

The surprising book of

Ecclesiastes

Ancient life advice with a modern edge

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1. INTRODUCTION

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem...

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

Book of Ecclesiastes Chapters 1, 12

Meet your new teacher.

No, not me! (Alison Lloyd, 21st century writer.) What you're looking at here is the translation of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Written centuries ago in the Ancient Middle East, it has since been incorporated into the Old Testament of the Bible. The book begins by introducing its author. The sections we're reading today are editor's notes, which give context. They tell us the author is the convener of an assembly — *ecclesiastes* in Greek, hence the name of the book. He's not a priest, but more of a public speaker who 'taught the people knowledge'. And he's not just anybody, but 'king in Jerusalem', a descendent of David. (That's what 'son of' tends to mean in the He-

brew Bible). He could well be Solomon, David's actual son, although he doesn't identify himself by name. As usual, there's academic debate about the author's identity, but I think that Solomon fits the profile. The author gives the impression, as you'll see, of a very wealthy man, powerful and relatively secure.

He's also a great intellectual. He thinks comprehensively about ideas. He values both beautiful writing and a sound message — style and content. (I love this!)

More than informed, he is wise. In the Old Testament, the idea of wisdom is generally about more than knowing facts. Wisdom understands the moral structure of the universe, and how to live in line with it. Wise words, from the Bible's point of view, are a gift from the Shepherd guarding His people. The king is convinced the right words can hammer truth home and make it stick in our hearts. Or drive us to action — that's what a goad does.

Imagine: one morning the king is in his palace, looking out across the valleys around Jerusalem, which are shrouded in mist. He's thinking about his day ahead — the gathering of nobles and heads of families. He knows he's getting older and his reign is drawing to a close. What will he say to them?

That's what we'll start looking at tomorrow. For today, be reassured. There are a lot of words out in the world, but with a lifetime of experience behind him, this guy has put thought into saying something worthwhile, for you too.

A note about the text of Ecclesiastes:

1. The Book of Ecclesiastes was written in Hebrew. The translation given here is drawn from a couple of mainstream, well-regarded versions - the ESV, the NIV and the CSB. Why a couple? Because as a philosophical and poetic book, Ecclesiastes has words that are really hard to translate into one English expression. I'm not a fluent Hebrew speaker, but I have done several semesters of Biblical Hebrew, so I can work through the original for myself.

I've taken out the verse numbers that you'll find if you open a modern Bible. They're useful for navigation, but they weren't part of the original and sometimes they get in the way of a smooth read.

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2. The Meaning of Life is not 42

Yesterday you were introduced to the royal author of this book. So what does he have to say, in summing up life? Maybe not what you think:

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem:

‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’

What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains for ever. 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.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Wow. Bet you didn't think the Bible was going to say that. Sounds kind of post-modern, almost.

This poem is like the first bars of Beethoven's 5th Symphony — dramatic, devastating, full on. The teacher is going to address nothing less than the meaning of life. He opens with his conclusion. Our life on earth — 'under the sun' — is 'meaningless'. Or futile, or vanity, depending on the translation. It's really useful to know that the Hebrew word here means a vapor, a mist, something insubstantial, in vain, useless, pointless. It can even mean an idol, a manufactured god, suggesting they are worthless and untrustworthy too. Human life, he's saying, is smoke and mirrors. 'The vanity of vanities'. We're here and then we're gone, like water flowing into the sea. Another generation replaces us, only to go through the same cycle.

We like to believe in progress. We are impressed by our technologies. In the author's time people had already built cities and pyramids, developed writing, harnessed horses, and smelted iron. Yet those major developments didn't impress him enough to change his view. The inventors were already gone and forgotten. Social progress does not save us from our individual fate.

If you find this passage depressing — and who wouldn't? — remember it isn't the end of the book. But don't brush it aside, I suggest. Let this sober assessment sink in. Have you been placing too much hope in the vain, unreliable things of the world? Is it time to reassess?

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3. Take it from Me

Our teacher wasn't a monk. He really knew how to live it up.

I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens... I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.' But that also proved to be meaningless. 'Laughter,' I said, 'is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?' I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-13, 2:2-10

After introducing himself and his theme, the author now speaks of how he's lived, and how he's learnt from experience. As king over a peaceful, prosperous nation, he is uniquely placed. He has lived a mega-rich, celebrity lifestyle. He is an autocrat, the billionaire of his day. Whatever his eyes desired, he got — wine, women, wealth, music and entertainment, real estate and servants. He denied himself nothing. So his first life lesson? Pleasure is pointless.

The king didn't only indulge his senses. He pursued professional dreams, undertaking ambitious building and agricultural projects. His second lesson is more subtle: personal achievements feel satisfying at the time, like physical pleasure, but ultimately they too are 'a striving after the wind.'

These are challenging words for me. I was brought up to do well in school and university, to work hard for gold stars and honours and career advancement. I've got certificates and books to measure the progress of my life. But Ecclesiastes shakes the foundations of my self-built castles in the air.

What point are you at? Are you launching out into the heady freedoms of adulthood? Are you in the middle of your productive years, flat out between work and home? Or maybe winding down? Do you wish you had privileges and achievements like the king's? Hear his voice of experience — these momentary things aren't worth your envy. Chasing after them is like trying to catch the wind.

You might have noticed Ecclesiastes is not a logical argument. It's more like a very poetic TED talk, or a long soliloquy. The teacher's thoughts shift around like the winds we read about yesterday. He digresses, then returns to repeated themes — much as our own perspectives shift across our lives or with our moods. (Note that because of the book's unique structure, I sometimes skip verses, and link passages. Of course you can read the whole book for yourself, beginning to end. Here's [one online source](#) .)

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4. Life can Drive you Mad

I said to myself, ‘Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.’ ...

With much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly... I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realise that the same fate overtakes them both.

Then I said to myself,

‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?’ I said to myself, ‘This too is meaningless.’ For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die!

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:16,18; 2:11-17


In the previous extract, the teacher dismissed pleasure as useless. In this passage, he reviews the pursuit of learning. He tells us he’s been successful

in accumulating both factual knowledge and discernment. This is sometimes painful and hard won. Nevertheless wisdom is clearly good, he says, like being able to see where you're going is good.

But in the end, what's the use? You might have two PhDs, a Nobel prize and five languages under your belt. Or you might not. Either way, the final outcome is the same. 'In the long run, we are all dead,' as the economist Keynes said. Keynes' point was that governments should intervene to help people in the short run. The author of Ecclesiastes, in contrast, sees that the smartest of our short run interventions don't change the bigger, more important, picture of our final destiny.

Our society places a high value on education and skills. This passage doesn't offer an excuse for not studying — 'the fool walks in darkness'! But it also cautions us against being over-confident in our knowledge. And it offers empathy when our efforts feel pointless or our results are disappointing. The teacher is not a 'don't worry, be happy' guy. The fact that even his wisdom doesn't last, or seem to matter like he feels it should, is grievous to him.

In the next section the teacher breaks into poetry, and if you're old enough to remember Pete Seeger, the words will be familiar...



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5. What Season are you in?

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

Yes, Pete Seeger and the Byrds got the words for 'Turn, Turn, Turn' from

Ecclesiastes. (If you don't remember the 1960s song, [this is it.](#))

In this section, the teacher has broken into poetry again. Our lives move through seasons, and switch from one extreme to another. Life under heaven is full of contrasts. We weep, we laugh, we mourn, we dance, we pull apart, we put together. The repetitions of words and structure reinforce his message — change and the march of time are inexorable.

Some of what we experience is very good. God has made everything beautiful in its time. This is one of my favourite quotes from the Bible.

It's a wonderful, proud thing, for example, to take your kid for their first day at school. But it can also be scary for the child, and painful for the parents. When it was my turn, I realised that school meant the beginning of my sons' independence. An intimate relationship was starting to loosen. That intense and wonderful early childhood bond doesn't last forever. There's a season for everything.

No matter what season you're in, no earthly thing lasts, good or bad. But how we wish they would. Our hearts have this notion of eternity, put there by God, the teacher argues. We don't understand everything beginning to end, yet we can't help longing for good things to be permanent. It can be tough, living with this loss and longing.

The beauty of Ecclesiastes, for me, is its unflinching recognition of this tension. It points us toward a missing, eternal, piece of the puzzle, that only God has to give.

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6. Life is not Fair

And I saw something else under the sun:

in the place of judgment – wickedness was there, in the place of justice – wickedness was there.

I said to myself,

‘God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed.’

I also said to myself, ‘As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: as one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?’

So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed – and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors – and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

The previous section focussed on the natural cycles of life. But it's not just those that cause us grief. In today's excerpt, the writer is perhaps thinking about issues he's had to deal with as a king. He sees that in the very place where justice should be given — e.g. by the courts or law enforcement — there is corruption and wrong. Where there should be uprightness — maybe in the temple or an assembly of elders — there is wickedness. Human institutions are prone to failure and oppression.

The teacher assures himself that God will judge eventually. Nobody gets away with something forever, because we aren't immortal. Our flesh and blood is temporary, as he has commented before. (A note on his viewpoint: Ecclesiastes doesn't know what happens to the human spirit after death. The author sees himself as one in a line of wisdom writers, and later Biblical authors have more to say. The resurrection of Jesus in particular is a gamechanger.)

The teacher can't dismiss the atrocities and abuses that he knows happen. The evil done by human beings to one another is so distressing, it seems unbearable to him. It's shocking to say people might be better off dead, than see evil. Yet some victims of war and oppression around the world might agree with him.

What can we take from this bleak passage? Firstly, Ecclesiastes does not paper over harm or suffering. It recognises that injustice is a truly horrible thing.

Also, for the author, the existence of evil certainly does not mean God is distant, or dead. Again, I think it points to the need for somebody beyond this world, to see that things are set right.

Next, Ecclesiastes turns to the relatable, everyday topic of work, and what it shows us about the purpose of life.

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7. Is Work a Bad Thing?

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour. This also is vanity and striving after the wind.

The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after the wind...

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil...

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6, 9; 5:10-20


Work dominates our daily lives. And this quote. The author of Ecclesiastes is very interested in this practical subject. ‘Profit’ or ‘value’ is one of his main themes. After his poem about life seasons (see 5: ‘What season are you in?’), he asked, ‘What gain has the worker from his toil?’

Not as much as we imagine. Rich people aren’t satisfied with their income. Their wealth and responsibilities add complications and stress. The struggle for a living can cause frustration, sickness and anger. Fortunes can be lost as well as won. You can’t take it with you when you die. Being driven and work-obsessed is chasing the wind.

And yet work is from God, the teacher says. It’s something He has given us to be busy with. The teacher is not suggesting that we disengage from life or the economy. Laziness (folding the hands) leads to loss. Working in a team is more rewarding than working alone. It is possible to find enjoyment in our labour and that is a good thing. Such satisfaction is God-given.

This passage is not saying employment, achievement or income is a measure of your worth. But it does mean you should go ahead and be happy when your veggie garden is productive! Or when you solve a problem in your workplace, or if you like your workmates, or you can afford a home or holiday for your family, or you make a client’s life better.

Even if you can’t do much, or you’re underpaid, you can be thankful for the everyday gift of work.



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8. How to Approach Spirituality

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfil it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfil your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfil it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, ‘My vow was a mistake.’ Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

In Chapter 5 Ecclesiastes changes focus. The teacher has been thinking about human pursuits and human society — the things that keep us busy and bothered but are all ‘vanity’. Now he turns to the question of how we relate to God while we’re here on earth. His answer? Carefully. With respect and humility. Don’t be casual with God. He is in a different league.

After everything the teacher has concluded so far, this is actually good news. Because unlike everything on the earth, including ourselves, God is not tainted with ‘vanity’. He is not insubstantial, changeable, unreliable or worthless.

God’s heavenly, eternal nature has consequences for us. God alone is to be feared and revered. So don’t offer him empty promises. A lot of slick talking and salesmanship goes on in this world, probably more now than in the teacher’s time. Advertising hype is everywhere we turn. There’s a popular theory that if you ‘manifest’ your

goal by dreaming and talking about it enough, it will happen. But don't think God will buy our spin. A fool's voice comes with many words, and God has no pleasure in fools.

Have you ever presumed on God, perhaps by treating Him as a kind of department store to get what you want? That's foolish and evil. Have you ever promised Him something, and then not followed through? That's vanity. Take what steps you can to fix it, or maybe offer an apology.

And keep reading, even through the less encouraging parts of this book, for a different perspective.

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9. Facing the ‘Worst of Times’

**A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.**

**It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart.**

**Frustration is better than laughter,
because a sad face is good for the heart.**

**The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.**

**It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person
than to listen to the song of fools.**

**Like the crackling of thorns under the pot,
so is the laughter of fools.**

This too is meaningless.

**Extortion turns a wise person into a fool,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.**

**The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.**

**Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,
for anger resides in the lap of fools.**

Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?”

**For it is not wise to ask such questions.
Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing
and benefits those who see the sun. Consider what God has
done:
Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?
When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider this:
God has made the one
as well as the other.
so no one can discover
anything about their future.
Wisdom is a shelter
as money is a shelter,
but the advantage of knowledge is this:
Wisdom preserves those who have it.**

In Chapter 6, which I've skipped over, the teacher observes more 'evil under the sun'. He sees people who are rich, respected and long-lived, but still dissatisfied. He paints a confusing and disillusioning picture. God sometimes makes our lives 'crooked', and it is beyond us to straighten them out. Here in chapter 7, he considers: how do we cope when life takes a turn for the worse?

The proverbs he quotes give surprising answers. His advice is poles apart from 'don't worry; be happy'. Essentially, he says sadness is good for our hearts. Funerals make us think. He recognises that injustice impacts our hearts negatively, but he advises against nostalgia for a better past, or letting anger take a hold. What is good and helpful in hard circumstances, is patience and a wise perspective. There's no escaping it — God does hand out good days and bad, adversity as well as prosperity. We don't know what's coming next. We have to acknowledge we are not in control.

Are you facing difficult and perplexing times? Don't be shocked. Troubles have been our common human experience for millennia, as we can see from this book. Let trouble rock your faith in yourself, or in humanity, but don't let it rock your faith in God.

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10. A Good Man is Hard to Find

In my futile life I have seen everything: someone righteous perishes in spite of his righteousness, and someone wicked lives long in spite of his evil. Don't be excessively righteous, and don't be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Don't be excessively wicked, and don't be foolish. Why should you die before your time?

Wisdom makes the wise person stronger than ten rulers of a city. There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins...

I have tested all this by wisdom. I resolved, "I will be wise," but it was beyond me. What exists is beyond reach and very deep. Who can discover it? I turned my thoughts to know, explore, and examine wisdom and an explanation for things, and to know that wickedness is stupidity and folly is madness. And I find more bitter than death the woman who is a trap: her heart a net and her hands chains. The one who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner will be captured by her. "Look," says the Teacher, "I have discovered this by adding one thing to another to find out the explanation, which my soul continually searches for but does not find: I found one person in a thousand, but none of those was a woman. Only see this: I have discovered that God made people upright, but they pursued many schemes."

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

The teacher has observed before that the world is unfair (Day 6), and here is another example. Some people get killed for their uprightness, while other people's wickedness gets them off the hook. Yet, when the teacher thinks about it again, there's actually nobody on earth who is always righteous and never does anything wrong. Strangely enough for a Bible book, you might think, the writer doesn't think aiming for excessive righteousness is particularly achievable or constructive.

This applies to women too, who can be just as devious and destructive as men. I don't think he is being misogynist here, since he's including women in the same flawed condition as men. We're all made upright, but we turn out bent. This state of affairs is more inexplicable vanity.

Then we come to this strange statement: 'One man among a thousand I found.' What did he mean? I don't know. This verse isn't quoted or commented on by later Biblical books. But it did get me thinking about Jesus. I thought that Christ's life and death were in some ways the ultimate example of the 'vanity' and futility Ecclesiastes talks about. Jesus accumulated no wealth and left nothing material; he was righteous, but he was punished with criminals. He came into this perplexing, often grievous world, suffered the worst of it, and copped our usual fate.

But now I'm getting rather ahead of Ecclesiastes. Next he's back with some solid practical advice.

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11. Keeping Your Head in Politics

Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance.

Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, 'What are you doing?'

Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a person may be weighed down by misery.

Since no one knows the future, who can tell someone else what is to come? As no one has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the time of their death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practise it.

All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt.

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labour that is done on earth – people getting no sleep day or night – then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it.

Ecclesiastes 8:2-9, 16-17

Here in the eighth chapter, the book of Ecclesiastes talks about the world of politics and power. Remember this advice is coming from a king himself! I sense a touch of irony and exasperation in his words.

The author says to do what you're ordered. Firstly, because you swore you would, to God no less. Secondly, it's safer, because the king holds power over you — his word is supreme. The king adds, don't join in a bad cause. Don't rush to escape your ruler and your responsibilities.

Most of us don't have direct contact with heads of government. But we could bring this principle to the level of our daily lives. For example, you may be discontented with your boss. An incident might tempt you to spit the dummy and throw in the towel on the spot. That's not wise, says the teacher, because there's a time for everything, even if your trouble lies heavy on you while you wait.

Eventually his observations of the political world cause him to wax philosophical again. Business and politics and human striving are ceaseless. But we should keep them in context. Political power is limited, and so is wisdom. To use former US Secretary of State Rumsfeld's words, there's a realm of 'known unknowns', and there's the 'unknown unknowns' beyond. Be wary of schemes of any political persuasion, that promise comprehensive answers and idyllic futures.

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12. Let the Good Times Roll

And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

He who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in the realm of the dead, where you are going.

Ecclesiastes 8:15, 9:4-10

Were you beginning to wonder if the teacher is clinically depressed? Here a lighter,

more pragmatic note comes to the fore. He recommends enjoyment — hooray!

Sadness, as we've seen, is an appropriate response to the futility and frustration of this world. But when you have the opportunity, enjoy yourself. It is better to be alive than dead, isn't it? There's always hope. After all, you only know all this bleak stuff about impending death because you're actually alive! (Yes, there is humour in the Bible, although this is rather black.)

So don't slouch about miserably in dirty clothes, smelly and unkempt. Love your spouse and enjoy their company — they are your portion, your share of the good life. God gives you enjoyment to balance out your toil. He approves of you eating, drinking, working and living to the full, while you can.

Does this contradict what we've read earlier, about the 'vanity' of our lives? Is the teacher saying 'eat, drink and be merry' and don't give a stuff about anything else? No, not exactly. He's still deadly serious about our inescapable fate and expects us to be too. But life is nevertheless a gift, and we're meant to like it.

The surprising book of

Ecclesiastes

Ancient life advice with a modern edge

13. Take Risks

Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-8

I've skipped Chapter 10, which contains many examples of the destructive power of wickedness and folly. It seems to be proving the point made in Chapter 9 that 'one sinner destroys much good.'

So, if there's so much bad stuff and stupidity about, perhaps we should disengage from the world as much as possible? Should we bunker down and not bother with

work or business or society, because everything is likely to go pear-shaped anyway?

No, the teacher tells us in this chapter. The opening line - 'cast your bread upon the waters' - reminds me of feeding ducks. But it's more likely a commercial metaphor, from the world of trade. Ship your wheat, your hard-earned dough (to use a modern expression), out onto the tumultuous ocean. Diversify your ventures. Because the world is full of uncertainty and God has not given you a crystal ball. If you spend your time trying to predict the weather, or the economy, or any of the myriad obstacles that might fall your way, fear will paralyse you.

Haven't we all been there? We can't decide — should I invest my super in the growth option or the conservative option? Should I donate to this charity's drive or the other's? At a relationship level, should I go out of my way for the neighbour or class-mate who rebuffed me last week?

If even Credit Suisse can go under, we might ask ourselves, where can I find a safe return? The answer seems to be that nowhere is guaranteed safe. (If you've read all the Ecclesiastes text to this point, you were probably expecting that!) Even reputable charities, churches and financial institutions make sub-optimal decisions about money. Bad outcomes are going to happen sometimes. We can't control where the tree falls. But if we take some risks and keep at it, there will be returns from somewhere.

The section concludes with a reminder to be positive and appreciate the good things in life. 'Light is sweet'. They are also a kind of bridge. They take us toward darkness, and the final poem of Chapter 12. We'll look at that tomorrow. Until then, have you got bread to share around? What seed can you sow that might prosper?

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14. The End

**You who are young, be happy while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you into judgment.
Banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigour are meaningless.
Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
'I find no pleasure in them'—
before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;
when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;**

**when people are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags itself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.
Remember him – before the silver cord is severed,
and the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the
ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave
it.**

**‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Everything is
meaningless!’**

Ecclesiastes has been quite a read. You've reached the final passage!

In the teacher's concluding thoughts, we come to ‘the burnt out end of smoky days’, to use the words of poet T.S. Eliot.

The teacher anticipates bad days, and even years, are coming. Many consider this passage to be a series of metaphors about old age. The arms/keepers tremble, the legs/strong men are bent, the teeth/grinders cease, the hair is white like almond blossom, the eyes/windows are dimmed. A person's life is like a precious light, hanging in a golden bowl, by a silver thread. It burns until the thread snaps and the bowl crashes to the ground, like the chandelier in Phantom of the Opera.

Other people say these verses are a portrayal of a ruined house, or a community devastated by disaster. Normal daily life has shut down, and the few remaining people are afraid to go out on the streets. The teacher was a masterful writer, so I think that, as poetry, this passage can work on different levels at once, referring to both individuals and societies.

The force of his words is the same — deterioration and decline give way to destruction. Body/buildings return to the earth and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Our lives and our doings are a mist, an illusion of solidity, a vanity that vanishes.

How very sad. Yes, I think we are meant to feel the ache of this. It is a tragedy that the world God made to be good (according to the Book of Genesis) is subjected to

this frustration.

‘Meaningless. Meaningless.’ ‘Vanity of vanities.’ The last words of the teacher takes us back to the opening. We’ve come around again, like the shifting wind.

Even the book’s structure reflects his point. Such powerful writing.

But was it all pointless? What do you think?

I say no. I am very thankful that we have such an unsentimental, probing, philosophical book within the Bible. Ecclesiastes is a bitter medicine. It debunks many of our illusions about our control and our abilities. It works like a detox on our hearts. Its scathing assessments are a radical corrective to some fond worldly dreams. If we are searching for real, lasting value, Ecclesiastes tells us it’s not to be found in human life on earth. We must look to God, in heaven. Fear him and heed him only. Don’t wait until you’re on death’s door to wake up to this. Remember your Creator while you’re young and strong.

What about you? Good on you for sticking with Ecclesiastes this far. What did you get out of reading it?