



How to use *Explore*

In this issue

The 92 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

Sometimes a prayer section will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

1
Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2
Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3
Ask God to help you understand

4
Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5
Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

6
Pray about what you have read

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Opening up the Bible

Welcome

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Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way that the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the One who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☛ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're not a "morning person", then last thing

at night or a mid-morning break may suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☛ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see *Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☛ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, you should try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☛ *Share:* As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts*: better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything, because it's about developing your relationship with the living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim'.



ECCLESIASTES: Pointless?

How do we make sense of life in a broken world where the bad guys always seem to get away with it? It happened in the teacher's day too, and he shares his wisdom on injustice.

Justice at last!

Life “under the sun”—life in a broken world ruined by sin—is hard and frustrating for all of us. Now, the teacher tackles one area which we find especially hard. Injustice!

Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-17

- ❓ *In verse 16, what does the teacher see as he looks at his world?*
- ❓ *How do we still see these things today?*
- ❓ *Why is injustice so hard for us to deal with?*
- ❓ *What hope does the writer have though in verse 17?*
- ❓ *Why is the day of judgment good news?*

Injustice in any aspect of life is hard to deal with. At work, at school, even in church. When people do wrong and hurtful things and get away with it, it's painful and disheartening. We long for justice to be done and be seen to be done! Wonderfully but uncomfortably, the teacher knows that God will hold *everyone* to account.

The day of judgment shows us *we matter* to God. If there was no judgment, it would show that God doesn't care. Wrongdoers would get off scot-free and it wouldn't matter. But because God is just and good, it matters to him that justice is done. God will right all the wrongs. So as God's people cry for justice, one day that prayer will be answered fully. See for example 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7.

- ❓ *How does the future fact of the day of judgment help us deal with the injustices we experience today?*

Is death the end?

The teacher moves on to think about death.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:18-22

- ❓ *What is the teacher's assessment in verses 18-20?*
- ❓ *What advice does he give in verse 22?*

The teacher will speak about our mortality a number of times in his book. He seems to want us to reflect on it for our spiritual good. Remember 3:1-8, where we are encouraged to view our lives as a whole.

Apply

The teacher is wise, but he didn't have the full picture. The Bible's story continues after him and sheds light into the dark corners

How does the resurrection of Jesus change the way we view death? For help see John 5:24-26.

- ❓ *How does the resurrection hope change the way we view our lives before death?*

Pray

Pray to God about any injustices you face. Thank him that he is a God of justice. Ask for courage to trust him in the hardship.



Facing up to reality

When we take a good long look at our world, what do we see? “Meaningless” is the teacher’s assessment! But why?

The teacher is taking us on a tour of life as he sees it—life under the sun. In chapter 4, he’s going to show us four aspects of life, and four times he will comment that what he sees is “meaningless”. The teacher has used this word before to describe the world he sees around him. The Hebrew word is “*hevel*”, and it means something that is fleeting, elusive, dissatisfying and frustrating. It describes the life we experience in a sin-ridden, broken world. It’s not all the Bible says about life, but the teacher’s perspective is a helpful reminder that even for believers, life can be hard.

What I saw

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

- ❓ *What does the teacher see in verse 1?*
- ❓ *Do you agree with his assessment? If yes, what examples can you give?*

Verses 2 and 3 express the raw emotions of a man who is shocked by what he sees.

- ❓ *Can you understand his feelings as you look at the world?*

TIME OUT

Oppression of the weak is all around us, and it *should* shock us when we see and hear about such things. Believers must never close their eyes to the sad realities of the world around us, nor offer trite or simple answers.

Read Romans 12:14-21

- ❓ *How might Paul’s words to believers in Rome help us when we face hardship or see others facing it?*

Remember though what the teacher taught us in Ecclesiastes 3:17. God won’t ignore such wrongs for ever! But for now it is a sad reality.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

- ❓ *What does the teacher show us about the wrong and right use of toil and achievement in verses 4-6?*
- ❓ *How is the story in verses 13-16 an illustration of the dangers of achievement and ambition?*
- ❓ *What key life principle do verses 7-12 teach us?*
- ❓ *How might this principle apply to you in your local church? What might it look like in practice to help and carry one another?*

Pray

Chapter 4 shows us a number of things that are meaningless in this broken world. But it also shows us some good things to do in response. Pray for the strength to respond to the frustration of this world in a godly, contented and loving way.



The morning after

Our Christian faith allows us to be confident in all circumstances.

Read Psalm 5

❓ *How would you sum up David's attitude towards his enemies?*

Things always look different in the morning. This psalm probably continues from the previous two. If so, there has been a remarkable turnaround in his thinking. Previously, he was overwhelmed with the number of his enemies (Psalm 3:1). Now, he is confident that they will not be able to stand before his King and God.

A confident plea

David's prayer is one of confidence. Yes, he asks to be heard (Psalm 5:2). But within the space of a few lines, he expresses an assurance that God will hear him (v 3). What has made the difference? It is nothing less than the character of God.

TIME OUT

❓ *What is it about God's character that should make us confident about our prayers?*

David's confidence is more than an assurance of answered prayer. He is also confident in the Lord's justice over his enemies (v 4-6). The language is strong: God cannot abide wickedness. That's why David is sure that he will make it back to the temple (v 7).

A realistic plea

The morning allows David to see things more clearly. His enemies have not disappeared—and so he needs to make two requests of his God. First, he needs to ask God not to let him follow the same paths (v 8). Second, he needs to ask God to deal with his enemies appropriately (v 9-10).

A public plea

In the last part of the psalm, David is praying in public. He is encouraging the Lord's people to share his confidence tinged with realism. He needs to encourage his people to find both their joy and protection in their God.

This song of confidence and realism has been sung by a greater anointed King: Jesus. God has delivered him from his enemies and now he leads us, his spiritual choir, in the same refrain.

Apply

Reflect on situations where Christians need to share both the confidence and realism of this psalm.

❓ *How do these two need to be held together in your own life, with its particular challenges?*

Fearing God

For all the teacher has said so far about the world around him, we might be forgiven for thinking that he's forgotten about God.

But this passage shows us that a believer's relationship with God is vital to understanding the world around us. It's striking that what we read here comes immediately after chapter 4 with its false worship of self and ambition. Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 speaks of true worship. The teacher's message about God can be summed up by two words: "listen" (v 1) and "fear" (v 7).

Listening to God

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-3

- ❓ *What is the most important thing we need to do according to the teacher in verse 1?*
- ❓ *What reason does he give for being humble before God in verse 2?*
- ❓ *How might we be in danger of offering the "sacrifice of fools"?*
- ❓ *What do you think it means in practice to listen to God?*

The teacher has spent a good deal of his time showing us what is wrong with the world. But it would be very easy for us to go away from him thinking the world has more to say than God. Rather, listening to God is more important than listening to the world around us! For the teacher, the law of God in the Old Testament was God's word. For us, the whole Bible is God's word to us. See, for example, 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Apply

- ❓ *Why is it so important to listen to God rather than the world?*
- ❓ *What might be the signs that you are listening more to the world than God?*

Fearing God

Read Ecclesiastes 5:4-7

- ❓ *What advice does the teacher give us in verses 4-6?*
- ❓ *Why are unfulfilled vows dangerous?*
- ❓ *What do you think it means to fear God?*

For help, read **Psalm 112:1** and **Deuteronomy 10:12** and **20**.

- ❓ *Why is the fear of God the antidote to rash vows?*

TIME OUT

Jesus also talked about making vows.

Read Matthew 5:33-37

- ❓ *How do the teacher's words and Jesus' dovetail together?*

Listening to God and fearing him are vital for our spiritual health in a world that is often painful and feels meaningless. God's word and his character help us to see the world as it is, and enable us to find our hope and strength in him.



Just a little bit more...

Question: How much money does a person need to be satisfied?

Answer: Just a little bit more!

The teacher has been showing us the frustration and pain of living in a broken world: a world wrecked by sin, the rebellion of human beings against God. But maybe wealth is the answer to real satisfaction? Perhaps we should gain as much as we can, then we can enjoy life and find meaning? The teacher shows us the folly of that pursuit.

Value judgments

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

- ❓ *What does the teacher say is the problem with wealth in verses 10-14?*
- ❓ *What perspective does he remind us of in verses 15-17?*
- ❓ *How does the teacher encourage us to think about wealth in a more positive way in verses 18-20?*

▼ Apply

The Bible is not against wealth in itself. The problem comes when we believe it will replace God in giving us real satisfaction.

All wealth is a gift from God, however much we have. The key is to find our joy in God and to be thankful for the gifts he gives us—whether that is wealth or poverty.

TIME OUT

Paul will give you more help on this subject.

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19

- ❓ *Why is wealth a potential danger for us?*
- ❓ *How can you cultivate an attitude of being content with what you have, as a gift of God?*
- ❓ *What practical steps can you take to be more thankful?*

Why ingratitude is so sad

Read Ecclesiastes 6:1-9

- ❓ *What problem does the teacher describe in verses 1-3?*
- ❓ *Verse 7 sums up the big issue in pursuing wealth. What is it?*

The writer uses a striking and moving picture in verses 3-6 of a stillborn child. It's important to realise that he's not minimising the deep pain of losing a child. That's not his point, and at many points in his book he reflects on the sadness of grief and death. He's making a different point here—that a human being who doesn't experience the pain of a discontented life is in a better position. They are at rest. An ungrateful dissatisfied person is enduring an awful life. Better not to know life than to experience a joyless one. That's his striking, if rather disturbing, point.

▲ Pray

Thank God for the gifts he's given you. Ask him to guard your heart from ingratitude and a dissatisfied desire for more.



An unexpected preacher

We often seek wisdom from experts in the relevant field. But now the teacher turns to someone whose wisdom we might not expect to receive!

Read Ecclesiastes 6:10-12

- ❓ *These verses mark the halfway point in the book. How do they sum up some of the teacher's lessons so far?*
- ❓ *What have been the most important lessons for you in chapters 1 – 6?*

The teacher is helping us to see that life in a fallen world is beyond our control. Sad and difficult things are realities for believers, even if there are many good gifts from our Creator to rejoice in. How should we live in response? One response is to live life as well as we can with no thought to the future. The other way, is to accept the teacher's assessment, and seek to live wisely in God's world. Chapter 7 helps us to do that. It's different in tone from other chapters and feels more like Proverbs. But as ever, the teacher's lessons can be a little bit different!

Unexpected preacher

Read Ecclesiastes 7:1-6

- ❓ *What do you think is the writer's point in verses 1-2 as he speaks about the "day of death" and the "house of mourning"?*
- ❓ *Why is he negative about a "house of feasting" (v 2) or the songs and laughter of fools (v 5-6)?*

The wise person, according to the teacher, is someone who reflects on their mortality, and uses that reflection to live a useful and fruitful life in God's service. The teacher is

not encouraging us to be morbid or grumpy. After all, he often counsels us to enjoy the good gifts God has given us. He's simply inviting us to ponder the length of our days and to live in the light of that reality.

Apply

- ❓ *How might reflecting on your mortality enable you to live a more focused and fruitful life for God?*
- ❓ *How might you enjoy the life God has given you, without allowing your heart to be captivated by pleasure in a foolish way?*

Wisdom to live by

Read Ecclesiastes 7:7-14

- ❓ *What do each of the four wisdom sayings in verses 7-12 (v 7, 8-9, 10 and 11-12) say to you about living wisely in God's world?*
- ❓ *Why is nostalgia an unwise thing for a believer to indulge in?*
- ❓ *How might verses 13-14 be a helpful summary of what we've considered in this section of Ecclesiastes?*



The limits of wisdom

We might think that wisdom is the way forward in a broken world—but even wisdom has its limits!

The teacher's investigation continues, but now he has set his piercing gaze on human nature and human reason.

Get real about people

Read Ecclesiastes 7:15-22

- ❓ *What problem does the teacher see in the world around him in verse 15?*
- ❓ *In what way is this a realistic assessment of a world marred by sin?*
- ❓ *How do verses 16-20 reveal what human nature is really like?*
- ❓ *What is the teacher's answer to living wisely according to verse 18?*

▼ Apply

At first, verse 16 might be a bit baffling. But the teacher appears to be thinking of two extremes—the self-righteous person who thinks they are better than they are; and the person who ignores all restraint. Both, it turns out, are wrong.

Having a biblical understanding of human nature is important in keeping us from despair. There is no one righteous before God (v 20). **Read Romans 3:9-12**, where Paul uses similar language to explain our sin. But the apostle goes on in verses 23-24 to explain how we can be saved. The teacher's realistic assessment of our hearts and the world in Ecclesiastes should lead us to seek the rescue we all need in Jesus.

❓ *How does having a biblical understanding of sinful human nature keep us from despair?*

❓ *How might such a view enable you to understand yourself and others better?*

❓ *How does the teacher lay the ground for the good news of Jesus?*

Get real about wisdom

Read Ecclesiastes 7:23-29

❓ *What problem does the teacher find in his search for wisdom?*

❓ *Why is the teacher's discovery a helpful reminder of the limits of human reason?*

❓ *What other things does he discover about humankind in verses 26-29?*

These verses could be misunderstood as being derogatory towards women. It seems though that the teacher is relating his personal discoveries to us. It's not a blanket statement about all women, just as it's not everything the Bible says about men. The Bible gives us examples of both godly men and women. But both men and women are sinners in need of mercy and grace—see verse 29.

▲ Pray

Thank God for this reminder of our sin and brokenness. Praise God for the forgiveness and rescue we have in Jesus.



Who's in charge?

Living in a fallen world doesn't mean we ignore all authority. But even good monarchs and good governments have their limits.

One of the topics that the teacher has wrestled with already is the topic of injustice. In a broken and messed-up world, sometimes the wicked seem to avoid justice, and the godly suffer hard times. It doesn't seem to make sense to him, nor does it seem fair. Verse 14 sums up his feelings in this chapter. But his reflection in chapter 8 does give us a bit more hope.

The wise way to view authority

Read Ecclesiastes 8:1-8

- ❓ *What does the teacher say is the right way to view the king—in our context, the human authorities placed over us?*
- ❓ *What does he say will happen if we do this?*

Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books of the Bible (like Proverbs, Song of Songs and Job). In the wisdom books, the writers set out general principles for living wisely in God's world. It's not law, and that means there can be exceptions. Here, for example, obeying the king's command does not always mean we won't come to any harm (Ecclesiastes 8:5). But the general principle of wisdom is right—obedience to authorities put in place by God, like a king or a government, is the godly thing to do.

TIME OUT

Read Romans 13:1-5

- ❓ *How does Paul help us to see the role of government in a fallen world?*
- ❓ *What might it mean for you to obey the authorities in your situation in life?*
- ❓ *In what circumstances might it be the godly thing to disobey the authorities?*

Remember who's really in charge

Read Ecclesiastes 8:9-17

- ❓ *What does the teacher see when he looks at the world he lives in (v 9-10, 14)?*
- ❓ *How does this tally with your experiences of the world?*
- ❓ *The teacher still has hope. What is that hope in verses 12-13?*
- ❓ *In the light of all this, what is the teacher's advice in verse 15?*
- ❓ *How can a believer realistically enjoy life when there is so much injustice and sadness in the world?*

Pray

Praise God that there is a day of judgment to come.

Pray for wisdom to honour God in how you submit to authority.

Pray for contentment and joy in the good things he has given you.



Where we're all heading

Death is a certainty for us all at some point. But how are believers to respond to that reality?

One of the challenges of studying Ecclesiastes is that the teacher sometimes revisits subjects he has dealt with earlier. Perhaps one reason for this is that life isn't neat and tidy—it's messy. This is one of the teacher's reasons for writing. He's helping us to think wisely about our lives, by showing us we can't understand everything. In chapter 9, the teacher revisits the theme of death. He wants us to think seriously about the end of our lives, so we live wisely in the present.

The stark reality

Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-6, 11-12

- ❓ *What do you think the teacher means by the fact that the righteous and wise are in God's hands, verse 1?*
- ❓ *How might that be reassuring in a chapter that teaches us about death?*
- ❓ *What is the teacher's stark reminder in verses 2-6?*
- ❓ *What is the other point the teacher makes about death in verse 12?*

▼ Apply

We've looked at the topic of death a few times in our studies in Ecclesiastes.

- ❓ *Why do you think it's something the teacher keeps coming back to?*
- ❓ *Why might it be helpful for us to think about death more than we do?*
- ❓ *In what ways do we seek to ignore the*

stark reality the teacher puts before us in this chapter?

A different attitude

Read Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

Having reminded us of our deaths, we might think the teacher is being unnecessarily morbid.

- ❓ *But what does he tell us to do in v 7-10?*
- ❓ *How can we both enjoy life, but also live in the knowledge that one day we will die?*
- ❓ *What do these verses teach us about God?*

▼ Apply

The teacher had God's wisdom, but he'd not yet seen the fulfilment of God's promises in Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus transforms the way we think about our death.

For more help, **read 1 Corinthians 15:51-58**. Paul is speaking about the future hope we have because of the resurrection of Jesus.

- ❓ *How does Jesus' defeat of death shape the way we now view our death?*
- ❓ *How does it shape the way we view our lives before then?*

▲ Pray

Pray you'd take the teacher's warnings seriously and live life wisely in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

