

Chapter 1



Life Without God

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2

*It's life's illusions I recall;
I really don't know life, at all.¹*

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.²

Hundreds of years before Shakespeare wrote those words into the mouth of Macbeth, the ancient Greeks expressed a similar perspective on life in the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, a mortal who offended the gods, was condemned to the torturous labor of pushing a huge rock to the top of a hill, only to have it roll back down to the bottom every time he succeeded, there awaiting his repeated efforts for all of eternity.

The twentieth-century existentialist French philosopher Albert Camus argued that the Sisyphus myth is an excellent metaphor for all of life. Life is absurd—it is Sisyphean—and if you try to find some

1. Joni Mitchell, “Both Sides Now,” track 10 on *Clouds*, Siquomb Publishing, 1969, vinyl.

2. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. John O’Conner (Longman, 2010), 5.5.24–29. References are to act, scene, and line.

overarching meaning in it, you will be driven either to suicide or to tricking yourself into some sort of religious belief. The better way—the authentic way, he argued—is to accept life as it really is and not torture yourself by pretending that there must be some overarching, foundational meaning behind it.³

Contrast this to the outlook of writer Eleanor Porter, whose classic children's novel *Pollyanna* advocates a naïve optimism about every aspect of life. The young orphan girl, Pollyanna, learns to live by a code called “the glad game,” which causes her to find something good in every circumstance. So when she receives a set of crutches for Christmas instead of the doll she had hoped for, she is glad because she does not need to use them. When her evil aunt forces her to live in a cramped, stuffy attic room, Pollyanna is glad because she has such a great view of the city. When she is punished for being late to dinner and forced to eat only bread and milk, she is glad because she decides she actually likes bread and milk.⁴

A less noble but more sophisticated version of this approach to life is the philosophy known as hedonism, which regards pleasure and pain as the only important elements of life. Pain is to be avoided, and pleasure is to be maximized—whether that is through drugs, sex, booze, entertainment, wealth, winning, education, food, success, or relationships. The point is to experience as much pleasure as possible for as long as possible.

Sisyphus and Pollyanna represent the extreme opposite ways of thinking about life, but there are myriad perspectives between them. Each one of us has a perspective on life. We think about life in general and our own lives in particular through lenses crafted by our experience, temperament, and circumstances. The problem is that, very often, our outlooks on life are not very thoughtful and, as a result, can be rather superficial. And a superficial view of the world sets you up

3. See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage Books, 1991).

4. Eleanor Porter, *Pollyanna* (The Christian Herald, 1912).

for a shallow life filled with disappointment and despair and misses out on deep, lasting joy.

Real Life in a Fallen World

Joni Mitchell expresses a more realistic, thoughtful view in her 1969 song, which says,

I've looked at life from both sides now,
From win and lose and still somehow,
It's life's illusions I recall;
I really don't know life, at all.⁵

In a very real sense, that is a major point made in the book of Ecclesiastes. Life is complicated. It doesn't always make sense. Simple honesty demands this assessment, whether you are a committed Christian or a convinced atheist. Consequently, simplistic answers to the profound problems and questions that arise from an honest look at life will not suffice, at least not for thinking people, because life is complicated.

That fact is what makes the book of Ecclesiastes so compelling. Herman Melville called it “the truest of all books” because it takes life seriously and realistically.⁶ The author does not close his eyes to either good or evil, pleasure or pain. He deals honestly with them as they exist in the real world. Such realism shatters both existentialism and hedonism while dealing honestly with both the lot of Sisyphus and the outlook of Pollyanna. Ecclesiastes is a book that looks at life as it really is—real life, life in what the Bible calls a fallen world.

Ecclesiastes argues that life without God is meaningless. That is the main point of the whole book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is a negative way of expressing the point of the book. While real life in a fallen world is indeed empty and meaningless when you

5. Joni Mitchell, “Both Sides Now.”

6. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale* (Penguin Classics, 2003), 465.

do not know God, when you do know Him and are rightly related to Him, life is full of deep joy and undergirded by unshakeable hope.

Enter the Preacher

Ecclesiastes is written by “the Preacher.” The first verse identifies him as “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). The word used is *Qoheleth*, a Hebrew word usually translated as “preacher” or “teacher.” At its root, the word means “gathering” or “assembly.” The noun form refers to the convener or one who gathers the assembly, and it is particularly used for the gathering of God’s people into a congregation. “Preacher” is an appropriate designation for this person—he is a leader and teacher of God’s people.

This also explains why the book is called “Ecclesiastes.” That is the English form of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “gathering” or “church” in the New Testament. So this book is instruction given to God’s people by a preacher He has appointed for them.

Older writers have typically identified this “son of David, king in Jerusalem” as Solomon. While the book does not name King Solomon as the author, the wisdom that it teaches certainly fits the context of what we know about his life. For example, later in the first chapter, the Preacher writes, “I said in my heart, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge’” (v. 16). When God appointed Solomon king in Jerusalem, He offered to grant the king anything he asked for. Solomon responded, according to 1 Kings 3:9, “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” God granted his request, making him the wisest man in the world (v. 12).

As a wise man, Solomon wrote down his words of wisdom and proverbs. First Kings 4:32 says “he also spoke 3,000 proverbs” and over a thousand songs. Ecclesiastes describes the Preacher as being this sort of man. “Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people

knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care” (Eccl. 12:9).

Despite his wisdom, Solomon fell into a life of indulgence that brought many sorrows (1 Kings 11:1–10). Ecclesiastes seems to have been written late in his life after he reflected on his many forays into seeking meaning in pleasure, work, wisdom, and wealth. What he discovered through such reflection is that life without God is meaningless. So as an expression of his repentance, he acknowledges his many failures and calls the people of God together to learn from his experience. He does this so that we may avoid the many mistakes that he made and learn to find joy and meaning in a world that is fallen.

God’s Words, Not Solomon’s

The Preacher writes with full confidence that his words in this book are not really his words but God’s. This is an important point for any believer who is tempted to be embarrassed or made to feel uncomfortable by the blatant honesty that is found in Ecclesiastes. Look at Ecclesiastes 12:11: “The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by *one Shepherd*” (emphasis added). Ecclesiastes, like all of Scripture, is God’s Word to us.

God’s people need the book of Ecclesiastes because we are not immune to thinking superficially about the world. Though we should know better, we can very easily be pushed along by the various philosophies and outlooks on life that are prevalent today. Consider the way that many American Christians talk about their presidential elections. So many of the evaluations and arguments about who to vote for or against are exactly like those made by people who do not know God. They terminate on the here and now.

Christians desperately need the message of Ecclesiastes today. I need it. So do you. We need it to keep us from unbelieving despair on the one hand and from what may be an even greater temptation—unrealistic optimism—on the other. Our minds must be adjusted to

reality through the lens of God's Word, and Ecclesiastes is specifically designed by God to do that—to help us be realistic and find hope and joy in the ways of God and not be afraid to look honestly at the things that are sorrowful, painful, wicked, and harmful in this world.

A Meaningless Life

So how does Qoheleth instruct the people of God? He begins by making a blanket judgment of what life is like without God: meaningless. “Vanity of vanities,” he writes. “All is vanity” (1:2). The Hebrew word translated as “vanity” literally means “breath” or “vapor.” It is a metaphor that Qoheleth uses for life.

Life is fleeting, insignificant, and ephemeral. Like a breath, life is momentary. It cannot be grasped but floats away like the steam off a hot cup of coffee or the wisp of smoke that follows the striking of a match. James puts it bluntly: “You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

What James says is true, even though we tend to measure our lives by other humans and equate longevity with eighty, ninety, or a hundred years on earth. When we compare our lives to the whole sweep of human history, however (to say nothing of eternity), what are they? Just vapor, a breath that appears for a moment and then disappears.

Life is a vapor, but most of us do not think about it that way. We do not let ourselves think about the end of our lives or life's brevity. Ecclesiastes forces us to consider this by challenging us to recognize that “vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity.”

Life is Vanity

Every way that we attempt to live without proper regard for God in this world is vanity. The Preacher gives multiple examples of this throughout Ecclesiastes. “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” he asks (1:3). Work, even hard productive work, is vanity (1:3–11; 2:18–26). Wisdom is vanity, too, he argues (1:12–18;