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ECCLESIASTES

*When life is frustrating*

SETTING

Uncertain

KEY VERSE

*"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."*

12:13-14

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**CONTENTS**

[INTRODUCTION 3](#_Toc128339589)

[A BIBLICAL BALANCE 4](#_Toc128339590)

[ECCLESIASTES 4](#_Toc128339591)

[SOLOMON? 5](#_Toc128339592)

[WHY THEN HINT ABOUT SOLOMON? 5](#_Toc128339593)

[EPILOGUE (12:9-14) 5](#_Toc128339594)

[“HEBEL” 6](#_Toc128339595)

[WHAT IS CALLED “HEBEL”? 7](#_Toc128339596)

[WHAT DOES MAN HAVE LEFT FOR HIS ENDEAVOR? (1:3, 3:9, 5:15) 10](#_Toc128339597)

[NEVER ANYTHING NEW (1:4-11) 11](#_Toc128339598)

[2:13-23 11](#_Toc128339599)

[SEIZE THE DAY #1 (2:24-25) 12](#_Toc128339600)

["A TIME FOR EVERYTHING..." (3:1-8) 12](#_Toc128339601)

[ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS (3:11) 12](#_Toc128339602)

[SEIZE THE DAY #2 (3:12-13) 13](#_Toc128339603)

[GOD'S WORKS ARE ETERNAL (3:14) 13](#_Toc128339604)

[GOD WILL JUDGE #1 (3:16-17) 13](#_Toc128339605)

[SEIZE THE DAY #3 (3:22) 13](#_Toc128339606)

[AN INTERMEDIATE THING (4:4-6) 14](#_Toc128339607)

[FEAR GOD #1 (5:1-6) 14](#_Toc128339608)

[SEIZE THE DAY #4 (5:17-19) 14](#_Toc128339609)

["IF GOD WILLS... " (7:14) 15](#_Toc128339610)

[THE RICH PEASANT (LUKE 12:16-22) 15](#_Toc128339611)

[FEAR GOD #2 (7:15-18) 15](#_Toc128339612)

[GOD WILL JUDGE #2 - FEAR GOD #3 (8:11-14) 15](#_Toc128339613)

[SEIZE THE DAY #5 (8:15) 16](#_Toc128339614)

[SEIZE THE DAY #6 (9:7-10) 16](#_Toc128339615)

[SEIZE THE DAY #7 - GOD WILL JUDGE #3 (11:7-10) 16](#_Toc128339616)

[DEATH COMES (12:1-8) 17](#_Toc128339617)

[CONCLUSION (12:13-14) 17](#_Toc128339618)

[LIFE IN A PERISHABLE WORLD WITH JESUS 18](#_Toc128339619)

## INTRODUCTION

In Hebrew, this book is called "Qohelet", which means something like "The Collector". Since the word "assembly" comes from the same root, it is natural to interpret it as a preacher of some kind, although the content of the book may be far from what we usually associate with preaching. "The collector" can also be someone who collects, e.g., observations or wisdom.

Ecclesiastes is found after the Proverbs in the Bible and gives, along with Job, a balance to the theology in the Proverbs. The proverbs apply to life in general, but not to every situation. It is not always guaranteed that things will go as planned. The preacher is realistic and warns us that sometimes life will not be so easy. It does not come with a correction to Proverbs per se, but a correction to reading too much into them and taking them too far.

The preacher is usually associated with Solomon based on *"son of David, king in Jerusalem"* (1:1). This had also been the traditional view until the 17th century. It is then common to see Solomon as a "bad example", e.g., from his older days when he had strayed a little from God (1 Kings 11). But the name Solomon is never actually mentioned, and it is only in chapters 1-2 that he sounds like a king. Later, he complained about many things he could have easily changed as king. "Son of David" can in reality be any descendant of David - if it is meant literally and not that he just wants to show that even Solomon would not have been able to conclude otherwise. He said, "I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me" (1:16). It was only David who was king in Jerusalem before Solomon (Saul had Gibeah as his capital). In 12:9, he is also called "the Teacher" and not the king.

One suggestion is that it is Solomon or someone else who wants to make a point even if he does not mean most of what he says. He then writes as if God did not exist, to show how meaningless life would be then. A third option is that he means what he says, but not that everything is "emptiness" or "meaningless".

The Hebrew word "*hebel*" is a keyword in the book. Some translations use *"meaningless"* every time, while other translations use many different words. Therefore, the translation you choose may impact your interpretation. The word means "breath" or "vapor" and is used figuratively for something fleeting, without substance, worthless, or vain. Ultimately, since nothing the preacher examines lasts beyond death, one could say that all of this is *"meaningless"*. But there are probably good reasons for using other words in the translation anyway.

The preacher's question is: " What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?" (1:3). That's what he's trying to figure out, and the frustrating thing is that nothing lasts beyond death. What are we to do if everyone dies and everything in life is perishable and in vain because nothing can overcome death?

The book comes with 3 themes as answers, and these appear here and there throughout the book:

1. Seize the day!
2. Fear God!
3. God will judge.

The conclusion comes in 12:13-14, and the solution seems to be both to seize the day and enjoy life when you can and to have an eternal perspective where you fear God and remember that there will be a judgment. The preacher has presented in a realistic way what life is like, but still encourages the same as the other wisdom literature: In any case, the most important thing is to fear God (Proverbs 1:1-7). At least he has explained things to us straight so that we will not be surprised and disappointed when accidents happen. Consequently, we have been prepared and will not lose faith if an accident happens.

Where is Jesus in Ecclesiastes? The book talks about God's coming judgment. The NT tells us that it is Jesus who will judge the living and the dead when he returns. Since the preacher concluded that nothing in this life can overcome death, Jesus has come into our world and done just that. They had some thoughts about a resurrection from the dead in the OT as well (e.g., Isa 26:19, Dan 12:2), but in Jesus, we have a clear hope of life after death.

### A BIBLICAL BALANCE

Not a correction to Proverbs, but a caution against reading too much into them and going to far with them. Maybe it corrects an attitude of trying to manipulate God. Did someone think that they could predict what God was going to do based on such words of wisdom?

### ECCLESIASTES

Hebrew: Qohelet = “the collector”?

Greek: Ecclesiastes

Gatherer => assembly => preacher

Did he collect people, observations, or wisdom?

### SOLOMON?

"Solomon" is never mentioned.

*“Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me”* (1:16).

* Weird that he says that when it was just David?
* But in 1 Chronicles 29:25, *"The Lord... bestowed on him royal splendor such as no king over Israel ever had before."*

Only in Ch. 1-2 does he sounds like a king. As king, he could have changed some of the things he complains about. In 12:9, he is called a teacher and not a king.

### WHY THEN HINT ABOUT SOLOMON?

To show that even Solomon, with all his resources and possibilities, would not have arrived at any other result?

Because the audience was heavily influenced by Solomon's proverbs?

*“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. 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. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. 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 12:9-14

## EPILOGUE (12:9-14)

Different suggestions regarding the authorship:

1. The same author as the rest of the book.
2. An editor who tries to "save" the book a little.
3. An editor who agrees with the message but makes a small correction.
4. An editor who completely agrees with the message.
5. An editor who agrees but tries to prevent the message from being misunderstood.

*“The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.”* v. 10

The book may sting a bit, but it gets people on the right course like other biblical wisdom literature.

The wise received this wisdom from God.

*"The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd."* v. 11

*“given by one shepherd”* (ESV, NIV, NASB) probably refers to the words of the wise and not the nails.

One must be careful not to go beyond biblical wisdom. *"Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them."* (v. 12)

It is the book as a whole that we have in the Bible. It's the content of the book we should focus on, not the person who wrote it (“the Teacher”).

*“Any argument that looks for an 'original' skeptical book of Qohelet (1:12-12:7) that has later been clumsily applied to a 'righteous' framework is pure speculation and based on mistaken notions of what is appropriate for a biblical book to contain.”* Peter Enns

## “HEBEL”

The Hebrew word *hebel* can mean different things in different contexts, as seen by how it is translated in the Norwegian Bible 2011 (NO11):

* In vain: 21
* Perishable: 8
* Meaningless: 2
* Volatile: 4
* Breathe: 1
* Emptiness: 1

Norwegian Bibel 2005 (NO05): emptiness (2/3)

KJ97: emptiness

NIV: meaningless

Literally, the word *hebel* means “steam” or “breath”. Figuratively, it describes something fleeting, without substance, worthless, or in vain, e.g., idols. The name Abel also comes from the same word.

How *hebel* is translated has a lot to say for the understanding of the book. If everything is emptiness/meaningless, you get a different impression than if everything is volatile/in vain. How it should be translated should be interpreted in light of the context. As it is translated differently, it is wise to check several Bible translations.

1:14: *"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."*

Trying to catch steam or breath becomes the same as herding/chasing the wind. You do not gain anything from it. It is like something that appears to have substance but deceives you and is impossible to get your hands on until it's gone.

## WHAT IS CALLED “HEBEL”?

**Everything (1:2, 2:17, 12:8)**

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”* 1:2

*"So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."* 2:17

*"'Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!'"* 12:8

**Every deed (1:14, 2:11), Worldly success (2:11)**

*“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing* *after the wind.”* 1:14

*“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.”* 2:11

**Joy and pleasure (2:1)**

*"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."* 2:1

**Wisdom (2:15)**

*"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.”*

**To leave all you own to another (2:19, 21, 26, 6:2)**

*“And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.”* 2:19

*"For a person may labor 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."* 2:21

*"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."* 2:26

*"God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, 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."* 6:2

**Human Struggle (2:23)**

*“All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.”* 2:23

**Animals and people (3:19)**

*“Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless.”* 3:19

**Achievements springing from envy of another (4:4)**

*"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."* 4:4

**To work oneself rich without a family (4:7-8)**

*“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!”*

**A disappointing King (4:16)**

*"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."* 4:16

**Insatiable pursuit of money (5:10)**

*"Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless."* 5:9

**Not being able to enjoy the wealth (6:2)**

*"God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, 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."* 6:2

**Try to satisfy the desires of the soul (6:9)**

*"Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."* 6:9

**Many words (6:11)**

*"The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?"* 6:11

**Days of men (6:12, 7:15, 9:9)**

*"For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?"* 6:12

*"In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness."* 7:15

*"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 labor under the sun."* 9:9

**The laughter of fools (7:6)**

*"Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless."* 7:6

**That the righteous are forgotten while the unrighteous are remembered (8:10)**

*"Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless."* 8:10

**That the righteous get what the unrighteous deserve and vice versa (8:14)**

*"There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless."* 8:14

**Everything to come (11:8)**

*"However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all. But let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. Everything to come is meaningless."* 11:8

**Youth and vigor (11:10)**

*"So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless."* 11:10

*“…yet another example of futile human effort.”* Roland Murphy

## WHAT DOES MAN HAVE LEFT FOR HIS ENDEAVOR? (1:3, 3:9, 5:15)

*"What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?"* 1:3

*"What do workers gain from their toil?"* 3:9

*"Everyone comes naked from their mother’s womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands."* 5:15

*“gain”* = advantage, profit. The conclusion is already given in 1:2. Answer: Nothing.

## NEVER ANYTHING NEW (1:4-11)

*"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. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. 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."* 1:4-11

The sun, the wind, and the water "work" all the time, but they never get anywhere.

The statement that “there is nothing new under the sun” is a generalization of the world; he does not say that, e.g., new discoveries or inventions never happen. This is part of the introduction to the book.

The author may have lived after the exile, in the "400 silent years", without prophets who spoke of new things God would do. Did people begin to lose faith in God's faithfulness and the coming of the Messiah?

## 2:13-23

*"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. 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.” For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die! So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a person may labor 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 labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless."* 2:13-23

## SEIZE THE DAY #1 (2:24-25)

*"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?”*

## "A TIME FOR EVERYTHING..." (3:1-8)

*“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens”* 3:1

*"the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter”* 8:5-6

## ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS (3:11)

*“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.”* 3:11

Eternity is an infinite amount of time, both forward and backward.

Both the human desire to understand life and our limitations in this regard have been given by God.

## SEIZE THE DAY #2 (3:12-13)

*“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.”* 3:12-13

*"Instead of being bitter about what God has not given us humans, the ability to understand the whole reality, we should enjoy the gifts that God has given us."* Rogland

## GOD'S WORKS ARE ETERNAL (3:14)

*“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.”* 3:14

There is a great contrast between God and the author. While the author is still looking for something that has eternal value and is not perishable, everything God does lasts forever. Is this a hint that God is the key to getting out of impermanence?

## GOD WILL JUDGE #1 (3:16-17)

*"And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there. 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.”* 3:16-17

Since there is a time for everything, there must also be a time for God's judgment. He knows this is going to happen eventually.

## SEIZE THE DAY #3 (3:22)

*"So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?"* 3:22

## AN INTERMEDIATE THING (4:4-6)

v. 4: *“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.”*

v. 5: *"Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves."* (Proverbs 6:9-11)

v. 6: *“Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.”*

Correction: He thinks the solution lies between letting envy fuel the effort (v. 4) and doing nothing (v. 6): One handful with toil and one handful with rest.

## FEAR GOD #1 (5:1-6)

*"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. 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. A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool. 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?"* 5:1-6

## SEIZE THE DAY #4 (5:17-19)

*“All their days they eat in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger. 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 labor 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.”* 5:17-19

## "IF GOD WILLS... " (7:14)

*"When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future."* 7:14

Bad days are a reminder of humility and God's will, not a sign that you have failed.

The teacher's inductive interpretation: Since it is so, it must be meant to be so, because God controls everything. God does not want us to know the future.

## THE RICH PEASANT (LUKE 12:16-22)

*"And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear."* Luke 12:16-22

Actually, it is exemplary planning that he does. But there is a lot of "I, me, and mine" here; he does not include God in the planning nor does he thank God for the harvest. It is the earth that is the subject in the first sentence. The soil produced a good crop, and he was lucky.

## FEAR GOD #2 (7:15-18)

*"In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness. Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise — why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool — why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes."* 7:15-18

## GOD WILL JUDGE #2 - FEAR GOD #3 (8:11-14)

*"When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless."* 8:11-14

## SEIZE THE DAY #5 (8:15)

*"So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun."* 8:15

## SEIZE THE DAY #6 (9:7-10)

*"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 labor 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."* 9:7-10

## SEIZE THE DAY #7 - GOD WILL JUDGE #3 (11:7-10)

*"Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all. But let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. 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 vigor are meaningless."* 11:7-10

## DEATH COMES (12:1-8)

*“'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 [the hands?], and the strong men stoop, when the grinders [the teeth?] cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows [the eyes?] grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades [the ears?]; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms [the almond tree gets white when it blossoms → the hair?] and the grasshopper drags itself along [poor mobility?] and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well [metaphors of death], and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!””* 12:1-8

So what should we do if everyone dies and everything in life is peripheral and wasted because nothing can overcome death?

## CONCLUSION (12:13-14)

*“Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. 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.”* 12:12-13

*“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”* Romans 8:18-22

## LIFE IN A PERISHABLE WORLD WITH JESUS

No guarantee that difficult things will not happen, but we give thanks for the good things along the way and have the promise that He is with us always.

*"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."* 2 Cor 4:8-9