

Ecclesiastes

“Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless!”

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with this bleak exclamation of futility. Scholars generally attribute the authorship of Ecclesiastes to King Solomon, son of David, who was once one of the wealthiest men on the earth. Jewish tradition holds that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes towards the end of his life. While Solomon’s authorship is not commonly disputed, it is possible that a third party gathered together this collection of his philosophical musings into a single work.

But why might someone so successful by human standards write something so full of despair? King Solomon began his career as the wisest man in existence. His kingdom grew and flourished under God’s blessing. However, Solomon’s weakness for foreign women caused him to fall deep into idolatry, and had devastating effects on the kingdom of Israel for generations far into the future.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon provides a discourse on the futility of earthly pursuits, and the inevitable end all creatures will face: death and judgment before God. He exhorts younger generations to take joy in honest work and simple pleasures, to enjoy their youth, and to ultimately fear God and keep his commandments.

This study will provide an overview of Ecclesiastes. Each week will examine a different passage and a main theme based on that passage. In addition, each week of the study will include one or more passages from the New Testament to show the hope, purpose, and meaning that are redeemed through Jesus.

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Week 1

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Open in prayer, then sing some worship songs

Opening Questions:

1. What situations do you find the most frustrating in life?
2. How do you express frustration or despair?

Important to Know:

“Everything is meaningless.” You will find that the word “meaningless” (also translated as “vanity”) appears throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. In the following verses, Solomon, King of Israel, expresses the futility he has seen in his life. In this study, we will hear Solomon’s thoughts of the futility of life, but also discuss the redemption and hope we have in our savior, Jesus Christ.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1. What is the general tone/theme of this passage?
2. What seems to be the source of the author’s frustration?
3. What images does the author use to make his point? Describe them.
4. What does it mean that “there is nothing new under the sun” (v. 9)?
5. How could someone in a position like Solomon’s (possessing great wealth, power, fame, knowledge, personal encounters with God...) come to feel this way about life?
6. Have you seen other famous people (modern or historical) who have also arrived at similar conclusions about life?
7. Where is God mentioned in this passage?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:15-18

1. According to this passage, why did Jesus die?
2. What is the “worldly point of view” described in verse 16? How might that compare to the “futility” described in Ecclesiastes 1?
3. How does Jesus rescue us from the futility described in Ecclesiastes?

Application Questions:

1. Does life ultimately have any meaning apart from God? How does Jesus give meaning to our lives?
2. Think about different aspects of your life (daily routine, work, relationships, etc). How do they have meaning and purpose in light of Jesus’ sacrifice?

Spiritual Exercise:

Ask God to reveal to us how he is at work in the world and our lives. Write down every way you see his purpose in your daily life this week, and share with the group during your next small group.

Memory Verse:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” – 2 Corinthians 5:17

Week 2

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Sing the hymn "Take My Life and Let It Be" or the worship song "Christ Be the Center of My Life"

Important to Know:

Today's passage in Ecclesiastes focuses on work, fulfillment, and purpose. In these few verses, King Solomon reminisces on the brevity of life and the apparent futility of work in this life. His conclusion, however, is that only in God can our life's work be fulfilling.

Opening Questions:

1. What is something you have spent lots of time and effort doing?
2. What motivates you to do your work (schoolwork, chores, job, hobbies, etc)?

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

1. What is the author's attitude in the opening verses of this passage? What strong statements does he make about life and the nature of work?
2. Why does the author despair in his work? What does he state is the result of a person's work when he dies?
3. Describe what the author might be experiencing in verse 23. Paint a picture of what his life might look like according to this verse.
4. According to this verse 25, what is a person unable to do without God?
5. Why might work be futile without God?
6. What is promised for the person who pleases God? What is promised to the one who doesn't please God?

Read Genesis 1:28-31

1. What does this passage say about creation? About the sun rising and setting?

2. According to Genesis, what is man's God-given role in creation?
3. How does God describe mankind and creation?
4. How does this contrast with the perspective presented in Ecclesiastes 2?
5. Why do we experience this futility in contrast to what was intended? (hint: see Genesis 3:17-19)

Read Colossians 3:23-24

1. How should we work for according to Paul? Who are we serving?
2. What reward are we working for?
3. How does this factor into the equation of our life's work and purpose?

Application Questions:

1. Where do you find yourself working with only earthly motives in mind? Is your work fulfilling?
2. How can you work, study, and live with the purpose of pleasing God and advancing his kingdom on earth?

Spiritual Exercise:

This week, every time you go to class, study, or work, pray and dedicate your work to God and his glory; invite Jesus to be present with you and to work in you and through you.

Memory Verse:

"For without him [God], who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness" Ecclesiastes 2:25-26a

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." Colossians 3:23-24

Week 3

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Sing the worship song “Cornerstone” or the hymn “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand”

Opening Questions:

1. Tell a story about a time or situation in which you felt uncertain or fearful
2. What is your favorite time of year and why?

Important to Know:

Much of Ecclesiastes is not so much a spiritual imperative (or a statement of how we should live) as it is a honest observation of the human experience. The different seasons and varied experiences of life display the complexity of God and the beauty of his creation. Sometimes life is easy and sometimes life is difficult. We can't control everything that happens to us, but we can decide our response. The decisions we make and our response to life's circumstances are largely dictated by what we believe about God and his character.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

1. Describe the contrasting “times” the author lists in this passage.
2. What does the author say about these things in their proper context? How has God made them (v. 11)?
3. What does it mean that God has “set eternity in the hearts of men”? What does this say about how he created us/our nature?
4. What does the passage say about God's nature in verse 14? How does God's nature compare to the differing times and seasons?

Read Matthew 6:25-34

1. What is Jesus' primary command in this passage?
2. What does he command us not to worry about?
3. Why does Jesus command us not to worry?
4. What are the implications of our being valuable in God's eyes?

Application Questions:

1. What truths about God's character or nature do you need to be reminded of that will help you through a potentially fearful or uncertain situation?
2. What is a specific situation in your life right now in which you need to trust God's character in the face of fear or uncertainty?

Memory Verse:

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." Ecclesiastes 3:11

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Matthew 6:26-27

Week 4

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

As a group, spend time praying and praising God for his attributes, and thanking him for the blessings he has given you this week.

Opening Questions:

1. What injustice in the world most troubles you?
2. What is something that gives you hope every day (small or large, ordinary or extraordinary)?

Important to Know:

This week we will be reading from chapter 4 and talking about oppression and suffering. This is part of the common state of humanity. We all suffer, and we will all face some sort of oppression in our life. How do we handle the suffering in the world, either our own or that of others? Today we will examine what the Bible says about suffering, and God's comfort in the midst of sorrow. The Gospel message is meant to bring this hope amid the troubles of our lives: Jesus has conquered the worst this world has for us. Because of his death and resurrection, evil is overcome.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

1. What did the author "see" in the opening verse of this passage?
2. Who are the oppressed? Who might they be in our world? Who are their oppressors?
3. According to verse 2, who are happier than the living? Who is happier than both of them (v. 3)?
4. Why might the author be in such a state of despair?

Read John 16:33

1. What does Jesus guarantee his followers in this world?
2. What is the hope and promise that he offers in the midst of a troubled world?
3. What does it mean that Jesus has "overcome the world"? (see Romans 5:6-8)

Application Questions:

1. How does Jesus offer you hope? What specific situations do you need to be encouraged that he has “overcome the world”?
2. What would you tell a friend who is currently experiencing hardship or suffering in his/her life?

Memory Verse:

“ I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

Spiritual Exercise:

Think about how you can offer hope to someone this week. Prepare yourself to encourage those who need comfort. Ask God to pour his love into you so that you might share it and the hope it brings with others.

Week 5

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Sing some worship songs; put on some worship music and journal about God and how he has blessed you this week.

Opening Questions:

1. Tell a story about a time you needed help from another person
2. Who is someone in your life you would consider a trustworthy friend?

Important to Know:

God created people to be in relationship with himself and with each other. We need each other. This passage in Ecclesiastes paints a beautiful portrait of how humans can strengthen and encourage one another. As you study, think about the practical implications of what it looks like to live in real community.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

1. In what condition is the man that the author describes in verse 8? Describe his circumstances. How do you think he got there?
2. What emotional state is the man in?
3. What is the author's assessment of the man's condition? What adjectives does he use?
4. How have you seen loneliness affect people?
5. What does the author present as a better alternative in verses 9-12?
6. What are the benefits of relationship and community described here?

Read John 13:34-35

1. What command does Jesus give to his disciples?
2. What results when Jesus' followers love on another?

Read 1 John 3:16-18

1. How does this passage describe Christian love?
2. What does it mean to “lay down our lives for our brothers”?
3. What does it mean to love not “with words or tongue but with actions and in truth”?

Application Questions:

1. What are ways as a community of Christians that we can lay down our lives for one another? (Being generous with time and possessions, encouraging one another, holding one another accountable, praying for one another, etc)
2. What can you do to proactively seek authentic relationships and community in your life during this season?

Spiritual Exercise:

Get lunch or coffee with another member of your core group. Share with one another how God has blessed you that week, and how he is challenging you. Pray for one another’s specific needs.

Memory Verse:

“Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:12

“This is how we know what loves is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” 1 John 3:16

“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.” 1 John 3:18

Week 6

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Sing the hymn "How Great Thou Art"

Opening Question:

1. Tell about a time you saw something large and majestic (the ocean, a mountain, something really large). Describe the feelings you experienced.
2. What is something (an animal, insect, heights, etc) you are really afraid of?

Important to Know:

Today's study will cover a very important topic: reverence for God. As humans, we must not forget our position as God's creatures, subject to his authority and greatness. Part of reverence for God involves being careful in our interactions with God. When we approach God, we should not make rash or boastful claims or promises. In the Ecclesiastes passage we will study, sacrifice is referenced. This is a description of worship. We'll also discuss how we should conduct ourselves in the presence of God as Christians based on a passage in Romans.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7.

1. What is the general tone of this passage?
2. In what manner does the author command us to approach God?
3. According to verse 1, what is characteristic of fools?
4. Why might humans need to be careful when approaching God? What is true about God and what is true about humans that would warrant caution as we approach him?
5. What does this passage warn about speech? (v. 6)
6. Why might it be dangerous to be insincere in God's presence?

Read Romans 12:1-2

1. What does Paul describe as our “spiritual act of worship?” What kind of sacrifice are we to offer, and what distinguishes our worship?
2. What reason does Paul give for us to offer ourselves as “living sacrifices”? What effect should God’s mercy have on our thinking and behavior?
3. What does Paul command Christians not to do in verse 2? What does he tell us to do instead?
4. Why is it important to maintain a standard of holiness for our physical bodies?
5. Why is it important to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds”?

Application Questions:

1. How might this passage change your attitude about worship? How could you approach God with more sincerity and reverence?
2. What is something you can do to honor God with both your body and your mind?

Memory Verse:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” Romans 12:1

Spiritual Exercise:

Read and meditate on Psalm 8 this week.

Week 7

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Play music in the background and journal about God's goodness to you this week.

Opening Questions:

1. What's the worst job you have ever had?
2. Tell a story about a time you lost a lot of money.

Important to Know:

Money isn't inherently a bad thing, and neither is wealth. However, today's passage will show us the danger of being consumed with wealth. The pursuit of material gain for its own sake is ultimately unsatisfying, and all labor for money will come to nothing when the laborer reaches the end of his/her life. We'll also look to the New Testament for a Christ-centered perspective on money and wealth.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

1. What is the theme of this passage?
2. Why would someone like Solomon have lots to say on the subject of money and wealth?
3. What characterizes someone who loves money and wealth?
4. According to verse 12, what can be one consequence of wealth?
5. What is the end result of a person's material possessions? What can a person take with them when they die?
6. Alternatively, what does Solomon describe as a happier attitude and way of living?

Read Matthew 6:19-21

1. Where does Jesus tell us to store up treasure?
2. What happens to earthly treasure in contrast to heavenly treasure?

3. What is the connection between “treasure” and the heart? What does Jesus mean when he says “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”?
4. What does it mean to store up heavenly treasure?
5. How might heavenly treasure be more rewarding than earthly treasure?

Application Questions:

1. How does this passage change your view of money and material possessions?
2. How can you use your money and resources in a way that has the kingdom of heaven in mind?

Memory Verse

”But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:20-21

Spiritual Exercise:

Consider giving a sum of money to a missionary or an organization dedicated to serving the disadvantaged. Pray and ask God how you can honor him by investing your resources in the kingdom of heaven.

Week 8

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Sing the hymn "Jesus Paid it All"

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever lost something that was important to you?
2. Have you ever received something really great that you didn't expect or deserve?

Important to Know:

The tone of this passage in Ecclesiastes, like much of the book, seems bleak. Solomon unrestrainedly expresses what many of us often feel in life. It's a truth concisely stated by Benjamin Franklin, who once said, "Nothing is certain but death and taxes." Today we'll examine not only the inevitable fact of death, but also look to the gospel for the hope we have in the face of death.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-10

1. What is the "common destiny" that all share?
2. Who specifically does the author list that share this fate?
3. What is the emotional tone of the author's conclusion that all die?
4. How do you feel about life after reading this passage?
5. If all are headed to the common destiny of death, then what is the purpose of life? How should a person live if this is all there is?

BUT WAIT... THERE'S HOPE, I PROMISE!!!

Read John 3:16

1. What motivated God to do what he did for the world?
2. For whom did God send his only son?
3. What is the promise for those who believe in God's son?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

1. What does Paul describe as the future of those who believe in Jesus (v. 51)?
2. What will happen to our mortal bodies?
3. For those who believe in Jesus, what is the ultimate fate of death?
4. What is the tone of this passage in contrast to the Ecclesiastes passage?
5. How does knowing Jesus change a person's ultimate fate or destiny?

Application Questions:

1. If you are unsure of what will happen to you after death, How does Jesus' sacrifice provide an answer?
2. How does the prospect of eternity with Jesus determine how you will live your life now accordingly?

Spiritual Exercise:

Meditate on Jesus sacrifice; think about someone with whom you can share the hope of eternal life

Memory Verse:

"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!. 1 Corinthians 15:57

Week 9

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

This study is designed to guide a core group through the book of Ecclesiastes. You should expect to revise and add questions as necessary to facilitate discussion for your group.

Worship Idea:

Sing "Revelation Song"

Opening Questions:

1. What is something you have hoped or waited for? How long did you wait? If you eventually received it, how did you feel when you received it?
2. Tell about a project you worked on for a long time. What was it like when you finally finished?

Important to Know:

This study marks the end of our journey through Ecclesiastes. It is our hope that this has been a deep and rich exploration of the human experience, and how Jesus ultimately fulfills and gives meaning and purpose to our lives. As a core group leader, you should discuss with your group where this scriptural journey has led you collectively as well as individually.

Text Questions:

Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

1. What is Solomon's conclusion to the philosophical discussions he presents in Ecclesiastes?
2. What does it mean to "fear God"? Why should we fear God?
3. Why should we keep God's commandments? What benefit is there in keeping them? What are the consequences of not keeping God's commands?
4. What awaits all people at the very end of all things?

Read Revelation 20:11-15

1. Describe the scene presented in this passage. What's happening here?
2. What happens to those whose name is not written in the book of life?
3. What happens to those whose name is written in the book of life? (see Revelation 21 & 22)

4. How does one's name come to be written in the book of life? (see Romans 10:9)

Application Questions:

1. How does the concept of the fear of God determine your attitudes and actions?
2. How will you live your life differently in anticipation of Jesus' return and the knowledge that what we do in this life can affect and influence eternity?

Memory Verse:

"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." Ecclesiastes 12:14

Spiritual Exercise:

Read Revelation 21 & 22 and think about the glorious future that is in store for us.