

YOBL

Year of Biblical Literacy

Week 24: Ecclesiastes

Daily Reading for Week

- Proverbs 22-24, Psalm 5
- Proverbs 25-27, Psalm 6
- Proverbs 28-31, Psalm 7
- Ecclesiastes 1-4, Psalm 8
- Ecclesiastes 5-8, Psalm 9
- Ecclesiastes 9-12, Psalm 10
- Song of Songs 1-4, Psalm 11
- Videos: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

Focus of time together

To hear the unique perspective that Ecclesiastes offers, compare the different world views presented to us in the Wisdom Literature, and receive Ecclesiastes' invitation to reflect on our life and death.

Connecting Exercise

In one minute, share a time in your life that felt particularly meaningful or meaningless.

Opening Prayer

Read Psalm 90 together.

Intro to Discussion

If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

- Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:32.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most confounding and strange books in the entire Bible. It's constant refrain of "meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless" seems to stand in contrast to the rest of the narrative of Scripture (which suggests that humanity was created by a loving God for a purpose, and the things we do in this life deeply matter). What are we to make then of such a different perspective and odd book as Ecclesiastes?

There are two distinct voices in Ecclesiastes: Qohelet, which is typically translated as "Teacher," whose teachings are presented in Ecclesiastes 1:12-12:7, and a second wise man who introduces Qohelet's teachings at the beginning (1:1-11) and offers comments

at the end (12:8-14). The thrust of Qohelet's teaching can be summed up by the verse from 1 Corinthians. Basically, life is hard and then you die, so carpe diem, because death will swallow the wise and the foolish alike. Yes, there are better ways to live than others, and we should be aware that God gave us life and He rules the universe, but ultimately we all will die. It is a shockingly nihilistic sentiment. Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at UC Berkeley, suggests Qohelet is a "literary persona of a radical philosopher articulating... a powerful dissent from the mainline Wisdom outlook that is the background of his thought."

Qohelet's famous opening words "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless" are regularly repeated and eventually close his teachings, and they beautifully encapsulate his message. In Hebrew, the word translated "meaningless" is "hevel" and literally refers to the thin, flimsy vapour that comes out of your mouth on a cold or foggy day before immediately disappearing. "Hevel" stands in contrast to the Hebrew word "ruah" or life-breath, the eternal substance that God breathed into humanity in Genesis 1-2. Qohelet's suggestion is that not only is life meaningless but it is insubstantial, elusive, and ultimately quickly forgotten. True, there is some temporary meaning and substance to life, but as the beautiful and haunting Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 poetically suggests, God gifts us with a short, fleeting life. Our bodies will decay and we will grow old and die. This leaves us with an interesting dilemma. Are we to take Qohelet's message at face value and live as if life is ultimately meaningless? Do we hold his teachings alongside the other wisdom literature as well as the prophets and Torah which suggest that our lives are not insubstantial "hevel" but that God has breathed his "ruah" into humanity and given us a purpose? Much of your interpretation of Ecclesiastes will depend on how you view the closing verses of the book.

In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, we find another wise man (NOT Qohelet) suggesting to his son,

*Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.*

Some scholars believe this closing section is a pious attempt to deflect readers from the potentially uncomfortable skepticism and nihilism consistently repeated throughout the book. Other scholars, believe this section at the end of book is the ultimate message of Ecclesiastes. Yes, life is hard and yes, you will die. In light of this, fear God and keep his commandments. Regardless of how you interpret its closing, Ecclesiastes is a beautifully original book that invites us into deep contemplation about God, life, purpose, meaning, reality, and our place in it.

Whole Group Discussion (40 minutes)

Questions for Basic Understanding

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

1. Think back to the other Wisdom Literature books we have read:
 - a. As a group, try to sum up Job's message/perspective.
 - b. Next, sum up the message/perspective of the Proverbs.
 - c. Finally, have someone sum up the message/perspective of Ecclesiastes.
2. Why do you think these three different perspectives are presented alongside each other in the Old Testament?

Questions for Listening to Scripture

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. When you hear Qohelet's repeated refrain of "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless!" how do you respond?
2. Ecclesiastes, and especially the beautiful poem about dying in chapter 12, invite readers to reflect on the seeming futility of life and inevitability of death. How might thinking about these things invite us into interaction and dialogue with God?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. When you read Ecclesiastes, do you find its nihilism depressing, strangely comforting, or both?
2. How might "meaningless, meaningless" coexist with the rest of the story of Scripture, which says our lives are deeply meaningful to God? How have you seen this tension lived out as you reflect on your own life?

Small Group Discussion

Questions for Self Examination

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware of who we are in the light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.

1. Sit for 3-5 minutes in silent prayer. Reflect on the events of your whole life.
 - a. For what are you grateful?
 - b. What would you hope would have been true of your life?
 - c. What do you wish you had done differently?
 - d. How can this influence the time that lies ahead of you still? .
2. Does the Book of Ecclesiastes offer you anything as you imagine these things?
3. Share your responses with one another.

Closing Prayer

End your time together by offering a prayer that confides in God about aspects of life that feel meaningless. But also in your prayer, seek to articulate hope, bringing to God the things from your small-group reflection time which you hope will be true of your life.

For example: "God, I acknowledge the way ____ feels meaningless, and I turn to you in hope for beauty and purpose in ____."