



MEANINGLESS

A STUDY IN
ECCLESIASTES



NORTHEAST
BIBLE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

“What’s the point?”

It’s a question everyone asks at some point in their lives. Whether the question is over the necessity of learning geometry (“When am I ever going to use this?”); the futility of trying to keep the house clean; the frustration over a child that never listens; or the exasperation of justice that is never served: we all have come face-to-face with the futility of life and quietly wondered, *“What’s the point?”*

Ecclesiastes speaks into this very “madness”. From our human point of view, life is full of things that feel futile: work that never ends, bills that never cease, demands we can never meet, questions we cannot answer, and time always working against us. Life in this broken world is full of futility and frustration. The author of Ecclesiastes uses the word “vanity” thirty-eight times as he reflects on the futility of life and living. Just consider his opening words:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun? [Ecc1. 1:2-3]

Even still, despite its bleak tone, Ecclesiastes actually offers us hope. It sheds light on how quick we are to seek significance in things that simply cannot deliver what we yearn, and it tackles the questions we ask about life, work, meaning, wisdom, evil, and pleasure. Ecclesiastes points us to what truly matters in life, and it shows us how walking with God can bring meaning to the mundane and allow us to enjoy even the simplest of life’s pleasures in light of eternity.

Framed as wisdom from a teacher to his student, Ecclesiastes calls a lot of important things to our attention. It forces us to wrestle with our ambitions and confront our fears. It drives us to consider our pursuits and our sense of meaning. But far from leaving us in the dark, Ecclesiastes invites us to walk in the light – to enjoy all that God has given us while showing us how to keep all these things in their proper places.

Ultimately, Ecclesiastes is a book that wrestles with some of the biggest questions in life while pointing us to the only One who can offer us truth and meaning in the midst of all of the madness.

No one wants to lead a meaningless life.

Ecclesiastes shows us that we don’t have to.

BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK

Ecclesiastes is categorized as one of the “Wisdom Books” of the Old Testament, where it echoes the questions asked in Job and provides wisdom in contrast to the assorted principles of Proverbs. Though its style and tone may differ from the other wisdom books, its message is the same: “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:13; see also Job 28:28, Ps. 110:10, and Prov. 1:7).

| LAW | HISTORY | WISDOM & POETRY | MAJOR PROPHETS | MINOR PROPHETS |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| GENESIS EXODUS LEVITICUS NUMBERS DEUTERONOMY | JOSHUA JUDGES RUTH 1&2 SAMUEL 1&2 KINGS 1&2 CHRON. EZRA NEHEMIAH ESTHER | JOB PSALMS PROVERBS ECCLESIASTES SONG OF SONGS | ISAIAH JEREMIAH LAMENTATIONS EZEKIEL DANIEL | HOSEA JOEL AMOS OBADIAH JONAH MICAH NAHUM HABAKKUK ZEPHANIAH HAGGAI ZECHARIAH MALACHI |

Ecclesiastes is named for its author, “the Preacher” based on its opening line: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1). The term “Preacher” comes from the Hebrew word, “*Qoheleth*”, and refers to a speaker who calls an assembly; and so Ecclesiastes points to the wisdom of a preacher handed down to his people.

Most scholars assume “the Preacher” is King Solomon based on both his wisdom and his authorship of Proverbs, which begins with an almost identical greeting (see Prov. 1:1). Under Solomon, Israel became a formidable and respected nation. At the height of his reign, he carried out vast building projects and enjoyed incredible luxury, resulting in widespread acclaim:

Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. (1 Kings 10:23-24)

But Solomon’s life and reign would ultimately be marred by a failure to follow God’s commands. He became bitter and proved that, even though he gained everything, he forfeited peace and lost his sense of meaning. Solomon’s life attests to the message of Ecclesiastes: the only path to life and meaning is knowing God and walking in His ways.



MEANINGLESS, MEANINGLESS

Kansas may have sung it, but Ecclesiastes was the first to say it: “All we are is dust in the wind.”

Kerry Livgren, the original founder and songwriter for the rock band Kansas, wrote the lyrics to the great classic, “Dust in the Wind”. Although Livgren didn’t yet know the hope of Jesus, he knew something of the futility of life and the search for meaning. In spite of fame and fortune and achieving his dream, Livgren couldn’t shake the sense that it was all still meaningless. It was in the midst of his searching that the reality of Ecclesiastes struck him, ultimately leading him to pen a song out of its message:

Now, don’t hang on; Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky.
It slips away, And all your money won’t another minute buy.
Dust in the wind, All we are is dust in the wind... ¹

Ecclesiastes 1 begins with this very message: vanity, vanity; everything is vanity. This word, “vanity”, comes from the Hebrew, “hevel”, which literally means “breath”, “vapor”, or “mist”. It carries the sense of a quickly passing breeze: it cannot be grasped or kept, and it disappears without a trace.

It is with this metaphor that the “Preacher” begins. Life can feel like a breath. A generation comes and a generation goes (Eccl. 1:4), the sun rises and the sun sets (Eccl. 1:5), streams run but the sea never fills (Eccl. 1:7); our work fades, the new becomes old, and all will be forgotten (v. 3, 10, 11). Simply put, it can all feel quite meaningless.

The opening of Ecclesiastes acknowledges the tension we all face. From the day laborer who spends each day searching for work just to put food on the table, only to wake and have to do it again tomorrow... to the new mother who goes from feeding to sleeping, feeding to sleeping, wondering if the season will ever end... to the teacher who goes from class to class, year after year, questioning if they are making any difference... everyone wrestles with the futility of life. No matter who we are and what we do, we all return to the earth.

All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. (Eccl. 3:20)

As bleak as it seems in its outlook, the opening of Ecclesiastes serves a critical purpose: it connects to our hearts and diagnoses that our lives

¹Livgren, K. (1977.) Dust in the wind [Lyrics]. On *Point of Know Return*. Kirshner.

will always be meaningless if we live detached from something greater. Otherwise, life is nothing but dust in the wind.

BEGIN

Describe something in your life that feels like an exercise in futility.

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. Ecclesiastes begins with the assertion that “all is vanity” (meaninglessness). Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Why or why not?

2. What are some of the Preacher’s examples that convey the meaninglessness of life?

3. Do you agree with the Preacher’s statement in Ecclesiastes 1:9 that “there is nothing new under the sun”? What would you say to someone who points to new scientific discoveries, or new inventions as proof of error in this verse?

WORD STUDY

הֶבֶל (hevel) “vanity”

noun, common: mist, vapor, breath, delusion; metaphorically of something elusive, fleeting or futile.

[see Job 7:16, James 4:14]

elsewhere: Jeremiah uses this word to speak of worthless idols (Jer. 10:1-5). Paul in the N.T. speaks of creation being subjected to “futility” and yearning for the hope of God’s redemption (Rom. 8:18-23).

4. How does James 4:13-17 give a practical encouragement of a similar concept that is presented in this section of Ecclesiastes?

5. Where do you see the grace of God in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

The Folly of Holding onto Things Here. Ecclesiastes teaches us that the things we seek for purpose, comfort, or pleasure on this side of eternity are flawed and fleeting. They do not last; they are easily replaced; they cannot save or satisfy. Simply put, life lived in pursuit of the earthly is a fool's game. As followers of Jesus, we are to "seek first His Kingdom" (Matt. 6:33) and live in light of the eternal instead of the earthly.

Life as a Mist. From Genesis to Revelation we are reminded that life is fragile and temporal. We were formed from dust and given life by His breath (Gen. 2:7); our time is short (Ps. 89:47); and, like a mist, we appear only for a little while before we vanish (James 4:14). This not only makes life precious, but it also supports that we live for the right things during the brief time we have.

A King Who Has Come to Show Us the Way. Ecclesiastes's opening words point to a king offering wisdom to those who will heed his voice; but the New Testament points us to a greater King, Jesus Christ, sitting on a greater throne and offering a greater Kingdom to us that cannot be taken. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the Way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus, the greater King, secured the way to eternal life through His death on the cross, offering us both peace with God and a renewed purpose on earth until His return.

REFLECT & APPLY

1. Where in your life are you struggling with monotony or even apathy? Take this to the Lord in prayer and ask Him to restore joy and meaning.

2. Reflect on some of the “ordinary blessings” that God has given you this week. Write a prayer thanking God for the gift of those blessings.

STRIVING AFTER THE WIND

No one tries to catch the wind. We may try to harness its power or capture its energy, but we can't really contain it. Even our children know that trying to catch the wind is futile. Yet this is precisely the visual the Preacher uses to capture our attention.

As Ecclesiastes opens, the Preacher chronicles how he tried to find meaning and purpose in three things: wisdom (Eccl. 1:12-18), pleasure and living (Eccl. 2:1-17), and work (Eccl. 2:18-26). But after observing and exploring, the Preacher comes to the same conclusion: it is all a "striving after the wind". This theme is so critical to the author he repeats this refrain *nine times* throughout the book!

"Striving after the wind" describes chasing something that can never be caught or contained. In Hebrew, "striving" can also mean "grasping" or "longing". It is the desire to possess something that simply cannot be had. We could stand in the breeze, trying to bottle the wind, but all our jar would contain is air. Nothing would happen or rush out if we opened it: the breeze is uncatchable. Similarly, we can try to "catch" fulfillment through our wisdom, pleasure, and work, but fulfillment itself is uncatchable, too.

Consider wisdom. The greatest minds on earth acknowledge that the mysteries of life are too vast to be fully known. Pursuing an answer to one question just opens the door to another. Even the great philosopher Voltaire was forced to concede that, "The more I read, the more I acquire, the more certain I am that I know nothing." It is a never-ending pursuit. In like fashion, the Preacher acknowledges that "in much wisdom is much vexation" (Eccl. 1:18). The questions are too many; having the answers doesn't protect us from pain; even the smartest people still face death. Wisdom cannot save.

Pleasure and possessions, likewise, cannot change our fate. The Preacher laments, "I became great and surpassed all who were before me... And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them" (Eccl. 2:9-10). Yet in the end, he counts it all as "vanity" and a "striving after the wind". Happiness is fleeting, and possessions are temporary; they soothe for a moment but cannot satisfy the soul.

Lastly, the Preacher laments the futility of "toil". In spite of everything he has done, he cannot take any of his work and accomplishments with him; he "must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it". The conclusion? "This also is vanity and a great evil" (Eccl. 2:21). We cannot be saved by what we know, what we have, or what we do.

In the end, the Preacher concludes that wisdom, pleasure, and work are things that cannot satisfy. Everything falls short outside of God. But when our eyes are firmly fixed on Jesus, we can enjoy even the simplest pleasures in life (Eccl. 2:24-25). The Preacher is not against striving, but he calls us to strive after the right thing—the Lord—and to hold everything else loosely, accepting it all as gifts from God, not replacements for God.

BEGIN

Where have you looked for happiness in life just to be disappointed and let down?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. How does the Preacher view the pursuit of pleasure and possessions? What does he conclude about their ability to satisfy?

2. In Ecclesiastes 2:17-23, the author reflects on the futility of leaving one's wealth to someone who may not appreciate it. What is the broader message in this reflection?

3. Why does Ecclesiastes present work as a meaningless pursuit despite the positive biblical view on work in Colossians 3:17?

4. How does the book's perspective on work challenge us to reevaluate the source of our hope and identity in relation to our accomplishments and talents?

5. In Matthew 6:19, Jesus warns against storing up temporary treasure on earth and worshipping money rather than God. How can work be an act of worship?

6. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 1:14-2:26 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Despair vs. Dependence. Ecclesiastes is a tough book to read if you lose sight of the Preacher's intent. Hearing the words "all is vanity and a striving after the wind" (Eccl. 1:14) repeated over and over can seem cynical and even nihilistic. But the Preacher's point was to create a tension that can only be resolved by looking to God. Everything pursued outside of Jesus is ultimately "a striving after the wind". Careers don't last; wisdom can't answer every question; wealth can't be taken with us, and pleasures are temporary. The Preacher wants us to despair in this life so that we will look to the One who is greater. Following the message and theology of the rest of the Scriptures, Ecclesiastes calls us to despair in ourselves and in our own accomplishments and instead place our faith and dependence on an eternal, never-failing God. Only God and His Kingdom lasts forever, so let us depend solely on Him.

Work and Toil. The Scriptures have much to say about work, and most of it is good. We are called to work and avoid being idle (2 Thess. 3:12; Prov. 18:9; 1 Tim. 5:8). We are to approach our work as

though we are serving the Lord and not man (Col. 3:23-24). So if Scripture commands us to work and to do so to the glory of God, why is it that Ecclesiastes paints work as futile and a “striving after the wind”? Simply put, we are called to work, but we are not called to put our hope in our work, our professions, or our talents. Ecclesiastes aims to remind us that only God, not work, can bring us joy and meaning. As the poet, C.T. Studd once wrote: *“Only one life, ’twill soon be past, Only what’s done for Christ will last.”*

God’s Good Gifts. When we fix our eyes on Jesus and anchor our purpose and identity in Him, we can rest in His work (instead of our own) and enjoy the simple pleasures of this life as gifts from our good Father. When we focus on the Creator, we can receive the gift of His creation with delight. When our hearts rest in Christ’s work, we can treasure the Sabbath, knowing the greatest work is already finished. And when we choose to live for His Kingdom, we can savor an evening of good food with good friends, taking both as a gift from God. Apart from God, everything lacks meaning. But when we live for Him, “there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil... for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (Eccl. 2:24-26).

REFLECT & APPLY

1. Where have you searched for satisfaction apart from God? Take a moment and repent for the areas in your life that you have sought fulfillment outside of God.

2. Embrace the joy of life’s simple pleasures and find rest in Christ by observing a Sabbath this week. Set aside a day of no work, delight in the company of good friends, savor delicious food, and acknowledge the goodness of God. Reflect on the impact this day of Sabbath has on your well-being and spiritual journey.

THE TYRANNY OF TIME

Ecclesiastes chapter 3 introduces us to one of the most famous and familiar passages of the book; in fact, it inspired the soundtrack of a generation. Pete Seeger actually penned the lyrics of his iconic song, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” from the opening lines of Ecclesiastes 3, voicing a generation in the 60’s and 70’s that lamented war and yearned for peace. (Younger readers might recognize the song from *The Wonder Years* and *Forrest Gump* soundtracks.)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

A time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal... ²

In poetic fashion, Ecclesiastes 3 depicts the ebb and flow of life while raising the very questions asked in every college philosophy class: “What is the meaning of life?” By contrast—birth and death, planting and plucking, war and peace—Ecclesiastes highlights not only the variability of life but also the significance of each season. In His sovereignty, God has a divine design to every season. Everything has its place and purpose, so we can rest in His timing and in His plan when we fix our eyes on Him (3:14-15).

In Ecclesiastes 3, we are again reminded of life’s brevity here “under the sun”, especially in contrast to eternity. We also read that God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (v. 11): we wonder if there is more to life and whether heaven is real. For the Preacher, these aren’t mere philosophical questions: they are deep spiritual ones that God planted in us to draw us to Him.

By leveraging questions about meaning, purpose, justice, and evil, the Preacher ultimately calls us to consider our fleeting lives in contrast to an infinite and eternal God. We are all but beasts (v. 18); we all share a common breath (v. 19); we come from dust and to dust we return (v. 20); and we all have questions about eternity (v. 21). Our situation is bleak without God.

Though Ecclesiastes may sound fatalistic or even hopeless, it is a cultural apologetic that appeals to those asking the great questions of life. It meets people where they are and addresses their angst and emotion, opening the conversation about living for more. Though our lives are fleeting, whatever God does endures forever (v. 14), and everything God does is designed to draw creation back to the Creator.

² Seeger, P. (1962). Turn! Turn! Turn! [Lyrics]. On *The bitter and the sweet*. Columbia Records.

BEGIN

Our time here on earth is limited, so we must be intentional with it. Do you feel like you use your time intentionally now? In what areas of your life might you be more intentional with your time?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-27, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. What insights does Ecclesiastes 3 provide regarding the essence of life, the passage of time, and the significance of purpose?

2. How does the concept of “everything having its time” in Ecclesiastes 3 challenge our human desire for control and our tendency to rush things?

3. How does God’s providence in Ecclesiastes 3:11-14 bring comfort and reassurance in uncertain times? How can we learn to rest in God’s timing and plan?

4. Read John 5:24. How does this answer the soul’s yearning for eternity as described in Ecclesiastes 3:11?

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 3 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Significance in Every Season. By God's design, there is a time for and significance to every season: nothing is without purpose. For example, spring brings growth and beauty, while fall brings harvest and rest. Both seasons are necessary. The same is true with each season in our own lives. From enjoying youthfulness *and* growing in maturity; to raising kids *and* releasing them; to putting your hand to the plow *and* refraining from it; even to knowing sorrow and experiencing joy: God has designed every season to have its own significance. Consequently, no matter your age and stage of life, God invites you to be part of His Kingdom and His work. He has plans for you, and every season of your life is worth something for the Kingdom.

An Ancient Apologetic for a Modern World. Ecclesiastes 3 poses the question of eternity to seeker and skeptic alike. The book frames age-old questions of purpose and meaning, making Ecclesiastes a useful guide for Christians amid a world struggling to comprehend war, inequity, injustice, and the meaninglessness of life. But Ecclesiastes isn't just effective in its content: its tone teaches us *how* to engage a hopeless world. Instead of offering quick solutions or empty platitudes to aching hearts (as many so often do), the Preacher chooses to sit in the dust with the skeptic and acknowledge his own questions and doubts. The skeptic needs to know that they are not alone as much as they need to know that there is hope and truth for their searching hearts. Just as Jesus drew near to sinners and tax collectors, Ecclesiastes teaches us to sit in the dust with the struggling and searching as we point them to the light of Jesus.

REFLECT & APPLY

1. What challenges or encouragement have you found in this week's study?

2. Take a moment to consider your current season. Maybe it's a season of joy and fulfillment, a period of testing and struggle, or a blend of both. Talk with the Lord about it and its significance for His Kingdom, and use Ecclesiastes 3:11-14 to write a prayer for the season you are in.

The work never ends. We work to meet the next set of bills. We clean, only for things to get dirty again. We never finish the laundry “once and for all”. We heave a sigh as new projects stack atop the existing ones. We’re caught in a continuous cycle of work, and our efforts are never enough. Sound familiar? It is familiar: everyone experiences the dual futility and necessity of work, just like the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 4.

Most of Ecclesiastes 4 laments how our work is futile—that it, too, is a “striving after wind” (Eccl. 4:4). The Preacher speaks of the innate competition between neighbors (v. 4), the consequences of laziness (v. 5), and the vanity of leaving a legacy (v. 7-8; v. 13-16). And yet, The Preacher also gives some solid advice from things he’s observed, like cautioning against greediness (v. 6) and hoping that people work with instead of against each other (v. 9-12). Sound familiar?

If we take a moment to honestly reflect on these things, we find that our own experiences align with The Preacher’s descriptions. We empathize with his disgust of oppression, his tiredness on the never-ending cycle of work, and his conclusion that we should keep the good things and reject the bad things in life. However, after reaching the conclusion that our work is meaningless, the Preacher essentially stops there. Scripture picks up where he leaves off, even answering the prevailing question: *why keep working at all?*

Flashback to the Fall in the Garden of Eden. When God created man, He put him to work in the Garden and it was “good” (Gen. 2:15). After the Fall, work became cursed, transforming into toil (Gen. 3:17-19). Toil resulted from the break in our relationship with God, not because work itself was the issue. When we stopped looking to God, everything became a burden. Ecclesiastes merely confirms the curse from the Garden: our work is now burdensome, too. Fortunately, the story doesn’t end there.

The picture of toil painted by Ecclesiastes is accurate and bleak, but it is also an *incomplete* picture. While Ecclesiastes views work through the Garden’s curse, we can view our work through the promises of God fulfilled by Jesus. Scripture points to a God who can bless and redeem our work, calling us to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31) because of the work Christ has done before us. Colossians goes further still:

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. (Col. 3:23-24)

Work is not our reward: God is. When we fix our eyes on Him, He redeems what otherwise would be a struggle and He restores purpose to what seemed meaningless.

Scripture never says that our work will be easy, free of frustration, or even sensible at times. However, we are encouraged to do our work *for* God. The gospel reminds us that the greatest work is already finished, and we discover purpose in our own work when we join God in *His work* to redeem and restore all things.

BEGIN

Think of a job or task you've had to do that made no sense to you. How did you feel about doing it?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-16, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions and contrasts. What stands out to you?

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. What does the Preacher suggest often drives our work, ultimately making it hollow and empty? (see Eccl. 4:4, 4:8) How have you seen this in your life or in the lives of those around you?

2. What is the connection between greed, envy and oppression related to this section of Ecclesiastes? In what ways does greed and envy lead to mistreating others still?

WORD STUDY

עָמַל (*āmāl*) “to labor”

verb: to labor, toil, work.

In contrast to other Hebrew terms that depict work as a service, *amal* describes work as a struggle. The difference is not based on the kind of work being done but the kind of relationship one has with God. A life rooted and anchored in Him can find value and even enjoyment in work, but a life lived only for the here and the now will always find work to be wearisome, futile, and fleeting.

3. How does the author emphasize the value of relationships and mutual support in Ecclesiastes 4:7-12?

4. In Ecclesiastes 4:13-16, the Preacher introduces the example of a poor but wise youth who rises to a position of influence. What lessons can we learn from this story? How does it challenge our assumptions about success and the pursuit of power?

5. What is the significance of the instruction given in Colossians 3:23-24 to work at whatever you do with all your heart, as working for the Lord rather than for human masters? How does this support or challenge what is benign said in Ecclesiastes?

6. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 4 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Rest vs. Toil. Our world seems unsteadily poised between two groups: those who don't want to work and those who worship their work. We see in both Ecclesiastes 4, and the Scriptures collectively tell us that neither of these approaches are God's design. God prescribed rest for His people and even modeled it by resting Himself after creation (Gen. 2:2-3, Ex. 20:8-11, Matt. 11:28-30). God created work; He invites us to work; and He has created *good works* for us to do (Eph. 2:10). Our work, our rest, and the balance of both is meant to be pursued with God. Whether we do too much or too little, the Scriptures remind us that we cannot do anything without Him. As we work "unto God",

so we also ought to rest in Him. God created both and invites us into both with Him.

Two Are Better Than One. From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures speak of the gift of relationship, companionship, and community. From the Garden of Eden where God said it was *not good* for man to be alone; to the throne of God where every tribe, tongue, and nation will gather and worship *together*; we are reminded that we cannot do life and faith alone. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 not only mirrors this larger Biblical theme but also calls our attention back to a God who Himself exists in community as Father, Spirit, and Son.

Wisdom, Foolishness, and the Teachable Spirit. As part of the wisdom literature in Scripture (see “Background of the Book” in the Introduction), Ecclesiastes draws out the Biblical contrast between the wise and foolish person. While “the fool” is often viewed as the person who rejects God, His ways, and His wisdom, Ecclesiastes 4:13 reminds us that the foolish person is also an isolated and arrogant person. They refuse to receive advice and wisdom from anyone. In contrast, Scripture calls us to humility that enables us to learn from mistakes. Beware the person who will not listen.

REFLECT & APPLY

1. Are you currently searching for purpose in your work or the things you do? Reflect on where your sense of purpose really comes from and ask God how you might reconcile your sense of purpose to His.

2. What area of work and rest do you need to make changes in in order to honor God’s design and pursue His purposes for your life? After writing down your reflection, share it with a trusted friend and ask them to encourage you in your commitment.

Use of synthetic diamonds is on the rise. Almost 95% of the diamonds used for industrial purposes are now synthetic, and the market for these diamonds is now worth more than \$21 billion dollars annually! People are increasingly choosing synthetic diamonds in their jewelry for their affordability, brilliance, and ethical origination.

So if synthetic diamonds have these benefits, why do so many people erupt when they find out the diamond in their ring is a *fake*? Just Google “wife finds out diamond is fake”, and see for yourself. The truth is, in those moments the frustration isn’t over the diamond’s molecular structure; it’s over the realization that something is not as it appears to be.

No one wants to be fooled by something fake, and this is the opening feeling of Ecclesiastes chapter 5. The Preacher begins by speaking of approaching God and our tendency to “draw near” in folly and haste. Though these proverbs might seem loosely ordered, they hone into a sour truth: we often fake our worship. Consequently, we must check the posture of our hearts by remembering God’s superiority and sovereignty.

The Preacher calls several things to our attention. He commends drawing near to listen humbly rather than thoughtlessly offering the “sacrifice of fools” (v. 1). He encourages us to be mindful in our commitments and vows, knowing that we cannot predict the future or make good on hasty promises (v. 4-6). And he concludes by cautioning us against trusting in words and dreams, calling us instead to simply fear God (v. 7). In short, our coming before God must be pure because He is worthy of genuine worship.

Both Jesus and the Old Testament prophets echo the Preacher’s points. They decry loud praying in the temple to highlight one’s piety and making haphazard vows before God without the intention to keep them (Matt. 5:33-37). These problems continue to color our worship today. We worship based on style instead of focusing on our Savior; we gather to socialize with others more than we do to seek God’s face; we make vows and commitments to Him in hopes that He will change our circumstances. Ecclesiastes reminds us that we all struggle with the same underlying heart condition: our pride and self-love consistently gets in the way of our worship.

Fortunately, the Preacher points us to a cure. We must “fear God”—rightly recognize who God is and honor Him by immersing ourselves in His Word. The more we do this, the more we come to know His character and His preeminence in all things. The better we come to know Him, the more we are awakened to our sin and our great need for Him. And

the more cognizant we are of our sin, the less likely we will be to trifle with God through pretending or bartering. If we earnestly seek Him, He promises to conform us to His perfect likeness.

Although scientists have not discovered a way to turn fake diamonds into real ones, God has long been redeeming and restoring disingenuous people who desire to walk in His Way. The Preacher points to our perpetual problem of “self” and how it keeps us from a right relationship with God, but the transforming work of Jesus is steady and able to turn our lives and our worship back to Him.

BEGIN

Have you ever been tricked by deceptive advertising to order a bad product or service? How did you feel when you learned something was not as it was portrayed to be?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts. What stands out to you?

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 emphasizes the importance of careful and sincere speech and having a proper heart when we approach God. How does this passage challenge our posture toward worship? How can we cultivate reverence and attentiveness in our communication with God?

2. What does Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 tell us about making hasty vows to God? How can we be more faithful in our commitments?

3. Read Psalm 33:8 and Psalm 111:10. Using those as comparisons, what does it mean in Ecclesiastes 5:7 when the Preacher tells us to “fear God”?

WORD STUDY

אָרַי (yare) “fear”

verb, imperative: to fear, be afraid; to be feared, be honored; awesome.

[see Prov. 1:7; Eccl. 5:7]

elsewhere: The Scriptures use this word to speak both of our posture (see Josh. 4:14, “they stood in awe [yare] of him”) as well as God’s character (see Ex. 15:11, “Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome [yare] in glorious deeds”).

4. Does your understanding of the “fear of God” make you be more devoted to him or reluctant to approach him?

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

True In Our Devotion. Ecclesiastes reminds us that our worship and our walk with God is not about our works, nor is it about the beauty or piety of our words. Our worship is contingent on our hearts. Think of poverty over pride and listening over speaking, both of which refer to the posture of our hearts. Genuine worship is anchored in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24); and the life that is pleasing to Him is clothed in justice, mercy, and humility (Micah 6:8).

Righteousness More than Sacrifice. A constant and recurring theme in the Scriptures is that the Lord desires righteousness more than sacrifice and for His people “to listen more than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22, Prov. 21:3). God longs for us to walk with Him throughout the week instead of just visiting Him on the weekends and going through the motions. While the idea of vowing may feel unfamiliar to

6 WISDOM & WEALTH

Few of us would consider wealth to be “meaningless.” Conversely, most of us would view wealth as an answer to prayer. We glorify wealth, celebrate it, envy it, and even pine for it. We assume that “to have is to be happy”, and that to have more is to be happier still. On the other hand, Ecclesiastes challenges our assumptions about success, wealth, and what makes us happy. It spotlights the reality that things we often look to and long for are finite and won't satisfy the deeper longing of our souls.

In this section of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher highlights the futility of wealth and wisdom. He begins by acknowledging that we live in a world where greed is the norm, leaving others poor, oppressed, and longing for justice (Eccl. 5:8-9). He describes how our world's appetite for more is never satisfied (Eccl. 6:7) and how even words and wisdom fail us because they cannot predict or secure our future (Eccl. 6:10-12). Like everything else, the Preacher has found that wealth, too, is ultimately meaningless. It cannot keep us from earthly troubles or secure our eternity.

This raw acknowledgement makes Ecclesiastes very relevant today. Ecclesiastes's ancient wisdom meets so many of our modern laments like our culture's cry for justice, our disgust over corporate greed, our grief over human poverty, and our concerns with consumption and sustainability. Ecclesiastes 5 and 6 speak right to the heart of these issues, calling us to find contentment in God and His gifts rather than trusting wealth.

The Preacher cautions us against the allure of wealth, saying that it is better to enjoy what God has given than to constantly pine for more (Eccl. 5:18-20). Our natural posture toward wealth is to want more of it, even if we can't take any of what we gain with us into the next life. The Preacher follows his call to be satisfied with God's gifts with the call to rejoice in the eternal. Ecclesiastes acknowledges what is written across all Scripture: the most important things on this earth aren't material! Albert Einstein put it another way: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

Ultimately, Ecclesiastes prefaces Paul's wisdom in the New Testament where he reminds us that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6-10). As disciples of Jesus, we are to view Christ as our greatest treasure, to be rich in good deeds (1 Tim. 6:18), and to store up treasures in heaven rather than coveting and storing up treasures on earth (Matt. 6:19-21). Ecclesiastes calls our hearts upward instead of outward, to the love of God and not to wealth.

BEGIN

We all have a natural propensity towards wanting more. How would you describe your outlook about wealth?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. According to Ecclesiastes, what are some of the limitations associated with wealth and even wisdom?

2. In what ways does the Preacher describe the insatiable nature of our world's appetite for more?

3. How does Ecclesiastes address issues of justice, greed, poverty, and consumption that are relevant in our modern society?

4. Read Matthew 6:19-20 and explain the ways in which Ecclesiastes finds its fulfillment in the teachings of Jesus about wealth. (*See Word Study on next page*)

WORD STUDY

נֶפֶשׁ (nephesh) “appetite”

noun, common: life, breath, living being; soul, appetite, craving or desire. [see Gen. 1:30, Ps. 78:18]
'Nephesh' is one of the more complex words in the Hebrew language; however, its use to describe life and breath while simultaneously describing appetite and desire is significant. Scripture is seeking to help us see how the deepest cravings seem to be tangibly part of us; but we know the cravings of the body cannot satisfy our souls.

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Fleeting Nature of Wealth. We are quick to look to the material security of wealth. Living in the physical world with physical bodies, it's hard not to trust the physical. Even still, the Scriptures repeatedly remind us of the fleeting nature of this world and that wealth cannot satisfy our souls or secure our futures. Jesus Himself reminds us of how temporal our fortunes are (Matt. 6:19-20), calling us to lay up treasures in heaven instead. To that end, Ecclesiastes reminds us that wealth is easily lost; that it can be saved up but not taken into eternity; and that one day our greatest treasures will be handed to others. Our calling, then, is to put our hope and trust not in wealth but in God alone who graciously provides for our good and our enjoyment (1 Tim. 6:17).

Desire, Craving, and Our Soul's Deepest Need. We have all hungered for something to the point that we *feel it* in the depths of our bones. Recall the word study for this week: *nephesh*. The Scriptures remind us that we are not disjointed creatures: our bodies, minds, thoughts, and emotions are interconnected. The world tells us to listen to our desires and that feeding them will lead to happiness and discovering “your truest self”. In contrast, the Scriptures tell us that chasing these physical yearnings will only make us yearn more. The physical will

never satisfy the spiritual needs of our souls. Ultimately, Ecclesiastes cautions against living a life driven by our appetites (Eccl. 6:7-9). God has promised us a better life and better way that comes when we look to Him (Gal. 5:16-24). Steeped in sin, our desires will always lead us astray; but when we look to Him we find the life that is truly life (1 Tim. 6:19) and the strength to resist that which cannot bring us lasting hope and joy.

REFLECT & APPLY

1. Why is it that the Bible talks so much about wealth?
2. Reflecting on your relationship with money do you find yourself being a spender, a saver, an accumulator; generous or a bit greedy?
3. Write down some areas that your spending, giving or saving might be out of line with what the scriptures teach. Take some time to prayerfully look over your budget and make commitments to be more inline with what scripture says about wealth. If you're married, do this exercise together, and pray over your next right steps in getting your budget on track with God's values.

THE PROBLEM OF SIN

Perhaps the most disheartening feeling in the world is when we try our hardest to meet the mark and yet we fail anyway. Whether it's missing the mark at school or at work or falling short in a relationship, it's easy to feel frustrated with our inadequacies or wrestle with the weight of seemingly impossible demands. Either way, these moments are a stinging reminder that we are neither the people we want to be nor the people we ought to be. We are limited and flawed, a message written across the whole of Scripture.

Ecclesiastes 7 explores and exposes this tension. Whereas the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes explored the futility of things (wealth and work, pleasure and possessions), the middle portion of Ecclesiastes exposes the futility of our own folly and desire. Through proverbs and poetry, the Preacher notes that it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than the song of fools (v. 5); that the patient spirit is better than the proud (v. 8); and that anger and looking to the past is not the way of wisdom (v. 9-10). Though seemingly disconnected, the Preacher uses all these things to point to the futility of our own thinking, entreating us once again to consider the work of God and trust not in our own righteousness but in His (v. 13, 16-18).

The contrasting nature of these proverbs can be confusing for modern readers, but the Preacher is imploring us to live a life sobered to righteousness. For example, when the Preacher says “the mind of the wise is in the house of mourning but the mind of fools is in the house of mirch” (i.e. “pleasure”) (Eccl. 7:4), he is arguing that a sober view of life is better than one steeped in selfish pleasure and carousing. Sober-minded living calls us to rejoice when prosperity comes but to hold it loosely because God has made the day of adversity as well (v. 14). Far from cynicism or fatalism, the Preacher is calling for a confidence that God is sovereign and in control of each day. We are meant to take life in each of its seasons and to pursue God in all of them.

Our trust in God and His righteousness is made all the more necessary by our fallen nature. We all are prone to wander and sin (Eccl. 7:20). It is here that the Preacher foreshadows Paul's teachings in Romans, reminding us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and that, though we were created upright, we have “sought out many schemes” (Eccl. 7:29). Simply put, our lives will always fall short of God's holy standard.

So how can the Preacher commend a life of righteousness if, at our core, we all fall short? What hope do we have? We have the hope of Jesus. Christ came so that all who fall short of the glory of God might

find righteousness through Him. He did not come so that we could live recklessly in our sin, but rather that we might be freed from it and given the strength by His Spirit to walk away from it.

We need not live feeling deflated by our inability to live the perfect life; Christ has already done that for us. We need only to believe that He is who He says He is and accept that His sacrifice on the cross has truly paid for our sins. When we place our faith in Him, the Scriptures promise we are forgiven of all of our sin (1 John 1:9).

May Ecclesiastes 7 remind us of our call to be wise, but may it equally humble us in the midst of our striving to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

BEGIN

Share a personal experience where failure played a role in your life. How did it impact you, and what lessons did you learn from it?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 7, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. How does the author of Ecclesiastes describe the value of wisdom and its advantages over foolishness?

2. According to Ecclesiastes 7:5-6, why is it better to heed the rebuke of the wise rather than the praise of fools?

3. What does the author mean by the statement in Ecclesiastes 7:29, “God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes”?

4. Ecclesiastes 7:20 says that no one is righteous on earth. Read Romans 3:23-26, How does this help give a complete understanding of man’s need and God’s plan?

5. Where do you see the problem of sin revealed in this chapter?

WORD STUDY

סָכָל (sākāl) “fool, foolish”

adjective: fool, foolish; to lack moral or spiritual sense.

[see Eccl. 2:19; Jer. 4:22, 5:21]

elsewhere: Jeremiah uses this word to speak of a people who refuse to listen to God (Jer. 4:22, 5:21). This word is used of those who act out of fear or place their confidence in themselves rather than in God. David foolishly took a census to assess his military strength instead of trusting in God (2 Sam. 24:10; 1 Chron. 21:8).

6. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 7 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

The Universality and Totality of Sin. Ecclesiastes 7 is a grim and sobering reminder that no one stands outside of sin. The Scriptures teach that we were all steeped in sin from birth (Ps. 51:5); that no one is righteous, not even one (Ps. 14:3); and though we were created to

be with Him, we have all departed from God (Isa. 53:6; Eccl. 7:29). Even the great heroes of faith throughout the Bible are shown to be flawed and sinful people. The lone exception to sinfulness is Jesus. Conceived in Mary's womb by the power of God, Christ was sent into the world to stand in our place, bear our burdens, and atone for our sins as the perfect, sinless, and spotless lamb of God.

Sober-Minded Living. Ecclesiastes is a poignant reminder to “live between the mountain and the valley”. We should neither cling to the highs nor despair in the lows but look to God in all things and take each season and circumstance as it comes. When our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we learn to live with gratitude and appreciate the good without clinging to it, trusting in it or depending on it. Equally, by keeping our eyes on Him, we need not despair during seasons of difficulty and suffering, knowing that He is Sovereign over all, and one day He will wipe every tear from our eyes as we are welcomed into heaven with Him (Rev. 21:4). As Paul says in Philippians 4, in Christ we can learn to be content in every circumstance (v. 11-13).

REFLECT & APPLY

1. Where have you seen sin impact the world we live in? How have you been impacted by sin? How have you dealt with the impact that sin has on your life and how your sin has impacted others?

2. Sin always has an impact. We have been hurt by others' sin and our sins have hurt other people. This week focuses on forgiveness. Write down who you need to forgive or commit to asking someone you have wronged to forgive you. Ask for His help in seeking forgiveness or in giving it to someone else.

THE WICKED & THE RIGHTEOUS

As much as we wish we could be in control, we know we are not. Though we get to vote for our chosen candidates, we have no power over kings or the kingdoms they control. We try to schedule and plan, but we have no control over today or whether there will even be a tomorrow. And even though we long to see justice, we cannot implement it or control the wicked. Much of maturity is accepting how little we control.

We find the Preacher wrestling with these things in chapter 8 of Ecclesiastes. He observes the power of kings and their open-ended jurisdiction. God puts them in charge (v. 2) and “who may say to them, ‘What are you doing?’” (v. 4). He laments that we cannot foresee what’s coming (v. 7) or control the length of our days (v. 8). Evil runs rampant, the wicked prosper, and justice is often delayed or denied (v. 11-12). Worse still, the righteous often suffer while the wicked are rewarded (v. 14). So much of life is simply beyond our control; even wisdom is insufficient (v. 16-18). The Preacher’s observations may seem fatalistic, but there’s a silver lining.

The reality is that the Preacher determines the best response is to rest in God and cast all our questions and burdens on Him. What appears to be a passive “giving up” is actually an act of “trusting in”. He argues that it’s better to keep God’s commands and pursue wisdom (v. 5), trusting Him with all that we cannot control. Though the wicked *seem* to prosper in this life, it is better to honor God than live for yourself because God will judge in the end (v. 12-13). And we may think that knowledge is power, but the more we study, the more we realize how little we understand. It is best to trust in God and rest in His goodness, leaving the mysteries of life in His hands (v. 14-17).

Ultimately, Ecclesiastes 8 beautifully complements God’s heart as recorded in Isaiah:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

God can be trusted with what is ahead, and He can be trusted to do what is right in the end. For those of us following Jesus, we need look no

further than His life and sacrifice on the cross as proof of that promise. Knowing our need, God sent His Son—and He will send Him once again.

BEGIN

Are you a rule follower or a rebel? What is your general posture when it comes to authority?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 8, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. What does the author mean by the statement in Ecclesiastes 8:6, “For there is a time and a way for everything”? How does this idea relate to the author’s perspective on life and the pursuit of meaning?

2. What does Ecclesiastes 8:8 tell us about our ability to control things? Does this bring encouragement or discouragement?

3. Why does it matter how we live our lives if both the righteous and wicked will have the same fate?

4. What does Ecclesiastes 8:17 tell you about God's plan and people's perspective?

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 8 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Respect for Rulers. The Preacher begins chapter 8 with a strong call to “keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him” (Eccl. 8:2). This is a common theme in Scripture since God consistently calls His people to respect authority because rulers have been put there by God; we are obliged to respect even when we don’t like or agree with our rulers. While facing an evil ruler who was persecuting Christians, Peter called the church to “honor the Emperor” (1 Pt. 2:17). Nothing happens outside of God’s sovereign will. Scripture is clear: God is the one who puts kings into place and removes them (Dan. 2:21). As Paul says in Romans, “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). To hate, oppose, or demonize those whom God has put in place over us is to ignore the call of Scripture on our lives. Instead, Scripture teaches us to trust God’s sovereignty; respect authority knowing that He is in control; and to love and pray for those who persecute us.

Inequity, Injustice, and God’s Sovereignty. Ecclesiastes 8 wrestles with the tension of seeing the righteous receive what the wicked deserve and the wicked receive according to “the deeds of the righteous” (Eccl. 8:14-17). Scripture is clear that this world is not as it should be: injustice abounds, and the wicked often seem to win. It is a consequence of the Fall—our rebellion against God and the brokenness of all things as a result. But the Scriptures also promise that God will right every wrong and restore what has been broken. Judgment will come, and “it will not be well with the wicked” (Eccl. 8:13). All things will be subjected to Jesus (1 Cor. 15:24-28); the wicked will be judged and the righteous will be rewarded (Rev. 20:11-15). It is beyond our ability to try to understand why God allows certain

things to go unpunished or why He waits when we think He should work (Eccl. 8:16-17). Instead, we must trust in God's sovereignty and in the promise that He will honor those who put their faith in Him (Eccl. 8:13).

REFLECT & APPLY

1. What is your understanding of God's sovereignty? Do you find peace or challenge with this idea?

2. Read Psalms 33. After reading, turn its words and concept into a personal prayer addressed to you. Write that prayer down to help you remember it.

A COMMON DESTINY

Are you a big “preparer”? Some of us prepare more than others. Some of us have the month calendared, our emergency contact list updated, a supply kit ready, and our will in order. Some of us don’t even have a to-do list for tomorrow... Regardless of how much or little we prepare for things in this life, Ecclesiastes reminds us that we are all hastening out of this life and into the next one. Ecclesiastes chapter 9 recaps how we should think about it.

We see a lot of familiar themes from earlier in the book in Ecclesiastes 9:1-12. The Preacher once again touches on the problem of sin, the inevitability of death, and his prescription for response. Consider the comparisons in the table below.

| TOPIC | PREVIOUSLY IN ECCLESIASTES | ECCLESIASTES 9 REEMPHASIS |
|--------------|---|---|
| SIN | “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” (Eccl. 7:20) | “...the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live...” (Eccl. 9:3) |
| DEATH | “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.” (Eccl. 7:1) | “It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean...” (Eccl. 9:2) |
| OUR RESPONSE | “...there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.” (Eccl. 3:12-13) | “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.” (Eccl. 9:7) “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Eccl. 9:11). |

A closer look at Ecclesiastes reveals many other parallels between this passage and the overall direction of the book's philosophizing. It reinforces the larger themes about the gravity of sin, the certainty of death, and how we best live our lives acknowledging those things. The sum of the Preacher's wisdom is that life is a gift from God, and we should enjoy it without making light of it. It was the best the Preacher could determine how to live at the time. Fortunately, Christ has a very different prescription and response to sin and death, and so should we.

Ecclesiastes emphatically confirms and amplifies the significance of what Jesus did. Because Christ lived perfectly and paid the price of sin on our behalf, we don't have to die under the penalty of sin.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but
have eternal life. (John 3:16)

At the time, the Preacher didn't know the hope of Christ, but we can read Ecclesiastes through that lens with joy instead of defeat!

Jesus also adds more to the Preacher's entreaty that we live well: He clarifies the mission that we are to *go* and *make disciples of all nations* (Matt. 28:18-20). God desires that *all* would come to Him in repentance (2 Pet. 3:9), and we the Church are the primary instrument God uses to enact His will on the earth. Life is hardly futile when we have been given so great a mission and so beautiful a hope.

We should acknowledge the Preacher's wisdom—that our time is limited—and add the hope of Christ to it, that we might be quick to respond to our sin with repentance, intentional in making the most of every opportunity for Christ, and focused on His mission. We all face a common destiny, but how blessed it is that the destiny of a believer is an eternity in heaven with Him!

BEGIN

Do you consider yourself a planner or more of an improviser?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-12, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. What is the same common fate of everyone according to Ecclesiastes 9:1-12?

2. How does the author's view of the brevity and uncertainty of life challenge common societal notions of success and achievement? How can this perspective influence our own pursuits and priorities?

3. In light of the author's observations about the unpredictability of outcomes and the role of chance in Ecclesiastes 9:11, how can we find meaning and purpose in our endeavors?

4. How can we understand the statement in Ecclesiastes 9:5 about death and consciousness in light of other biblical passages that address the topic? Consider the following Scriptures: John 5:24-29, Luke 20:37-38 and Revelation 21:4-15.

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Life Happens. We want to believe that if we do what is right, good will prevail, and we'll be spared from struggle and suffering. But, in a way, Ecclesiastes 9 reminds us that "life happens". Everyone faces difficulty, and the same struggles happen "to the righteous and the wicked, the good and the evil" (Eccl. 9:1-2). That is the reality of life on this side of heaven. We live in a fallen world that doesn't always make sense, and the same fate (death) awaits us all. So we should live not for this life but for the next one. Scripture is clear about eternity: those who do not fear God will be eternally separated from God, but the righteous will be rewarded in heaven (Rev. 20:11-15). Knowing this, the Preacher calls us to live a right and righteous life before God (Eccl. 9:8) while enjoying the good gifts He has given us here during our short time on earth (Eccl. 9:7).

The "Good" of Work. Oftentimes, we think of "work" as pointless and laborious, something from which heaven will rescue us. But this is not the Biblical perspective of work. From the beginning, God invited us to work the Garden (Gen. 2:15). Work came before the Fall and was not a consequence of it. Rather, sin would make work difficult, but work itself is a part of our created calling. We work because we were made in God's image, and we honor Him when we work. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." Paul echoes this sentiment in the New Testament, saying: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23-24). Our work should never be our identity or security. However, what we do and make can bring glory to God and reflect His goodness to the world. Our work matters and is not in vain, and it is part of our participation in His Kingdom-building. By keeping our eyes on Jesus and anchoring our lives in Him, the "vanity" of work is redeemed, and we can find purpose in the careers God has given to us.

REFLECT & APPLY

1. What strategies do you and people around you use to try to control the uncertainties of life?

2. Identify one or two ways to help you cultivate a mindset and lifestyle rooted in an eternal perspective while also cherishing the temporary blessings and joys of life on earth. Write them down and practice them this week.

10 TRY & TRUST

“Life’s not fair: deal with it.” Ever heard it? More still, ever wondered *why* life is so unfair? We naturally get angry when people get punished for doing the right thing or even rewarded for doing the wrong thing. It begs the question: why worry about doing the right or wrong thing when the consequences seem random? Of course, Ecclesiastes has plenty to say about the themes of this passage—foolishness, unfairness, and generosity—all while pointing us to something greater.

Toward the end of Ecclesiastes 9, the Preacher concedes that wisdom is often unrecognized or easily lost. We see it with the poor, wise man who delivers a city under siege by his wisdom; after the people are safe, they forget about him (Eccl. 9:13-16). The Preacher also observes that people sometimes outright ignore wisdom, and that our reputations can be undone by just a little bit of folly (Eccl. 10:1). Even so, the takeaway is that “wisdom is better than might” (v. 9); it is still better to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord, even when the world does otherwise.

Ecclesiastes 10 expands more on foolishness and unfairness. According to the Preacher, fools have a way of making their foolishness known to everyone else (v. 3). Fools often fall out of favor with authority (v. 4), bring trouble on themselves through their own works (v. 8-9, 15), bring destruction with their words (v. 12-14), and bring trouble on others with their foolishness (v. 16-17). Although we might expect that foolish actions directly lead to consequences, the Preacher also adds that life is unfair (v. 5-6) in that God sometimes allows the world to operate in ways we don’t understand (Eccl. 11:5). While acknowledging the vanity, frustration, foolishness, and unfairness, the Preacher also follows-up these passages with his response.

We are to trust God fully with everything. We read earlier when studying Ecclesiastes 8 that we can trust God to bring the wicked to justice. Ecclesiastes 11 goes even further with a follow-up call to “cast your bread upon the waters” (Eccl. 11:1); this is widely interpreted as an appeal for generosity. We should trust God to provide and protect us and try to do good even when life is unpredictable and unfair. We should also try to be wise with the things God has given us because we don’t know what the future holds (v. 6).

When we combine Ecclesiastes’s wisdom with Jesus’s ministry, we can mix the call to live generously with the hope of the gospel in Christ Jesus. If Christ is the ultimate gift—the one thing in the world most worth giving—our hearts should yearn to be radically generous with Him. The imagery of sowing and reaping also falls in line with this.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:7-10)

Ultimately, we should respond to all of life's trials and triumphs with trust in God, relying on His provision to protect us. We should let the hope of Christ drive us to be abundantly generous with His message. No matter what comes, we can cast our bread on the surface of the waters for the same reason we can cast all of our sins on Him: Jesus Christ has made the meaningless life meaningful again.

BEGIN

What does it mean to have a limited vantage point in your life? How accurate would you describe your perspective of reality?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 9:13-11:6, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. Ecclesiastes 9:13-16, presents a parable about a poor but wise man who saves a city from destruction. What lessons can be drawn from this parable regarding the value of wisdom and its impact on outcomes in life?

2. Ecclesiastes 10:2-3 provides several examples of the consequences of foolishness and lack of discretion. What principles can we learn from these examples about the importance of wisdom?

3. According to Ecclesiastes 10:4-7 is life fair? Have you ever struggled with this issue before?

4. Read Galatians 6:7-10 Does this passage contradict what you read in Ecclesiastes or bring a more complete understanding to what the Preacher said in Ecclesiastes?

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 9:13-11:6 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

Wisdom Better than Folly. Ecclesiastes echoes the dominant message of the book of Proverbs by teaching that wisdom is better than folly (Eccl. 9:11-18). Throughout the Scriptures, “wisdom” is always associated with walking in reverence of God and in light of His commands (Prov. 1:7, 2:6). In contrast, “folly” is living according to your own judgment and desires (Prov. 18:2). King Solomon serves as one of the greatest cautionary tales in Scripture concerning the contrast between wisdom and folly. In spite of being given

tremendous wisdom by God, Solomon chose to abandon God's commands and follow his desires (1 Kings 11:1-8), ultimately tarnishing his legacy and leading to the ruin of the nation. As followers of Jesus, we are to be directed by the Word of God instead of the desires of the flesh, trusting the promise that His Spirit will bring life and peace, knowing that the flesh will only result in bondage and brokenness (Rom. 8:6; Col. 3:1-17).

Work vs. Sloth. As we covered in our previous session, work is not a curse or consequence of the Fall but rather a holy calling and partnership with God in His creation (Gen. 2:15). We reflect God when we work, taking up His very example and creative spirit. This is precisely why Scripture speaks so strongly against “sloth” (Eccl. 10:18). Sin leads us to view work selfishly (for “me”, for gain, for personal glory) as well as leading us to despise and avoid it (see Prov. 21:25). In contrast, Scripture calls us to work diligently as if for the Lord (Col. 3:23-24), providing for our families and those in need (1 Tim. 5:8) instead of being slack and idle (Prov. 18:19). We do not work to prove anything about ourselves; but when we work—and work diligently—we reflect something beautiful about God. As the Preacher says, “He who observes the wind will not sow” (Eccl. 11:4). So let us give ourselves wholly to the Lord, glorifying Him in our work and trusting Him with the results.

REFLECT & APPLY

What characteristics would you use to define someone who is wise? Can you recognize any of those characteristics in yourself? Are there any you would like to grow in?

Ask God to help you grow in the areas you have identified. Let a faithful friend know of your desire to grow in wisdom.

Think of someone who you think is a wise person. Write them a note or shoot them a text letting them know that you value this quality in them.

FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

Few people in our culture are as celebrated as Hollywood “A-Listers”. From the world’s perspective they have it all: success, fame, fortune, position. But as the old saying goes, “not all that glitters is gold”. Having reached “A-List” status himself, actor and comedian Jim Carrey famously lamented: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and have everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”³ Like the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, Carrey ultimately discovered that glory simply wasn’t enough.

Over the last eleven chapters we have journeyed along with the Preacher as he explores the meaning of life and living. We have watched as he pursued pleasure and possession, work and wisdom; and yet at every turn he found himself empty once again. Now, in the same way that he began, Ecclesiastes closes with a familiar refrain: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (Eccl. 12:8).

While it is tempting to view Ecclesiastes as a “depressing book”, we must not miss the Preacher’s ultimate point: though so much in life can *seem* hollow and meaningless, God can bring meaning and purpose to those who put their trust in Him.

In spite of everything that has failed and disappointed, the Preacher calls us not to despair but to trust: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of man” (Eccl 12:13). Fear in this context does not mean “to be terrified” but rather “to revere” or “to honor”. Though youth is fleeting and fades; though careers eventually come to an end; though fortune cannot be kept; and evil and difficulty always seem to remain: in Christ we are rescued from the hopelessness of it all and promised a life that is *truly* life (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

Never before has a generation had access to so much, wanted for so little, yet despaired so deeply. We know so much about the world, but we do not know why we are in it. But the Preacher points us to the remedy: stop looking to the world to satisfy your soul and rest in Jesus instead. We can rest in the knowledge that He will bring every deed into judgment, right every wrong, and fix all that is broken (Eccl. 12:14). And it is precisely that knowledge that gives the Preacher the courage to tell us to enjoy what God has given us and treat life as a gift.

Ecclesiastes, far from leaving us heavy, invites us to live free. As followers of Jesus we can embrace that invitation knowing that Jesus has overcome.

³ Stone, J. “Carrey’s been busted—being rich not the answer.” The Ottawa Citizen, 16 December 2005, p. F2.

BEGIN

Do you trust people easily or are you a bit suspicious of others? What qualities make someone trustworthy?

READ

Read Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14, paying attention to key themes, words, repetition, actions, and contrasts.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

1. According to Ecclesiastes 11:7-8, what does the writer encourage the reader to do? How does this relate to the theme of uncertainty in life?

2. What does Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 suggest about enjoying life while being mindful of future judgment?

3. How can we strike a balance between embracing joy and pleasure in life while remaining aware of our accountability to God?

4. In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, what is the ultimate conclusion or summary of the book of Ecclesiastes? How does the writer's perspective on life relate to the fear of God?

5. Where do you see the grace of God in this section of Ecclesiastes?

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

Consider the message of Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14 in light of the rest of Scripture and how it supports and reveals the following themes.

The Emptiness of Life Apart from Jesus. Ecclesiastes points us to the reality that there is no life apart from God. Consider what Jesus's own disciples declared: in the wake of people turning from Him, Jesus asked, "Do you want to go away as well?" to which Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:67-68). Ecclesiastes observes that if we look to anything other than God, we find ourselves wanting for more. It is all "vanity" apart from Him. Yet in Him there is the promise not only of eternal life but of strength, peace, joy, and hope even in the midst of this life! In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), but apart from Him we are nothing and have nothing.

The Reality of Judgment and a Holy Judge. Like a judge rapping their gavel on the bench, the book of Ecclesiastes closes with the Preacher's official findings after considering all the evidence: "all has been heard" and now for the verdict: "Fear God and keep His commands... For God will bring every deed into judgment" (Eccl. 12:13-14). The Scriptures are clear that God will judge the living and the dead (Ps. 96:13; Rev. 20:11-15). For those who have walked with God there is nothing to fear, but for those who have not, the Scriptures call us to return from our wandering (Is. 55:6-7). Because God is righteous and holy, we can rest assured that His judgments will be right and that He will redeem all that is and has been broken. Until then, Ecclesiastes assures us that if our lives are rightly focused on Him, we can enjoy life as a gift from our Creator (Eccl. 11:7-10).

REFLECT & APPLY

1. Pursuing even seemingly good things apart from God is ultimately done in vanity. Reflecting on the book of Ecclesiastes, what are some things people look to find satisfaction in?

2. Do you have a tendency to look for meaning in financial security, lives experiences or from the approval of others? How does fearing God set all these things in their rightful place?

3. Read Psalms 1:1-6 write down any reflections about it you might have. Commit to memorizing all 6 verses this week.