

Ecclesiastes

Finding Meaning in a
World of Passing Pursuits

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About the Author



BARNABAS PIPER is an assistant pastor at Immanuel Church in Nashville and is the author or co-author of several books and small group studies, including *The Pastor's Kid*, *Help My Unbelief*, and *Hoping for Happiness*. Prior to being called into ministry Barnabas worked in Christian publishing for almost 15 years. He co-hosts The Happy Rant podcast, writes regularly for He Reads Truth, and has contributed to numerous other websites and publications. Piper speaks regularly at churches, camps, and conferences around the country. He lives in the Nashville area with his wife and two daughters.

How to Use This Study

This Bible study book includes eight weeks of content for group or individual study.

Reading Wisdom Literature

On the pages directly following this one, you will find a guide to understanding wisdom literature. This section is designed to give you helpful direction for understanding and processing the book of Ecclesiastes.

Group Sessions

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each week of content begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members, with God's Word, and with the video teaching from author Barnabas Piper.

START. This page includes questions to get the conversation started and to introduce the main topic of the session teaching.

WATCH. This section provides space for taking notes as participants watch the video. Codes to access the teaching videos are included with your purchase of this book and can be found on the insert located at the back of this book.

DISCUSS. This page includes questions and statements that guide the group to respond to Barnabas's teaching and to explore relevant biblical truth.

A NOTE ABOUT DOING THIS STUDY AS AN INDIVIDUAL. You may choose to do this study as an individual as opposed to participating in the group. If so, treat the group session and the associated teaching video as the first day of study for the week then proceed with the personal study portion.

Personal Study

Each week provides three opportunities for personal study—a guided reading plan and two days of Bible study.

GUIDED READING. This study covers the book of Ecclesiastes thematically. Each session includes a guided reading plan with several readings from Ecclesiastes and brief commentary. These readings could be done in one sitting or across a whole week. These plans are designed to deepen your understanding of the book of Ecclesiastes and help you discern the themes it discusses.

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDIES. Additionally, the personal study section includes two three-page Bible studies. Each includes learning activities for individual engagement between group sessions. The personal study revisits stories, Scriptures, and themes introduced in the video teaching, so that participants can understand and apply them on a personal level.

Leader Guide

Lastly, in the back of this resource there is a leader guide included to help those leading others through this study. There you will find some tips for leading a small group as well as specific considerations for each session of study.

Reading Wisdom Literature

While the Bible is a single volume, it is composed of sixty-six individual books. Those books can be categorized into different genres: law, history/narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, gospels, epistles, and apocalyptic. Don't let this overwhelm you! It's actually a beautiful depiction of God's creativity and care for His people. Each genre reveals something unique about God in both style and substance. Each genre draws readers to truth and the person of God in a distinct way, and we need them all.

We must also approach each genre differently. We can't read poetry like history or wisdom literature like epistles. We need to read them in their intended style so we can really see what God is revealing of Himself.

Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job comprise the wisdom literature genre. The aim of wisdom literature is to help us grow in biblical wisdom (obviously). What is that? In short, it is living life with godly skill, thinking with the mind of God, and prioritizing or judging with godly priorities. These books deal in the substance of everyday life, and our goal in reading them is to learn how to faithfully walk with the Lord in all of life.

Here are a few pointers for reading wisdom literature to get the most out of it.

1. Remember that these are God's words as much as any other book of the Bible, even if they seem opaque or confusing sometimes. Wisdom literature reveals the mind, the priorities, the decision-making, and the character of God. While it may not have many propositional statements about God, all wisdom literature is essentially God telling us how He thinks.
2. Wisdom literature, especially proverbs, should be read as principles, not promises. We can find exceptions to every principle (e.g., if you work hard you will succeed). So we must read these books as principle truths rather than truths specific to every circumstance. Principles are true in general. And they are the way things ought to be.
3. Wisdom literature is often poetic, so it uses word pictures and vivid imagery. It is not to be read like a scientific or doctrinal work marked by linguistic precision. Rather, we are to consider: what is it evoking, what is it drawing out of our hearts? That is the aim of biblical wisdom, to transform the heart into alignment with God.

4. Ancient poetry often uses parallelism: stating truths in couplets that often seem at odds but that actually clarify and uphold one another. For example Proverbs 26:4-5 says, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” Which is it? Remember that the aim is godly skill and discernment, so both are true and only wisdom can help us determine which is applicable and helpful in a given circumstance.
5. Because of poetic language and techniques like parallelism, we must be cautious about pulling a verse out of its context to prove a point or offer as a command. For example, consider Proverbs 26:4 again, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” Take that out of context and we lose the counterbalance of “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” Context matters in all biblical interpretation, but it is especially significant when dealing with principles and evocative language.
6. Sometimes wisdom literature focuses on anti-wisdom (what the Bible calls foolishness) so that we can see both the consequences of defying God and the beauty of walking with Him. Ecclesiastes and Job do this. This means we must read them with an eye toward the greater reality of God’s heart, God’s desires, God’s design, and God’s priorities. Otherwise we can mistake a lengthy passage about anti-wisdom as prescriptive for our lives or as morally good.
7. All wisdom literature must be read in light of Genesis 1, God’s good creation according to His perfect design, and in light of Genesis 3, the reality of sin and God’s curse on the world that brought about the disordering and twisting of all things. Much of wisdom is seeing the good in the twisted and the twisted or sinful in the good. It is rarely so simple as labeling something “good” or “bad.” Rather wisdom allows us to recognize the reflection of Genesis 1 and the marks of Genesis 3 in all aspects of life.
8. Remember that all wisdom is fulfilled and embodied in Christ. We cannot gain godly wisdom outside of life in Jesus. He is our means of wisdom through His saving work and the giving of His Holy Spirit. It is easy to think of “gaining wisdom” as something we do through discipline and rigor. And while we do strive for it, it is given by God through His Son.



WEEK 1

Vanity Under
the Sun

Start

Use this section to get the conversation started.

What types of books do you enjoy reading? What types of books do you tend to avoid?

What has your experience been reading Ecclesiastes before? What have you struggled with? What have you appreciated?

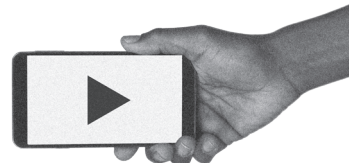
Ecclesiastes is a challenging book, one that doesn't even seem to fit in the Bible at first glance. In past reading of Ecclesiastes, you might have found yourself asking the question—what is this even doing in here? Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature like Proverbs and Job, but it seems to have a very different message than those books. Many of us read the book and can't quite figure out what the message is! We often treat it as one of those portions of Scripture reserved for checking boxes on a Bible reading plan, but not really for understanding.

Over the next eight sessions we're going to examine the broad themes of Ecclesiastes. In this session, we will be looking at the context of the book—vanity under the sun.

Watch

Take notes as you watch video session 1.

To access the teaching sessions,
use the instructions in the back
of your Bible study book.



DISCUSS

Use this section to guide your group discussion.

Read the opening verses of Ecclesiastes.

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

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2

These verses summarize the main theme of Ecclesiastes. How would you describe this theme in your own words?

Ecclesiastes is a profoundly realistic book. It invites us to confront the state of the world. The meaning of vanity in Ecclesiastes is something that is real and tangible, but not lasting—like an early morning fog. It also means that nothing functions the way it should and that nothing we experience will be as fulfilling as we hoped it would be. Ecclesiastes is warning us that we can't grasp onto anything in this life to fulfill us.

What have you hung your hopes on that has left you disappointed or disillusioned?

Even though we've been disappointed and disillusioned, why do we continue to hang our hopes on the things of this world?

Each of us has experienced disappointment and disillusionment because of work, family, injustice, comparison, or loss. Ecclesiastes addresses each of these challenges, but not with gentle words and saying "it'll be all right." We all know it's not always all right; the hurt is real. Instead it looks at reality the way the Bible defines it: fallen. We can't hang our hopes on anything in a fallen world because nothing is as it should be and nothing lasts.

How might a profoundly realistic perspective of our fallen world help us find happiness and purpose?

To understand Ecclesiastes, we have to recognize the context of the book, which we find in the opening chapter.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:9.

*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.*

ECCLESIASTES 1:9

How does the phrase “under the sun” help us place the teaching of Ecclesiastes in context? How does this relate to the idea of vanity?

“Under the sun” is both a location and duration. It is a place and an amount of time. “Under the sun” describes the entire earth—everywhere the sun shines. It also refers to the fallen state of world under the curse of sin. Because of sin, nothing is as it should be and exists in a state of death and decay. Because of Jesus, we know that the state of the world “under the sun” is not permanent. Ecclesiastes paints a dark backdrop against which the reality of God's truth shines brightly.

How does looking to Jesus Christ shape our perspective on the life we live in a fallen world?

How does Jesus Christ give us hope in the fallen world that Ecclesiastes describes?

Ecclesiastes tells us that we look above and beyond the fallen world to find our hope. We look to Jesus Christ. And in doing so, we find out how we can actually find enjoyment and purpose and fulfillment in this world.

Close your time together with prayer.

Personal Study 1

Guided Reading

Read the following sections of Ecclesiastes to gain a deeper appreciation for the context of the book.

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-15

This is a sweeping, broad introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes. It sets the stage and context for what follows. Most importantly it introduces the concept of “all is vanity under the sun,” a lens through which the rest of the book must be read to make sense.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

There is a time for everything under the sun; this is a characteristic of a fallen world. It doesn't mean everything is good or as it should be, but simply that we live in world marked by the goodness of God (life, healing, laughter, embracing, loving) and the fallenness of sin (Genesis 3). So there is a time for pain, death, and loss during this life as well. We are supposed to feel the tension in these verses as the author juxtaposes the pleasant with the unpleasant.

ECCLESIASTES 3:19-22

Under the sun we are all marked by the same fate; all is vanity. Does that mean life is not worth living or that we are of no greater value than the “beasts”? No. It means we were not made to live “under the sun” but for a different hope and reality.

ECCLESIASTES 8:14-17

These verses highlight the mystery and confusion of life under the sun. Things do not go the way they are supposed to—the righteous are rewarded as if they are wicked and vice versa. This too is vanity because it is unsatisfying and unfulfilling. Under the sun we are unable to understand or clearly see the ways of God and how He is working, and this causes frustration and confusion. But verse 15 again lifts our eyes away from bleak hopelessness. It points out that there is hope and joy in the midst of this vain, confusing life.

ECCLESIASTES 11:8

A stark reminder that we are all mortal, that our days under the sun are numbered. But rather than finding this depressing, the verse points us to rejoicing and gratitude. The implication is that life is a gift, something from God to be treasured. So despite the fact that “all that comes is vanity” (nothing in this life lasts) we are to rejoice in what God does give.

ECCLESIASTES 12:7-8

A final reiteration of the temporal nature of all things, but not a passive one. Verse 7 points out that the spirit returns to God who gave it. It is pointing out that our lives are created by God, gifts from God. So yes, life on earth is “vain” and fleeting, but that does not change the reality that it is God-given.

Notes

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Personal Study 2

All is Vanity

Read the opening words of Ecclesiastes.

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

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

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2

Define the word vanity.

I live in middle Tennessee, near Nashville, and it's not uncommon for us to have early morning fog. Sometimes it's so thick I can't see but a few feet in front of my car. When fog like this happens it's eerie, beautiful, and demands that I drive very cautiously.

I love bonfires in the fall. Sitting around with friends and family, talking and laughing, making s'mores, sipping drinks—it's the best . . . until the smoke blows my way. (And we all know that smoke follows us as we move around the fire too.) It stings my eyes, makes me cough, and generally interrupts an otherwise wonderful time.

My route to drop my kids off at school takes me by a big lake. Sometimes when the weather is calm and it has just started to turn cold a mist sits on the lake, just above the water. It catches the early morning sun and looks ethereal and peaceful. Photos never do it justice.

What do fog, smoke, and mist have in common? They are all real, visible, and affect us. And then they are gone. The fog and the mist blow away with a breeze or a temperature change. The smoke is gone on the wind, or when dry wood is added to the fire. This is a picture of what "vanity" means in Ecclesiastes.

What do the images of fog, smoke, or mist teach you about what "vanity" means in Ecclesiastes?

We often think of vanity as a mirror, or as a trait of someone who really likes to look at himself in that mirror. (“He’s so vain, always thinking about his appearance.”) Or maybe we think of it in terms of purpose. A vain effort is a pointless one and comes to nothing. Vain hopes are useless, a waste of time because they won’t come true.

In Ecclesiastes vanity means something else. It means a vapor, something temporal and passing, something there and gone. And ultimately this means it is something unfulfilling, something that does not satisfy our longings.

What are things in your life you have counted on to fulfill you but that do not satisfy?

What did Solomon (the author of Ecclesiastes) mean when he used this word? How is the way he used this word different than the way we often use it?

Understanding vanity is the key to understanding Ecclesiastes. When you read the opening words of the book it appears the preacher is extraordinarily pessimistic, saying that life is pointless. It could be read as “Nothing is worth anything.” But we have to ask ourselves, “Does understanding vanity that way square with the rest of the Bible?”

Consider what you know about the rest of the Bible; is Ecclesiastes saying “nothing is worth anything”? What else might “all is vanity” mean?

To understand what this means we need to consider two things: first, the whole of Scripture and second, the definition I gave for “vanity” a couple paragraphs ago.

Ecclesiastes

When we think of God's good creation (Genesis 1), God's promises, God's covenant with His people, God sending Jesus to rescue and redeem lost sinners like us, and the promise of Jesus's return, we know this cannot mean that life is pointless and not worth living. The whole Bible proclaims the value of living with God. So it must mean something else.

What Bible passages come to mind (stories, promises, teaching) that display the value and goodness of life with God?

So let's consider the definition of "vanity" I gave earlier: a vapor, something temporal and passing, something there and gone—something unfulfilling, something that does not satisfy our longings. This means that Ecclesiastes is not saying that life is worthless, but that nothing in this life ultimately satisfies. It isn't saying life is pointless, but that everything good in this life does not last and does not wholly fulfill us. While this isn't exactly joyous, it is quite different than a perspective that would make us give up on life and happiness.

How have you experienced the kind of "vanity" Ecclesiastes describes?

Ecclesiastes is not robbing us of hope. Rather, it is uprooting us from false hope and replanting us where true hope and happiness exist. Compelling us to lift our eyes to a different reality far better than the passing vapor of meaning we find in this life.

By erasing false or shallow hope, what is Ecclesiastes pointing us to instead?

In the next study we will look closely at a phrase Ecclesiastes uses time and again: "under the sun" (1:9). This is a clue as to both the context for why "all is vanity" and to where true, lasting happiness and fulfillment exist.

Personal Study 3

Under the Sun

A few years ago I had a minor surgery done. The doctor told me they weren't going to put me fully under anesthesia, but that local anesthetics wouldn't be strong enough. So they did what they called "twilight anesthesia," which means placing me in a state somewhere between awake and asleep. I have some vague, passing memories of moments throughout the surgery, but it mostly felt foggy and surreal.

If you are a sports fan, you've likely heard an older player described as "in the twilight of his career." It refers to those last few seasons when he is in decline but still has some game left. He can produce here and there, but the end is near.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:9.

*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.*

ECCLESIASTES 1:9

This verse introduces the phrase "under the sun." At first it's easy to read right past this little phrase and think nothing of it, but we can't do that. "Under the sun" is the context for the whole book of Ecclesiastes. It is used in some form over twenty times throughout the book as a reminder of the context, setting, and truths being written.

When you read "under the sun" what do you think it means?

What is the Bible trying to communicate?

What do anesthesia, old athletes, and "under the sun" have to do with each other? Twilight. Under the sun is not primarily a geographic description as much as it is a description of time and clarity, of lifespan and understanding. It's a duration more than a location. "Under the sun" is the Solomon's way of describing how we exist as human beings in a fallen world that we have entered into and will one day pass away from.

Ecclesiastes

Why is it significant that “under the sun” primarily describes time/lifespan and clarity/understanding? What is Ecclesiastes trying to focus our attention on?

Just as twilight anesthesia was foggy, disconnected, and sleepy, so life “under the sun” is foggy and disconnected from God’s perfect reality. We all feel that disconnect and experience it in disappointment and lack of fulfillment. We instinctively agree with Ecclesiastes that all is vanity under the sun. Everything is in the twilight of its lifespan, like the careers of those football players. It all passes away.

“Under the sun” has a geographic aspect to it as well; specifically it relates to the lives we lead during our time on earth. In the movie, *The Lion King* (cartoon edition, i.e. the good edition) Mufasa takes his son, Simba, up to Pride Rock and declares “Everything the light touches is our kingdom.” The same is true for our temporal, twilight realities—everywhere the sun rises and sets is the kingdom marked by vanity. Vanity is the state of being for the whole earth.

Reflect on the comprehensive nature of “under the sun.” It defines our location (on earth), our time (lifespan), and our understanding (foggy, incomplete). Why is life this way? What does the Bible have to say elsewhere to help you understand?

What Ecclesiastes is describing is the day-to-day, lived-out effects of the curse of Genesis 3. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve rebelled against God by deciding they wanted to function as their own gods, to have His knowledge and make their own decisions about what was best for them. As a consequence, God marked the world with a curse that touches every aspect of every part of life. Instead of perfect union and joyous relationship with Him, the world became marked by vanity under the sun—everything passes and fails to fulfill.

Read Genesis 3:14-19 and consider how the curses of sin define and describe life “under the sun.”

The curse is a separation from God, a breaking of relationship both in physical creation and in our souls. We are “under the sun,” shaped by mortality, entropy (the tendency toward decay and decline), and inertia (the tendency toward doing nothing and remaining unchanged). As you consider your mortality, don’t make it an intellectual exercise. The curse is a profound biblical reality that each of us feels in our bones and carries the weight of in our hearts. We know the disappointment and grief when nothing satisfies as we hoped it would, either because it’s defective or short-lived. We feel the strain in maintaining a close relationship with God, often feeling like He is far away. If we’re honest, we go through life with the sense that things are not as they ought to be.

When have you experienced the disappointment, grief, and pain of life “under the sun”? How is this feeling related to our separation from God?

The writer of Ecclesiastes is not fatalistic or a doomsayer. He is not wallowing in the misery of life nor is he a nihilistic screenwriter giving us an empty, depressing biopic. In the same way that he seeks to uproot false hopes by pointing out vanity, he seeks to lift our eyes to a different reality by describing life “under the sun.” He is pointing us to something better, a life that could be described as “above the sun.” Remember, Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. That means it is guiding us to see things the way God sees them and to connect to His heart, His desires, and His way of living.

How does the bleak background of life under the sun help us see the goodness and beauty of walking with God in this life?

Reading and studying Ecclesiastes in the context of vanity under the sun is vital for our understanding. You must keep it in mind and look for it throughout the verses of this dense book. It will keep you connected to God’s heart in this book—an invitation to look above the sun to the light and joy of life with Him. That perspective will allow us to live the life he has given us under the sun with peace, wisdom, and satisfaction.

How does the promise of a reality “above the sun” lift your heart?