

## INTRO

- What is an achievement in your life you are proud of?

Ecclesiastes challenges our childish, naive thinking about the world. Today's text specifically provokes us to consider how much our lives are shaped by circumstances beyond our control, such as time and chance, rather than by our own abilities, skills or merit.

## READ

Eccl. 9:11-12

*(Ecclesiastes is a very different and challenging book to read. Because of that, we have summarized some important key ideas on the next page to help you read and understand the book in context for yourself)*

## REFLECT & RESPOND

In North America, we have a high belief in ourselves and, if given the right opportunity, there is seemingly nothing we can't achieve if we are willing to work hard for it. This way of thinking forms the basis of a meritocracy, where success, power, and influence are based on merit and rewarded accordingly.

Even in religion, this can be seen whether it is Karma, works-based, or even the "prosperity gospel" which rewards and favours those with enough "faith".

*Qu: in what ways do you think a meritocracy is helpful? In what ways is it harmful?*

But, what if our success in life doesn't depend solely on our ability and effort? What if the unfairness we experience and witness reminds us of life under the sun?

In today's reading, we see 5 examples of where merit should predict success: the fastest, strongest, wise, brilliant and learned should win. Not so, says the Teacher. Life under the sun is unpredictable and uncontrollable! This is *hevel*.

*Qu: how does it make you feel for the Teacher to say, in essence, that a lot of the outcomes in your life are beyond your control? Do you agree?*

But, the Story of Scripture tells us something more: Jesus is the Good News of God's Providence, Judgement and Grace in an unpredictable and unjust world.

**God's Providence** (his care and concern for us) invites us to trust Him despite life's unpredictability. I may not be in control of many things in life, but He is!

**God's Judgement** affirms our heart's longing for a world where there is true and complete justice, and all evil is dealt with.

**God's Grace** is better than merit—we don't get what we deserve, since Jesus takes our condemnation upon himself, and we get what we don't deserve (our salvation and redemption).

*Qu: in light of God's providence, judgement and grace, how does this change the way we see and act particularly towards others?*

## RESPOND & PRAY

- Pray along the direction of your discussion as a group.

*\*\*Reminder: This Discussion Guide is to help facilitate conversation and application around the topic. Feel free to adapt it and the qu's to your group specifically.*

## SIX KEY IDEAS TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes can be difficult to interpret because it is so different from the other books in the Bible. Its unique style needs some explanation before we can begin making sense of it. We hope these six ideas will help you unlock many of the lessons we can learn from the book.

### 1 - Ecclesiastes is a speech by Qohelet (the Teacher) about the meaning of life.

The book has two “authors”. One is a speaker in an assembly (He is called *Qohelet* in the original Hebrew, usually translated as the Teacher or the Speaker). His purpose is to talk about how we can make sense of life’s meaning. The other author is an editor who wrote down the Teacher’s speech and also wrote a brief prologue (1:1) and an epilogue (12:9-14) to the book.

### 2 - The book is not an explanation, but an exploration of what gives life meaning.

Rather than just giving an answer to the question of life’s meaning, the Teacher goes on a journey to explore how we try to make sense of life. His journey is a winding road full of dead ends and it’s not before the book’s conclusion that we hear what he really believes about the matter.

### 3 - The book is about understanding earthly life (under the sun) from an entirely earthly perspective.

The Teacher’s method is to analyze only what we can see happening on earth (under the sun), and he limits himself to what we can experience and reason for ourselves. This point is really important for making sense of why the Teacher can’t find any meaning in life in his exploration. In other words, the Teacher’s intention is to show that we can’t make sense of life if we limit our scope and our methods to what is only “earthly”.

### 4 - Life under the sun is *hevel*: a mysterious, formless, short-lived, mist or vapour.

The way the Teacher makes this point is to call everything in life *hevel* – a Hebrew word that means vapour, mist, or breath. By that, he means that earthly life is fragile, short-lived, and hard to make sense of. Many translations of *hevel* have been vanity, meaningless, or even mysterious.

### 5 - The conclusion: there is more to life than what we see “under the sun”. We know that what we do matters because we’ll be judged for it. And it is possible to make sense of life because we were created on purpose and with a purpose by God.

By the end of the book, the Teacher concludes that his earthly method only resulted in vanity or meaninglessness. But then he reminds us that there is more to what we see under the sun. We were made by God and will be judged by Him. That changes everything. Since we were made by God, there is some sense we can make of things. And since our actions will be judged by God, it must mean that they are not meaningless. Our actions make a difference, so much so that God holds us accountable for them.

### 6 - Ecclesiastes is not all that God wants to tell us.

Finally, the Teacher only hints at the beginning of an answer to the question about life’s meaning. God has revealed a lot more about life’s meaning than what we find in Ecclesiastes. Most important of all, through Jesus Christ he made a way for us to be forgiven and for life under the sun to be forever transformed. Because Christ took upon himself the guilt for our sins, we can face God’s judgment with confidence. And because of the resurrection, we know that life will be forever transformed and not be merely *hevel*. As we explore this amazing book, let us always allow our minds and hearts to drift back to Christ.