

Enjoy Life!

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2; 2:18-25; 9:7-10

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Prayer of illumination: *May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

Are you a skeptic or a true believer? A skeptic is someone who questions things, evaluates sources, analyzes arguments. Skeptics demand evidence. They're critical thinkers.

A true believer, on the other hand, is often all-in. Easily convinced, accepting claims at face value.

My wife, Des, is a skeptic. She asks questions. She challenges even her doctors. She doesn't hesitate to change them if she isn't fully convinced of the diagnosis.

Me? I'm the opposite. I tend to believe what I hear. I'm gullible. I'm the favorite of scammers who knock on the church's door asking for money.

Now, if you're a skeptic, Ecclesiastes is your book in the Bible. A skeptical and critical thread runs throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. The author asks hard questions as he observes a lot of inconsistencies in the world. He doubts traditional wisdom's attempts to explain these contradictions. He looks straight in the face and says, "This makes no sense!"

And with that, let's dive into Ecclesiastes. My plan is to do a three-part series on this intriguing book. Curiously, it's seldom included in the lectionary. Maybe many preachers don't like its brutal honesty, raw skepticism, and dark view of reality. That's hardly new. The rabbis almost didn't include it either in the Hebrew canon, the list of authoritative writings in the Old Testament.

But first, some necessary background on the book.

Ecclesiastes is one of the Old Testament's "wisdom books," if you will, along with Proverbs and Job. These books explore what's called "practical

wisdom”—how to live well, how to make good choices, how to navigate life, and understand life’s deeper meaning.¹

But Ecclesiastes is different.

Proverbs says: *Live right and things will go well for you.* Ecclesiastes says: *Not always. Sometimes, life makes no sense.*

Ecclesiastes, therefore, is a kind of "anti-Wisdom" book, if you will. Like Job, it challenges the traditional and optimistic idea that life is fair or predictable. While Proverbs claims that life is basically good, that evil is punished and the righteous rewarded, the writer of Ecclesiastes, who calls himself “the Teacher,” or *Qoheleth* in Hebrew, meaning “one who gathers an assembly, ” says not so. Why? As he observes life, he sees a lot of contradictions. The righteous suffer. The wicked prospers. This is, in fact, the problem that the book of Job addresses—the suffering of the innocent. For the author Ecclesiastes, life doesn’t make sense. Meaningless. Absurd.

As such, Ecclesiastes reflects the theme of the Theater of the Absurd—a dramatic genre from the 1950s that explores the idea that life is inherently meaningless and the universe is indifferent to human existence.

By the way, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther translated Qoheleth as “the Preacher.” But I’ll stick with “Teacher.” Apologies to our Lutheran friends from Emanuel. After all, in Congregational churches like ours, it’s the moderator who calls or gathers the church for a meeting, not the preacher. Just a little inside joke.

On a more serious note, this anti-wisdom sense in Ecclesiastes is seen in the opening lines of the book.

Vanities of vanities, says the Teacher,
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity (1:2).

The keyword here is *vanity*—used 38 times in the book. That tells us how crucial the word is to understanding Ecclesiastes. Today, we use the word

¹ See Richard J. Clifford, S.J., “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. V, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

vanity to mean egotism, self-absorption, excessive pride in one's qualities, abilities, achievements, etc.

But the Hebrew word is *hebel*. It means vapor, mist, breath, wind. Something that evaporates, so the basic idea is something that's fleeting, ephemeral, lasting only for a very short time, here for a moment, then gone.

So when the Teacher says, "*All is vanity*," he means, "*Everything is temporary, fleeting, absurd, and out of our control.*"

That includes us. We live, we die—and that's the end of the story. Whether you're rich or poor, wise or foolish, righteous or wicked—we all die. Death is the great equalizer.

"Vanity of vanities," says the Teacher. "All is vanity." It sounds like a suicide note, as one writer said. The meaninglessness of it all, etc.²

The teacher says he tried everything to find meaning and purpose in life.

- He pursued wisdom.
- He indulged in pleasure.
- He built grand projects.
- He gathered wealth and possessions.

But in the end, he says: "I considered all that my hands had done... and all was vanity and a chasing after wind" (2:11).

Even work, he says, is futile. Pointless. Why? Because everything you build or earn will be left to someone else. And you can't control what they'll do with it.

He writes:

"All their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." (2:23)

That sounds familiar, doesn't it?

² Ray Waddle, *Against the Grain: The Unconventional Wisdom from Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: The Upper Room Books, 2005), 22.

Have you heard of the term *The Great Resignation*? Following the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in early 2021, American workers voluntarily quit their jobs in record numbers. There were many reasons, of course, but a huge factor was that many employees realized their jobs did not bring joy and fulfillment even as they worked longer hours under increasing pressure. They were exhausted. Stressed out. Unfulfilled. In such circumstances, quitting a job is an act of protest and radical self-care. There's no virtue in stressful work for its own.

I was also a part of the Great Resignation. I resigned from my former church in early 2021, but not because I was exploited. Let me be clear. My church was loving and generous. They supported me through surgery and rehab, giving me my full salary during the two months of recuperation, for which I will be forever grateful.

So why did I quit? Was I exhausted? Burnt out? Who wasn't affected by the pandemic?

Now I have fulfilled my role. I did my job. Kept my end of the bargain, as it were. But something was missing. Something inside me had shifted. A sense that what I was doing no longer made sense to me. And it wasn't the fault of my church.

Maybe that's what the writer of Ecclesiastes was getting at—that even good work can feel meaningless if we've lost touch with our deeper purpose. Jordan Peterson, a well-known psychologist, makes a similar point in his book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, and so does David Brooks in his book *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*. They say to aim for purpose and meaning in life, rather than making happiness the main goal. When your life is filled with purpose and meaning, you'll often find that happiness naturally follows. Because happiness is a by-product, a reward of doing something truly meaningful.

Thankfully, for our passage this morning, the Teacher ends with words of hope and comfort. He doesn't leave us in despair. He comes to a quiet, surprising conclusion:

He said, "There is nothing better for human beings than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (2:24).

He's not talking about shallow pleasure. He's talking about simple, small pleasures that offer some fulfillment, things like (9:7-10):

- Eating good food
- Drinking wine (or beer, if you prefer!)
- Wearing nice clothes that make you feel good.
- Enjoying life with the partner whom you love.

Yes, life is fleeting. Ephemeral. Transient. It's here today, gone tomorrow. We're not immortal, but that's precisely why we should savor the simple pleasures and gifts God gives us while we have them.

In other words, seize the day!" *Carpe diem*. Make the most of the present moment. Take a chance on life. Embrace risk and uncertainty.

The Teacher's message is clear: "Seize the day!" Embrace the present moment. How? Cherish connections and experiences. Hug loved ones more tightly; go on regular dates. Take time off to relax. If wanderlust strikes, explore new places or move to a new city. New cultures aren't just adventures; they expand your worldview.

And please, enjoy good food! Grab that ice cream and those burgers, egg rolls and fried chicken, while they're still affordable. We all know prices seem to be going up, not going down as promised.

So, eat, drink, and be merry, says the Teacher. Enjoy life because tomorrow we die, and it'll be too late.

Earlier, we've talked about how if you're a skeptic, the Book of Ecclesiastes might just be for you. Because it really grapples with the idea that life can feel absurd, fleeting, and often doesn't make much sense.

But here's the thing: even in all that, there are simple pleasures we can truly enjoy. So enjoy life because life is a gift, a divine offering. And within this gift are a myriad of simple joys and pleasures: your morning coffee, a walk in the park, the smell of flowers in your garden, laughter with friends, and the warm embrace of the one you love. These are not fleeting

moments. They aren't the ultimate meaning of life, but they are good gifts God meant for us to savor.

And if you live your life full of gratitude for these simple gifts, then you're living wisely. Yours, then, is a meaningful life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.