

The book of Ecclesiastes

# *Chasing the Wind*

Keeping it real about life under the sun



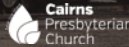
## *Series Companion*

*Term 1, 2018*

The book of Ecclesiastes

# Chasing the Wind

Keeping it real about life under the sun



## Introduction

*'Meaningless, Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'*

It's not the most positive and uplifting sentiment in the Bible, and for many people it is enough to put them off reading the book of Ecclesiastes all together. Not only does this phrase start the book, it also ends the book and is repeated another thirty-eight times in the twelve chapters in between.

And yet while this message may sound too depressing and outdated, like something you'd expect to hear in a dour lifeless church where everybody frowns or from a crazy street preacher, the book of Ecclesiastes actually has a vital and relevant message for us today. One commentator calls it 'the most contemporary book in the Bible...' and over the next few weeks we are going to see this why.

We are going to see this book that contains so much about meaninglessness also points us in the direction of

true meaning and joy. Its' depressing observations about the meaninglessness of 'life under the sun' are like a shepherd's goad – a sharp stick prodding us to wake us up to the foolishness of so many of the activities and objects we look to for meaning and fulfillment.

The teacher of Ecclesiastes exposes pleasure, wealth, work, knowledge, fame and even justice as empty and meaningless foundations for a life that will only end in the grave. But the message is not only negative. Seven times the teacher also challenges us to fear God because this is the only way to find meaning and contentment and joy in lives that will always end in death.

As Christians, we can now appreciate even more than the teacher of Ecclesiastes how fearing God brings meaning and contentment to life. The teacher knew and trusted that fearing God was the best way to live because he is the loving creator of the world. But we know he is the Father of Jesus Christ our saviour who has risen from the dead to give us the hope of eternal life.

It is this hope of resurrection and eternal life that really allows us to enjoy God's creation in the right way and to maintain hope and joy amidst the contradictions and suffering that are so much a part of life under the sun. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58, because of the hope of the resurrection our labour in the Lord is not in vain.

## *Reading Ecclesiastes*

The book of Ecclesiastes is part of the 'wisdom literature' of the Bible which also includes Job, Proverbs and the Song of Songs. These books seek to make sense of the mechanics of living for God in our world. They examine questions like 'Why is there suffering?' 'What makes for success and happiness?' and 'What is so special about sex?'

As you will see, these books are different in both form and content from a lot of the other parts of the Old Testament. In form, they are not written as a narrative [story], but are a mixture of short poems and pithy sayings. Because we are often not used to this kind of writing it can be harder to follow the flow of the book.

A helpful hint is, rather than looking for a plot that develops from one section to the next, try comparing and contrasting groups of sayings or different sections to see how the message is developed [Ecclesiastes 2:17-26 is a clear example of two contrasting perspectives brought together to give a more complete truth].

The content of the wisdom books is also different from most of the Old Testament because they do not say much about the history of God's plan of salvation or how to get into a relationship with him. Instead they focus on how to make sense of life as one of God's people in our fallen, mixed up world.

However, as always when reading the Old Testament God's plan of salvation is still in the background and we will want to ask how the teaching of Ecclesiastes is fulfilled, enhanced or modified by the climax of all God's plans – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the general characteristics of Ecclesiastes as wisdom literature, there are three features of the book itself that will help you to understand it better:

1. The word translated 'meaningless' in the NIV or 'vanity' in older translations is a key word in Ecclesiastes, but is actually difficult to translate into English. It is the Hebrew word 'hevel' and literally means mist or fog. The teacher of Ecclesiastes uses it to refer to the fleeting, difficult to understand nature of life. It is impossible to get a hold of and just when you think you've grasped it, it disappears before your very eyes. This is the sense in which it is meaningless.
2. The phrase 'under the sun' is also very important to note and understand as you read Ecclesiastes. It refers to what

happens in this world without reference to anything or anyone else and the teacher uses it to qualify his statements that everything is meaningless. It is life from the 'under the sun' perspective that is meaningless. But according to the Bible [and even Ecclesiastes] it is also possible to look at life from another perspective, a heavenly or eternal perspective. And while the teacher doesn't explore this other perspective a lot, He acknowledges it is the way to find solid meaning in our world.

3. As a book, Ecclesiastes doesn't have a simple structure to help us understand it. However it does have a general pattern where sections with a horizontal 'under the sun' perspective broken up sections with a 'vertical' perspective that acknowledge God and his hand in the world and encourage us to fear him. It is important to keep both these perspectives in mind if you want to grasp the full message of the book.

### *The Series*

As mentioned above, Ecclesiastes does not have a simple structure or straightforward argument that runs through the whole book, rather different topics and themes are repeated and looked at from slightly different angles. In this series we will be choosing a selection of passages that focus on different topics, rather than looking at every single part of the book verse by verse.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Passage</b>	<b>Topic</b>
28/01/2018	Ecclesiastes 1:1-14	Chasing the Wind
4/02/2018	Ecclesiastes 2:1-17	Chasing Pleasure
11/02/2018	Ecclesiastes 2:18-26	Chasing Work
18/02/2018	Open Church	
25/02/2018	Ecclesiastes 3:1-15	Chasing Time
4/03/2018	Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3	Chasing Justice
11/03/2018	Ecclesiastes 5:8-20	Chasing Wealth
18/03/2018	Ecclesiastes 8:1-17	Chasing Wisdom
25/03/2018	Ecclesiastes 11:8-12:14	Chasing Life

# 01 Chasing Pleasure

## Kick Off

Read the introduction to this study guide and discuss how 'wisdom literature' is different in form and content from other parts of the Old Testament.

## Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

1. In this section of Ecclesiastes the teacher is exploring how pleasure might help him find meaning in his life. List the different ways he goes about examining pleasure.
2. What conclusion does the teacher draw from his study of pleasure?

## Read Ecclesiastes 2:11-17

3. In these verses the teacher starts to include wisdom and foolishness in his search for meaning. Does he think it is better to be wise or foolish?
4. Why is wisdom, like pleasure, unable to provide ultimate meaning?

## Ecclesiastes 2:1-17

## *Thinking it through*

5. How do the experiences of the teacher echo the life of King Solomon? How does the life of King Solomon illustrate the meaninglessness of pleasure and even wisdom?
6. When the teacher says that he finds pleasure meaningless and a chasing after the wind, what does he mean?

## *Application*

7. Do you agree with the teacher about the meaninglessness of chasing pleasure? Do you have a personal experience of this you could share?
8. If there's no meaningful pleasure under the sun, how does Psalm 16:11 help us understand where meaningful pleasure can be found? How does the work of Jesus help us to understand the concept of 'eternal pleasures'?
9. The first question of the Westminster Catechism, [a summary of the beliefs of the Presbyterian Church] asks 'What is the chief end of man [humanity]?' The answer: 'To glorify God and enjoy him forever.' Is this a description of your life?
10. Are there meaningless treasures that you need to stop chasing? What things can you do to make the eternal pleasures of God more real and more significant in your life?

# Notes and prayer points

*Ecclesiastes 2:1-17*

*Ecclesiastes 2:1-17*



# 02 Chasing Work

## Kick Off

How much of your life do you spend at work?

Have you ever been unemployed? How did you cope with that experience [or how do you think you would cope if you became unemployed]?

## Read Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

1. In general, how does the teacher of Ecclesiastes feel about his work and why?
2. What particular things does the teacher say about work in verse 23?

## Read Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

3. What approach to work does the teacher suggest in the face of his negative observations about it? Why does he suggest this approach?

## Thinking it through

4. How does the teachers experience of work compare with King Solomon's experience[see 1 Kings 14:21-28 for a reminder of what happened after Solomon died]?

*Ecclesiastes 2:18-26*

5. Have a look at Genesis 2:15 and Genesis 3:17-19. How do these verse help explain the teachers experience of work?
6. How would you sum up the teaching about work in these verses?

### *Application*

7. Do the teacher's observations about work fit with your own experience?
8. What are some views of work in our culture? Can you think of specific examples of stories or advertisements of people who show this view?
9. How can you take the teachers advice to 'eat and drink and find satisfaction in your own toil...'?
10. According to 1 Corinthians 15:56-58, what new perspective does Jesus bring to work? How can this help you in your work?

### *Ecclesiastes 2:18-26*

# *Notes and prayer points*

*Ecclesiastes 2:18-26*

*Ecclesiastes 2:18-26*

# 03 Chasing Time

## Kick Off

If you had the choice at work between a pay rise or more time off, which would you take and why?

## Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

1. Bible scholars argue about whether this famous poem about time has a positive or negative tone. What reasons can you see for each way of reading it?

Positive	Negative

2. Is there anything in the poem that surprises you, or that you don't understand? Discuss these things in your group.

## Read Ecclesiastes 3: 10-15

3. According to these verses, how does thinking about God change our perspective on time?

## Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

4. What does the teacher say about how should people live in response to God's control of time?

### *Thinking it through*

5. What does it mean that 'God has put eternity in people's hearts?'
6. How does Psalm 31:14-15 compare with the teaching in Ecclesiastes 3?
7. Look at Romans 5:6-8 and Galatians 4:4-5. How does Jesus fulfil the teaching of Ecclesiastes 3?

### *Application*

8. How does the coming of Jesus change or strengthen the way we think about time?
9. What do you think the teacher would say to someone who is thinking 'If only I had more time my life would be so much better?'
10. Think about the way you respond when 'your time' is interrupted through delays or the needs of others? How does the teaching of Ecclesiastes, help you have a response that better acknowledges God?

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-15*

# *Notes and prayer points*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-15*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-15*

# 04 Chasing Justice

## Kick Off

What are some of the greatest injustices in our world?

## Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

1. According to verse 16, what problem is the teacher grappling with in this section?
2. The teacher says that wickedness and injustice is a test for humans. What is it supposed to show them?
3. Does the teacher offer any hope in the face of wickedness?
4. What is the best way to live, given the pervasive wickedness of human society?

## Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

5. What further thoughts does the teacher have on the problem of injustice? How would you describe his tone in these verses?

*Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3*

## *Thinking it through*

6. What does the teacher mean when he says that wickedness is a test from God to show humans that we are like the animals?
7. According to the teacher the oppressed have no comforter. How can the teacher say this? Hint: what perspective is the teacher coming from?
8. Once you add God to the picture, how does that change our perspective about oppression and injustice? See for example Deuteronomy 10:17-18, Psalm 68:4-8.
9. How does Jesus promise to overturn the despair of injustice under the sun? See Luke 4:16-21

## *Application*

10. How does a trust in Jesus motivate us to meaningfully devote ourselves to living righteous and just lives? How could you be more devoted to righteousness and justice?

*Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3*



# Notes and prayer points

*Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3*

*Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:3*

# 05 Chasing Wealth

## Kick Off

How much money do you need to be happy [be honest!)?

## Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-17

1. Many people throughout the history of the world have made it their life's goal to gain as much wealth as they can. What problems does the teacher identify with this life goal?
2. What connection does the teacher draw between wealth and injustice/oppression?

## Read Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

3. What is the best way to live, in the light of the frustrations of wealth?

## Thinking it through

4. Are you convinced by the teacher's arguments about the meaninglessness of wealth?

## Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

5. How do the teacher's statements about the frustration and pointlessness of wealth fit with his observation that it is good for a person to enjoy their wealth and possessions?
6. Looking at Jesus teaching in Luke 9:23-25, what is an even bigger danger of wealth than frustration and meaninglessness?
7. In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus tells a parable illustrating the danger he talked about back in chapter 9. What is the difference between the attitude of the rich fool and advice of the teacher in Ecclesiastes 5:18-20?

### *Application*

8. As followers of Jesus, can we take the teachers advice with regards to wealth? What will Jesus teaching add to our approach to wealth?
9. What habits in your life are reflect a pursuit of and love for wealth/possessions?
10. What habits could you change to reflect a contentment with what God has given you a trust that Jesus gives true life, and a commitment to taking up your cross and following him?

# Notes and prayer points

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

# 06 Chasing Wisdom

## Kick Off

Wisdom will always make your life better. Discuss

## Read Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

1. Fill in the table below and compare the message of Ecclesiastes 8:1 with 8:17. Are they similar or contrasting?

Summary of Ecc 8:1	Summary of Ecc 8:17

2. Looking at verses 2-6, when is wisdom especially useful?
3. Looking at verses 7-8 and 14-16, what are some of the limitations of wisdom?
4. Compare verses 12-13 with verse 14. How can they both be true?
5. What advice does the teacher have when even wisdom can't help you understand life?

*Ecclesiastes 8:1-17*

## *Thinking it through*

6. Can you summarise what the teacher is saying about wisdom?
7. Why might God have made it so that even the wisest person can't understand everything about our world or what will happen in the future?
8. How does the death of Jesus on the cross also show God's attitude to wisdom - see 1 Corinthians 1:26-31?

## *Application*

9. Many people think that wisdom/education is the answer to the problems of the world. What does Ecclesiastes teach?
10. Looking again at the verses from 1 Corinthians 1, Can the wisdom we have in Jesus give us more than the wisdom Ecclesiastes is talking about?

## *Ecclesiastes 8:1-17*

# *Notes and prayer points*

*Ecclesiastes 8:1-17*

*Ecclesiastes 8:1-17*

# Of Chasing Life

## Kick Off

Have you stopped looking forward to your next birthday? If so, when did it happen and why?

## Read Ecclesiastes 11:8-12:8

1. What is the teachers first advice about how to spend your youth? Are there any qualifications?
2. In what sense is youth and vigor ‘meaningless’?
3. How does the poem of 12:1-8 describe the aging process?
4. What does the teacher say you should do in the days of your youth, before age takes your life?

## Thinking it through

5. We might think that enjoying your youth and remembering the Lord are contradictory activities. Why does the teacher insist they go together?

## Ecclesiastes 11:8-12:14



6. Where does the teacher see life ending up? How does the coming of Jesus give us new information about what happens after death?
7. While the teacher's main focus is on enjoying the days of your youth, even he calls people to enjoy all their days. Looking at Philippians 1:21-24, how does knowing Christ help us rejoice all the days of our life

### *Application*

8. Many of us can be quite obsessed with health and trying to stay young. What would the teacher make of this?
9. If you're still in your youth, are you enjoying it by remembering the Lord? If your youth has passed, are you able to keep rejoicing in the Lord, or are you stuck in nostalgia for the past?

### *Postscript*

### *Read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14*

What final bit of advice does the author offer about how to take the words and advice of the teacher?

*Ecclesiastes 11:8-12:14*

# Notes and prayer points

*Ecclesiastes 11:8-12:14*

*Ecclesiastes 11:8-12:14*



