



ORDINARY JOY

8 Studies In Ecclesiastes



Ecclesiastes

Welcome to the words of Ecclesiastes. Welcome to the wise words of Ecclesiastes. Welcome to a book that will make us wonder, make us work, and even, at times, may make us wince. Yet the beauty of Ecclesiastes is that if we will slow down, enter the world of Ecclesiastes, engage with its inspired message, and then let its acute observations and truths sink deeply into our minds, Ecclesiastes also can make us wise.

For Ecclesiastes is classified as a “wisdom” book of the Old Testament. And we need to be reading wisdom books! In a world that can be perplexing and painful, as part of a global society that feels like its pace is accelerating wildly, even as our own individual lives become tangled in complexity, we desperately crave wisdom. We need wisdom so that we can live well as Christ-followers in this complicated world. And in Ecclesiastes we can hear a cool and insightful voice, offering insight - *inspired insight* - into what “the good life” is and how to live that life well. Ecclesiastes instructs us on so much more than merely negotiating the hazards of human existence. Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live fully engaged with the world around us, keenly aware of its futile and frustrating aspects, yet journeying to our sovereign Creator with joyful hearts, busy hands, and a hopeful perspective.

Ecclesiastes has been described as “a ‘seeker-friendly’ work, written for ordinary people living in the rhythms of the everyday” (G Kelly). In other words, this is a book for us! In the weeks ahead, let’s read over, wrestle with, and *relish* in these words from God. May Ecclesiastes’ words of delight enlarge our diminished ideas of our Triune God, and enrich our vision of Him. May Ecclesiastes’ words of truth “engage and shape our lives” (I Provan). And may Ecclesiastes’ words of wisdom lead us to Christ Jesus who is Himself the wisdom of God (1Cor. 1:31) and in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom (Col. 2:3).

As we enter Ecclesiastes together, and enter ‘the wreck of it all,’ we will be led time and time again from Ecclesiastes to Jesus Christ. It is Jesus, after all, who is the true King and the true Son of David . . . ‘One greater than Solomon is here’ Jesus proclaimed (Matt. 12:42). In [the Preacher] we see a foretaste of the true Sage, Jesus. Therefore, the language, teachings, footsteps, cross, and resurrection of Jesus will inform our reading (Z Eswine).



Ecclesiastes: Intro

We find Ecclesiastes, a slim yet potent book of wisdom, deep in the Old Testament, tucked in the shadows of mighty Psalms and Proverbs. Although often overlooked or dismissed as obscure, Ecclesiastes makes a unique contribution to biblical wisdom. God, He who generously gives wisdom to His children (Prov. 2:6), has a distinctive message for us through Ecclesiastes.

1. Turn to Ecclesiastes' final chapter. Read 12:10. How are the contents of Ecclesiastes described?

2. Now read 12:9-11a, a fascinating description about the process of the book's composition (as superintended by the Holy Spirit [2 Pet. 1:19-21]). How can these verses shape our attitude toward Ecclesiastes? What expectations do they raise?

As we approach these studies in Ecclesiastes, let's do so with expectancy! These are "words of delight . . . words of truth . . . words of wisdom." They offer delightful insights and arresting truths. They are wise!

Consider the various sources of media which infiltrate your life. What percentage of what you see or hear would you describe as "words of truth" or "words of delight?" What are some long-term effects of letting words which neither delight nor truthfully inform become the permanent sound-track inside our heads?

3. Continue reading 12:11. What additional fact(s) about this book motivate us to explore its pages with eager minds and receptive hearts?

Ecclesiastes has been “given” (12:11). If it’s been given, then it’s a gift, a God-gift in fact. As we unwrap this unique gift, what will we also receive? See Romans 15:4.

As you engage with Scripture - not only Ecclesiastes, but other books as well - how do you keep yourself alert to God, your Creator and Shepherd, who has given these words to you? What sometimes prevents us from seeing all the books of the Bible as His gifts to us, freely and lovingly shared?

WHO

4. Like a curious browser in a used bookstore, we’ve just raced to the closing chapter and read part of the final paragraph. Now let’s step back a few paces, ask a few questions, and get an overview of the book. Read 1:1, the opening verse. Who is introduced here?

5. What’s going on with “the Preacher?” This name will appear 7 times in the book (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10). Depending on your version, you might find reference to “the Preacher,” “the Teacher,” or maybe even to “the Quester” or “the Philosopher.” The Hebrew word represented by these various renderings is *Qoheleth*, a term describing someone associated with a “gathering” or “assembly.” Read the following verses; list events associated with such “assemblies”:
 - Deut. 5.22
 - 1 Kings 8.1, 22-23, 54-55, 65-66
 - 2 Chron. 30.23-27

The whole Christian Bible [including Ecclesiastes] thus comes to be received as that which addresses the entire people of God. What God has to say to Israel . . . is received as speech directed also at the church . . . It is impossible to see how we can be followers of Jesus and not regard his Scriptures as our own. Thus, when [the Preacher] addresses the assembled Israelites, we must also gather on the fringes of the crowd and listen to his word as the *ekklesia*—the word that is frequently translated in the New Testament as ‘church’” (I Provan).

As we listen to and learn from this Preacher," or "Assembler," in what ways could we also . . . hear the words of the LORD Himself? Celebrate the message of the Preacher? Be led to worship and moved to prayer? Experience God's blessing and gladness of heart?

WHAT?

So what is this book about? Ecclesiastes is complex and nuanced, a challenging book to summarise. The whole book challenges our addiction to "Christianese," those tidy, sometimes trite sayings that reduce our theology to simple little jingles. Ecclesiastes demands that we *engage*. We are forced to read it, and think through it, as an entire *book* that is held together with developing themes that grow richer each time they re-surface. We can gain inklings, however, of its basic message as we survey its opening verses.

6. Ecclesiastes opens and closes with a heart-wrenching cry, a cry which might be called the "motto" of the book. Read 1:2 and 12:8. What is that cry? How does this repetitious wording provide a context for the book? What, according to Ecclesiastes' cry, is a fundamental problem with human existence?

7. In understanding the ESV's "vanity" and "vain" (words which occur over thirty times in the book), we once again need to consider a Hebrew term which resists easy, one-to-one translation into English. The original word is *hebel*. Literally, it means "vapour, mist, breath, breeze."

What major point is being made by the Bible's use of "hebel" in Psalms 39:5; 144:4 and Proverbs 21:6?

So the book of Ecclesiastes rests on a framework constructed in response to *hebel*, to that which is fleeting, impermanent, futile, and uncontrollable. The cry "all is vanity," is not saying that everyone is conceited. Rather, the point being made is that everything - including us! - is but a breath, as fleeting as a wisp of mist in the morning. And the events of our lives are as elusive as a breeze; we cannot capture them or control them. (OPTION: Read James 4:14 for a New Testament expression of this concept).

Does Ecclesiastes' initial commentary on human existence resonate? In what aspects do we see our own lives, and that of our society, as fleeting ("Here today, gone tomorrow!)? As futile or frustrating? As elusive, not yielding to our control? What are some ways our Canadian culture seeks to overcome this very nature of human life?

WHERE?

8. As we read, we'll realise that Ecclesiastes addresses us on two levels or planes. Read 1:3 to discover the perspective for most of the book's observations: "_____ the sun".

This phrase is unique to Ecclesiastes and is a catchword of the book, surfacing about 30 times in the remaining verses. As you read, stay alert to "under the sun," as well as "under heaven" and "on earth".

9. What limitations are emphasised by "under the sun?"

What quiet hint of hope can you detect by the repeated use of "under the sun?" (Think biblically)

WHY?

Why is this a book of wisdom? Ecclesiastes is a gift to us because it *reveals* to us wisdom that we cannot ourselves discover or detect "under the sun." It conveys to us a way of engaging in life "under the sun," and of living well, even in this fallen and futile and fleeting world. Let's end this study by moving again to the book's conclusion.

10. Read 12:13-14. What truths can completely transform our "under the sun" perspective and experience?

v. 13

v. 14

Ecclesiastes' teaching enables us to navigate life "under the sun" in a way that is both right and richly purposeful. It reminds us that what we see is not all that there is. There is a God, whom we are to "remember" (12:1) and who is to be acknowledged as Creator, as our Creator. Now we don't live aimlessly, but in a relationship of reverence and obedience to this eternal God. It is He Who sees and evaluates all that we do. Suddenly every word, thought and action - far from meaningless - is freighted with eternal significance. Having realised this, we begin to journey along the way of wisdom.

What questions do you have as we study Ecclesiastes' wisdom, its words of truth and delight?

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. **MEMORISE:** *The Preacher sought to find words of delight and uprightly he wrote words of truth (Eccles. 12:10). Begin your journey through the delight and truth of Ecclesiastes by committing this verse to heart.*

2. Ecclesiastes "seeks to furnish our minds with the contemplation of God. Over thirty times in these twelve chapters, the Preacher exalts God as our Creator, gift giver, enjoyment provider, life sustainer, wisdom teacher, Redeemer, and judge. The Preacher intends that upon hearing his message, his audience will contemplate God" (Z Eswine). In preparation for this study, spend some time with the One True Shepherd (12:11). Ask that He will nourish your mind through His words in Ecclesiastes, and thus lead to you to a place of richer confidence in His goodness, gracious provision, and loving sovereignty.

3. The Preacher, we are told, weighed and studied and arranged his writing with great care (12:9). Set aside an hour or two this week, and read through Ecclesiastes in one sitting. Honour the Preacher, and the Shepherd, by attending with great care to this portion of the Word. Read with a mind receptive to His truth and a heart ready to obey.

MORE WISE WORDS

The Preacher is distinctly original and creative in his thought and manner of expression and is not merely restating what other sages have taught. As a genuine wisdom teacher, he has a gift for penetrating observation and for stating things in a profound and challenging manner that can spur the [reader] on to deeper thought and reflection (*ESV Study Bible*, “Introduction to Ecclesiastes”).

The purpose of Ecclesiastes can only be reached by *reading it* . . . There is no substitute for reading the book . . . Its words are supposed to change the reader in a way that cannot be duplicated . . . To understand Ecclesiastes, you have to go the whole way through [the book], . . . for [it] is not simply trying to state information, but to bring the reader to the point he can actually grasp true wisdom. For that to happen, you must enter into [the Preacher’s] argument and into his experience. You must see in Ecclesiastes, mirrored for us, our own experience as the people of God. You will also discern, as the argument of the book progresses, the fulfillment of Ecclesiastes in the life and teaching of Jesus, the greater Solomon (J Meyers).

Praise God for the beauty of Ecclesiastes - not just what the book says but also the way the book says it... He is a God of exquisite beauty. It is only appropriate, then, for the book that tells the story of his salvation to please the ear, inspire the imagination, fascinate the mind, and delight the soul (P Ryken).

If there is no escape from what is under the sun, then rescue will have to come from somewhere else. The time will come when God will personally squint and sweat beneath the sun’s light and heat. He will enter the gainless world, endure its vanity, and feel the pain of it.... Jesus will stand beneath the sun with us (Z Eswine).



Ecclesiastes: All is Vanity

Welcome back to Ecclesiastes. Last study we oriented ourselves towards this fascinating book. We met the Preacher and considered his cry that our fallen and flawed world (our “under the sun” human existence) often is distinguished by its fleeting, fragile, futile and unfathomable nature . . . in short, by its “vanity” (1:2). Now the Preacher launches into a poetic survey of that fractured world, pointing our attention first to nature, then to history.

1. Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11. What human frustration is expressed by the opening question of the poem (v. 3)? (For further commentary about the treadmill of human toil, read 2:18-23).

v.4 - While the earth remains (for now!) a permanent feature of reality, what are our human prospects (cf. 2:16; 9:14-15)?

vv. 5-7 - What three examples from the natural realm illustrate the way that we humans can see constant cycles of movement and plenty of expended energy, yet find no real progress or gain?

v. 8 - Despite the magnificence of Planet Earth and its teeming activities, what does the Preacher observe about its ability to provide lasting satisfaction for humanity?

vv. 9-11 - How does the poem sum up history?

Ecclesiastes opens with a bombardment of bleak images. Life on Planet Earth, viewed from “under the sun,” appears repetitious, monotonous, and purposeless. Humans themselves seem destined for oblivion, and, until they reach that oblivion, unable to leverage reality to even help themselves. This is not a cheery poem! Thankfully, we’ve many further miles to travel with the Preacher along wisdom’s way. But let’s pause here and absorb these biblical observations, disturbing as they may be, instead of skipping along to a more “inspiring” passage. For these words are Scripture, and therefore *inspired* by God, if not “inspiring!”

Study 2

Consider again the complaints listed in the poem. How does our own Canadian culture try to cope with realities such as . . .

1. Our inability to ultimately "gain" or truly get ahead?
2. The continuous cycles of nature (the "circle of life")?
3. The human heart cry that "I can't get no satisfaction"?
4. The longing to be recognised, remembered and celebrated?

One writer interprets these verses as reminding us of "how severely limited we are as human creatures. The poem unpacks the ephemeral nature of man's endeavours" (J Meyers). Why is facing this truth spiritually healthy? When we realise that we cannot fully comprehend, let alone control, the world, what are we forced to face?

Many 21st century Canadians measure personal virtue by one's care for the environment. Environmentalism is the new religion. Ecclesiastes one, however, insists that creation - by itself - can't answer our questions or provide us with meaning, satisfaction, purpose, or a sense of our destiny. How, biblically, are we to respond to the rallying cry of environmentalism?

Expecting the natural world to provide the key to the meaning of life is like racing up to a Starbucks kiosk at the airport and hoping to get a boarding pass! But while Starbucks can't help you arrive at your final destination, it can make the sojourn in the airport a little more enjoyable. How is creation, likewise, a marvellous gift to us from God when it is received as He intended it to be? Re-consider our poem. How is nature "a testimony to the goodness, orderliness . . . and constancy of its Creator?" (P Ryken). How do "the very regularities of the world" (D Kidner) speak to you of God?

2. The Preacher next recounts for us his quest for wisdom through his own personal endeavours. Read 1:12-14. How does he describe this quest?

3. Read 2:1-11. List specific ways the Preacher sought to achieve meaning and pleasure.

v. 2

v. 3

v. 4

v. 5

v. 6

v. 7

v. 8

4. Review vv. 9-11. Which phrases sound with a surprisingly modern ring to our ears?

5. Comedy, alcohol, architecture, building (and decorating?) homes, gardening, power over people, money, possessions, music, sex, fame, success and career! The Preacher sampled them all. How does he summarise the results of his efforts? Re-read 1:14, then 2:11 and 17.

Keeping in mind the areas where the Preacher sought purpose and pleasure, evaluate our own world. How aligned is our culture with these pursuits? How different are we in the Church from our culture?

If chapter 2 ended with the paragraph running from v. 18 to v. 23, the situation would be grim. As the initial search for joy and meaning concludes, our page is covered with words like “hate, toil, give up, despair, evil, sorrow, vexation, vanity.” And such despondence and darkness are legitimate conclusions from an honest survey of what goes on “under the sun.” But in v. 24, we break through our “under the sun” view point, and our perspective is re-calibrated. “If there is no escape from what is under the sun, then rescue will have to come from somewhere else” (Z Eswine).

6. Glance back at 2:1-12 and notice the opening wording of nearly every verse. Who is the focus? Then, savour verses 24-26. Who is - at last! - considered in this survey of the human situation?

Study 2

“When new factors are brought in . . . ‘the vanity’ of life is not obliterated or forgotten; but the new factor transforms the perspective . . . The new perspective does not cancel out the old; the believer is living in an overlap. But the new perspective revolutionises his outlook” (M. Eaton). What are some examples of how shifting from an ego-centric posture (I... I... I) to a God-centred perspective can be transformational?

7. “This life on earth is intended to have as its centre the God who created everything and who holds everything in His hand” (1 Provan). Consider what this rich paragraph (vv. 24-26) reveals to us about God:

v. 24 What (who) is the only source of lasting nourishment and enjoyment and good? What does this tell us about the nature of our God?

v. 25 What can we not do without God or apart from Him? What do we learn about His desires for us?

v. 26 What does God give to those who please Him (lit., “the good before Him”)? What does the verb “give” emphasise?

We conclude our study today, not trapped in frustration by the endless and cycles of nature, nor depressed by the prospect of our eventual oblivion by impersonal history, but set free to recognise, and then to receive, and finally to rejoice in the abundant, and daily experienced, goodness of God. We have followed the Preacher along the way of wisdom and learnt:

- Life under the sun is fragile, impermanent, uncontrollable, and soon forgotten.

- Yes, it is. But also - we see this “under the sun” life in its proper perspective only when we view it in light of God, the Creator of the sun and all other good gifts, He who is the centre of all.
- God is generous. He graces our lives with gifts and these gifts are good, bringing wisdom and joy.
- We need to live with open hearts (oriented to God), open eyes (seeing the God-giveness of these gifts), and open hands (humbly receiving all as from His hand). When we live in right relationship with God (“pleasing Him”), then we will find wisdom and even joy.

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *“There is nothing better for a person to do than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God for apart from Him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”* (Eccles. 2:24-25).
2. “All the things that we call the ‘goods’ of life . . . slip through [our] hands unless they are received as a gift from God and until God gives [us] the ability to enjoy them and obtain satisfaction from them” (W Kaiser). As a simple way to stay keenly aware of the many gifts from His hand, try thanking the Lord specifically at each meal this week for every individual item you are about to eat or drink.
3. Likely something will occur this week that you long to understand, to control, or to preserve. But as Ecclesiastes teaches, there is so much under the sun that is not fathomable, that we cannot control, that cannot be made permanent. We can take heart from a New Testament passage that uses the same word that the Preacher did. The term appears as “vanity” in Ecclesiastes, and as “futility” in Romans. Read Romans 8:18-25. Let its perspective speak hope and patience into your heart.

MORE WISE WORDS

For Old Testament orthodoxy, creation rings with the praise of the LORD . . . But, says the Preacher, take away its God, and creation no longer reflects his glory; it illustrates the weariness of mankind . . . If our outlook is merely ‘under the sun,’ no doxology can arise to him who is ‘in heaven’ (Eccles. 5:2) (M Eaton).

When we turn back to God, asking Him to save us in the name of Jesus Christ, something very surprising happens: the very pleasures that once failed to satisfy us now help us find even greater joy in the goodness of God. . . . God is not a spoilsport. He is not trying to take pleasure away from us but to give it to us. Once we learn how to find satisfaction in God himself, then all of his other gifts become the best and truest pleasures. . . . But you will never find it by living for your own pleasure. You will only find it when you learn to glorify God and enjoy him forever (P Ryken).

Wisdom acknowledges God and not the self as the center of existence and gladly embraces the limitations of the creature set within the larger massive reality of creation (I Provan).

The world and your life are more broken than you realise, and what God created for us is more satisfying than we believe (Z Eswine).



Ecclesiastes: A Season and a Time

As we move into Ecclesiastes' third chapter, we notice that once again the Preacher opens a new section of this book with a poem (as he did in chapter 1).

1. Verse 1 introduces and summarises what one commentator called “a masterpiece of wisdom poetry” (D Garrett). According to v.1, what is the poem about?

2. Now read vv. 2-8, the Preacher's poetic observations on the rhythms of human life. What one word sounds 28 times in the poem, like the ticking of an unstoppable clock?

How many pairs of opposites, or extremes, describing human experience are listed?

3. In Old Testament writing, seven is a number that usually symbolises completeness or totality. What idea might the Preacher be underlining by listing two sets of seven pairs of opposites? How is he illustrating the point of v. 1? How does this list represent the full range of the life we know? Finally, notice the opening pair of opposites. Why is that placed first?

4. Although all manner of ingenious schemes have been used to explain the organisation of these times and seasons pairs, realistically, “it is difficult to discern a deliberate pattern” (R N Whybray). Why is this somewhat random arrangement an appropriate way to describe our lives and their seasons?

Like the life events in this poem, the events in our own lives may unfold “in no discernible order. . . That is the way our lives are. We cannot predict. We cannot determine. We cannot recognise a pattern. . . We are not in control!” (J Meyers). Is this an accurate assessment of reality?

Study 3

Read on: Ecclesiastes is asking you to reconsider your stance toward life. Controlling the times and seasons, or even understanding why God sends them when He does, is too great and marvellous a thing for anyone but God. . . Faithful and wise living means submitting to God's timetable and thereby responding in a way that acknowledges God's superior but inscrutable plan for your life" (J Meyers). Share with the group a time you discovered God's plan to be inscrutable, yet superior, to your own.

5. This poem, like that of chapter one, describes the full range of what we as humans *will* experience; it does not prescribe what we *should* seek to do. Rather than focusing on our productivity, it emphasises God's sovereign providence. How does knowing this truth change the way we read, and apply, these verses?

6. The Preacher returns later in the book to our need to accept God's sovereignty. Read 7:13-14. In light of God's sovereign rule over our world (v. 13), how are we to react:

In "the day of prosperity?"

In "the day of adversity?"

To summarise 8:14, "When times are good - THANK! When times are bad - THINK!" What spiritual disciplines prod us to embrace what God is accomplishing in us and for us in every season, and then to respond to Him by either thankfulness or thoughtfulness, rejoicing or reflection?

7. Return to chapter 3 and read vv. 9-10. Then re-read 1:3 and 2:22. Sound familiar? Why would the Preacher articulate questions he's already asked?

Do we, like the Preacher, keep asking the same questions and confronting the same issues in our faith journey? We'll discover that the Preacher will continue re-asking questions, so that he can re-answer them with fuller wisdom and increasingly rich insight. How does this pattern in Ecclesiastes of "spiralling" wisdom (coming back to the same insights in order to develop and deepen them) educate us? Encourage us?

8. Read 3:11-15. What words from the theme verse (3:1) appear in v. 11? How does the truth of v. 11a give us perspective on the various activities and events which happen to us (as described in vv. 2-8)?

Hmmm. Everything is “beautiful?” A quick look around the world shows us that everything does not appear to be “beautiful.” Why does the Bible use this term? First, the Hebrew term for “beautiful” also can mean “fitting.” So the idea expressed may be “beautifully fitting” (I. Provan). There is nothing that cannot be beautifully fit, or integrated, into God’s plan. This is the sort of thinking we find in Romans 8:28.

Secondly, we must notice how the text further describes “beautiful.” Events are beautiful in a context; everything is made *beautiful* _____ (3:11).

9. The Preacher next affirms that we have a God-given gift and a limitation. What is that gift (v. 11b)? Yet what limitation - also given by God - keeps us from seeing everything’s “in-its-time” beauty (v. 11c)?

We are like the desperately near-sighted, inching their way along some great tapestry or fresco in the attempt to take it in. We see enough to recognise something of its quality, but the grand design escapes us, for we can never stand back far enough to view it as the Creator does, whole and entire, from beginning to end” (D Kidner). How do we respond in faith to our inability to discern God’s grand designs?

10. We know there is an “all-embracing plan . . . vast, eternal and comprehensive” (W. Kaiser), but since we aren’t able to figure that plan out, how are we then to live? Read vv. 12-13; what’s our assignment?

Vv. 12-13 contain the second of Ecclesiastes’ seven “seams” of wisdom, those passages in the book which bind together the Preacher’s questions and comments on his quest for wisdom. Seven times the Preacher surveys our “under the sun” life and then offers wise counsel for life, not in denial of the harsh realities of life, and not in spite of them, but *because* of them. It’s *because* we yearn to understand God’s eternal ways and plans, but are frustrated by our inabilities, that we live joyfully and choose to “do good.”

11. Flip back to 2:3. The Preacher's quest was to see what was _____ for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. His search for the "good life" took him to all sorts of places . . . and none delivered. The wisdom of 3:12 is that those who experience the "good life" are those who do _____.

Consider Ecclesiastes' time frame for "doing good" (3:12). How does it redefine the Canadian dream of striving for early retirement . . . in order to live "the good life?"

How does the New Testament confirm that our Creator has designed life so that those who are in right relationship with Him will live joyfully and do good? See John 15:11; Ephesians 2:8-10.

12. Back to the Preacher. How does the generosity of God enable us to stop bemoaning all we don't understand and can't control, and instead to embrace the season of our life we're in right now (v. 13)?

13. Read vv. 14-15. As we grow in wisdom, what further human limitations will we accept? After we humbly accept the truths of these verses, how can they comfort us and provide an anchor of security?

In faith, we confess that we humans are mere "creatures of time" who cannot control or even predict the changes in our seasons of life. Ecclesiastes teaches us that "only God's work has the perfection and eternal worth for which [we] long" (D Garrett). How does such a confession of faith colour our day-to-day living? How should it affect our choices and priorities?

14. Once again the Preacher reminds us that the key to living rightly, and the means to coping with reality, lie in our relationship with God. What does v. 14 have to say about that relationship?

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Our God is the Eternal One, in Whose history-spanning plan all things fit beautifully. We consider His eternal wisdom, and feel awe and wonder. Next study we will explore what Ecclesiastes has to teach us about what it means to fear this God, as we follow the Preacher further along the way of wisdom.

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *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. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live (Eccles. 3:11-12).*

2. Grab some scrap paper and jot down a few of the ways that life feels "just out of control." Holding that list in mind, pray through Psalm 131. You might personalise v. 3 with your own name.

3. Invest some time in meditating on Jesus' trust in His Father's timing as displayed in John 13:1. "Know this: that the Saviour who was born 'when the fullness of time had come' (Gal. 4:4), and who died for our sins 'at just the right time' (Rom. 5:6), has a beautiful sense of timing" (P Ryken). Gaze at Jesus, *the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end* (Rev. 22:13). Entrust your present season to His loving, capable hands.

MORE WORDS OF WISDOM

Although as time-dwellers we see God's work in tantalizing flashes, the very fact that we can ask about the whole design and long to see it, is evidence that we are not entirely prisoners of our world. In more promising words, it is evidence of not only how but for Whom we have been made (D Kidner).

Put verses 13 and 14 in the first person and use it as a job description: 'There is nothing better than to be joyful and do good as long as I live, and to eat and drink and take pleasure in all my work—this is God's gift to me.' Imagine how much good a person could do over the course of a lifetime simply by putting these verses into daily practice. Then imagine how much kingdom work a church could do if it approached everything with this kind of joy, this kind of hard work, and this kind of gratitude to God (P Ryken).

We cannot truly understand or control 'the times' and so we are cast back on God who holds our times in his hands and alone knows the span of our individual days. Yet the God on whom we are cast is good, and he is *for us* (Rom. 8:31). Our response to His grace and blessings should be to seize the time we have and live it well and joyfully to his glory and praise (I Provan).

The frustration [we] feel in [our] inability to make sense of things on [our] own is actually the result of a God-given burden . . . Consequently we can never be finally satisfied with anything the world can offer us. Made in God's image, created for Him, we must remain forever dissatisfied until we live in Him and for his glory. We were made for eternity, not merely for time (S Ferguson).



Ecclesiastes: Fear God and Draw Near

“Do you fear God? In a sense, Ecclesiastes is written to help you do so” (J Meyers). This week we focus on the fear of God, a topic not especially in tune with North America’s casual and consumerist church culture. Yet this is a key theme, appearing numerous times throughout the book. In fact, its conclusion urges us, Fear God and keep His commandments. According to Ecclesiastes, to fear God and then to live as if we really do (i.e., in reverent, trusting obedience) is what it means to be fully human (12:13).

1. We learnt last study that we do not know God’s plans. In fact, we *cannot* fathom His plans, and are unable either to predict or to alter the permanent, unchanging nature of what He does. Review Ecclesiastes 3:11-14. What are two ways believers can respond to our Creator’s unfathomable sovereignty?

vv. 12-13

vv. 14

2. What does this “fear” of God (3:14) mean? Here’s a sampling of some helpful definitions:

- *Godly awe, reverence and devotion (ESV Study Bible notes)*
- *Reverent and awesome regard for God (M Eaton)*
- *Reverence for God that will issue in a life centred on God (I Provan)*
- *Awe in the presence of a Mighty God (R N Whybray)*

What common elements can you discern in the preceding definitions?

As our society becomes increasingly casual and cynical of authority, how can we cultivate a healthy and biblically defined fear of the Lord? How do we remain sensitive to those with trauma or dysfunction in their backgrounds, yet not ignore the biblical insistence that we fear God? How should our identity in Christ shape our reverence? In what ways can God’s “divine faithfulness . . . make the fear of God a fruitful, filial relationship?” (D Kidner; “filial” means “that of a son or daughter”).

3. Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. According to v. 1, what is one area of life where the wise will show that they “fear before God?”

When you go to _____ ...

In what ways can the fear of God fuel and invigorate our corporate worship? What habits or attitudes might make us vulnerable to drifting into complacency or even irreverence?

4. This passage is peppered with specific instructions for us on how to approach God. One commentator explains, “‘Guard your steps’ means ‘proceed with reverence’” (D Garrett). List each instruction this passage offers to teach us how to enter corporate worship with reflective, receptive, and reverent hearts.

v. 1

v. 2

v. 2

v. 2

v. 4

v. 6

v. 7

What above-the-sun reality motivates us to worship with “holy caution” (M Eaton), to weigh our words, and not gush like fools (v. 2)? (OPTIONAL: Enjoy Solomon’s prayer of 1 Kings 8:22-30).

This text's teaching has been summarised as a command to go to worship with a receptive attitude and a readiness to listen (W Kaiser). What practical steps can we take to foster such receptivity? How does God the Spirit offer us invaluable help as we struggle to listen and learn with honour for God in our hearts?

6. "The fear of God is one of the most important positive concepts in the entire Bible" writes one commentator (P Ryken). Ecclesiastes nudges us to re-evaluate our perspective on the fear of the Lord. In chapter three, we see that our proper response to God's unfathomable sovereignty is to live joyfully and with pleasure even as we "fear before Him" (3.12, 13, 14). Joy, pleasure, goodness and fear will mingle in a vibrant, God-centred faith response. In chapter five, we realise that our awe of God doesn't make us cringe and retreat in terror from Him, but rather, causes us to draw near to Him in worship and prayer.

Now let's consider 8:12-13. How does this passage also contribute to our grasp of the fear of God as something positive?

7. How is the claim of v. 12, "It will be well with those who fear God," a statement of faith, especially in light of the realities described in v. 14?

"The fear of God . . . is not only the beginning of wisdom; it is also the beginning of joy, of contentment and of an energetic and purposeful life" (M Eaton). How does a gospel exchange of the negative kind of fear (e.g., fear of the future) for the positive kind of fear (the fear of God) lead to joy, contentment, and abundant life?

8. Ecclesiastes' wisdom is summed up in its final verses. "Everything Ecclesiastes affirmed - the sovereign freedom of God, the limits of human wisdom . . . the brevity and contingency of human life - all lead [to these final commands]" (D Garrett). Read 12:13-14. How is Ecclesiastes' wisdom boiled down into two clear instructions (12:13) about humanity's top priorities? Why are these two instructions linked? Is it possible to do only one?

"Only in Jesus can we at last enter fully into the Teacher's final admonition - to fear God and obey His commands (v. 13). What human effort can never do, Christ makes possible" (G Kelly). How are these commands fulfilled by Christ? Why does this matter to us?

9. "To know God is to be stunned by His presence" (S Ferguson). Consider the opening and closing verses of chapter 12 (vv. 1, 14). How do they contribute to our reverent awe for God?

10. A very literal translation of the Hebrew of v. 13 would read something like, *for this is the whole of man (=humanity)*. How can fearing God be the "whole" of our life, what our lives are all about? Discuss: "We are purposed to fear God. . . . To fear God . . . recognises that all this life under the sun has its end in Him and so do we" (Z Eswine).

J Meyers writes, "Fearing God, paradoxically, is the way to live without fear." D Kidner also insists, "'Fear God' is a call that puts us in our place, and all other fears, hopes and admirations in their place." How does a life grounded in the fear of God "deliver us from all other fears" (S Ferguson)?

*Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another.
The LORD paid attention and heard them . . . (Mal. 3:16).*

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *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 (Eccles. 8:12).*

2. Ecclesiastes' wisdom keeps us vigilant against flippant, presumptuous prayer. "Prayer is not reciting a list as quickly as possible so as to rush once more into the round of daily life" (J S Wright). Meditate on Jesus' prayer instructions in Matthew 6:6-8. Jesus recognises the need for reverence, yet He mingles reverence with intimacy. Pray Matthew 6:9-13 with Jesus, remembering that we are on earth, and that our loving Father is mighty God in Heaven.

3. Block off a portion of time this week to *draw near to listen* (Eccles. 5:1). The context of Ecclesiastes 5 was of the awe of God in a corporate setting. Yet the receptive and reverent heart must also be cultivated the rest of the week. "Silent reflection - deliberate inactivity - is necessary if we are to regain perspective and remember who God really is and what that really means. We need to hear . . . and to hear, we need to stop talking" (I Provan). Read Luke 10:38-42 to discover Jesus' comment on a reverent and receptive heart.

4. "Do you think you are wise? Then ask yourself if you fear God" (J Meyers).

MORE WORDS OF WISDOM

When we consider the holiness of God and compare it with our own unholy worship, it is a wonder that any of us is still alive. Thank God for Jesus! It is not only his sufferings that save us, but also his obedience, including the perfect worship he offered to his Father. . . . When we know that even our worship is forgiven, then we can approach God with joyful confidence. . . . We say, 'I am already accepted through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now it is my privilege to worship God the way he wants to be worshipped' (P Ryken).

Why must we resist our personal haste of thought, feeling and word? Because church is the house of God. God presents Himself for our contemplation and adoration. . . . Church-going is God-hallowed activity. When we go, we keep trying . . . to orient our lives under the sun around His voice rather than ours (Z Eswine).

Access to the house of God has required a prior provision from God. Otherwise, none of us could enter. . . . Mercy undergirds every step we take down the aisle (Z Eswine).

No amount of emphasis on grace can justify taking liberties with God, for the very concept of grace demands gratitude; and gratitude cannot be casual (D Kidner).

God must be the focal point of worship, not the self, and the Word of God should take priority, not the words of the worshipper (I Provan).



Ecclesiastes: Joy in Our Hearts

If the eternal alone can meet our deepest needs, it is hardly surprising that we are left frustrated and spiritually hungry by the temporal. Turn away from the God who alone can satisfy you and it is inevitable that you will be dissatisfied with lesser . . . pleasures . . . All the pleasures of this age mock us unless we have our need for eternal life satisfied by God, and our thirst quenched by the living water which Christ alone can give us. But take Christ and with him comes all manner of pleasures (S Ferguson).

Ecclesiastes chronicles one individual's quest for joy, pleasure and purpose "under the sun." As we study its wisdom, the book reveals that such a quest is destined to be in vain. For all joy, pleasure, and purpose which are not rooted in the Eternal One will inevitably be fleeting, futile, and frustrating. "Apart from him, who can eat or who can find enjoyment?" (2.25).

But Ecclesiastes also reminds us that there is a Sovereign God, who reigns above the sun, whom we are to remember (12:1) and to revere (3:14; 5:7). When we are in right relationship with our Creator, then - and only then - can we receive His good gifts. As we embrace a life centred on reverent regard for God, we will see, receive, and rejoice in His good gifts. In this study, we will explore seven invitations to joy found in Ecclesiastes. We'll discover that the one who fears God can exclaim, "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore!" (Ps. 16:11).

1. Let's begin by reviewing the first three invitations to joy: 2:24-26; 3:11-13; and 3:22. What words or phrases keep appearing? What are some areas of life where we experience God's goodness?

2. What is the source for these gifts of life, which represent simple, ordinary blessings?

2.24: *This also, I saw, is from the _____.*

3.13: *This is _____ to man.*

If the ordinary activities that are fundamental to human existence all come from God's hand as His gifts to us, what does this tell us about God?

Study 5

Many feel that God, if He even exists, is stingy, remote, and begrudges us even the simplest of pleasures. How does Ecclesiastes' wisdom - which builds on Genesis' creation teaching - counter this misconception? Why is it crucial for us to affirm that God is good, that His creation is good and beautiful, and that "we were designed to enjoy its pleasures" (P Ryken) as gifts from Him? See also 1 Timothy 6:17.

3. Since even the basic activities of our day are God-gifts, what does this tell us about ourselves and our ability to provide for ourselves? What attitudes towards God should this trigger?

"All the things that we call 'the goods' of life . . . slip through [our] hands unless they are received as gifts from God and until God gives [us] the ability to enjoy them and obtain satisfaction from them" (W Kaiser). What habits will sharpen our spiritual eyesight so we can see, then intentionally celebrate, the God-givenness of the basic things and activities in our lives?

4. According to the Preacher, what is the best way to live for us to live in our unpredictable and often painful world (3.12)? Where can we locate the source of joy as we live under the sun (2.26)?

Ecclesiastes instructs us to "be joyful," anticipating the flavour of New Testament instruction (e.g., Phil. 4:4). We are prone to think of joy as a fickle emotion which might alight on us . . . or might not. But the biblical perspective of joy is much more robust. "God intends for us not only a life of faith, but of joy" (M Eaton). The wise will approach joy actively, as a way to live obediently and as God intends. How can we obey Scripture and choose joy, even when we feel joyless? How does our identity in Jesus enable us to accept the life we actually have ("our lot") and to find joy?

5. Read 5:18-20, a fourth invitation to joy, expanding on the earlier ones. What else does God give to us?

v. 18 . . . *the few days of _____ that God has given him (cf. 8.15).*

v. 19 *God has given _____ and _____ and power*

to _____

and to _____ his lot,

and to _____ in his toil.

Why are gifts of wealth and possessions not enough by themselves? See 5:10; 6:1-2. What further God-gifts must accompany them?

6. Human nature includes being anxious about our length of life. Furthermore, we “brood over the past and worry about the future” (J S Wright). How does God heal these unhealthy preoccupations (5.20)?

7. Read 8:14, then 8:15 which is Ecclesiastes’ 5th refrain of joy. Verse 14 offers a painfully honest reflection on the unexpectedness and seeming unfairness of life. What does it say? Is this an accurate observation? How does remembering the meaning of “vanity” equip us to interpret the verse?

8. Keeping v. 14 in mind, re-read v. 15, focusing on its opening words. How do vv. 14 and 15 illustrate that biblical wisdom does not deny the pain and perplexity of human life, but calls us to a different focus (a life of joy centred in God)?

Study 5

Do you know someone who rejects or scorns Christianity because it's too "pie in the sky" and supposedly doesn't deal with the world's suffering? How could knowing Ecclesiastes 8:14-15, and other passages, equip us to thoughtfully and kindly respond with biblical truth to their accusation?

9. Read 9:7-9, the 6th call to joy. First, the Preacher "commended" joy (8:15); now he commands us to find (extraordinary) joy in our (ordinary) lives. Beginning with "Go!" the Preacher urges us to embrace God's gifts, since "life's enjoyments are not guilty pleasures but godly pleasures" (P Ryken). List all the ways we celebrate with God's approval (vv. 7-9):

White clothing and oil have been described as "outward signs of joy, indicating a festive and celebratory atmosphere" (I Provan). What might 21st century equivalents be? "Those who belong to God should above all others have a capacity to enjoy life" (D Garrett). If we serve and share life with the God of all joy, how do our lives reflect that reality? Why is a "festive and celebratory" life an expression of the Gospel?

10. We conclude with the seventh call to joy, Ecclesiastes 11:7-10. This lovely little passage celebrates the sheer "bliss of being alive" (D Kidner), and reminds us that the gift of life is sweet and pleasant. We'll return later to this text when we reflect on how our "rejoicing" is to be balanced by our "remembering" (of the brevity of life and of God's ultimate evaluation of all we do). For now, read these verses and record how 11:8 summarises the Preacher's wisdom for living:

So if a person lives many years, let him _____
_____!

Notice that this command to a life-long posture of rejoicing is immediately followed by another command - to “Remember your Creator” (12:1). There is a logical connection between our approach to the gift of life, humbly and gratefully received from the hand of God, and the bedrock truth that He is our Creator. Ecclesiastes teaches us that “the enjoyment of life is God’s will. To enjoy life is to obey God, who created the world in this particular way and indeed actually requires such an attitude” (R N Whybray).

We’ve just studied seven rich texts that portray God’s design for us - lives of joy. Jesus told His followers, “*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full*” (Jn. 15:11). Journey joyfully this week with Jesus. “One of the best ways for us to enjoy life is with Jesus, sharing in His pleasures. All the good things mentioned in Ecclesiastes symbolise gifts of his grace” (P Ryken). So let’s enjoy Jesus and His gifts, knowing that “a merry heart has God’s approval” (P Ryken).

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *For he will not remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart (Eccles. 5:20).*

2. “To taste the sweetness of ordinary joys, we learn to enter each day with a conviction about the givenness of things” (Z Eswine). Set aside ten minutes each morning this week and “see” the goodness of God as expressed in earthly blessings. Receive them as grace-gifts, not as entitlement, and respond to such bounty with joyous thanks and praise. Let simple gifts trigger prayerful adoration of their Giver.

3. Choose an activity or chore in the daily round of your ordinary life. How can that activity become a space for God-centred enjoyment? Ask Him to enable you to see and enjoy His presence in the midst of that (possibly unappealing) chore. Ecclesiastes teaches that “life is not only good in itself, but that it is to be savoured with enthusiasm, as one might savour honey” (M Eaton). Savour life, *your* life and not the one you hanker for, as it comes from His hand.

4. Consider what changes are needed for you to live-out Ecclesiastes. “Live well, now... Be simple in the pleasures you enjoy (9:7), joyful in demeanor (9:8) and faithful in relationships” (G Kelly).

MORE WISE WORDS

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights (Jam. 1:17).

Should this fleeting life be about doing anything we please? . . . Perhaps the answer lies in when *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) evokes worship, when it is a form of honouring the God who is honouring us with his presence. Put another way, when *carpe diem* becomes *carpe Deum*, or translated loosely for our purposes here, “seize God!” (C Weber).

God is the source of all the gifts of earthly life: its bread and wine, festivity and work, marriage and love . . . At first sight, this may look like mere praise of simplicity and moderation; but in fact the key word is God and the secret of life held out to us is openness to Him: a readiness to take what is heaven-sent, whether it is toil or wealth or both (D Kidner).

A joy resides in God’s gifts for our notice, and this by his design (Z Eswine).

Praise God for the goodness of life! Praise him for everything sweet you taste and everything bright you see! (P Ryken).

Christian wisdom advocates celebration, rejoicing and enjoying what God has given you to enjoy . . . Cherish the small gifts that come your way from God. [Our] true lot in this world is primarily understood in terms of . . . joyous reception of the gifts of God. Approach life receptively; enjoy God’s gifts as they unfold (J Meyers).



Ecclesiastes: The Tears of the Oppressed

In God's own book review of Ecclesiastes, its contents are considered to be *words of delight . . . words of truth . . . words of wisdom*" (12:10, 11). In these studies we have, indeed, experienced the delight, truth and wisdom of this inspired book. Yet most of us also will have found that Ecclesiastes does not make for easy, breezy reading. "We must all confess, if we are honest with ourselves, that we have some difficulty navigating this book" (J Meyers). Ecclesiastes requires our full attention, our thoughtful reflection, and a sustained approach in our reading. Like all biblical books, it is meant to be read as *a book*. In other words, we don't flip through its chapters, searching for an easily understood verse or two that will soothe our spirits, provide some uplifting and "nice" devotional thoughts, or support our pet doctrine.

Ecclesiastes resists such a consumer-like approach. This week's study will illustrate the danger of the random "Happy Verse" approach. Our topic is suffering, about which the Preacher has much to say. But if we simply pluck one of his insightful comments out of its (inspired) context and try to make sense of it on its own, we may be puzzled and possibly depressed! What's more, we'll miss the true and wise perspective on suffering that Ecclesiastes, as a carefully composed and complex book, can provide us. Let's listen attentively to the Preacher's voice of wisdom and learn. Start by reading 3:16-4:16.

1. Review 3:16. What are the two grievances the Preacher makes as he surveys, again, our fallen and sin-fractured world? What is the irony about the locations of this wickedness?

The Preacher observed that "injustice is found precisely where society is supposed to protect the innocent and enforce justice and fairness" (J Meyers). Fast forward to the 21st century. Where are our "places of justice" and "places of righteousness?" Do we too find wickedness there? How should we as Christ-followers respond?

2. Verse 16, on its own, makes for grim, although realistic, reading. What two truths contained in the next verse offer hope (v. 17)? How does God's plan of salvation address these injustices?

3. Re-read v. 18. What inescapable reality about ourselves as humans must we accept? According to vv. 19-20, in what respects are we like beasts (cf. Ps. 49:12)?

What illusions about ourselves are shattered by death's reality? One author claims that "the sooner we come to terms with our death, the wiser our life has a chance to become" (Z Eswine). How does facing the inevitability of our death lead to wise living? See also Psalm 39:4-5; 90:12 and Ephesians 5:15-17. How can serious reflection about death lead us to fresh insight for living and the way we spend our lives?

4. The question of 3:21 is haunting in its familiarity and its realism. Many of us have been wracked by such secret, fleeting doubts at a loved one's graveside. What is the grieving question of this verse?

5. This is a timely occasion to remind ourselves that we must read each verse within its larger biblical context and that the "[biblical] author must be interpreted by himself" (J S Wright). The anguished cry of v. 21 is not left unanswered. Verse 22 immediately offers a partial and practical response, but it is not until we've read through to the book's final chapter that we find hints of an ultimate answer. Read 12:7.

What words from 3:20-21 are repeated in 12:7 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:49)?

How does 12:7 offer hope and perspective? Read also Psalms 49:15 and 73:23-26. How do these verses contrast (gloriously!) with the hopelessness of those who cannot see beyond Ecclesiastes 3:21?

The Preacher assures us that those who fear God go to their "eternal home" (12:5) and their spirits return to God (12:7). But the full splendour of life and immortality did not shine its light until the coming of Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 1:10) to our death-wracked planet. Enjoy John 14:1-6. How do Jesus' lovely words depict our future? How could you convey this comfort with a grieving friend?

6. The Preacher will return again (and again) in Ecclesiastes, to this theme, insisting we face our human mortality and live accordingly. Read 7:1-4. What are some opportunities for gaining wisdom described in:

v. 1

v. 2

v. 3

v. 4

- a. Really!?! It's better to go to a funeral than a birthday party or baby shower? What painful lesson does mourning help us "lay to heart?" (v. 2). What do we see more clearly "when our vision has been cleansed by tears?" (S Ferguson). How does our culture, in contrast, promote escapism and provide distraction?

- b. How can a time of mourning be of eventual benefit? How does it contribute to our spiritual growth, help us avoid an "unexamined life," and prepare us for service (7.3)? Reflect: "By the grace of God and through faith in Jesus Christ, even death can be used by the Holy Spirit to bring us life and joy" (P Ryken). How?

- c. To what does a brush with death open our ears (7.5)?

Times of bereavement are windows of opportunity for showing Jesus' love. We can care for and comfort the anguished ones left behind. Such times also often (temporarily) open hearts to conversation about spiritual realities. How well can you describe your confidence about your eternal future? How would you explain your hope that because of Christ, you will be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22)?

7. Back to Ecclesiastes 4. From the unavoidable prospect of death (3:18-21), the Preacher turns to the tragedy of oppression. Review 4:1. What simple word picture symbolises the sorrow of the oppressed?

What phrase, appearing twice in 4.1, underlines the loneliness and helplessness of the oppressed? (vv. 7-8 also will allude to human aloneness).

Now skip ahead and read 4.9-12. How does the Preacher describe the benefits of companionship in v. 9? v. 10? v. 11? And v. 12? How can companionship answer some of the anguish in v. 1?

"Behold," the Preacher cries to us, "the tears of the oppressed." "It is impossible to be a follower of Jesus and simply observe 'the tears of the oppressed' who 'have no comforter'" (I Provan). How does Jesus respond to oppression? How can this shape our response?

8. In 4:4, what does the Preacher identify to be "the fuel that feeds the flame of human striving?" (I Provan). Is embracing the opposite extreme, laziness, the answer (v. 5)? Why are both envy-driven rivalry and idleness ultimately self-destructive?

9. The proverb of v. 6 beautifully portrays contentment - a quiet and satisfied life, one "free from jealousy or rivalry" (R N Whybray). "Sometimes less is more and the quiet person has found the right balance . . . He does not keep demanding more and more but accepts what God has given" (P Ryken). How does Ecclesiastes' teaching on God's gifts of joy enable us to live contentedly?

10. The chapter ends by tackling yet another evil under the sun. What point do verses 13-15 (a little parable) make about human fame and the fickleness of success (as does 9:13-16)? One commentator wryly remarks, “The currently unpopular are always replaced with those who are not yet unpopular” (D Wilson). How can we find wise insight for life in this little story?

The Preacher advises, *In the day of adversity, consider . . .* (7:14). Let’s take the time to keep wrestling with this week’s tough questions and allow Ecclesiastes’ wisdom to sink deeply into our hearts and minds.

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart (Eccles. 7:2).*

2. Did some of the Preacher’s blunt observations and honest questions make you wince this week? “The Christian believer is not always able to give full answers to difficult questions. But the situation of the unbeliever is more desperate; their whole being cries out to ask a question which their refusal and rejection of God renders illicit. If there is no God there is no ultimate answer to the question “Why?”” (S Ferguson). Open your heart to your heavenly Father. Let your unanswered questions and doubts become blessings, as they remind you of God’s ultimate wisdom, as they prod you to keep thinking and studying the Bible, and as they draw you to Christ in seeking prayer.

3. The wise, “by laying death to heart and looking ahead to what God has planned for us in Christ will live wisely . . . and die well” (P Ryken). How has Ecclesiastes impressed upon you your own mortality? How has it reminded you of the profound difference between us humans and our Eternal Creator? How does it remind you that you are not in control, only God is? Being aware of the company of Jesus, work through these challenges and ask Him to show you how you can live your life wisely in light of these realities.

MORE WISE WORDS

The wise Christian will trust in God's gracious purposes for us and His inscrutable timing, without avoiding or sugar-coating the brutal realities of life (J Meyers).

Only those who have met and understood death . . . fully understand that resurrection must come to us as an utter and surprising gift (I Provan).

Death is an evangelist. It helps us to see that there is a great gulf fixed between Creator and creature, and places us in a position therefore truly to worship and repent of our sins (I Provan).

We who . . . fear our death are given profound grace and empowerment in Jesus, the One greater than Solomon. He delivers us from the fear of dying, so that in him we might rise from our bondage and live purposed in Him (Heb. 2:15) (Z Eswine).

Anyone who wants to know what will happen after death should ask Jesus . . . because he has been through death and reached the other side (P Ryken).

To be in the presence of sickness or death has a tendency to bring us quickly to the really crucial matters in life . . . There is a lesson to be gained from and work to be accomplished by sorrow (W Kaiser).

Sadness [is] not only replaced by joy but [is] in itself a preparation for the truest form of it (D Kidner).



Ecclesiastes: Whistle While You Work

Have you noticed how often our countdown to the weekend begins first thing Monday morning? TGIF (“Thank God It’s Friday”) has become the Canadian worker’s slogan. But while this type of thinking may be familiar, Ecclesiastes insists that it’s also flawed. God has a great deal to say to us about our work. In the Bible’s opening chapters, we’re taught that humans are designed to work - to be productive, creative, active - as part of their God-given purpose within creation. Yet the reality we experience in our sin-flawed world is that work “under the sun” is, well, *work*. It can be tiring and tedious; for some, it’s a tyrant.

Within Ecclesiastes, words like “work,” “toil” and “labour” occur over twenty-five times. The Preacher will share his observations on work with his usual honesty and realism. He also will instruct us how to work well and how to work wisely. He will teach us how to see, and then accept, our God-given tasks in life so that we engage in our work with joy and purpose. We might even learn to say, “Thank God it’s Monday!”

A. WORK IS FUTILE AND FRUSTRATING

1. One of Ecclesiastes’ proverbs reads “*The toil of a fool wears him*” (10:15). While we might not be keen to label ourselves as fools, we probably do identify with the way our work can feel like “toil” that wears us. Let’s return to chapter 2 and listen to the Preacher as he surveys his many years of labour. Read 2:18-23. What term - signifying that which is fleeting, futile, frustrating, and unfathomable - does the Preacher use three times as he reflects on his toil under the sun (vv. 19, 21, 23)?

2. Why has the Preacher found his work to be futile, and its rewards fleeting?

vv. 18-21

v. 22

3. What are some human responses to the frustrations and futility of our work?

v. 20

v. 21b

v. 23

Do Ecclesiastes' observations on work still resonate in our world? Do we still taste such bitterness in our own jobs and daily tasks? The Preacher complains that he works so industriously, only for someone else to benefit from his efforts. Do we? And does work still trap us in cycles of toil? Why is it important for Christ-followers to admit the fleeting nature of work's rewards and the frustration of our labours under the sun?

4. Read Ecclesiastes 4:7-8. What further grievances does the Preacher add?

There is no _____ to all his toil . . .

His eyes are _____ with riches

He never asks, "For whom am I toiling and _____ myself of pleasure?"

5. Work never ends and it doesn't satisfy in itself. What does the Preacher also discover about the reliability and permanence of our work's rewards? See 5:15-17.

B. WEALTH IS FLEETING

6. As we listen to Ecclesiastes' wisdom, we realise that work - in and of itself - will never satisfy us. But we still may be tempted to wonder if the results of work - wealth - will bring value to our lives. Read Ecclesiastes 5:10. What is the essential flaw in humans that always turns what we have into "not enough?"

What perspective does 1 Timothy 6:10 offer on this "insatiable appetite for more" (J S Wright)?

7. In 5:13-14, we witness the tragic results of a life devoted to making and accumulating money.

v. 13 What was the cost to the worker himself?

v. 14 What was the final outcome (Option: cf. 1. Tim. 6:9)?

How do we also live to gain and then maintain our wealth in a way that is “to our hurt?” Why does the pursuit of wealth become self-destructive? What did Jesus have to say about this dangerous inclination of the human heart? See Matthew 6:19-21, 24.

8. The wise will learn that wealth does not buy lasting security or satisfaction. Read 6:1-2 to discover the reason why wealth, power and honour (i.e., money, stuff, control and fame) cannot bring joy on their own.

“If anything is worse than the addiction money brings, it is the emptiness it leaves. Man, with eternity in his heart, needs better nourishment than this” (D Kidner). By this point we are ready to add our voices to the Preacher’s as he laments, “*So I hated all my toil!*” and “*What gain has the worker from all his toil?*” Yet we do not wish completely to reject work, for the Preacher also cautions us against idleness and self-indulgence (4:5; 10:17-18). An answer will begin to emerge as we carefully examine all the wise counsel Ecclesiastes offers us, and discover that there are fruitful and fulfilling ways of working for those who live wisely, in the way our Creator has designed for us.

C. THE WAY OF WISDOM IS FRUITFUL AND FULFILLING

9. Ecclesiastes 3:22 hints at the first step in recovering a biblical view of work. How is work described?

The wise will rejoice in his work for that is _____

Work is not a punishment to be avoided or resented, but rather part of our original condition as beings created to be constructive. It is our divine assignment “under the sun.” Our jobs and tasks are “an allotted portion of life, whose purpose is known to the Giver and is part of his everlasting work” (D Kidner).

Study 7

Do we view working as an integral part of being human, accepting work as our lot? Work passionately with all of your heart even if you are stuck doing some work that is beneath your dreams. Still, God can meet you here. . . . God and his joys are found here, within our lot, and not somewhere else" (Z Eswine; emphasis added). How can rhythms of prayer help us to embrace our God-given "lot" in working?

10. Re-read 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22, paying close attention to what these texts say about work. How do these texts deepen our appreciation that our sovereign God Himself has assigned us our "lot?"

2:24: He should . . . find enjoyment in his toil. This . . . is from the _____
_____.

3:13: Everyone should . . . take pleasure in all his toil - this is God's _____ to
man.

Imagine that next Monday, an angel appears, handing you the week's "To Do" list, assigned directly by God. Think how this would galvanise you into passionate, completely engaged action! How does 2:24 likewise revolutionise our attitude to work? Does God our Creator truly take personal interest in our work? How does Ephesians 2:10 enlarge our perception of our "work" as our divine calling?

11. Both 2:24 and 3:13 contain an intriguing Hebrew phrase, translated as "find enjoyment / satisfaction" or "take pleasure." Literally the texts refer to "seeing good" in our toil. How can we learn to recognise (to "see") and focus on what is good in our work? What are obstacles to viewing our work this way?

12. The wise believer realises that not only work but the capacity to *rejoice* in our work is a gift of God. Thus, “the very work that had tyrannised him was potentially a joyful gift of God (and joy itself is another) if only he had the grace to take it as such” (D Kidner). Read 5:18-20. What accompanies our work when it is accepted gratefully, as part of our Creator’s plan, when we look for the good in it, and then treat it as a God-gift?
13. We conclude with 8:15. How does this verse’s wording emphasise that we find joy not merely in the results of our work but in the *process* of our work?

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *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 (Eccles. 8:15).*
2. “For the believer, our true Boss and ultimate Master is the Saviour who gave his life for our sins. Whatever our job happens to be . . . we are working for Christ and his kingdom. To put this another way, we are working under the Son, not under the sun” (P Ryken). Copy Colossians 3:17 onto an index card. Place it somewhere in your work space. Let it prod you to work wholeheartedly, in the name of Jesus, for the glory of God.
3. Pray that God’s Spirit would keep you keenly aware of His personal presence in the midst of your working routines and daily tasks. When we work, alive to His presence and purposes, we “are thereby kept occupied and delighted in the inner recesses of [our] lives with God Himself” (W Kaiser).
4. Dwell on this challenge: *Therefore, my beloved brothers [and sisters], be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).*

MORE WISE WORDS

Our life is not only a great deal of trouble and hard work; it is also refreshment and joy in God's goodness. We labour, but God nourishes and sustains us. There is reason to celebrate. . . . God is calling us to rejoice, to celebrate, in the midst of our working day (D Bonhoeffer).

The secret of life held out to us is openness to [God]: a readiness to take what comes to us as heaven-sent, whether it is toil or wealth or both. . . . There is fulfilment to be found in accepting such work as the Creator's gift . . . and offering it up to Him" (D. Kidner).

When our work is received and exercised as part of God's work - there is no higher good than to synchronise with God's beneficent purposes for [us]. . . . It is a God-given provision that life can be enjoyable *in its toil*, not in its absence (M Eaton).

In his grace, God has given every one of us something good to do for him. We do not work because we have nothing better to do, but because God has called us to work for him (P Ryken). Cf. *Ephesians 2:1-7*.

When we re-orient life toward the Creator . . . it involves the embrace of joy . . . and "seeing the good" in our toil, rather than looking for the profit that may derive from it (I Provan).

A man may work hard to acquire money, only to discover at the end of the day that the money actually acquired him (D Wilson).

Every little thing in [our] lot can be a means of potential joy and fellowship that God can give (Z Eswine).



Ecclesiastes: The End of the Matter

As we've travelled along the way of wisdom, we've gained a clear view of some "under the sun" realities in our sin-stained world - the puzzling nature of suffering, the fact of injustice, the inevitability of death, our inability to predict our futures. Yet we find that ultimately, Ecclesiastes leads us - not to cynical despair - but to the God's gift of joy. We learn we're designed by our Maker to live in a world brimming with His good gifts. This week we explore another strand of wisdom woven through the book, one that offers hope for the future, and motivation to live meaningful, joyful lives now. God is our Maker; He also is our Judge. Ecclesiastes affirms that because of Who God is, and what He promises, there will someday be perfect justice. So all of life is invested with eternal significance since God cares about everything we do.

1. The first hints of God's future just judgement surface in 3:16-17. Read these verses. When we are distraught about injustice and wickedness, what truth brings endurance? How does this offer perspective on our limited capacity as humans to implement justice?

"Our confidence does not lie in a justice system but in the Chief Justice himself, Jesus Christ. God has promised a day when his Son will judge the righteous and the wicked . . . Whenever we see injustice - especially acts of oppression we are powerless to prevent - we can still pray for justice, leaving things in God's hands" (P Ryken). What are some areas of oppression we could pray for as a church?

2. Whom will God judge? Does this broaden your understanding of the meaning of "judgement?"

3. The careful reader notices that this judgement will be in the future: “God will judge . . .” Although no mention is made of a date for this longed-for day of justice, what phrase comforts and encourages us to wait patiently for God to act in judgement?

Ecclesiastes 8:6 literally reads, “*There is a time and a just way [same as in 2:9] for everything, although man’s trouble [evil, or misfortune] lies heavily on him.*” How does this affirm the wisdom of chapter 3?

This is an article of faith . . . You do not see it in the world around you. Rather, you hear God telling you that He will bring everything into judgement and you believe it and confess it because you are certain He is trustworthy. Judgement belongs to God’s time” (J Meyers). What glorious historical event also moves our hearts to trust in the perfect timing of God’s judgement? Read Acts 17:30-31.

4. Read 8:12-14. The Bible assures us, “*It will be well with those who fear God,*” but when we look around us, that is not always obvious (v. 14). How do these verses, like 3:16-17, give us hope for the future but require us now to walk by faith?

How does our 21st century culture deceptively blind us to this biblical perspective?

5. As Ecclesiastes reaches its final chapters, for a seventh time the Preacher will urge us to live humbly, fully, wisely, and joyfully. Read 11:5-10. What is beyond our comprehension, according to v. 5?

6. The Preacher has been relentlessly hammering home to us all that we humans do not know, do not understand, and cannot predict. What are some other areas of our ignorance or helplessness?

3:21

6:12

8:7

8:8

How does our vast ignorance leave us in need for an impartial, all-knowing judge? Why do we rebel against that?

7. Ecclesiastes 11:5 describes God, literally, as “the Maker of everything.” What has Ecclesiastes already told us about how our mighty God relates to humanity?

5:2 For God is _____, _____, and you are on earth.

7:29 God _____ upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

8:15 . . . through the days of his life that _____ has _____ him (cf. 5:18, 9:9).

How do these truths prepare our hearts to receive the claim, *God will bring you into judgement*” (11:9)?

8. Chapter 11 may make prim and proper Christian squirm a bit. Already we’ve been counselled to live with generosity (11:1-2), courage and gusto (“withhold not your hand”), savouring the beauty and brightness of life (11:7), and rejoicing in every year we live (11:8). Now in v. 9 the Preacher essentially counsels, “Do what you please!” How does the final sentence of v. 9 keep all the wise advice in context?

Study 8

The following of the heart and the eyes is to be carried out in the sure knowledge that there is moral accountability in the universe . . . Joy is to be pursued within the boundaries . . . set by God. Yet joy is indeed to be pursued!" (I Provan). Do your Christian beliefs marry pleasure and virtue? Do you truly believe that a life seeking Jesus and His Kingdom will be also a pursuit of joy? What prevents us from freely embracing the beautiful and bountiful world our Creator has designed for us to enjoy?

9. Read 12:1. How does this verse reinforce the warning of 11:9?

Since "God is our Creator . . . our days and deeds are in his hands" (Z Eswine). How does submitting to God as Creator help us to see Him as our Judge? How does understanding God as Creator enable us to understand ourselves as created beings?

"To remember him . . . is to drop our pretence of self-sufficiency and commit ourselves to Him" (D Kidner). "To remember God . . . is to be mindful of God in every circumstance - including him in all our plans, praising him for all his blessings, and praying to him through all our troubles" (P Ryken). What habits enable us to overcome our chronic God-amnesia? How does the Holy Spirit help us?

10. Ecclesiastes has reminded us to celebrate the goodness of our Creator. While all we do will either fail or be forgotten, God's works are eternal (3:14). His ways cannot be altered, manipulated or even fully comprehended (7:13-14). God is in control of all (6:10) and maker of all (11:5). Ecclesiastes has led us to such above-the-sun wisdom. Now read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, the book's crowning wisdom. What is the book's final word on what motivates us to live reverently and obediently (v. 14)?

11. How does the wording of v. 14 emphasise that God's evaluation will be all-inclusive, embracing every aspect of our existence? See also Romans 2:16.

It kills complacency to know that nothing goes unnoticed and unassessed, not even the things we disguise from ourselves. But at the same time, it transforms life. If God cares as much as this, nothing can be pointless" (D Kidner). Everything matters to God. How does this speak to you about the eternal significance of your daily life - including "every casual thought and careless word" (P Ryken)?

12. Zack Eswine observes, "For many of us, judgement scares, threatens, and spooks us. But for the Preacher, judgement blesses us." Read Jesus' beautiful words in John 5:21-24. How does our life in Christ allow us to see the blessing in judgement?

On what grounds can [the Preacher] feel confident that some final judgement will put it all right? Is there not a missing link in all this? The missing link is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. . . . God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice . . . by Christ, the Saviour and the Sin-Bearer (M Eaton).

WISDOM WORK-OUT

1. MEMORISE: *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 judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Eccles. 12:13-14).*
2. Consider launching your work day with a short prayer such as, "What I pray matters, but so does what I eat. What I believe and what I buy. How I worship and where I work. Give me, God, a life-wide vision" (G Kelly).
3. We might not think of Ecclesiastes as being an obvious resource for evangelism. Yet when Paul shared the gospel with the Athenians, his comments showed remarkable similarities to Ecclesiastes' message. Read Acts 17:22-31, staying alert to the many links to Ecclesiastes and the way Paul's speech carries Ecclesiastes' wisdom to its final fulfillment in Christ Jesus. Prayerfully think about how Ecclesiastes has moved you closer to Christ and how it can equip you to point others to Him also.

MORE WISE WORDS

We make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

The prospect of divine praise or blame makes every detail of our lives significant rather than meaningless. To know this gives direction to our hearts and discrimination to our eyes (NIV Study Bible Eccles. 11:9n.)

Yes, enjoy whatever you see or desire but . . . in the midst of your enjoyment, remember that God will review even the quality of your pleasures and the manner in which you enjoyed yourself . . . So have fun! Rejoice and delight yourself in the thrill of living. Yet put a prudent tone in your step by recalling that today will reappear in the tomorrow when we face the One who fully knows right from wrong (W Kaiser).

We are free to pursue the good desires we possess. In this . . . we remember our Creator. We remember that he will judge us, that he will give us joy and bring us ultimately home” (Z Eswine).

All our ways are of concern to God, who judges us. Joy was created to dance with goodness, not alone. . . . This . . . insisting that all our ways matter to God, and are therefore meaningful through and through, robs joy of nothing but its hollowness (D Kidner).

Joyful living is also serious living. We in remembrance of who God is and of who we are (I Provan).

Although those who have believed in Jesus have already been justified by faith (Rom 5:1) and will not face condemnation on the final day (Jn. 5:24; Rom. 8:1, 33), God will still judge their works (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10) and reward them accordingly (Matt. 6:1-6, 16, 18; 10:41-42) (ESV Study Bible 1 Cor. 3:14-15n.).

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