

The Search for meaning...

This month's readings take us into the wisdom literature of the Bible in the book of Ecclesiastes. The Teacher goes on a journey to seek the meaning of life under the sun. That is the meaning of this present life? The poetry and language is a little different to what we are used to. These readings will challenge the way you think about everyday life and what is important. Ultimately life under the sun only makes sense when it is lived in the light of the Creator.

Ask God to challenge the way you think about life under the Sun.

The Holy Bible: New International Version—2011

Day	Passages on search for meaning	Verse reference	Questions
1	<p>The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”</p> <p>What do people gain from all their labours 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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 1:1–8a	The wisdom literature of the Bible seeks practical wisdom for this present life. Ecclesiastes is a search for meaning in this present life, in life ‘under the sun.’ How do you make sense of this present life? How does the teacher’s questions resonate with you?
2	<p>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. No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.</p>	Ecclesiastes 1:9–11	What does the teacher observe about life under the sun? What is new about life under the sun? How does this challenge our perspective of history? How does this challenge how you see your own life?

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3	<p>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 mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.</p> <p>What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.</p> <p>I said to myself, “Look, I have 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.</p> <p>For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.</p>	Ecclesiastes 1:12–18	The teacher introduces himself and his search for meaning. What do we learn about his mission? What does he learn about life under the sun? What is the value of wisdom?
4	<p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 2:1–3	The teacher seeks meaning in pleasure. What does he learn about pursuing pleasure? Why does pleasure fail us? When do you pursue pleasure? How do we make sense of pleasure?
5	<p>I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem 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.</p> <p>I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, 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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 2:8–11	The teacher seeks meaning in wealth and possessions. What does he learn about pursuing wealth and possessions? Why does our culture chase after wealth? What do we learn about such pursuits here? How do we make sense of wealth?
6	<p>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 the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.</p> <p>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.”</p>	Ecclesiastes 2:12–15	The teacher seeks meaning in the pursuit of wisdom. What does he learn about wisdom? How do you pursue wisdom? What is the value of wisdom? When does wisdom fail? How do you make sense of wisdom?

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7	So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun. For a person may labour with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has 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 labour under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.	Ecclesiastes 2:20-23	The teacher seeks meaning in work. What is the value of work? How does work fail us? How do you view work in your life? How do we make sense of work?
8	A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own 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.	Ecclesiastes 2:24-26	Every so often the teacher lifts his eyes higher than life under the sun. How does God help him make sense of life? How does knowing God make a difference to this present life? What can you thank God for?
9	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 from embracing, 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.	Ecclesiastes 3:1-8	The teacher captures the rhythms of life under the sun. How does he make sense of time? What do we learn from his poetic observations? What do we learn from these rhythms of life? What strikes you from this at the moment?

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10	<p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 3:9–14	<p>Only God can help us makes sense of life? What is the significance of God placing eternity in the hearts of men? How does this help us to understand the meaning of life? How does this help us live life under the sun? How can you thank God?</p>
11	<p>Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.</p> <p>And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there.</p> <p>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.”</p>	Ecclesiastes 3:15–17	<p>The teacher continues his search for meaning. What was the evil he saw in this present life? How do we see that in our days? How does the teacher make sense of injustice? What is the future for injustice? What comfort is there in the face of injustice?</p>
12	<p>Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:</p> <p>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 never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.</p>	Ecclesiastes 4:1–3	<p>What does the teacher see in life under the sun? How does he respond to this? How do you feel about injustice and oppression? How do you respond to the tears of the oppressed?</p>
13	<p>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.</p> <p>Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.</p> <p>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!</p>	Ecclesiastes 4:4–8	<p>The teacher returns to the pursuit of wealth. What does he observe? What was the man non content? When are you discontent? What is the source of true contentment?</p>

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14	<p>Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has 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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 4:9-12	<p>Humans are made for relationships. Why is companionship more important than the pursuit of work? How do you foster your friendships? What does this have to say about work/life balance? What is the value of relationships?</p>
15	<p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 4:13-16	<p>What does the teacher see in his search for meaning? Why is wisdom better than wealth? How does foolishness show itself here? Why is kingdom building futile?</p>
16	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 5:1-2	<p>The search for meaning takes the teacher into the house of God? What does he learn about true religion? What meaning does God add to life under the sun? What do you learn here?</p>
17	<p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 5:4-7	<p>What does the teacher observe about those who make vows? What practical wisdom do we learn here? How does this challenge you? What do you learn about how you use your mouth?</p>

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18	<p>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.</p> <p>Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless.</p>	Ecclesiastes 5:8–10	In his search for meaning the teacher sees more injustice? What does he see? How does this show itself in our culture? What does the love of money show itself? Why doesn't money satisfy us? How does this challenge you?
19	<p>This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone 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 life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.</p>	Ecclesiastes 5:18–20	The teacher has a moment on clarity. What does he realise? What helps him make sense of life under the sun? What is the secret of contentment? What is the secret of enjoying life? What is this saying to you?
20	<p>I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on mankind: God gives some people wealth, possessions and honour, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them, and strangers enjoy them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.</p> <p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 6:1–3	What does the teacher see here in his search for meaning? How does he make sense of this? How do you see this evil in our days? How does this challenge the way you see life?
21	<p>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.</p> <p>As it is with the good, so with the sinful.</p>	Ecclesiastes 9:1–2a	What does the teacher conclude? What is the common destiny of man? Is there comfort for us here? How do we make sense of death?

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22	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 labour 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.	Ecclesiastes 9:7-10	What does the teacher conclude about the meaning of life? What is the purpose of life? How are we encouraged to enjoy life? What do you learn from these passages?
23	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.	Ecclesiastes 9:13-16	What does the teacher observe? What does he learn from this situation? Why is wisdom better than strength? How could this apply to your life?
24	As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. 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.	Ecclesiastes 10:1-4	The teacher writes proverbs to challenge us. What do these proverbs teach us? What is the difference between the fool and the wise man? How does this show itself in your life? How do you develop wisdom?

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25	<p>The toil of fools wearies them; they do not know the way to town. Woe to the land whose king was a servant 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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 10:15-19	<p>What are the marks of the foolish life? What are the marks of the wise life? How do these proverbs challenge you? When are you foolish? When are you wise?</p>
26	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.</p>	Ecclesiastes 11:1-5	<p>The teacher writes proverbs to challenge how we see life. How do these proverbs challenge the way you live life? What are they encouraging you to do? Where does God fit into the picture?</p>

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27	<p>You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart 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 vigour are meaningless.</p>	Ecclesiastes 11:9-10	<p>What wisdom does the teacher have for the young? What do we learn about making the most out of life? Where does God fit into life under the sun?</p>
28	<p>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.</p>	Ecclesiastes 12:1-3a	<p>What wisdom does the teacher have for the young about living life in the present? What wisdom does the teacher have for the young about aging? How can we remember our Creator?</p>
29	<p>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.</p> <p>The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.</p> <p>Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.</p>	Ecclesiastes 12:9-12	<p>What do we learn about the teacher? How does so the search for wisdom weary us? What is the point of reading wisdom literature? How do proverbs provoke us to respond to God? How do you respond to Ecclesiastes?</p>

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30	Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.	Ecclesiastes 12:13-14	The meaning of life is found in serving God the creator. What do we learn from the teacher's search for meaning? What does fearing God look like in your life?