


# The Book of Ecclesiastes: The Meaningless and Mundane of Life

# TALKING WALKINGPOINTS

## Leaders' Guide

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A publication of , the adult discipleship ministry of Triangle Community Church

**Talk** together about the glory of God's kingdom. –Psalm 145:11  
Love the Lord your God and **walk** in all his ways. –Joshua 22:5

## Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- 1 What from Sunday's message interested you? ...made sense to you? ...confused you? ...intrigued you? ...upset you? ...encouraged you? ...and **why**?
- 2 How often, if ever, do you feel like life, and all your labors, are meaningless? Mark this scale...  
●-----●  
Never Rarely Often Always
- 3 What sorts of experiences increase your sense that "*vanity of vanities, all is vanity!*"?
- 4 • Open your Bible to Psalm 90, and let's discover God's help for human transitoriness.  
From v. 1-6, mark all of the words and phrases which refer to segments of time. What do you observe?
- 5 If humans had not sinned, we would have lived forever (Genesis 1-3). But we did, and so we die (2:17). Read Psalm 90:7-12. According to v. 7, 9 & 11, what emotion in God accounts for our transitoriness?
- 6 In light of this situation, the psalmist makes six requests in v. 12-17. Let's explore them one by one.
  - 7 In v. 12, he links a realization of man's transitoriness with gaining wisdom. How does that work?
  - 8 In v. 13, he asks for God to show pity to us, his servants. How would that help?
  - 9 In v. 14, he asks to be satisfied with God's lovingkindness. How does that bring joy in sorrow?
  - 10 In v. 15, he asks for gladness in proportion to his degree of affliction. What might that look like?
  - 11 In v. 16, he asks to see God's work in the world, and God's majesty. How would that help?
  - 12 In v. 17, he asks God to make our work in this world permanent, even though we ourselves are temporary. What "eternal works" do you think "transitory people" are able to do?
- 12 Are you doing any of those eternal works? Which ones should you do more of? How can we help?

- 1 Don't spend too much time on this generic "starter question"—there's a lot of meaty, soul-reflection in the remaining questions. Just use it to get the ball rolling on the discussion.
- 2 **Say:** "Let's each take one minute of prayerful reflection to mark the following chart. Please be honest—you don't have to share your answer with us." **Then, have everyone mark it.**
- 3 You likely will need to "prime the pump", so be prepared with your own answer to this question. (But wait for others to think and answer. Check your watch—20 seconds feels like an eternity!)  
Note: This question asks what "merely increases" the sense of futility—not that drives one to despair. Folks may struggle to answer this question if they've never been driven to despair, but everyone has the sense of "**Oh, what's the use!**" from time to time. If folks raise the bar impossibly high on this question it will make it difficult for folks with "sunny dispositions" to answer it. But you'd like to hear from everyone.
- 4 **Possible answers include:**
  - "all generations" (v. 1)
  - "Before" and "from everlasting to everlasting" (v. 2)
  - "years", "yesterday", and "a watch in the night" (v. 4)
  - "morning" (v. 5)
  - "morning" and "evening" (v. 6)
  - 5
    - "anger" and "wrath" (v. 7)
    - "fury" (v. 9)
    - "anger" and "fury" (v. 11)
- 6 (v. 12) Realizing how temporary we are will help us get over our foolishness.
- 7 (v. 13) We need God's presence and involvement in this difficult life.
- 8 (v. 14) God's lovingkindness = his covenant loyalty, which brings joy in sorrow.
- 9 (v. 15) Have folks think through what amount of comfort would be sufficient to ease this life's pain.
- 10 (v. 16) When we see that God is active in this world of sorrows, we know that he's aware and involved.
- 11 (v. 17) 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 is very helpful here. It shows that believers (those who have Christ as their foundation, v. 11), must be careful how we "build on that foundation" (ie, what kinds of things we do as Christians, v. 10). Worldliness = "wood, hay and straw", which is burnt up in the judgment, and leads to loss of heavenly reward. Godly living = "gold, silver and precious stones", which endure God's judgment, and leads to heavenly reward. Genuine believers themselves will (by God's grace) endure the judgement themselves (v. 15b; cf. Romans 8:1). **So, what types of deeds are "wood, hay, straw"?** The context (1 Corinthians 3:1-4) shows us: "fleshly living", "infantile faith", "inability to receive mature teaching (solid food)", "jealousy and strife". **And, what types of deeds are "gold, silver, precious stones"?** The context (1 Corinthians 3:6) shows us: "planting spiritual seeds" and "watering (promoting) spiritual growth".
- 12 You likely will need to "prime the pump", so be prepared with your own answer to this question. (But wait for others to think and answer. Check your watch—20 seconds feels like an eternity!)

## Sermon Summary Key Text: Ecclesiastes

For some time I've been pondering over the book of Ecclesiastes. It is an intriguing book that is difficult to get a handle on. But I kept plugging away at it. For me, the book was like a magnet, drawing me back to it, again and again and again. Little by little, I began to grasp its message. This "Preacher" (1:1) says that his words are like goads that will move us towards God. They are like tent pegs that will hold us fast in the storms of life. What is more, they were given by the Shepherd of heaven (12:9–11)! If we take the preacher's word at face value, he says that there is in this book a kind of truth that can hold us stable, a kind of truth that can move us towards God. So, what is his message? Although Ecclesiastes is a difficult book, we should approach it in the same way we read any other book: first read the preface, then the conclusion, and finally, look for its major emphasis.

**I. The Preface to Ecclesiastes** "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). Life is futile. Life is meaningless.

**II. The Conclusion to Ecclesiastes** "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (12:13–14 cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10).

**III. The Emphasis of Ecclesiastes** Consider, for example:

- "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his **labor is good**. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God." (2:24)
- "I know that there is nothing better for them than to **rejoice and to do good** in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees **good in all his labor—it is the gift of God**." (3:12–13)
- "I have seen that nothing is better than that man should **be happy in his activities**, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?" (3:22)
- "Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and **enjoy oneself in all one's labor** in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which **God has given him; for this is his reward**." (5:18)
- "So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to **eat and to drink and to be merry**, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which **God has given him under the sun**." (8:15)
- "Go then, eat your bread in **happiness** and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for **God has already approved your works**. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head." (9:7–8)

The message of Ecclesiastes is: "Life is vain, futile, meaningless, so eat, drink and be merry, while fearing God and keeping his commandments." But note carefully: when Ecclesiastes says this, it does not mean that it is not worth living. It **does** mean that, try as we will, we never can figure life out. God is the keeper of that key, and he doesn't give it to men and women (3:11). We **want** to see the big picture—how everything fits together (7:14). When life tumbles in on itself, when things go awry, we scratch our heads and ask "Why?" That's perfectly understandable. But try as we might, we simply can't put it all together. We can't untangle the mystery which is life (6:1-2).

Back when Susan and I were younger, we couldn't afford to dine out and eat all the things we love—things like prime rib and lobster and cheese cake. But now that we can afford it, we really shouldn't—or even can't!—eat those things! (When you become a little more established and can afford most anything on the menu, you still can't eat it because your teeth won't chew it, or your cholesterol won't allow it, or your digestive tract can't handle it!) Life is vanity! I once asked my accountant for a success formula that I might apply. He said, "Doug, I've discovered that some of the stupidest people are among the wealthiest, and some of the shrewdest have gone bankrupt" (6:1-2; 9:11).

But the thing that makes life most difficult is the reality of death. It comes to all, whether wise or foolish (2:14-15). Death keeps such a sloppy appointment book. "You just can't figure it out," says Ecclesiastes. It doesn't matter how devout you are, or to what you've devoted your life—in a generation or two, no one will even remember your name! You will be forgotten. If you've never considered that, you haven't

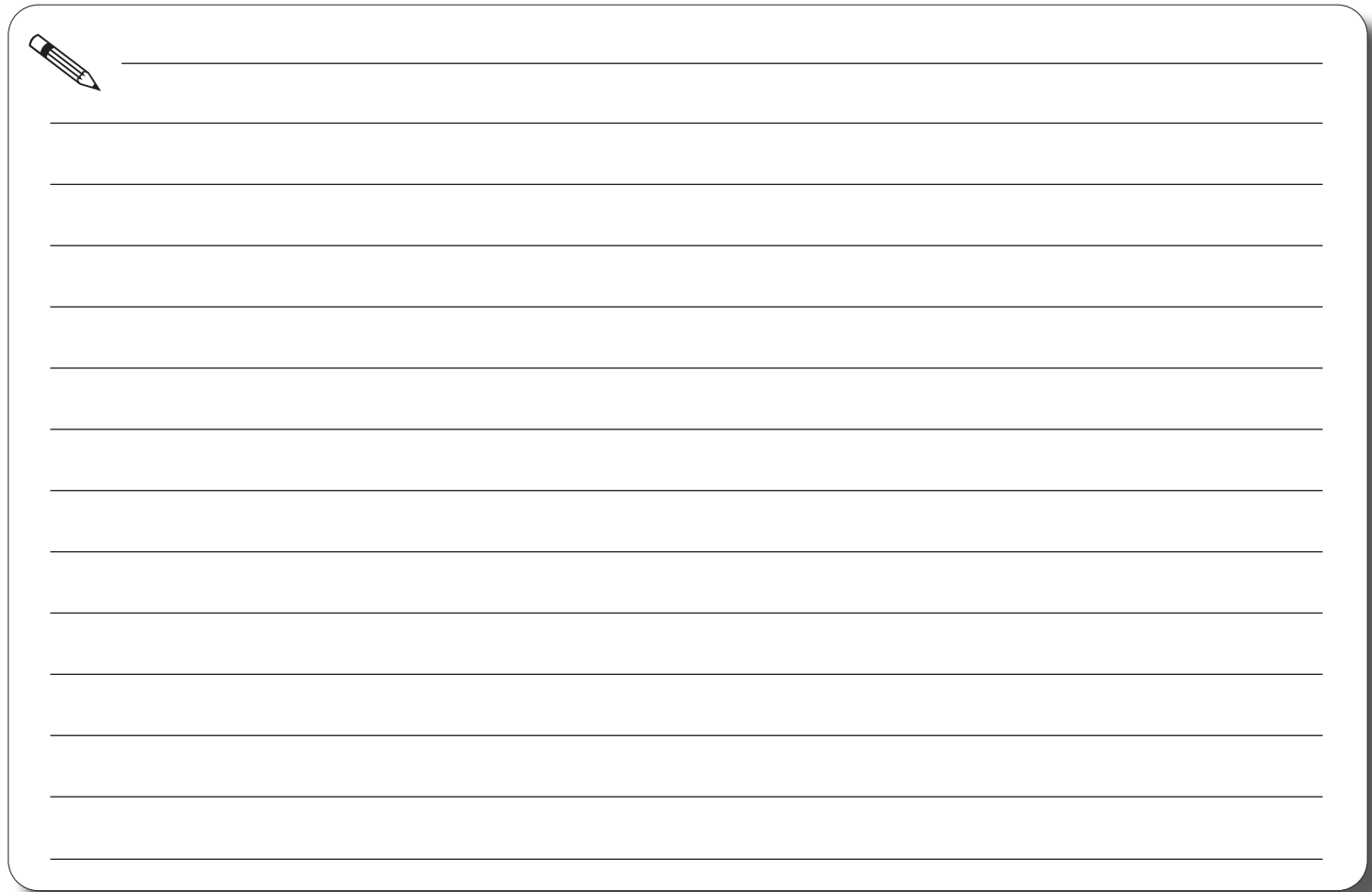
thought deeply enough. Many people have considered this fact and as a result, have chosen suicide. The cycles of nature suggest vanity (1:5-7), as do science (1:10), history (1:11), and philosophy (1:18). Wise people know the world is bankrupt—they just don't have the ability to fix it! What **do** you do when you face the futility of life? Do you live it up, do you give up, or do you look up? Look up, and see that...

**God is Sovereign** The preacher in Ecclesiastes is not a cynic; he's no skeptic. He's a realist and he's a person of faith. He believes that God is sovereign, and believing that allows us to live **with** mystery (3:11). God is in control (7:14). We don't know life's plot line, but God does. Not only is God's eye over history, his hand is **on** it!

**God is Good** Knowing this allows us to enjoy life—whether we see his goodness or not (3:12-13 & 5:19). God gives you work to fill your days. Whatever your job is—in the home or outside it—trust that your work matters. Being busy is far better than having nothing to do. And—enjoy your life! In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, it's not just a shame not to enjoy life; it's a sin not to enjoy it! Whatever comes to you from the hand of a good God, enter into it with thanksgiving.

Ecclesiastes sums everything up this way: “Live life to the hilt. Enjoy it! But live it responsibly, because you and I will give an account to God for how we have conducted ourselves in this life that he has given us to live.” We will give an account for the good we could have enjoyed, and refused to enjoy. We will also give an account to God for the good we could have done and refused to do.

Remember: God is God, and he doesn't owe us an explanation! He simply gives us Himself, and with that, every good and perfect gift for us to enjoy! You can know that in the face of all the perplexities and vanities of life, you can trust the sovereign, good, and righteous God to be with you, and to love and care for you. And with that faith you can trust what you cannot trace. You can step where you cannot see. You can undergo what you may never understand.



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## Digging Deeper in Your Daily Quiet Time

It has been said, ***"You cannot kill time without injuring eternity. Every act should be performed as though all eternity depended on it."***

This week, let's meditate on and memorize Psalm 90.

**Monday**— Write Psalm 90:1-2 on a 3x5 card. Review it at least ten times throughout the day.

- What impression did it make on you?
- Write a brief prayer to God.

**Tuesday**— Write Psalm 90:3-4 on a 3x5 card. Review it at least ten times throughout the day.

- What impression did it make on you?
- Write a brief prayer to God.

**Wednesday**— Write Psalm 90:5-6 on a 3x5 card. Review it at least ten times throughout the day.

- What impression did it make on you?
- Write a brief prayer to God.

**Thursday**— Write Psalm 90:7-9 on a 3x5 card. Review it at least ten times throughout the day.

- What impression did it make on you?
- Write a brief prayer to God.

**Friday**— Write Psalm 90:10-12 on a 3x5 card. Review it at least ten times throughout the day.

- What impression did it make on you?
- Write a brief prayer to God.

**Saturday**— Write Psalm 90:13-17 on a 3x5 card. Review it at least ten times throughout the day.

- What impression did it make on you?
- Write a brief prayer to God.



- *"Why do so many of us struggle with addictive habits?"*
- *"Are freedom and change possible—for me or my friends?"*
- *"What is the biblical method for breaking addiction's grip?"*

### Biblical Hope and Help for Addictive Habits and Eating Disorders

- **Saturday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 9am — noon**
- **Triangle Community Church [4216 Kildaire Farm Road, Apex]**
- **Facilitators: Dave and Krista Dunham**
- **For adults and high school students**
- **Tickets just \$15**
- **Free childcare available**



This interactive workshop will provide you with rich biblical perspectives on addictions, with additional focus on eating disorders, and will equip you with practical strategies for combatting these common struggles.