

LEADERS GUIDE


WISDOM

ECCLESIASTES:
DISCERNING LIFE'S PURPOSE

A stylized magnifying glass with a white handle and a light blue frame is positioned over the letter 'Q' in the word 'WISDOM'. The lens of the magnifying glass is filled with a pattern of small, light blue dots, mirroring the background pattern of the central section.

JOHN D. MORRISON

A RESOURCE OF LAKEWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH

Lakewoodlife.org
DR. TOM SMILEY, SENIOR PASTOR

Ecclesiastes

Discerning Life's Purpose

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Ecclesiastes: Discerning Life's Purpose

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Published by Lakewood Press

Lakewood Baptist Church

2235 Thompson Bridge Road

Gainesville, Georgia 30506

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A Letter from the Senior Pastor

Greetings! Welcome to a new year. Over the course of 2020 we are going to be learning about biblical wisdom. We all want to live wisely and we all want to make wise decisions. We all look back on moments or events in our lives and wish we would have done things differently. At times, we all wish “we knew then what we know now.” But the real question is, “How can I know the wise thing before I do it?”

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” God teaches us in his word that we should go to him for true wisdom. The writer of Proverbs says, if you want “to know wisdom and instruction,” then start here: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” In order to live a truly wise life, you and I must look first to God. The wisdom of God is often different than the wisdom of the world. Think about Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” In other words, the message of the cross of Jesus Christ is foolishness in the world’s eyes, but to Christians the message of the cross is the perfect wisdom of God. Where the world sees the death of a man, the Christian sees the depth of the love of God. Where the world sees the end of life, the Christian sees the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you want to know what true wisdom is, you must ask God. And if you want to live a truly wise life, you have to live it by God’s standards and not the world’s standards.

To live wisely before God, you must prepare yourself for how the world will push back against you. Remember what God said in 1 Peter 2:15, “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” Therefore, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5–6). To be wise in God’s eyes means to worship and honor him first, and it means to look to Jesus Christ who is God’s true wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Over the course of this year we are going to immerse ourselves as a church with God’s wisdom. I’m excited that this year there will be a new “element” in our study. Each week you will have an activity to do or a devotional to read and write your own notes. I write in my journals all the time. I encourage you to write in yours and make this a memorable year. It will be great to look back on what the Lord taught you over the course of this year, or even to pass along to your grandchildren one day. Also, we will be memorizing Scripture together as a church. Check out the book for the verses and follow along.

Will you join me on this journey to live wisely and honor God first? The title of our study is Wisdom 2020. Of course, 2020 is the calendar year of our study, but it is also a reminder that like 20/20 vision, true wisdom means “Seeing Life Clearly through the Lens of Scripture.”

May God bless you as we journey this year through the biblical theme of wisdom.

Dr. Tom Smiley

Senior Pastor

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Introduction

Ecclesiastes is a challenging book to understand. In many ways, our challenge to understand the book reflects the challenge Solomon faced as he sought to make sense of life. Ecclesiastes records Solomon's pursuit to discern life's purpose. In light of death and the many realities of life that can seem, humanly speaking, arbitrary, Solomon tries to understand what human existence is all about. In this book he captures the question that people face either implicitly or explicitly at least once in their lives: does any of this really matter?

When viewed from a human perspective, what Solomon describes as “under the sun,” life is futile. From a purely human vantage point, life is “vanity of vanities;” it is like trying to catch the wind. Vanity is not the final word of Ecclesiastes. After pursuing all the other avenues for meaning, Solomon returns to the Lord. The book concludes, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:13-14). The shift to an eternal perspective suddenly brings clarity and purpose to life on earth. Life has eternal significance when it is lived in the fear of the Lord.

Author

From the earliest Jewish interpreters of Ecclesiastes through most of Christian history, readers of Ecclesiastes have understood Solomon to be the author of this book. Solomon is never directly named in the book as its author, and so this fact along with other considerations have led some to question his authorship. There are good reasons to believe Solomon authored Ecclesiastes, and the reasons to question his authorship do not prove compelling. The autobiographical statements in the book, particularly in the first two chapters, make the most sense if Solomon wrote them.

The author is identified by the Hebrew word קהלת (*qohelet*). Various translations render this word as either “Preacher” or “Teacher.” Others will merely transliterate the word and leave it as Qohelet (pronounced ko-hell-et) in English translation. The Hebrew word shares the same root as the word for assembly, and so others will translate the word as “Gatherer” or “Convener.” It is difficult to know all the nuances this word would have had to its original Hebrew audience, but if we have in mind someone who publicly teaches a gathering of people, we are understanding the main thrust of the word. Both “preacher” and “teacher” capture this idea well.

Ecclesiastes ultimately affirms life and joy. . . but only as the end result of a ferocious struggle with the brokenness of life.

Craig Bartholomew & Ryan O'Dowd

Flow of the Book

The first chapter introduces the book. It begins with the author (1:1) and then gives the motto of the book: “vanity of vanities” (1:2). Next comes an introductory poem that sets forth some of the key themes of the book (1:3-11). The chapter concludes with Solomon explaining his project to explore the purpose of life (1:12-18).

After the introductory nature of the first chapter, the majority of the book is spent recounting Solomon's pursuit of meaning. He traces out different paths down which people search for meaning. His conclusion for each is “vanity.” For a variety of reasons, these different approaches to life ultimately prove futile. Finding meaning in them is like trying to catch the wind.

Within these middle chapters that discuss the futility of life, we find affirmations of the gift of life. In 2:24-26, 3:9-15, 3:16-22, 8:10-15; 9:7-10; 11:7-12:7, Solomon celebrates the good things that people can enjoy in life. These good things are seen as gifts from God. They can be enjoyed because God gives them to us. However, the reasons behind the distribution of these gifts remains a mystery in this life. These celebrations of God's good gifts grow stronger as the book advances.

Such commendations of the good things in life stand in stark contrast to the statements on the futility and meaninglessness of life. The tension between the brokenness of the world and the enjoyment of it cannot be resolved with “under the sun” thinking. The only way to enjoy life in this world is to affirm it as a gift from God. Human reasoning cannot make sense of the world. A merely human perspective will lead to despair, not joy. Enjoying life requires a theological perspective. Joy can only be found in this life when one understands who God is. Joy, meaning, and purpose will only be found with the fear of the Lord.

Chapter 12 concludes the book and ties the various strands of thinking together. While life in this world is futile from a human perspective, it has meaning and purpose when one begins with the fear of the Lord. Ecclesiastes ends where Proverbs begins: with the fear of the Lord (Eccl 12:13-14; cf. Prov 1:7). The fear of the Lord is the beginning and the end of God's wisdom for our lives. When we frame our lives with the proper fear of him, we find that our lives not only have meaning and purpose but that we will also have joy in the Lord.

New Testament Connection

Solomon's quest in Ecclesiastes is to discern the purpose of life. Intimately related to this concern of why we exist is the question of what it means to be human. Solomon rightly concludes that we can only understand our purpose in life—what it means to be human—in light of who God is. The fact that the Lord is the sovereign creator, sustainer, and judge of all things shapes how we live.

As we read Ecclesiastes in the context of the rest of Scripture, we are reminded that who we are as people is defined by who God is. We are made in God's image (Gen 1:27). Thus, to know ourselves we must know God. Being divine image bearers means that we are made to be in relationship with God. He made us to be in communion with him.

Sin broke the bonds of this relationship, and it took Jesus, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) to redeem us and to restore that communion. We are only able to live as we were meant to live as God's image bearers through faith in Christ. We need to be united by faith to Jesus, the perfect image of God. Only through union with Christ can we enjoy communion with God. Only as we trust in Jesus and are found in him can we be truly human.

True purpose, meaning and even joy will only be found in Christ Jesus. As we are united to him through faith and by the Holy Spirit, we will be able to live more fully as the image bearers God made us to be. We will discern life's purpose when we look to Jesus and see in him the image of God and our hope for forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. Then, we will find meaning and joy as we seek to glorify God by exalting Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.



Solomon

While Solomon is never named as the author, all of the autobiographical information in Ecclesiastes points to him as the one who wrote this book. A good place to begin the study of Ecclesiastes is with a reminder of who Solomon was. 1 Kings 1-11 recounts Solomon's life. You might consider highlighting a few of the details of his life from these passages to refresh people's memory. We do not know when Solomon wrote this book, but his reflections on life and its meaning would fit well between the Lord's condemnation of his life in 1 Kings 11:9-13 and Solomon's death.

- Who was King Solomon? What do you remember most about him?
- Look at Ecclesiastes 1:12-18. What is Solomon's goal in this book? Why was Solomon uniquely situated to seek an answer to this question?

Start with the End

Unlike English class in school, you are allowed—even encouraged—to read the end first. We need to understand the end of the book in order to read the rest of the book the right way. When you read a murder mystery a second time, knowing the end helps you see clues along the way that you missed on the first reading. In the same way, when we start with Ecclesiastes 12:9-14, we are better able to make sense of the whole book.

- Read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14.
- According to 12:11, what is the purpose of wisdom? Are these comforting images? Why or why not?
- According to 12:13-14, what's the conclusion of this book? It is essential to keep this conclusion in front of us as we read the rest of the book.

Vanity

After an initial introduction in 1:1, the author then states the motto of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). This statement is repeated at the end of the book (12:8), and together these two statements form bookends of Ecclesiastes that frame the whole message. The construction "vanity of vanities" is a translation of the way the Hebrew language creates a superlative. Think of the way the Bible uses "King of kings" to describe the fact that the Lord is the supreme king; he is the one and only ruler over all the earth. Likewise, in Ecclesiastes, "vanity of vanities" is describe what is the most vain. That is, the most futile.

The Hebrew word translated as vanity is *הֶבֶל* (*hebel*). *Hebel* means "vapor" and is used metaphorically throughout Ecclesiastes to describe the futility of life. Solomon is searching for meaning of life "under the sun," which is another key phrase of the book that means he is looking for purpose from a human perspective. He does not want to appeal to God to find meaning in life; he tries to find it in human strength. When pursued from an "under the sun" perspective, meaning and purpose in life are illusive at best. Finding them is like trying to catch the wind, "a striving after the wind" (1:14). If one will not look at life from God's perspective, then life is like a vapor. It is fleeting and futile—but this is not where Ecclesiastes ends.

Vanity (*hebel*) occurs about 38 times in the book of Ecclesiastes. This week your group has read chapters 1-4. It will be helpful to see how often Solomon uses the word just in these first four chapters.

- Consider dividing your group into four smaller groups and then assigning them each a chapter. Have them read the chapter and note any time Solomon uses the word vanity (or however their version translates it: *vanity, meaningless, futility*).
- What stands out to you about the way Solomon uses this word?

Vain Pursuits

One way Solomon uses vanity is to summarize and mark off different sections in these early chapters. Notice how he typically concludes a section with the statement that all is vanity. As Solomon seeks to find meaning in life, reflect on some of the avenues that he ultimately deemed vain.

- Another way to frame Solomon's quest is found in 1:3, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" In other words, what's the point of working so hard? What are some answers you have heard people give to such a question?
- *Pleasure* (2:1-11) — Solomon here describes his pursuit of pleasure as the purpose of his work and life. While we would all draw the line that sin is out of bounds for believers, are you ever tempted to pursue good and upright pleasures as ends to themselves? How are we tempted to live like our own security and comfort are the goals of life? How does aiming for these things miss the mark from what the Bible teaches should be our goal?
- *Wisdom* (2:12-17) — Why does Solomon say there is finally no distinction between the wise person and the fool? How would you translate these verses into a twenty-first century context? What does it look like to pursue living wisely in the world today?
- *Work* (2:18-23) — Why does Solomon consider hard work to be vain? How have you seen the vanity of toil in your life or someone you know?

Keep the Whole Book in Mind

In reading Ecclesiastes, we must keep the whole book in mind. The individual sections only make sense in light of the whole. When questions arise, return to the final chapter to hear Solomon's last word on the water.



Pleasure and Vanity

While the motto of Ecclesiastes is “vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2), Solomon balances this despair in the face of the world’s brokenness with celebrations of God’s good gifts. Five times in 2:24-26, 3:9-15, 8:10-15; 9:7-10; 11:7-12:7, Solomon calls on his readers to enjoy the good gifts God has given them. Notice particularly in these passages that Solomon recognizes the good gifts of life are from God; they can be enjoyed because he has given them. However, this enjoyment of the good things of life is tempered by the fact that we cannot often discern why some people receive them and others do not. Solomon’s advice is to enjoy what God has granted when he has granted it.

- Consider dividing your group into five smaller groups and assign the one of the following passages to each: 2:24-26; 3:16-22, 8:10-15; 9:7-10; 11:7-27. For each of these passages, ask:
 - What is the message of these passages?
 - How does it compare with 3:9-15?
 - Is the call to rejoice tempered by anything in the surrounding verses?

Turn! Turn! Turn!

Before looking at 3:9-15, we should examine the verses just before in 3:1-8. One commentator notes about these verses, “This poem is perhaps the most famous passage in Ecclesiastes. . . and perhaps the least understood.” This is either a poem of great hope or of great despair. There is little middle ground in between. As you go through the lines, you start to realize that you have little if any control over either part of the contrasting pairs. The first pair—birth and death—makes one’s lack of control apparent, and this is solidified through the rest of the verses. It is a poem of incredible despair if viewed from merely an “under the sun” perspective. However, when seen from an eternal perspective, it is a poem of great hope because these times are in God’s hand. The reality of God’s sovereign control over all things is reinforced by 3:14-15. The message that God is God, even over time and life is a word of hope.

- Who is in charge of time? Who exercises control over all that is in this world? What biblical passages support Solomon’s claim? Why is this message such good news for us?

Pleasure and Toil

As 3:1-8 spell out God’s sovereign control, 3:9 responds with the questions: does my work even matter? If God is in control over all things, what profit is there in my toil. Solomon begins his answer in 3:10, not by pointing to the worth of human endeavors, but by pointing to what God has done: God has given humans business “to be busy with.” The next few verses require a closer examination to understand this business.

- What does Solomon mean that God has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11)?

Notice how “time” connects this verse back to 3:1-8. Here again God is in control; he’s the one making things beautiful in the right time. Also, note the Lord’s goodness here in making things beautiful. Even in the midst of this broken world, we can enjoy beauty from his hand that points back to him (Ps 19:1).

- What does he mean that God has put eternity in our hearts (3:11)?

There is great beauty to enjoy in this life, and yet God has made us for something more. We were made in his image for communion with him (Gen 1:27). We can enjoy this life, but as Augustine said in his Confessions, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

- What does the limitation “yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” mean (3:11)?

Being made in God’s image does not mean that we will understand the “why” of this world. There are many questions about God’s purpose in the creation, fall, and redemption of the world that we will not understand this side of eternity.

- What advice does Solomon give in 3:12-13? How does this connect with his discussion in 3:11?

Even if we cannot know the “why” of this world, we can still receive life here as a good gift from God.

- 3:14-15 reinforce Solomon's teaching that God is in control. In light of this reality, how can you enjoy the good gifts of this world in a manner that honors God?



Rejoicing and Vanity

Our focus this week is on the final two verses of Ecclesiastes, and how these verses summarize the conclusions of the book. The book begins to draw to a close a few verses earlier in 11:8. From 11:8-12:8, Solomon reflects on the span of one's life from youth to death. 11:8 summarizes Solomon's recommended approach to life, then in 11:9-12:1 he describes youth, and he describes old age and death in 12:2-7. Solomon concludes in 12:8 with the motto of the book: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity."

- Look at Solomon's advice in 11:8. How does this verse reflect the major themes from the first two weeks of this study?
- Compare 12:8 with 1:2. Why would Solomon begin and end the book with this refrain?

The Preacher and Wisdom

12:9-10 serve as a commendation of the Preacher. While Solomon may be difficult to understand in Ecclesiastes and certainly strayed from following the Lord at points, he remains wise and taught the people much.

- Have you found Ecclesiastes to be filled with "words of delight" (12:10)?
- Why is this an important affirmation about Solomon: "uprightly he wrote words of truth" (12:10)?
- What is the purpose of biblical wisdom according to 12:11?
- In light of 12:12, what sets this book apart as worth studying among so many other books?

The End of the Matter

These final verses are the concluding message of the book, and the rest of Ecclesiastes needs to be read in light of them.

- What does Solomon describe as the whole duty of man (12:13)?
- What is the fear of the Lord? Consider how the following passages speak of this fear: Deut 6:1-5; Deut 10:12-15; Job 28:28; Ps 22:23; Ps 25:14; Ps 33:8, 18; Ps 111:10; Prov 8:13; Prov 9:10; Acts 9:31.
- How does fear of the Lord manifest itself in your life?
- How does 12:14 reinforce the duty described in 12:13? Why is this eternal perspective important for finding purpose in this life?



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