

# THE DRAMA OF ETERNITY

**STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.**



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# Vapour of Vapours.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the central image is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which literally means "vapour." It has been translated smoke, vanity, meaningless, futility, useless. But the word is capturing transience; the idea that life and all of its elements are fleeting and cannot be controlled for our gain.

This series is birthed from the conviction that Ecclesiastes sets out to teach us how to live our 'vaporous lives' faithfully while we cope with our desire for the infinite. That is, we all want our life to last and have meaning, yet we know that this life and all we get up to has an ending. Ecclesiastes provides a healthy way to deal with this reality.

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*Vapour does not mean  
that life is meaningless,  
but that it is temporal.  
It is passing and we  
cannot grasp it.*

The opening designation of the book identifies the speaker as "Qohelet" in the Hebrew, which is a word that refers to one who addresses an assembly. This could mean that the writer of Ecclesiastes was a pastor or a preacher or a more generalised public speaker.

Because the book doesn't use the personal name of God and is written in a style of Hebrew different to earlier writings of the Old Testament, some think that this points toward the latter option, being an address of Solomon's to the foreign nations. You can see hints of this in 1 Kings 4:34 "From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom."

Strictly speaking, the book never officially names the author as Solomon, but he's been considered the most likely candidate for Qohelet through most of Jewish and Christian scholarship. The book does call the Qohelet "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), someone who was surpassingly wise (1:16), and who had a very prosperous reign (2:1–9).

In any case, it's clear that the book is at least intended to be read as Solomonic; in the tradition of a wealthy, wise king in the line of David. We find that it's best understood as a text where we can hear Solomon as he fulfils his role as shepherd king over Israel by faithfully communicating the wisdom of the divine Shepherd through delightful words of truth (Eccl. 11:9-14).

There's no doubt that this is a tricky book to understand. But why shouldn't it be? For in these pages we find a wise teacher who lays out the realities of life in all its complexity and messiness. Life is tricky. There's no way around it. Yet the wise reader of Ecclesiastes will come to realise that whilst life might be complex, unpredictable, and messy, God is in control and will bring everything to a fitting and just conclusion.

Therefore, our duty as followers of Jesus is to confess our ignorance and impotence at trying to control life and instead receive life and rejoice in it as a gift from God's hand. This will produce a life that is wholly content despite our human limitations while constantly reminding us to "fear God and keep his commandments" (Eccl. 12:13).

Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) is used in these studies.

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# Ecclesiastes

## THE BIG IDEA →

WE ARE LIVING IN A  
TEMPORARY WORLD  
UNDER AN ETERNAL  
GOD!

↙ ECCLESIASTES ↘  
WHAT SAYS ABOUT

OUR WORK

1:3, 3:9, 3:22  
WHAT DO WE GAIN  
FROM OUR WORK?  
NONE OF IT IS ETERNAL.  
BUT THERE IS NOTHING  
BETTER FOR US  
THAN TO REJOICE IN IT.

God's Work

3:11-15, 7:13, 11:5

God has worked  
from beginning to end,  
and everything he  
does endures forever.  
But we cannot know  
what he has done or  
straighten what he  
has made crooked

1:2

EVERYTHING  
IS VAPOUR

3:11

GOD HAS PUT A DROP  
OF ETERNITY IN  
OUR HEARTS

6:1

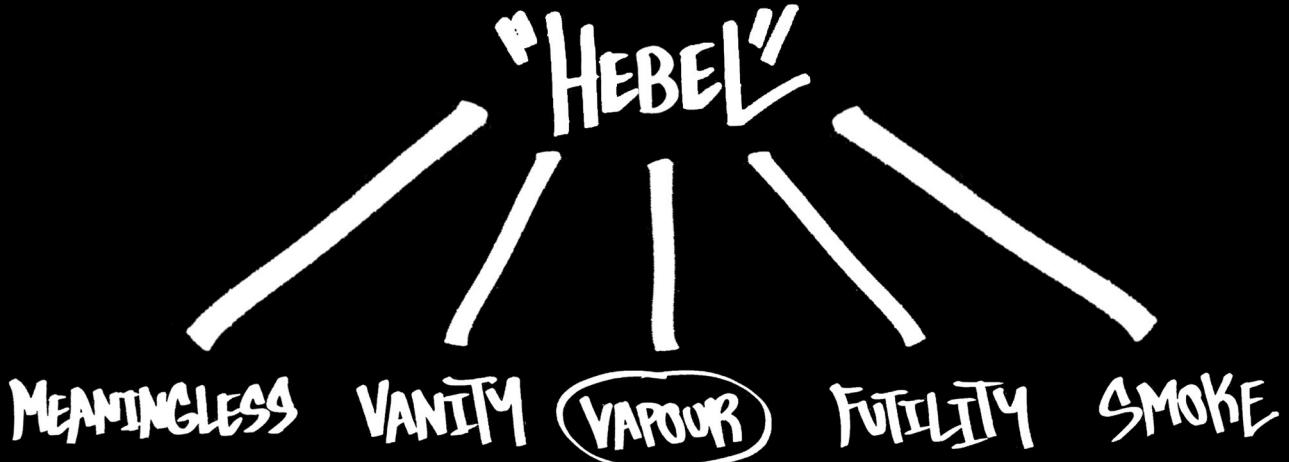
VAPOUR IS  
TRAGEDY

5:20

VAPOUR IS  
JOYOUS

12:5

MAN HEADS TO  
HIS ETERNAL HOME



"HEBEL" IS A HEBREW WORD THAT LITERALLY MEANS "BREATH" OR "VAPOUR". SOME VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE HAVE TRANSLATED IT "MEANINGLESS" OR "VANITY". BUT THAT CAN BE MISLEADING. WHAT THE BOOK IS SAYING IS NOT THAT EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS, BUT THAT EVERYTHING IS TEMPORARY - VAPOROUS. NOTHING IN THIS WORLD IS ETERNAL. OR IS IT?

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"THE END OF THE MATTER.  
FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS  
COMMANDMENTS, FOR THIS  
IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN!"

Ecclesiastes 12:13

# WEEK 1

## EVERYTHING IS VAPOUR!

**1** The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

**2** Absolute futility," says the Teacher.  
"Absolute futility. Everything is futile." **3** What does a man gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun? **4** A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. **5** The sun rises and the sun sets; panting, it returns to its place where it rises. **6** Gusting to the south, turning to the north, turning, turning, goes the wind, and the wind returns in its cycles. **7** All the streams flow to the sea, yet the sea is never full. The streams are flowing to the place, and they flow there again. **8** All things are wearisome; man is unable to speak. The eye is not satisfied by seeing or the ear filled with hearing. **9** What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. **10** Can one say about anything, "Look, this is new"? It has already existed in the ages before us. **11** There is no remembrance of those who came before; and of those who will come after there will also be no remembrance by those who follow them.

**12** I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. **13** I applied my mind to seek and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied. **14** I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind.

**15** What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

**16** I said to myself, "Look, I have amassed wisdom far beyond all those who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has thoroughly grasped wisdom and knowledge." **17** I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly; I learned that this too is a pursuit of the wind.

**18** For with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases.

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# STUDY QUESTIONS

**BIG IDEA:**

*Because all of life is vapour, humanity cannot control it in such a way as to gain lasting reward.*

**Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-18**

Have you ever worked with determination toward a goal only to lose all your work in a moment's notice? How did it make you feel realising your labour was in vain?

In Eccl. 1:2, The word translated 'meaningless' or 'futile' is the Hebrew word 'hebel' (pronounced hevel). In other parts of the Old Testament this word is translated as 'breath' or ' fleeting' or 'vapour/mist' (e.g. Psalms 144:1; Psalms 39:5; Proverbs 31:30). How might understanding 'hebel' as 'vapour' or 'breath' affect the way we read and understand Ecclesiastes?

What do you think the Teacher is trying to communicate with his extended poem on the cycles of nature (vv. 2-11)?

What are your 'go-to' places when it comes to placing your trust, or what things do you tend to grasp at for security?

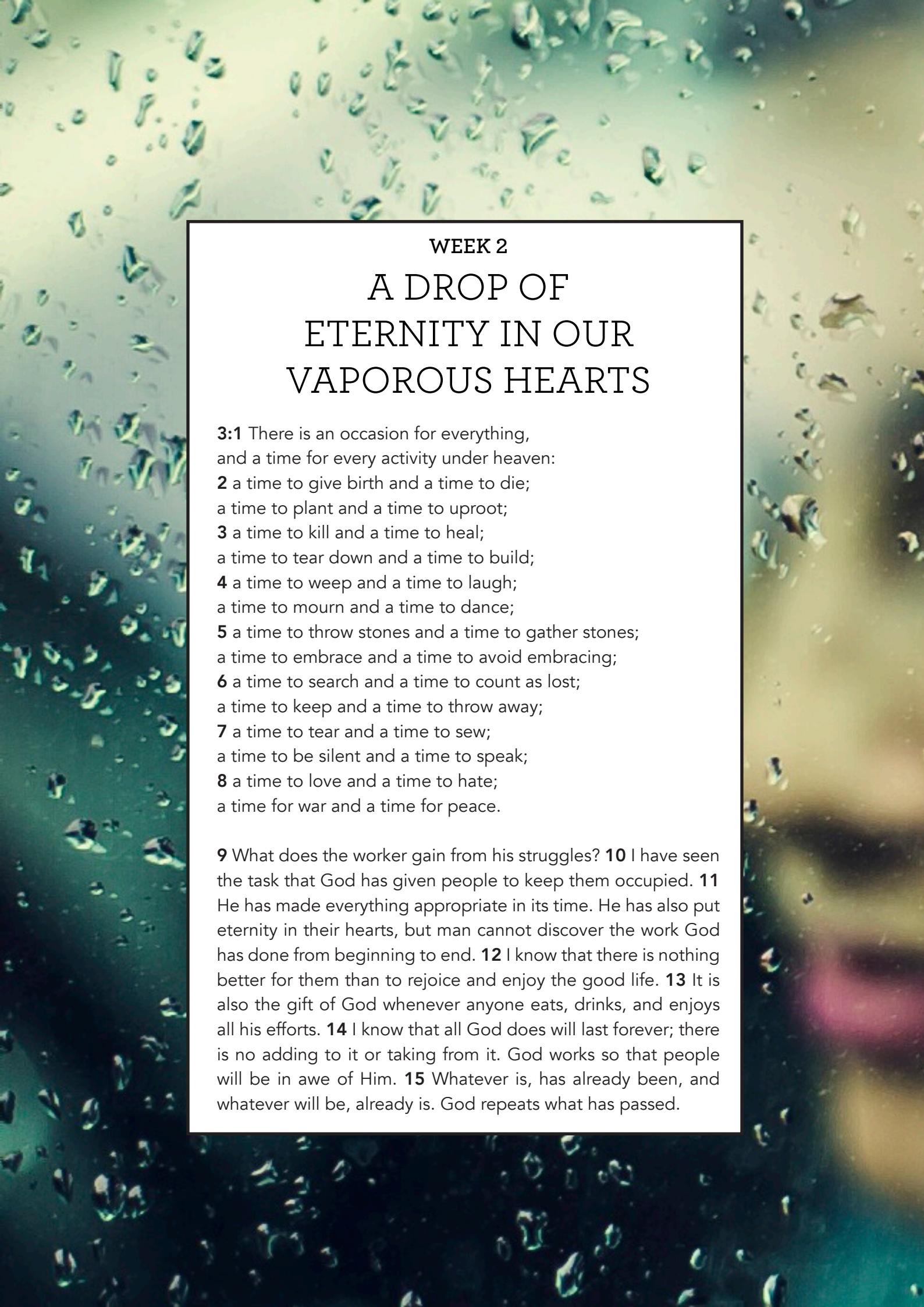
**Read Romans 8:18-28.**

What parallels do you see between this passage and Ecclesiastes 1? (Hint: The word 'futile' in Rom. 8:19 is the Greek word for 'hebel'.)

What solutions does Romans 8:18-28 offer to the reader of Ecclesiastes?

Solomon says, 'There is nothing new under the sun!' But Jesus says, 'Behold! I am making all things new!' (Revelation 21:5). What hope does Jesus offer to you in the midst of a fragile, fleeting, and vaporous world?

Why is it so easy to place our trust in things other than the goodness of Jesus? What hinders us from relying on Christ for our security?



## WEEK 2

# A DROP OF ETERNITY IN OUR VAPOROUS HEARTS

**3:1** There is an occasion for everything,  
and a time for every activity under heaven:  
**2** a time to give birth and a time to die;  
a time to plant and a time to uproot;  
**3** a time to kill and a time to heal;  
a time to tear down and a time to build;  
**4** a time to weep and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn and a time to dance;  
**5** a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;  
a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing;  
**6** a time to search and a time to count as lost;  
a time to keep and a time to throw away;  
**7** a time to tear and a time to sew;  
a time to be silent and a time to speak;  
**8** a time to love and a time to hate;  
a time for war and a time for peace.

**9** What does the worker gain from his struggles? **10** I have seen the task that God has given people to keep them occupied. **11** He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but man cannot discover the work God has done from beginning to end. **12** I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life. **13** It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts. **14** I know that all God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of Him. **15** Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is. God repeats what has passed.

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## STUDY QUESTIONS

**BIG IDEA:** *The rhythms of life have a flow and regularity that is beyond human control. God has done this – and has placed a drop of eternity into our hearts – so that we might fear him.*

**Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15**

This chapter opens with a kaleidoscopic view from heaven of all the colours and shades of life. How might it help someone to see and acknowledge these?

How many of the seasons in vv. 2–8 are within our control?

Do you think life would be easier if you knew all the seasons of life before you?

What do these verses say about the lasting value of all the joyful seasons of life: birth, laughing, dancing and embracing?

What are the challenges of our work, from vv. 9–11a?

From v. 11b and vv. 14–15, what can we know of God's work?

Read vv. 12–13. Is this how you see life under God?

Read Revelation 1:9–20. How are Jesus' words in vv. 17–19 different to Ecclesiastes 3:14–15?

## WEEK 3

# THE TRAGEDY OF VAPOUR

**6:1** Here is a tragedy I have observed under the sun, and it weighs heavily on humanity: **2** God gives a man riches, wealth, and honor so that he lacks nothing of all he desires for himself, but God does not allow him to enjoy them. Instead, a stranger will enjoy them. This is futile and a sickening tragedy. **3** A man may father a hundred children and live many years. No matter how long he lives, if he is not satisfied by good things and does not even have a proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. **4** For he comes in futility and he goes in darkness, and his name is shrouded in darkness. **5** Though a stillborn child does not see the sun and is not conscious, it has more rest than he. **6** And if he lives a thousand years twice, but does not experience happiness, do not both go to the same place?

**9:1** Indeed, I took all this to heart and explained it all: the righteous, the wise, and their works are in God's hands. People don't know whether to expect love or hate. Everything lies ahead of them. **2** Everything is the same for everyone: there is one fate for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and the bad, for the clean and the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice. As it is for the good, so it is for the sinner; as for the one who takes an oath, so for the one who fears an oath. **3** This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: there is one fate for everyone. In addition, the hearts of people are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live—after that they go to the dead. **4** But there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living, since a live dog is better than a dead lion. **5** For the living know that they will die, but the dead don't know anything. There is no longer a reward for them because the memory of them is forgotten. **6** Their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared, and there is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun.

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## STUDY QUESTIONS

**BIG IDEA:** *Before you disappear into death, use the breath you have to make a sober assessment of your life, recognising that all you do and have comes from the hand of God and cannot be taken with you.*

**Read Ecclesiastes 6:1-6 and 9:1-6**

These verses are wrestling with some of the darkest implications of our “vaporous” world. Read 6:6 and 9:2–3. What’s the main point of these verses?

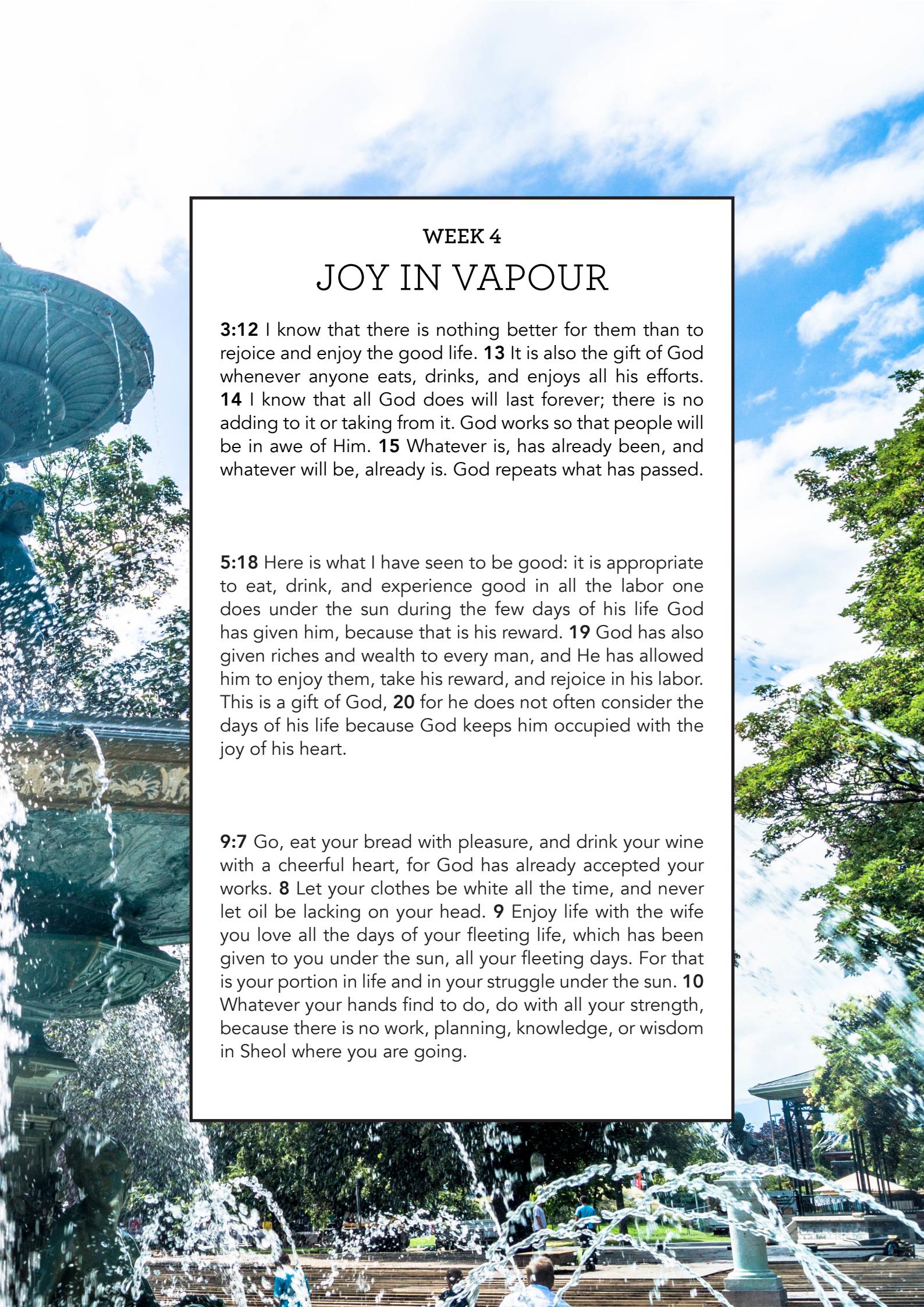
What are some ways that people make peace with this reality of death?

What would it be like to live a life like 6:2 describes? Can you relate to that at all?

If someone doesn’t enjoy the good things in life (6:2) and is completely disconnected from everything done under the sun when they die (9:5–6), what is the alternative? What would you expect the Teacher to consider a ‘good’ life and death?

Have you ever thought about what legacy you would like to leave behind in this world?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50–58. What do these verses have to say about the “vapour” of life and death?



## WEEK 4

# JOY IN VAPOUR

**3:12** I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life. **13** It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts. **14** I know that all God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of Him. **15** Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is. God repeats what has passed.

**5:18** Here is what I have seen to be good: it is appropriate to eat, drink, and experience good in all the labor one does under the sun during the few days of his life God has given him, because that is his reward. **19** God has also given riches and wealth to every man, and He has allowed him to enjoy them, take his reward, and rejoice in his labor. This is a gift of God, **20** for he does not often consider the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart.

**9:7** Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart, for God has already accepted your works. **8** Let your clothes be white all the time, and never let oil be lacking on your head. **9** Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days. For that is your portion in life and in your struggle under the sun. **10** Whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength, because there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

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## STUDY QUESTIONS

**BIG IDEA:** *When life is received as a gift it frees you up to enjoy the good pleasures that God has hard-wired into his creation.*

**Read Ecclesiastes 3:12-15, 5:18-20 and 9:7-10.**

In one sentence, how would you summarize our culture's positive message of the best way to live life?

Is it at all similar to 3:12-13?

Do these verses seem at odds with what we've read so far in Ecclesiastes?

5:18-19 speak about our "reward" and 9:9 speaks about our "portion." What is this reward/portion? How are we to see our "reward"?

5:18 and 9:9 both comment on the brevity of life. How do brevity and joy work together in these verses?

What are we commanded to enjoy?

**Read Isaiah 55.**

This chapter describes an invitation to a feast, just after the song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. This is God calling his people to eat and drink without cost, and to go out with joy, but in a different way to Ecclesiastes. The food and drink here are God's compassion and his forgiveness, that he bought for us with the death of his suffering servant, who we now know as Jesus.

How can you be stuffing your face in this feast of forgivness and "going out with joy?"

## WEEK 5

# FROM VAPOUR TO ETERNITY

**12:1** So remember your Creator in the days of your youth:

Before the days of adversity come,  
and the years approach when you will say,  
"I have no delight in them";  
**2** before the sun and the light are darkened,  
and the moon and the stars,  
and the clouds return after the rain;  
**3** on the day when the guardians of the house tremble,  
and the strong men stoop,  
the women who grind cease because they are few,  
and the ones who watch through the windows see dimly,  
**4** the doors at the street are shut  
while the sound of the mill fades;  
when one rises at the sound of a bird,  
and all the daughters of song grow faint.  
**5** Also, they are afraid of heights and dangers on the road;  
the almond tree blossoms,  
the grasshopper loses its spring,  
and the caper berry has no effect;  
for man is headed to his eternal home,  
and mourners will walk around in the street;  
**6** before the silver cord is snapped,  
and the gold bowl is broken,  
and the jar is shattered at the spring,  
and the wheel is broken into the well;  
**7** and the dust returns to the earth as it once was,  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.  
**8** "Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Everything is futile."

**9** In addition to the Teacher being a wise man, he constantly taught the people knowledge; he weighed, explored, and arranged many proverbs.  
**10** The Teacher sought to find delightful sayings and write words of truth accurately. **11** The sayings of the wise are like goads, and those from masters of collections are like firmly embedded nails. The sayings are given by one Shepherd.

**12** But beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study wearies the body. **13** When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep His commands, because this is for all humanity. **14** For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

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## STUDY QUESTIONS

**BIG IDEA:** *In everything you do: remember your Creator, fear him, and keep his commandments. For if you do, this vaporous life will give way to an everlasting life with God.*

**Read Ecclesiastes 11-12**

Read 11:1-6. With special attention to verses 2, 5, & 6, what themes does the Teacher revisit from earlier chapters (e.g. Ch. 1 & 3)?

Given that reality is the way it is (outside of our control), what advice for living well does the Teacher offer in 11:6-8? Do you think this is a helpful or unhelpful way to live?

In 11:9, what safeguard does the Teacher put in place so that wise living doesn't turn into folly? Does this thought ever cross your mind in your pursuit of happiness?

Why would it be important to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (12:1), before the dark days of 12:1b-7?

"Do not seek death. Death will find you. But seek the road which makes death a fulfilment" (Dag Hammarskjöld). What do you make of that quote? Do you think the Teacher would agree with it?

How does 12:11 help shape the way we view the writing of Ecclesiastes as a whole? Why are the Teacher's words so valuable?

The conclusion in 12:13 is "fear God and keep his commandments." How would this fit with what we've seen previously: "enjoy life as a gift from God"?

*In Ecclesiastes 7:10 the Teacher says, "Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins."*

*And then in 11:9 he tells us, "Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment."*

**Now read 2 Corinthians 5:6-15.**

How is it that Paul can have confidence in the face of God's judgement?

Ecclesiastes opens with no eternity in sight, then speaks about a drop of eternity being placed in our hearts (3:11), and ends here with God's people returning to their eternal homes (12:5). From the 2 Corinthians passage, how does Paul expound on this understanding of an eternal home? How does Paul imagine it shapes the way we live?



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