

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

SOMETHING MORE

LIVING WELL IN A BROKEN WORLD

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *EVEN THE MONSTERS*

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*For Jackson,
my dearly loved son.*

I would fight lions barehanded for you.

*If I find in myself a desire
which no experience in this world can satisfy,
the most probable explanation is that
I was made for another world.*

C.S. Lewis

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A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

“Dad, why am I here?”

A refreshing wave of cool air washed over us as my nine-year-old son and I escaped August’s heat and humidity into air-conditioned bliss. The Oakville, Ontario Home Depot stood tall and open before us—paint and tools and hardware as far as the eye could see. The building is one of my happy places.

“Why are you at this store?” I asked. He knew why we were in the store. His tone carried a searching quality. “Or why are you here on this earth, in this life?”

“Yeah, what am I alive for?” he responded. “What’s the purpose of me being born?”

If you’re thinking, *No, that is not a conversation a nine-year-old boy starts with his dad*, well, you’ll have to take my word for it. It was not unusual for Jackson to ask me a philosophical question, and learning how to answer him has been a joy to practice over the years. Earlier that year, his older sister had spoken her last words. She suffers from a degenerative medical condition, one that delayed her ability to speak and then stole it away by age twelve. As a result, having one child who can still engage with me verbally is not something I take for granted.

So my nine-year-old son asked me a grown-up question.

“There are two answers to that question,” I answered. “There is the ultimate answer that focuses on the eternal, and then there is a simpler answer that focuses on this life here on earth. The ultimate eternal answer is that God created you to have a beautiful relationship with him forever. The whole Bible talks about that. It can get complicated in places, but that’s the basic idea.”

Remember, I’m talking to a nine-year-old here.

“The simpler answer applies mostly to just this life and is the focus of

the book of Ecclesiastes. It just so happens that I'm going to start a sermon series on Ecclesiastes next month."

I have no memory of what we talked about next. I don't know if we got distracted by other shoppers, if Jackson switched topics to something Pokémon related, or if the conversation continued for another twenty unrecorded minutes of father-son philosophizing while we shopped for power tools or angle brackets or number eight two-and-a-half-inch flat-head, square-drive construction screws. (If it was the latter, we probably bought the yellow zinc variety. I seem to have a lot more of those than I need.)

Before we go on, I'd like to clarify one thing. I mentioned that I'd prepared a sermon series on Ecclesiastes. I am not, however, a preacher by occupation. I did my undergraduate degree in liberal studies, which allowed me to jam a large volume of religious studies and history into my degree. I have studied the Greek of Alexander and the New Testament. I've unpacked the various Anabaptist and Calvinist schools of theology, explored by foot and sailed the places that today we call the Holy Land and its surrounding geography, but the preaching thing was strictly voluntary.

The practice of passionate study, however, has been a consistent part of my life since childhood. Like my son, I started wrestling with existential questions and faith topics from my preteen years. I find this material intensely interesting, and I love making it practical and relatable. This vein of investigation grips me the way sports grip some of my friends.

Supporting this introspective quality, I moved out of my parent's home at thirteen. It was a practical arrangement—my father had secured me a twelve-hour night-shift job at an old creaky farmhouse some miles from our place. While still essentially a child myself, I became the night nurse for the farmhouse couple, a brother and sister in their nineties. Bedpans, sponge baths, salves for wounds that would not heal, soiled bedsheets, and cleaning dentures for this couple were my introduction to some of the challenges of old age. The job took me away from home from 6:30 p.m. till 7:30 a.m. seven nights a week, 365 days a year from age thirteen to seventeen. I learned to raise myself while dealing with a spilled urinal or other problem at 2 or 3 a.m. This seemed like a good idea to my parents. I think boarding school would have been better. At least I would have had teachers and peers.

The oddly cold nature of my home life, unfortunately, mirrored my relationship with spiritual matters. Home and religion were intellectual con-

structs but not deeply attractive experiences. Bible study gripped me for its meaning but not its emotion.

I quit the nursing job at seventeen. In response to me sleeping at home again, my parents began charging me rent. As a result, I got my own apartment at eighteen, as soon as I was old enough to sign my own lease. That separation from my parents proved insufficient, so less than a year later, I moved from California to Canada. Shortly thereafter, I formally abandoned Christianity and became an atheist. I've written elsewhere about how I came back to faith in my early twenties.¹ With that return to faith, Bible study transformed from an intellectual interest to an emotionally engaging source of deep meaning.

In my early thirties, however, that faith was challenged once more. The birth of our daughter, her immediate medical problems, and a cascade of other calamities that followed tore apart my understanding of God and the sense of self I had established.

There's a book in the Bible called Job, which is the landmark text for Christians, Jews, and Muslims on the topic of unjust suffering. I began a serious study of that book after our daughter's birth, desperate to find answers to deep questions regarding suffering and pain. The result of that study was a new faith foundation that didn't take away pain but taught me how to survive what had previously seemed unendurable. As a secondary result of that study, I published a book that combined memoir with biblical commentary on Job to explain what I had discovered.²

However, once I was done with Job, mere survival was not enough to see me through the rest of my life. I needed something more than survival. I needed to know how to live day to day and not just endure. Thus began my study of Ecclesiastes.

If Job is the book in the Bible on unjust suffering, Ecclesiastes is the book on existential suffering.³ Said differently, Ecclesiastes is a book narrowly focused on the meaning of life—in this life, right now. Ecclesiastes doesn't

1 Daryl Potter, *Even the Monsters: Living with Grief, Loss, and Depression*, 2nd ed. (Oakville, ON: Paper Stone Press, 2022).

2 Potter, *Even the Monsters*.

3 I am indebted to Leslie Pashuk (Registered Psychotherapist and MThS), who pointed out this distinction in private conversation.

concern itself much with matters of salvation, heaven, or eternity. Ecclesiastes wants to know how to live now on this planet, even when conditions are less than ideal. Pick your sphere of interest—political controversies, environmental challenges, social ills, psychological pain, misogyny, economic oppression, war, death, and disease—Ecclesiastes covers it all and more. The world is broken. The book pulls no punches on that score, but in response, it teaches us how to live well in a broken world.

Job taught me how to survive the monsters life sometimes throws at us. I needed Ecclesiastes, however, to teach me how to do more than survive. Ecclesiastes was the flower planted on Job's foundation that taught me how to enjoy life again.

A few days after my philosophical conversation with Jackson in the hardware store, I had a conversation with a friend of mine. Let's call him George. I had known George for over two decades in another city over four thousand kilometers away. George had just come to town for a visit. It was great to see him, but then it became clear that George was in rough shape. I had not seen George in person for a long time, and the things George shared with me caught me off guard.

George was in his mid-forties, married, and a mature career-oriented guy. His kids were grown and on their own now. By all accounts, he had made a success of himself. But he approached me on that visit with tears in his eyes, and to cut a long story short, a lot of bad stuff had happened. He was at a stage where it seemed he didn't want to live anymore. He started sharing with me his lack of dreams, his emptiness, and his feelings of despair. He no longer had any goals or desires. Depression, it seemed, was only part of it.

George had read my book on Job, which had helped him sort through his feelings about God and his sense of injustice. But, like me after I'd finished writing the book, he needed to know what came next. He needed something more.

As George talked, I listened. While I listened, I also talked to myself. *This is serious*, I thought. *George is in pain, but I have no idea how to help him. I'm not a doctor or a psychologist or a therapist.*

George kept talking. I kept listening. I also started silently praying. The prayer went something like this: *God, please help me help your boy because I have no idea what to say to him.*

If you're thinking, *That's your genius prayer in a crisis?*, my honest answer

is yes. That's about it. I can be articulate on paper, but my wife will be the first to attest that I can get a bit tongue-tied in an emotional jam.

At least I knew what not to do. I knew not to say, "Well, you've got heaven to look forward to, George." That would suggest that he was right: life was, at best, an empty disappointment, and all he could hope for was to hurry up and die. A middle-aged adult on the edge of a nervous breakdown needs something more immediate than an after-death consolation prize to get them through the day.

So I prayed. Then it came to me: *I've been studying Ecclesiastes for a long time now. Ecclesiastes is not a book about heaven. Ecclesiastes is a book about how to live this life, here and now, today.*

Ecclesiastes had everything my friend needed. And so, in ten minutes, right there on the spot, with no notes, I gave him the entire sermon series—not just the first sermon scheduled for delivery a few weeks later, but the whole series, the whole book of Ecclesiastes, in ten minutes.

There was George, in crisis, suddenly subjected to my ten-minute survey of Ecclesiastes. He got the whole thing, cover to cover, in one uninterrupted go. I have no memory of what I said precisely or how I organized my points, but he was glowing by the end of my speech. His tears were gone. You could see a sparkle in his eyes.

Ecclesiastes is not a book that gives pat answers. There is no A plus B equals C in this book. Ecclesiastes is instead a gut-level reality check on how life really works and an open door to a new way of thinking and being. George's eyes didn't sparkle because he had the solution to life's riddle. His eyes sparkled because he suddenly saw the path forward in a completely different light—one focused on now and not some mysterious beyond-the-grave promise of heaven.

George still had his work cut out for him after this talk. All I could do in ten minutes was crack open Ecclesiastes and get him started. It was up to him to take his walking stick and bravely step through that door.

My conversations with Jackson and George reinforced for me the importance of revealing the message of Ecclesiastes not just for me but also for those I loved. George did not have academic interests and was unlikely to read a traditional commentary. And how long would it take for my son to be old enough to really dig into this ancient text and understand its modern applications? I'd rather he understood these things early in life and not wait until his fifties, as was my case.

Modern life cries out for the kind of understanding that Ecclesiastes was written to provide. However, that ancient text has become obscure. The foreign nature of ancient poetry, translation complexities, and a bias in academic literature toward obscure and, frankly, boring language conspires to hide God's treasure beneath layers. For many, Ecclesiastes has become either inaccessible or misunderstood. As a result, unlike my book on Job, which was an accident of personal study, I intended for this text on Ecclesiastes to become a book from the beginning.

This book is a journey. It unfolds according to a natural progression, weaving memoir and commentary together as it unveils truth and practical tools for living. Ecclesiastes makes false starts and then backs up to correct the record as its author honestly explores the reality of human experience in this life. The passions of youth are unpacked with wiser eyes later in life, and thus the contradictions revealed here are part of the book's charm.

Life is not neat. It does not conform to a formula. As a result, this book is not an internet article on the ten keys to a better life. While I've included a section called "Life Lessons Summary" at the end, that is not a checklist to work through. Likewise, jumping ahead to sections of topical interest may help a little, but that approach won't give you the best results. Ecclesiastes is a lived experience that aims to adjust how we think about reality and how we approach living well despite the brokenness evident in the world around us. Nothing is off limits. Sex, politics, and religion are all up for investigation and debate in Ecclesiastes. The topics flow from one to another, and we'll engage with them as they appear, but their order matters. The book's ideas, images, and evolving metaphors build on each other in sequence.

Ecclesiastes is for the soul that wants to know how to live now. Heaven can wait. This book asks how I should live on Tuesday afternoon when things around me go right or wrong or take unexpected turns that defy understanding. Then it teaches us how to live again on Wednesday when dawn brings yet new experiences or emotions.

The reader of Ecclesiastes will come away with a mindset—a framework for living well in a broken world regardless of the unique circumstances of our lives and times and individual days. The book is a rich and, in some places, controversial work, and it will be fun to unpack its layers.

I've come back to Ecclesiastes again and again for over forty years now. For the past decade, I have studied it intensely, unpacking the original

Hebrew grammar with the aid of translation tools and commentaries written by Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and secular scholars. I've quizzed preachers, doctors, therapists, bankers, craftsmen, farmers, artists, fishermen, nurses, programmers, and mechanics, testing the lessons found in Ecclesiastes against the reality of their own lived experiences and mine. For the single or paired, parents or childless, young or old, rich or poor, God's own book on how to live in a broken world has proven its worth. It's a pleasure to share those lessons now with you.

"Why am I here? What am I alive for? What's the purpose of me being born?" my son asked.

"How do I keep living when there's nothing further to look forward to?" my friend George asked.

And I wondered, *How do I do more than just survive this life? How can I live well in my broken world?*

Ecclesiastes answers all these questions. Let's tackle this wonderful book together.

PART ONE

**A HEART'S HUNGER
LEADS TO A SEARCH**

THE AUTHOR OF ECCLESIASTES

A LITTLE OVER three decades before Jackson asked me his “What am I here for?” meaning-of-life question, I was about the same age as him and busy thinking about how to get more sugar in my diet.

When I was growing up, our household was a firmly whole- and natural-foods house. Processed foods were not stocked, and sweets were usually only found in whatever fruits were in season or had been canned the previous year. Our pantry did have a plentiful supply of the ingredients necessary to make just about whatever sort of cookie, pie, or cake a kid might crave, but they were purchased and stored, as far as I could tell, just to collect them. Compounding what I saw as the sugar shortage in my world, strictness ruled our household. Asking for treats was not an option. As a result, we ate healthy and as a kid, I hated it.

One day my parents went into town with my sister, and I was left on my own in the house. The sugar cravings that day were high. Looking back, I suppose that a normal preteen boy would have simply raided the pantry to scoop sugar into our unsweetened iced tea or found some similar low-effort solution. However, for me, ambition was an early quality.

Instead of starting with the pantry, I started with the recipe drawer. There, I found a promising handwritten guide to making German chocolate cake. Perfect. Never having baked or cooked anything in my life before, I went through the kitchen finding all of the listed ingredients and then set to work making a full cake pan of gloriously sweet German chocolate cake.

Considerations about the trouble I'd be in when everyone got home were drowned out by the siren call of sugar.

The handwritten recipe recorded everything in old imperial measurements. "Pounds" was written the usual shorthand way as "lbs" and so on.

I went to work. I measured carefully. I followed the recipe exactly. I preheated the oven perfectly. I timed its entry and exit with precision. I was going to eat cake, and I was going to eat a lot of cake before the rest of the family got home. For me, this was a preteen sugar heist of epic proportions.

My attempt was a complete disaster. Experienced bakers will right away have wondered, "Who measures cake recipe ingredients in pounds?" Nobody, unless you're running an industrial bakery. The items accounted for in teaspoons were appropriately abbreviated as "tsp." Tablespoons should have been "tbs," but someone forgot to cross the *T*. So "tbs" became "lbs," and my sheet pan German chocolate cake consumed several pounds of butter and cocoa and, relatively speaking, not much else. The end product was an oily soup. Likewise, cocoa is quite light—I needed a lot of it to start doling it out in pounds. The half cup or so of sugar never had a chance against pounds of bitter cocoa. Looking back, I have no idea how I even measured the cocoa. The bathroom scale maybe?

I have an aunt, who we'll discuss later, who would have laughed at my mistake, corrected the handwritten recipe card, and taken everyone out for ice cream with a sparkle in her eye. Alas, that was not the house I grew up in. The experience, however, did teach me a lot about recipes. I learned to question who wrote them and if they were any good at baking before committing resources to executing their demands.

Studying Ecclesiastes brings up a similar concern. The book claims to unpack the meaning of life and to teach us how to live well in a broken world. Those are big topics. So who wrote this book? And do they know what they're talking about?

Fortunately for our study, the first thing we encounter in Ecclesiastes is a claim of authorship. Ecclesiastes 1:1 states,

¹ *The words of the Teacher of the Assembly, David's son, king in Jerusalem.*⁴

For most of my life, I believed that the famous King Solomon had been

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are taken from the Common English Bible (CEB).

the author of Ecclesiastes. This first verse seemed to support that idea since Solomon was one of David's better-known sons.

When I began to seriously study this book, I consulted numerous commentaries as well as a translator's handbook, and many of them assured me that in the original Hebrew, the language emphasizes that the author was in fact *the* son of David, not *a* son of David.⁵ In other words, the author was David's most prominent son, the one who succeeded him on the throne—Solomon.

Jewish and early Christian tradition also identified this son as Solomon, my Sunday school teachers taught it that way to me as a child, and most Bibles with brief introductions to the biblical books put him down as the author as well. There are references to Solomon's reign, wealth, and wisdom later in the book, which also support that claim. As a result, my childhood understanding looked solid.

It didn't take me long, however, to stumble into a jungle of modern criticism that took issue with the idea that Solomon was the literal author. The reasoning in these texts was complex, even for scholarly articles, and it took some serious effort on my part not to quit my study at verse one. Making practical head or tail of academic infighting quickly becomes exhausting.⁶

However, here I'm focused on what God is communicating to us through the book of Ecclesiastes in light of the events of Solomon's life—his activities, accomplishments, and failures. From that standpoint, it doesn't matter if Solomon was the literal writer. Solomon could have spoken these teachings aloud, and a listener could have digested his words and written them down years later. Perhaps Solomon wrote several texts and a later editor stitched those various unpublished works together into this book. How God put the book's message together is beside the point. The scholarly jungle awaits if you're interested in that kind of study.

However, once you boil all that theory, analysis, and outright speculation down and emerge from the academic jungle with a conclusion on the authorship, the same profoundly engaging and surprising book awaits. The

5 Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), p. 20.

6 Solomon himself says essentially the same thing at the end of Ecclesiastes in 12:12.

book takes an unflinching look at life and offers wisdom as relevant today as when it was written. And the writer, whether it was literally Solomon or not, wants us to read this book through the lens of Solomon's life and experience. As a result, identifying whose hand held the pen is pointless for practical readers.

All that to say, I'm going to call the author Solomon from now on because it's a helpful approach to understanding what God is trying to communicate here, regardless of the mechanics of how the book was physically penned and edited.

Why Solomon?

So who was this guy and why put him in charge of writing a book about the meaning of life? We'll need to dive into a bit of history here to answer that question, but bear with me. This guy has an interesting biography.

Solomon was born in the eleventh century BCE with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. Around the time of his birth, his father, David, finalized the last conquest of his reign by taking the Ammonite city of Rabbah.⁷ The crown he took from that defeated king was made of seventy-five pounds of gold (about thirty-four kilograms) plus precious stones.⁸ I think that a crown that heavy might have been a strategic blunder. It may have served the Ammonite king better, politically and medically, to have spent more effort working on nation building and international relations rather than devising a crown the weight of a child. Regardless, David conquered the Ammonites, and Israel became the region's powerhouse.

But what was it like growing up in that context in David's palace?

I can imagine Solomon talking with someone at some point about how his parents met. He may have asked one of his parents, his nurse, or perhaps one of his older half siblings. *Wait—Solomon had half siblings?* you might ask. Yeah, well, that's where Solomon's silver spoon starts to look a little tarnished.

Solomon's mom was David's eighth wife. Right away, you know there must be a story there. That story gets even more dramatic when we remember Solomon's mom's name was Bathsheba. This marriage was originally an

⁷ See 2 Samuel 12 for the full story.

⁸ 2 Samuel 12:30, NIV.

adulterous affair that led to the murder of Bathsheba's first husband and the death of David and Bathsheba's first child, Solomon's older full sibling.

This discussion could quickly morph into endless digressions about David's family line, so let's not get too lost in the backstory. A few highlights, though, will help paint the picture of Solomon's not-so-silver-spoon childhood. First, his older half brother Amnon raped his half sister Tamar. David, as both father and king, did nothing about this horrible crime. Another half brother named Absalom eventually took matters into his own hands, murdered Amnon, and then led an armed rebellion against his father.⁹ Absalom briefly overthrew the throne before losing a key battle and dying at the hands of David's men.¹⁰

Solomon's dad was a poet, a king, and the warrior famous for killing Goliath, which sounds cool, but his home life was a mess. Actually, his home life was criminal, but let's move on from this extreme domestic dysfunction.¹¹

The second book of Samuel introduces God's view of the newborn Solomon, despite the circumstances of his birth.

The Lord loved him²⁵ and sent word by the prophet Nathan to name him Jedidiah because of the Lord's grace.

2 SAMUEL 12:24B–25

As the CEB notes, the name "Jedidiah" means "Loved by the Lord."¹² The poor kid would need God's love to survive his family life.

And right there, I think, is one key reason why God chose Solomon as his point of view for Ecclesiastes. Modern psychology offers much insight into how growing up in a dysfunctional family can shape a heart's hunger

9 See 2 Samuel 13 for the full story.

10 See 2 Samuel 15–18 for the story of Absalom's revolt and eventual defeat.

11 For readers offended by this unflattering portrayal of David's family life, in addition to reading 2 Samuel carefully, you may find value in North Coast Church's excellent forty-six-week sermon series on this topic. It is available online at this site and address: "David: The Pride, Priorities, and Passions in the Palace; 1st & 2nd Samuel," North Coast Church (website), uploaded January 8–November 19, 2022, <https://www.northcoastchurch.com/david-1st-2nd-samuell/>.

12 2 Samuel 12:25, CEB footnote b.

later in life. God didn't need modern psychology to know this. God made the human heart. God chose Solomon when he was just a newborn.

But there's more. First Kings provides further insight into how Solomon's good character and bad upbringing comingled in both positive and negative ways.

On the negative side of the ledger, Solomon kicked off his reign by embarking on several violations of God's law: he murdered a half brother for political reasons,¹³ married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh Shoshenq I,¹⁴ and conscripted tens of thousands into forced labor gangs to help him achieve his personal and political ambitions.¹⁵ Think slaves operating in mines and other dangerous, back-breaking, inhuman conditions, and you get the idea of how ruthless Solomon could be.

The positive side of Solomon's ledger is also a bit of a mixed story. For example:

³ Now Solomon loved the Lord by walking in the laws of his father David, with the exception that he also sacrificed and burned incense at the shrines.

1 KINGS 3:3

So was he worshipping God at these shrines? In other words, did he have the right idea but the wrong procedure? Or was he worshipping idols at these shrines? The passage doesn't say, but it does make it clear that this was a flaw. He loved God and was doing well at this early stage, except for this detail.

Regardless, God demonstrates his characteristic grace by coming to Solomon with an amazing offer. In 1 Kings 3:5, God says to Solomon, "Ask whatever you wish, and I'll give it to you." Solomon asks for wisdom, and

13 1 Kings 2:25.

14 1 Kings 3:1.

15 1 Kings 9:15–21.

¹⁰ It pleased the Lord that Solomon had made this request. ¹¹ God said to him, “Because you have asked for this instead of requesting long life, wealth, or victory over your enemies—asking for discernment so as to acquire good judgment—¹² I will now do just what you said. Look, I hereby give you a wise and understanding mind. There has been no one like you before now, nor will there be anyone like you afterward. ¹³ I now also give you what you didn’t ask for: wealth and fame. There won’t be a king like you as long as you live. ¹⁴ And if you walk in my ways and obey my laws and commands, just as your father David did, then I will give you a very long life.”

1 KINGS 3:10–14

The result was a wealthy, famous man renowned for physical and intellectual achievements in areas as diverse as architecture, landscape and interior design, botany, literature, zoology, entomology, international relations, and ornithology.¹⁶

He also went a bit bananas in the marriage department and a few other areas of life, but we’ll talk about that later. The bottom line for our purposes is that he was a guy from an incredibly dysfunctional family who somehow found favor in God’s eyes and was blessed in adulthood with every resource imaginable to make meaning out of his earthly life. Ecclesiastes records this eminently qualified man’s search for earthly meaning.

As we’ll discover as we go through this book, Solomon was not only rich, wise, and famous—he was also a detail-oriented guy. If Solomon had written a recipe for a fancy chocolate cake, he’d have notated the measurements accurately. This is a guy who knew how to put a life plan together.

16 For example, see 1 Kings 4:29–34.

