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FOR THE STUDENT

Thank you for joining us as we dig into Ecclesiastes this semester! This Bible study is designed to be used by Cross Impact P.O.W.E.R. groups, which are explained on the following pages. As you prepare for each group meeting, you are encouraged to read through the upcoming passage and lesson ahead of time. As you read, answer the “Stop and Think” questions and make notes throughout the lesson. If you have questions, feel free to write them down and discuss them with your P.O.W.E.R. group at the next meeting.

Our driving mission at Cross Impact is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. If you do not have a personal relationship with God through Christ, please do not hesitate to approach your P.O.W.E.R. group leader. He or she would be privileged to share with you what it means to be a true disciple of Christ. We invite you also to read the verses about the gospel at the end of this booklet.

Cross Impact IUPUI Officers, 2014-2015

How to get the most out of this study:

- A. Pray. Ask God to teach you and to give you understanding as you go through this study on Ecclesiastes.
- B. Read Ecclesiastes. Spend time in it, meditate on it, and worship God through it. We encourage you to read through the entire book in one sitting before beginning the lessons.
- C. Allow adequate time to study and meditate over each lesson. Take one lesson a week to allow adequate time to study and meditate over each lesson.
- D. Choose one verse from each lesson to memorize each week.

PHILOSOPHY OF P.O.W.E.R GROUPS

Prayer – The foundation of all spiritual relationships is praying for and with one another.

1. Prayer should be present at every POWER group get-together (Matt. 7:7-8, Phil. 4:4-8).
2. Encourage/insist that the group lift one-another in prayer (Gal. 6:2, James 5:16, Heb. 13:18).
3. Each group member is responsible for following up on prayer requests. This encourages each other and shows mutual care and faithfulness.

Openness – Loving, spiritual relationships are built on transparency and honesty.

1. All members need to be open about their own sin, and foster an atmosphere of confidentiality and transparency with everyone in the group (Rom. 14:19, 1 Thess. 5:11, Heb. 3:13, Heb. 10:25).
2. Openness should be for edification and accountability (Eph. 4:16 + 29, 1 Thess. 5:11).
3. Spend some time in a close, informal environment to allow time and space for openness.

Word – The Scriptures are the center and core of spiritual maturity in the believer's life.

1. God's Word is the center of the Christian life as it teaches us, rebukes us, corrects us, and instructs us in righteous living (2 Tim. 3:16-18).
2. Life should not be based on feeling or intellectual achievement, but on God's Word (Mark 12:24, John 8:31-32, Heb. 4:12, 1 Peter 1:19-21).
3. Members should be searching and applying Scripture to their day-to-day lives (2 Tim. 2:15, Heb 5:11-14).

Encouragement – Christ-like friendships are built on serving and building up one another.

1. As a P.O.W.E.R. group member, you are the **primary** means within Cross Impact for encouraging your fellow members towards Christ-likeness (John 13:14, 34-35, Rom. 15:14, Heb. 10:24, James 5:16, 1 Pet. 5:5).
2. Encouragement has many facets:
 - a. Coming alongside to comfort / encourage
 - b. Coming alongside to exhort / motivate towards love and good works (Heb. 10:24)
 - c. Coming alongside to provide much-needed accountability (Heb. 10:25)

Responsibility – Mutual trust and concern for one another is established on members being responsible in their spiritual growth, their ministry, and reaching others.

1. **Spiritual:** Pursuing Christ passionately is your first and foremost responsibility
2. **Gospel Sharing:** Using the God-given opportunities to bring others (classmates, co-workers, roommates, family members, and random strangers) to the Savior
3. **Mutual Concern:** This means not being afraid to ask tough questions and not being afraid to really get down to issues that group members are struggling with.
4. **Time:** This means dedicating your time and effort towards meeting with your group to encourage one another spiritually.

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember the first time when, as a child, you received a chocolate Easter bunny? Most of us probably have that fantastic memory. But, undoubtedly, it was followed by the bitter moment when you sunk your teeth into it, only to discover that it was hollow. Tragedy of tragedies! You had been deceived into thinking that you would be satisfied with a solid chunk of chocolate, when in reality it was just a hollow illusion, just a shadow of what it promised.

In a nutshell, that is the message of Ecclesiastes, even as the opening of the book depressingly declares “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.”¹ Indeed, in our own experience during the daily grind of life, those same words often ring with truthfulness—we bite into life, expecting to be satisfied, only to discover that it is hollow. Although believers should be the most content people on earth (Hebrews 13:5-6), we often find ourselves unsatisfied, searching for something we do not know.

The wisest man to ever live found himself in that same discouraging state of mind. Having heaped to himself wisdom, possessions, and pleasures (which are the same commodities our current society promises will fulfill us), he still concluded that “all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:17). Although life sometimes seems to have little or no meaning, Solomon’s conclusion is that this is the result of a misdirected focus.

Throughout his intriguing book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon exhorts us to focus once again on the God who has “put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). In other words, our Creator made us with an eternal, God-sized hole in our hearts, and only God can satisfy that eternal longing that has been programmed into the very fiber of our being. Therefore, while he does indeed encourage us—almost surprisingly—to “eat and drink and be joyful” (Ecclesiastes 8:15), he preaches that the only context in which that will indeed be enjoyment is in the fear of God (Ecclesiastes 12:13). So, as you study this book, pray that God will transform your focus and redirect your hopes to the only One who can truly fulfill them (cf. John 10:10).

¹ The word translated “vanity” has traditionally been understood to mean “emptiness,” but it also carries the meaning of transience—having a vapor-like quality, similar to the idea in James 4:14.

Author

The word “Preacher” in verse 1 probably refers to a leader of that assembly and, in this context, the one who addresses it. According to verse 1, this Preacher was a son of David and a king in Jerusalem. According to Ecclesiastes 12:9, he was also “wise...[and] taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.” The book chronicles the quest of one who had virtually unlimited power, possessions, and pleasures. All of these profile characteristics strongly point to Solomon as the human author of Ecclesiastes.

New Testament Fulfillment

All of the Old Testament is fulfilled and enlarged in the New Testament, and it is the same with the book of Ecclesiastes. The searching for meaning, belonging, and transcendence found in the book is answered by the revelation of Jesus Christ! It certainly seems that Paul had this book in mind when he wrote in Romans 8:20-24a —

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.

In June 1942, the powerful Nazi businessman Oscar Schindler witnessed the corralling and deportation of Jews for the death camps. This would have been a rather normal sight for him, except for one lone little girl whose red clothing contrasted starkly with the terror and death of the scene around her. That little girl forever changed Schindler, who was so moved by that moment that he ended up repudiating Nazism and rescuing over 1,100 Jews. When Schildler’s story was dramatized in the film, Schindler’s List, director Steven Spielberg accented the mostly black and white movie with the bright red coat of the little girl.

The same effect is discovered in Ecclesiastes. Commentator Jim Winter colorfully explains:

Ecclesiastes is life portrayed in black and white, emphasizing the captivity and destruction of a whole race—the human race—gathered together under the shadow of death. But there is color. The occasional candle flickers and soon others begin to glow and illuminate the scene. The brightest color appears when the cameras focus upon one Person vividly illuminated against the drab back-drop—not a little girl in a red coat, but God, the Creator of human beings. As the camera pans away

and the span of biblical history is revealed, we see that same God among the seething mass of humanity, sharing in their suffering and death—Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the message of Ecclesiastes! He is “the way” that leads to meaning, satisfaction, fullness, and life (John 14:6; 10:10)! From our vantage point, having the completed scriptures and reading the biblical story line as a whole, one can see analogies between the Preacher and Jesus Christ who is the “Son of David” (Matt. 1:1), King (Matt. 2:2; Acts 17:7; Rev. 17:14; 19:16), “wisdom from God” (1 Cor. 1:24, 30), and “one Shepherd” (Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; John 10:11, 16). In fact, Luke 11:31 declares that “something greater than Solomon” is found in Jesus Christ.

What a privilege we have to read Ecclesiastes with the end and fulfillment in mind. As we look back upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, we recognize that Solomon’s longing, so painfully expressed and minimally met, found both its source and its satisfaction in Him.

Conclusion

Is life really worth living? It depends on how you live. There are only two ways to live—life “under the sun” and life “in the fear of God.” If God is your orientation through a relationship with His Son Jesus, then you can live life “in the fear of God.” This is God’s desire for us, that we might “have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Practical Reminders

As you complete this study, keep the following in mind:

1. **Repetition:** The same themes and ideas are often repeated throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. This repetition is not an indication that Solomon was running out of things to say. In fact, it adds even more weight to his reasoning.
2. **Interpretation:** Some verses are admittedly difficult to understand and interpret. If you have questions about specific verses in Ecclesiastes, please make a note of them and ask your P.O.W.E.R. group leader. Be open in discussing them with your group.
3. **Flexibility:** This study is intended to be a help to you, not a burden. If you do not have time to complete an entire lesson, feel free to use it as you see fit. Your P.O.W.E.R. group will help to fill in ideas that you were not able to complete.

LESSON 1 – LIFE UNDER THE SUN

In the first half of this book, we follow Solomon’s journey down this particular way to live—this life “under the sun.” It’s not a pretty path. Instead, as we will learn more fully in future chapters, it is made up of the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11), the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11), the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17), the frustrations of labor (2:18-26), the elusiveness of life (3:1-15), the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16), the disappointment of wealth (5:8-20), and the dissatisfaction of humanness (6:1-12).

Solomon has walked this path—indeed, he spent much of his life on that road. He knows it well, and throughout this book, he describes the path “under the sun” or “under heaven” with these words: “vanity,” “no advantage,” and like someone who is foolishly “striving after wind” hoping to catch it in his hand.

By far, “vanity” is his favorite word, as he employs it 38 times with at least three different (and yet common) senses: (1) “fleeting,” describing the transitory and even fragile nature of life (cf. James 4:14); (2) “futile,” attesting to man’s difficult and seemingly meaningless existence; and (3) “enigmatic,” stressing the frustrating turns and unanswered questions of life.

In this lesson, we’re going to learn that the ceaseless cycle of existence illustrates the futility of life “under the sun” (*read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11*). In these first eleven verses, the author (the “Preacher”) views life as a giant treadmill—ever turning, ever repeating, never starting something new. So it is, he observes, with life. Life is cyclical to the point of weariness and pointlessness—it seemingly leads nowhere; it is hard to find any sense of significance. Solomon starts off by showing us an “under the sun” perspective of life.

The Cycle of People (1:3-4)

A quick Google search suggests that the world population is currently 6.9 billion people, which is more than double what it was just fifty years ago. Statisticians also tell us that roughly 132 million people are born every year, while 56 million people die every year. These numbers are staggering, and are far greater than when Solomon wrote here in verse 4, “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” Each individual human exerts so much energy and “toil” during his life “under the sun” (v. 3); yet, what “gain” does he get by that? He is born, lives, and dies, and the earth just keeps on spinning (v. 4).

We discover this monotonous human cycle regularly. Every new school year, we buy expensive books and attend our first day of classes, read syllabi, take tests, pass exams, and do it again the next year. We occupy a job, train our replacement, and then hand it over to him; and he does the same. We purchase a car, drive it into the ground, and then sell it to another person who drives it even further into the ground. And each day, the earth just keeps spinning, seemingly in cruel partnership with this boring monotony. Together, these two verses depict a human landscape filled with much activity, but so little advantage; so many individuals, but so little impact.

Stop and Think

- Do you ever find your daily life to be a ceaseless cycle? In what ways?

- Have you ever thought that your life is somewhat insignificant?

- What circumstances make you feel that way? (Note: these may not be bad or sinful things!)

- Have you had someone close to you pass away? Describe how you felt when you first heard the news of their sickness or death.

The Cycle of the Planet (1:5-7)

The *sun* depicts the unrelenting monotony of life (v. 5). It rises and sets each day and then “hastens” to do the same thing all over again tomorrow. That word “hasten” literally refers to someone or something panting with fatigue (Jeremiah 14:6; Isaiah 42:14). Like man, the sun is personified as wearing itself out just to repeat everything the next day.

The *wind* also illustrates this incessant round (v. 6). Invisibly, it “goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.” But even though we feel that the wind seems random on the surface of our planet, you can quickly find on the Internet multiple pictures of its well-mapped courses (i.e., wind currents).

The *rivers and streams* follow a constant cycle (v. 7). “All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full”; and so the rivers are ever flowing, and the sea is always being filled. The phrase “not full” is used of people in verse 8 (i.e., with the idea of being discontent), further demonstrating that the author’s greatest frustration is not that our planet is so predictable, but that our existence is so trivial.

When you turn 40 years old, you will have witnessed all four seasons 40 consecutive times with no exceptions—and none of them will have been perfect. Some winters will have been too harsh; others, too mild. Some summers will have been too hot; others, too wet. You will have also experienced almost 15,000 rotations of the earth, and never once will the stars have been out of line or the sun missing. And when you pass away, people after you will experience the same natural laws. Solomon is using the predictability of our planet to mirror the dull routine of our existence.

Stop and Think

- If you were writing this chapter, what other illustrations (besides the sun, wind, and rivers) would you use to explain the constant cycle of life on this planet?

- If your life on this earth ended next week, what about you would stand out in people’s minds when they remembered your life? Who would remember you in 20 years and why?

For most of us, the answers to this last set of questions are fairly small in scope. You may not be remembered for winning a Nobel prize. You may not be known by millions of people around the world. Even if you were, that fame would be short-lived. How many of you have considered the courage of Harry S. Truman, the leadership of Julius Caesar, or the stardom of Elvis Presley today. The point is that life, like the sun’s rotation and the wind’s circling, seems to be an endless cycle of existence.

The Cycle of Performance (1:8-11)

In verses 8-11, Solomon is bemoaning the weary monotony of “all things” detailed in verses 4-7. Well, as best as he can, for he notes that “man cannot utter it;” man is not able to express or describe the multiplied examples of this ceaseless cycle. The secularist (i.e., the one who lives merely “under the sun”) sees and sees and sees this, and hears and hears and hears it. But, like the ever-absorbing-yet-never-filled-ocean, he neither exhausts its examples, nor triumphs over its futility—he remains at a loss for significance “under the sun,” for the cycle leads nowhere.

In verses 9-11, Solomon considers the concepts of novelty and memory, and likewise demonstrates their failure to break this ceaseless and insignificant rotation. He defies all sense of novelty, uttering the classic maxim, “there is nothing new under the sun.”

Human culture is fascinated with the “new.” This perpetual pattern of history helps to explain our generation’s infatuation with fads, and the rebirth of them. We are always looking for something fresh and new—art, clothing, phones, hobbies, social networks, toys, music, etc.—but the “new” is often just the old repackaged, and the novelty of today’s item is tainted by the quick “passing away” of yesterday’s bestseller (1 John 2:15a, 17).

Stop and Think

- How should the mindset of Ecclesiastes 1 change the way you think about the “fads” of this world? Are they to be rejected? Or maybe just moderated? What does the right perspective look like in a believer’s life?

- How does Solomon’s teaching about life’s ceaseless cycle affect our search for fullness in relationships or in accomplishments?

- Apply Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 to what John says in 1 John 2:15-17.

Inventions and improvements are not bad things. But lest we think that our modern innovations and our generation will defy the norm, Solomon deflates our naïve pride in verse 11, reminding us that, as we don't remember today what people had considered "monumental" events in the past, so future "great moments in time" will also be forgotten. Media and technology may better record and preserve the data, but history invalidates its originality, and time erases its memory. This is not to say that innovations of each human generation are unhelpful or unoriginal, but that man has yet to find an escape from this cycle of futility, even in all of his "inventions."

Stop and Think

- How should you Biblically think about your own accomplishments in a world consumed with "one-upmanship"? Is confidence and pride in your work good or bad?
- How does your classwork, research, or job sometimes feel like "chasing after wind"? (1:14)
- When your life feels empty, what do you choose to fill it with?

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 2 – TESTING LIFE

Lesson 1 was a general introduction to the dark setting in which Solomon finds himself. In the second half of chapter one (1:12-18) Solomon explains his plan to experiment with the benefits of this life. This test takes place in chapter 2, where he pursues pleasure (2:3-11), wisdom (2:12-17), and work (2:18-26).

Experiment #1: Pleasure (2:1-11)

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. Solomon introduces his experiment through having a dialogue with his heart (verse 1). He proposes a test to determine whether or not pleasures provide an adequate justification for human existence. If anyone was to apply his mind and heart to anything, it was Solomon, the riches and wisest man in the world.

Partying (vv. 1-2)

Both “laughter” and “pleasure” in verse 2 refer to “frivolous merrymaking.” He is talking about the nightclub. Solomon dove into the party scene and lived it up. But again, the Preacher is blunt as to what he discovered—of the one, he said, “It is mad [or folly, senseless]”; of the other, he rhetorically asks, “What use is it?”

Alcohol (v. 3)

Verse 3 depicts a Solomon who is exploring the physically-cheering effects of wine. The word “searched” is the same word used of the twelve Israelites who “spied” out the Promised Land before they entered it (Numbers 13:2). It is as if Solomon is doing reconnaissance in his mind to determine whether or not any pleasure might be found there as a result of drinking. Knowing the possibility of drinking himself to the point of ‘getting wasted,’ Solomon kept careful control over his mental faculties (i.e., “my heart still guiding me with wisdom”) so that he could conduct his experiment without hindrance. In essence, he is evaluating, not drunkenness, but the pleasurable use of alcohol to kill pain, reduce stress, alleviate frustration, and provide pleasure.

Immaturity (v. 3)

Solomon even suggests in verse 3 that he experimented with immaturity (i.e., “to lay hold on folly”). This term for “folly” is used only throughout Ecclesiastes (1:17; 2:3, 12; 7:25; 10:1, 13) and refers to behaviors and ideas that lack insight, prudence, and understanding. Before modern society extended the age of adolescence, Solomon tested lifestyle-immaturity to see if it could be a source of pleasure.

Stuff (vv. 4-8)

Solomon gathered possessions to an unmatched degree completely for himself—and he did so intentionally, honestly testing their value to satisfy (i.e., “my wisdom remained with me”—v. 9). He amassed houses/estates (v. 4), gardens (vv. 5-6), servants (v. 7), assets (v. 7), money/treasures (v. 8), and music/musicians (v. 8). If possessions did not fulfill him, they would not fulfill anyone.

Sex (v. 8)

Here we are reminded of the extravagance of Solomon’s lifestyle. He didn’t just pursue illicit sex; he collected a large harem of women to enjoy. From the harem of Solomon to the internet porn industry, human history has never steered from its pursuit of pleasure through every sexual activity imaginable.

What did Solomon find through his experiments? They didn’t work (vv. 10-11)! While he found some level of pleasure, even as he assumed he would (cf. Hebrews 11:25), ultimately that happiness is attained difficultly and lasts only for a time. Wealth, partying, narcotics, sex...it is all empty. Like an ignorant little child who chases the wind, Solomon had run after fulfillment and returned grasping air.

Stop and Think:

- Solomon found partying, wine, immaturity, and possessions to be vain in truly cheering his heart. In what ways do these things deceptively conceal a “catch” that keeps them from offering lasting satisfaction?

- Can you think of modern day examples of people who, like Solomon, have tested different pleasures in life and found them insufficient?

- Of the things Solomon tried (listed above), which ones are you pursuing to provide satisfaction?

Experiment #2: Wisdom (2:12-17)

Read *Ecclesiastes 2:12-17*. After the pleasures of this life, Solomon tries his hand at gaining wisdom. He admits that it is better to be wise than to be a fool (2:13), but he concludes that even wisdom is vanity. Solomon saw that you can spend your entire life accumulating wisdom and knowledge, but it does not stop you from transient mortality. Being the smartest and wisest person in the world cannot keep you from the fate of the most dimwitted fool: death.

Stop and Think:

- According to verses 14-17, why does Solomon conclude that wisdom is also vanity?

- Is spending time learning and gaining knowledge and wisdom worth a believer's time? Why or why not?

Experiment #3: Work (2:18-23)

Read *Ecclesiastes 2:18-23*. Solomon tries a third time to find something that will ultimately satisfy him; he turns to work. Now, Solomon was no slacker. In fact, 1 Kings 1-10 records his great building projects that he initiated and administrated during his rule—amazing structures that people came from all over the world to see. Nevertheless, when he considered “all [his] labor which I had taken under the sun” (vv. 18, 20), he “hated” it (v. 18) and it “cause[d] [his] heart to despair” (v. 20). He recognized he had to “leave [all his earnings behind] unto the man that shall be after [him],” his successor (v. 18). His material earnings were transient, fleeting, passing away—at least from his clutches—and his untested and unentitled successor would inherit all that he had worked for (vv. 18-21). Furthermore, his workaholicism robbed him of all satisfaction that labor might afford, offering him “striving of heart,” “sorrows,” “vexation,” and “[no] rest” instead (vv. 22-23).

Stop and Think:

- Who was Solomon's successor and what happened to Solomon's earnings? (See 1 Kings 14:21-26)

- How have you personally witnessed or experienced the momentary nature of one's achievements or earnings?

- In what ways might work actually punish an individual instead of offering them any satisfaction?

Conclusion (2:24-26)

So, are we to enjoy the pleasures of this life or not? Solomon concludes his experiments with some positive statements: He discovers that true value is found in God. Therefore eat, drink and enjoy everything that God gives you.

Solomon found them unsatisfying but then says we should enjoy them! Here is how this makes sense. Solomon had perceived the blessings of this life as products of his own labor, and thus they were fragile and would pass away. But, when we see these things as from the hand of God, they obtain a new meaning. They are not given to us as things to be enjoyed in and of themselves, but are given to us as a means of enjoying God himself! We can simply enjoy these pleasures, knowing that God loves to “give good things to those who ask him” (Matthew 7:9-11). Joy and satisfaction will come, then, not when they're pursued for themselves, but as we pursue the joy-giver: God.

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?





- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 3 – TIME

In Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, life was portrayed as a repetitious and pointless cycle.  In 3:1-8, life is pictured as an endless back-and-forth of activity.  These verses deal with our perception of and planning for the future, and remind us that even our best planning may go haywire, because we are not in control of the “right time” for what happens in our lives. And so it is that our perception of and planning for the future further substantiates that life merely lived “under the sun” is futile. But, that is not the only way to live! This passage, like the Preacher’s discussion of labor in 2:18-26, guides us out of the one worldview and into the other. We will be confronted with the elusiveness of life, but we can follow the guidance of this passage to avoid pointlessness and discover peace, even as we plan.

There Is a Time for Everything (3:1-8).

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Everything in life has an appointed time, yet as we meditate on that foundation, we notice some disconcerting cracks about this timing. Time inevitably repeats itself, even as we saw in chapter 1. In light of our pursuit for permanence and fulfillment, such redundancy offers little relief. Time is random; it can appear unpredictable, unexpected, and uncontrollable. It goes back and forth, from one thing to the next; no sooner do we do something than we have to undo it. At other times, the rhythm skips a beat, like a bad heart, and leaves us feeling short of breath. Time is like a dictator, never consulting us. We seem bound by each season, and we can only respond to the march of time. Unbidden change controls us; we do not control it.

Stop and Think:

- What do you think the author means by “for everything there is a season”?
- What are some frustrations about these “times” in verses 1-8 (times that are redundant, random, cruel)?

- Can you think of specific times for some of these in the list? Share your findings with the group.
- Jesus Christ, as a human being, experienced these times. Discuss how these times figured into His life (see also: Galatians 4:4 and Romans 5:6).

God Controls Time (3:9-15).

“The problem is not that life refuses to keep still, but that we see only a fraction of its movement and of its subtle, intricate design.” ~ Derek Kidner

Read *Ecclesiastes 3:9-15*. God’s plans are beautiful, but to us they appear blurred: God has a way of making all things turn out beautiful, but we might not see all of the details for ourselves. With complete knowledge of the “beginning” and the “end” of all things (cf. Psalm 90:4; Isaiah 46:9-10; 2 Peter 3:8), He has decreed for “everything” to happen at the right time—yes, even “His time.” Therefore, from the Creator’s perspective, life is not elusive, but “beautiful” (Isaiah 55:8-9). Solomon offers us an “in the fear of God” perspective on the world. With the phrase “I perceived” (vv. 12, 14) he offers two faith-based solutions that will help us navigate through the elusiveness of life.

Solution 1: Trust God’s Goodness (vv. 11-13)

Solomon tells us that he “knows” that “there is nothing better for mankind than “to rejoice, and to do good in his life” and “eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor.” He shows us how to actively trust God’s plan by heartily obeying God’s will (vs. 12). In spite of the elusiveness of life, there is one thing we can count on: God is pleased with the one who does good and blesses his choice of obedience. In New Testament language, Paul explains it this way: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24). Solomon also shows us that we trust God’s goodness when we enjoy God’s gifts with gratefulness in our hearts. James tells us that God is the source of any good thing that comes into our lives (James 1:17), so we can enjoy these good gifts and glorify God as the supplier of those good gifts. Believers who have learned to answer all of life’s difficulties with “God is good all the time” (Psalm 119:68) are not living in denial, but are truly walking by faith.

Solution 2: Trust God’s Sovereignty (vv. 14-15)

Throughout the ages, religious people have analyzed the evasiveness of life and concluded either (1) that God is in control but not good, or (2) God is good but not in control. In this passage, Solomon rejoices to recognize that God is both good and sovereign, all the time. Solomon writes in verse 14, “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever.” The One who knows the beginning from the end (Isaiah 46:10) and inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15) has established His will, and it cannot be thwarted (Daniel 4:35). He takes counsel with no one, nor is accountable to any (Ephesians 1:11).

Therefore, we know that whatever happens, it has occurred within the omniscience and decree of God (Lamentations 3:37; Amos 3:6). God has not overlooked any detail or been absent from any situation. As His knowledge is all-inclusive, so His control is all-invasive. Life may elude us, but God’s sovereignty does not! As we study history—both personally and earthly—we see that underlying the elusive patterns of life is the unshaken and unimpeded will of God. In the New Testament, James 4:13-17 reminds us to make our plans with “God’s will” as our goal. If we ignore His sovereign will, the elusiveness of life will frustrate us incessantly. But, when we plan with faith in the constancy of God’s will, the failings of our plans become contrasting testimony to the faithfulness of God’s plans.

In Jeremiah 29:11, the goodness and sovereignty of God converge in beautiful encouragement, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘Plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’” So, while life may elude us, the future evade us, and our plans reap the consequences, we have the confidence of knowing that our God is good and sovereign, and we can rest in that assurance.

Stop and Think

- God makes “everything beautiful in its time” (vs. 11a). Do you agree with this statement? What things are examples of this fact?
- What does Solomon “perceive” is the best solution to this endless cycle of times? (vs. 12-13).

- How does this solution (vs. 12-13) play out in everyday life on campus?
- How can you “take pleasure in all your toil” right now?
- What is the 2nd thing that Solomon perceives (see also Psalm 33:11 and Daniel 4:34-35)? How does that affect your view of what happens in your life?

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 4 – EVIL UNDER THE SUN

Have you ever heard of Murphy’s Law: “If anything can go wrong, it will”? It is a way of describing how this world is a constant revolving cycle of mess-ups. The worse of two scenarios is the more likely to occur. You know: it’s going to rain the day you forgot your umbrella; you’re going to have a pop quiz the only time this semester you forgot to do the reading; no matter how long or how hard you shop for an item, after you have bought it, it will be on sale for cheaper somewhere else. “Murphy’s Law” is just our way of laughing about an axiom that really does exist: misfortune will find you (cf. Job 5:7; 14:1). This is because we are living in world broken by sin. But more than misfortune, this world is filled with harshness and sinful behaviors that can only be the result of a cancer plaguing the entire planet. What does this look like in people’s lives? Ecclesiastes 4 reads like a chapter in Proverbs. We read here of several cancerous manifestations of what, to put it mildly, many would call an “unlucky” world. Let’s walk through this chapter together.

Misfortune #1: Death (3:18-22)

In the movie *The Thin Red Line*, Private Witt expresses, “I’ve heard people talk about immortality, but I ain’t seen it.” “Eternity in our hearts” (cf. 3:11) has provoked dozens of religions that talk about an afterlife, but no one has seen it or can prove it observationally.

From a secular perspective, death reduces our entire existence and significance to the same level as the animals (v. 18). Since we experience their same fate, we have no ultimate advantage over them—our accomplishments, earnings, and treasures are ripped away from us, and in the grave we decompose just like our pets (vv. 19-20). Thus, in the grand scheme of things there is “no advantage” for the human over the animal (v. 19). And this becomes soberingly true at the scene of the deadly automobile accident, in the wake of a violent hurricane, in the paleness of the nursing home room, and in the morbid serenity of the mortuary.

Stop and Think

- Believers can find themselves reading right through this passage even as they read hope (i.e., resurrection) right into it. However, how does today’s secularist view death (cf. Ephesians 2:12)?

- How can this misfortune be used to help people “feel their way toward [God]” (Acts 17:27) and come out of the fog?

Misfortune #2: Oppression (3:16-18; 4:1-3)

Have you ever felt like the oppressors have all the power (4:1)? The people who take advantage of others sometimes seem to be getting ahead way too fast. From Solomon’s perspective “under the sun,” the dead are more fortunate than the living and even praiseworthy; and yet, the unborn, and thus inexperienced, are better off than both (4:2-3). Indeed, it is this very conclusion that has driven some to take their own lives. Life merely lived “under the sun” is futile, and the harness of existence proves that. Life’s misfortunes are a brick wall blocking our search for satisfaction. Oppression is simply one brick in that wall.

Jesus was moved with compassion at the sight of both physical and spiritual oppression. Some of us probably need to care more for the physically oppressed, and we all need more concern for the spiritually oppressed.

Stop and Think:

- Is oppression a problem around us? How does a 21st century person in the United States oppress other people?
- How do you respond when you read about physical oppression of women, children, and other helpless people around the world (or in your own back yard)?
- How do you respond when you see the spiritual oppression that is binding people you walk past every day?
- Do you think that the popular campaigns for “social justice” and “ending oppression” are Biblical approaches to solving the problems of oppression? Why or why not?

Misfortune #3: Dissatisfaction (4:4-8)

Labor—even if it is “skillful”—produces only restlessness, as was presented in 2:18-26. Here in chapter 4, Solomon looks at three attitudes discovered in the workplace, all of which betray a sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Rivalry (v. 4)

Solomon looks first at the Fortune Five Hundred companies and at the Who’s Who lists; there, he witnesses only envy, rivalry, and brutal competition.

Stop and Think:

- How is envy presented as motivation for hard work in the “American Dream” business model (in some cases)?
- In actuality, how much profit is received from being envious of your neighbor (read verse 4 again)? How have you seen this in your own struggle with envy?

Laziness (v. 5)

On the other end of the spectrum is the drop-out (i.e., “fool”). He does not join the jealous rivalry (and probably sees himself above it or trying to escape from it), but neither does he enjoy its material earnings.

Stop and Think:

- What does verse 5 mean by, “the fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh”?
- Why do you think, in a society and generation of self-made independents, laziness is such a problem?

- How does laziness manifest itself in the average person’s life? What about in your life?

Independence (vv. 7-8)

A third attitude found in the world of business is the spirit of independence. Solomon describes the workaholic loner—undistracted by family, he works long and hard hours and amasses great wealth. On the flip side, unblessed by family, it is all work and no play for him. Because there are no relationships or companions, his great wealth rings hollow (cf. Psalm 39:6), and he is not “satisfied.”

Stop and Think:

- Can you think of a modern “Ebenezer Scrooge” whose driving passion is his work, to the neglect of people around him?
- Out of the three misfortunes related to work (rivalry, laziness, and independence), which do you see as most problematic in your life? How do you think that can be remedied? How does verse 6 apply to your struggle?

Misfortune #4: Loneliness (4:9-12)

Here Solomon simply states an equation— $2 > 1$. However, this is more than just a numeric fact; it’s a truth for life!

Stop and Think:

- How is this truth illustrated in business and economics? In families? In church?
- Describe a time in your life when you need a friend to help you up (verse 10).

- Do you naturally like to be alone or would you rather have a “group”? In light of that answer, how do you think the message of verses 9-12 should apply to you?

Misfortune #5: Disloyalty (4:13-16)

“Do not trust the cheering, for those persons would shout as much if you and I were going to be hanged.”—Oliver Cromwell

Verses 13-16 continue this theme of loneliness by considering the isolation of leadership. Solomon writes here about the tension between tradition and revolution. Verse 14 describes a youth who comes out of prison and poverty to dethrone the “old and foolish king” of verse 13. Since he is a relatively “wise” youth (cf. Psalm 119:100) who is willing to listen to admonition, a trait that his crusty and arrogant predecessor no longer possesses (v. 13; Job 12:20; Proverbs 26:12), his poverty is overlooked and even glorified by those who would make him king, and the masses follow after him (v. 15-16a). No sooner has his reign commenced than the seeds of revolution are sown again, for “they also that come after shall not rejoice in him” (v. 16). Over this problem of disloyalty and its potentially devastating consequences, Solomon cries, “This also is vanity and vexation of spirit” (v. 16).

Stop and Think:

- What are some examples from modern history of the transience of political power?
- Why does man’s depravity (the fact of his sin nature) lead to disloyalty?
- How do we see disloyalty in the everyday, non-political realm?

Conclusion

Life is harsh, and misfortune is bitter. Is there any alleviation? Is there an escape from this trouble and sorrow? Yes, and His name is Jesus! Jesus is the good Shepherd and kind Savior who alone can smooth the rough places and straighten that which is crooked. He confronts all these harsh misfortunes with His healing grace. Jesus solved the problem of death – He is the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25-27; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58). Jesus deals with the problem of oppression – He is the Comforter (Isaiah 25:8; Malachi 4:2; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; Hebrews 4:15). He satisfies the problem of our dissatisfaction – He is the Rest-giver (Matthew 11:28-30). He conquers our problem of loneliness – Jesus is the Friend (Proverbs 18:24; John 15:15; Galatians 4:4-7). He overcomes the problem of our disloyalty – Jesus can be our King (Jeremiah 23:5-6; Matthew 19:28; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 1:8). Life is harsh, but in Jesus there is hope!

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 5 – FEAR GOD

Ecclesiastes 5 is Solomon’s instruction relating to the alternative of living merely “under the sun.” He contrasts all his previous discussion of life “under the sun” with instruction on living “in the fear of God.” He does this by addressing the manner in which we enter into the presence of our God and King. Solomon is calling us to watchfulness in our worship. He is contrasting fear-filled worshippers with foolish worshippers, reverent worship with rash worship. And in order to save us from the severe consequences of irreverence (cf. vv. 1c, 6), Solomon provides us with simple wisdom for our worship: we must approach God reverently.

This passage begins with the phrase “guard your steps when you go to the house of God.” This is almost like a sign that reads, “Watch your step!” But what does it mean to “watch your step” in worship? In the beginning of this chapter, we learn the following characteristics of reverent worship:

Attentiveness (5:1)

In the moment of worship, Solomon says that listening is better than offering. Lest we miss what we need from God, we must come to church to listen. See, our greatest need is for God; thus, our greatest response is simply to listen. The word “listen” has the double-edged meaning of both hearing and heeding (Exodus 24:7; Matthew 7:24-27), and so we are encouraged to listen with active ears. This is an identifiable mark of reverent worship—expectant (“drawn near”) attentiveness (“to listen”) to the Word of God.

It is a mark of “foolish” worship (i.e., “sacrifice of fools”), not fear-filled worship, to merely offer a sacrifice in haste, duty, and ritual without pausing and even coming close to hear from God. Today, those who mindlessly sing the songs, dutifully contribute to the offering, and impatiently daydream during the sermon are offering the “sacrifice of fools” and committing a grave “evil.” In a sovereign irony, they will reap exactly what they’ve sown: they’ve ignored God and will be ignored by God (cf. 1 Samuel 15:22-23, 26).

Thoughtfulness (5:2-3)

Colloquially put, Solomon encourages worshippers to “think before you speak.” This is not a warning against using words as we worship but against a hasty thoughtlessness that may underlie those words. The fewer the words, the more time for reverent thought; the more the words, the less time for reverent thought. Solomon sees a link between wordiness and thoughtlessness in our worship. Since foolish worship is the product of mindless chatter (“many words”) Solomon advocates thoughtfulness in order that we may be reverent.

Those who know God deeply, love Him fervently, and obey Him habitually are believers who have cultivated their minds and quieted their mouths in their pursuit of God. In the words of James, they are “swift to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger” as they “receive...the implanted Word” (James 1:19, 21).

The Internet has exposed the lack of thoughtfulness among those who profess to worship God (on blogs, twitter, facebook, etc.). While there is no lack of words in these innumerable blog posts, there is often a noticeable absence of good thought behind them. Although we would carefully prepare our words if asked to speak at the White House, or even before our peers, we often fail to exhibit the same carefulness when approaching God. The fear-filled worshipper of God exercises his mind more than his mouth in His relationship with God.

Responsiveness (5:4-5)

Solomon encourages us to respond to God in our worship, but to be careful in doing so. Verses 4-5 speak of responsive worship, particularly the response of “vowing a vow” to God. This was a practice in which a person would make some commitment or promise to God in response to what he had learned about God or what God had done for him. This type of worship is an overflow of praise and gratitude which generates a tangible response to God. Examples of these vows include Genesis 28:20-22; Numbers 21:2; 30:3; Psalm 132:2-5; and 1 Samuel 1:11.

For us as New Testament believers, we no longer have to fulfill certain regulations in order to enjoy fellowship with God, but we can and should respond in our hearts and actions to God’s work. We should spend our lifetime, individually and corporately, engaged in responsive worship. God’s love toward us through Jesus and our reciprocal love toward Him overflow into active and constant response. Appropriately knowing God will provoke the appropriate worship of God, which is shown by an appropriate response to God. You cannot see God or hear from God (vv. 1-2) and not be moved to respond in worshipful obedience!

Genuineness (5:6-7)

Hand-in-hand with the previous point is this one. Solomon has just warned against vowing a vow and not paying it, or making a decision and not fulfilling it. Now, he reveals the heart of the matter, which is a disingenuousness, insincerity, dishonesty, and hypocrisy in one's responsive worship.

The warning of verses 4-5 builds in verse 6. Solomon is not merely concerned that we pay what we have vowed, but that we simply worship God with realness and genuineness. The rash, hasty, and thoughtless worshipper of verse 2 is here revealed to be a worshipper, really in title only. When the rubber meets the road, this individual ducks out of any authentic involvement in worship, excusing his superficiality with, "it was an error, a mistake" (v. 6). What man calls a "mistake," God calls a "sin" (v. 6a).

The true God-fearing worshipper is genuine before God, as is evidenced in his seriousness, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, meekness, and responsiveness. In contrast, the foolish and disingenuous worshipper who heartlessly "goes through the motions" is in danger of God's anger and judgment (v. 6; cf. 12:14; Acts 5:1-11).

The only solution for our innate hypocrisy and externalism is the "fear of God," which is where Solomon again brings us at the end of verse 7. When we are rightly related to God and actively aware of our relationship to Him, sincerity and genuineness is fanned into a flame of authentic worship of God.

Stop and Think:

- Based on verses 1-7, describe the "fool's" worship in your own words.
- In light of this passage, discuss some of the problems that your age group faces in the area of worship.

- Which of the 4 characteristics (attentiveness, thoughtfulness, responsiveness, genuineness) of reverent worship is the strongest in your life? Why?
- Which is the weakest in your life? How can you change?
- How do we practically cultivate the fear of God so that we might genuinely, and thus reverently, worship Him?

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 6 – THAT’S LIFE

It was perhaps J. R. R. Tolkien that popularized the proverb, “Out of the fire and into the frying pan;” highlighting the tension and stress of life on our planet. We all experience the excruciating friction between life and death. Every single human to walk this planet has dealt with this tyrannical tension, and history “under the sun” is the record of death’s complete victory. There are only corpses; for every great king, soldier, scholar, architect, religious leader, philanthropist, inventor, etc. has been featured in an obituary.

While over 8 billion people are breathing today in weak defiance of death’s reign, it is only a matter of time before death adds to its toll. In fact, each day the tension between life and death continues as 300,000+ people are born and 155,000+ people die. The statistics erroneously suggest that life is winning, but do not tell that to the funeral home directors and pall bearers. They know that everyone born in the hospital today will pass through their halls another day.

Indeed, we may cheat death today, but will succumb to it tomorrow. At times death even seems preferable. What an enigmatic problem, then, is this basic tension between life and death.

It is this tension which Solomon has struggled with at times throughout this book and now addresses again in Ecclesiastes 9. As we have come to expect, though, Solomon’s comments, grounded on years of observation and meditation, deal with this tension seriously, but also optimistically. In fact, he suggests that much can be learned from life’s friction with death. When we apply wisdom to the topic of death, we will, like Solomon discover that death teaches us three lessons: that life is sour, that life is sweet, and that life should be seized. So, let us think wisely about death and learn well its lessons.

Life Is Sour (9:1-3, 11-18).

Solomon’s reflections trace the ingredients that make life sour.

The finiteness of life (vv. 1, 11-12)

Solomon expresses confidence in the sovereign will of God in vs. 1, stating that all things are “in the hand of God.” In vs. 11-12, Solomon observes what is happening “under the sun,” and sees that the outcome does not always match the input—“speed” and “strength” do not always guarantee victory; “wisdom” and “discernment” do not always assure prosperity; and a sharpened knowledge (“skill”) does not always procure favor (v. 11).

From a mere “under the sun” perspective (v. 11a), Solomon explains why human calculations are frequently upset. It is because “time” and “chance” can mess with our calculations (v. 11b). We don’t know when “time” will run out or when “chance” may strike (v. 12a), for God has kept that information to Himself (Ecc. 3:1, 11).

The fact of death (vv. 2-3a)

It’s not just that all things—“love” or “hate”—happen to all people; but “[there is] one fate” to all men, too (Ecc. 2:14-15; 3:19). It does not matter if you are a righteous, good, and clean person or a wicked, sinful, and unclean person—death itself comes indiscriminately to all.

The fullness of sin (v. 3b)

Death is inevitable because man is totally sinful. This sinfulness affects everyone (“sons of men”) individually (cf. Romans 3:10-23). Evil fills people to their core (“the heart”) during their whole life (“while they live”).

The foolishness of our solutions (vv. 13-18)

Just when we find a mitigating factor (i.e., something that helps alleviate life’s sourness)—in this case, wisdom—we forget it or reject it to our own hurt. This is how we solve our problems “under the sun” (v. 13a).

Life is Sweet (4-6).

[After verses 1-3,] is despair all that is left? Surprisingly enough, man in general thinks not, or the race would have perished long ago. And Qobeleth agrees. Life is decidedly worth living. After all, even at its worst, or near it, it is better than nothing, which is what death appears to be. The robust good sense of verse 4, with its popular proverb to clinch the point, paves the way for a spirited refusal in the next two verses to let death browbeat the living before the their time. Rather, let life put death to shame! –

Derek Kidner

These verses give us a small glimpse of hope, that even though life is short and there are many difficulties in this life, at least it is better than the alternative from a purely human perspective. The dead cannot accomplish anything. They are dead.

To illustrate, Solomon quotes a proverb—“A living dog is better than a dead lion” (v. 4b). The logic of this proverb is in its contrast. This dog lacks the power of the lion, but he has life; the lion has the power, but lacks life; thus, in reality, the lion has forfeited everything. While in life the lion may have dominated the dog, in death the lion is put below that dog.

Living people have much to do, to feel, to experience; they still have things both in which to excel, and things in which to epically fail. The dead, however, forfeit their knowledge (v. 5a), reward (v. 5b), relationships (v. 5c), experiences (v. 6a), and ownership (v. 6b). So, while there is life, there is hope!

Stop and Think

- From verse 1, and also from the following verses, what aspects of life’s circumstances are “in the hand of God,” unfolding according to His sovereign will (see also Exodus 4:11; 1 Samuel 2:6; Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; Isaiah 53:10; Romans 13:1)?
- How should you view yourself and your life in light of God’s sovereign ruling of all things?
- What are some biblical examples of the anomalies described in vs. 11-12 —someone who was swift or strong but did not experience the victory, or someone who was wise and discerning but did not find prosperity?
- Solomon is speaking from an ‘under the sun’ perspective of life in vs. 4-6. How does the New Testament build on this point of ‘life being better than death’ (John 3:16)?

Life Should be Seized (9:7-10).

In these verses, Solomon again returns to a familiar solution—enjoy life (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20). Since life is sweet and death is sour, maximize the days that God has given you! Of course, contentment and thanksgiving must be maintained throughout (4:6; 5:12; 6:9), but Solomon commands that we enjoy the following aspects of life.

Festivities (v. 7)

Solomon writes, “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.” This, together with verse 8, suggests that Solomon is commending more than just the enjoyment of a good meal, but all the festivities of a Middle Eastern feast. While modern day partying is inappropriately based on a godless hedonism rather than a God-fearing contentment, the idea of partying and festivities is actually endorsed here.

Comforts (v. 8)

White garments and an anointed head represented the opposite of grief (2 Samuel 12:20) and were simple comforts in the hot (thus, white garments) and dry (thus, ointment) climate of Palestine. The God-fearer experiences God’s grace to enjoy both His basic provisions and His kind luxuries.

Family (v. 9)

Solomon exhorts us to enjoy our family (specifically, the spouse—Proverbs 18:22). He directs us to add joy to our love—having a family whom you love, and enjoying the family that you love are two different things, and Solomon advocates the latter.

Work (v. 10)

Solomon pats us on the back and pushes us back into our workplace, where he encourages us to show energy in (“with your might”) and find satisfaction from our labor. Again, since “there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave,” life is better than death, and work can be one of those enriching and enjoyable aspects of life.

Stop and Think

- What aspects of life are you failing to seize and fully enjoy as God has graciously planned for you?

- How do we avoid moving beyond enjoying these aspects to idolizing these aspects? What are some practical ways that we can enjoy these things without becoming dependent upon them (i.e., loving the gift over the Giver)?
- What signs might indicate that we are no longer gratefully enjoying these gifts with contentment, but worshipping or depending upon them?

Conclusion

Our own experience unveils a daily tension between life and death. Indeed, death is the great enemy, but for those living in the fear of God, rightly oriented to Him through faith in Jesus, death has been defeated! Now, as we think wisely about death, its powerless existence can be a source of great instruction. It teaches us that life is short, thus compelling us to rescue people from its bitterness. It teaches us that life is sweet, thus stirring us with the hope of eternal life. It teaches us that life should be seized, thus giving us fresh perspective on how to live each day.

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 7 – LIFE’S FUNDAMENTALS

Anyone who has spent any time playing an organized sport is familiar with the term “fundamentals.” In February 2013, Doug Hix wrote in *Youth Fitness Magazine*, “After speaking with multiple NBA, MLB and NFL players [about] the secrets to their success, several times it came back to [their] continually working on the fundamentals they learned as a child growing up.” These fundamentals become the foundation upon which a successful athletic career is built.

Throughout most of the second half of Ecclesiastes, we have been discovering the “advantage” of wisdom to navigate this life of “vanity.” Fundamental to such a life of wisdom are two key truths that we should apply to our planning, decisions, and activities. These fundamentals result in a satisfied life “in the fear of God.”

Truth #1: Life is Unpredictable (11:1-6).

Since Life is Unpredictable, Invest Broadly (vv. 1-2).

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-2. Solomon tells us that since life is unpredictable (i.e., this passage shows that there are details about trouble, timing, and triumph in life that we just “do not know” [4x]), you must learn to invest wisely and broadly, acting in faith.² This has application outside of the business world. We should be balanced, not only in our investments of money but also in our investments of time and energy. Have you ever met someone whose life was consumed by just one or two things? Maybe he was an advocate

² The meaning of the metaphor “casting your bread on the waters” from vs. 1 probably alludes to maritime commerce, and putting your goods on several different ships for trading all around the known world.

for a political cause. Or maybe he was so hung up on himself, or one nit-picky issue that every conversation seemed to drift toward that topic. Human nature often has a tendency to overload one aspect of life to the detriment of the rest of life. A mark of maturity is the ability to balance spiritual life, family, work, and hobbies. “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:5).

Stop and Think

- Financial advisors often talk about “diversifying your investments.” Is it legitimate to use this passage to support this 21st century financial advice?
- Do you live a balanced life? (Phil. 4:5) What area of your life is taking too much time or energy? What area of your life is being neglected?

Since Life is Unpredictable, Work Hard (vv. 3-6).

Read Ecclesiastes 11:3-6. Verses 3-4 is talking about a farmer who waits until there is perfect wind and weather before planting and reaping his crops. He is so preoccupied with waiting until the perfect moment that he never actually does any work.

Verse 5 gives us the biblical basis for the unpredictability of life. Life is not random. Instead it is the design of a sovereign God who has not revealed all of his works to us. A baby’s development in the womb is a perfect example of this. How does the spirit of life come to dwell in a young child? Just as we cannot fully explain this, we cannot explain or comprehend “the work of God who makes everything.”

Stop and Think

- What is the modern application of the proverb in verses 3-6?

- Reading verses 3-6 together, how does the fact that we do not understand God’s work motivate us to work diligently?

Truth #2: Death is Unavoidable (11:7-12:8).

Since Death is Unavoidable, Enjoy Life (vv. 11:7-12:8).

Read Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8. In contrast to verses 1-6, Solomon reminds us what we do know about life—death (v. 11:8), judgment (v. 11:9), and aging (vv. 12:1-8). An inescapable fact of life is that we are all hurtling towards the grave, and we only have one chance to live life. Thus, the author mutters again, “all that comes is vanity.” This may mean either that what our future holds is *obscure* and *unknowable* (cf. 8:14) or that life itself is *fleeting*. Certainly, both are true, having been expressed by Solomon elsewhere in this book and being repeated in the New Testament—“yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

Reread Ecclesiastes 11:7-10. In these verses, Solomon shows that the God-fearer who knows God’s will regarding death, judgment, and aging will be compelled to practice wisdom in at least three different areas of enjoyment — He will rejoice and chose joy, for death challenged the melancholy (vv. 7-9a). He will revel and experience life, for youthfulness should be seized (v. 9b). He will relax and remove vexations, for aging appreciates the moment (v. 10). So, the conclusion that Solomon comes to in light of this vanity is to enjoy life! Because life is short, enjoy your youth. In a sense, live it up! Enjoy the pleasures that this life has to give.

Since Death is Unavoidable, Remember God (vv. 11:9; 12:1).

Read Ecclesiastes 11:9; 12:1. Balancing his first wisdom application is this second. Enjoying life should not lead us to pleasure-seeking lawlessness, because we have to remember that God is the judge of all things, including us (11:9).

Stop and Think

- If someone were to ask you, “As a Christian, is it ok to have fun?” how would you respond in light of Ecclesiastes 11:9?

- Read quickly through Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 (a metaphoric description of death and the brevity of life). When you think about your coming death, what thoughts and emotions most overwhelm you (e.g., fear? conviction? examination)? Why do you think you feel that way about death?

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

LESSON 8 - THE CONCLUSION OF IT ALL

“In conclusion...” Those are words that every listener loves to hear. We have followed Solomon on quite the exhaustive and exhausting journey, and now we come to the end. We learned what we already knew—that life merely lived “under the sun” is futile; but we also discovered the alternative—to live life “in the fear of God.” In the Teacher’s final paragraph, he provides a fitting synopsis to the entire book, which is summarized in one statement: **“Fear God and keep His commandment, for this is the whole duty of man.”** In order to drive that home, Solomon rehearses his authority, his purpose, and his message.

The Author’s Credentials (12:9-11)

His character (v. 9a)

Read Ecclesiastes 11:9-11. Solomon himself possessed wisdom or “skillful living.” In response to his request for wisdom and knowledge, God granted that to Solomon in great abundance (2 Chronicles 1:7-12). Solomon’s ability to discern truth and skillfully apply it to various situations was astonishing.

His concern (vv. 9b-10)

Solomon’s concern, stated in a word in the first half of verse 9 is fleshed out in verses 9b-10. He is concerned that his subjects learn “knowledge,” which is not just mere intellectualism, but a knowledge of how to live life before God. The verbs in verse 9 depict the earnestness with which Solomon concerned himself (“weighing,” “studying,” and “arranging”). He is modeling for us here how we ought to be pursuing knowledge and wisdom (Proverbs 2:1ff).

His purpose (v. 11)

To stimulate: Solomon says that “the words of the wise are as goads.” A “goad” was a stick with an iron point used to prod animals. This indicates that one of Solomon’s purposes in writing this book was to stimulate “the people” to think and then to respond.

To stabilize: Solomon also asserts that the “collected sayings” are like “nails firmly fixed.” This indicates that Solomon desired to stabilize and strengthen people by means of this book. Having wrestled himself with the instability of living merely “under the sun,” he desires to establish people upon the bedrock of truth.

To Shepherd: Solomon declares that all these wisdom-sayings are ultimately “given from one Shepherd.” This “Shepherd” is probably not Solomon (for his title “Teacher” has been consistently applied), but God (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 80:1; Psalm 95:6-7). Thus, Solomon beautifully affirms biblical inspiration (cf. 2 Peter 1:21). God alone is the source of true wisdom (Proverbs 2:1ff; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 2:3).

In referencing the ultimate authority of the Shepherd, Solomon gently maintains that the purpose of the Book of Ecclesiastes is not to drive us to despair or discouragement, but to bring us into the presence of God.

Stop and Think:

- How has this book challenged your thinking and stimulated you to action?

- How has this book grounded you and stabilized you?

- Has this book shepherded you and led you to a specific conclusion about life?

The Author’s Conclusion (12:12-14)

In verse 12, Solomon cautions against any kind of knowledge that is not based on the revelation given by the “Shepherd” (Jeremiah 8:9). Solomon is not at all opposed to knowledge and learning (cf. vv. 9-10); instead, he is opposed to man-based, man-made (“making many books”), and man-centered (“much study”) instruction. Such godless education carries no finality (“no end”), but instead fatigue and frustration.

Solomon writes his summary in verse 13, “the end of the matter, everything having been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” In one succinct statement, he condenses man’s entire responsibility in his “under the sun” existence into two parts—fear of God in one’s heart and obedience to God with one’s life.

Notice here that like James in the New Testament, Solomon inseparably joins both faith and works (cf. James 2:14, 17, 26).

Throughout his book, Solomon has complemented grace (2:24-25; 3:12-13; 9:7-9) with judgment (3:17; 11:9). Here he does the same, but adds the reminder of God's judgment upon "every secret thing" (v. 14—cf. Psalm 90:8; 1 Corinthians 4:5). Previously, this rehearsal of judgment had served to balance our rejoicing (11:9); now, it serves to motivate our righteousness (2 Peter 3:11-14).

Conclusion

"Twentieth-century man...is supremely troubled about being 'thrown into existence' and asks why is there something rather than nothing. Probably the twentieth century, at least in the Western world, is the most bored epoch the world has yet seen. 'Stop the world, I want to get off' is a popular cliché....

To such a world Ecclesiastes has something to say. He does not come as a formal philosopher; it is a word from God he has to share, despite his reflective low-key approach. He does not present half-a-dozen arguments for the existence of God. Instead he picks up our own questions. 'Can you cope with life without having any idea where you are going? You don't have all the answers to life's enigmas, do you? Your neo-pagan view of life doesn't give you any hope of achieving very much, does it? Nature will not answer your questions, and you are bored by it anyway. History baffles your attempts to understand it. You don't like to think about your own death; yet it is the most certain fact about your existence.'

'What would it be like,' asks the Preacher, 'if things were utterly different from what you thought? What if this world is not the ultimate one? What if God exists and is a rewarder of those who seek him? What if one of his supreme characteristics is his utter, incredible generosity, his willingness to give and give and give again, his utter acceptance of us just as we are? Could it be,' asks this provocative and seemingly negative Preacher, 'that the barrenness and hideous purposelessness of life stems only from the fact that you will not believe in such a God?'

We leave the Preacher there. His message is not complete, for he lived before the full light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He saw 'afar off', and still leaves us with some questions. How can God accept us in such a way? What is the explanation of the hideous mess of this world? On what grounds can he feel confident that some future judgment will put it all right? Is there not a missing link in all this? The missing link is Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is in Christ, the Saviour and sin-bearer, that God says to us: 'God is reconciled to you...You be reconciled to God' (2 Cor.

5:18ff.). He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man whom he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

‘Some...sneered...Others said, “We want to hear you again.”...A few...believed.’” (Acts 17:32) – Michael Eaton

Stop and Think

- Do you agree with vs. 12? If this is true, why should we still study and read books?
- Why do you think Solomon ends Ecclesiastes the way he does?
- Are you satisfied with the ending? Why or why not?
- What does it look like in “real life” to fear God and keep His commandments?

DISCUSSION



- What idea(s) or verse(s) stood out to you the most? Why?



- What from this passage did you have a question about or want to discuss with the group?



- What do you need to apply to your life, or remember from this lesson?



- What is one thing that you learned that you can share in your conversations with others this week?

APPENDIX A – TIME ALONE WITH GOD

“How do I go about reading and benefiting from God’s Word?” Here are a few helpful tips (some of these are taken from an article by Matt Smethurst called, “How Not to Read Your Bible in 2013”).

1. **Encourage and be encouraged by others:**

Get accountability and help from other believers. Tell a friend about your desire to read God’s word consistently, and speak with him regularly about what you are learning.

2. **Don't just do it whenever.**

Chances are that if you set out to read the Bible more without a specific plan, your endeavor will end like a passing New Year’s resolution. Set a time, even if it is a small window, when you will read the Word every day, and guard it with your life. With so many distractions and scheduled things in our lives, we must take time to get alone with God. Nothing is more valuable in life than that.

3. **Don't turn a means of grace into a means of merit.**

God is not more pleased with you when you read your Bible 6 days in a week than when you read it 4 days. We read the Word because it is our necessary spiritual food and because we desire fellowship with our Lord, not because it will make God happy with me.

4. **Don't just read.**

Answer questions as you read, and write down the answers. Here are a few questions that will guide your reading of the Bible:

- What does this tell me about God?
- What does this tell me about myself and my sin?
- How do I need to change in light of what I have learned?

10 Questions to Ask of Every Chapter of Scripture

1. What does this chapter teach me about God?

Note: Look for teaching about His attributes, attitudes, and actions.

2. Specifically, what does this chapter reveal about Christ?

Note: Look for Christ in all the Scriptures, including the Old Testament. He is the key to, and message of, the entire Bible.

3. What are the doctrines taught in this chapter?

Make a list of them with relevant quotations from the chapter and any cross-references I may know.

4. Who are the leading characters/key events?

5. What sins and follies are stated or implied?

Examine my own heart in the light of this list. Which things in the list, or suggested by it, do I need to confess and forsake?

6. What are the spiritual attitudes and actions evidenced in this chapter that I should seek after and cultivate?

Always be asking the question, "How can I grow to be more like Christ through this passage of Scripture?"

7. What new thing have I seen and what old truth has the Lord brought with fresh blessing to my heart?

8. What are the key words and phrases that call for further study?

9. What one thing may I remember this chapter by?

10. What is this chapter calling me to change in my life or to affirm in my heart?

APPENDIX B – HANDLING GOD’S WORD

In order to handle the word of God properly, it is important to follow certain guidelines of interpretation (hermeneutics is the \$10 word). Observing these guidelines does not always guarantee correct conclusions, but disregarding them frequently leads to error.

Walt Henrichsen has written a helpful book on this subject: *A Layman’s Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (NavPress, 1979). The rules he suggests are summarized below. You would profit greatly by also reading the explanations and examples of these given in his book.

1. General Principles of Interpretation

- a. Work from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.
- b. The Bible interprets itself; Scripture best explains Scripture.
- c. Saving faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary for us to understand and properly interpret the Scriptures.
- d. Interpret personal experience in the light of Scripture and not Scripture in the light of personal experience.
- e. Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command. So, use them in your life as examples, but make sure to follow the specific commands given to believers.
- f. The primary purpose of the Bible is not to increase our knowledge but to change our lives.
- g. Every Christian has the right and responsibility to investigate and interpret the Word of God for himself.
- h. Church history is important but not decisive in the interpretation of Scripture. Therefore: the Church does not determine what the Bible teaches; the Bible determines what the church teaches.
- i. The promises of God throughout the Bible are available through the Holy Spirit for the believers of every generation.

2. Grammatical Principles of Interpretation

- a. Scripture has only one meaning and should be taken literally.
- b. Interpret words in harmony with their meaning in the times of the author.

- c. Interpret a passage in harmony with its context.
- d. Interpret a word in relation to its sentence and context.
- e. When an inanimate object is used to describe a living being, the statement may be considered figurative.
- f. When an expression is out of character with the thing described, the statement may be considered to be figurative.

APPENDIX C – VERSES EXPLAINING THE GOSPEL

God's Purpose: Honor and Serve Him

Revelation 4:11 – Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

I Corinthians 10:31 – So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Psalms 16:11 – You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Mankind's Problem: Sin

Romans 3:23 – For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

I John 3:4 – Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

Sin's Penalty: Death

Romans 6:23 – For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hebrews 9:27 – And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

Revelation 20:15 – And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

How Can we Have Eternal Life? It's Humanly Impossible!

Proverbs 14:12 – There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

Ephesians 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Christ's payment: Our Sinless Substitute

Romans 5:8 – But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

I Peter 3:18 – For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

Our Pardon: Turn and Trust

John 14:6 – Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Acts 3:19 – Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.

Acts 16:31 – And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Romans 10:13 – For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

God's Promise: Eternal Life

John 3:36 – Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 5:24 – Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Will you Receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior Today?

Admit that you have sinned against God and ask Him for forgiveness.

Believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for you on the cross, rose from the dead, and is Lord.

Call upon Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior.

Outline and verses taken from "God's Bridge to Eternal Life" – DBTS, Detroit, MI.

For more study in Ecclesiastes, including passages that this Bible study did not cover, visit www.singlefocusindy.org/ecclesiastes.