THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

The King Who Outlasts the Sun

Ecclesiastes, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Outlasts the Sun: The Book of Ecclesiastes, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” Ecclesiastes is written by someone who had it all and still felt empty. He tried everything: education, partying, building, buying, achievement, fame. And at the end of each experiment he wrote the same word. Smoke. Vapor. It slipped through his fingers.

Ecclesiastes might be the most honest book in the Bible. It asks questions a lot of people are afraid to ask out loud. What’s the point? Why do good people get hurt? Why does hard work sometimes go nowhere? Why does everything I chase leave me wanting more? And what happens when I die?

So why read it? Because you live in a world that keeps promising that the next thing will finally make you happy: the next phone, the next relationship, the next achievement, the next hundred followers. Ecclesiastes has already tested those promises, and it tells you the truth about them. Then it points you toward the only thing that lasts.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Ecclesiastes in five chapters: the grand experiment (Ecclesiastes 1–2), a time for everything (3), injustice, loneliness, and friendship (4–5:7), money, unfairness, and today’s gifts (5:8–10:20), and remember your Creator (11–12).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who the Preacher was, what the key word hevel means, and how to read a book that sometimes sounds surprisingly gloomy. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as who wrote Ecclesiastes or how to read its darkest lines, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Ecclesiastes in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the twenty-first book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Ecclesiastes speaks powerfully to a generation surrounded by endless options, constant comparison, and the pressure to find meaning in achievement, possessions, and online status. This book explains the Hebrew word hevel, vapor or smoke, and shows how things slip through our fingers when we make them our ultimate meaning, while also highlighting the book's surprising call to enjoy simple daily gifts from God.

Ecclesiastes is honest about despair. A compassionate Real Talk box around chapter 4 encourages any reader who feels empty, hopeless, or alone to talk to a trusted adult or counselor and lists 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Other boxes address loneliness and friendship, comparison and envy, money, unfairness, procrastination, and making the most of youth.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how life under the sun aches because death seems to get the last word, and how the New Testament presents Jesus as the One who stepped under the

sun, defeated death, and makes ordinary faithfulness matter forever, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Ecclesiastes in their own rich ways, reading it each year at the Feast of Booths. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will remember their Creator in the days of their youth, and will find in Him the meaning that nothing under the sun can give.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature, like Job and Proverbs. But where Proverbs gives short, confident sayings about how life usually works, Ecclesiastes steps back and asks whether any of it ultimately matters. It reads like the journal of a brilliant, restless thinker who tested every path to happiness and wrote down the results with brutal honesty. It mixes reflections, poems, proverbs, and advice. Some parts sound hopeless. Others are full of joy. That tension is part of the point.

Who Is the Preacher?

The book introduces its speaker as Qoheleth, a Hebrew word that means something like the one who gathers people, or the Teacher or Preacher. The Greek translation of that title gives us the name Ecclesiastes. He is called the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and his story of unmatched wisdom, wealth, building projects, and pleasure sounds a lot like Solomon. Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Solomon wrote it, perhaps late in life, looking back on his mistakes. Many scholars today think a later writer used Solomon's life as a kind of persona, a way of asking what life looks like for someone who had everything, pointing out features of the Hebrew that seem to come from a later time. Some think a narrator collected the Preacher's words and added the opening and closing verses, which speak about the Preacher in the third person. Either

way, the book's message is the same, and Christians on both sides of the question accept it as God's word.

The Key Word: Hevel

The most important word in Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word hevel. It appears about thirty-eight times. Older translations, including the WEB, translate it vanity, as in vanity of vanities, all is vanity. But hevel literally means vapor, breath, mist, or smoke. Think of your breath on a cold morning: you can see it, but you can't hold it. Or smoke from a campfire: it's real, but when you grab at it, your hand comes back empty. That's what the Preacher means. Things like money, pleasure, success, and status are real, but they're fleeting and can't be held on to. When you try to make them your ultimate meaning, they slip right through your fingers. Hevel can also carry the sense of something baffling, a mystery you can't figure out.

Under the Sun

Another key phrase in Ecclesiastes is under the sun, which appears about thirty times. It describes life as we see it from ground level, in this world, without looking beyond it. Under the sun, everything eventually dies, and the same things happen to the wise and the foolish, the good and the bad. Much of Ecclesiastes is the Preacher honestly describing what life looks like from that view. But he also keeps pointing upward, to God, who is above the sun, and to the gifts He gives.

How to Read It

Because the Preacher is so honest about his frustration, some lines in Ecclesiastes can sound shocking, or even like they contradict the rest of the Bible. It helps to remember that he is often describing

what life looks like under the sun, and testing ideas to see where they lead. The book's final verses give the conclusion he reached. Jewish communities read Ecclesiastes every year during the Feast of Booths, a joyful harvest festival, which says something about how they understood it: not as a depressing book, but as a wise and honest one that teaches people to enjoy God's gifts without worshiping them.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Ecclesiastes 1–2): The grand experiment.

Chapter 2 (Ecclesiastes 3): A time for everything.

Chapter 3 (Ecclesiastes 4–5:7): Injustice, loneliness, and friendship.

Chapter 4 (Ecclesiastes 5:8–10:20): Money, unfairness, and today's gifts.

Chapter 5 (Ecclesiastes 11–12): Remember your Creator.

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CHAPTER 1

The Grand Experiment

Ecclesiastes 1–2

Ecclesiastes doesn't ease you in. It opens with a shout. "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher; 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.'"

Remember what that word means. Hevel: vapor, breath, smoke. You could translate the line, Smoke of smoke! Everything is smoke! In Hebrew, saying something twice like that, vanity of vanities, is a way of making it as strong as possible, like saying the holy of holies or the king of kings. The Preacher is saying everything is the most fleeting, slippery, can't-hold-on-to-it thing imaginable.

Then he asks the question that drives the whole book. "What does man gain from all his labor in which he labors under the sun?" You work, study, practice, and grind. What do you actually get out of it, in the end?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Smoke and Mirrors**

Hevel is the same word as the name Abel, the son of Adam and Eve whose life was cut short in Genesis 4. His life was like a breath, there and gone. When the Preacher says all is hevel, he isn't saying nothing exists or nothing matters at all. He's saying that nothing under the sun lasts or can give ultimate meaning. Some scholars also hear a sense of absurdity or enigma in the word, things that don't make sense. Try reading the book with the word vapor or smoke in mind whenever you see vanity. It often makes things clearer.

The Preacher looks at nature and sees endless cycles. Generations come and go. The sun rises and sets, then hurries back around to rise again. The wind blows south, then north, then around and around. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Everything keeps moving, but nothing seems to get anywhere. “All things are full of weariness beyond uttering. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.”

That last line might be the most relatable thing ever written. You can watch a hundred videos and still want another. You can listen to music all day and still want more. You can scroll for hours and never feel full.

Then he says something that sounds strange in a world obsessed with the next new thing. “That which has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.” Phones change. Fashions change. But the deep stuff of human life, love, envy, ambition, loss, the search for meaning, stays the same. And then he adds, people forget. No one remembers the people who came before, and no one will remember us either.

> **REAL TALK** **Nothing New Under the Sun**
>
> It might seem like your generation faces totally new problems. In some ways, it does. Social media, AI, and constant connection are new. But the deeper struggles are ancient. People have always wanted to be seen, to be liked, to belong, to matter, and to be remembered. People have always compared themselves to others and felt like they didn’t measure up. The Preacher reminds you that you’re not the first person to feel this way, and you won’t be the last. That’s actually comforting. It means the wisdom of people who walked this road before you, including the Bible, still applies.

Then the Preacher introduces himself. He was king over Israel in Jerusalem, and he decided to run an experiment. He would search out by wisdom everything that happens under heaven. He had all the resources in the world. If anyone could find meaning, he could.

Experiment number one: wisdom and knowledge. He became wiser than everyone before him. He studied everything. And he found that "in much wisdom is much grief; and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." The more he learned, the more he saw how broken the world was, and the more it hurt. Knowledge alone couldn't fix the crooked things.

Experiment number two: pleasure. "I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure;' and behold, this also was vanity." He tried laughter and partying. He tried wine. He tried to see whether fun could make life meaningful.

Experiment number three: projects and possessions. "I made myself great works. I built myself houses. I planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and parks." He built pools, bought servants, gathered huge herds and flocks, collected silver and gold, and hired singers and musicians. He had the best of everything.

And he had status. "So I was great, and increased more than all who were before me in Jerusalem." He was the most famous, admired, powerful person around. He didn't hold back. "Whatever my eyes desired, I didn't keep from them. I didn't withhold my heart from any joy."

> **REAL TALK** **Clout**
>
> Today, the Preacher might have been an influencer with millions of followers, a mansion, a fleet of cars, and a feed full of luxury vacations. His fans would have thought he had the perfect life. A lot of people today chase clout: likes,

views, followers, popularity, being seen. It's not wrong to enjoy being appreciated. But clout is hevel. It's smoke. One day you're trending, the next day you're forgotten. And no number of followers can fill the deep need to be truly known and loved. Many famous people have said that reaching the top left them emptier than they expected. If your worth rises and falls with your numbers, you'll always be anxious. There's a better place to find it.

Then comes the result of the experiment. "Then I looked at all the works that my hands had worked, and at the labor that I had labored to do; and behold, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was no profit under the sun."

A chasing after wind. Try it sometime. Go outside on a windy day and try to catch the wind in your hands. That's what it felt like. All that effort, and his hands were empty.

Then the Preacher hits his lowest point. He realizes that the wise and the foolish both die. "The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walks in darkness—and yet I perceived that one event happens to them all." He realizes that everything he built will be left to someone else, who might be a fool and waste it all. "So I hated life, because the work that is worked under the sun was grievous to me." He lies awake at night. "Even in the night his heart takes no rest."

REAL TALK **Achievement Burnout**

A lot of teenagers today are under enormous pressure to achieve: perfect grades, perfect test scores, the right college, varsity sports, leadership roles, impressive activities. Some of that can be good. But when your whole identity depends on achievement, you can end up like the Preacher: exhausted, anxious, unable to sleep, and wondering what the point is. If you're feeling burned out, you're not lazy or weak. Talk to a parent, school counselor, or trusted adult about what you're carrying. You were created to be loved, not just to perform.

But then, at the end of chapter 2, a different note appears. It's quiet, but it's important. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God."

Notice the shift. When the Preacher tried to squeeze meaning out of pleasure, work, and possessions, they turned to smoke. But when he received simple things, like food, drink, and the satisfaction of good work, as gifts from God's hand, he found something good. The problem wasn't the gifts. The problem was trying to make them God.

That's one of the big lessons of Ecclesiastes. Good things make terrible gods. But they can be wonderful gifts.

> **REAL TALK** **The Party Experiment**
>
> The Preacher's pleasure experiment sounds a lot like what some people your age are told will make them happy: the party scene, drinking, hooking up, chasing the next thrill. He tried it all, with unlimited money and no one to stop him, and he says it left him empty. Pleasure isn't bad. God invented it. But pleasure chased for its own sake shrinks. The thrill that felt huge last month barely registers this month, so you need more to feel the same thing. That's how many addictions start. If you or a friend is struggling with alcohol, vaping, drugs, pornography, or anything else that has started to feel out of control, please talk to a parent, school counselor, or doctor. You're not the first, and there is real help and real hope.

It's worth noticing how honest the Preacher is about his own heart. He doesn't blame his parents, his culture, or his circumstances. He simply admits that he got everything he wanted and it still wasn't enough. That kind of honesty is rare. Most people keep chasing, convinced that the problem is that they haven't gotten quite enough yet. One more achievement, one more purchase, one more

relationship, and then I'll be happy. The Preacher had already reached the end of that road, and he came back to tell us there was nothing there.

If you're a Christian, you might wonder whether Ecclesiastes is telling you not to work hard, study, have fun, or dream big. It isn't. The Preacher still says wisdom is better than folly, as light is better than darkness. Elsewhere he tells you to work with all your might. The point is not that these things are worthless. The point is that they are not God. They can't carry the weight of your whole life. Put them in the right place and they become good gifts. Put them in God's place and they will crush you.

There's one more thing to notice. The Preacher's experiment was mostly about himself. Look at the language: I made myself, I built myself, I planted myself, I got myself. Me, myself, and mine. Maybe part of the reason it all felt so empty is that he was living for himself alone. Jesus later said that whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for His sake will find it. Meaning is often found not by grabbing more for yourself, but by giving yourself away to God and to others.

KEY VERSE

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does hevel mean? How does thinking of it as vapor or smoke change how you understand the book?
2. Which of the Preacher's experiments, wisdom, pleasure, projects, or status, do you think people your age chase the most?
3. Why do you think having everything still left the Preacher feeling empty?
4. What's the difference between enjoying a good thing as a gift and trying to make it your ultimate meaning?

TRY THIS *Make a list of three things you've been chasing lately, like grades, followers, a relationship, or possessions. Next to each, write how it would look to enjoy it as a gift from God instead of making it your meaning.*

CHAPTER 2

A Time for Everything

Ecclesiastes 3

Ecclesiastes 3 contains one of the most famous poems ever written. You might have heard it at a funeral, a wedding, or a graduation, or in a song. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

Then comes a list of fourteen pairs of opposites. “A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which 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.”

The list keeps going. 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 throw 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.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fourteen Pairs**

The poem has fourteen pairs, which is seven times two. In the Bible, seven often stands for completeness. The Preacher is painting a picture of all of life, from birth to death, with everything in between. Some of the pairs are surprising. A time to kill? A time to hate? The Preacher isn’t telling us to go out and do those things. He’s describing the reality of life in a broken world, where there really are times for war, for opposing evil, and for grief. In the

1960s, the folk band The Byrds turned this poem into a hit song called Turn! Turn! Turn!, and it has been sung and quoted ever since.

The poem is beautiful, but it also raises a question. If everything has its season, who decides the seasons? We don't. We can't choose when we're born or when we die. We can't make grief end on schedule. We can't force a season of building to come when we're in a season of breaking down. Life moves in rhythms we don't control.

That can feel frustrating. But it can also be freeing. You don't have to make every season happen. You can trust the One who does.

REAL TALK **What Season Are You In?**

Maybe you're in a season of weeping right now. Maybe someone you love has died, a friendship has ended, or your family is going through something hard. Ecclesiastes says it's okay to weep. There's a time for it. You don't have to rush to the laughing part. Or maybe you're in a season of building, full of energy and new opportunities. Enjoy it. Seasons change. The hard ones won't last forever, and neither will the easy ones. Wisdom means recognizing what season you're in and living faithfully in it, not wishing you were somewhere else.

Then the Preacher steps back and asks his big question again. "What profit has he who works in that in which he labors?" If all of life is just seasons coming and going, what's the point?

And then he writes one of the most profound sentences in the Bible. "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in their hearts, yet so that man can't find out the work that God has done from the beginning even to the end."

Look at those three pieces. First, God has made everything beautiful in its time. Even the hard seasons have a place in His design. We may not see it yet, but God is weaving something beautiful.

Second, God has set eternity in our hearts. Humans aren't like animals that live only for the moment. We long for something permanent. We ask why. We want our lives to matter forever. We feel the ache when things end. That longing was put there by God.

Third, we can't figure it all out. We see a small slice of the story. Only God sees the whole thing, from beginning to end.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Eternity in Our Hearts**

Many thinkers have noticed what the Preacher describes here. Humans seem to be built for something more than this world can give. Augustine, a Christian thinker who lived about sixteen hundred years ago, prayed to God, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You. C. S. Lewis wrote that if we find in ourselves a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most likely explanation is that we were made for another world. The Preacher's point is that the ache you feel, the sense that life should mean more, isn't a malfunction. It's a clue.

That's why everything under the sun feels like vapor. It isn't that the things themselves are bad. It's that we were made for eternity, and they're not eternal. Trying to satisfy an eternal longing with temporary things is like trying to fill the ocean with a garden hose.

REAL TALK **That Restless Feeling**

Have you ever gotten something you really wanted, a new phone, a ticket to a concert, a relationship, a spot on the team, and felt a little letdown afterward? Or felt a strange restlessness late at night, like something is missing even though nothing is technically wrong? That might be the eternity God set in your heart, reminding you that you were made for more. The answer isn't to stop enjoying good things. It's to bring that restlessness to God, who is the only One big enough to fill it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: A Time to Kill, a Time to Hate?**

Some lines in the poem make readers uncomfortable. Is the Bible really saying there's a time to kill and a time to hate? The Preacher is describing life as it actually unfolds in a fallen world, not handing out permission slips. Many interpreters connect a time to kill with things like just war, self-defense, or, in ancient Israel, the harvesting of animals for food, and a time to hate with hating evil itself, as Scripture elsewhere tells God's people to hate what is evil and hold on to what is good. Christians disagree about some applications, such as when war is justified. But nothing in the poem cancels Jesus' command to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Hate evil. Love people, including the ones who are hard to love.

So what should we do, if we can't figure everything out? The Preacher's answer is surprisingly simple. "I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good as long as they live. Also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labor, is the gift of God." Enjoy life. Do good. Receive daily gifts with gratitude.

And trust that God's work lasts, even when ours doesn't. "I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; and God has done it, that men should fear before him."

The rest of chapter 3 wrestles with injustice. The Preacher sees that in the places where there should be justice, like courtrooms, there's wickedness instead. He says that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, because there's a time for every work. Then he notices that humans and animals both die and return to dust. "Who knows the spirit of man, whether it goes upward?" He's asking honestly, from under the sun, what happens after death. He doesn't have the full answer yet. The rest of the Bible, and especially the resurrection of Jesus, will give it.

> **REAL TALK** **A Time to Speak**
>
> The poem says there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak. That's real wisdom for a world where everyone feels pressure to comment on everything immediately. Not every group chat needs your reply. Not every argument online needs your opinion. Sometimes the wise thing is to stay quiet, listen, and think. But there are also times when silence is wrong, like when a friend is being bullied, when someone is in danger, or when the truth needs to be told. Wisdom is knowing the difference, and asking God for help when you're not sure.

The idea of seasons can also help you be patient with yourself. Maybe you feel behind. Your friends seem to have their lives figured out, they've found their thing, they're dating, they know what college they want, and you don't. Ecclesiastes reminds you that God's timing isn't the same for everyone. Some flowers bloom in spring and some in autumn. You're not late. You're in your season. Growth takes time, and God is not in a hurry with you.

The seasons can also help you love other people well. When a friend is grieving, it's not the time for jokes or quick fixes. Paul wrote that we should rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. When a friend is celebrating, it's not the time to bring up your problems or compete with their good news. Paying attention to what season someone else is in is one of the kindest things you can do.

Notice too that the poem begins with birth and death. Every season of life happens between those two moments, and neither is in our control. That's humbling. But the Preacher doesn't leave us there. He says God has made everything beautiful in its time. Christians believe that one day God will make even death itself part of a beautiful story, when He raises His people to life. The final season hasn't come yet.

KEY VERSE

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in their hearts, yet so that man can't find out the work that God has done from the beginning even to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which pair in the poem of Ecclesiastes 3 describes the season you're in right now?
2. What do you think it means that God has set eternity in our hearts?
3. When have you felt the restlessness the Preacher describes? What did you do with it?
4. How can trusting that God makes everything beautiful in its time help you in a hard season?

TRY THIS *Write down the season you're in right now, using one of the pairs from Ecclesiastes 3. Then write a short prayer asking God to help you live faithfully in it, and to make it beautiful in His time.*

CHAPTER 3

Injustice, Loneliness, and Friendship

Ecclesiastes 4–5:7

Chapter 4 begins with some of the darkest observations in Ecclesiastes. “Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold, the tears of those who were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.”

Notice the phrase repeated twice: they had no comforter. The Preacher sees people being crushed by those in power, and no one is there to wipe their tears. It’s so painful that he says the dead are better off than the living, and those who were never born are better off still, because they haven’t seen the evil done under the sun.

That’s a very dark thing to say. And the Bible doesn’t hide it.

> REAL TALK **When Life Feels Empty**
>
> Maybe you’ve felt what the Preacher felt in chapter 4: that life is so painful or pointless that it would be better not to exist. If you’ve felt that way, you’re not alone, and you’re not a bad person or a bad Christian. The Bible includes these words because God knows people feel this way. But please don’t keep those feelings to yourself. Talk to a trusted adult today, like a parent, school counselor, pastor, coach, or doctor. A counselor or therapist can help you work through emptiness, depression, or grief, and getting help is a sign of

strength. If you're having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. Notice that the Preacher didn't stop writing in chapter 4. His book keeps going, and so can your story. There are people who want to be your comforter.

Next, the Preacher looks at work and achievement, and he notices something uncomfortable about what drives a lot of it. "Then I saw all the labor and achievement that is the envy of a man's neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind." A lot of hard work isn't really about the work. It's about competition, wanting to be better than someone else, wanting what they have, wanting them to envy you.

He offers a better way. "Better is a handful, with quietness, than two handfuls with labor and chasing after wind." It's better to have a little and be at peace than to have twice as much and be exhausted, anxious, and always comparing.

REAL TALK **The Comparison Game**

Comparison drives so much of life: grades, looks, followers, clothes, phones, colleges, relationships, achievements. The Preacher saw it three thousand years ago, and he called it chasing the wind. You can never win the comparison game, because there's always someone ahead of you. Proverbs calls envy rot in the bones. A good question to ask is: Am I doing this because I love it and it's good, or because I want to beat someone or impress someone? Try to celebrate other people's successes instead of resenting them. And remember that a quiet handful of contentment is worth more than two exhausted handfuls of envy.

Then the Preacher describes one of the saddest characters in the book. "There is one who is alone, and he has neither son nor brother. There is no end to all of his labor, neither are his eyes satisfied with wealth." This man works nonstop. He has no family,

no friends, no one to share his life with. And he never stops to ask the obvious question: who am I doing all this for?

That leads into one of the most beloved passages in Ecclesiastes. "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls, and doesn't have another to lift him up."

The Preacher gives three pictures of why friendship matters. First, when you fall, a friend can pick you up. Second, "if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one keep warm alone?" On cold nights in the ancient world, travelers huddled together to stay warm. Friends warm each other. Third, "If a man prevails against one who is alone, two shall withstand him." A friend has your back.

Then he ends with a beautiful line. "And a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Threefold Cord**

A rope made of three strands woven together is much stronger than three separate strands, or even two. Ecclesiastes 4:12 is often read at weddings, where many Christians interpret the three strands as a husband, a wife, and God at the center of their marriage. That's a beautiful application. But the original context is broader: it's about any friendship, partnership, or community. The point is that we're stronger together than alone, and stronger still when more people are woven in. Many Christians also see God as the strand who holds every relationship together.

REAL TALK **Loneliness**

Loneliness is one of the biggest struggles teenagers face today, even in a world where you can be connected to hundreds of people online. You can have a thousand followers and no one to call at 2 a.m. The Preacher says it's not good to be alone. If you're lonely, you're not weird, and it's not your fault. Here are some ideas. Look for one person, not a whole group. Join

something: a youth group, a club, a team, a volunteer project. Ask someone to hang out, even if it feels awkward. Be the friend you wish you had, by noticing the person sitting alone. And talk to a trusted adult if loneliness is making you feel hopeless. God made you for relationships. He'll help you find them.

REAL TALK **Friends Online and Off**

Online friendships can be real and meaningful, especially if you live far from people who share your interests or faith. But the Preacher's pictures of friendship are very physical: lifting someone who fell, keeping each other warm, standing back to back. Screens can't fully do that. Try to have at least a few friends you see in person, who know your face, your family, and your bad days. And be careful with online friends you've never met. If someone online asks you to keep secrets, send photos, or meet in person, tell a trusted adult right away. Real friends don't pressure you into hiding things.

The chapter ends with a story about a king. "Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who doesn't know how to receive admonition any more." A young person who is wise and willing to learn is better off than a powerful old king who won't listen to anyone. Age and power don't make you wise. Teachability does. That's good news for teenagers: you don't have to wait until you're older to be wise. But the Preacher also notes that even the popular young king who replaces the old one will eventually be forgotten. Popularity is hevel too.

Chapter 5 begins with a short section about worship. "Guard your steps when you go to God's house; for to draw near to listen is better than to give the sacrifice of fools." The Preacher warns against going through the motions of religion without really paying attention. It's better to listen than to perform.

Then he says, “Don’t be rash with your mouth, and don’t let your heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven, and you on earth. Therefore let your words be few.”

> **REAL TALK** **Few Words**
>
> The Preacher isn’t telling you to stop praying. The Psalms are full of long, honest prayers. He’s warning against careless words, empty promises, and showing off. Some people make big promises to God when they’re scared or emotional, like, God, if You get me through this test, I’ll read my Bible every day forever, and then forget about it. The Preacher says it’s better not to make a promise than to make one and break it. When you talk to God, be honest, be humble, and mean what you say. And remember to listen too. Sometimes the best prayer is a few honest words followed by silence.

The Preacher’s warning about words also fits with the rest of chapter 5. He says that just as dreams come with lots of worries, a fool’s speech comes with lots of words. People who talk the most aren’t always the wisest. Sometimes they’re just the loudest. Think about how much noise fills your day: notifications, videos, podcasts, comments, opinions. The Preacher invites you into something rare: quiet. Coming to God with a quiet, listening heart is an act of trust. It says, You are God, and I am not. I don’t need to impress You. I’m here to listen.

Notice how chapters 4 and 5 fit together. The Preacher looks at oppression, envy, loneliness, and empty religion, and in the middle of it all he points to friendship and to honest worship. Those are two of God’s best answers to a lonely, unfair world: people who walk with you, and a God who listens to you. You need both. A friend can lift you up when you fall. God can hold you when no one else is around.

REAL TALK **Being the Friend Who Lifts**

It's easy to read Two are better than one and think about the friends you wish you had. But it's also a challenge to be that kind of friend. Are you the person who lifts others up when they fall, or the one who walks past? Do you notice when a friend has gone quiet, seems sad, or is pulling away? Sometimes lifting someone up looks like a text that says, Hey, I've been thinking about you. Sometimes it's sitting with them at lunch. And sometimes it's telling a trusted adult when a friend says something that worries you, like that they want to hurt themselves. That isn't betraying them. It might save their life.

There's also something to learn from the Preacher's honesty in chapter 4. He doesn't rush past the tears of the oppressed. He looks at them. A lot of people scroll past suffering in the news because it's too much to take in. That's understandable. But God sees every tear, and He calls His people to be comforters. You can't fix every injustice in the world, but you can comfort the person in front of you, and you can speak up when you see someone being crushed.

KEY VERSE

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls, and doesn't have another to lift him up.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Preacher was so troubled that the oppressed had no comforter? How could you be a comforter to someone?
2. How much of what you do is driven by comparison? What would change if it weren't?
3. Who are the people who would pick you up if you fell? Whose cord are you part of?
4. What do you think it means to let your words be few before God?

TRY THIS *Reach out to someone who might be lonely this week. Sit with them, invite them somewhere, or send them an encouraging message. Then thank God for one friend who has picked you up when you fell.*

CHAPTER 4

Money, Unfairness, and Today's Gifts

Ecclesiastes 5:8–10:20

If you could have any amount of money, how much would be enough? Most people, when they're honest, would say: a little more than I have now. The Preacher saw right through that. "He who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity."

That's one of the most accurate sentences ever written about money. If you love money, you'll never have enough. Every raise becomes the new normal. Every purchase creates a new want. Studies of lottery winners and wealthy people often find that, after a short burst of happiness, they're no more satisfied than before.

The Preacher notices more problems with wealth. When your stuff increases, so do the people who want a piece of it. Rich people worry so much about their money that they can't sleep, while "The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much." And in the end, you can't take any of it with you. "As he came out of his mother's womb, naked shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labor, which he may carry away in his hand."

REAL TALK **Never Enough**

Advertisers spend billions of dollars every year trying to convince you that you need something you don't have. Influencers show off hauls, unboxings, and luxury lifestyles. It's easy to feel like you'll finally be happy once you get the right shoes, the right phone, or the right car. Ecclesiastes says that's a trap. Jesus said the same thing: "Beware! Keep yourselves from covetousness, for a man's life doesn't consist of the abundance of the things which he possesses." A good practice is to notice the moment you start wanting something. Ask yourself, Will this really satisfy me? Wait a week before buying anything big. And practice gratitude for what you already have.

But then the Preacher says something that surprises people who think Ecclesiastes is just gloomy. "Behold, that which I have seen to be good and proper is for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy good in all his labor, in which he labors under the sun, all the days of his life which God has given him; for this is his portion."

He goes on to say that when God gives someone wealth and the ability to enjoy it, "this is the gift of God." Money isn't evil. Possessions aren't evil. The ability to enjoy them is a gift from God. The problem comes when you love them, worship them, or think they can give you ultimate meaning.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Enjoyment Refrain**

Seven times in Ecclesiastes, the Preacher pauses his hard observations to say something like: there's nothing better than to eat, drink, and enjoy your work, because it's a gift from God. You can find these refrains in chapters 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 11. Some readers have thought the Preacher was being cynical, as if he were saying, life is meaningless, so you might as well party. But the refrains always connect enjoyment to God's hand and God's gift. Most Christian readers see them as glimmers of light breaking through the clouds. When you stop trying to squeeze ultimate meaning out of life, you're finally free to enjoy it.

The middle chapters of Ecclesiastes, 6 through 10, are a collection of observations and proverbs. Some are about the shortness of life. “A good name is better than fine perfume.” Some are about wisdom in daily life. “Don’t be hasty in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools.” Some are about nostalgia. “Don’t say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For you do not ask wisely about this.” There’s even one about how a little foolishness can ruin a lot of wisdom. “Dead flies cause the oil of the perfumer to produce an evil odor; so does a little folly outweigh wisdom and honor.” One dumb post can ruin a good reputation.

One of the most surprising lines says it’s better to go to a funeral than to a party, because a funeral reminds you that life is short. “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men, and the living should take this to heart.” That isn’t morbid. It’s wise. Remembering that your life is limited can help you spend it on what matters.

> **REAL TALK** **Good Days and Hard Days**
>
> “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider.” That’s simple but powerful advice. When life is going well, enjoy it, and don’t feel guilty for being happy. When life is hard, stop and think. Ask what you can learn, who you can lean on, and how God might be at work. Both kinds of days come from God’s hand, and both are part of your story.

The Preacher also faces one of life’s most frustrating realities: it’s unfair. Sometimes good people get treated like the wicked deserve, and wicked people get treated like the good deserve. The Preacher calls that hevel. He sees that no one, however wise, can figure out all of God’s work under the sun. The harder you try, the more it slips away.

And then he writes a line that every student, athlete, and job seeker should know. “I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.”

The fastest runner doesn’t always win. The strongest army doesn’t always win. The smartest person doesn’t always get the job. The most skilled person doesn’t always get noticed. Sometimes the runner trips. Sometimes someone gets sick on the day of the test. Sometimes the other person just happened to know the coach.

> **REAL TALK** **When Life Isn’t Fair**
>
> You might work incredibly hard and still not make the team. You might study for weeks and still bomb the test. You might be the best candidate and still not get chosen. That hurts, and Ecclesiastes doesn’t pretend it doesn’t. But it also frees you from a dangerous lie: that everything that happens to you is a perfect reflection of your worth. It’s not. Time and chance happen to everyone. Work hard, because diligence matters. But don’t measure your value by your results. Your worth was settled by God before you ever stepped onto the field. And if something unfair is happening because of real injustice, like discrimination, bullying, or abuse, speak up and tell a trusted adult.

So how do you live in a world like that? The Preacher’s answer in chapter 9 is one of the most joyful passages in the Bible. “Go your way—eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works.” Wear clean clothes. Enjoy the people you love. Love your spouse someday, if God gives you one. Enjoy your days, because they are your portion.

And then: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.” Life is short, and you don’t know what tomorrow will bring. So don’t wait. Do what’s in front of you, and do it with your whole heart. Paul

said something similar: “whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”

REAL TALK **Today’s Simple Gifts**

What are the simple gifts in your life? Maybe it’s a really good sandwich. A sunset. A song that gives you chills. Laughing with your friends until your stomach hurts. A hug from your mom. A walk with your dog. A hot shower on a cold day. The first warm day of spring. Ecclesiastes says those aren’t small things. They’re gifts from God’s hand. You can’t make them your ultimate meaning, but you can receive them with joy and gratitude. Try putting your phone down and paying attention. Joy is often hiding in ordinary moments.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is Ecclesiastes Contradicting Itself?**

Readers have long noticed that Ecclesiastes seems to say opposite things. Wisdom is better than folly, but the wise and foolish die alike. Life is hateful, but life is sweet. Enjoy your work, but work is chasing after wind. Some readers think the Preacher is quoting ideas and then answering them. Others think he is honestly recording how life feels from different angles, the way a journal might. Others see the tension as the point: under the sun, life really is both beautiful and broken, and only God can hold it together. Ancient Jewish teachers debated whether the book belonged in Scripture because of these tensions, and they concluded that it did, because it begins and ends with words of truth and the fear of God.

The middle chapters also contain a famous warning about trying too hard to be perfect. The Preacher notes that there is not a righteous person on earth who always does good and never sins. That’s humbling and freeing at the same time. You’re going to mess up. Everyone does. Wisdom isn’t pretending to be perfect. It’s being honest about your failures, asking for forgiveness, and getting back up.

There’s also wisdom here about anger, patience, and pride. “The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.” Patience is a quiet

kind of strength. It waits instead of exploding. It listens instead of interrupting. It lets things play out instead of forcing them. In a culture that wants everything instantly, patience is almost a superpower.

Chapter 9 also says that a living dog is better than a dead lion. In the ancient world, dogs were not cute pets. They were scavengers, and calling someone a dog was an insult. Lions were the kings of the animals. But the Preacher says a living dog is better off, because the living still have hope. As long as you are alive, there is hope. That's worth remembering on your hardest days. Your story isn't over.

REAL TALK **Gratitude Changes Your Brain**

Researchers who study happiness have found that people who regularly practice gratitude, such as writing down things they're thankful for, often report feeling happier and less stressed. The Preacher got there long before scientists did. Contentment doesn't come from getting more. It comes from noticing and receiving what you've already been given. Paul wrote from a prison cell that he had learned to be content in every situation. Contentment is something you learn, and you can start practicing it today.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sheol**

In chapter 9, the Preacher says there is no work or plan or knowledge in Sheol, where you are going. Sheol is the Hebrew word for the grave or the realm of the dead. Much of the Old Testament speaks about it in shadowy terms, as a place of silence where the dead are cut off from life under the sun. Readers disagree about how much the Preacher knew about life after death. Some think he simply didn't know. Others think he was speaking only about this world, from the under the sun view. Over time, God revealed more, through prophets like Daniel, who spoke of people rising from the dust, and finally through Jesus, who rose from the dead and promised eternal life to all who trust Him. The Preacher's point still stands: you only get this life once, so live it fully now.

REAL TALK **When Chance Feels Cruel**

Time and chance can cut deeper than losing a game. Sometimes a car accident, a diagnosis, a layoff, or a natural disaster changes everything in a moment, and it seems completely random. Ecclesiastes doesn't give a neat explanation, and neither should we. But the rest of the Bible says that even what feels like chance is not outside God's care. Jesus said not a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father, and that you are worth more than many sparrows. You can grieve, ask hard questions, and be angry about what happened, and God can handle it. If a sudden loss has left you struggling to cope, please talk to a parent, school counselor, or pastor. You don't have to carry it alone.

KEY VERSE

He who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think people who love money are never satisfied?
2. When have you seen time and chance affect the outcome of something, even when someone worked hard?
3. What's the difference between enjoying God's gifts and worshiping them?
4. What are three simple gifts you've enjoyed this week?

TRY THIS *Keep a gift list for one week. Every day, write down three simple gifts from God that you enjoyed. At the end of the week, read the whole list and thank Him.*

CHAPTER 5

Remember Your Creator

Ecclesiastes 11–12

The last two chapters of Ecclesiastes are written directly to young people. After eleven chapters of experiments and observations, the Preacher turns to you.

He starts with some advice about taking risks. "Cast your bread on the waters; for you shall find it after many days." That might sound strange, but it probably means something like: be generous, invest boldly, and take good risks, because your efforts will pay off in ways you can't predict. He adds, "Give a portion to seven, yes, even to eight." Spread your generosity and your efforts widely.

Then he warns against waiting for the perfect moment. "He who observes the wind won't sow; and he who regards the clouds won't reap." If a farmer waits until the weather is perfect, he'll never plant anything. "In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening don't withhold your hand; for you don't know which will prosper."

> **REAL TALK** **Waiting for Perfect**
>
> Do you ever put things off until conditions are perfect? I'll start working out when I have more time. I'll try out for the play when I'm more confident. I'll talk to that person when I know exactly what to say. I'll start reading my Bible when life calms down. The Preacher says if you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never do anything. You don't know which of your efforts will succeed.

> So sow your seed anyway. Try the thing. Send the application. Start the habit. Some seeds won't grow, but some will.

Then he says something wonderful about youth. "Truly the light is sweet, and it is a pleasant thing for the eyes to see the sun." Life is good. Enjoy it. "Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment."

Notice the balance. The Preacher isn't telling young people to stop having fun. He's telling them to enjoy life, follow their dreams, and see the world. But he adds a reminder: you're accountable to God for how you live. Freedom and responsibility go together.

And then comes the verse this whole book has been building toward. "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near, when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Remember**
>
> In the Bible, to remember doesn't just mean to think about something. It means to act on it, to pay attention, and to live in light of it. When God remembers His people, He acts to help them. When the Preacher tells you to remember your Creator, he's telling you to put God at the center of your life now, not someday. The word Creator is a reminder that God made you. You belong to Him. Your life is His gift, and He knows how it's supposed to work.

Why remember Him in your youth? Because youth is when habits form, when the direction of your life is set, and when you have the most energy and time. And because, as the Preacher goes on to describe, youth doesn't last.

What follows is one of the most vivid poems in the Bible, a picture of growing old. The Preacher describes it like a great house falling into ruin. The sun, moon, and stars grow dark, perhaps a picture of failing eyesight or the joy fading from life. “The keepers of the house shall tremble,” which might be shaking hands or arms. “The strong men shall bow themselves,” probably bent legs or back. “The grinders cease because they are few,” which most readers take as losing teeth. “Those who look out of the windows are darkened,” eyes going dim.

The poem continues. The doors to the street are shut, maybe hearing fading. Old people wake up early at the sound of a bird. They’re afraid of heights and of falling. “The almond tree shall blossom,” which many think pictures white hair, since almond blossoms are white. The grasshopper drags itself along, slow and heavy. Desire fails.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Reading the Poem of Aging**

Interpreters have different views on the details of Ecclesiastes 12. Many read it as a symbolic description of the human body growing old: arms, legs, teeth, eyes, ears, and hair. Others read it as a picture of a household or a village shutting down after a death, with servants trembling and mourners in the streets. Still others see it as a storm darkening the world. These views can overlap. Whatever the details, the message is clear: life is short, bodies age, and death comes to everyone. The Preacher isn’t trying to scare young people. He’s trying to wake them up.

Then the poem ends with death, pictured as a silver cord snapping and a golden bowl breaking, a pitcher shattered at the spring and a wheel broken at the well. “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” Earlier, in chapter 3, the Preacher asked who knows whether the spirit goes upward. Here, he gives an answer: the spirit returns to God.

REAL TALK **Old People in Your Life**

Think about the older people in your life: grandparents, great-aunts, elderly neighbors, people at church. They were once young, just like you. They had dreams, crushes, friends, and fears. Many of them have wisdom you won't find on the internet. Ecclesiastes 12 is a reminder to honor them, listen to their stories, and spend time with them while you can. Ask a grandparent what they wish they'd known at your age. You might be surprised by what you learn. And remember that one day, if God gives you a long life, you'll be the one with white hair, hoping someone younger will listen.

REAL TALK **Thinking About Death**

Ecclesiastes talks about death a lot, and that can feel heavy or even scary. It's normal to wonder what happens when we die, or to feel anxious about losing people you love. Thinking about death isn't morbid when it helps you live wisely. Moses prayed, "So teach us to count our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Counting your days means remembering that they're limited, so you spend them on what matters most. But if thoughts about death are constant, frightening, or make you feel like you want to die, please talk to a trusted adult or counselor, or call or text 988. You don't have to sort through those feelings alone.

The book comes back around to where it began. "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher. 'All is vanity!'" Everything under the sun is vapor.

Then a narrator steps in to sum things up. He says the Preacher was wise, and he carefully arranged many proverbs and sought out words of truth. "The words of the wise are like goads." A goad was a sharp stick farmers used to poke oxen and keep them moving in the right direction. Wise words sting sometimes, but they keep you on track. He also says, with a touch of humor that every student will appreciate, "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."

And then comes the bottom line of the entire book. “This is the end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it is good, or whether it is evil.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Bottom Line**

After all the experiments, observations, frustrations, and joys, Ecclesiastes ends simply. Fear God. Keep His commandments. Remember that God sees everything and will judge it. That might sound heavy, but it’s actually the answer to the whole book. If everything under the sun is vapor, then meaning must come from above the sun. And if God will judge every work, then our lives aren’t meaningless after all. What we do matters to Him. The fear of God here means awe, reverence, and trust, the same fear Proverbs opened with: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Here’s a fascinating detail: Ecclesiastes never once uses God’s personal covenant name, the LORD. It always simply says God, the Creator above the sun, which fits a book looking at life from ground level. Wisdom starts with the fear of God, and Ecclesiastes ends there.

The judgment the Preacher mentions can sound frightening, and it is serious. But it also means that nothing is wasted or forgotten by God. Every hidden kindness, every quiet act of faithfulness, every tear, every wrong done to the oppressed, God sees it all. Under the sun, injustice often wins and good deeds go unnoticed. But under the sun isn’t the end of the story.

REAL TALK **Don’t Wait Until Later**

A lot of people think, I’ll get serious about God later. When I’m older. After college. Once I’ve had my fun. The Preacher’s advice is the opposite: remember Him now. Not because God wants to take away your fun, but because life with Him is the best life there is, and because none of us knows how many days we have. Paul told young Timothy not to let anyone look

down on him because he was young, but to set an example in speech, life, love, faith, and purity. You don't have to wait to matter to God or to serve Him. Your faith can be real right now.

It's striking that Ecclesiastes saves its most direct appeal for the young. The Preacher had already lived his life, made his mistakes, and tested every path. Now he turns to the next generation and essentially says, Don't do what I did. Don't spend your life chasing the wind and discover too late that it was empty. Start with God. Build your life on Him from the beginning, and enjoy every good gift along the way.

That doesn't mean you'll never struggle with the things Ecclesiastes describes. You'll still feel restless sometimes. You'll still be tempted to chase clout, money, pleasure, and achievement. You'll still face unfairness and loss. But you'll face them with a Creator you remember, a God who is above the sun and who holds your life in His hands.

The image of the silver cord and the golden bowl is also worth pausing on. Silver and gold are precious. The point is that a human life is valuable, even though it's fragile. You are precious to God, not because you're impressive, rich, or famous, but because He made you. That's the deepest answer to the emptiness the Preacher felt. Your life isn't vapor to God. He made you, He knows you, and He remembers you.

REAL TALK **Cast Your Bread**

Casting your bread on the waters can look like a lot of things at your age. Being kind to the new kid. Helping a younger sibling with homework. Giving some of your babysitting money to a family in need. Practicing your instrument when no one is listening. Volunteering at a food pantry. Saying yes to a chance to serve at church. You might not see the results right away, and

you might never find out how much it mattered. But the Preacher says you'll find it after many days. Generosity and faithfulness have a way of coming back around, often in ways you'd never expect.

KEY VERSE

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them;"

Ecclesiastes 12:1 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the Preacher wants young people to remember God now and not later?
2. What seed have you been waiting to sow until conditions are perfect?
3. How does knowing that life is short change how you want to live?
4. Why do you think Ecclesiastes ends with fear God and keep His commandments?

TRY THIS *Ask an older person you know what they wish they had known at your age, and write down their answer. Then write a short prayer asking God to help you remember Him in the days of your youth.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Ecclesiastes aches because, under the sun, death seems to get the last word. The wise die like fools. The rich leave their money to someone else. The hardest worker and the laziest person end up in the same grave. Again and again, the Preacher runs into that wall. And yet he also senses that God has set eternity in our hearts. We were made for more than vapor.

Jewish readers treasure Ecclesiastes for its honesty and its call to fear God and enjoy His gifts. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw that the Preacher's deepest questions find their answer in Jesus. Paul wrote that creation "was subjected to vanity," using the same word the Greek translation used for hevel, but "in hope" that it "will be delivered from the bondage of decay." Jesus stepped under the sun. He lived an ordinary human life, worked with His hands, ate and drank with friends, wept at a grave, and died. Then He did what no one under the sun had ever done. He rose from the dead. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Because He lives, death doesn't get the last word anymore. And that changes everything about ordinary life. Paul wrote, "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." In Jesus, nothing done for Him is vapor.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He set eternity in your heart, so nothing less than Him will ever fully satisfy.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Ecclesiastes says there is not a righteous person on earth who never sins. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus stepped under the sun and beat death.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, so death doesn't get the last word.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The Preacher tried to earn meaning and came up empty. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Remember your Creator.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. The Preacher would tell you to let your words be few and honest. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've chased things that couldn't satisfy me, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus stepped into this world, died for my sins, and rose from the dead, so that death doesn't get the last word. Forgive me, and make me Yours. Fill the emptiness in my heart that nothing else can fill. Help me remember You now, in my youth, and enjoy the good gifts You give without making them my god. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Ecclesiastes 3 and 12, then 1 Corinthians 15, the chapter about how Jesus beat death.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Enjoy a simple gift. Share a meal with people you love this week, and thank God for it out loud.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. The Preacher asked hard questions for twelve chapters. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Ecclesiastes is right, everything under the sun is vapor, and the only thing that lasts is the God above it, who is calling you to remember Him now.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (WEB)