

# Gift or Gain?

Living the good life under  
the sun

Sermons & studies in the Book of Ecclesiastes

## The focus of this sermon series

The book of Ecclesiastes alternates between two perspectives:

1. **Human existence *apart from God*.** This existence is marked by the struggle throughout life to *gain* satisfaction, happiness or fulfilment.
2. **Human existence *lived before God*.** This existence is a life lived in receiving good from God as His *gifts* to go ahead and enjoy, under and honouring Him.

“Ecclesiastes has taught me that there is an intrinsic fragility and transience to life. While this can make us frustrated and sad, it also means that little pleasures and moments of beauty can be received for what they are: fleeting gifts, beyond our control but full of joy and grace” (Kirk Patston, SMBC OT Lecturer).

**Resources** used in the following studies:

- Richard Belcher, Ecclesiastes, Gospel Coalition Commentary, [thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/ecclesiastes/](http://thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/ecclesiastes/)
- College Church Indianapolis, Nothing Matters: Ecclesiastes Studies, [yourchurch.com/sunday-gatherings/sermons/99/](http://yourchurch.com/sunday-gatherings/sermons/99/)
- Iain Provan, Ecclesiastes, NIV Application Commentary
- David Gibson, Ecclesiastes: Life in the Light of Eternity, New Growth Press, 2021
- Austin Stone, Ecclesiastes sermon series, [austinstone.org/media/sermons?book=Ecclesiastes](http://austinstone.org/media/sermons?book=Ecclesiastes)

## Sermon One. A Word to the Wise (Ecclesiastes 1:1-18)

Imagery: out of the pretend world and living in the real one.

1. Author (verse 1)
2. Motto (verse 2)
3. Big question: gift or gain? (verse 3)
4. Introductory poem (verses 4-11)
5. The limits of wisdom (verses 12-18)

### Study One. A Word to the Wise (Ecclesiastes 1:1-18)

Can you think of a time when you thought you'd gained something significant, only to find that in time you were dissatisfied again?

#### Observation & Meaning

Read 1:1–2

1. The author of Ecclesiastes makes himself anonymous. What we definitely know is he is one of the sons of David. What do you know about them?

2. v2 is the motto for the Book. It's attention grabbing. *Everything is meaningless* (some translations say "vanity" or "futility"). The Hebrew word for *meaningless* is *hevel*. Commentator Derek Kidner defines *hevel* as "a wisp of vapour, a puff of wind, a mere breath—nothing you could get your hands on; the nearest thing to zero." Why would this be considered as a motto?

Read 1:3-11

3. v3 is the big question that the Book is answering. What is it, and how would you answer?

4. The phrase "under the sun" (v3) is repeated throughout Ecclesiastes. What does life under the sun mean?

5. In v4-11, we read of the repetitive nature of life. What point do you think he is trying to make?

*Read v12-18*

6. How did the Teacher gain wisdom (v12-13)?

7. What are his conclusions of wisdom (v14-18)?

### **Application & Prayer**

8. Ecclesiastes 1 sets a scene for the book. Its purpose is to call its readers to abandon an unsatisfying way of living. Why do you think we need this view of life?

9. Do you think the book is pessimistic or realistic (or optimistic!)? What are you; what would you like to be?

Pray we'd see 'life under the sun' as God does.

## Sermon Two. The Search for Satisfaction (Ecclesiastes 2:1-26)

Imagery: chasing after the wind

1. Completely immersed in pleasure-seeking (verses 1-11)

2. Failure of wisdom in light of folly & death (verses 12-16)

“The single question that animates him is this: If we won’t live forever, or even long enough to make a lasting difference to the world, how then should we live?” (David Gibson)

3. Grievous gain or satisfying gift (verses 17-26)

## Study Two. The Search for Satisfaction (Ecclesiastes 2:1-26)

What's your motivation for getting up each morning?

### Observation & Meaning

*Read 2:1-1*

1. In this chapter, the Teacher talks to himself, motivates himself to live his life to the fullest. How did the Teacher embrace pleasure seeking?

2. Has there ever been a season of your life where you lived like Ecclesiastes 2:10? If so, describe that experience.

- a. What led you there?
- b. What was it like?
- c. What, if anything, led you out?

3. In v11 and 18, what is his conclusion on pleasure-seeking? Why?

*Read 2:12-26*

4. There are a lot of contrasts in v12-26.

- a. What leads to despair and grief?

b. What leads to satisfaction and joy?

5. How is 'gift versus gain' an important concept to grasp?

### **Application & Prayer**

6. Whether you are employed, unemployed, a student, a stay-at-home parent, or something else, you spend the hours of your life engaged in some sort of *toil*. Describe your toil.

d. Why do you do it?

e. What about it is satisfying?

f. What about it is unsatisfying?

7. The invitation of Eccl 2:24–26 is to set our attention on God, his original design, and how to please him. There is true joy available to you in this life, but you will not find it if you make your toil your god. How can *acknowledging the hand of God* change how you approach your toil?

Pray for each other's toil in this light.

## **Sermon Three. Eternity on My Mind (Ecclesiastes 3:1-22)**

Imagery: harmonising with reality

1. Wisdom to be present in all times (verses 1-8)
2. Living with eternity in our hearts (verses 9-14)
3. Two things: death & judgment (verses 15-22)

### Study Three. Eternity on My Mind (Ecclesiastes 3:1-22)

What things do you seek to control? What might it look like to surrender control?

#### Observation & Meaning

*Read 3:1-8*

1. Eccl 3:1-8 is a poem stating that there is a time and season for everything. Except for the first pair (“a time to be born and a time to die”), human action is required to accomplish a desired result. For example, “a time to plant” is dependent on people understanding the right time to plant so the opportunity to plant is not lost. What does this teach us about our dependence on God’s wisdom?

2. Do any of these ‘times’ describe your life right now?

3. The patterned order in the world (verses 1-8) is abruptly followed by words of comfort and challenge in v9-22. What are the words of comfort?

What are the words of challenge?

4. How do v9-14 say we should approach our time here on earth?

5. What do you think ‘to be happy and to do good while they live’ (v12) means? How might it be different from secular hedonism (pleasure-seeking) and philanthropy (doing good to fellow man)?

6. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...” (Prov 9:10; Job 28:28). This is the first principle of biblical wisdom, and it has been largely absent from Ecclesiastes until now (3:14). Why would God want us to fear Him?

### **Application & Prayer**

7. Do you have a “life-rearranging, joyful awe and wonder before God” (Tim Keller)?

Can you see that this relational ‘fear’ (rightful acknowledgement, honour) of God is *the* route to satisfaction, enjoyment, and truly doing good in this transient life?

Pray for this liberating fear of God amongst us.



#### **Study Four. All the Lonely People (Ecclesiastes 4:1-16)**

“Again I looked”. “I saw /have seen /looked” is declared 19 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes. What does this tell us about the Teacher’s method of making sense of the world?

#### **Observation & Meaning**

1. What is life like for people in the following verses?

a. v1-3

b. v4-6

c. v7-12

d. v13-16

2. Where have you seen these dynamics play out in life? Would you agree with their meaninglessness?

## Reflection & Prayer

3. As you consider your own life, how have / do these four dynamics manifest in you or others?

### Going to the Gospel

4. The evil of the world is so multifaceted that the hope for this world cannot come *from* this world. So, the God who created the world stepped into the world He created. Whenever we look in the mirror or at the world around us and see the evils named in Eccl 4:1–16, we must remember that Jesus willingly threw Himself into inequality, oppression, rivalry, materialism, and the hands of corrupt leaders. Consider the person and work of Jesus. How does the gospel address each of the evils you outlined in question 1?

5. How do v9–12 speak to our responsibility to one another as the body of Christ? Why is spiritual friendship important?

Pray that we'd heed the pathways of foolishness and misery that Eccl 4 describes, and instead embrace the ways of wisdom that God's grace in Jesus teaches us.



### **Study Five. Caution: Approach God With Care (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)**

This passage paints a portrait of a person foolishly casual toward God. What are contemporary examples of this?

#### **Observation & Meaning**

*Read 5:1–7*

1. God's holiness is synonymous with His absolute perfection in everything—His complete separation from sin and His unrivaled majesty and glory. What does the Teacher say about how God-fearers should approach the holy God in worship? ('when you go the house of God' – ie the Temple)

2. What in particular does he say about words?

3. Why does God care so much about our words, and especially, keeping our word?

### **Application & Prayer**

4. Consider the commitments you make, especially in the context of church life. How well do you follow through on your commitments to worship God in your cell group, at church, or with other Christians?

5. Eccl 5:7 ends by saying “Therefore fear God.” What might change about your words, and your worship, if you truly and consistently ‘feared God’?

Pray for the right fear of God that leads to righteous words and pure worship.

## Sermon Six. Unfulfilled Expectations with Wealth (Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:11)

Imagery: grief versus joy

1. The grievous evil of misused wealth (verses 1-17)
2. The *tov* and joyous life (verses 18-20)
3. The grievous evil of the joyless life (6:1-11)



4. Eccl 5:11–12 speaks to the increase of anxieties and complications that accompany growing in wealth. This is the paradox of riches: as possessions increase, so do your liabilities. More money, more problems. Describe some of the ways money has made your life more (not less) complicated.

### **Reflection & Prayer**

5. Our use of money demonstrates what we truly value. If somebody did an audit of your life and spending habits, what would they conclude about what you truly treasure?

Read 1 Timothy 6:6–10 (alongside Eccl 5:19-20)

6. Spend some time thinking about these verses. What would it look like for you to practise “godliness with contentment” under the good hand of God, in this season of life - regardless of how much money you have?

Pray for this for each other!

### **Sermon Seven. Who Knows What is Good? (Ecclesiastes 6:12-7:29)**

Imagery: Tov - good, merry, pleasing, desirable, in order, usable, efficient, friendly, kind, morally good.

Big question: once we grasp the big message of Ecclesiastes- that life in this world eludes our control - how then should we live?

Main idea: be neither an escapist nor a know-it-all. Learn to live the fact that life is limited.

1. Tov-life faces reality head-on (7:1-12)

2. Tov-life lives in God's world (7:13-29)

## Study Seven. Who Knows What is Good? (Ecclesiastes 6:12-7:29)

### Observation & Meaning

1. How does 7:1-12 go against many of our cultural concepts of wisdom?

2. This section is filled with the word *Tov* (good/better). We find it 12 times in ch 7. How do 7:13-29 speak of living the good (*Tov*) life before God?

a. v13-14

b. v15-18

c. v26

d. v27-29

## Going to the Gospel

3. What does Jesus say is the Tov life? Read the following passages and discuss:

a. Luke 18:18-29

b. Acts 10:38

c. Romans 3:21-26

d. Ephesians 2:8-10, Galatians 6:9-10

## Reflection & Prayer

4. Reflect on the different proverbs in Eccl 7:7–13. Select one that resonates most with you. What do you think it means? Why do you think that one resonates with you in this season of life?

5. What strategies do you think people you know, including yourself, use to avoid facing the reality or death?

6. What do you make of the idea that death can give us the perspective we need to begin to enjoy life?

Pray that in seeing reality from God's perspective, we would know how to live well.

**Sermon Eight. The Case Against Self-Sufficiency (Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:18)**

Imagery: the clock is ticking

1. The good life is always on time (8:1-17)

2. Life lived in light of the end (9:1-18)

## Study Eight. The Case Against Self-Sufficiency (Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:18)

Who is the wisest person you know? What makes them so wise?

### Observation & Meaning

*Read 8:1-17*

1. Eccl 8:2 links obedience to civic leaders with the reminder that God is inseparably involved in the whole situation. How does the reminder of God's sovereignty frame your posture toward governmental authority?

2. (However) Living in a fallen world means living with a complicated relationship to our government leaders. To what degree are you letting wisdom—not anger, hopelessness, or fear of man—shape your thinking, feelings, and actions at this particular political moment?

3. What does knowing the proper time and appropriate action look like in:

a. v2-6?

b. v9-13?

c. v14-15?

*Read 9:1-18*

4. How can keeping our death in mind shape how we live in the here and now? (See 8:7-8, 9:1-12)

### **Reflection & Prayer**

5. Do you think 8:15 and 9:7-10 are apt, or too simplistic, in light of the times, and the end? How do the Teacher's conclusions challenge you and your motivations in life?

Pray that we would live with wisdom in light of the times, and the end.

## **Sermon Nine. Dead Flies and Little Birds (Ecclesiastes 10:1-20)**

Imagery: dead flies and little birds

Insignificant events with significant consequences

1. Verses 1-4, 8-14, 18-20

2. Verses 5-7, 15-17

## **Study Nine. Dead Flies and Little Birds (Ecclesiastes 10:1-20)**

Spend a few moments discussing Eccl 10:1. What does it mean? How have you seen this principle to be true in your own life and observations?

### **Observation & Meaning**

1. In today's passage, there are lots of proverb-style wisdom statements. What are the common themes?

2. Natural cause and effect is a big feature of these statements. Little things and insignificant events can create or lead to significant consequences.

a. How does this happen?

b. Why does it happen?

3. 'Folly' or 'fool' is in verses 1, 2, 3, 6, 12, 13, 14, and 15.

a. What is folly?

b. What are the consequences for fools?

### **Reflection & Prayer**

4. Who are some people in your life who will lovingly tell you the truth when you are prone to foolishness? What sorts of things have they brought to your attention in the past?

5. Ephesians 5:15–17 warns us to be “very careful how [we] live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”

Are there any changes you need to make about the way you are walking or the path you are on? Spend some time in honest reflection, and then go to God in prayer for one another.



## Study Ten. Celebrate Life! (Ecclesiastes 11:1-10)

### Observation & Meaning

1. What are the benefits of long-term investments? (v1-2)
2. How do we know when to plan long-term and when to make big short term investments?
3. In v5-10, we see that the affirmation of God's sovereignty should never permit the idea that humanity ultimately has no responsibility. How does this passage (and especially Eccl 11:6) subvert a nihilistic (i.e. "nothing I do matters") attitude in view of God's sovereignty?

4. Chapter 2 was a brutal confrontation of pleasure-seeking living. Why then is 11:7-10 encouraging pleasure-seeking for youth?

### **Reflection & Prayer**

5. These verses explain what it looks like to properly rejoice and enjoy life. Are these verses descriptive of your life right now? Why or why not?

6. No one but God knows how many days we have remaining. How are you investing your life right now? Do you believe it is a worthwhile investment? Why?

Pray that all of us – young and old – will make wise investments of time, resources, and life itself, in light of God's coming judgement.

**Sermon Eleven. “Remember Your Creator” (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8)**

Imagery: the inevitable deterioration of life

1. Remember your Creator (verses 1-5)

2. Remember Him (verses 6-10)

**Study Eleven. “Remember Your Creator” (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8)**

**Observation & Meaning**

1. What does it mean to remember God?

2. Why the imperative to remember your Creator when young?

3. How do v1-8 speak to everyone’s future? Is this realistic?

## Reflection & Prayer

4. How can we live well now preparing for our / our world's eventual future decline?

5. Life is a breath. Since you are still alive today, there is still time to put Eccl 12:1 into practice. What could it look like for you to spend your remaining days, however long, remembering, honoring, and enjoying your Creator?

Pray for the wisdom to remember our Creator in the days of our (fleeting, or past) youth.

## **Sermon Twelve. A surprising punchline: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14**

Imagery: awe/fear of God shapes how we live His way

1. The wise Teacher (verses 9-10)
2. The guiding & stabilising nature of wisdom (verses 11-12)
3. Fear God & keep Him commandments (verses 13-14)

**Study Twelve. A surprising punchline: Ecclesiastes 12:9-14**

Why is it important to learn from teachers who are wise (and not simply knowledgeable)?

**Observation & Meaning**

1. How was the Teacher wise? (v9-10)

2. What is the purpose of wisdom? (v11-12)

3. What does the Teacher say as the Book's conclusion? (v13-14)

a. Who is this for?

b. What does fear of God mean?

c. Why fear Him?

## Reflection & Prayer

4. How would you summarise what we've studied in Ecclesiastes?

5. How has your approach to life changed, as we've moved through this book?

Alternate ending!

4. Saint Augustine famously opens his book *Confessions* by saying to God: "Thou has made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee." In many ways, this is the message of *Ecclesiastes*. In what areas of life does your heart feel restless? Where do you feel deeply unsatisfied?

5. Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus is the ultimate resting place for those dissatisfied with a life of meaningless toil. Have you come to Jesus for ultimate rest and meaning?