



# ECCLESIASTES TEACHING OUTLINE

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# BOOK SUMMARY

## - ECCLESIASTES -

### THE CHALLENGE OF ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes presents its readers with two ultimate options for how they should live their lives - life lived in light of death, or life lived in light of future judgement. The implied challenge is that the reader will take one of these views - do they believe death will have the final word or will God have the final word? Will they pursue the temporary pleasures of this life or will they pursue a relationship with God?

### THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK

To begin to unpack and understand the message of the book of Ecclesiastes it is crucial to see how the book is structured. There are two personalities who speak in the book, the teacher (Qohelet) who refers to himself in the first person (1:12-12:7), and a second speaker who describes the teacher to his son in the third person (1:1-11 and 12:8-14). The words of the teacher can be seen as a quotation framed by the words of the second speaker who is the author/narrator. Thus, to understand the message of the book as a whole, it is important to first understand the message of the teacher and then the message of the author who conveys the teacher's words.

The term 'meaningless' is used by the teacher over thirty times throughout the book and the author seems to sum up the teachers words by beginning and concluding his speech with the refrain "Meaningless, meaningless! All is meaningless". Faced with the inevitable reality of death, the teacher is driven to the conclusion that everything is meaningless. As the teacher pursues various paths to find meaning, he is constantly brought back to the stark realisation that death is lurking for both the wise and the fool, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed. He reasons that if death is the end of the story, no ultimate meaning can be found in life, men are no different to the animals. This leads the teacher to repeatedly call on people to 'seize the day' (carpe diem). In the face on an existence that can offer no ultimate meaning, the best one can do is find enjoyment in the temporal pleasures of life, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." (2:24)

The teacher does not have the last word however. In 12:8-14 the voice of the author of the book concludes the matter as he reflects on what the teacher has said. Is the teacher right? Is it right to live life from the perspective that death will be the final outcome and so to enjoy what you can while you can? The final words of the author starkly disagree and cut through the advice of the teacher; "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 deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (12:13-14).

The Teacher's assessment of life is limited in that it only takes into account 'life under the sun'. His assessment of the world is right in that the world has been brought under a curse because of sin. But will the truly wise man view the world only from this perspective? He will not, because it fails to recognise God's redeeming purposes for the world and for us who live in it - God has spoken, God has revealed his purposes. Death will not have the final word.

*"Death is swallowed up in victory."  
"O death, where is your victory?  
O death, where is your sting?"...*

*...Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'*

*1 Corinthians 15:54b-58*

### **ECCLESIASTES FROM A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE**

From the New Testament perspective there is no doubt about the wise way to live this life. Someone has passed through death, death was not the final statement in his life, and it is he who will one day have the final word as every person bows before him as Lord and judge.

*'And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'*

*Philippians 2:8-11*

How does one live in light of this?

*'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'*

*Philippians 3:7-14*

Also in the words of Jesus:

*'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*

*Mark 8:34-38*

The New Testament is clear, the wise person will live in light of the resurrection of Jesus. God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ, the judge, before whom every person will one day stand. And following him will mean laying down our lives now, for his sake, but will result in receiving true life when he comes again in all his glory. Only if death were the victor would the wise man live in light of death.

*'If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."'*

*1 Corinthians 15:32*

But when death has been defeated, the wise man will live in light of judgement. No longer is death the only certainty for man, but judgement before Christ.

# ECCLESIASTES SESSION OUTLINES

|   | Title   | Aim / Content Summary  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | <b>MEANINGLESS?</b><br>13/11 MARCUS                   | To introduce the question of 'where is meaning to be found in life' and that the teacher understands meaning as something you can 'gain' from life, i.e. something which shows your life made a difference.  |
| 2 | <b>THE SEARCH FOR MEANING</b><br>20/11 STEVE          | Can meaning be found in pleasure, work, wisdom or wealth? Can any of these make a difference or does death swallow up any temporary achievement? Are you looking for meaning where it can not be found?  |
| 3 | <b>THE TYRANNY OF TIME AND CHANCE</b><br>27/11 MARCUS | We are all 'victims' of time and chance. We can not change the way the world works nor can any personal attributes such as righteousness, strength, or wisdom offer us any control over when things will happen to us, especially death. What difference can you make in a world like this?                        |
| 4 | <b>ONE SURE THING</b><br>4/12 STEVE                   | In a world full of many uncertainties, the one certain thing is that all will die. How can anything matter if death is the end of everything? People are all very different and will live their lives in many different ways, but in the end all end up the same. Does this make everything therefore meaningless? |
| 5 | <b>SEIZE THE DAY</b><br>11/12 MARCUS                  | If death is the end, there is nothing better than to seize the day. Enjoy life for all it is. Enjoy food, drink, the work you do. Enjoy your wife, your wealth and everything else. Enjoy life now because in the grave there is no more.  |
| 6 | <b>DEATH. THE END?</b><br>18/12 STEVE                 | If death is the end, then life is meaningless. But what if death is not the end? What if the things we do will be called to account? What if the dead are raised? How will that affect our understanding of life? What will we live for in light of resurrection and judgement?                                    |

# STREET INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

| TALK | QUESTION  |
|------|---|
| 1    | <p>A. What was your Great Grandfather's name?<br/>What did he do as a job?</p> <p>B. Do you think one person can change the world?</p>  |
| 2    | <p>C. Where do you think people try to find meaning in life?</p> <p>D. What do you want to achieve in life?</p> <p>E. If Bill Gates is the richest person in the world, why do you think he keeps going to work each day?</p> |
| 3    | <p>F. Do you believe in Karma?</p> <p>G. Do you believe in fate?</p> <p>H. Do you think some people are more in control of their lives than others? (Who? Why?)</p>   |
| 4    | <p>I. Do you think there is life after death?</p> <p>J. Why do you think death is an unpopular topic to talk about?</p>   |
| 5    | <p>K. What's your favourite day of the week?</p> <p>L. What's the best thing about life?</p> <p>M. Would you rather live in the moment or live for the future?</p>  |
| 6    | <p>N. Do you ever wish there was more to life?</p> <p>O. If someone came back to life, how do you think what they said about life after death would affect people's lives?</p>  |

# Some Quotes on the Meaning of Life

## **Life is Meaningless**

“Life is a mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose” (Joseph Conrad)

“It is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we die.” (Jean Paul Sartre)

“(Life is like a disease) and the only difference between one man and another is the stage of the disease at which he lives” (George Bernard Shaw)

“Life is like a ship tossed by every wave and by every wind; a ship headed to no port and no harbour, with no rudder, no compass, no pilot, simply floating for a time, then lost in the waves.” (Clarence Darrow)

“Life is like an onion; you peel off layer after layer and then you find there is nothing in it.” (James Gibbons Huneker)

“Why does a person even get up in the morning? You have breakfast, you floss your teeth so you'll have healthy gums in your old age, and then you get in your car and drive down I-10 and die. Life is so stupid I can't stand it.” (Barbara Kingsolver)

“Life seems nothing more than a quick succession of busy nothings.” (From the movie *Mansfield Park*)

“Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.” (William Shakespeare - *Macbeth*)

“Youth is a blunder, manhood a struggle, old age a regret” (Benjamin Disraeli)

“Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up but a comedy in the long shot.” (Charlie Chaplin)

“Life is a whim of several billion cells to be you for a while” (Unknown)

## **Life is what you make it**

“The true joy in life is being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.” (George Bernard Shaw)

“We live in a vast and awesome universe in which, daily, suns are made and worlds destroyed, where humanity clings to an obscure clod of rock. The significance of our lives and our fragile realm derives from our own wisdom and courage. We are the custodians of life’s meaning” (Carl Sagan)

“I don't want to have the terrible limitation of those who live only on what makes sense. Not me - I want an invented truth.” (Clarice Lispector)

## **Meaning is unknowable**

“If we find an answer to that (why we and the universe exist), it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.” (Stephen Hawking)

“My life has a superb cast but I can't figure out the plot” (Ashleigh Brilliant)

## **Enjoy Life**

“I know what things are good: friendship and work and conversation. These I shall have.” (Rupert Brooke)

“Laugh often and much” and “appreciate beauty” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

“Life is a very short trip—while alive, live!” (Malcolm Forbes)

“If I go to a play I do not enjoy it less because I do not believe that it is divinely created or divinely conducted, that it will last forever instead of stopping at eleven, that many details of it will remain in my memory after a few months, or that it will have any particular moral effect on me. And I enjoy life as I enjoy that play.” (Sinclair Lewis)

“My formula for living is quite simple. I get up in the morning and I go to bed at night. In between, I occupy myself as best I can.” (Cary Grant)

“Perhaps I'm old and tired, but I always think that the chances of finding out what really is going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied” (Douglas Adams)



## **Serve Others**

“Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile” (Albert Einstein)

"The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well."  
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

“You should be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” (Horace Mann)

“Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.” (Galadriel -Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring)

## **Uncontrollable / Chance / Random**

"Life is like a box of chocolates - you never know what you're gonna get." Forest Gump)

“Life will always remain a gamble, with prizes sometimes for the imprudent, and blanks so often to the wise.” (Jerome K. Jerome)

“Life is so largely controlled by chance that its conduct can be but a perpetual improvisation.” (W. Somerset Maugham)

## **Serve God**

“I just want to do God’s will” (Martin Luther King Jr.)

# TALK 1 - MEANINGLESS?

## **Aim:**

The aim of this session will be to get people thinking about where meaning can be found in life by introducing the Teacher's question 'What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?' The intention is for people to see that what the Teacher is looking for is something that he can show for having lived his life. It's like the Teacher is saying; 'You spend your whole life working hard, so what have you got to show for it at the end?' Or to put it another way, 'What difference would it make to the world if you had never been born?'

## **Talk Title:**

Meaningless?

## **Passage:**

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

## **Interview Questions:**

1. What was your great grandfather's name and what did he do as a job?
2. Do you think one person can change the world?

## **Night Structure:**

1. Welcome and Introduction
2. Prayer
3. Table Discussions 1
4. Bible Reading
  - a. Ecclesiastes 1:1-11
5. Interview Questions
  - a. What was your great grandfather's name and what did he do as a job?
  - b. Do you think one person can change the world?
6. Table Discussions 2     **7.00pm**
7. Conclusion and wrap up

# TALK 1 - MEANINGLESS?

## Questions

### Table Discussions 1

1. Do you think that we can find meaning in life or is it all just meaningless?

**Yes I think you can...because what would be the point of living...**

2. What makes this an uncomfortable question?

**Because if there is no meaning to life –what is the point of living**

3. What makes this an important question?

**Because it defines the most important question in life**

### Table Discussions 2

1. Looking at verse 2, how do you think the teacher would answer the question, ‘is life meaningless?’

**Yes – Read Verse**

2. What is the teacher looking for as he looks for meaning in the world?

**Does my work have value – worth**

Verse 3: How would you put the teachers question in your own words?

**Ecc 1:3 What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?**

3. In verses 4, how does the teacher answer his question?

**People are born and die but life keeps going on...**

4. The teacher has said that the world remains the same forever, looking at verses 5-11, what is it about the world that makes him say this?

**This is illustrated from nature and life in general**

5. How do you think the teacher would answer the question ‘can one person change the world’? Why?

**I think He would say one person can’t change the world...**

6. Are you happy with what the teacher has said so far? Why? Why not?

**Yes, because it is true – according to our observation on life...**

7. Using the crayons and paper supplied, draw a picture that illustrates the Teacher’s observations in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11



# TALK 2 - THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

## **Aim:**

The aim of this session will be to investigate where the Teacher goes looking for meaning and to see that every path leads him to the conclusion of meaninglessness. From this, people should be challenged about where they pursue meaning in life. Are they looking for meaning in work, wealth, pleasure or wisdom? Are they seeking meaning in something that will only lead to death and therefore utter meaninglessness? And, if meaning can't be found in these areas of life, the questions arise; 'Where can meaning be found?' and 'Is life really meaningless?'

## **Talk Title:**

The Search for Meaning

## **Passage:**

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26, 5:10-20

## **Interview Questions:**

1. Where do you think people try to find meaning in life?
2. What do you want to achieve in life?
3. If Bill Gates is the richest person in the world, why do you think he keeps going to work each day?

## **Night Structure**

1. Welcome and Recap
2. Prayer
3. Table Discussions 1
4. Bible Reading
  - a. Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
  - b. Ecclesiastes 5:10-20
5. Interview Questions
  - c. Where do you think people try to find meaning in life?
  - d. What do you want to achieve in life?
  - e. If Bill Gates is the richest person in the world, why do you think he keeps going to work each day?
6. Table Discussions 2
7. Conclusion and wrap up

# TALK 2 - THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

## Questions

### Table Discussions 1

1. Where do you think people try to find meaning?
2. How do people show where they're looking for meaning in life?

### Table Discussions 2

1. In what ways does the teacher pursue pleasure? (2:1-11)
2. What was the teacher's reward for what he did? (2:10-11)
3. Why does the teacher conclude that his endeavours were meaningless? (2:11, 1:3)
4. Does the teacher see any advantages in being wise? (2:12-16)
5. Why does the teacher conclude that wisdom is meaningless? (2:14-16, 1:3)
6. Why does the teacher consider work meaningless? (2:17-23, 1:3)
7. Why does the teacher consider wealth meaningless? (5:10-17, 1:3)
8. Do you think people often look for meaning in any of these areas? How can you tell?
9. Why do you think people try to find meaning in the sorts of places that the Teacher says are meaningless?
10. Using the crayons and paper supplied, draw a picture that illustrates the Teacher's search for meaning.

# Talk 3 – The Tyranny of Time and Chance

## Aim

The aim of this third session is to investigate what the Teacher has to say about time and chance and how this impacts on our ability to achieve anything which could be considered gain. As the Teacher looks at what happens during the ‘times of our lives’ (3:2-8) he sees that God has established periods, moments, or times for a wide range of emotions and activities. Further more, the Teacher sees that there are no guarantees in life, that people are victims of time and chance (9:11-12). All this leads him to question what value there is in doing anything, what gain can be achieved in a world like that? If the times and seasons for what happens to people are fixed by God, what can man do to change it? God is doing the same today as he did yesterday, and tomorrow he will do the same as today (3:15). So, if there is no advantage in being strong, swift, wealthy, wise, or even righteous, what difference does it make whatever people do? All will die at the appropriate time and when that is has nothing to do with anything they can control. Can meaning exist in a world like that?

## Talk Title

The Tyranny of Time and Chance

## Passage

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, 7:13-14, 8:7-8, 8:14-17, 9:11-12, 10:14, 11:1-6,

## Interview Questions

1. Do you believe in Karma?
2. Do you believe in fate?
3. Do you think some people are more in control of their lives than others?

## Night Structure

1. Welcome and Recap
2. Prayer
3. Table Discussions 1
4. Bible Reading
  - i. Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
  - ii. Ecclesiastes 9:11-12
5. Interview Questions
  - i. Do you believe in Karma?
  - ii. Do you believe in fate?
  - iii. Do you think some people are more in control of their lives than others?
6. Table Discussions 2
7. Conclusion and wrap up

# Talk 3 – The Tyranny of Time and Chance

## Questions

### Table Discussions 1

1. Do you think people believe they are in control of what happens in their lives? What makes you think this?
2. What ‘evidence’ can you think of that demonstrates that people aren’t in control of what happens to them?

### Table Discussions 2

1. Is the poem (3:2-8) telling us what is good to do in life or telling us what simply happens to us in life? Why do you think this?
2. Are the various ‘times’ that the Teacher observes things that we have control over or are they simply things that can come upon us without notice?
3. Considering both the poem in verses 3:2-8 and what the Teacher has to say in verses 3:14-15, how would you describe in your own words what the Teacher observes about time?
4. Given what the teacher observes about time, how do you think he would answer his own question that he asks in verse 9? (Consider also 1:3-4)
5. Read Ecclesiastes 8:14-15 and 9:11-12. Does the Teacher think that there are ways for people to control what happens to them? For example, would the teacher expect ‘good’ people to have ‘good’ things happen to them?
6. Does this fit with your experience? Are people in control? Can people control things like when they will die (9:12)?
7. Using the crayons and paper supplied, draw a picture to illustrate the Teacher’s understanding of time and chance as it relates to people.



# Talk 4 – One Sure Thing

## Aim

The aim of this fourth session is to consider what the Teacher has to say about Death. Through the past three sessions, a repeated theme that has arisen from the text is that death is what makes everything ultimately meaningless. What gain can people get out of life if they are no different to the animals, the fool is no different to the wise, the righteous no different to the wicked, the rich no different to the poor? If death is the end for all people, can there be meaning to anything in life? Does anything matter? It is hoped that people will be faced by the reality of death and consider what the implications are if the Teacher is right. This should lead people to start asking questions like; ‘If the teacher is right, how should I live?’, ‘What should I live for?’ and ‘Does it even matter?’ Further, people should be becoming increasingly dissatisfied with what the Teacher has to say. No! Death is not the end! But is it?

## Talk Title

One Sure Thing

## Passage

Ecclesiastes 2:14-16  
Ecclesiastes 3:17-22  
Ecclesiastes 5:15-20  
Ecclesiastes 7:2  
Ecclesiastes 7:4  
Ecclesiastes 9:1-10  
Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:7

## Interview Questions

1. Do you think there is life after death?
2. Why do you think death is such an unpopular subject to talk about?

## Night Structure

1. Welcome and Recap
2. Prayer
3. Table Discussions 1
4. Bible Reading
  - a. Ecclesiastes 3:18-22
  - b. Ecclesiastes 9:1-10
5. Interview Questions
  - a. Do you think there is life after death?
  - b. Why do you think death is such an unpopular subject to talk about?
6. Table Discussions 2
7. Conclusion and wrap up

# Talk 4 – One Sure Thing

## Questions

### Table Discussions 1

1. Why do you think people don't generally like to talk about death?
2. If there was no life after death, how would this affect how you lived now?

### Table Discussions 2

1. What is it that makes the wise person have no advantage over the fool? (2:14-16)
2. What is it that makes humans have no advantage over the animals? (3:18-21)
3. What is it that makes the rich person have no advantage over the poor? (5:15-17)
4. What is it that makes the righteous have no advantage over the wicked, the clean no advantage over the unclean, the good no advantage over the bad? (9:1-3)
5. Does the teacher expect anything beyond death? (3:20-22, 9:4-10)
6. How do the Teacher's observations that life end in death, and that death may very well be the end, impact on his search for meaning? (Keep in mind what the Teacher is looking for as he looks for meaning (1:3-4))
7. Using the crayons and paper supplied, draw a picture that illustrates the Teacher's observations about death offering no advantage to anyone.

# Talk 5 – Seize the Day

## Aim

The aim of this fifth session is to present what the Teacher concludes as to the best way of living in light of what he has found as he has searched for ‘gain’ in the world. As the Teacher has looked for meaning, as he has looked for something which would make his life amount to something, he discovered that in the end all die. And if death is the final word for everyone, then how can there be any meaning, any gain in that? His conclusion? Enjoy life. Seize the day. Have a go. Stop looking for some sort of lasting purpose and enjoy life for all it has to offer. Enjoy your food, your drink, your work, your wife and your wealth. Enjoy everything you can about life, because in the grave, there is no more, all comes to an end.

## Talk Title

Seize the Day

## Passage

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26  
Ecclesiastes 3:12-13  
Ecclesiastes 3:22  
Ecclesiastes 5:18-20  
Ecclesiastes 8:15  
Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

## Interview Questions

1. What is your favourite day of the week?
2. What’s the best thing about life?
3. Would you rather live in the moment or live for the future?

## Night Structure

1. Welcome and Recap
2. Prayer
3. ‘Carpe Diem’ scene from Dead Poets Society
4. Table Discussions 1
5. Bible Reading
  - a. Ecclesiastes
  - b. Ecclesiastes
6. Interview Questions
7. Table Discussions 2
8. Conclusion and wrap up

# Talk 5 – Seize the Day

## Questions

### Table Discussions 1

1. If death was the end of human life, what would a ‘wasted’ life consist of?
2. Do you think people generally live as though life here and now is all that there is? How can you tell?

### Table Discussions 2

1. According to the Teacher, what is the best thing for a person to do during their life? ( 2:24, 3:12, 3:22, 5:18, 8:15, 9:7-10)
2. What observations about the world and human life have led the Teacher to this conclusion? (2:1-26, 3:1-15, 3:18-22, 5:13-20, 8:14-15, 9:1-10)
3. Does the Teacher’s advice come from seeing life before death as all there is or from a hope of life beyond death?
4. Has the Teacher found what he was looking for? (1:3-4)
5. Does the Teacher sound as though he is completely satisfied with what he has discovered and encourages about life? (Consider for example his repeated phrase ‘there is nothing better’ and 9:7-10)
6. Under what circumstances does the Teacher’s advice make sense? Under what circumstances could it be wrong?
7. Using the crayons and paper supplied, draw a picture that illustrates the Teacher’s recommendations for how to live life.