

# **THE GREAT PURSUIT**



**THE MESSAGE FOR THOSE IN SEARCH OF GOD**

# **THE GREAT PURSUIT**

**THE MESSAGE TEXT BY EUGENE H. PETERSON**

**ADDITIONAL CONTENT BY RANDALL NILES**



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# AN INTRODUCTION

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We all pursue something.

Throughout the seasons of life, we churn through cycles of pursuit. Whether fame and power, peace and abundance, fun and pleasure, or healing and forgiveness, we actively seek something at every phase of existence.

Often, we enter dry periods where paying the mortgage is more important than contemplating the meaning of being—where self-sufficiency is more focal than selfless reflection.

And then it happens . . .

At some point in life, we catch a glimpse of the miraculous . . . maybe the mysterious. We contemplate our earthly origin or we grapple with our eternal destiny.

It could be the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, or a devastating divorce.

It could be the vision of a starving child digging through trash in a street-bound slum.

It could be the vision of a heroic soldier saving a child from the chaos of a street-side bomb.

It could be a massive, star-filled sky or a tiny hummingbird hovering nearby.

It may strike as a monumental epiphany, or it may sneak up as an inconsequential flash.

Regardless, it happens, and the deep questions of life return—if just for an instant. A passion to pursue ultimate purpose, meaning, and truth is reignited in our soul!

Who am I, *really*?

Why am I *really* here?

Where will I *really* be in 10,000 years?

And, most important, where does God fit into all of this?

Who is God, *really* . . . and how do I *really* pursue him?

Throughout the seasons of history, all of humanity has faced this same cycle of perplexity. Whether great thinkers or everyday peasants, our ancestors have all confronted the mystery of God. Some meet God and immediately walk away. Some meet God and embrace him eternally. Some pursue a relationship, while others retreat from possible engagement.

Yes, we all pursue something . . .

This is the story of mankind's pursuit of God . . .

. . . and God's pursuit of mankind.



# AN INVITATION

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Life should be an honest quest.

The journey isn't easy, but at least it should be real.

Many pilgrims throughout history left us with authentic portrayals of their pursuits. They recorded the miraculous, mysterious, and spiritual, so we could share in their wonder. They exposed their questions, doubts, and fears, so we could share in their confusion.

Scientists, artists, poets, philosophers, kings, musicians. They wrote from their hearts as they experienced God and sought answers from him.

In this book, we've collected some of the timeless texts that reveal *The Great Pursuit* in all of us. Here are seven biblical accounts along with stories from our ancestors and contemporaries that consider the relationship between God and humanity.

We'll explore the musings of a mighty ruler, witness the trials of a wealthy businessman, hear the cries of an anointed prophet, and share the up-and-down battle of a shepherd-king. We'll peer into the mystical world of a crusty fisherman, walk the path of a loyal scribe, and watch as a simple man hears from God and makes a 180-degree turn in his life.

Like those who've gone before us, we invite you to open your mind, expose your heart, and embark on an authentic journey. We encourage you to dispense with your notions of religion, and just seek *God*.

Even if for a moment, leave your baggage behind.

Ponder. Struggle. Yell. Cry. Pour out your heart to God.

A meaningful search means exposing it all—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

A true pursuit of God requires honesty—honesty before God and honesty with ourselves.

Ask some tough questions, explore some long-held assumptions, and see where *The Great Pursuit* takes you.



# ECCLESIASTES

## INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

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Unlike the animals, who seem quite content to simply be themselves, we humans are always looking for ways to be more than or other than what we find ourselves to be. We explore the countryside for excitement, search our souls for meaning, shop the world for pleasure. We try this. Then we try that. The usual fields of endeavor are money, sex, power, adventure, and knowledge.

Everything we try is so promising at first! But nothing ever seems to amount to very much. We intensify our efforts—but the harder we work at it, the less we get out of it. Some people give up early and settle for a humdrum life. Others never seem to learn, and so they flail away through a lifetime, becoming less and less human by the year, until by the time they die there is hardly enough humanity left to compose a corpse.

Ecclesiastes is a famous—maybe the world’s most famous—witness to this experience of futility. The acerbic wit catches our attention. The stark honesty compels notice. And people do notice—oh, how they notice! Non-religious and religious alike notice. Unbelievers and believers notice. More than a few of them are surprised to find this kind of thing in the Bible.

But it is most emphatically and necessarily in the Bible in order to call a halt to our various and futile attempts to make something of our lives, so that we can give our full attention to God—who God is and what he does to make something of us. Ecclesiastes actually doesn’t say that much about God; the author leaves that to the other sixty-five books of the Bible. His

task is to expose our total incapacity to find the meaning and completion of our lives on our own.

Ecclesiastes challenges the naive optimism that sets a goal that appeals to us and then goes after it with gusto, expecting the result to be a good life. The author's cool skepticism, a refreshing negation to the lush and seductive suggestions swirling around us, promising everything but delivering nothing, clears the air. And once the air is cleared, we are ready for reality—for God.

["Ecclesiastes" is a Greek word that is usually translated "the Preacher" or "the Teacher." Because of the experiential stance of the writing in this book, giving voice to what is so basic among men and women throughout history, I have translated it "the Quester."]

## The Quester

**01.** These are the words of the Quester, David's son and king in Jerusalem:

Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That's what the Quester says.]  
    There's nothing to anything — it's all smoke.  
What's there to show for a lifetime of work,  
    a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?  
One generation goes its way, the next one arrives,  
    but nothing changes — it's business as usual for old  
    planet earth.  
The sun comes up and the sun goes down,  
    then does it again, and again — the same old round.  
The wind blows south, the wind blows north.  
    Around and around and around it blows,  
    blowing this way, then that — the whirling, erratic wind.  
All the rivers flow into the sea  
    but the sea never fills up.

The rivers keep flowing to the same old place,  
and then start all over and do it again.  
Everything's boring, utterly boring —  
no one can find any meaning in it.  
Boring to the eye,  
boring to the ear.  
What was will be again,  
what happened will happen again.  
There's nothing new on this earth.  
Year after year it's the same old thing.  
Does someone call out, "Hey, *this* is new"?  
Don't get excited — it's the same old story.  
Nobody remembers what happened yesterday.  
And the things that will happen tomorrow?  
Nobody'll remember them either.  
Don't count on being remembered.

### **I've Seen It All**

Call me "the *Quester*." I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there's not much to write home about. God hasn't made it easy for us. I've seen it all and it's nothing but smoke — smoke, and spitting into the wind.

Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened,  
A minus that won't add up.

I said to myself, "I know more and I'm wiser than anyone before me in Jerusalem. I've stockpiled wisdom and knowledge." What I've finally concluded is that so-called wisdom and knowledge are mindless and witless — nothing but spitting into the wind.

Much learning earns you much trouble.  
The more you know, the more you hurt.

▶ The writer described himself as “David’s son” and “king over Israel in Jerusalem.” Thus, King Solomon is the traditional choice for the autobiographer of this reflective prose. Here’s a king who had experienced it all—great wisdom and wealth, great power and pleasure. Yet, as he reflected on his life, the aging Quester now considered everything meaningless smoke—worthless trinkets in the puff of vapor called “life.” Only here, at the end of his great pursuit, did the Quester understand and accept the ultimate truth concerning the vanity of a self-centered, world-focused existence.

**02.** I said to myself, “Let’s go for it—experiment with pleasure, have a good time!” But there was nothing to it, nothing but smoke.

What do I think of the fun-filled life? Insane! Inane!  
My verdict on the pursuit of happiness? Who needs it?  
With the help of a bottle of wine  
and all the wisdom I could muster,  
I tried my level best  
to penetrate the absurdity of life.  
I wanted to get a handle on anything useful we mortals might do  
during the years we spend on this earth.

### **I Never Said No to Myself**

Oh, I did great things:  
built houses,  
planted vineyards,  
designed gardens and parks  
and planted a variety of fruit trees in them,  
made pools of water  
to irrigate the groves of trees.  
I bought slaves, male and female,  
who had children, giving me even more slaves;  
then I acquired large herds and flocks,

larger than any before me in Jerusalem.  
I piled up silver and gold,  
loot from kings and kingdoms.  
I gathered a chorus of singers to entertain me with song,  
and — most exquisite of all pleasures —  
voluptuous maidens for my bed.

Oh, how I prospered! I left all my predecessors in Jerusalem far behind, left them behind in the dust. What's more, I kept a clear head through it all. Everything I wanted I took — I never said no to myself. I gave in to every impulse, held back nothing. I sucked the marrow of pleasure out of every task — my reward to myself for a hard day's work!

## **I Hate Life**

Then I took a good look at everything I'd done, looked at all the sweat and hard work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.

And then I took a hard look at what's smart and what's stupid. What's left to do after you've been king? That's a hard act to follow. You just do what you can, and that's it. But I did see that it's better to be smart than stupid, just as light is better than darkness. Even so, though the smart ones see where they're going and the stupid ones grope in the dark, they're all the same in the end. One fate for all — and that's it.

When I realized that my fate's the same as the fool's, I had to ask myself, "So why bother being wise?" It's all smoke, nothing but smoke. The smart and the stupid both disappear out of sight. In a day or two they're both forgotten. Yes, both the smart and the stupid die, and that's it.

I hate life. As far as I can see, what happens on earth is a bad business. It's smoke — and spitting into the wind.

And I hated everything I'd accomplished and accumulated on this earth. I can't take it with me — no, I have to leave it to whoever comes after me. Whether they're worthy or worthless — and who's to tell? — they'll take over the earthly results of my intense thinking and hard work. Smoke.

That's when I called it quits, gave up on anything that could be hoped for on this earth. What's the point of working your fingers to the bone if you hand over what you worked for to someone who never lifted a finger for it? Smoke, that's what it is. A bad business from start to finish. So what do you get from a life of hard labor? Pain and grief from dawn to dusk. Never a decent night's rest. Nothing but smoke.

The best you can do with your life is have a good time and get by the best you can. The way I see it, that's it — divine fate. Whether we feast or fast, it's up to God. God may give wisdom and knowledge and joy to his favorites, but sinners are assigned a life of hard labor, and end up turning their wages over to God's favorites. Nothing but smoke — and spitting into the wind.

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► **By the world's standards, the Quester had everything a man could desire—fame, charm, smarts, big money, women knocking at every door. Yet, in his twilight years, the wise teacher realized that “the big things in life” paled in comparison to the sovereign and eternal reality of God.**

**Regardless of our position, power, or prosperity, we have little control over the seasons of our existence. Without God, life's meaning wobbles on a world without an axis.**

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## **There's a Right Time for Everything**

**03.** There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth:

A right time for birth and another for death,

A right time to plant and another to reap,

A right time to kill and another to heal,

A right time to destroy and another to construct,

A right time to cry and another to laugh,  
A right time to lament and another to cheer,  
A right time to make love and another to abstain,  
A right time to embrace and another to part,  
A right time to search and another to count your losses,  
A right time to hold on and another to let go,  
A right time to rip out and another to mend,  
A right time to shut up and another to speak up,  
A right time to love and another to hate,  
A right time to wage war and another to make peace.

But in the end, does it really make a difference what anyone does? I've had a good look at what God has given us to do—busy-work, mostly. True, God made everything beautiful in itself and in its time—but he's left us in the dark, so we can never know what God is up to, whether he's coming or going. I've decided that there's nothing better to do than go ahead and have a good time and get the most we can out of life. That's it—eat, drink, and make the most of your job. It's God's gift.

---

### **Turn! Turn! Turn!**

To every thing, turn, turn, turn  
There is a season, turn, turn, turn  
And a time to every purpose under heaven  
A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal  
A time to laugh, a time to weep  
  
To every thing, turn, turn, turn  
There is a season, turn, turn, turn  
And a time for every purpose under heaven  
A time to build up, a time to break down  
A time to dance, a time to mourn  
A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together

— Pete Seeger, 1966

I've also concluded that whatever God does, that's the way it's going to be, always. No addition, no subtraction. God's done it and that's it. That's so we'll quit asking questions and simply worship in holy fear.

Whatever was, is.

Whatever will be, is.

That's how it always is with God.

## God's Testing Us

I took another good look at what's going on: The very place of judgment—corrupt! The place of righteousness—corrupt! I said to myself, “God will judge righteous and wicked.” There's a right time for every thing, every deed—and there's no getting around it. I said to myself regarding the human race, “God's testing the lot of us, showing us up as nothing but animals.”

Humans and animals come to the same end—humans die, animals die. We all breathe the same air. So there's really no advantage in being human. None. Everything's smoke. We all end up in the same place—we all came from dust, we all end up as dust. Nobody knows for sure that the human spirit rises to heaven or that the animal spirit sinks into the earth. So I made up my mind that there's nothing better for us men and women than to have a good time in whatever we do—that's our lot. Who knows if there's anything else to life?

## Slow Suicide

**04.** Next I turned my attention to all the outrageous violence that takes place on this planet—the tears of the victims, no one to comfort them; the iron grip of oppressors, no one to rescue the victims from them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead instead of the living who are still alive. But luckier than the

dead or the living is the person who has never even been, who has never seen the bad business that takes place on this earth.

Then I observed all the work and ambition motivated by envy.  
What a waste! Smoke. And spitting into the wind.

The fool sits back and takes it easy,  
His sloth is slow suicide.

One handful of peaceful repose  
Is better than two fistfuls of worried work —  
More spitting into the wind.

### **Why Am I Working Like a Dog?**

I turned my head and saw yet another wisp of smoke on its way to nothingness: a solitary person, completely alone — no children, no family, no friends — yet working obsessively late into the night, compulsively greedy for more and more, never bothering to ask, “Why am I working like a dog, never having any fun? And who cares?”  
More smoke. A bad business.

It’s better to have a partner than go it alone.  
Share the work, share the wealth.  
And if one falls down, the other helps,  
But if there’s no one to help, tough!

Two in a bed warm each other.  
Alone, you shiver all night.

By yourself you’re unprotected.  
With a friend you can face the worst.  
Can you round up a third?  
A three-stranded rope isn’t easily snapped.

A poor youngster with some wisdom is better off than an old but foolish king who doesn't know which end is up. I saw a youth just like this start with nothing and go from rags to riches, and I saw everyone rally to the rule of this young successor to the king. Even so, the excitement died quickly, the throngs of people soon lost interest. Can't you see it's only smoke? And spitting into the wind?

### **God's in Charge, Not You**

**05.** Watch your step when you enter God's house.  
Enter to learn. That's far better than mindlessly offering a sacrifice,  
Doing more harm than good.

Don't shoot off your mouth, or speak before you think.  
Don't be too quick to tell God what you think he wants to hear.  
God's in charge, not you — the less you speak, the better.

Overwork makes for restless sleep.  
Overtalk shows you up as a fool.

When you tell God you'll do something, do it — now.  
God takes no pleasure in foolish gabble. Vow it, then do it.  
Far better not to vow in the first place than to vow and not  
pay up.

Don't let your mouth make a total sinner of you.  
When called to account, you won't get by with  
“Sorry, I didn't mean it.”  
Why risk provoking God to angry retaliation?

But against all illusion and fantasy and empty talk  
There's always this rock foundation: Fear God!

▶ **The Quester understood the vanity of superficial and secularized religion. God's "house" was the first Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, which was created as a place for heartfelt worship and sacrifice. Within years of its completion, the religious bureaucracy took over. As a result, the people focused more on the ceremonial machine than the sincere pursuit of God. This has been humanity's timeless travesty—and it continues to this day.**

Although a pessimist on the surface, Quester is wise and willing to nudge us back on course. He reminds us that our pursuit of God has nothing to do with mindless religion—rule and ritual for the sake of ceremony. Simply, it is the fear of God that strips religion naked and exposes its misguided appendages. Rather than uttering alms, we should fall to our knees in utter awe.

## A Salary of Smoke

Don't be too upset when you see the poor kicked around, and justice and right violated all over the place. Exploitation filters down from one petty official to another. There's no end to it, and nothing can be done about it. But the good earth doesn't cheat anyone—even a bad king is honestly served by a field.

The one who loves money is never satisfied with money,  
Nor the one who loves wealth with big profits. More smoke.

The more loot you get, the more looters show up.  
And what fun is that—to be robbed in broad daylight?

Hard and honest work earns a good night's sleep,  
Whether supper is beans or steak.  
But a rich man's belly gives him insomnia.

Here's a piece of bad luck I've seen happen:  
A man hoards far more wealth than is good for him  
And then loses it all in a bad business deal.  
He fathered a child but hasn't a cent left to give him.

He arrived naked from the womb of his mother;  
He'll leave in the same condition — with nothing.  
This is bad luck, for sure — naked he came, naked he went.  
So what was the point of working for a salary of smoke?  
All for a miserable life spent in the dark?

## Make the Most of What God Gives

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here's what I've decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that's about it. That's the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift! God deals out joy in the present, the *now*. It's useless to brood over how long we might live.

## Things Are Bad

**06.** I looked long and hard at what goes on around here, and let me tell you, things are bad. And people feel it. There are people, for instance, on whom God showers everything—money, property, reputation—all they ever wanted or dreamed of. And then God doesn't let them enjoy it. Some stranger comes along and has all the fun. It's more of what I'm calling *smoke*. A bad business.

Say a couple have scores of children and live a long, long life but never enjoy themselves—even though they end up with a big funeral! I'd say that a stillborn baby gets the better deal. It gets its start in a mist and ends up in the dark—unnamed. It sees nothing and knows nothing, but is better off by far than anyone living.

Even if someone lived a thousand years—make it two thousand!—but didn't enjoy anything, what's the point? Doesn't everyone end up in the same place?

We work to feed our appetites;  
Meanwhile our souls go hungry.

So what advantage has a sage over a fool, or over some poor wretch who barely gets by? Just grab whatever you can while you can; don't assume something better might turn up by and by. All it amounts to anyway is smoke. And spitting into the wind.

Whatever happens, happens. Its destiny is fixed.  
You can't argue with fate.

The more words that are spoken, the more smoke there is in the air. And who is any better off? And who knows what's best for us as we live out our meager smoke-and-shadow lives? And who can tell any of us the next chapter of our lives?

### **Don't Take Anything for Granted**

**07.** A good reputation is better than a fat bank account.  
Your death date tells more than your birth date.

You learn more at a funeral than at a feast —  
After all, that's where we'll end up. We might discover  
something from it.

Crying is better than laughing.  
It blotches the face but it scours the heart.

Sages invest themselves in hurt and grieving.  
Fools waste their lives in fun and games.

You'll get more from the rebuke of a sage  
Than from the song and dance of fools.

The giggles of fools are like the crackling of twigs  
Under the cooking pot. And like smoke.

Brutality stupefies even the wise  
And destroys the strongest heart.

Endings are better than beginnings.  
Sticking to it is better than standing out.

Don't be quick to fly off the handle.  
Anger boomerangs. You can spot a fool by the lumps on his  
head.

Don't always be asking, "Where are the good old days?"  
Wise folks don't ask questions like that.

Wisdom is better when it's paired with money,  
Especially if you get both while you're still living.  
Double protection: wisdom and wealth!  
Plus this bonus: Wisdom energizes its owner.

Take a good look at God's work.  
Who could simplify and reduce Creation's curves and angles  
To a plain straight line?

On a good day, enjoy yourself;  
On a bad day, examine your conscience.  
God arranges for both kinds of days  
So that we won't take anything for granted.

### **Stay in Touch with Both Sides**

I've seen it all in my brief and pointless life — here a good person cut  
down in the middle of doing good, there a bad person living a long


life of sheer evil. So don't knock yourself out being good, and don't go overboard being wise. Believe me, you won't get anything out of it. But don't press your luck by being bad, either. And don't be reckless. Why die needlessly?

It's best to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it.

Wisdom puts more strength in one wise person  
Than ten strong men give to a city.

There's not one totally good person on earth,  
Not one who is truly pure and sinless.

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 **Is mankind inherently good or inherently evil? Our answer to this question reveals much about our worldview.**

Throughout the ancient Scriptures, we're taught that all of humanity fails the "goodness" test—all of us fall short in some way or another. What do our own lives reveal? Although most of us recoil at the notion of being labeled "bad," deep down, when we truly examine our own hearts and motivations, we know we miss the mark.

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Don't eavesdrop on the conversation of others.  
What if the gossip's about you and you'd rather not hear it?  
You've done that a few times, haven't you — said things  
Behind someone's back you wouldn't say to his face?

## **How to Interpret the Meaning of Life**

I tested everything in my search for wisdom. I set out to be wise, but it was beyond me, far beyond me, and deep — oh so deep! Does anyone ever find it? I concentrated with all my might, studying and exploring and seeking wisdom — the meaning of life. I also wanted to identify evil and stupidity, foolishness and craziness.

One discovery: A woman can be a bitter pill to swallow, full of

seductive scheming and grasping. The lucky escape her; the undiscerning get caught. At least this is my experience — what I, the Quester, have pieced together as I've tried to make sense of life. But the wisdom I've looked for I haven't found. I didn't find one man or woman in a thousand worth my while. Yet I did spot one ray of light in this murk: God made men and women true and upright; *we're* the ones who've made a mess of things.

**08.** There's nothing better than being wise,  
Knowing how to interpret the meaning of life.  
Wisdom puts light in the eyes,  
And gives gentleness to words and manners.

### **No One Can Control the Wind**

Do what your king commands; you gave a sacred oath of obedience. Don't worryingly second-guess your orders or try to back out when the task is unpleasant. You're serving his pleasure, not yours. The king has the last word. Who dares say to him, "What are you doing?" Carrying out orders won't hurt you a bit; the wise person obeys promptly and accurately. Yes, there's a right time and way for everything, even though, unfortunately, we miss it for the most part. It's true that no one knows what's going to happen, or when. Who's around to tell us?

No one can control the wind or lock it in a box.  
No one has any say-so regarding the day of death.  
No one can stop a battle in its tracks.  
No one who does evil can be saved by evil.

All this I observed as I tried my best to understand all that's going on in this world. As long as men and women have the power to hurt each other, this is the way it is.

## One Fate for Everybody

One time I saw wicked men given a solemn burial in holy ground. When the people returned to the city, they delivered flowery eulogies — and in the very place where wicked acts were done by those very men! More smoke. Indeed.

Because the sentence against evil deeds is so long in coming, people in general think they can get by with murder.

Even though a person sins and gets by with it hundreds of times throughout a long life, I'm still convinced that the good life is reserved for the person who fears God, who lives reverently in his presence, and that the evil person will not experience a "good" life. No matter how many days he lives, they'll all be as flat and colorless as a shadow — because he doesn't fear God.

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Here's something that happens all the time and makes no sense at all: Good people get what's coming to the wicked, and bad people get what's coming to the good. I tell you, this makes no sense. It's smoke.

So, I'm all for just going ahead and having a good time — the best possible. The only earthly good men and women can look forward to is to eat and drink well and have a good time — compensation for the struggle for survival these few years God gives us on earth.

When I determined to load up on wisdom and examine everything taking place on earth, I realized that if you keep your eyes open day and night without even blinking, you'll still never figure out the meaning of what God is doing on this earth. Search as hard as you like, you're not going to make sense of it. No matter how smart you are, you won't get to the bottom of it.

**09.** Well, I took all this in and thought it through, inside and out. Here's what I understood: The good, the wise, and all that they do are in God's hands — but, day by day, whether it's love or hate they're dealing with, they don't know.

Anything's possible. It's one fate for everybody—righteous and wicked, good people, bad people, the nice and the nasty, worshipers and non-worshipers, committed and uncommitted. I find this outrageous—the worst thing about living on this earth—that everyone's lumped together in one fate. Is it any wonder that so many people are obsessed with evil? Is it any wonder that people go crazy right and left? Life leads to death. That's it.

## Seize Life!

Still, anyone selected out for life has hope, for, as they say, “A living dog is better than a dead lion.” The living at least know *something*, even if it's only that they're going to die. But the dead know nothing and get nothing. They're a minus that no one remembers. Their loves, their hates, yes, even their dreams, are long gone. There's not a trace of them left in the affairs of this earth.

Seize life! Eat bread with gusto,  
Drink wine with a robust heart.  
Oh yes—God takes pleasure in *your* pleasure!  
Dress festively every morning.  
Don't skimp on colors and scarves.  
Relish life with the spouse you love  
Each and every day of your precarious life.  
Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange  
For the hard work of staying alive.  
Make the most of each one!  
Whatever turns up, grab it and do it. And heartily!  
This is your last and only chance at it,  
For there's neither work to do nor thoughts to think  
In the company of the dead, where you're most certainly  
headed.



## SEARCHER ON THE WAY

### *A King's Epic Tale*

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Nearly five thousand years ago, Gilgamesh was the King of Uruk in Sumeria, a city state on the Euphrates River in modern-day Iraq. Gilgamesh was the central hero in numerous adventures and legendary tales for hundreds of years after his life. Many of these stories were recorded on ancient clay tablets dating back more than four thousand years, and these collections of cuneiform texts are now known collectively as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is organized into two main parts. The first is a powerful story of adventure, where the heroic king defeats incredible monsters, evades terrible gods, and woos numerous fair maidens. However, the second part of the Epic reveals a much different side of the great conquering king.

Near the end of his heroic life, Gilgamesh meets a barmaid named Siduri. Initially, Siduri fears Gilgamesh because of his rugged and blood-stained presence, but soon discovers the depth of this warrior's painful past. As Gilgamesh boasts of his feats and foes, Siduri breaks through his larger-than-life façade. Gilgamesh soon crushes under the weight of life's vanity, and Siduri shoots straight for the heart of the matter in Tablet 10 (translated by Yanita Chen, 1994):

O Mighty King, remember now that only gods stay in eternal  
watch.

Humans come then go, that is the way fate decreed on the  
Tablets of Destiny.

So someday you will depart, but till that distant day  
Sing, and dance.

Eat your fill of warm cooked food and cool jugs of beer.

Cherish the children your love gave life.

Bathe away life's dirt in warm drawn waters.

Pass the time in joy with your chosen wife.

On the Tablets of Destiny it is decreed  
For you to enjoy short pleasures for your short days.

Similar to Quester, mighty Gilgamesh is forced to face his fragile state of humanity. Near the end of his life he realizes the simple truths of existence and embarks on a new quest for eternal meaning.

I took another walk around the neighborhood and realized that on this earth as it is—

The race is not always to the swift,  
Nor the battle to the strong,  
Nor satisfaction to the wise,  
Nor riches to the smart,  
Nor grace to the learned.  
Sooner or later bad luck hits us all.

No one can predict misfortune.  
Like fish caught in a cruel net or birds in a trap,  
So men and women are caught  
By accidents evil and sudden.

### **Wisdom Is Better Than Muscle**

One day as I was observing how wisdom fares on this earth, I saw something that made me sit up and take notice. There was a small town with only a few people in it. A strong king came and mounted an attack, building trenches and attack posts around it. There was a poor but wise man in that town whose wisdom saved the town, but he was promptly forgotten. (He was only a poor man, after all.)

All the same, I still say that wisdom is better than muscle, even though the wise poor man was treated with contempt and soon forgotten.

The quiet words of the wise are more effective  
Than the ranting of a king of fools.

Wisdom is better than warheads,  
But one hothead can ruin the good earth.

**10.** Dead flies in perfume make it stink,  
And a little foolishness decomposes much wisdom.

Wise thinking leads to right living;  
Stupid thinking leads to wrong living.

Fools on the road have no sense of direction.  
The way they walk tells the story: “There goes the fool again!”

If a ruler loses his temper against you, don’t panic;  
A calm disposition quiets intemperate rage.

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Here’s a piece of bad business I’ve seen on this earth,  
An error that can be blamed on whoever is in charge:  
Immaturity is given a place of prominence,  
While maturity is made to take a backseat.  
I’ve seen unproven upstarts riding in style,  
While experienced veterans are put out to pasture.

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Caution: The trap you set might catch you.  
Warning: Your accomplice in crime might double-cross you.

Safety first: Quarrying stones is dangerous.  
Be alert: Felling trees is hazardous.

Remember: The duller the ax the harder the work;

Use your head: The more brains, the less muscle.

If the snake bites before it's been charmed,  
What's the point in then sending for the charmer?

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The words of a wise person are gracious.  
The talk of a fool self-destructs —  
He starts out talking nonsense  
And ends up spouting insanity and evil.

Fools talk way too much,  
Chattering stuff they know nothing about.

A decent day's work so fatigues fools  
That they can't find their way back to town.

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Unlucky the land whose king is a young pup,  
And whose princes party all night.  
Lucky the land whose king is mature,  
Where the princes behave themselves  
And don't drink themselves silly.

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A shiftless man lives in a tumbledown shack;  
A lazy woman ends up with a leaky roof.

Laughter and bread go together,  
And wine gives sparkle to life —  
But it's money that makes the world go around.

Don't bad-mouth your leaders, not even under your breath,  
And don't abuse your betters, even in the privacy of your home.

Loose talk has a way of getting picked up and spread around.  
Little birds drop the crumbs of your gossip far and wide.

## 11. Be generous: Invest in acts of charity. Charity yields high returns.

Don't hoard your goods; spread them around.  
Be a blessing to others. This could be your last night.

When the clouds are full of water, it rains.  
When the wind blows down a tree, it lies where it falls.  
Don't sit there watching the wind. Do your own work.  
Don't stare at the clouds. Get on with your life.

Just as you'll never understand  
the mystery of life forming in a pregnant woman,  
So you'll never understand  
the mystery at work in all that God does.

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▶ In the ancient world, the miracles of pregnancy, gestation, and birth were constant reminders of the divine. Fertility was such an incredible mystery that nearly all cultures attributed the process to God or some polytheistic hierarchy of gods.

In the last few decades, technology has provided us a glimpse into the miraculous. Through advanced *in utero* imaging techniques, we can now witness the life-making process in its full wonder. Remarkably, some of us use these technological advances to discredit the divine. Without pondering, we quickly make the leap from "observing the miraculous" to "understanding the miraculous."

So, what's the logical conclusion? The ancient days are gone. We now "understand" the world around us. Therefore, we don't need God anymore (any kind of god).

How did that happen? Why don't the latest scientific and technological discoveries drive us toward the divine? Shouldn't the latest images and insights reconnect us to the miracle and mystery of it all?

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Go to work in the morning  
and stick to it until evening without watching the clock.

You never know from moment to moment  
how your work will turn out in the end.

### **Before the Years Take Their Toll**

Oh, how sweet the light of day,  
And how wonderful to live in the sunshine!  
Even if you live a long time, don't take a single day for granted.  
Take delight in each light-filled hour,  
Remembering that there will also be many dark days  
And that most of what comes your way is smoke.

You who are young, make the most of your youth.  
Relish your youthful vigor.  
Follow the impulses of your heart.  
If something looks good to you, pursue it.  
But know also that not just anything goes;  
You have to answer to God for every last bit of it.

Live footloose and fancy-free —  
You won't be young forever.  
Youth lasts about as long as smoke.

**12.** Honor and enjoy your Creator while you're still young,  
Before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes,  
Before your vision dims and the world blurs  
And the winter years keep you close to the fire.

In old age, your body no longer serves you so well.  
Muscles slacken, grip weakens, joints stiffen.  
The shades are pulled down on the world.  
You can't come and go at will. Things grind to a halt.  
The hum of the household fades away.  
You are wakened now by bird-song.

Hikes to the mountains are a thing of the past.  
Even a stroll down the road has its terrors.  
Your hair turns apple-blossom white,  
Adorning a fragile and impotent matchstick body.  
Yes, you're well on your way to eternal rest,  
While your friends make plans for your funeral.

Life, lovely while it lasts, is soon over.  
Life as we know it, precious and beautiful, ends.  
The body is put back in the same ground it came from.  
The spirit returns to God, who first breathed it.

It's all smoke, nothing but smoke.  
The Quester says that everything's smoke.

### **The Final Word**

Besides being wise himself, the Quester also taught others knowledge. He weighed, examined, and arranged many proverbs. The Quester did his best to find the right words and write the plain truth.

The words of the wise prod us to live well.  
They're like nails hammered home, holding life together.  
They are given by God, the one Shepherd.

But regarding anything beyond this, dear friend, go easy. There's no end to the publishing of books, and constant study wears you out so you're no good for anything else. The last and final word is this:

Fear God.  
Do what he tells you.

And that's it. Eventually God will bring everything that we do out into the open and judge it according to its hidden intent, whether it's good or evil.