

# One

## *Contentment Cannot Be Found “Under the Sun”*

**A**s a nineteen-year-old woman at Northwestern University, I had a three-part plan for fulfillment:

1. I would get thin and gorgeous so that
2. I could snare a sexy man with a bright financial future so that
3. we could raise beautiful children in an elaborate house overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

If you have the broad perspective of life—that is, a perspective that includes God and eternity—you realize how narrow my perspective was. You also can see that I was headed for disappointment. But I, like most people, had blinders on. I plunged headlong into various pursuits “under the sun” only to discover that my dreams of fulfillment dissolved like cotton candy.

Much of the book of Ecclesiastes is from the perspective of one who has done us the favor of wearing these blinders so that we can see how futile this perspective is, how it only leads to discontent. Whenever you see the phrase “under the sun” in Ecclesiastes, recognize that the speaker has put on the narrow perspective. He tries to find contentment by pursuing status, wealth, entertainment, and other earthly treasures, but each time he is surprised by the emptiness of it all.

By the age of twenty-one, I’d achieved my first two goals: I was thin and stayed thin long enough to snare a sexy, promising premed student. And though we were blessed with our first beautiful child, reality surprised me. Steve’s hours were long, and our baby had colic. My life seemed to consist of walking the baby, cleaning our apartment, changing diapers, and washing dishes. If someone had shown me Ecclesiastes 1:9 at that time, I’d have thought, *Solomon must have experienced housework!*

*What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.*

Life seemed so repetitive. Were the high points in my life going to be an occasional dinner out or a new sofa? Like Solomon, I began to despair. Life was so meaningless!

Ecclesiastes gives wisdom to the secular person, forcing her to face the futility of a life apart from God. However, it also offers wisdom for the believer. For we, like unbelievers, can fall into the trap of turning to things for satisfaction. Solomon's warning is the same to both:

*None will find contentment, purpose, joy, or peace of mind of any lasting sort apart from him. (Eccl. 2:25b, T. M. Moore)*

Plunging into a book as challenging as Ecclesiastes without a guide is as foolish as hiking into the deep woods without a map, mosquito repellent, or water. This week we'll get you ready so that your hike will be enjoyable and fruitful.

## *WARMUP*

Be open to sharing your name, a little about yourself, and what you hope to learn from the group.

## *Memory Work*

You have two weeks to do this memory work.

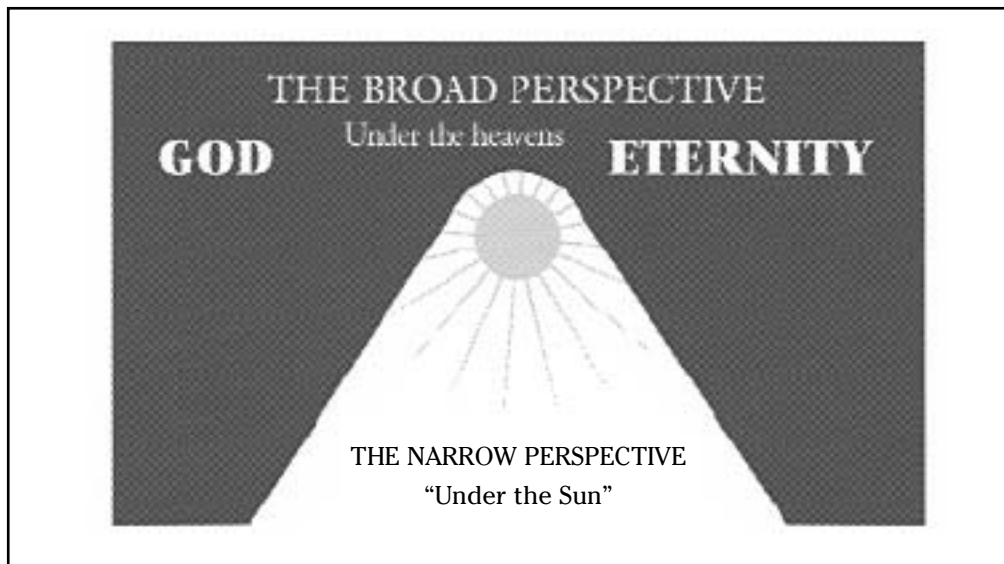
*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Eccl. 2:10–11)*

## *Praise*

Each day, before you study, prepare your heart with worship.

## *Scripture Study*

The Scripture study is divided into five days for personal quiet times with the Lord.



## DAY 1

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### *How Could Someone So Wise Be So Foolish?*

Is Solomon the author of Ecclesiastes? Although the text clearly says he is, some experts disagree. Their objections, however, can be satisfied. The first objection involves some Aramaic words from the opening and closing of the book that post-dated Solomon. But the book could easily have been opened and closed by an editor who came after Solomon. The bulk of the book is Solomon’s words—and it certainly is Solomon’s story. The second objection questions how the wisest man on earth could have had such an enormous lapse during which he behaved so foolishly. If you aren’t familiar with Solomon’s story, you’ll learn it today. He did, indeed, throw away much of his life by ignoring God’s warning. But the true dividing line between a wise man and a fool is not an impeccable record, for none of us in our depravity have that. The difference is in our ability to truly repent, admit our folly, and do a genuine U-turn.

Solomon repents and humbly writes his memoirs, not glossing over his failures, but instead, allowing them to serve as a clear warning to others. He wears his failures like a scarlet letter and confesses openly to all of us. Many of us will never have the money or the power to plunge headlong into the various pursuits Solomon did, but we can learn, if we are wise, from his testimony that it was like “feeding on the wind.” Why crave what can never satisfy?

1. In 1 Kings 2:1–4, what charge did David, Solomon’s father, give to him and why?

2. In 1 Kings 3:1, what did Solomon do? Why do you think he did that?

This was Solomon's first foreign wife. Some think she was a convert, so Solomon was not in disobedience. More likely this was a politically motivated marriage that did result in peace with that neighbor. This account may be out of chronological sequence, but it serves as a portent of things to come. God cautions against doing something wrong because of expediency. He also has some special warnings for kings:

*The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.*  
(Deut. 17:16–17)

3. What are some of the things kings were not to do according to this passage from Deuteronomy?

4. Read 1 Kings 3:2–15.

A. How did Solomon show his love for the Lord? What weakness did he display?  
(v. 3)

B. How do you show your love for the Lord? What weakness do you also display?

C. How did Solomon show a generosity of spirit in giving to the Lord? (v. 4)

D. How did the Lord appear to Solomon, and what did He say? (v. 5)

E. For what does Solomon praise the Lord? (v. 6)

- F. How does Solomon describe himself in verse 7? What do you think he means by this?
- G. What is Solomon's one request and why? (vv. 8-9)
- H. How does the Lord feel about this? Why? (vv. 10-12)
- I. Why is humility so important to God?
- J. What other blessings does God give to Solomon and why?
5. How is Solomon's wisdom immediately demonstrated according to 1 Kings 3:16-28?
6. According to 1 Kings 9:10, what are some of the things Solomon did in the next twenty years?
7. Read 1 Kings 11:1-6.
- A. How many other foreign women did Solomon love besides the Pharaoh's daughter?
- B. Describe how this was disobedience according to this text?
- C. According to the text, what happened to Solomon as he grew old and why?

8. Why do you think that a man who possessed such great wisdom had such a huge lapse?
  
9. Often our greatest blessings are also our greatest dangers. How might that have been true in Solomon's life?
  
10. As you reflect on your life with all its God-given blessings and wisdom, is there any area where you feel you have failed significantly?
  
11. How might the Lord still bring beauty out of the ashes of your failure?

## DAY 2

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### *Take Heed, Lest You Also Fall*

If we think we could never fall like Solomon did, then we are not in touch with our own frailty. Let us not think that because we may have been blessed with godly parents, scriptural knowledge, or a certain degree of common sense, that we are not vulnerable. We have an enemy who is constantly on the prowl, looking for ways to make God look bad through our lives. If we are too proud to recognize the depth of our depravity, we are likely to fall right into the enemy's traps. When Solomon was young, he recognized his great need for God, but as he grew older he failed to continue to rely on the Lord. May this be a lesson to us all.

### *Memory Work*

Continue memorizing this week's verses.

## *Praise*

Sing songs to prepare your heart for the Word.

12. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1–14.

A. How were God's people richly blessed? (v. 1–4)

B. What happened to them? (v. 5)

C. Why does Scripture tell us about their failures? (v. 6)

D. What four things are we specifically told not to do? (vv. 7–10)

E. Why were the moral failures of our believing ancestors recorded? (v. 11)

F. What should we learn from this? (v. 12)

G. Find the warning, the promise, and the plan in verse 13.

H. How would you apply this in an area where you tend to be weak?

I. What is the summary warning in verse 14?

## DAY 3

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### *Approaching Poetry in the Bible*

The book of Ecclesiastes is in the poetry section of the Old Testament. (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are all poetical literature.) The word *literally* means “according to the literature.” In other words, if you are going to interpret Scripture accurately and literally, it needs to be according to the literature or genre. You don’t, for example, read a history book in the same way you would read a sonnet. You can take all the words in prose at face value, but not so with poetry. Instead, with poetry, you look for the central meaning. When the psalmist tells us, for example, that we can hide under the shelter of God’s wings, he isn’t saying God has actual wings but that He longs for us to come close and trust Him. Poetry uses word pictures and metaphors to penetrate the heart and memory.

### *Memory Work*

Prepare your heart by reviewing your memory verses.

### *Praise*

Singing praises to the Lord will help get you ready for this lesson.

13. Read the prose account (Ex. 14:26–31) and then the poetry account (Ex. 15:1–12) of the dividing of the Red Sea.
  - A. In what ways are these two accounts similar?
  
  - B. In what ways are they different?
  
  - C. Explain how the prose account appeals to the mind without an emphasis on emotion or word pictures.
  
  - D. What word pictures or emotions do you find in the poetry account? How does this appeal to the heart and stay in the memory?
  
  - E. Why do you think the Lord uses two different forms of literature to explain the same event?



Note how you don't take all the words in poetry at face value. When Moses says, "You blew with your breath, and the sea covered them" (Ex. 15:10), you don't take the words at face value, for God didn't really come down and blow with cheeks puffed out. This is a word picture to convey the intimate involvement and power of God. You are interpreting it literally, however, if you understand that *literally* means "according to the literature."

You will also find poetry within other books, just as we did in Exodus, which is in the historical section of the Old Testament. Also, the prophetic books (the last section of the Old Testament) have many poetical sections within them.

14. What books in the Old Testament are in the poetry section?

15. What is the value of poetry? How might you read it differently than prose?

Ecclesiastes is, in effect, a poetic drama. When Solomon wants to show us the futility of living life apart from God, he takes that perspective so that we can truly enter into his desperate emotions. He actually didn't have that perspective anymore, and throughout you will see comments on what he came to realize. It is vital to understand how he keeps putting on these distorted earthbound glasses and then taking them off again as he remembers God. You could easily misinterpret Ecclesiastes. If you take these verses out of context, it will make you wonder about the consistency of Scripture! For example, when he puts on his distorted glasses he says,

- A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink ... (2:24a)
- A man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. (3:19b)

There are also those who think Solomon wanders sadly through the whole book, only coming to his senses at the end. But that is not true either, and this is where you will find T. M. Moore's paraphrase helpful. Solomon is continually realizing that this life is hard, and this book is a healthy dose of reality for those of us who are idealists with our heads in the clouds. We continually live with the pain of a fallen world and a depraved nature. But Solomon also continually shows us that with the wisdom of God, there is hope and an inextinguishable joy in the Lord despite great sorrow.

16. Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 in Moore's paraphrase, which you will find in the center of this guide. Read it carefully. Then go back and underline or highlight phrases that are filled with the emotion of poetry. In the margin, describe the emotion you sense.

In the discussion group, turn to this paraphrase and have several participants share their observations.

17. Keep a bookmark (or your thumb!) in the paraphrase, for you will be turning back and forth. Look again at Ecclesiastes 1:1–11.

A. With what four words does this paraphrase of Ecclesiastes begin? Why is this important in understanding the perspective?

B. Before Solomon tells us his story, he tells us the end in verse 2. Describe it.

C. Solomon moves back in time, re-enacting his life. He puts the blinders on that he was wearing during this backslidden time. What questions does he ask? What are the implied answers? (v. 3)

D. What impact does he see most people making on this world? (v. 4)

E. Where does he look first? What does he see that discourages him? (vv. 5–7)

F. What conclusions does he come to? (vv. 8–11)

18. How might a person misinterpret Ecclesiastes by failing to understand the genre? Give an example from this opening section.

## DAY 4

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### *The Narrow Perspective*

Jan Holderness, a doctor's wife, describes how she felt before she came to Christ:

At thirty-six years old, I was depressed. The money, things, children, home, husband, clubs, cars, and cleaning women couldn't give me the utopia I had always wanted and expected.

The things "under the sun" were never intended to satisfy. As St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You" (Augustine's Confessions). Or, as Solomon himself put it when he takes off his blinders in Ecclesiastes 3:11: "God has put eternity in our hearts." Our longing is for God, but as long as we are wearing blinders, as long as our efforts are for things "under the sun," we will never find contentment. Instead, we will find we are "chasing the wind."

This narrow perspective, identified by the phrase "under the sun," occurs dozens of times in Ecclesiastes.

### *Memory Work*

Continue memorizing this week's verses.

### *Praise*

Prepare your heart with songs (singing with your heart and mind) before you begin reading in the Word.

Read the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes in your own translation, highlighting the phrase "under the sun" wherever you see it.

19. Describe the narrow or "under the sun" outlook in terms of perspective, feelings, and conclusions.
  
20. Have you ever experienced a time when you were limited to the narrow perspective? If so, share something about it.
  
21. Fill in the blank spaces in the following chart. Under "Despair," what bleak question or statement is articulated? Under "Hope," explain how bringing the broad perspective of God and eternity into the equation changes everything.

	<u>DESPAIR (NARROW VIEW)</u>	<u>HOPE (BROAD VIEW)</u>
1:3	What do we really gain from all our hard work?	Anything we do for the Lord will last eternally.
1:9		
1:14		
2:11		
2:17-20		
2:21-23		

## DAY 5

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### *The Broad Perspective*

Kay Arthur left her first husband and went from one man to another in search of unconditional love. When she heard about the reality of God's judgment, she felt sick because she couldn't seem to change. One night she collapsed on her knees, cried out to God, and received Jesus, the Prince of Peace. In *Lord, Heal My Hurts* (Multnomah, 81) she writes,

In the days that followed, I knew I had been set free. My perspective on life was different. I had a hunger for the Word of God. And wonder of wonders, I could understand it. I was no longer a slave. I had the power to say no and to live according to God's commandments.

Contentment is not based on circumstances, but on perspective. T. M. Moore paraphrases Ecclesiastes 1:25 like this:

*I will tell you here and now, before you think me cynical, that none will find contentment, purpose, joy, or peace of mind of any lasting sort apart from him.*

Because Solomon is taking us into a drama, he can also take off the blinders, take us into his present life, and give us a broad perspective in which he has a much clearer vision about what is important. It is, however, at least interesting to note that even the

broad vision is still not truly clear, for Solomon seems to see “as through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). The word used for God throughout Ecclesiastes is *Elohim*, which designates deity, rather than the faithful *Jehovah*, the God of the covenant and promise. In a sense the book of Ecclesiastes is a drumbeat preparing the way for the strong light of Christ. Yet the broad view in Ecclesiastes does show us the secrets of contentment.

## *Memory Work*

Review your memory verses.

## *Praise*

Prepare your heart with praise.

22. Read Ecclesiastes 2:24—3:1 in your translation. What turn in perspective do you note?

23. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–17 in your translation. Write down any phrases that show the broad perspective.

24. If time permits, share one thing you will remember from this lesson.

## *Prayer Time*

Many people are intimidated by the idea of praying out loud. This guide will be gentle, leading you into this gradually. And no one will ever be forced to pray out loud.

Share a personal request with the others in your group such as, “I would like to be more disciplined about spending time with God” or “I need wisdom as a mother.” Write these requests down, and pray for each other at home.

Close by singing “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” together.