

# Meaning

**FOR YOUR LABOR**

A Daily Devotional from the Book of Ecclesiastes

BY BRENT NIEDERGALL

# Meaning for Your Labor

By Brent Niedergall

Copyright © 2023 by Positive Action for Christ, Inc. P.O. Box 700,  
502 W. Pippen Street, Whitakers, NC 27891.

All rights reserved. No part may be reproduced in any manner without  
permission in writing from the publisher.

Scripture quotations are from the *ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®)*,  
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.  
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

First printing, 2023

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-59557-379-7

Edited by Kristi Dozier, Christa Lord, and Miya Nakamura

Cover by Josh Ludlow

Published by



## Preface

Reading Ecclesiastes can feel like attempting to decipher a puzzle wrapped in a riddle and folded up inside a fortune cookie. Solomon's work is filled with provocative tensions, difficult observations, and surprising conclusions. But this transparent struggle to find meaning in life speaks to our own concern for true fulfillment.

Although Ecclesiastes may seem inscrutable, like a goldmine it offers rich reward to those who wrestle with its truths. This verse-by-verse devotional reveals that God offers true meaning for the lives of each of His children. He has designed us to find fulfillment in Him, and He offers Himself freely.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Brent Niedergall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "B".

Brent Niedergall

Rocky Mount, North Carolina

# The Wisest Tour Guide

## Ecclesiastes 1:1

*“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”*

---

What if Thomas Jefferson could lead you on a tour of Monticello? Or what if you could tour Gettysburg Battlefield under the direction of General Meade and General Lee? These would be well-qualified guides for such tours. If we had access to the wisest person who ever lived, we would have a well-qualified guide to help us discover purpose in life. Thankfully, God has graciously provided such a guide in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Our tour guide is King Solomon. And, with this brief introduction, Solomon identifies his position and purpose behind writing this book. Although Solomon does not identify himself as the author by name, he was the only son of David to reign as king in Jerusalem. The Bible records that the Lord blessed King Solomon with a level of wisdom and discernment beyond that which anyone has had before or since (1 Kings 3:12).

As for this book’s purpose, it contains the words of the Preacher. The Hebrew word translated *preacher* refers to “the leader of the assembly.”<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes, the name we know this book by, comes from the Greek translation of this Hebrew word. The Book of Ecclesiastes contains Solomon’s wise words to the assembly. It’s an autobiographical account of Solomon’s grappling with wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we can think of this book as a master class on wisdom. It equips us to navigate life with skill. Thank the Lord we can study wisdom in His Word by reading words written by the wisest man of all time.

**Final Thought:** Devote yourself to the study of wisdom.

---

1 David J. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), s.v. “עֲלֵיָהוּ.”

2 Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 284.

# Meaning Amid Meaninglessness

## Ecclesiastes 1:2

*“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”*

---

King Solomon, the incomparably wise Preacher, wastes no time in announcing his overall message. All is meaningless! Out of the eight Hebrew words in this sentence, five are the word *hebel* which is translated here as “vanity.” Solomon uses this word 38 times in Ecclesiastes. Because this word plays such a central role in Ecclesiastes, understanding its meaning is essential to understanding the meaning of the entire book.

The word *hebel* can communicate the idea of “breath” or “vapor.”<sup>3</sup> Some argue that Solomon uses this word figuratively to mean “temporary” or “transitory.”<sup>4</sup> But its usage outside of Ecclesiastes suggests the word is better understood to mean “meaningless.”<sup>5</sup> When Solomon says, “All is *hebel*,” he means, “All is meaningless.” Everything we do is in vain. All is vanity.

As his message unfolds, Solomon will clarify what he means by “all.” God is not meaningless, and our relationship with God is not meaningless. But Solomon’s words should arrest our attention. What is meaningless in your life? What has lasting value?

**Final Thought:** Evaluate what has lasting meaning in your life.

---

3 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), s.v. “הָבֵל.”

4 Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 69.

5 Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Vol. 14., New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 282–283.

# Worthy Effort

## Ecclesiastes 1:3

*“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”*

---

Cutting down a tree in the heat of summer somehow feels counterintuitive. When arborists remove a tulip poplar, loblolly pine, or white oak, they are simultaneously removing the only source of shade protecting them from the blazing sun. Plus, removing trees is difficult labor.

Solomon calls attention to the difficulty of our labor on Earth. If everything is meaningless, what value is there in work—and everything else we toil over?

That is exactly Solomon’s point in this rhetorical question. There is no value to our labor—what’s done “under the sun”—if that is all there is to life. But if we broaden our perspective to include not only the physical realm, but also the spiritual, then our work does have value. There is value in what we do on Earth when it is done for the Lord.

Jesus redirects our treasure-seeking heavenward (see Matt. 6:20). Paul reminds us that our labor for the Lord has purpose (see 1 Cor. 15:58). When done for the Lord, all of our actions bring Him glory (see 1 Cor. 10:31). How does your labor bring glory to God?

**Final Thought:** Labor for spiritual profit.

# Purpose and Panting

## Ecclesiastes 1:4–5

*“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.”*

---

Every Monday, many workers begin another workweek with their eyes focused on Friday. They strive to make it to the weekend, often repeating this pattern until they retire. With this outlook, life can feel monotonous—the same cycle, repeating itself day after day. Time passes relentlessly. Apart from a few high points and minor variations, life is vanilla and plain. It was the same for our parents; it was the same for their parents; so on and so forth. Our predecessors led their own routine lives. Our descendants will do the same.

The sun rushes across the sky, day after day. Time passes. Nothing really changes. The sun’s hurrying could be translated as “panting,” just as it’s rendered in Isaiah 42:14 to describe a woman struggling to give birth.<sup>6</sup> Poetically speaking, even the sun is exhausted in its endless toil.

What have you gained by your toil on the tedious hamster wheel? Good grades, promotions, praise, fun, a swelling savings account? When you step off, all will be forgotten. Someone else will step on for their turn. But for Christians, our existence need not be characterized by tedium. We can find fulfillment and purpose by teaching, serving, giving, and loving—“good works” for us to do out of love for God and our neighbor (Eph. 2:10).

**Final Thought:** Find purpose in your fleeting life by leaving a lasting, spiritual legacy.

---

<sup>6</sup> Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 69.

# Wind and Water

## Ecclesiastes 1:6–7

*“The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.”*

---

Have you ever stood on a bridge to watch the water rushing beneath you? If so, you know it almost feels like you are moving instead of the water. Likewise, you can stand behind Niagara Falls and watch the water pour down in constant motion. Where motion seems to exist, it doesn't. And where motion does exist, Solomon says it's endlessly futile. Whether you're stuck in a rut or spinning your wheels, you've probably had that feeling of repetitive work with little result. Solomon uses water and wind to picture this frustrating repetition.

As Solomon carries forward the theme of monotony, he covers all his bases. He already made the point that the sun, moving east to west, is a fixture of repetition. Now he directs our attention to the wind, which blows over all four cardinal directions of the earth. Despite its coverage, the wind, returning to where it began its circuit, seems to accomplish nothing.

Solomon makes the same point with water. Streams of water pour endlessly into the oceans but never satiate the thirsty seas. There always seems to be more water to replenish the flowing streams.

This endless repetition feels futile until we consider God's design. God has a purpose for the wind. God has a purpose for even the waters—they refresh plants and animals (see Ps. 104:3–4; 10–16). Our great God, in His power, directs it all. “He makes his wind blow and the waters flow” (Ps. 147:18).

What may seem futile to us has been purposefully designed by God. Therefore, He is worthy of praise.

**Final Thought:** Don't mistake God's constant control for pointless repetition.



# Rest for the Restless

## Ecclesiastes 1:8

*“All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.”*

---

Isn't it funny how we can eat our favorite foods—deep dish pizza, sushi, frozen custard—over and over without losing interest? We've heard our favorite songs again and again, yet our interest doesn't diminish. We know how the movie ends because we've seen it a dozen times, but it somehow still stirs our emotions. We want to see what has been seen countless times before. We want to do what has been done countless times before. This is the story of our lives.

Solomon's examination of how the world works is conclusive. The world is wearing itself out with endless activity. Our own activities in the pursuit of satisfaction are exhausting. This constant effort is enough to wear anyone out. Perhaps our primary concern, instead of finding satisfaction in life, should be finding true rest for our weariness.

Jesus offers rest as the answer for our weariness. Jesus told the people, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). We know that one day we will receive eternal rest, but Christians have rest even now (see Heb. 4:3). So although our lives are full of wearisome pursuits, we can trust that the Lord is working in us. We know He has work for us to do, and that He gives us help so that His work is not burdensome (see Eph. 2:10; 1 John 5:3). Serving the Lord is a blessing, a blessing that we can enjoy for all eternity after we are freed from the toils of this earth. Won't that be satisfying?

**Final Thought:** Find rest for your weariness in Jesus.

# Repeating History

## Ecclesiastes 1:9–10

*“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us.”*

---

The Pittsburgh Pirates have played over 20,000 Major League Baseball regular season games in their history. But there is no indication they plan to stop winning and losing baseball games. This is how life goes. History repeats itself. People play baseball, go to war, pursue technological advances, and eat lots of cheeseburgers. It’s all been done before, and it will all continue to be done.

Solomon observes that nothing is new. So, is there any purpose in all of this? From an “under the sun” perspective, no. It’s all been done before. There is no point to humanity’s history, development, and achievements. Humanity’s perpetual pursuit of new advancements never ends. Fulfillment is never found. From a human perspective—with God removed from the equation—there is no purpose.

But from God’s perspective, there is much purpose. There is something new. God is sovereign over history. He’s drawing lost people to Himself (John 6:44). He’s made each of His children a new creation (see 2 Cor. 5:17). He enables believers to put on the new self (see Eph. 4:24). He will one day rule over a new heaven and new earth (see Rev. 21:1).<sup>7</sup>

Just as God had a purpose for humanity’s past, from the largest events to the smallest, God has a purpose for all that’s happened or will happen to you. Do you believe that His purposes are good?

**Final Thought:** Rejoice that God gives purpose to life.

---

<sup>7</sup> Garrett, Proverbs, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*, 288.

# Remembering and Forgetting

## **Ecclesiastes 1:11**

*“There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.”*

---

Our ability to remember is limited. Achievements and achievers are forgotten every day. Headlines are forgotten even before new ones appear. Famous people and momentous events are replaced by new famous people and more momentous events. History teachers can only teach so much history.

The Book of Esther records that Mordecai saved the life of King Ahasuerus by reporting an assassination plot. The king owed Mordecai his life, yet he forgot to reward Mordecai for his deed until later providentially reminded. Joseph was forgotten for two years after interpreting a dream for Pharaoh’s cupbearer. The actions of these two men were remembered—eventually. But most are not.

A quest for fame is a fool’s errand. If you’re hoping that people will remember you forever, you will probably be disappointed. You and your deeds, no matter how impressive, will cease to be remembered at some point in the future. You will be forgotten in no time.

But there is Someone who will never forget you. The Lord promises, “The righteous . . . will be remembered forever” (Ps. 112:6). Our eternal God promises us eternal life with Him. He won’t forget us, and we will be able to rejoice with the saints in eternity over how God graciously used all of us for His glory. What will God and His people remember you for?

**Final Thought:** Thank God that He will remember you forever.

# A King's Quest

## Ecclesiastes 1:12–13

*"I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with."*

---

The Lord gave King Solomon not only lots of wisdom but also a quest. God appointed him to investigate everything on Earth that affects the human experience—the results of which Solomon will reveal over the next several chapters. This was a monumental task, one that could not be finished quickly. God told Solomon to pour his heart into this work and to make it his consuming project. Who better to do this work than Solomon—a man with unparalleled wisdom and knowledge of the true God?

Although Solomon was the right man for the job, he did not find this a happy endeavor. The preceding prologue explains why. Everything is meaningless (see Eccles. 1:2). Everything has been done before (see Eccles. 1:9). Life is a meaningless, weariness-inducing experience (see Eccles. 1:8). With that under-the-sun perspective, this was unhappy business.

But this same business of the Preacher is our business. Solomon's quest is your quest, too.

Though you have not been given Solomon's overflowing abundance of wisdom, you are not ill-equipped for the task God has given you. In fact, if you are in Christ Jesus, you are well-equipped. Your business can be a happy one because "Jesus became to us wisdom from God," and as a result, we have "righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Your life is not meaningless. God has given us His grace in Christ Jesus. We wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who sustains us to the end (see 1 Cor. 1:7–8).

**Final Thought:** Know Christ to see purpose in your life.

# Herding the Wind

## Ecclesiastes 1:14

*"I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."*

---

For anyone who's ever met a cat, the meaning of "herding cats" is probably clear. Cats have a mind of their own and rarely cooperate with their owners' plans. Similarly, getting your team to cooperate, or getting a group of unruly kids to follow instructions, could feel much the same—frustrating. And that's how Solomon felt about his unhappy quest. Not only does life seem meaningless, it's also futile. Instead of comparing life to herding cats, he likens everything in life to striving after the wind.

The majority of translators opt for *striving* or *chasing* after wind. But there's a possibility this Hebrew word conveys the sense of *tending*, such as how a shepherd tends his sheep.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, a comparison of chasing wind to herding cats might not be such a stretch. Whichever is the case, chasing or tending, the meaning is the same. Both are futile.

The first chapter of the Book of Romans explains that there's a powerful God at work in the universe. He deserves glory and gratitude from His creation because He is the powerful God of the universe. This is the life purpose that God intends for us—it's where we can find meaning. But when we refuse to give God the glory and gratitude He deserves, our own thinking becomes futile, or nonsensical (see Rom. 1:21). Our understanding of reality becomes useless.

But Christians recognize that life has the most fulfilling purpose we can imagine. What could be more fulfilling than giving glory and thanks to our God, who possesses eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20)?

**Final Thought:** When life feels frustrating, worship your powerful God.

---

8 Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (New York: De Gruyter, 1979), 13.