

The name Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek translation of a Hebrew term that occurs repeatedly in this book. The term likely refers to “someone who addresses an assembly.” These are therefore the collected words of a “teacher” or “preacher,” just as a note at the end of the book informs us: *Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.* The Teacher describes himself as having been *king over Israel in Jerusalem*, and the editor introduces him with the title *son of David*. Both of these mean that he was in the royal line of Judah. He is not further identified, and while tradition identifies him with Solomon, who was renowned for his wisdom, it is appropriate to leave this cloak of anonymity in place.

The words of the Teacher himself begin and end with the declaration, *Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!* As we discover from the teachings of the rest of the book, this phrase warns us that all of the rewards we work for and expect in life are actually uncertain, fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying. The Teacher pursues this insight, and the problem it poses for living, in a long discourse that shifts back and forth between prose and poetry, and between autobiography and exhortation. The book has no clear structure or progression, in keeping with the picture of the world it presents. Instead, it makes observations and poses questions, returning to one theme after another like the wind it describes as *going round and round . . . ever returning on its course*. The words of the Teacher are provocative and unsettling, and the editor who presents them thus recognizes that they will serve as “goads” to prod readers out of their complacent assumptions and make them examine the course they have chosen in life.

The basic issue addressed in the book is the futility that commonly reveals itself in how things turn out in life. It is true, the Teacher says, that there are joys and satisfactions that the uncertainty of life often does not threaten. These include finding joy in one’s daily work, as well as in friendship and marriage. But when he says *What is crooked cannot be straightened*, he reminds us that something has intruded to make our world wrong somehow. *Under the sun*, where we all live, there are no guarantees about the results of our efforts. This fits right into the larger Jewish story told in the rest of the Scriptures. Setting things right again is what this bigger drama is about. The Teacher, however, does not tell us about God’s attempts at straightening the world. He is content in the end to inform us that God is still the sovereign over all things and it is our duty to follow his ways for living, for he *will bring every deed into judgment*.

Ecclesiastes

The words of the Teacher,^a son of David, king in Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”

What does anyone gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?

Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?

It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

There is no remembrance of people of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on the human race! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

I said to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem^a as well—the delights of a man’s heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my labor,
and this was the reward for all my toil.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.

Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.

What more can the king's successor do
than what has already been done?

I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.

The wise have eyes in their heads,
while fools walk in the darkness;

but I came to realize
that the same fate overtakes them both.

Then I said to myself,

“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?”

I said to myself,
“This too is meaningless.”

For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
the days have already come when both have been forgotten.

Like the fool, the wise too must die!

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For people may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to others who have not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

People can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,

a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

Whatever is has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account.*

And I saw something else under the sun:

In the place of judgment—wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

I said to myself,

“God will bring into judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity,
a time to judge every deed.”

I also said to myself, “As for human beings, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath*; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”

So I saw that there is nothing better for people than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.

And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,

are happier than the living,
who are still alive.

But better than both
is the one who has not yet been,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.

And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Fools fold their hands
and ruin themselves.

Better one handful with tranquillity
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.

There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”

This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:

If they fall down,
they can help each other up.

But pity those who fall
and have no one to help them up!

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.

God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.

A dream comes when there are many cares,
and many words mark the speech of a fool.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.

If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

Those who love money never have enough;
those who love wealth are never satisfied with their income.
This too is meaningless.

As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.

And what benefit are they to the owners
except to feast their eyes on them?

The sleep of laborers is sweet,
whether they eat little or much,
but the abundance of the rich
permits them no sleep.

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:

wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,
or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when they have children
there is nothing left for them to inherit.

Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb,
and as everyone comes, so they depart.

They take nothing from their toil
that they can carry in their hands.

This too is a grievous evil:

As everyone comes, so they depart,
and what do they gain,
since they toil for the wind?

All their days they eat in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.

This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for people to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives people wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.

I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on the human race: God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

Everyone's toil is for the mouth,
yet the appetite is never satisfied.

What advantage have the wise over fools?

What do the poor gain
by knowing how to conduct themselves before others?

Better what the eye sees
than the roving of the appetite.

This too is meaningless,
a chasing after the wind.

Whatever exists has already been named,
and what humanity is has been known;
no one can contend
with someone who is stronger.

The more the words,
the less the meaning,
and how does that profit anyone?

For who knows what is good for people in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?

A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.

It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart.

Frustration is better than laughter,
because a sad face is good for the heart.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person
than to listen to the song of fools.

Like the crackling of thorns under the pot,
so is the laughter of fools.

This too is meaningless.

Extortion turns the wise into fools,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.

The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,
for anger resides in the lap of fools.

Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?"
For it is not wise to ask such questions.

Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing
and benefits those who see the sun.

Wisdom is a shelter
as money is a shelter,

but the advantage of knowledge is this:
Wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.

Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?

When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider:

God has made the one
as well as the other.

Therefore, you cannot discover
anything about your future.

In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

the righteous perishing in their righteousness,
and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

Do not be overrighteous,
neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?

Do not be overwicked,
and do not be a fool—
why die before your time?

It is good to grasp the one
and not let go of the other.
Whoever fears God will avoid all *extremes*.^a

Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful
than ten rulers in a city.

Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous,
no one who does what is right and never sins.

Do not pay attention to every word people say,
or you may hear your servant cursing you—
for you know in your heart
that many times you yourself have cursed others.

All this I tested by wisdom and I said,

“I am determined to be wise”—
but this was beyond me.

Whatever exists is far off and most profound—
who can discover it?

So I turned my mind to understand,
to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things
and to understand the stupidity of wickedness
and the madness of folly.

I find more bitter than death
the woman who is a snare,
whose heart is a trap
and whose hands are chains.

The man who pleases God will escape her,
but the sinner she will ensnare.

“Look,” says the Teacher,^b “this is what I have discovered:

“Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—
while I was still searching
but not finding—

I found one [upright] man among a thousand,
but not one [upright] woman among them all.

This only have I found:

God created humankind upright,
but they have gone in search of many schemes.”

Who is like the wise?

Who knows the explanation of things?

Wisdom brightens the face
and changes its hard appearance.

Obey the king’s command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him, “What are you doing?”

Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm,
and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.

For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter,
though a person may be weighed down by misery.

Since no one knows the future,
who can say what is to come?

As no one has power over the wind to contain it,
so no one has power over the time of their death.

As no one is discharged in time of war,
so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own^a hurt. Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise^b in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.

When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth—people getting no sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. People toil to search it out, but no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it.

So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad,* the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good,
so with the sinful;
as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.

This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope*—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even their name is forgotten.
Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.

Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so people are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.

The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one sinner destroys much good.

As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left.

Even as fools walk along the road,
they lack sense
and show everyone how stupid they are.

If a ruler's anger rises against you,
do not leave your post;
calmness can lay great offenses to rest.

There is an evil I have seen under the sun,
the sort of error that arises from a ruler:

Fools are put in many high positions,
while the rich occupy the low ones.

I have seen slaves on horseback,
while princes go on foot like slaves.

Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.

Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them;
whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

If the ax is dull
and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed,
but skill will bring success.

If a snake bites before it is charmed,
the charmer receives no fee.

Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious,
but fools are consumed by their own lips.

At the beginning their words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness—
and fools multiply words.

No one knows what is coming—
who can tell them what will happen after them?

The toil of fools wearies them;
they do not know the way to town.

Woe to the land whose king was a servant⁷
and whose princes feast in the morning.
Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth
and whose princes eat at a proper time—
for strength and not for drunkenness.

Through laziness, the rafters sag;
because of idle hands, the house leaks.

A feast is made for laughter,
wine makes life merry,
and money is the answer for everything.

Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,
because a bird in the sky may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

Ship your grain across the sea;
after many days you may receive a return.
Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;
you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

If clouds are full of water,
they pour rain on the earth.

Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where it falls, there it will lie.
Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed⁷ in a mother's womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things.

Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,

for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.

Light is sweet,
and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

However many years anyone may live,
let them enjoy them all.

But let them remember the days of darkness,
for there will be many.
Everything to come is meaningless.

You who are young, be happy while you are young,
and let your hearts give you joy in the days of your youth.

Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you into judgment.

So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigor are meaningless.

Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them”—

before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;
when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
when people are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags itself along
and desire no longer is stirred.

Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.

Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
and the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
and the wheel broken at the well,
and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Everything is meaningless!”

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd.¹ Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the *ḥ* duty of every human being.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.

Ecclesiastes Endnotes

Page 1179 *the Teacher*: Or *the leader of the assembly*;
also in subsequent text

Page 1180 *and a harem*: The meaning of the Hebrew
for this phrase is uncertain.

Page 1182 *God . . . account*: Or *God calls back the past*

Page 1182 *breath*: Or *spirit*

Page 1187 *will avoid all extremes*: Or *will follow them
both*

Page 1187 *the Teacher*: Or *the leader of the assembly*

Page 1188 *over the wind to contain it, / so*: Or *over the
human spirit to retain it, / and so*

Page 1188 *to his own*: Or *to their*

Page 1188 *and receive praise*: Some Hebrew
manuscripts and Septuagint (Aquila); most
Hebrew manuscripts *and are forgotten*

Page 1189 *and the bad*: Septuagint (Aquila), Vulgate
and Syriac; Hebrew does not have *and the bad*.

Page 1189 *Anyone . . . hope*: Or *What then is to be
chosen? With all who live, there is hope*

Page 1191 *king was a servant*: Or *king is a child*

Page 1191 *know . . . formed*: Or *know how life (or the
spirit) / enters the body being formed*

Page 1193 *the Teacher*: Or *the leader of the assembly*;
also in next paragraph

Page 1193 *shepherd*: Or *Shepherd*

