

Ecclesiastes



This book contains the thoughts of a very wise person known as "Preacher." The Preacher reflects deeply on the contradictory nature of human life, on God's mercy and justice, on the seasonality of life, the nature of time, and on many other topics that continue to engage people today.

Nothing Makes Sense

1 When the son of David was king in Jerusalem, he was known to be very wise, and he said:

- 2** Nothing makes sense!
Everything is nonsense.
I have seen it all—
nothing makes sense!
- 3** What is there to show
for all of our hard work
here on this earth?
- 4** People come, and people go,
but still the world
never changes.
- 5** The sun comes up,
the sun goes down;
it hurries right back
to where it started from.
- 6** The wind blows south,
the wind blows north;
round and round it blows
over and over again.
- 7** All rivers empty into the sea,
but it never spills over;
one by one the rivers return
to their source.▷
- 8** All of life is far more boring
than words could ever say.
Our eyes and our ears

are never satisfied
with what we see and hear.

- 9** Everything that happens
has happened before;
nothing is new,
nothing under the sun.
- 10** Someone might say,
"Here is something new!"
But it happened before,
long before we were born.
- 11** No one who lived in the past
is remembered anymore,
and everyone yet to be born
will be forgotten too.

It Is Senseless To Be Wise

12 I said these things when I lived in Jerusalem as king of Israel. **13** With all my wisdom I tried to understand everything that happens here on earth. And God has made this so hard for us humans to do. **14** I have seen it all, and everything is just as senseless as chasing the wind.▷

- 15** If something is crooked,
it can't be made straight;
if something isn't there,
it can't be counted.

16 I said to myself, "You are by far the wisest person who has ever lived in Jerusalem. You are eager

to learn, and you have learned a lot.”¹⁷ Then I decided to find out all I could about wisdom and foolishness. Soon I realized that this too was as senseless as chasing the wind.▷

¹⁸ The more you know,
the more you hurt;
the more you understand,
the more you suffer.

It Is Senseless To Be Selfish

2 I said to myself, “Have fun and enjoy yourself!” But this didn’t make sense. ² Laughing and having fun is crazy. What good does it do? ³ I wanted to find out what was best for us during the short time we have on this earth. So I decided to make myself happy with wine and find out what it means to be foolish, without really being foolish myself.

⁴ I did some great things. I built houses and planted vineyards. ⁵ I had flower gardens and orchards full of fruit trees. ⁶ And I had pools where I could get water for the trees. ⁷ I owned slaves, and their sons and daughters became my slaves. I had more sheep and goats than anyone who had ever lived in Jerusalem. ⁸ Foreign rulers brought me silver, gold, and precious treasures. Men and women sang for me, and I had ‘many wives’ who gave me great pleasure.

⁹ I was the most famous person who had ever lived in Jerusalem, and I was very wise. ¹⁰ I got whatever I wanted and did whatever made me happy. But most of all, I enjoyed my work. ¹¹ Then I thought about everything I had done, including the hard work, and it was simply chasing the wind.▷ Nothing on earth is worth the trouble.

Wisdom Makes Sense

¹² I asked myself, “What can the next king do that I haven’t done?” Then I decided to compare wisdom with foolishness and stupidity. ¹³ And I discovered that wisdom is better than foolishness, just as light is better than darkness. ¹⁴ Wisdom is like having two good eyes; foolishness leaves you in the dark. But wise or foolish, we all end up the same.

¹⁵ Finally, I said to myself, “Being wise got me nowhere! The same thing will happen to me that happens to fools. Nothing makes sense. ¹⁶ Wise or foolish, we all die and are soon forgotten.” ¹⁷ This made me hate life. Everything we do is painful; it’s just as senseless as chasing the wind.▷

¹⁸ Suddenly I realized that others would someday get everything I had worked for so hard, then I started

hating it all. ¹⁹ Who knows if those people will be sensible or stupid? Either way, they will own everything I have earned by hard work and wisdom. It doesn’t make sense.

²⁰ I thought about all my hard work, and I felt depressed. ²¹ When we use our wisdom, knowledge, and skill to get what we own, why do we have to leave it to someone who didn’t work for it? This is senseless and wrong. ²² What do we really gain from all of our hard work? ²³ Our bodies ache during the day, and work is torture. Then at night our thoughts are troubled. It just doesn’t make sense.

²⁴ The best thing we can do is to enjoy eating, drinking, and working.¹ I believe these are God’s gifts to us, ²⁵ and no one enjoys eating and living more than I do. ²⁶ If we please God, he will make us wise, understanding, and happy. But if we sin, God will make us struggle for a living, then he will give all we own to someone who pleases him. This makes no more sense than chasing the wind.▷

Everything Has Its Time

3 Everything on earth has its own time and its own season.

² There is a time for birth and death,
planting and reaping,
³ for killing and healing,
destroying and building,
⁴ for crying and laughing,
weeping and dancing,
⁵ for throwing stones
and gathering stones,
embracing and parting.

⁶ There is a time for finding and losing,
keeping and giving,
⁷ for tearing and sewing,
listening and speaking.

⁸ There is also a time for love and hate,
for war and peace.

What God Has Given Us To Do

⁹ What do we gain by all of our hard work? ¹⁰ I have seen what difficult things God demands of us. ¹¹ God makes everything happen at the right time. Yet none of us can ever fully understand all he has done, and he puts questions in our minds about the past and the future. ¹² I know the best thing we can do is to always enjoy life, ¹³ because God’s gift

to us is the happiness we get from our food and drink and from the work we do. ¹⁴Everything God has done will last forever; nothing he does can ever be changed. God has done all this, so that we will worship him.

¹⁵Everything that happens
has happened before,
and all that will be
has already been—
‘God does everything
over and over again.’

The Future Is Known Only to God

¹⁶Everywhere on earth I saw violence and injustice instead of fairness and justice. ¹⁷So I told myself that God has set a time and a place for everything. He will judge everyone, both the wicked and the good. ¹⁸I know that God is testing us to show us that we are merely animals. ¹⁹Like animals we breathe and die, and we are no better off than they are. It just doesn't make sense. ²⁰All living creatures go to the same place. We are made from earth, and we return to the earth. ²¹Who really knows if our spirits go up and the spirits of animals go down into the earth? ²²We were meant to enjoy our work, and that's the best thing we can do. We can never know the future.

4 I looked again and saw people being mistreated everywhere on earth. They were crying, but no one was there to offer comfort, and those who mistreated them were powerful. ²I said to myself, “The dead are better off than the living. ³But those who have never been born are better off than anyone else, because they have never seen the terrible things that happen on this earth.”

⁴Then I realized that we work and do wonderful things just because we are jealous of others. This makes no more sense than chasing the wind.▷

⁵Fools will fold their hands
and starve to death.

⁶Yet a very little food
eaten in peace
is better than twice as much
earned from overwork
and chasing the wind.▷

⁷Once again I saw that nothing on earth makes sense. ⁸For example, some people don't have friends or family. But they are never satisfied with what they own, and they never stop working to get more. They should ask themselves, “Why am I always

working to have more? Who will get what I leave behind?” What a senseless and miserable life!

It Is Better To Have a Friend

⁹You are better off having a friend than to be all alone, because then you will get more enjoyment out of what you earn. ¹⁰If you fall, your friend can help you up. But if you fall without having a friend nearby, you are really in trouble. ¹¹If you sleep alone, you won't have anyone to keep you warm on a cold night. ¹²Someone might be able to beat up one of you, but not both of you. As the saying goes, “A rope made from three strands of cord is hard to break.”

¹³You may be poor and young. But if you are wise, you are better off than a foolish old king who won't listen to advice. ¹⁴Even if you were not born into the royal family and have been a prisoner and poor, you can still be king. ¹⁵I once saw everyone in the world follow a young leader who came to power after the king was gone. ¹⁶His followers could not even be counted. But years from now, no one will praise him—this makes no more sense than chasing the wind.▷

Be Careful How You Worship

5 Be careful what you do when you enter the house of God. Some fools go there to offer sacrifices, ‘even though they haven't sinned.’ But it's best just to listen when you go to worship. ²Don't talk before you think or make promises to God without thinking them through. God is in heaven, and you are on earth, so don't talk too much. ³If you keep thinking about something, you will dream about it. If you talk too much, you will say the wrong thing.

⁴God doesn't like fools. So don't be slow to keep your promises to God. ⁵It's better not to make a promise at all than to make one and not keep it. ⁶Don't let your mouth get you in trouble! And don't say to the worship leader,▷ “I didn't mean what I said.” God can destroy everything you have worked for, so don't say something that makes God angry.

⁷Respect and obey God! ‘Daydreaming leads to a lot of senseless talk.’

⁸Don't be surprised if the poor of your country are abused, and injustice takes the place of justice. After all, the lower officials must do what the higher ones order them to do. ⁹‘And since the king is the highest official, he benefits most from the taxes paid on the land.’

¹⁰ If you love money and wealth, you will never be satisfied with what you have. This doesn't make sense either. ¹¹ The more you have, the more everyone expects from you. Your money won't do you any good—others will just spend it for you. ¹² If you have to work hard for a living, you can rest well at night, even if you don't have much to eat. But if you are rich, you can't even sleep.

¹³ I have seen something terribly unfair. People get rich, but it does them no good. ¹⁴ Suddenly they lose everything in a bad business deal, then have nothing to leave for their children. ¹⁵ They came into this world naked, and when they die, they will be just as naked. They can't take anything with them, and they won't have anything to show for all their work. ¹⁶ That's terribly unfair. They leave the world just as they came into it. They gained nothing from running after the wind. ¹⁷ 'Besides all this, they are always gloomy at mealtime, and they are troubled, sick, and bitter.'

¹⁸ What is the best thing to do in the short life that God has given us? I think we should enjoy eating, drinking, and working hard. This is what God intends for us to do. ¹⁹ Suppose you are very rich and able to enjoy everything you own. Then go ahead and enjoy working hard—this is God's gift to you. ²⁰ God will keep you so happy that you won't have time to worry about each day.

Don't Depend on Wealth

6 There is something else terribly unfair, and it troubles everyone on earth. ² God may give you everything you want—money, property, and wealth. Then God doesn't let you enjoy it, and someone you don't even know gets it all. That's senseless and terribly unfair!

³ You may live a long time and have a hundred children. But a child born dead is better off than you, unless you enjoy life and have a decent burial. ⁴⁻⁵ That child will never live to see the sun or to have a name, and it will go straight to the world of darkness. But it will still find more rest than you, ⁶ even if you live two thousand years and don't enjoy life. As you know, we all end up in the same place.

⁷ We struggle just to have enough to eat, but we are never satisfied. ⁸ We may be sensible, yet we are no better off than a fool. And if we are poor, it still doesn't do us any good to try to live right. ⁹ It's better to enjoy what we have than to always want something else, because that makes no more sense than chasing the wind.▷

¹⁰ Everything that happens was decided long ago. We humans know what we are like, and we can't argue with God, because he is▷ too strong for us. ¹¹ The more we talk, the less sense we make, so what good does it do to talk? ¹² Life is short and meaningless, and it fades away like a shadow. Who knows what is best for us? Who knows what will happen after we are gone?

The Best in Life

- 7** 'A good reputation at the time of death is better than loving care at the time of birth.'¹
- ² It's better to go to a funeral than to attend a feast; funerals remind us that we all must die.
- ³ Choose sorrow over laughter because a sad face may hide a happy heart.
- ⁴ A sensible person mourns, but fools always laugh.
- ⁵ Harsh correction is better than the songs of a fool.
- ⁶ Foolish laughter is stupid. It sounds like thorns crackling in a fire.
- ⁷ Corruption▷ makes fools of sensible people, and bribes can ruin you.
- ⁸ Something completed is better than something just begun; patience is better than too much pride.
- ⁹ Only fools get angry quickly and hold a grudge.
- ¹⁰ It isn't wise to ask, 'Why is everything worse than it used to be?'
- ¹¹ Having wisdom is better than an inheritance.
- ¹² Wisdom will protect you just like money; knowledge with good sense will lead you to life.
- ¹³ Think of what God has done! If God makes something crooked, can you make it straight?
- ¹⁴ When times are good, you should be cheerful;

when times are bad,
 think what it means.
 God makes them both
 to keep us from knowing
 what will happen next.

Some of Life's Questions

¹⁵I have seen everything during this senseless life of mine. I have seen good citizens die for doing the right thing, and I have seen criminals live to a ripe old age. ¹⁶So don't destroy yourself by being too good or acting too smart! ¹⁷Don't die before your time by being too evil or acting like a fool. ¹⁸Keep to the middle of the road. You can do this if you truly respect God.

¹⁹Wisdom will make you stronger than the ten most powerful leaders in your city.

²⁰No one in this world always does right.

²¹Don't listen to everything that everyone says, or you might hear your servant cursing you. ²²Haven't you cursed many others?

²³I told myself that I would be smart and try to understand all of this, but it was too much for me. ²⁴The truth is beyond us. It's far too deep. ²⁵So I decided to learn everything I could and become wise enough to discover what life is all about. At the same time, I wanted to understand why it's stupid and senseless to be an evil fool.

²⁶Here is what I discovered: A bad woman is worse than death. She is a trap, reaching out with body and soul to catch you. But if you obey God, you can escape. If you don't obey, you are done for. ²⁷With all my wisdom I have tried to find out how everything fits together, ²⁸but so far I have not been able to. I do know there is one good man in a thousand, but never have I found a good woman. ²⁹I did learn one thing: We were completely honest when God created us, but now we have twisted minds.

8 Who is smart enough
 to explain everything?
 Wisdom makes you cheerful
 and gives you a smile.

Obey the King

²If you promised God that you would be loyal to the king, I advise you to keep that promise.

³Don't quickly oppose the king or argue when he has already made up his mind. ⁴The king's word is law. No one can ask him, "Why are you doing this?"

⁵If you obey the king, you will stay out of trouble. So be smart and learn what to do and when to do

it. ⁶Life is hard, but there is a time and a place for everything, ⁷though no one can tell the future.

⁸We cannot control the wind[>] or determine the day of our death. There is no escape in time of war, and no one can hide behind evil. ⁹I noticed all this and thought seriously about what goes on in the world. Why does one person have the power to hurt another?

Who Can Understand the Ways of God?

¹⁰I saw the wicked buried with honor, 'but God's people had to leave the holy city and were forgotten.' None of this makes sense. ¹¹When we see criminals commit crime after crime without being punished, it makes us want to start a life of crime. ¹²They commit hundreds of crimes and live to a ripe old age, in spite of the saying:

Everyone who lives right
 and respects God
 will prosper,

¹³but no one who sins
 and rejects God
 will prosper or live very long.

¹⁴There is something else that doesn't make sense to me. Good citizens are treated as criminals, while criminals are honored as though they were good citizens. ¹⁵So I think we should get as much out of life as we possibly can. There is nothing better than to enjoy our food and drink and to have a good time. Then we can make it through this troublesome life that God has given us here on earth.

¹⁶Day and night I went without sleep, trying to understand what goes on in this world. ¹⁷I saw everything God does, and I realized that no one can really understand what happens. We may be very wise, but no matter how much we try or how much we claim to know, we cannot understand it all.

One Day at a Time

9 I thought about these things. Then I understood that God has power over everyone, even those of us who are wise and live right. Anything can happen to any of us, and so we never know if life will be good or bad.[>] ²But 'exactly' the same thing will finally happen to all of us, whether we live right and respect God or sin and don't respect God. Yes, the same thing will happen if we offer sacrifices to God or if we don't, if we keep our promises or break them.

³It's terribly unfair for the same thing to happen to each of us. We are mean and foolish while we

live, and then we die. ⁴As long as we are alive, we still have hope, just as a live dog is better off than a dead lion. ⁵We know that we will die, but the dead don't know a thing. Nothing good will happen to them—they are gone and forgotten. ⁶Their loves, their hates, and their jealous feelings have all disappeared with them. They will never again take part in anything that happens on this earth.

⁷Be happy and enjoy eating and drinking! God decided long ago that this is what you should do. ⁸Dress up, comb your hair, and look your best. ⁹Life is short, and you love your wife, so enjoy being with her. This is what you are supposed to do as you struggle through life on this earth. ¹⁰Work hard at whatever you do. You will soon go to the world of the dead, where no one works or thinks or reasons or knows anything.

¹¹Here is something else I have learned:

The fastest runners
and the greatest heroes
don't always win races
and battles.
Wisdom, intelligence, and skill
don't always make you healthy,
rich, or popular.
We each have our share
of bad luck.

¹²None of us know when we might fall victim to a sudden disaster and find ourselves like fish in a net or birds in a trap.

Better To Be Wise than Foolish

¹³Once I saw what people really think of wisdom. ¹⁴It happened when a powerful ruler surrounded and attacked a small city where only a few people lived. The enemy army was getting ready to break through the city walls. ¹⁵But the city was saved by the wisdom of a poor person who was soon forgotten. ¹⁶So I decided that wisdom is better than strength. Yet if you are poor, no one pays any attention to you, no matter how smart you are.

¹⁷Words of wisdom spoken softly
make much more sense
than the shouts of a ruler
to a crowd of fools.
¹⁸Wisdom is more powerful
than weapons,
yet one mistake can destroy
all the good you have done.

10 A few dead flies in perfume
make all of it stink,
and a little foolishness
outweighs a lot of wisdom.
²Sensible thoughts lead you
to do right;
foolish thoughts lead you
to do wrong.
³Fools show their stupidity
by the way they live;
it's easy to see
they have no sense.
⁴Don't give up your job
when your boss gets angry.
If you stay calm,
you'll be forgiven.

⁵Some things rulers do are terribly unfair:
⁶They honor fools, but dishonor the rich; ⁷they let
slaves ride on horses, but force slave owners to
walk.

⁸If you dig a pit,
you might fall in;
if you break down a wall,
a snake might bite you.
⁹You could even get hurt
by chiseling a stone
or chopping a log.
¹⁰If you don't sharpen your ax,
it will be harder to use;
if you are smart,
you'll know what to do.¹
¹¹The power to charm a snake
does you no good
if it bites you anyway.
¹²If you talk sensibly,
you will have friends;
if you talk foolishly,
you will destroy yourself.
¹³Fools begin with nonsense,
and their stupid chatter
ends with disaster.
¹⁴They never tire of talking,
but none of us really know
what the future will bring.
¹⁵Fools wear themselves out—
they don't know enough
to find their way home.¹
¹⁶A country is in for trouble
when its ruler is childish,

- and its leaders
party all day long.
- 17 But a nation will prosper
when its ruler is mature,
and its leaders
don't party too much.
- 18 Some people are too lazy
to fix a leaky roof—
then the house falls in.
- 19 Eating and drinking
make you feel happy,
and bribes can buy
everything you need.
- 20 Don't even think
about cursing the king;
don't curse the rich,
not even in secret.
A little bird might hear
and tell everything.

It Pays To Work Hard

- 11 Be generous, and someday
you will be rewarded.▷
- 2 Share what you have
with seven or eight others,
because you never know
when disaster may strike.
- 3 Rain clouds always bring rain;
trees always stay
wherever they fall.
- 4 If you worry about the weather
and don't plant seeds,
you won't harvest a crop.

5 No one can explain how a baby breathes before it is born.▷ So how can anyone explain what God does? After all, he created everything.

6 Plant your seeds early in the morning and keep working in the field until dark. Who knows? Your work might pay off, and your seeds might produce.

Youth and Old Age

7 Nothing on earth is more beautiful than the morning sun. 8 Even if you live to a ripe old age, you should try to enjoy each day, because darkness will come and will last a long time. Nothing makes sense.▷

9 Be cheerful and enjoy life while you are young! Do what you want and find pleasure in what you see. But don't forget that God will judge you for everything you do.

10 Rid yourself of all worry and pain, because the wonderful moments of youth quickly disappear.

12 Keep your Creator in mind while you are young! In years to come, you will be burdened down with troubles and say, "I don't enjoy life anymore."

- 2 Someday the light of the sun
and the moon and the stars
will all seem dim to you.
Rain clouds will remain
over your head.
- 3 Your body will grow feeble,
your teeth will decay,
and your eyesight fail.
- 4 The noisy grinding of grain
will be shut out
by your deaf ears,
but even the song of a bird
will keep you awake.

- 5 You will be afraid
to climb up a hill
or walk down a road.
Your hair will turn as white
as almond blossoms.
You will feel lifeless
and drag along
like an old grasshopper.
- We each go to our eternal home,
and the streets are filled
with those who mourn.
- 6 The silver cord snaps,
the golden bowl breaks;
the water pitcher is smashed,
and the pulley at the well
is shattered.
- 7 So our bodies return
to the earth,
and the life-giving breath▷
returns to God.
- 8 Nothing makes sense.
I have seen it all—
nothing makes sense.

Respect and Obey God

9 I was a wise teacher with much understanding, and I collected a number of proverbs that I had carefully studied. 10 Then I tried to explain these things in the best and most accurate way.

11 Words of wisdom are like the stick a farmer uses to make animals move. These sayings come from God, our only shepherd, and they are like nails that fasten things together. 12 My child, I warn you to stay away from any teachings except these.

There is no end to books,
and too much study
will wear you out.

¹³ Everything you were taught can be put into a few words:

Respect and obey God!

This is what life
is all about.

¹⁴ God will judge
everything we do,
even what is done in secret,
whether good or bad.

Notes

Phrases enclosed in half square superscript brackets (‘¹’) are those that are difficult to translate from the original Hebrew with great certainty. Consequently, the English rendering given should be understood as only one possible way of translating such texts.

- ▷ **1.7** *return to their source*: Or “flow into the sea.”
- ▷ **1.14,17; 2.11,17,26** *chasing the wind*: Or “eating the wind.”
- ▷ **4.4,6,16** *chasing the wind*: Or “eating the wind.”
- ▷ **5.6** *worship leader*: Or “messenger.”
- ▷ **6.9** *chasing the wind*: Or “eating the wind.”
- ▷ **6.10** *with God, because he is*: Or “with anyone who is.”
- ▷ **7.7** *Corruption*: Or “Oppression.”
- ▷ **8.8** *control the wind*: Or “escape from death.”
- ▷ **9.1** *or bad*: Three ancient translations; the Hebrew text does not have these words.
- ▷ **11.1** *Be generous ... rewarded*: Or “Don’t be afraid to invest. Someday it will pay off.”
- ▷ **11.5** *how ... born*: Or “what makes the wind blow or how a baby grows inside its mother.”
- ▷ **11.8** *Nothing makes sense*: Or “There’s nothing to look forward to!”
- ▷ **12.7** *life-giving breath*: Or “spirit.”