophecies of the “Day of the Lord” and how the heavens will withhold their light (Isaiah 13:9-10). The trembling of our legs mirrors the trembling of the earth Haggai foresaw in Haggai 2:6-9. Qoheleth’s language that our teeth stop grinding is reminiscent of Jeremiah’s prophecy that work at the millstone would cease on the day of judgment (Jeremiah 25:10). The effect of these repeated references is striking. Death isn’t just a tragedy; it is an apocalypse! It is not merely the end of our life, but the end of our world!

LIFE UNDER THE SUN

Ecclesiastes is a book that asks us to sit in death's shadow. Qoheleth wants us to stop and think for a moment about where our stories are ultimately headed. Every single one of us is going to die. To our modern ears, that sounds like a terrifying thought. After all, we try to avoid thinking about death at all costs. Consider some of the ways our culture responds to death (fittingly using the acronym D.E.A.D):

DISTANCE: We live in a day and age where we can keep our distance from death. Hospitals and hospices have made it so where doctors and specialists deal with many of death's realities. The struggles that accompany the end of life are often hidden from public view. When we do have to face death, it's usually in the calm and serene confines of a funeral home. Generations ago, people had to hold funerals in their own houses. Now, we can keep death at arm's length, quarantined into a home of its own.

ENTERTAIN: Ecclesiastes has already cautioned us of how pleasure can distract us from the things that really matter. Nowhere is this more evident than in how we treat death. In our days of smartphones, we keep our minds in an almost constant state of busyness. The times we could use for reflection are filled with entertainment. Rather than confronting our mortality, we learn to ignore it. Worse, so much of the content we consume treats death and violence in an almost casual manner. Death fills our screens but rarely enters our hearts.

ACCELERATE: The past couple of decades have seen a surge in the practice of assisted suicide. Governments around the world have started to condone the practice as a more humane way of facing death. Conversations around assisted suicide aren't simply a matter of easing suffering; they are a matter of control. We can't always control life, so we make a play to try and control our deaths. We want to deal with our mortality on our own terms. If we're going to have to face death, then we want to face it with some kind of dignity.

DENY: Compared to previous generations, we are in a much better position to fight against death. Two hundred years ago, the average lifespan was less than 40. Today, we have more than doubled that. Nearly every aspect of modern life is designed to keep us safe and to help us avoid death. We can eat healthy to keep our bodies in peak condition. We can take medicines to reverse aging's effects. Most of the diseases that would have ravaged our ancestors are easily curable with today's technology. We live as though we are invincible. We are remarkably skilled at delaying death's approach.



As you can see, we don't typically handle the subject of death well. Our instinct is to push it to the corners of our minds. Still, Ecclesiastes wants us to pause here for a second. That's because thinking about death doesn't make us weak; it makes us wise! As tempted as we might be to act like our time is limitless, there is freedom in understanding our limits. Recognizing that death is coming helps us to prioritize the way we live now. What are the things I really want to do? Who are the people I really want to invest in? What are the things I really want to leave behind? Understanding our limits helps us understand life.

In a sense, that's been the message of Ecclesiastes all along. We like to think life is limitless. But it's the limitations of life that bring it meaning. We can enjoy the pleasures of this world more when we realize that they will never bring us permanent joy. We can find satisfaction in a hard day's work once we recognize that work doesn't give our lives meaning. We can be content in our relationships only after we acknowledge that the people around us are just as broken as we are. We can steward our time more wisely when we understand that it's slipping away.

**Life isn't found outside the limits;
it's precisely within those limits
that we learn how to live.**

LIFE UNDER THE SON

Philip Ryken: **“The very fact that you are weary of this life is pointing you to Jesus as the only One who can satisfy your soul.”**

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth has asked us to consider life “under the sun.” He placed a frame around the world, limiting his observations to the physical world. Here at the end, however, he considers what might lie outside of that frame. Is there something else? In a life that seems meaningless, what meaning can be found? His answer serves as a kind of twist ending, rewiring the way we understand the entire book:

“That’s the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone’s duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.”



After forcing us to look at life “under the sun,” the end of Ecclesiastes cries out for something more.

This life can't be all there is! All the empty pursuits have left us holding nothing. Something else has to be going on here! For the briefest of moments, the final verses of Ecclesiastes peel back the curtain of this world. There is a God in this story. Better still, there is a God who created us to be in this story. He placed us here and gave us a purpose. Though we search for meaning and significance “under the sun,” we can only find our true purpose in the God who set the sun in its place.

For as much as he has talked about life in a Genesis 3 world, Qoheleth ends by taking us back to the beginning. In Genesis 1-2, God set us in paradise. He placed us there to fellowship with Him and to work alongside Him in this creation. All we had to do was keep one command. Though we failed in that assignment, the end of Ecclesiastes tells us that our responsibilities have not changed. “Fear God and obey His commands.” Live in awe of your Creator and listen to Him. That's it! That's all Adam and Eve had to do. That was their entire duty. And Qoheleth reminds us that it's ours too! We're outside of Eden, but the calling is still the same. Fear God. Obey Him. This is what it means to be human. This is what it's always meant to be human.

And yet, Solomon's quest for purpose doesn't just take him to the beginning of the story; it also takes him to the end. In the final words of the book, he reminds us of where our stories are ultimately heading. Turns out that the specter of death that haunts Ecclesiastes isn't the end of our stories. Just as there's something beyond the frame of this world, there's something beyond the grave. While that might seem like good news at first, the reality Solomon presents us with is one of the most sobering truths in the book: "God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad."

One day, we will each have to stand before God's throne. On that day, everything we've ever done will be laid bare before Him. Every thought, every action, every pursuit will be brought into the light. He will call us to account for the life He gave us. The God who sees all things will judge all things.

Ecclesiastes started with a cry for meaning: "'Everything is meaningless,' says the Teacher, 'completely meaningless!'" It ends with a statement that brings meaning to everything we do. If God will judge us for how we've lived, then there's nothing in this life without significance. Everything we do matters. Everything we don't do matters. The words we say, the thoughts we think, the motivations we hide – all of these things matter! Our temporary lives hide our eternal purpose. We were meant to stand before God!



The good news of the Gospel is that we don't have to stand alone. On that day, there's a Savior who will stand with us. The Bible tells us that Jesus walked into our frustrating and fallen world. He lived our life, subjecting Himself to the same seasons and sufferings we experience. His death on the cross looked like another meaningless tragedy in a Genesis 3 world. But His resurrection three days later changed everything! His death unwound the power of sin! His resurrection brought the promise of new life for us all! We don't have to face the end with anxiety; we can look forward to it with anticipation!

Hebrews 9:27-28: **“And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, so also Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for Him.”**

The Teacher told us life is meaningless. The Savior assures us that life is meaningful. Life under the sun is full of frustration, uncertainty, and death.

Life under the Son is filled with purpose, hope, and the promise that everything we do for Him matters.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What resonated with you from this week's video discussion? How do the closing words of Ecclesiastes help reframe the point of the entire book? As you finish up this study of Ecclesiastes, what has been your biggest takeaway?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 12:1-14. How does this final chapter encourage us to live for God? How does the Teacher's final reminders of the end help us keep all of life in perspective? In what ways does this final chapter point us to the true meaning and purpose of life?
3. What kind of imagery does Solomon use here to describe what time and aging does to us? How does getting older affect us – in both good and bad ways? How have you seen these things in your own life? How can remembering God in our youth help set us up for what the rest of our life will bring?
4. What does it mean to “fear God and obey His commands”? How do we practically live out these final words? Given all the pursuits Ecclesiastes has talked about, what does it look like to reorient our lives around who God is and what He commands?
5. How does the reality of Judgment Day change the way we view life? Why is it important that we live with that day in mind? How does Ecclesiastes' final reminder of God's judgment bring meaning to life?
6. As you close, read 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. How does the temporary nature of this life remind us of what's really important? How does it bring us hope? Close together in prayer by asking God to help root your hearts in the hope of an eternal home with Him.