

to the gospel, in chapter 3 of *You Must Be Joking* (Hodder).

2. How would you answer someone who said he couldn't believe in God because life is meaningless? Prepare your case.
3. In the face of all the evils mentioned in Ecclesiastes, the Christian still enjoys a life worth living. Why not investigate the richness of life more closely by undertaking a Bible study on the word 'joy', using a concordance?

Now his eyes were afresh opened to see that in his nature and thoughts lay large spaces wherein God ruled not supreme - desert places, where who could tell what might appear? For in such regions wild beasts range, evil herbs flourish, and demons go about. If in very deed he lived and moved and had his being in God, then assuredly there ought not to be one cranny in his nature, one realm of his consciousness, one well-spring of thought, where the will of God was a stranger. If all was as it should be, then surely there would be no moment, looking back on which he could not at least say,

Yet like some sweet beguiling melody,
So sweet, we know not we are listening to it,
Thou, the meanwhile, wast blending with my thought,
Yea, with my life and life's own secret joy.

George MacDonald, *The Marquis of Lossie* (Kegan Paul)

Notes



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Meeting With God Bible Reading Notes

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Week 45: The book of Ecclesiastes (A bird's eye view)

'Wisdom literature', of which Ecclesiastes is an example, was a popular style in Old Testament times. The books of Proverbs and Job are other examples. For us it takes a bit of getting used to because it is not a familiar form. The style seems a little disconnected by our standards. Though 'Wisdom Literature' is ancient, the theme of Ecclesiastes is as poignant as it ever was. Mankind searches for meaning, but without God you are better off never having been born.

Many contemporary writers use this theme, such as Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. Secular writers are not always sure what their lives lack, but they do know that something is missing. As you read Ecclesiastes, bear in mind that the majority of people we meet every day are in this position. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes they are discovering that everything under the sun is meaningless.

Day 1. 'Meaningless! Meaningless!'

Ecclesiastes 1 & 2

Ecclesiastes' - or Qoheleth - translates as 'the Preacher'. Some feel he may have been Solomon. Whoever he was the Preacher limits his scope to a description of life 'under the sun', that is, in the world as man sees it without God. If this was the case, then we would have to agree that his findings are the only ones feasible. But the Christian knows that the apparent meaninglessness of the world contrasts sharply with the abundant life found in Christ, and the new interpretation of reality that he gives us.

1. Write out concisely the author's main theme. To what extent do you agree with the Preacher's promises and conclusions?
2. Why is his enjoyment of pleasure hollow?
3. Note some of the reasons why the pursuit of wisdom fails to satisfy.

Read John 10:10b and use it as the basis of your prayer of thanksgiving that we need not face life alone.

Day 2. From dust to dust

Ecclesiastes 3:1 - 4:12

Man understands the passing of time, but if he cannot see it from the all-important spiritual point of view then it is bleak. Pleasures do not satisfy. Life is full of cruelty and unhappiness, and anything of promise is rendered meaningless by death. Such are the findings of the Preacher.

1. Describe the Preacher's attitude towards (a) the natural world, (b) human history. Does he see any way to escape the endlessly repeated pattern of life?
2. Following on from this, what view of life does he put forward?
3. List the four examples given of the futility of life. To what reflections do these give rise?
4. Loneliness is a terrible plight, but for those who have friends there is much consolation. Write down the ways in which the privilege of friendship helps us as Christians. See Matthew 18:19-20 and Hebrews 10:24-25. You might like to refer back to the study on friendship in the Proverbs series (week 40).

Pray that God will help you seek out someone who is lonely and befriend him or her.

Day 3. In awe of God

Ecclesiastes 4:13 - 6:12

The unrelieved pessimism of the early chapters gives way from now on to advice and teaching. The Preacher believes that wisdom, even though it looks foolish in the eyes of the world, is the only way to live.

1. Make notes on the advice given concerning worship. What is the right spirit in which it should be conducted? Why is it important to fulfil promises?
2. Are you known as a trustworthy person who keeps his or her word? (See Numbers 30:2; Proverbs 11:13; Daniel 6:4.)
3. 'Money isn't everything'. Make a list of the reasons why the Preacher would agree with this saying.

Consider your own attitude to material wealth, praying that God will keep you from envy, always being prepared to help those in need. Ian Coffey's *Pennies for heaven* (Kingsway) is helpful on our responsibilities in handling money.

Day 4. Death - the great leveller?

Ecclesiastes 7:1 - 9:12

The Preacher has found that the most satisfactory way to live is to know that your life comes from God. It is foolish to compare what you have with others as this will breed discontentment.

1. Read chapter 7 and then write down the practical points of wisdom the Preacher gives. What is the guiding principle behind these tips?
2. Then turn to chapter 8:1 - 9:12. How should the fact that no one knows his or her future influence the way he or she lives? See also chapter 11:1-6 and James 4:13-17. What about you?

The Preacher envisages no eternal life beyond death. But we know that death hasn't the same meaning for the righteous and the wicked. The injustices of this life will be dealt with.

3. Read Luke 23:39-43 and 1 Corinthians 15:54-58 and use them to explain what deficiencies there are in the Preacher's Old Testament understanding.

Why not commit 1 Corinthians 15:54-58 to memory? You could write it down on a card or piece of paper and use odd moments today to learn these verses.

Day 5. Fear God

Ecclesiastes 9:13 - 12:14

The Preacher has described life without God realistically. He has shown it for what it is, hollow and purposeless. In this final section he highlights the pivot on which man's life turns — his relationship to God.

1. The Preacher expected too much from wisdom when he tried to base his reasons for living on the pursuit of it. Now he puts it in its right perspective. Make a list of the values of gaining wisdom.
2. Death and old age are gloomy prospects without Christ. Contrast the Preacher's view with that of a Christian's. See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 1 Peter 1:3-5.
3. Reading Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 consider the Preacher's conclusions. How then should we live in the light of these?

'The end of the matter' (12:13-14) ... does bring into full view what has earlier been glimpsed only fitfully and, for the most part, in deep shadow. Now the fear of God emerges as not merely man's duty (that word has been supplied by the translators) but as his very raison d'etre; and the judgment of God has, as it must have, the last word.

Derek Kidner, *Wisdom to Live By* (IVP)

Jesus lives! Praise God that he has provided us with so great a salvation.

Weekend

1. An awareness of the meaningless of life, outside of Christ, is only realistic. Much of modern literature and art portrays a sense of meaninglessness. But for a Christian, pessimism is a state of mind that cannot be defended. Michael Green shows how this topic can be a stumbling block, preventing a response