

ECCLESIASTES

BY MICHAEL KASTING





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Welcome!

WELCOME TO LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY (LWBS)

LWBS is a practical course of study with a special emphasis on the application of God's Word to the life of the individual. While emphasizing practical application, LWBS presents each book of the Bible as the holy, inspired Word of God, the confessional position of The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Our purpose is to help equip believers to live joyfully in God's redeeming love and to share with others God's plan of salvation.

It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help you grow in your knowledge and appreciation of our God and His Word.

*“But grow in the grace and
knowledge of our Lord and Savior
Jesus Christ.”*

2 PETER 3:18

STUDY STRUCTURE



Personal Study



Small Group Study



Leader's Overview



Author's Commentary

LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY SUGGESTS THIS FOUR-STEP METHOD

1. **PERSONAL** – The student prays for guidance from the Holy Spirit and answers the Personal Application (P. A.) questions at home using only the Bible (no commentaries).
2. **SMALL GROUPS** – The class meets for an opening and divides into small groups of 8–10 people. The small group leader guides the group through the P. A. questions, encouraging each to share their answers and discuss further as time allows.
3. **THE MESSAGE** – The lecture or message is given by a pastor or layperson who has researched the material and presents the study, giving personal insight and augmenting, but not duplicating, the author's comments.
4. **THE NARRATIVE** – The author's comments or narrative, along with the P. A. questions for the next lesson, are given out at the end of the class. At the next class meeting, before answering the P. A. questions, the small groups may choose to review the author's comments of the last lesson and share what each has highlighted as meaningful or important.

With this four-step method the student has the opportunity to study the particular section of Scripture covered by the lesson from four different approaches. This emphasizes the Bible text and gives the student an understanding and ownership for each section studied.

Each lesson should be stapled together according to the number of the lesson in the right-hand corner of the page. The P. A. questions for the next week should be attached after the author's narrative for the current week, as they will be the home study for the next class session.

The first meeting of the class is an introduction to the study. Since the members of the small groups have no P. A. questions to discuss at the first meeting, they may use the time to get acquainted or to tell what they hope to receive by studying this course. At the first meeting, the lecturer presents background information about the course, using the Introduction lesson as a guide.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

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LWBS Courses:

Romans – 2016

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The Parables of Jesus – 2023

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Memorial, Vancouver, WA

Concordia, Akron, OH

Faith, Sequim, WA

Trinity, Oregon City, OR

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Time and Grace – A Pastor’s Story, 2012

Blood and Life – Sermons on the Old Testament, 2013

Through the Needle’s Eye: Sermons on the Gospels, 2016

Singing Heaven’s Song Now: Sermons on the Epistles, 2021

Into the Valley of Shadows: Our Journey Through Alzheimer’s Disease, 2023

Short-term mission in Kyrgyzstan, 2006

Retired from ministry in 2015

LWBS editor for several courses

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- Bollhagen, James. *Ecclesiastes*. (Part of the Concordia Commentary series). St. Louis: Concordia, 2010. Another thorough, careful exposition by Concordia of all the major themes and applications of Ecclesiastes. Useful for both clergy and laity. Argues for Solomon's authorship.
- Keil, C. F. and F. Delitzsch. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Volume 6 of COMMENTARY ON THE OLD TESTAMENT). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866. Lots of technical information. More for clergy.
- Kurth, Erwin. *Ecclesiastes*. Living Way Bible Study. Our original study for this book.
- Leupold, H. C. *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952. The author has designed a commentary accessible to laity as well as clergy. He makes the case against Solomon's authorship.
- Longman, Tremper. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Clear and accessible to clergy and laity. Joins the case against Solomon's authorship.
- Luther, Martin. *Notes on Ecclesiastes; Lectures on the Song of Solomon; Treatise on the Last Words of David*. Volume 15 of Luther's Works (Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan). St. Louis: Concordia, 1972.
- Meek, Russell. *Ecclesiastes and the Search for Meaning in an Upside-down World*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2022. Contains a fascinating exploration of the connection between Abel, whose name means "vapor" or "vanity," the primary theme word of Ecclesiastes.

BOOK:

- Swindoll, Charles. *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality*. Waco: Word Books, 1985. An extended devotional treatment of Ecclesiastes that ties this ancient book to our modern experiences and contemporary cultural "wisdom." Dated, but insightful, thought-provoking applications.

VIDEO STUDY:

- Ecclesiastes*. The Bible Project. Bibleproject.com. This website has thoughtful introductions to all the books of the bible, plus many "topical" studies. If you want a concise, substantive introduction to Ecclesiastes, this is for you!

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- Hoerber, Robert, editor. *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (NIV). St. Louis: Concordia, 1984.
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- The Holy Bible* (English Standard Version). Wheaton: Crossway, 2016.

Journal Of A Desperate Journey

Lesson 1

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A Disappointing and Desperate Journey

It was a bitterly cold day in January of 1912 when a five-man expeditionary crew led by British naval officer Robert F. Scott finally reached their destination, the South Pole. But more bitter than the cold was what they discovered there. A rival team from Norway led by Roald Amundsen had beaten them by a month, leaving a flag and a tent as evidence. Scott, who was keeping a journal of the trek, wrote, “Great God! This is an awful place, and terrible enough for us to have labored to it without the reward of priority.”

The team’s disappointment turned into desperation as they tried to make it back to their supply depot. Two of the men succumbed along the way, and the rest froze to death 11 miles short of their destination. Scott’s entries in the journal he left behind painted a vivid and heart-breaking picture of their struggle to survive.

The Bible has a desperate journal too. It’s about the journey of a man who searched for life’s purpose high and low and learned from experience what it was like to “labor without reward” on his travels through life. The book has a generous helping of disappointment and even despair. And many of us who live on what Charles Swindoll describes as the “ragged edge” read his words with a sad nodding of our heads. That’s life – the treadmill of work, the emptiness that often dogs our steps, an unsatisfying rat race with no cheese for the rats, and the inevitability of death. Yikes!

So why read it? Because Ecclesiastes is much more than a desperate journal. It’s also a book of wisdom gained along life’s way and a pointer to the resilience and simple joys God gives to all who will trust Him. The author’s goal is to “deconstruct” all the ways we humans try to find meaning in life APART from God so that we will be open to discovering the meaning of life WITH God.

Along the way, it’s plain, honest talk about coping with life as it is and not as we’d like it to be. There is, to be sure, more sorrow than joy in Ecclesiastes. This paragraph from Hermon Melville’s Moby Dick

summarizes: “The mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him cannot be true. And the same with books. The truest of all men was the man of sorrows; and the truest of all books, Ecclesiastes, the fine-hammered steel of woe.”

No reader will come through this book thinking, “I’ve got this!” But hope will be planted in the hearts of those who read it trusting that “God’s got this.” He can supply us with simple joys and the faith to receive them from His hand.

Martin Luther called it a “book of comfort,” a “noble little book” that teaches patience in the face of “unpleasantness” (LW 35:260). He made a fascinating guess that the whole of Ecclesiastes may have been a long after-dinner speech delivered to a dining hall filled with guests! That’s just one of many things to make us put on our thinking caps as we make our way through this book.

Let’s dig in, shall we?

Ecclesiastes In the Canon

Our Jewish neighbors call the Old Testament the Tanakh, an acronym made from three Hebrew words – Torah (Law), Neviim (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). The “Writings” include poetical books (Psalms, Proverbs, and Job), the “Megillot,” or Scrolls (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther), a prophecy (Daniel), and some history (Ezra, Nehemiah, and I and II Chronicles).

Ecclesiastes was normally read on the eve of Sukkoth, the Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorated the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites – yet another desperate journey marked by stubborn disobedience and finally the death of a whole generation.

Ecclesiastes left its mark in the New Testament in nearly a dozen quotations or allusions, where its wisdom continued to reverberate among the followers of Jesus.

The Author – Solomon

The title Ecclesiastes translates a puzzling word found nowhere else in the Bible. The Hebrew word is Qoheleth (one who addresses the qahal or “assembly”). The NIV renders it as “The Teacher.” Martin Luther called this book *Der Prediger*, “The Preacher,” and many other translations use that title for the author. “Ecclesiastes” is borrowed from the Septuagint’s Greek translation. It’s an office, not a proper name.

To add one more layer, The Bible Project proposes that we distinguish “The Preacher,” whose words form the main body of teaching in Ecclesiastes, from the actual writer of the book, who introduces the Preacher at the start, but also summarizes and evaluates him in the final section (12:9-14). Tremper Longman agrees, saying that the “voice in the frame” (prologue and conclusion) “seems most likely to be the author of the finished book.” Longman calls him the “frame narrator.”

Although Qoheleth is not named, James Bollhagen makes the traditional case that he is King Solomon. His self-description as “son of David” (1:1) who was “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12) fits him precisely. Solomon certainly had wealth vast enough to tackle expensive building projects (2:4, cf. 1 Kings 4-7) and, yes, wisdom enough to reflect and write eloquently (1 Kings 4:32). Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Psalms 72 and 127 are other portions of the Bible attributed to him. The repetition of “in vain . . . in vain . . . in vain” in the latter psalm parallels the refrain “vanity of vanities!” in Ecclesiastes. His lengthy public prayer for the Temple’s dedication (1 Kings 8) shows him in the role of actually being a qoheleth, “addressing the assembly.”

On the other hand, H. C. Leupold and Tremper Longman argue against Solomon's authorship. Why? First, Solomon is not named anywhere in the book, as he is explicitly in Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Psalms 72 and 127. "The Preacher" presents himself as a believer in God, a "veteran" of lots of life. But the narrative in 1 Kings 1-11 says that as an old man, Solomon became an idolater and earned God's anger. No mention there of any repentance. For Solomon to be the author, he would have needed to repent and end up as a "sadder but wiser" man. Some ancient Jews thought that's what had happened. Leupold cites Jewish legends of Solomon being forced to relinquish his throne because his subjects' dissatisfaction with his idolatry! Yet, he argues, the Bible is ruthlessly silent about such a scenario. Instead, he proposes that the book comes from a much later date following the Exile, and that the author uses "Solomon" as a pseudonym. "This," he thinks the Preacher says, "is what the truly wise believer Solomon WOULD have said to us, and what God Himself DID say!"

Ecclesiastes is much more than a desperate journal. It's also a book of wisdom gained along life's way and a pointer to the resilience and simple joys God gives to all who will trust Him. The author's goal is to "deconstruct" all the ways we humans try to find meaning in life APART from God so that we will be open to discovering the meaning of life WITH God.

If we are to accept Solomon's authorship, we must explain how this very wise (and godly!) man slipped into gross sin and folly. Bollhagen guesses that as Solomon's government bureaucracy grew, and as his marriage alliances multiplied, he made compromise with the idolatries of his many wives and became preoccupied with "stuff," a sure recipe for disillusionment. Earthly wealth got a hold on him. Bureaucracy superseded faith. Deflation and disillusionment arrived.

Proponents of Solomon's authorship hold that there must have dawned a realization of his foolishness and apostasy, a kind of "midlife crisis" (says Swindoll) after which Solomon became a repentant old man who was almost "too late smart," eager to apply and share the lessons he'd learned from God.

Did he or didn't he? In either case, the book brings us genuine wisdom from God, whether written by Solomon or someone who was able, by God's direction, to apply such wisdom to the vexing problems we all face. This study will simply call the author "The Preacher."

Noteworthy Words and Phrases

"Meaningless" (in some versions, "vanity")

The Hebrew word is *hebel*, which occurs 35 times in Ecclesiastes. It means "vapor" or "wind," things that are temporary and hard to grasp. The word suggests that all human endeavors are temporary, like vapor that dissipates into thin air. Hard to grasp in the sense that life often doesn't make sense. It's filled with puzzling, paradoxical things. Adam and Eve named their second son "Hebel" (Abel). The name was prophetic. Abel was murdered by his brother Cain. He disappeared like a vapor and became Exhibit A of the unpredictability and futility so often evident in life. He was a good man who died young while his murderer lived on!

“Under the sun”

This phrase occurs 29 times. It's the “horizontal perspective” on life, what you see when God is left out of the picture. Meaninglessness! Emptiness! The Concordia Self-Study Bible (hereafter CSSB) sums it up: “Life not centered on God is . . . purposeless.”

“Wisdom”

This is a word we'd expect, with 28 appearances in twelve chapters. Much of the Old Testament's wisdom literature takes the form of brief, proverbial sayings, strung together like pearls on a necklace. The wisdom books' aim is not merely to provide a “how to” list which will serve as a table of duties. More important is their urging of the proper attitude (“fear God and keep his commandments” in 12:13). Solomon's book of Proverbs says the same: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7).

“God”

Interestingly, the word used exclusively for “God” in Ecclesiastes (40 times) is the Hebrew Elohim rather than His covenantal name Yahweh. There is no reference to His mighty saving acts in the Exodus and Conquest. The focus is on everyday experiences. Sunrise. Sunset. Work. Mealtimes. God is watching it all and will judge it all. We are reminded that while we live “under the sun,” we must remember Him who is “above” it! The ultimate wisdom is to revere and trust God. In the context of the New Testament, we are called to live “under the Son,” our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said it plainly to the Corinthians that “Christ is. . . the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). Jesus Himself claimed that in His arriving, “one greater than Solomon is here” (Matt. 12:42). So Ecclesiastes finally sets the stage for the Gospel of Jesus. Christ is the root. A sanctified life is the fruit.

Paradoxes In Ecclesiastes

Many students of Ecclesiastes have observed the paradoxes that are woven through this book. Pastor Erwin Kurth listed some of them:

- (The Preacher) negates life, yet affirms it.
- He finds life meaningless, yet urges piety.
- He deprecates wisdom, yet counsels wise living.
- He deplores the futility of life, yet considers it a good thing to be alive.
- He finds no evidence of a moral world order, yet warns against irresponsible behavior.

Many readers will find this approach frustrating. We like things tied neatly with a bow! We'll read joyful statements of simple faith sprouting out of what seems the very barren soil of frustration and mortality. Unanswered questions abound. We are teased into wrestling with the text as we hold it next to our own life's experience. It's one of the reasons generations of students have found Ecclesiastes a fascinating journey.

Unlike “fair weather religion,” says Bollhagen, Ecclesiastes espouses “the simple life of childlike faith while honestly facing the quandaries of existence in this fallen world.”

*But hope will be
planted in the hearts
of those who read
it trusting that
“God’s got this.” He
can supply us with
simple joys and the
faith to receive them
from His hand.*

An Outline of Ecclesiastes?

Those who are used to a clear progression from A to B to C will find that Ecclesiastes is not easily outlined. There is a clearly-demarcated prologue (1:1-11). And there is an equally clear summation at the end (12:9-14). The theme in 1:2 (“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “. . . Everything is meaningless”) is repeated verbatim in 12:8. But there is not a distinctly cogent progression in the large section between, though all of it appears to be the words of Qoheleth himself, Longman argues. He further sees a general division in the body of the book between two sections:

1:13-6:9 Autobiographical Narrative

6:10-12:7 Wisdom Admonitions.

There are noteworthy treatments of a variety of important issues, like work and old age, money, the use of one’s time, worship, and the proper way to submit to rulers. But interspersed everywhere are those seemingly random pearls of wisdom we mentioned earlier. Our lessons will progress through the book by taking the chapters in order, often focusing on some of the noteworthy emphases along the way.

Ancient and Modern Wisdom Meet

Every culture has its way of sharing wisdom about life. In the USA that wisdom often comes in brief “sound bites” via commercial ads (“you deserve a break today”) or bumper stickers (“he who dies with the most toys wins”). It may be personified in movie characters like Patch Adams or Atticus Finch or Forrest Gump, who mused that “life is like a box of chocolates.” It may be carried in a simple country song (“love will always find a way”). An earlier generation will remember that journalism brought us some thoughtful voices like Walter Cronkite and Andy Rooney.

Ecclesiastes is deeper and more sobering than most of our culture’s sound bites and talking heads. And it adds what we rarely hear – a religious perspective that points to God’s role in our lives.

Ecclesiastes has continued to make an impression in our wider culture in recent years. The title of Henry James’ novel *The Golden Bowl* comes from Eccl. 12:6. The character Qohen Leth in the movie “The Zero Theorem” (2013) is inspired by Qoheleth and is a play on that name. Other examples are the song “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds in 1965 and the quote from Ecclesiastes 11:9 (KJV) at the beginning of the movie “Platoon” in 1986:

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: and do all things that thou art able to do. . . But know thou, that God will bring every deed unto judgment.

Let’s listen to the Preacher. Take a long look at what he sees. Let his words echo in your soul and challenge you to a deeper faith.



Personal Application

Lord God, slow me down. Open my eyes to look more carefully at things around me every day: the busyness of tiny insects, the formation of clouds, the veins in leaves, and the faces of people I pass. Give me patience to reflect on what I see and consider what these things show me about You. Enable me to digest such truths and appreciate life and my place in it. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

For Review

1. What does the title “Ecclesiastes” mean?
2. What are the arguments against the authorship of Solomon?
3. The Jews normally read this book at the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the wilderness wandering. Why would this have been a useful setting to ponder its themes?
4. Where do people in our own culture turn to find “practical wisdom”?

Read 1:3-11

5. “What does a man gain from all his labor?” is the book’s opening question. Read Mark 8:36. What’s the connection between the Preacher’s question and Jesus’ question?
6. List some of the chief things you have spent your life working on. What do you have to show for it?
7. What effect does each of the following have on you?
 - a. Standing at the seacoast
 - b. Walking downtown in a bustling city
 - c. Driving through a slum

d. Gazing at a starry night sky

e. Exploring a large library

8. In what different sources have you discovered “wisdom for life”?

9. The Preacher says there is “nothing new under the sun.” In our age of rapid change, do you agree or disagree? If true, what help would this observation provide you?

Read 1:12-18

10. Skim through the headings in each chapter of your Bible from 1 Kings 1-11 to see the progression of Solomon’s life. How long was his reign (11:42)? If Solomon wrote it, do you think Ecclesiastes came nearer the start or the end of his reign? Why?

11. When do you feel most sharply the “burden” (13) of life?

12. Verse 14 mentions “chasing after the wind.” Use your cross-references to find other occurrences of this phrase.

13. What does this phrase say about the prospects for human planning?

14. When Jesus uses the picture of “wind” in John 3:8, what does “wind” there describe?

15. If you choose, share an experience in which acquiring knowledge brought you sorrow or joy.

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Sixteen Tons and What Do You Get?

Do you ever wonder “What am I getting out of all this?” Whether you’re working a shift at the factory, writing a paper for school, or lifting weights at the fitness club, it’s natural to wonder where such effort will lead and what benefit, if any, you’ll receive.

Your parents and grandparents may recall a song popularized by Tennessee Ernie Ford about a mine worker shoveling coal day after day:

*I was born one mornin' when the sun didn't shine
I picked up my shovel and I walked to the mine
I loaded sixteen tons of number 9 coal
And the straw boss said, "Well a-bless my soul!"
You load sixteen tons, what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt
Saint Peter, don't you call me, 'cause I can't go
I owe my soul to the company store.*

“What do you get?” is the question that launches Ecclesiastes (1:3). One cannot know what got “The Preacher” thinking about it. Different settings may prompt such reflection when it’s your turn to puzzle over life. It could start as you stand on the beach watching and hearing the endless surf, pondering eternity. “Waves like these have been coming in and out since time began . . . wow!” It might occur to you as you see endless shelves of books in a large library. “Who wrote all these books? And why? Is anyone reading them?” A trip to the cemetery and a walk among the headstones is sure to make one wonder, “Who were all these people? What did their lives amount to?” You’ll think about yours too!

We begin walking with the Preacher through his journal. Look. Listen. Turn your imagination loose for a walk with him “under the sun.”

Nothing New Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 1:3-11

“What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” (3). The Preacher asks because he has been watching the endless cycle of nature, a predictable, monotonous loop that is paralleled by the drudgery that greets us all (“a man” is the Hebrew word ‘adam, which really means “mankind” in general).

Verses 4-7 list, in order, “earth,” then “sun,” then “wind,” and finally “streams.” Some ancient peoples listed earth, air, fire, and water as the four basic components of everything that we can sense in the world around us. As the Preacher watches, he notes that each of them manifests a dreary sameness. The sun rises and sets day after day. The winds blow back and forth, first one direction, then another . . . endlessly! The “streams” (called “wadis” in the Middle East) gush to the sea annually, but the sea never fills.

The Preacher sees that we humans are also stuck in the same monotonous loop. “Generations come and generations go” (4). That revolving door is just one more part of life “under the sun.” Phil, the TV reporter in *Ground Hog Day*, is the movie version of this dreary scenario. He’s doomed to repeat the same day endlessly. Horrors! The Preacher groans, “There is nothing new under the sun” (9). Poet Rudyard Kipling puts it in historical perspective:

*The craft that we call modern
The crimes that we call new
John Bunyan had them typed and filed
In 1682.*

For all we humans can see, this depressing sameness is an argument against our faith and all we hope for. Scoffers then and now say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning” (2 Peter 3:4).

The question “What does man gain?” (“What’s in it for me?”) can be read as the default response of us sinful humans generally. Fallen man is curved in on himself. We tend to treat life as if everything were a quid pro quo (Bollhagen). If there is no payoff, “life isn’t fair.” That was the sense of Satan’s accusation against righteous Job: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9). God reminds the Israelites that their veneer of religion is really self-centered: “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements . . . ?’” (Mal. 3:14).

But The Preacher’s question “What does a man gain?” is not just a selfish whine. He really wants to understand how the world works. How are GOD’S purposes being served in “all that is done under heaven” (13)? Are we simply doomed to a meaningless existence?

It’s not just the Preacher asking. Jesus Himself poses a similar question in Mark 8:36. “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” The question is rhetorical. The answer anticipated by both the Preacher and Jesus is “No good at all!” That is to say, “Without God, life will surely be purposeless.”

*Meaningless is the
verdict on life “under
the sun” without God.
When God IS in the
picture, however,
everything changes.*

Each generation must learn it all over again because we don't remember the people who came before us (10-11). Bollhagen asks pointedly, "Do you even remember the names of your great-grandparents?" This writer must admit, "No." And our descendants won't long remember US either!

Don't Forget The Bigger Picture

Meaningless is the verdict on life "under the sun" without God. When God IS in the picture, however, everything changes. Those four elements (earth, sun, wind, and water) become windows through which we see His divine working. The gracious arrival of Jesus under the sun with us makes all the difference. The earth becomes something the meek inherit (Matt. 5:5). The sun becomes a daily illustration of the radiant, healing attention of God to His people (Psalm 19). The Holy Spirit's mysterious working is like the wind blowing life unexpectedly (John 3:8) into our deadness. And Jesus Himself endows the believer an inner "spring of water" (John 4:13-14).

Nothing new? The answer the Preacher and all of us finally receive from God is "I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5)! But it's hard to appreciate the goodness of that Good News until we have stood for a while beside the Preacher and felt what he felt.

The Preacher Undertakes A Closer Investigation

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

The Preacher finally introduces himself. "I . . . was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (12). Knowing the history of Solomon is useful for understanding what we'll be reading in chapter 2, regardless of authorship, for the text obviously portrays Solomon's experiences.

Review 1 Kings 1-11, which narrates his story. After his father David made him king (1), his throne was secured (2). At Gibeon he made his memorable request for wisdom, which God richly granted (3-4). He undertook the greatest of building projects, the Temple and then the palace (5-7). His dedicatory prayer shows him functioning as the Qoheleth addressing the assembly (8). After God's paired promises and warnings (9), we read about his burgeoning bureaucracy. The queen of Sheba's visit and his mounting wealth and splendor are noted (10). Then comes the sad and shocking descent into apostasy, fueled by his coupling with hundreds of "wives" and "concubines" who turned the old man's heart (11).

Luther commented, "There is such great crookedness and depravity in human affairs that they can never be corrected." To explore life with human wisdom alone ("under the sun") and not from God's perspective will only result in the realization that "the more you know, the more you realize how little you know!"

God is angry at his apostasy. Enemies arise. Rebellion and the division of the nation follow. Solomon's death is recorded (11:43) without any mention of his repentance and any story of how he became a "sadder but wiser" old man. The Book of Ecclesiastes itself could be the record of how he finally wised up before his own time ran out after 40 years of ruling Israel.

The Preacher intends to get to the bottom of things! He devoted himself to "study" and "explore by wisdom" (13) to see if he could make sense of life under the sun. The word "explore" is the same verb used of the task of the twelve spies who surveyed Canaan before the Conquest, notes Bollhagen. And here is the first overt mention of that prodigious wisdom God had gifted to Solomon.

But the Preacher's devoted study came up empty. He shares the disappointing results up front, even before describing the search itself: "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (14). What a picture of frustration, akin to our "herding cats" or "going on a wild goose chase"! So that we don't forget, he repeats the description eight more times (1:17; 2:11, 17, and 26; 4:4, 6, and 16; and 6:9).

His search was doomed from the start, he explains. An impossible task! "What is twisted cannot be straightened" (15). Luther commented, "There is such great crookedness and depravity in human affairs that they can never be corrected." To explore life with human wisdom alone ("under the sun") and not from God's perspective will only result in the realization that "the more you know, the more you realize how little you know!"

Brace Yourself!

The chapter's closing verses bring the Preacher's counsel to brace ourselves for the humbling that our search for understanding will bring. "Just look at me!" he seems to say. "I was the wisest king EVER in Jerusalem, and I wound up 'chasing the wind'! Imagine how YOU will fare!" (Bollhagen).

Human wisdom without the knowledge God imparts (see CSSB note on verse 18) will lead us to "sorrow." The Hebrew word can also be translated "frustration." Does the Preacher mean that the more we study human life on earth, the more we'll conclude that "life isn't fair" (see 8:14, for example)? The "good guys" sometimes finish last. Honest old folks are conned out of their life savings. Meanwhile, the rogue may live a long life and die in his sleep. Have you ever spoken your sorrow when your high hopes were brutally squashed?

What awaits us in this book? Will our exploration show us our depravity staring out of the mirror? When we finally see clearly, will we like what we see?

Will sorrow have the last word? Or will we find hope?



Personal Application

Heavenly Father, I confess that I want to be happy! How does that happen? Teach me the difference between pursuing happiness for its own sake and seeking You, with happiness as the by-product. I ask it through Christ Jesus, who came to bring us lasting joy. Amen.

For Review

1. Contrast what the “wind” taught the Preacher and the way Jesus uses “wind” in John 3:8.
2. Characterize the ending of Solomon’s life as 1 Kings narrates it in chapter 11.

Read 2:1-16

3. My personal idea of “the Good Life” is (circle the two you like best)

Being on the road in an RV

Playing or watching sports

Dining out at the best spots

Long talks with friends

4. The Preacher set out to find “happiness” (the best translation of the Hebrew word). What “doors” does he try in his search?
 - a. Verse 3: _____ and _____
 - b. Verse 4: _____
 - c. Verse 5: _____ and _____ with all kinds of _____
 - d. Verse 7: _____ and lots of _____
 - e. Verse 8: _____ and _____; _____, and a _____
 - f. His verdict on all of these (verse 11)?
5. What “doors” have you tried in your life that you later regarded as foolish?
6. Share an important project you have undertaken in recent years. How would you measure “success” in it?
7. According to verse 14, what advantage has a wise person over a fool?

8. What negates that advantage?
9. (For your personal reflection only) Has the death of someone important to you ever made you question life's "fairness"?
10. How does a passage like this change your focus on what is truly important?

Read 2:17-26

11. Read Luke 12:13-21. How is that narrative and parable connected with this section in Ecclesiastes?
12. Have you prepared a will? Was the experience satisfying or burdensome? Why?
13. Why did the Preacher say he "hated" life (see 2:17)?
14. What does the Preacher include in the "good life" (see 2:24)? What do you think of his list? Have you found his observation true, or would you add something?
15. What do you hope your personal (not financial) legacy will be?

Lesson 3

Trying Every Door

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Chasing the Good Life

The Declaration of Independence holds out “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as a God-endowed right for each of us. But what is “happiness”?

For almost everyone, being “happy” has good health, family, and friends as basic components. Beyond that, what is our idea of the good life we want to pursue? For a retired couple, it might be driving down the highway in their RV with the freedom to explore whatever’s on the horizon. A plugged-in teen might think competing in the League of Legends gaming tournament the most satisfying version of happiness. An old song reminds us that happiness is “different things to different people.” Your preferred pleasure might be sleeping in, dining at Benihana, or reading a good book by a crackling fire. Mine might be refinishing old furniture, collecting stamps, or coaching little league baseball.

The Preacher decided to devote his wisdom and financial resources to a serious search for “happiness.” What would give him the most bang for the buck? He pursued every option. He left no stone unturned. The old Schlitz beer ad could have served as his philosophy: “You only go round once in life, so grab the gusto.”

How did it turn out for him? And how will it turn out for us? Let’s read about his experiment with pleasure in chapter two to see what he discovered.

Trying All the Pleasure Doors

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

The Preacher launches his experiment: “I will try happiness” (verse 1 –Bollhagen’s translation). The Hebrew word could be rendered “pleasure” (NIV) or “gladness.” Like a curious adolescent exploring a fun house, he tries every door.

Door one (2) is “laughter.” How Solomon arranged for this we don’t know. Did he employ a court jester? In our culture there’s a whole industry of stand-up comedians, a whole TV genre called “sitcoms.” Some are genuinely funny, while others need an artificial laugh track. The preacher found laughter for its own sake to be simply “foolish.” It accomplished no discernible purpose.

The next two doors are marked “wine” and “folly” (3). Judging by the abundance of ads for “wine tastings,” this is a popular door in certain parts of the USA. Cabernet Sauvignon? Pinot Grigio? Riesling? Does the Preacher mention “folly” as the next because too much wine can propel us to do and say foolish things? Or is “folly” a separate sort of “Harmless and enjoyable nonsense” (Leupold)?

For the “sinner” who does not reckon on God or look to Him, God continues to give “the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.” For that poor fellow, life continues to be “meaningless, a chasing after wind” (26).

Next, he says, “I undertook great projects” (4). Besides the construction of his magnificent temple, which took seven years, Solomon went on to build a lavish palace for himself, and then another for the pharaoh’s daughter, whom he had taken as a wife (1 Kings 7). The royal palaces were a thirteen-year project.

Nor did he stop at buildings. He planted vineyards (see Song 8:11), gardens and parks with fruit trees scattered everywhere (5), probably for the pleasure of the royal household, not the commoners. These, in turn, required “reservoirs” for their irrigation (6). There still exist three rectangular pools southwest of Bethlehem for storing runoff water, along with the remains of aqueducts to distribute the water.

All this frenzy of building and planting necessitated a huge work force. We read in 1 Kings 5:13-16 that Solomon conscripted 183,000 slaves, of whom 30,000 were Israelites! All this building and staffing required an enormous capital investment, so he says, “I amassed silver and gold” (8). Some of it came as tribute from conquered neighbors (“the

treasures of kings and provinces”) and some from increasing taxes on his own citizens (see 1 Kings 4:7). Such conscription and taxation almost certainly planted seeds of discontent that later blossomed into rebellion and the nation’s division.

Even after all this, Solomon’s “pleasure experiment” wasn’t finished. He acquired (from other countries?) an array of “men and women singers.” His father David had focused on liturgical music for Israel’s worship, but Solomon intended the music for his personal pleasure.

As a caper to all of the above, Solomon assembled a “harem” (NIV translation of a term that appears nowhere else in the Bible). The RSV, ESV, and others render it “many concubines” (cf. 1 Kings 11:3, which numbers 700 wives and 300 concubines!). Though God had forbidden the king to take “many wives” lest his heart be led astray (Deut. 17:17), Solomon “enlarged his harem with a vengeance” (Bollhagen).

The Preacher had wine, women, and song in luxurious abundance. “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired” (10). He tried every door. The verdict? “Everything was meaningless (hebel), a chasing after the wind” (11). He remained stuck in the same depressing rut. The experiment brought him no profit. He was sadder, even though wiser!

Is Wisdom Better Than Folly?

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16

The Preacher's pleasure experiment had come up empty, but he was still in possession of his mental faculties, so he pivoted to explore wisdom itself. "I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly" (12). Was wisdom better than folly? And if so, how?

At first blush, the answer seemed obvious. Isn't it better to go through life with eyes open, not shut? Careful reflection is better than ignorance, however blissful. The difference is like night and day (13). The wise person "has eyes," and the fool "walks in the darkness" (14). But no matter how wise a person is, he will be succeeded by someone who may undo everything! We've all seen examples of pastors, coaches, and even presidents who undid the accomplishments and thereby spoiled the hard work of their predecessors.

The great equalizer is death. "Then I thought in my heart, 'The fate of the fool will overtake me also'" (15). Charles Swindoll voices the discovery this way: "So what if I get a fine education? So what if I pursue a responsible job? So what if I decide to practice a profession or learn a trade? I may live with my eyes wide open. . . raise a fine family and plan wisely for retirement. But the fact is: the axe falls on my neck just like it does on the neck of a fool. I, like the fool, am going to die."

What's worse is that, here under the sun, "both (the wise and the fool) will be forgotten" (16). We make our tombstones out of granite, not cardboard, in hopes that our names will be preserved. But with very few exceptions, the words of an old hymn come true: "They fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day."

You Can't Take It With You!

Ecclesiastes 2:17-23

In the early 1920s archeologist Howard Carter and his team of diggers uncovered an astonishing hoard of wealth in King Tut's tomb in Egypt. There were thrones and chariots, daggers, clothing, board games, dishes, and much more. Since he cherished the hope of an afterlife, King Tut could be pardoned for thinking that he might take his possessions along.

The Preacher, at least initially, had no such hope, and he realized a depressing truth: you can't take it with you! "All the things I had toiled for . . . I must leave them to the one who comes after me" (18-19). This is the bitter answer he has discovered to the question that opened the book: "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3). One can feel the Preacher's pain as he says what we are sometimes tempted to say, "I hated life!" (17)

The problem? "The one who comes after me . . . who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?" (19). That very thing happened to Solomon. His son Rehoboam proved to be a gigantic fool. First Kings 12 records how Rehoboam rejected the wise advice of his father's counselors and embraced the foolish bravado of his boyhood pals. Bad move! Within the first generation, all of Solomon's great work went down the drain. The kingdom of Israel was split apart permanently.

C. S. Lewis put it this way: "Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in'; aim at earth and you will get neither" (in Mere Christianity).

Solomon's experiment with pleasure, his analysis of wisdom versus folly, and now his evaluation of hard work brought the same dismaying verdict: "All of it is hebel - meaningless!" (17). His experience has knocked the bottom out of traditional wisdom's maxim that a good life and hard work are rewarded and laziness and folly are punished (Proverbs 13:4). Three times he repeats the phrase "under the sun" (18, 20, 22) as a forceful reminder that it's a dilemma only divine grace can amend!

"My heart began to despair" (20). The Hebrew idiom, says Bollhagen, indicates a conscious decision to give up. Such despair, for many people, leads them to put an end to life, regardless of their wealth and privileges. Poet Edward Arlington Robinson captured such a pathetic outcome in his poem "Richard Cory":

*Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.
And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.
So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.
The First Rays Of Divine Light*

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

Until now, everything we've read in Ecclesiastes has been from the perspective of one who is "under the sun." That is to say, life as it is lived apart from God. In this final section, at last, we see light filter down from above the sun, from the One who made it. "For the first time," says H. C. Leupold, "Kohleth reaches beyond the level of the things under the sun and . . . indicates that on the higher level there is a source of true joy."

The Preacher looks again at life, at the routine of daily work, eating and drinking. But now there is a difference. Three times in three verses he speaks of "God." "The hand of God" (24) gives the simple, daily gifts of work and food. And there is more for those who are in a relationship of trust and obedience. "To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom" (26). No longer is man using his unaided insight, but now in living concert with his Maker.

For the "sinner" who does not reckon on God or look to Him, God continues to give "the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God." For that poor fellow, life continues to be "meaningless, a chasing after wind" (26).

So where will you build your life and invest your effort? On the "sand" that is an empty life without God, or on the "rock" which is the hearing and heeding of His word (Matt. 7:24-27)? The rich fool in Jesus' parable is a model of the "vanity of vanities" the Preacher warned about. He is busy building bigger barns, only to lose everything in the end because he left God out of his reckoning (Luke 12:16-20). The wise lays up "treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20) and in the process discovers that "there is nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (24) because he knows and loves God, who secures his future. That, the Preacher has discovered, is "the good life" we find by faith in God.

C. S. Lewis put it this way: "Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in'; aim at earth and you will get neither" (in *Mere Christianity*)