

INTRO

- What's the first job you ever had?

Ecclesiastes is part of the Bible's "wisdom" literature, provoking us on what it means to live well in this world. Considering we'll spend 1/3 of our lives working, this week Ecclesiastes deconstructs work under the sun.

READ

Eccl. 2:22-23; 4:1-6; 5:10-12; 6:1-2

(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

The Teacher paints a bleak picture of us trying to find significance and meaning solely from our work. He describes work as:

- **Oppressive**—the haves and have-nots (4:1-3).
- **Self-inflicted Suffering**—either through overwork because of misplaced ambition, or underwork/laziness leading to ruin (4:4-6).
- **Seductive**—even those who realize their ambitions through work, the resulting success and wealth prove problematic (5:10-12).
- **Unsatisfying**—the few people who get all their heart's desire, still aren't able to fully enjoy it (6:1-2).

This is *hevel* indeed!

Qu: what are some frustrations you experience with your work (or study)?

Ecclesiastes is an important reality check for us in trying to build lives, meaning and careers apart from God. But, Ecclesiastes is part of a much bigger Story Scripture invites us into around the purpose of work.

REDEEMING WORK

We redeem work from *hevel* by understanding the Design, Dignity and Destiny God has for our work.

The Design of Work

As image-bearers created in God's image, God has made us for meaningful work. Work was part of Paradise and is one of the primary ways we participate in God's work in the world.

The Dignity of Work

Work is essential for our survival and flourishing as human beings. Both overwork and underwork make us less human. What spoils work for us is our hunger to get more from it than it can give.

The Destiny of Work

Jesus' resurrection and the start of new creation redeem our lives and work from *hevel*: our lives and work matter now and into eternity.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. — 1 Cor 15:58

Qu: After the whole chapter on the significance of Jesus' resurrection, Paul ends with the above verse. What is the significance of Jesus' resurrection and our work?

Qu: in what ways does your work/studies connect with the work of the Lord?

(Try to get people to think how, for example, their work may serve others, improve lives or society, benefit the common good, bring beauty, order, justice, truth into the world etc.)

(You could also have a discussion on what falls under "the work of the Lord")

RESPOND & PRAY

- Pray along the direction of your discussion as a group and what the greatest need is right now in regards to work.

***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.