

## Fear God, Enjoy Life: The Message of Ecclesiastes

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According to a Russian legend a peasant was to receive by a deed all the land he could encompass by running in one day. When the day came, he ran and ran, got back to the starting point at the end of the day, and was tired. The sun was almost down, but not quite. So he took off in another direction to acquire some more land. He got back just as the sun dropped below the horizon—and he dropped dead.

What a picture of the futility of modern living. People gain something, but they can't enjoy it. They work for wealth, but then lose it. They acquire education, but they are still miserable. What then is the point of living?

This question is discussed in one of the least-understood books of the Bible. Ecclesiastes records a man's search for significance, his hunt for happiness, his race for reality. Solomon asked, What is the point of life "under the sun"?—a phrase he used twenty-nine times. He had everything—fame, family, and fortune, wisdom, women, and wealth, song, slaves, and silver—and yet he was despondent. He wrote, "I hated life" (2:17), and he said he felt despair (2:20). Many people today, like Solomon, experience pessimism and frustration, a sense of gloom and doom.

Solomon, "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), opened his book on a sour note: "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (1:2). The Hebrew word *hebel*, translated "meaningless," could also be rendered "empty," "frustrating," or "perplexing." Why was he frustrated? Why did he feel life was empty, like a fleeting vapor? Why did he write ten times that life is like "chasing after wind" (1:14, 17, etc.), that is, useless effort?

Several reasons. First, he noted that life is unfair. Oppressed people have no one to console them (4:1); the poor are often forgotten (9:15–16); workers gain little in return for all their toil (1:3; 3:9; 5:15); the righteous are treated like the wicked (8:14); fools are put in leadership positions (10:6); good crops from farming are not guaranteed (11:6).

Second, he said that life seems futile because we do not know the future (6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 9:1; 10:14); because we cannot understand all that God does (3:11; 11:5); because hard times can come on us unexpectedly (9:12); because after death both wise people and fools are forgotten (2:16); and because we cannot take anything with us when we die (1:12; 5:15).

Third, Solomon wrote that life seems frustrating because of its many uncertainties. Toil brings no lasting pleasure (2:10–11); we may have money but not be able to enjoy it (6:3, 6); we are unable to determine whether our days will be good or bad (7:14); retribution is often not executed (8:11); wisdom can be ruined by a little foolishness (9:18); and we cannot predict which investments will pay off and which ones won't (11:2).

So it would seem that work, wisdom, and wealth can be worthless. Why work if it brings pain and grief (2:22–23)? Why be wise if the wise die along with fools (2:15–16)? Why acquire money when we may lose it through some misfortune (5:13–14)?

Many human efforts seem futile and fruitless, and life has much that we simply cannot understand. Solomon wanted his readers to face the fact that life has its puzzles: we can't figure out everything;



we all face enigmas; our days are filled with frustrations; and life seems like a riddle. True, Solomon was pessimistic as he faced reality. He wanted to keep his readers from placing confidence in their own efforts and energies. Yet this was not his last word.

Ecclesiastes does not leave us despondent and in despair. True, life at times seems like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. But Solomon went beyond that. He gave a realistic view of life, a view that admits problems and shortcomings, that recognizes inequities and uncertainties, but yet a view of life that has two positive recommendations.

One suggestion, which Solomon makes repeatedly throughout his book, is to enjoy life. He writes, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (2:24). "There is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God" (3:12–13). "So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot" (3:22). "Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot" (5:18). "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun!" (8:15). "Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningful life that God has given you under the sun—for this is your lot in life" (9:8). "However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all.... Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth" (11:9).

This is not hedonism—eat, drink, and be merry, because you will soon die. This is realism—to work and to eat are gifts from God for those who please Him (2:26).

Solomon reminds us that despite all of life's enigmas and inequities, we should enjoy what God has given us. To be happy in one's work is a gift of God (5:19). As Paul wrote, God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17).

Another suggestion Solomon makes is to fear God, that is, to trust, obey, serve, and worship Him. We should enjoy life because death is coming (Eccles. 11:9), but we should also fear God because judgment is coming (1:9; 3:17; 12:14). Six times Solomon relayed this command to fear God—to recognize who He is and respond accordingly. "God has so worked that men should fear Him" (3:14, NASB). "Fear God" (5:7, NASB). "The man who fears God will avoid all extremes" (7:18). "I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. It will not be well for the evil man... because he does not fear God" (8:12–13, NASB). "Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13).

To fear God means we stand in awe of Him and depend on Him, not ourselves. We recognize that we are human and finite, whereas He is divine and infinite.

Ecclesiastes shows us in stunning ways that the key to life is not in life itself. Pleasure, materialism, wisdom, and money are all futile and folly. True happiness comes from centering our lives on God, not ourselves. Thus Ecclesiastes dodges two extremes. Instead of asceticism ("give up") believers are encouraged to enjoy life. And instead of hedonism ("give in") believers are encouraged to fear God.

Solomon tried everything—pleasure, wine, wisdom, building projects, slaves, animal husbandry, silver and gold, singers, and a harem (2:1–8). But he had to admit that when he surveyed it all, "everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (2:11). The secret to life, then, is not in things. Instead two keys open the door to fulfillment, meaning, and joy: Enjoy life and fear God!