

---

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE IN THE BIBLE

---

• STUDY GUIDE •  
WITH LEADER'S NOTES

# ECCLESIASTES

LIFE IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY

---

DAVID GIBSON

---



# **ECCLESIASTES: LIFE IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY**

David Gibson

**STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES**



New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404

[newgrowthpress.com](http://newgrowthpress.com)

Copyright © 2021 by David Gibson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

This study guide follows the author's approach to Ecclesiastes in his book *Destiny: Learning to Live by Preparing to Die* (IVP, 2016) and published in the USA as *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Crossway, 2017). Some of the material also first appeared on the Desiring God website and is used with permission.

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover Design: Faceout Books, [faceoutstudio.com](http://faceoutstudio.com)

Interior Design and Typesetting: Gretchen Logterman

Exercises and Application Questions: Jack Klumpenhower

ISBN: 978-1-64507-188-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-64507-189-1 (eBook)

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21      1 2 3 4 5

God the protector of all that trust in Thee,  
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy;  
increase and multiply upon us Thy mercy;  
that Thou being our ruler and guide,  
we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not  
the things eternal: Grant this heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's  
sake our Lord. Amen.

*The Collect, Fourth Sunday after Trinity,  
The Book of Common Prayer*

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Lesson 1 - Wisdom .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1–11	
Article: <i>Get Wise</i>	
Exercise: <i>The Upside-Down Life</i>	
<b>Lesson 2 - Happiness .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26	
Article: <i>How to Be Happy</i>	
Exercise: <i>What’s in Your Barns?</i>	
<b>Lesson 3 - Time .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 3	
Article: <i>My Times Are in His Hands</i>	
Exercise: <i>Fixing or Faith</i>	
<b>Lesson 4 - Justice .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 4	
Article: <i>Stop the Injustice</i>	
Exercise: <i>Responding to Injustice</i>	
<b>Lesson 5 - Words.....</b>	<b>48</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 5:1–7	
Article: <i>Get Real</i>	
Exercise: <i>Dreamers, Speakers, and Listeners</i>	
<b>Lesson 6 - Death .....</b>	<b>58</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 7:1–25	
Article: <i>Death and Its Gifts</i>	
Exercise: <i>Loosen Your Grip, Open Your Hands</i>	
<b>Lesson 7 - Life .....</b>	<b>69</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 9	
Article: <i>How to Live</i>	
Exercise: <i>The Full-Life List</i>	

Lesson 8 - <b>Planting</b> .....	<b>79</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 11:1–8	
Article: <i>Sow Bountifully</i>	
Exercise: <i>Reaching Out to Others</i>	
Lesson 9 - <b>Aging</b> .....	<b>89</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 11:9–12:8	
Article: <i>Before You Come Undone</i>	
Exercise: <i>Responses to Growing Old</i>	
Lesson 10 - <b>Eternity</b> .....	<b>100</b>
Text: Ecclesiastes 12:9–14	
Article: <i>Lose Not the Things Eternal</i>	
Exercise: <i>Eternity and Mission</i>	
<b>Leader’s Notes</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>120</b>



# INTRODUCTION

Many believers wonder why Ecclesiastes is even in the Bible. At first glance, it seems to offer little hope, which feels wrong for people who are trusting Jesus. But if you listen carefully to its wisdom, you will come to realize that its goal is to topple *false* hopes. Ecclesiastes wants to lead an insurrection in your heart. It will insist that you admit the wispy futility of your dreams for success, prosperity, pleasure, recognition, legacy, self-sufficiency, and even religious achievement. It will leave you with your hopes recalibrated. It will teach you to look at the life you have with new eyes and to look beyond this life and into eternity.

This means you can expect Ecclesiastes to make you more eager to know the Creator who put you in this often-frustrating world and more ready to practice his strange way of living in it. After all, your Creator has walked among us “under the sun,” but did so with eternity’s light as his guide. Just as you have no hope outside of him, you also have all hope in him. So, as with the other small-group resources in this series, this study guide will help you examine the Bible in a way that steers you toward this good news.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study guide will help you study Ecclesiastes within a group. Studying with others lets you benefit from what God is also teaching them, and it will give you encouragement and accountability



as you struggle together with the hard themes found in this part of the Bible.

Like Ecclesiastes itself, this study guide assumes that every group member is caught up to some extent in the emptiness of this world and has a daily need to look beyond it. With this in mind, the group should be a place to be open about sins, frustrations, and the hard realities of life—even the Christian life. Don't expect every participant to be equally quick to see and accept what Ecclesiastes is teaching. Ecclesiastes is clear that life is difficult and that faith is a constant challenge rather than an easy fix. It invites you to ponder its claims rather than rubber-stamp them with a too-quick "amen."

Each participant should have one of these study guides in order to join in reading and be able to work through the exercises during that part of the study. *The study leader should read through both the lesson and the leader's notes in the back of this book before each lesson begins.* No other preparation or homework is required. A few sections of Ecclesiastes are skipped over in the group discussions, so some group members may want to read these on their own between group meetings, but it is not necessary to do so in order to fully participate in the discussions.

There are ten lessons in this study guide. Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, perhaps a bit more if your group is large, and will include these elements:

**BIG IDEA.** This is a summary of the main point of the lesson.

**BIBLE CONVERSATION.** You will read a passage from Ecclesiastes and discuss it. As the heading suggests, the Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. In most cases, the questions will have several possible good answers and a few best answers. The leader's

notes at the back of this book provide some insights, but don't just turn there for the "right answer." At times you may want to see what the notes say, but always try to answer for yourself first by thinking about the Bible passage.

**ARTICLE.** This is the main teaching section of the lesson, written by the book's author.

**DISCUSSION.** The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life.

**EXERCISE.** The exercise is a section you will complete on your own during group time. You can write in the book if that helps you. You will then share some of what you learned with the group. If the group is large, it may help to split up to share the results of the exercise and to pray, so that everyone has a better opportunity to participate.

**WRAP-UP AND PRAYER.** Prayer is a critical part of the lesson because your spiritual growth will happen through God's work in you, not by your self-effort. You will be asking him to do that good work.

Ecclesiastes specializes in disruption. Expect the Holy Spirit to use it to dismantle your time-bound idols. Ask him now to replace them with a deeper faith in Jesus that thrusts you, perhaps bewildered, into a life in light of eternity.

Lesson

# 1

## WISDOM

### BIG IDEA

Godly wisdom begins with realizing that everything this world offers, including our lives here, is fleeting, unsatisfying, and without lasting impact—which leads us to abandon a “normal” way of living.

### BIBLE CONVERSATION *20 MINUTES*

Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom. This means it invites you to come to God more indirectly than you may be used to, by first pondering its sayings about life in the world. Traditionally, Ecclesiastes has been attributed to King Solomon since it mentions several biographical details that fit Israel’s wisdom-seeking king. But the author, whoever he is, chooses to refer to himself anonymously as simply “the Preacher” or “the Teacher,” and our study will follow his lead.

The Preacher begins with a summary statement: All is vanity (some translations say “meaningless” or “futility”). Since *vanity* can have many meanings, it’s important to understand that here you should think of *vanity* in terms of “something that will vanish” or “something that is all in vain.” The Hebrew word can mean

“mist” or “breath,” suggesting a vapor that will not last or is futile to try to grasp.

With this in mind, have someone read the Preacher’s opening poem aloud from **Ecclesiastes 1:1–11**. Then discuss the questions below.

What is your initial reaction to the Preacher’s opening statement that all things are a vanity of vanities? What have you seen in the world that might support this statement?

Read “between the lines” of the poem. List some of your deep longings it alludes to that are left unfulfilled in this world.

The Preacher observes that not only are we here and then gone, we leave no lasting impact anyone will remember for long. How might this thought change your approach to death?

\*\*\*\*

Now read the article from this study guide’s author. Take turns reading it aloud, switching readers at each paragraph break.

*Lesson*

# 1

ARTICLE

## GET WISE

*5 MINUTES*

Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs rather than a fool in his folly.

Proverbs 17:12

A wild animal can tear you limb from limb, but the Bible says it is nothing compared to the damage a fool can do.

Ecclesiastes, as part of the Bible's wisdom literature, is all about how to get wise for life. It is one of God's beautiful gifts to us, but it is a strange gift: it comes wrapped in riddles and conundrums. Ecclesiastes requires that we brace ourselves and learn to look at the world from a very different angle. Folly looks at the world normally, but wisdom gives us an unusual lens.

This is the gospel way. It turns things upside down, and inside out, and back to front. The first will be last, the least will be the greatest, and the way to find your life is to lose it.

### A BOOK WITH A SURPRISING GIFT

On September 15, 2001, the former Formula One race car driver Alex Zanardi was involved in a terrible crash which required



him to have both legs amputated. Fifteen years later, at the Rio Paralympics, Zanardi won gold in the handcycling event. On receiving his medal, Zanardi said, “I feel my life is a never-ending privilege. . . . Even my accident, what happened to me, became the greatest opportunity of my life.”<sup>1</sup> I sit up and take notice when I hear someone like Zanardi speak. There is always something beautiful—and disorientating—in finding a gift where we only thought to find tragedy.

In these studies, I want to suggest that God intends Ecclesiastes to have the same jolting effect in our lives. Zanardi’s words echo the worldview of the author of Ecclesiastes. Many have been baffled by his repeated refrain, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,” and by the jarring ways this part of God’s Word seems to speak about life in his world. But the brilliance of Ecclesiastes is to unearth gifts in that most awful, most strange, and most bitter place of all: death.

The biggest adjustment we have to make in reading Ecclesiastes is grasping what the Teacher is doing with the reality of our own coming death. He does not say death is a good thing. He does not deny it is a shattering curse; in fact, that reality courses through all he says. But he does believe that is not all there is to say about death. The tragic fact that one day I will be no more and be forgotten by the generations who follow can be, in Zanardi-like words, an invitation to the greatest opportunity of my life. If we really believe that we will die, and accept that coming reality, then we can learn how to live.

## A WORD WITH A STARTLING MEANING

The Teacher makes this point in many ways. His argument is not linear and logical, but more like an artist layering a canvas with different textures. One of his brush strokes appears already in the second verse of the book: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher;

vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The word *vanity* translates the Hebrew word *hebel* which some have rendered as “meaningless.” Such a reading poses many problems for us as we grapple with how life in God’s world could possibly be meaningless.

But a better translation of *hebel* is “mist” or “vapor.” In Psalm 39:4–5, David asks God to teach him the measure of his days and to let him know how fleeting he is. We often speak of time as fleeting, but David says that *he* is fleeting: “Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [*hebel*]!” In Psalm 144:4, David says again, “Man is like a breath [*hebel*]; his days are like a passing shadow.”

So the idea with this word *hebel* is not that life is pointless, an existential dead end devoid of purpose and meaning. Rather, almost everything about life—and especially our lives as human creatures in the world—has a morning mist-like quality. We come with an expiration date, and so do most other things. When you set human lives in the context of world history, stretching back behind us and rolling on past us, we are no more long-lasting than the dew on your lawn this morning. The Preacher wants you to make a coffee and sit down and think really hard about what that means for your life.

## A QUESTION WITH A SHOCKING ANSWER

To help this startling word *hebel* percolate into your system, the Preacher asks a stark question in the very next verse: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” The whole of Ecclesiastes is the Preacher’s own answer to this question, but his answer is a shock: Nothing. Or, at very best, not much.

The word *gain* here carries the idea of a surplus, something left over, a life that finishes in the black not the red. He’s referring to the innate desire we all have in one way or another to leave a legacy with our life, and for what we do to have a lasting significance beyond all the effort and toil we pour into our lives.

It's important to keep reading Ecclesiastes over and over until you can tune into this Preacher's unusual message. He is not saying that toil and effort and industry are worthless; on the contrary, he sees them as good gifts (see Ecclesiastes 9:9–10). Rather, right at the start of his long sermon, the Preacher is here flagging up something he knows to be true of every sinful human being this side of the fall: we want too much for ourselves from our labors.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, in his unique and inspired way, has seen into the human heart and observed the particular form of pride that first lurked in Eden and still resides in us all. We want to be like God by knowing it all and having it all, and we want to build our own towers to reach to the skies. If we think about death at all, it is something that happens to other people. For ourselves, we think we will live, we will work, we will achieve, we will go here and there and do this or that with our lives. And then we hear God speaking to us, through the words of this strange Preacher, that death comes to us all and the world has already long forgotten the people who came behind us and will soon forget the people who come after us.

Learning to hear this message as a gift might mean we have to unlearn some “normal” ways we think about life. But receiving Ecclesiastes as the sharp goad of a loving Shepherd (Ecclesiastes 12:11) is to embrace a wonderfully wise path to life.

## DISCUSSION *10 MINUTES*

What kind of legacy have you hoped to leave when your life here is over, and what “toils” have you worked at to try to make it happen?

At this point, do you feel you need to hear the jolting words of the Preacher? Explain.

*Lesson*

# 1

**EXERCISE**

## THE UPSIDE-DOWN LIFE

*20 MINUTES*

Life's normal responses to the vanity described in Ecclesiastes might include striving anyway, giving up, denial, or escaping into amusements. But as the article mentioned, the gospel teaches us to look at life in a new, unusual way that “turns things upside down, and inside out, and back to front.”

Jesus went through life that way. Although he is God, he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:6–7). When we stop grasping for the mist, we not only learn from Jesus but walk alongside him and enjoy his gifts.

This exercise introduces some ways the gospel life is not normal. Begin by completing the exercise on your own. Read through the descriptions of life with Jesus, and then answer the questions at the end. You'll finish by sharing some of your responses with the group.

**1. The way up is down.** Sharing in Christ brings the relief of letting go of your urge to get ahead. It changes the meaning of greatness.



It means sharing Jesus's life of service to others and surrender to God, trusting him to lift you up in due time.

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43–45)

**2. The path to life leads through death.** The sweetest fellowship comes when you die daily to your dreams of success, your self-reliance, and your need for worldly rewards and recognition—and finally when your body itself dies and you enter Christ's presence and then join in his resurrection.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:24–25)

**3. You must see what can't be seen.** Though your body is wasting away and your worldly dreams are a mist, Jesus is preparing for you an eternal, weighty, lasting glory.

We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18)

**4. True wisdom looks like foolishness.** The message that Jesus died for you sounds like foolishness that only weak, lowly, and despised people might accept. But if you believe it, God saves you through it.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?  
(1 Corinthians 1:20)

**5. When you are weak, you are strong.** Your very inability to take hold of what you want or even to serve God makes you rely more on him, the source of true strength.

I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

**6. Growth comes by God's power, not willpower.** It's hard to take the low place, die to self, welcome weakness, and live for what is unseen. Striving to achieve such a life for yourself is just as futile as any other self-focused striving. Instead, you receive this life from God, as a gift, as you draw near to him daily.

“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Which description of the gospel's unusual way to live feels hardest to you? If you can, explain why. \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

Which description fits a way you have already noticed God working in you. Note how. \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

Which Bible passage above, taken along with Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, most encourages you to know Jesus better. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

When the group is ready, share some of your responses.

## WRAP-UP AND PRAYER *10 MINUTES*

Of course, other parts of the Bible teach us that in Christ we do have both lasting impact and newness: “In the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58), and “Behold, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5). But the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is not so clumsy as to tell us this up front. He will make us ponder and squirm and struggle with the world first. This will be the focus of our next few lessons.

You might use your closing prayer time together to pray for the coming lessons in this study, asking God to use the sharp words of Ecclesiastes to prick you in helpful ways.