



BIBLE STUDY
Ecclesiastes

A ST. JOHN'S BIBLE STUDY



INTRODUCTION

Real Life With A Real God

Welcome to Ecclesiastes, a book about real life with the real God. We tend to crave order, predictability, simplicity; a comfortable life. Ecclesiastes will not let us have it.

The primary perspective we encounter in Ecclesiastes comes from the words of “the Preacher,” a man who devotes his life to pursuing wisdom and answering the question: What is the purpose of it all? But the Preacher is no armchair theologian, and so he gives himself - mind, body, and soul - to the task at hand. He begins the book, famously, with what seems like the conclusion of his search: that all of life is vanity, a striving after wind. But there is more to this statement than meets the eye. Because, even though the Preacher recognizes the uncertainty of life, he also knows that God “has put eternity into man’s heart,” knowledge which leads him and us onwards in the pursuit of truth, in the fear of the Lord.

In spite of all the ambiguity and frustration of life, the Preacher asks earnest, humble questions, and that makes this a timely book in our day and age when there is so much despair and confusion about the meaning and purpose of our existence. He is not afraid to confront difficulties head on: work is never finished, wealth is never enough, justice is absent, wisdom is wasted, and death comes for us all. And yet, in acknowledging these things, the Preacher shows us why and how to live joyfully in an imperfect world, as imperfect people, in the presence of a perfect and just God.

As Christians, although we have a more complete picture of life than Ecclesiastes, we need to take the struggles of the Preacher seriously, and never lose sight of the fact that meaning is grounded in a good and sovereign God, whatever our circumstances. And not only that! This God has spoken through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Father has delivered us from sin and death. By his own death Christ triumphs over the relentless cycle of futility and death and, through his resurrection, he brings the hope of eternal life to all of life, infusing every part of our existence with purpose and meaning.

In the midst of the confusion and disappointments of life, as we wait for the coming of our Shepherd and his perfect kingdom, we confess that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again,” and we long for the day when he “will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14). May God richly bless you as you take his words in this book to heart!

Wisdom Literature

Ecclesiastes belongs to a genre called “wisdom literature.” Wisdom is an appealing concept. We want to be wise, and we want to have the power that we assume comes with wisdom. What is the pursuit of wisdom if not a desire for mastery? According to the Bible however, wisdom is not about getting ahead in life, or having control. Rather, it is about being in relationship with God, for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10). The goal of true wisdom is not power but obedience, recognizing our proper place in the universe and our utter dependence upon a holy and just God. This sets wisdom literature apart from the self-help and self-improvement culture that holds so much sway today.

Though wisdom literature is concerned with the truth, it has a particular focus on truth as it intersects with life. It is concerned with answering the question “How should I live?” But the answers given are not usually tidy answers, because life itself is not tidy. More often than not, the truths of wisdom literature are guidelines or guiding principles rather than promises or commands, requiring careful reflection. So, for example, in Proverbs 26:4, we read “answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” And then in the verse immediately following, we read “answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” Wisdom, we learn here, is discerning when one should and should not answer a fool, but the particular answer is not given to us, because that depends on the situation.

An Overview Of The Book

There are two voices of wisdom in the book of Ecclesiastes: the Preacher and the Narrator. The bulk of the book is written in the voice of the Preacher (1:2-12:8), but his wisdom is contained within a framing narrative (1:1 and 12:9-13). Because of this, many scholars think that Ecclesiastes was written in two stages, by two people, though this cannot be definitively proven. Recognizing that the Preacher's teaching is being framed within a larger perspective is important to remember as we approach individual passages, lest we misunderstand his contemplation as cynicism and despair. The Preacher's observations and teachings are insightful and important, but they are not the final words of the book, or of the larger biblical story.

Who Was The Preacher?

The Preacher (in Greek *Ecclesiastes*, and in Hebrew *Qohelet*) is identified as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem," with the very first verse of the book. Because this Preacher is both very wealthy (2:4-9) and very wise (1:16), many have been persuaded to identify him as Solomon, reflecting on his life after seeing the fruit of his idolatry in 1 Kings 11. Though it is possible that Solomon did write the bulk of the book, it is fairly unlikely (and the book itself makes no definitive claims). Our own Dr. Packer was of the opinion that the Preacher was a wise man roleplaying as Solomon, in order to make a point.

Vanity of Vanities! All Is Vanity!

The word "vanity" occurs thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes, many of them in the first half of the book. The Hebrew word *hebel*, which the ESV translates as "vanity," functions as a metaphor throughout the book, and is difficult to translate. At its most basic meaning, *hebel* is breath or vapour; something inconsequential or impermanent. In comparison with God, idols are sometimes described as *hebel* in the Old Testament, that is lacking substance or true power (e.g. Deut 32:21). The prophet Jeremiah uses the word to describe the vain or empty hope of false prophecy (e.g. Jer 23:16) in comparison with the sure promises of God. It is also not a coincidence that the first man who was ever murdered had the name Hebel (Abel in English), since his life was so short and easily snuffed out. In light of this nuance, some recent English translations have opted for "all smoke" or "merest of breath," instead of "vanity of vanities," which is helpful, especially since another phrase that the Preacher pairs with vanity is "striving after wind." Though the word *hebel* certainly has connotations of meaninglessness or futility, whenever you see the word "vanity" in Ecclesiastes, try to remember this broader network of meanings associated with the word. This will also be highlighted at certain points in the Study Notes of individual studies, when particularly appropriate.

**WORK IS NEVER FINISHED, WEALTH IS NEVER ENOUGH,
JUSTICE IS ABSENT, WISDOM IS WASTED, AND DEATH
COMES FOR US ALL. AND YET, IN ACKNOWLEDGING THESE
THINGS, ECCLESIASTES SHOWS US WHY AND HOW TO
LIVE JOYFULLY IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD, AS IMPERFECT
PEOPLE, IN THE PRESENCE OF A PERFECT AND JUST GOD.**

TABLE OF CONTENTS & OVERVIEW

The studies in this guide will focus on six specific passages from the book, highlighting major themes. It will be tremendously beneficial to read the entire book (It's not very long before you begin the studies) to get a better sense of how all the parts fit together. Here is how our series breaks down:

STUDY 1 UNDER THE SUN - 1:1-14	PAGE 5
STUDY 2 VANITY OF VANITIES - 2:1-11	PAGE 13
STUDY 3 LIFE IS PAIN - 3:1-22	PAGE 21
STUDY 4 THE PLACE OF WISDOM - 8:1-17	PAGE 29
STUDY 5 DEATH AND JOY - 9:1-12	PAGE 37
STUDY 6 ONE SHEPHERD - 11:5-12:13	PAGE 45

Here is one possible framework for the entire book, taken from Iain Provan's NIV Application series commentary:

INTRODUCTION - 1:1-11

WISDOM, PLEASURE, AND JOY - 1:12-2:26

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING - 3:1-22

ACHIEVEMENT AND OPPRESSION - 4:1-16

TRUE WORSHIP - 5:1-7

THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH - 5:8-6:12

WISDOM IS SHELTER - 7:1-12

THE UNIVERSE BEYOND OUR GRASP - 7:13-29

DEALING WITH AN UNJUST WORLD - 8:1-17

LIVING IN THE FACE OF DEATH - 9:1-12

THE WAY OF WISDOM - 9:13-10:20

THE MYSTERIOUS GOD - 11:1-8

IN THE DAYS OF YOUTH - 11:9-12:8

QOHELET WAS A WISE MAN - 12:9-14

A FEW TIPS FOR READING

- Remember that Ecclesiastes is a dialogue between belief and experience, that works towards a conclusion.
- Read bigger sections to help give you the context for a more difficult section.
- If you are struggling to understand a statement, ask yourself "In what way might this be true?"
- Some of the major themes addressed in Ecclesiastes are: death, chance, injustice, and the sense of purposelessness that arises from these experiences. How are these themes expressed and developed? What is the eventual answer to all of these issues?

**“FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS
COMMANDMENTS, FOR THIS
IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF
MAN.”**

Ecclesiastes 12:13



STUDY ONE

Ecclesiastes

STUDY ONE - ECCLESIASTES 1:1-14

Perhaps one of the oldest queries humanity asks is, “what is the meaning of life?” For millenia, answers have ranged from comedic, to philosophical, to cynical. Ecclesiastes is the Bible’s answer to what a wise life looks like. The Preacher begins his monologue in 1:2 with a poem for the ages. Rather than asking an opening question, he introduces us to the wider themes of the book, and a bird’s eye view over some of his conclusions. On display is the full grandeur of God’s creation and all its offerings of both joy and happiness, but also frustration. Ecclesiastes sometimes gets the label of being cynical or pessimistic, but that is not his intention.

PASSAGE

1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

3 What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.

8 All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?

It has been already
in the ages before us.

11 There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.

12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

STEP 1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 12

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- Repetitions
- Images/metaphors
- Commands
- Warnings
- Contrasts
- Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- Big Bible Words
- Themes from the book

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- What is the tone of the passage?
- Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- Create a heading or picture for each section
- Note key verses
- What does the structure reveal?
- What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ A few questions to consider

- What are some of the repetitions in this passage and what is their impact?
- What effect do the descriptions of natural scenes have? Especially contrasted with vv.12-14?
- The writer of *Ecclesiastes* details his credentials briefly here. What do vv.12-17 reveal about the Preacher and the nature of his search?

STEP 2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 12

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and the one that follows straight after.
- How do they impact how we understand our passage?

Ⓑ A few questions to consider

- “Life under the sun” is a key phrase in the book. What do you think it means? What role does it play in the Preacher’s argument?
- How do vv.8-9 relate to the rest of the chapter? What conclusions does the preacher seem to have made from these observations?
- What is the central argument the Preacher is trying to make in this chapter?

Ⓒ What’s the Main Idea?

Ⓓ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has revealed to you, Ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly and love him more deeply through the next steps of your study.

STUDY NOTES

WHY POETRY?

The book of Ecclesiastes is marked by constant shifts between poetry and prose. The prose presents statements directly, while the poetry gives a sense of depth and poignancy to what is being described. The purpose of poetry is to concentrate perception.

A Few Translation Notes

This chapter introduces us to two important words in Ecclesiastes:

1. The word “Preacher” (*Ecclesiastes* in Greek, and *Qohelet* in Hebrew) could mean: teacher, preacher, philosopher, class instructor, gatherer, or an observer of life.
2. The word “vanity” is used to portray temporariness. This includes ideas like: fog, mist, vapour, trying to hold air in your hands, ephemeral, fleeting, futility. The late great Dr. J.I. Packer translated this word as “fuzziness”. Life is fuzzy and aggravating, like wearing glasses of the wrong prescription all the time.

CONTEXT

Within Ecclesiastes:

- This chapter serves as an introduction to some overarching themes within the book. In 2:3 we also get a concise goal: “what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.”
- “There is nothing new under the sun.” This phrase occurs only in Ecclesiastes, and is used frequently. It is a characteristic feature of the world that can be observed and seen.

Within the Old Testament

- The Preacher’s assertion that “there is nothing new under the sun” stands in tension with how the rest of the Old Testament understands God as being the source of and ruler over creation, the one to whom nature sings and whom it glorifies (e.g. Psa 148). God seems absent in these opening verses.
- Ecclesiastes exists as one of the five wisdom books in the OT. These books are written with the goal of teaching God’s people about daily life:
 - Job teaches us how to suffer.
 - Psalms teaches us how to pray.
 - Proverbs teaches us how to behave.
 - Song of songs teaches us how to love.
 - Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live.



STUDY TWO

Ecclesiastes

STUDY TWO - ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 2:1-11

Having developed the core of his argument in chapter one, the Preacher now begins to reveal how he went about seeking answers in his search for purpose. He details the lengths to which he went, amassing every pleasurable experience humanity could offer through the heights of self-centeredness and the unlimited opportunities that came from his social standing. Meanwhile, in the background of these selfish pursuits stands the constant question “What is there to gain by all of this?” All the very best that life under the sun seems to offer is confronted by this question, and with the Preacher we are forced to face its emptiness fully and frankly.

PASSAGE

1 I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity.

2 I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?”

3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.

5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.

6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

STEP 1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 20

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- Repetitions
- Images/metaphors
- Commands
- Warnings
- Contrasts
- Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- Big Bible Words
- Themes from the book

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- What is the tone of the passage?
- Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- Create a heading or picture for each section
- Note key verses
- What does the structure reveal?
- What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ A few questions to consider

- What is the first test that the Preacher sets himself?
- What were some of the different sources of pleasure or gratification he tested?
- Who seems to be at the centre of this passage? How do you know this?

STEP 2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 20

(A) Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and the one that follows straight after.
- How do they impact how we understand our passage?

(B) A few questions to consider

- What does the Preacher seek to gain by setting upon this mission?
- Why does he reach the conclusion he does in vv.9-11? (For a fuller exploration of this theme you can also read 2:12-23).

(C) What's the Main Idea?

(D) Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has revealed to you. Ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly and love him more deeply through the next steps of your study.

STUDY NOTES

A Life of Pleasure

Verses 1-3 of chapter two serve as the Preacher's thesis statement for the first half of Ecclesiastes. He means to test, experiment, and gain as much as life under the sun has to offer.

Me, Myself, and I

Of particular importance in this passage is the overwhelming use of "I". As far as the Preacher can see at this point, all things he undertakes are of his own volition.

Let's Get Physical

Also worth noting is the use of the heart and the eyes in this passage. These metaphors help us understand the completeness with which the Preacher is seeking pleasure. It is both an outer and inner seeking; nothing has been overlooked or unobtained. The heart does not signify feelings, but rather internal desires and thoughts. His search has not been skin deep or haphazard.



STUDY THREE

Ecclesiastes

STUDY THREE - ECCLESIASTES 3:1-22

The Preacher begins the next section of Ecclesiastes (chapters 3-6) with a famous poem. It has been quoted by presidents, sung by famous musicians, loved by poets, and most often misunderstood completely. Here the Preacher tries to convey the breadth of our lives under the sun, with all of its beauty and hardship. There is a season for everything, even death. If we don't notice this and take it to heart, we are fools, confused by the state of the world and even if we do understand, what then have we actually achieved? Things still happen with or without our input, and we've contributed little. Here in chapter three the Preacher muses on God's arrangements for us, and the wickedness of humans.

PASSAGE

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

- 2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- 5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- 8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

9 What gain has the worker from his toil?

10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;

13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

16 Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

18 I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.

19 For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity.

20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.

21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

22 So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

STEP 1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 28

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- Repetitions
- Images/metaphors
- Commands
- Warnings
- Contrasts
- Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- Big Bible Words
- Themes from the book

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- What is the tone of the passage?
- Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- Create a heading or picture for each section
- Note key verses
- What does the structure reveal?
- What is the authors flow of thought?

Ⓓ A few questions to consider

- What kind of contrasts are being made in vv.1-8 and vv.9-22? Are there any that stand out for you?
- Death and the impermanence of life is a major theme in chs.3-6 How has the Preacher expressed his frustrations with the finality of death in this passage?
- Compared to previous chapters, what is different about the focus in this passage?

STEP 3. WHAT DOES IT REVEAL?

- This is the first time the Preacher talks about God at any length. What does he say about God? What does this bring to the search for wisdom and meaning?
- The next couple of chapters contain a variety of examples for how life can be both perplexing and disheartening. Why do you think the Preacher starts this section with a poem about life and death?

STEP 4. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?

- What are some current issues that give you a sense of futility about life? Does the tension between being mortal like the animals while also being sought out by God for eternity's sake discomfort you? Have you found any answers provided by the world compelling?
- We experience frustration in life all the time. Read Romans 8:18-25. What insight does Paul offer us? What difference does the resurrection make?

STUDY NOTES

Some Context

Chapters 3-6 begin the second major section of Ecclesiastes, and we only get a taste of it in this study, since the next study will jump over to chapter 8.

Several breakdowns for this section are possible, but here is one possibility:

1. God's arrangements, and the frustrations of eternity in hearts of men
2. Human wickedness, and the lack of justice
3. Human suffering, under further injustice
4. Human achievement, and its lack of use after death
5. Money and idolatry
6. Human discontent
7. The hunger for more
8. Everything is vanity

Let Him Who Is Without Sin Cast the First Stone

There isn't much agreement from the commentators about what it might mean to "cast away stones" and "gather stones together" in this poem. It is possibly about gathering stones from a field for the sowing of crops (or vexing your neighbour by tossing stones into his field!), the gathering of stones to build an altar (or the destruction of a worship site), or a vague reference to marital intimacy (or lack thereof).

The Law of Falling Bodies

The Old Testament is generally quite fuzzy in speaking about what happens after death. We know, for example, that a spirit can persist after death (1 Sam 28), and that certain people can go to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Job, interestingly enough, makes one of the clearest statements about physical resurrection (Job 19:25-26). Here in Eccl 3:21 we see one of the few explicit references to the idea of an afterlife, but there is no resolution of the matter.



STUDY FOUR

Ecclesiastes

STUDY FOUR - ECCLESIASTES 8:1-17

With this study, we're entering into a new section of Ecclesiastes, as the Preacher moves from the darkness of the first several chapters towards the light of the book's conclusion. The chapter previous to this week's study is a collection of wisdom sayings which speak about a better way of living, reminding us that wisdom does have a purpose even if the results are out of our hands. 7:5 for example tells us that "it is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools." The theme of the wise life continues in today's passage, with an emphasis on how wisdom relates to lived experience. In particular, it grapples with the question of why someone should even bother with wisdom, given all the injustice at work in the world. There are foolish and wicked people for whom it goes well, and there are wise and righteous people for whom it goes poorly. What then is the purpose of wisdom?

PASSAGE

1 Who is like the wise?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

A man's wisdom makes his face shine,
and the hardness of his face is changed.

2 I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.

3 Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.

4 For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?"

5 Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.

6 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?

8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.

9 All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.

10 Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.

11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.

13 But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

15 And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep,

17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

STEP 1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 36

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- Repetitions
- Images/metaphors
- Commands
- Warnings
- Contrasts
- Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- Big Bible Words
- Themes from the book

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- What is the tone of the passage?
- Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- Create a heading or picture for each section
- Note key verses
- What does the structure reveal?
- What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ A few questions to consider

- Is the king in vv.2-4 a just or an unjust king?
- How would you divide up this passage? Pay attention to summary statements like “All this I observed...” in v.9

STEP 2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 36

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and the one that follows straight after.
- How do they impact how we understand our passage?

Ⓑ A few questions to consider

- The short poem in v.1 introduces the rest of the chapter. What wisdom shines through in this passage and melts away our hardness of heart?
- Do you think the Preacher is commending a life of reckless pleasure in v.15? Why or why not?
- How do you understand the conclusion in vv.15-17, especially in light of the introduction in v.1?

Ⓒ What's the Main Idea?

Ⓓ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has revealed to you. Ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly and love him more deeply through the next steps of your study.

STUDY NOTES

8:2 “Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him”

Kingship in ancient Mesopotamia was always bound up with the spiritual realm. Many ancient kings claimed direct descent from the gods, which allowed them to exercise absolute authority in all matters. The biblical understanding of kingship was much more balanced, seeing the king as a servant of the Lord. Deuteronomy 17, for example, makes it clear that an Israelite king is under God’s authority, and subject to his laws. Though Scripture affirms that people should submit to human authorities, and respect their coercive powers (e.g. Romans 13:1), it is always a limited submission, done for the sake of the Lord, the one we must fully submit to.

8:4 Supreme Power?

The Hebrew word *shilton*, which the ESV translates as “supreme” in v.4, can also be translated as “power” or “authority.” The word appears only one other time in the Bible, in Ecclesiastes 8:8: “No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death.” For all the power a king might have, he is still mortal, and nothing compared to the resurrection power of King Jesus.

8:10 “They used to go in and out of the holy place...”

This verse speaks about the worst kind of hypocrisy where a willfully wicked person participates regularly in temple worship with no consequences, and is instead praised by their society.

8:15 To Eat, and Drink, and Be Joyful

This is a striking conclusion for the Preacher to arrive at, especially in light of passages like 2:1-8. From the broader context of the book, it becomes clear that what Ecclesiastes is endorsing is the enjoyment of God’s good creation through simple creature comforts, rather than hedonistic nihilism.



Ecclesiastes

STUDY FIVE

STUDY FIVE - ECCLESIASTES 9:1-12

Our passage for today confronts us with a theme that has been lurking since the book began. We've also run into it once before in Study Three. Everyone, regardless of how they live, will die, and many of us in circumstances that we don't choose. And there is a related reality which is equally difficult to bear: we have very little control over the life we do get to live. Not only are we quite frail, we are also profoundly fallible and downright foolish. Ecclesiastes' portrayal of human nature is decidedly unromantic yet in the midst of all of this, our passage points us towards hope. Even though the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, there is one who holds all of our deeds in his hands and, amazingly, he delights in us.

PASSAGE

1 But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him.

2 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, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath.

3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

4 But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.

6 Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

7 Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

8 Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

11 Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

12 For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

STEP 1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 44

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- Repetitions
- Images/metaphors
- Commands
- Warnings
- Contrasts
- Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- Big Bible Words
- Themes from the book

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- What is the tone of the passage?
- Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- Create a heading or picture for each section
- Note key verses
- What does the structure reveal?
- What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ A few questions to consider

- What different kinds of people are mentioned in this passage?
- What is the event (v.2) that everyone experiences?
- What God-ordained certainties do we find in this passage?

STEP 2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 44

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and the one that follows straight after.
- How do they this impact how we understand our passage?

Ⓑ A few questions to consider

- What is the Preacher's response to death?
- Where does joy and the ability to face death come from in this passage?

Ⓒ What's the Main Idea?

Ⓓ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has revealed to you. Ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly and love him more deeply through the next steps of your study.

STUDY NOTES

9:2 “To the clean and to the unclean”

refers to those who are ritually pure or impure, under Levitical law. If you were unclean (e.g. had come into contact with the dead, had a skin disease etc.) you were not allowed to enter the temple for worship.

9:3 “Madness is in their hearts.”

The Hebrew word for “madness” denotes foolishness or disorder, much like in English, but in the Old Testament the heart is the place where thinking and willing is done, and is not associated with emotion and desire in the same way that it is in English.

9:4 “A living dog is better than a dead lion.”

Dogs were not beloved pets in the ancient world, and represented the lowest of the low. See for example Deut 23:18 or 1 Sam 17:43. It is also significant that the tribe of Judah, out of which the kings of Israel came, was associated with the lion.

9:6 “Forever they have no more share”

...is a strong phrase that, if taken in the wrong way, would imply that Ecclesiastes is denying the possibility of resurrection. The Hebrew word translated as “forever” (*olam*) denotes an extremely long span of time, not the Greek idea of eternity. Jewish writing during Jesus’ time speaks about this age (*olam*) and the age to come (*ha’olam haba*), which would be ushered in by the Messiah.

9:7 “God already approves what you do...”

This is another loaded phrase that deserves a bit of explanation. Read one way, it would seem to imply that we can do whatever we want with God’s blessing! Another way to translate the Hebrew would be “God already takes delight in your works,” meaning that even though we have madness and evil in our hearts, and we often foolishly resist God’s wisdom and ways, God is actually favourably disposed towards his covenant people, even while they follow him imperfectly.

9:10 “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

Sheol is the shadowy realm of sorrow, where all the living go when they die. It is a place of death, decay, sickness, and shadow. It is not the place of final judgement for all who reject God (commonly referred to today as “hell”), because God’s presence is still there (Psa 139:8). Appropriately enough, Old Testament thinking about Sheol is somewhat fuzzy. Deut 32:22 seems to indicate that God’s wrath can still be felt in Sheol, while 1 Kings 2:6 shows it is possible to go to Sheol in peace. Sheol can be used as punishment by God (e.g. Num 16:30-33, Psa 55:15), but one can also be delivered from it (Psa 86:13). Here in Ecclesiastes we see that Sheol is a realm where life as we know it ceases to exist.



Ecclesiastes

STUDY SIX

STUDY SIX - ECCLESIASTES 11:5-12:13

With today's passage, we come to the end of a challenging book, and Ecclesiastes finishes just like life, with death. In these final thoughts, the Preacher actually takes us through the entire breadth of our existence: from birth, to youth, to old age, to death, and beyond. Though we live short and seemingly meaningless lives, we live them by the grace of God, under his sovereignty, awaiting his judgement. As grim as the book of Ecclesiastes might seem, it is a book of profound hope and joy and truth. Our lives are not absurd because God is intimately bound in our lives, even as we struggle to see it.

The book concludes with a postscript that frames all of the Preacher's discussion in 1:2-12:8, and directly addresses us as readers, reminding us that wisdom - words of delight, words of truth - are often uncomfortable, spurring us towards God. Anything other than this is suspect, because we are foolish and sinful people. We want the easy answers and the comfortable words. Ecclesiastes will not let us have them. Instead, the Narrator demands that we know our place in the universe and recognize that the fear of the Lord is the root of wisdom (Prov 9:10). Wisdom, above everything else, is worship and obedience to the one Shepherd who cares for his sheep. In the end, it is Christ, the one true Shepherd who delivers us from folly, futility and death by laying down his life for his sheep. And he alone, as God, has entered "life under the sun" to bring eternal life to all who will come to him.

PASSAGE

11:5 As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

8 So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

9 Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

10 Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

12:1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";

2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain,

3 in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed,

4 and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—

5 they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—

6 before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,

7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

9 Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

10 The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

11 The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

12 My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

STEP 1. WHAT DOES IT SAY?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 52

Ⓐ Pray

Ⓑ Look Closely At

- Repetitions
- Images/metaphors
- Commands
- Warnings
- Contrasts
- Verbs—note past, present, and future. Who is doing this action?
- Big Bible Words
- Themes from the book

Ⓒ Look Structurally

- What is the tone of the passage?
- Divide the passage into its natural sections, one for each major thought.
- Create a heading or picture for each section
- Note key verses
- What does the structure reveal?
- What is the author's flow of thought?

Ⓓ A few questions to consider

- What are the commands in this passage?
- How does the main passage begin in 11:5 and end in 12:8? What is the progression of thought?

STEP 2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

NEED SOME HELP?

If you need some help with steps 1-2, check out the study notes on page 52

Ⓐ Look at the context

- Read the passage that has come immediately before and the one that follows straight after.
- How do they impact how we understand our passage?

Ⓑ A few questions to consider

- It is the work of God, through the Holy Spirit, that we are given life (11:5; 12:7), and “God has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11). What holds the joy of birth and the sorrow of death together in this passage?
- Who is the “one Shepherd” from whom all wisdom comes?
- The book concludes that to fear the Lord is the whole duty of man. What do you understand this to be saying? (see also 3:14; 5:7; 8:12)?

Ⓒ What’s the Main Idea?

Ⓓ Stop to Pray

- Thank God for all he has revealed to you. Ask him to help you see Jesus more clearly and love him more deeply through the next steps of your study.

STUDY NOTES

11:5; 12:7 “The spirit comes to the bones...and the spirit returns to God who gave it”

The word for spirit in Hebrew is *ruah*, which can also mean breath/wind/life-force. It is this Spirit that hovers over the waters of the deep in Genesis 1 at the beginning of creation; and in Genesis 6:3, as a consequence of the Fall, God promises that his “Spirit will not abide in man forever.” Here in Ecclesiastes, with the coming and going of the Spirit, we are reminded that it is God the Holy Spirit who gives and sustains human life.

11:10 “...for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.”

The challenge of translating *hebel* from Hebrew into English was noted in the introduction to this study guide, and in this passage in particular the limitation of translating it as “vanity” is striking. A better translation of 11:10, for example, would be “for youth and the dawn of life are short.” The Preacher is exhorting the young to make the most of their youth because it is so short, not because it is pointless. See also 12:8.

12:2 “before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened...”

is not an image of nightfall, but of Sheol or of the end of the age. The prophets frequently write about God’s judgement in this way, e.g. Ezek 32:7-8.

12:3 “...the keepers of the house tremble...”

The picture we are getting here is of a household dying off in the presence of some unknown or indeterminate evil (e.g. “terrors are in the way” (12:5). These descriptions might be functioning symbolically to describe the body as it fails, so perhaps:

- Keepers of the house = mental faculties
- Strong men = musculo-skeletal structure
- Grinders = teeth
- Those who look out = eyes

Further evidence for this interpretation would be that as one ages, things are difficult to hear (the sound of the grinding is low), shallow restless sleep is common (one rises up at the sound of a bird), and virility (desire) wanes.

12:5-6

...are tricky verses to translate, especially because the language is quite symbolic. The blossoming of the almond tree might refer to old age, as the blossoms of that tree are white. The precise meaning of the silver cord, golden bowl, pitcher, and wheel are debated in commentaries, but all are in agreement that they are representations of death. What is perhaps most striking about these final descriptions of death is that they are quite picturesque. The vessels and tools which are breaking are precious, and were useful in their time. The grief of death comes not just from the fact that someone is gone, but that they had worth.

12:11 “They are given by one Shepherd.”

Nowhere else in Ecclesiastes is there a reference to “one Shepherd,” so this is an enigmatic statement, especially since it comes at the end of the book. King David was a shepherd, so it is possible that the writer wants to link wisdom with the Davidic monarchy. The fact that there is only one shepherd however, should probably lead us to identify the shepherd as God. Psalm 23 is of course the classic example of this metaphor, though there are other instances in the Old Testament where God is described as a shepherd (Gen 48:15, 49:24; Psa 80; Isa 40:11 etc.) Jesus claims this title for himself during his earthly ministry (John 10), and he is also described regularly in the New Testament as the wisdom of God (e.g. 1 Cor 1:24).W