

INTRODUCTION

Searching for Meaning



The alarm clattered. It was an old Timex, rounded like the sun with a gold rim around the laminated face. Each time it went off, it shook the nightstand next to Noah Adamson's bed. Its early-morning clamor awakened him to what some might view as the bright beginnings of a new day.

Not Noah. Noah loved bed. With his usual groan he reached over to the nightstand, grabbed the clock, and strangled out its last sound. For a long, tempting moment he considered burrowing back under the covers again. Then the adrenalin kicked in. Before his feet hit the floor, he was already thinking about the Pearson Furniture proposal.

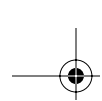
He usually needed the details of his morning routine to psych him for the day—sit-ups, hot shower, cold rinse, a careful shave. Today he sped through the whole sequence with his mind already at work. He was heading downstairs in his best suit when Joan called up from the kitchen, "Honey, your eggs are ready. Do you want bacon?"

"No time." He grabbed his briefcase from his downstairs desk and slipped into the kitchen. "Give the eggs to the kids, and I'll get a burrito at work."

"It'll just take a minute." She flipped a pile of scrambled eggs onto a waiting plate and handed him a glass of orange juice. "You can be out the door before the boys even wake up."

Noah took a seat. Arguing would take more time than eating. "If this day goes





the way I want, I'm going to put a huge dent in Jonathan's ability to get the final nod for all major deals."

"How so?" she asked brightly.

"Too complicated to explain." He forked in the last bite of eggs and reached for his coffee mug.

Joan got the message. Conversation was not on the morning's agenda. "Well, I wish it wasn't such a battle zone for you every day." She smoothed her sixties-style apron and stared out the window with that spacy expression that always mildly annoyed him. "Try not to be too late tonight," she said. "We're starting that new Bible study, and we agreed to bring drinks. Can we leave a little early to go by the store, or do you want me to pick up the drinks before—"

"Bible study?" Noah's face creased with irritation. "Look, I'll be wiped out if the day goes well and double-wiped if it doesn't."

"Well, we promised, and you told Jack you'd be there. You said Ecclesiastes was right up your alley because you took a class in existentialism or something in college." Joan kept her voice level, but a tightening in her shoulders told Noah she was digging in. If he wanted to keep the peace, skipping the study was not an option.

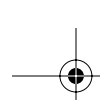
"Okay," he grunted. "We'll pick up the drinks on the way. But I'm telling you that if I am a wreck, I'm not going to go to a Bible study where I have to listen to Jack Simpson wing on about his knowledge of the Bible."

Joan turned, and the look on her face sent a stab of irritable guilt through him. He knew she looked forward to Bible study evenings. She spent most of her time caring for Timmy and Ryan and the house, and she needed the social outlet. Plus, dragging him to Bible studies was her way to exact a pound of spiritual flesh for his lack of involvement in the things of God. Noah was willing to give her that—one evening a week to keep her satisfied and off his back.

"Don't worry." He told her as he reached for his briefcase again. "If I can pull off what I'm planning today—and I promise you, I will—I'll be more than a match for Jack Simpson and Ecclesiastes."

But by the time he'd backed the car out of the garage, Noah already wished he hadn't caved in about the Bible study. An evening with Ecclesiastes—what a way to unwind after a hard day. Noah had read a few sections of the book a few years





back, and what he remembered was vaguely depressing. Eat, drink, and be merry. Everything is meaningless. Everything is merely a chasing the wind.

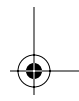
So why bother? He'd always liked that little slogan, "why ask why," and now it settled into his mind with a dull ache as he steered his Audi into the familiar flow of freeway traffic. His memory of Ecclesiastes fused with irritation that it did not have a clearer and more hopeful message. Why ask why—especially with Jack Simpson in the room. Jack was a successful trial lawyer, and Noah just knew he would make Ecclesiastes into a model of order and logic, practicality and boredom. Which was worse: despair or Jack?

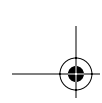
Maybe he could find a little time to at least read a few chapters of Ecclesiastes before going to the study. That way he'd at least have a leg to stand on when Jack started—

Brake lights up ahead signaled a sudden slowdown and short-circuited Noah's reverie. But Noah was used to city traffic; he'd already spotted a gap in the next lane. Without losing speed, he eased in behind a speeding Mustang, letting the flow of traffic push the Bible study from his mind. He had more important matters to think about, anyway—such as this morning's meeting, where he planned to make his move.

Noah was a stockbroker with the Chicago office of Brothers Consolidated, a firm that traded in "shorts." Most investors buy a stock that looks as if it will increase in market value. "Shorters" buy the rights to shares but hope that the stock is overvalued and will fall so they can purchase it well under the value it currently holds.

Noah had risen through the ranks of his peers because of his penetrating guesswork in picking stocks that were likely to fall. He did his research and investigated each company's portfolio, but his real ability was in reading people—and tracking the cultures of the companies he studied. He viewed each company like a family, getting to know each family's myths, secrets and weak spots. Each corporate family is based on the CEO's personality and vision. Noah was convinced that if he got to know the background, bias, and beliefs of the people at the helm, he could predict when the company would overextend itself and tumble into the abyss. Then the sharks could move in.





That's how Noah saw himself—as a shark. He loved to travel alone in the uncharted recesses of the Internet, gulping down everything written about a corporation and its owner. He often went back to the stories written about the CEO in high school and college to discover the points of formative failure, tragedy and loss. He was a shark who knew his territory.

Noah loved his work. He loved being a shark.

And if that meant he could never stop swimming . . . well, he was willing to pay that price.

Abundant Life in a Meaningless World

As Christians, we have given our lives to Jesus. He is the center of our lives. He is our Lord and our Savior. Nothing is more important than Jesus.

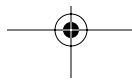
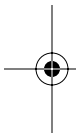
Or is he?

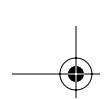
If asked, most Christians would automatically affirm that their relationship with Jesus is central to their lives. However, further reflection might lead to another conclusion. Ask yourself these questions:

- What do you daydream about?
- How do you think about your future?
- What occupies your thoughts?
- What do you spend most of your time doing?
- What would you like to spend most of your time doing?
- In what ways do you envy others?

How does your relationship with Jesus enter into the picture? And what is it that fuels the passion of your life? If it's not Jesus, perhaps it is work, play, sports, money, the acquisition of power, family, friends, church, ministry or something else "under the sun."

The phrase "under the sun" is a familiar one to readers of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. The Teacher in that book explores different avenues of potential meaning of life, including the ones just mentioned. Surprisingly, he comes up empty, frustrated and angry. "Everything is meaningless" is yet another frequent refrain of that book.





You see, the book of Ecclesiastes is an idol buster.

Perhaps you are familiar with the idols that are described in books like Exodus and Isaiah. These were false gods, represented by statues, that were worshipped not only by the people in the surrounding land but, tragically, by fallen Israelites as well. They had names like Baal, Marduk, Asherah and many, many others. People put these idols in the center of their life; to borrow a phrase from a mid-twentieth-century theologian, they became the people's "ultimate concern." Men and women offered them material goods and labor and time with the hope that the gods would make their lives better.

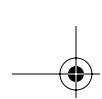
But you don't have to bow down before a statue in order to participate in perverse worship. Ecclesiastes reminds us that idol worship often takes a more subtle form. To the author of Ecclesiastes, the pursuit of money or power or any object of desire is the same as bowing before Baal.

Christians today face tremendous temptations to worship such idols of our heart. We go to church on Sundays, but during the sermon we think about how much better our life would be if we only had the money to buy our dream waterfront house or take that well-deserved island vacation. Even pastors may be tempted to worship at the altars of larger congregations, more tithing units, more honor and prestige.

And we, the authors, are no different than any other Christian. We too find our hearts wandering away from Jesus and toward other people or things that we delude ourselves into thinking can provide our lives with meaning and significance and success. Indeed, we have often kidded each other that this is our midlife-crisis book because midlife is a time to question what is truly important and Ecclesiastes speaks directly to these questions. But you don't have to be a midlifer to struggle with issues of meaning and purpose. No matter your age, we offer this book to you as an invitation to rediscover the abundant life that comes with putting Jesus in the center of life.

How can this happen? It starts with being brutally honest, admitting that much of our current activity involves "chasing the wind" or even after false gods and that it gets us nowhere. It starts with a deep dissatisfaction with the way things are and a hungry willingness to try something completely different.





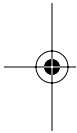
Many voices in our day—through books, sermons, websites, media—are happy to tell us what to do. These voices, often solidly biblical, offer steps to guide us to a better world, an improved marriage, more obedient and culturally unaffected children and success in our work without losing our families. The trouble is, these steps often simply lay down a new set of expectations. Rather than merely feeling overwhelmed by the chaos, we also feel guilty for not managing it better. And we're still haunted by questions of purpose and meaning.

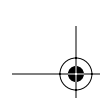
Ecclesiastes points to a different possibility—the possibility of real change. This comes when our hearts pursue a narrow way that at first seems more difficult than the problems we face. This new course of life sets the possibility for new decisions, new behavior and new meaning.

That possibility lies at the heart of this book, which follows the lives of eight fictional people as they confront their own questions of meaning and learn from their study of Ecclesiastes. The fiction chapters are intended to help you reflect on your life and the lives of your friends and family members. Interspersed with the fiction are sections that comment on the story and explore the major subthemes of Ecclesiastes. As in our earlier book *Intimate Allies*, Dan does the primary writing on the fiction chapters and Tremper does the primary writing for the nonfiction chapters.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a brief Bible study on Ecclesiastes as well as a series of questions for discussion and reflection. These materials can be fruitful for personal study, but we hope this book can also be a good resource for a small-group setting.

The book of Ecclesiastes is essentially a dialogue between two wise men—a skeptic and a person of faith. And for most of Ecclesiastes, the skeptic does the talking. He recounts his search for meaning in life. He explores the different idols he pursued to bring meaning to his life—control, relationships, work, pleasure, wisdom, spirituality, even life itself. His search ended in frustration, so he renounces all the effort he expended, warning his listeners that





- control will always slip out of our grasp.
- relationships will always disappoint.
- work will leave us frustrated.
- pleasure is always fleeting.
- wisdom is never an adequate guide.
- spirituality usually gives in to legalism.
- life ends in decay and death.

It's a disturbing message—and Ecclesiastes is not a book that most Christians enjoy reading. Yet it is the skeptic's bleak pronouncements that allow us to see through the fog of our hectic lives to the book's final conclusion: We find bold purpose when we submit to God's great desires for us.

Most of us at one time or another find ourselves tempted to move toward the worship of one of these seven idols, hoping to find joy, success and meaning. Ecclesiastes invites us to struggle against these futile temptations and move back toward God, the source of our hope. For if we allow ourselves to be disturbed and our idols challenged, we will find an essential and solid hope.

For in Ecclesiastes the skeptic's statements are not the answer. The ultimate answer lies in a paradox—that in losing our idols, we find not only meaning, but also God himself.

So as you read this book on busting the idols of the heart, rest assured. What may seem like a difficult premise—that we worship gods which are not God—can actually be a source of comfort. Our worship of other gods is not a new thought to Jesus. He is constantly being supplanted by his creation, yet he will be victorious in our hearts. He will win the supremacy he is owed. And he relentlessly undermines all that is not god to make room for the God who has redeemed our hearts.

