



5 Studies in Ecclesiastes

Trinity Church Adelaide

2024

One of my closest friends is often amused that the movies I enjoy and recommend to her are usually stories of great tragedy involving a deep trial of human experience. She comments that for a relatively happy person, I seem to have a surprising attraction to sad, pessimistic movies.

It is consistent then that I've enjoyed writing these studies in Ecclesiastes, which is generally considered a somewhat pessimistic, depressing read. But my own conclusion on that matter is that it is a kindness of God to have included this book in his word. It validates our frustrations and puzzlement at what we see in the world. It gives us permission to ask the same question our writers did: what on earth *is* the meaning of life?

My prayer is that as you work through these studies, observing things of this world and wrestling with the meaning of life, you will be increasingly at peace about living on this planet with a bunch of ambiguity. I pray also that you will be encouraged to pursue eternal things with increased priority, confident that the Maker of All sees all, will one day make all the crooked things right again, and hold all to account. May this grow in us all a greater urgency to confidently share the good news of Jesus with others so that more might live eternally with him.

Michelle Schultz
Oct 2024

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“Friends” - My worldly inspiration for this series

This booklet contains 5 Studies: I don’t pretend it comprehensively covers all of the book of Ecclesiastes. But I hope it will serve as a good companion to the upcoming Trinity Church Adelaide sermon series.

You will notice a consistency in the Study titles. This is a nod to the 1990s television series, *Friends*, whose episodes were each similarly entitled. The theme song to *Friends* always makes me smile for a variety of reasons: and while the six key characters predominantly lived selfish lives of folly, they certainly understood the importance of companionship. They walked through the joys and challenges of life together: sometimes laughing, sometimes comforting, and often hurting each other. Wisdom/Folly and Companionship are the two extra topics I’d have covered if I’d chosen to extend this to a 7-part Study Series. And Toil, if I’d extended to 8!

“So, no one told you life was going be this way?” Perhaps if we’d read Ecclesiastes more closely one could posit that actually, we have been told!

Please don’t think I condone everything within the television series, *Friends*, just because I’ve referenced it here. This is a principle you also need to apply at times when reading the pages of Ecclesiastes.

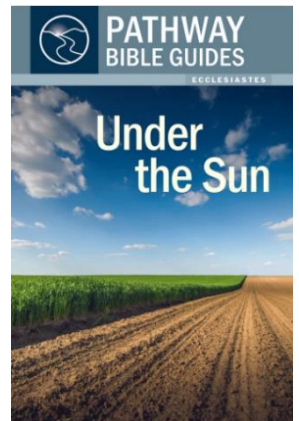
Spotify Playlist

I’ve created a Spotify Ecclesiastes playlist, which includes the *Friends* famous Rembrandt’s song. Follow along: playlist called “Ecclesiastes”. The 14 songs in some way connect to the themes we look at in this series. Suggestions welcomed😊.



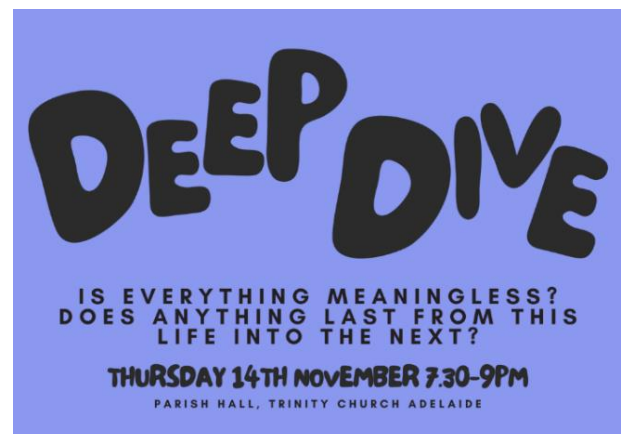
If your group has appetite for more than five studies, I recommend:

- **Mathias Media** have published Des Smith's 7 bible studies, entitled "Under the Sun". Available for purchase online in hard copy or pdf via, <https://matthiasmedia.com.au/products/> (search for "Under the Sun")
- **City Bible Forum** produced an excellent personal reading and reflection booklet, entitled "Chasing Life". Originally published as a project under the hand of Craig Broman in 2018, this contains 9 daily readings, study questions, and contributions from a variety of workers. Available to download at <https://thirdspace.org.au/city/episode/chasing-life-reading-guide>.



I've no doubt that the above books have influenced the studies in this booklet, and I'm grateful for their input.

- Attend our next **Deep Dive Event: Thursday 14 November 2024 - *Is Everything Meaningless? Will anything last from this life into the next?*** Paul Harrington, Senior Network Pastor of the Trinity Network, will confront these questions head on, and will further help us explore what we can labor for in this world that will endure into the age to come.



Key things to know

It might be helpful to be aware of the following terms as you read Ecclesiastes.¹

The Teacher	The person whose teaching is preserved in this book. The original Hebrew (<i>qoheleth</i>) has come to be understood as “preacher”, particularly to a gathering of people: and in Ecclesiastes is always used with the definite article (<i>The P/Teacher</i>) suggesting a title or position rather than name.
Meaningless	The original Hebrew (<i>hebel</i>) means ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’, and is often translated as ‘vanity’ intending to convey a sense of frustration, nonsense, futility, or emptiness. To say everything is meaningless is then like saying it is fleeting.
under the sun / on earth / under heaven	Speaking literally of planet earth
a chasing after the wind	Conveys a sense of futility – why chase the uncatchable wind? An enigma.
Then I saw / I have seen / I also saw	These are statements about what has been observed to occur. Take care not to mix up an observation with a conclusion, nor to assume that something observed is condoned!
Justification: full or centered text formatting	Some text will be printed fully justified: some centered. Centered text is sometimes poetry by the Teacher. Other times, it is more likely him quoting existing sayings: included either because they are apt to include in his argument, <i>or</i> because he is quoting it as mis-advice in order to respond to it.

¹ For more detail, see Lucas, Ernest, “Exploring the Old Testament: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature”, Volume 3, SPCK, 2003. Pg145

A bit about Ecclesiastes the book

Ecclesiastes uses a variety of literary styles and unapologetically weaves from one topic or theme to another. The almost overuse of a few favourite phrases, combined with a reliance on poetry and quotes to make a point, reminds us listening to a wise old sage.

Ecclesiastes is part of the section of the canon of scripture known as the Wisdom Literature, and is placed between Proverbs and Song of Songs. Both those books start by attributing authorship to Solomon. It is curious then that Solomon is not mentioned by name in Ecclesiastes: although traditionally this book has been attributed to him. Much has been written about this! Although one thinks of Solomon when reading 1:1, 1:12, and 12:9, there are compelling scholarly arguments around dating, content, and form which leave us with doubts that it was Solomon's writing. I'm personally satisfied to accept that Ecclesiastes is the work of one or two editor/writers who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote this book later in time but in and of the tradition of the wise King Solomon.²

Ecclesiastes is written using the literary device of Frame Narrative. It's a technique where there is a story within a story; movies such as The Princess Bride and The Titanic are well known examples. A narrator opens and sets up the book (1:1-11) and returns to the stage with the final last word (12:9-14), offering a final perspective on the story along with wise closing comments. Much is lost if we don't listen closely to the narrator.

² For a longer discussion on authorship, see Lucas, E, p149.

Study 1 – The one about pursuits

(Chapters 1 -2)

Getting started

In some ways, life is like a game of poker (risk, uncertainty about what hand you'll get): in other ways, it's like a game of chess (long term strategy and controlled environment). Which do you think best describes life?

How would you define 'wisdom'? Can you think of examples of worldly wisdom / advice that doesn't align with biblical wisdom?

Connecting with the issues

Read Ecc 1:1-12

1. What does 1:1 and 1:12 tell us about who "the Teacher" is?

In v1-3 the narrator has introduced us to the thesis of the entire book: the assertion by The Teacher that everything is meaningless (v2), and has presented a question most of us will ask at some stage in our lives, "What do we gain from all our earthly labors?".

2. In setting the stage for the story to follow, what observations does the narrator make about the world in v4-11? *Think in two categories: creation and humanity.*

3. Do the observations ring true? Are you comforted or confronted by these observations?

Read 1:12-18

We now move to the voice of the Teacher. He describes a quest he's undertaken, and gives a brief overview of his findings.

4. What did the Teacher do, and what is his conclusion?

5. Take a couple of minutes to clarify your understanding of both v15 and v18.

The Teacher now proceeds to give more detail about the investigations which led to their conclusion.

6. Read the passages below. Summarise the pursuit/s undertaken and the purpose/s the Teacher finds in each. Does his conclusion resonate with you?

2:1-11

2:12-16

7. In all his pursuits in Chapter 2, what reference does the Teacher make to God?

Read 2:17-26

8. Do these observations reflect views of people today?

Other scripture on this issue

9. How do the following passages help us respond to the meaninglessness expressed by the Teacher?

Gal 2:19-21

1 Cor 15:57-58

Matt 28:16-20

Responding personally and pastorally

People who love Jesus can easily get caught up in the pursuits described in chapter 2. Like the Teacher: even after pursuing pleasure or achieving our reasonable, good goals, we can be left feeling similarly puzzled or unfulfilled.

10. If this is your experience, what might be some first steps toward putting your priorities in better order? (Consider returning to the NT passages we looked at in Q9.)

11. What might be some effective ways to demonstrate to your non-Christian friends that your priorities are shaped by something eternal?

Pray

Take a couple of minutes to silently reflect on today's study. Have a time of open prayer, where those comfortable to pray aloud can do so to encourage and spur one another on using the sentence starters below.

Wow, Lord, I'm amazed at you for...

Thank you Lord, for...

I'm sorry Lord for...

Please help me this week to...

Listen to our Ecclesiastes Spotify Playlist: QR Code page 3

Larry Norman, one of the pioneers of Christian Rock and Roll music, released a song in 1969 called "Nothing Really Changes". The chorus makes a hopeless statement, but part way through he adds a riff (in italics below), completely changing the tone, highlighting the transforming, life-changing work of Jesus.

**"Nothing really changes, everything remains the same. We are what we are,
til the day that we die (*Unless you love the Lord*)"**

Study 2 – The one about time

(Chapter 3)

Getting started

They say timing is everything. Share some examples where this has been true for you.

Connecting with the issues

Read 3:1-8

1. What are some comforting implications of verse 1?

Sift through v2-8, clarifying the meaning and noticing the breadth of life experiences included.

2. At first read these verses appear to encompass the entire human experience. But are there any life experiences 'missing' that the world's stereotype tells us should be included?

3. What are some confronting implications of these verses (3:1-8)?

Read 3:9-22

4. What frustrations are expressed here? *(note that we'll look at justice and God's judgement a little next week – so don't spend too much time on it here!).*

5. What does it mean that God “has made everything beautiful in its time”? (v11).

6. What do v14-17 tell us about God’s timing and purposes?

7. How does Ecc 7:13-14 speak to this issue?

Other scripture on this issue

8. What do the following passages tell us about God’s timing, change, and purpose? Do these passages address anything raised in previous questions?

John 12:23-33

Gal 4:4-5

2 Cor 5:1-11, 15

2 Peter 3:8-9, 15

Responding personally and pastorally

9. What challenge or encouragement can you take from today's study?

10. How can today's passages help you pray and or care for:

a. Loved ones who don't yet know Jesus

b. Believers who are suffering

Pray

Take a couple of minutes to reflect on today's study. Have a time of open prayer, where those comfortable to pray aloud can do so to encourage and spur one another on using the prayer starters below.

Wow, Lord, I'm amazed at you for...

Thank you Lord, for...

I'm sorry Lord for...

Please help me this week to ...

Think more about what lasts through to eternity at our upcoming Deep Dive on Thursday 14 November 2024 7:30-9:00pm with Paul Harrington (Senior Network Pastor, Trinity Network). Further details on page 4.

Study 3 – The one about injustice

(selected verses of Chapters 4,5,7, & 9)

Getting started

Start this study by sharing some of the current global or local injustices that move you. As a group, bring the people and situations before God in prayer.

In this study we'll move around a few chapters as the text weaves in and out of many themes. We are focusing on oppression and injustice.

Connecting with the issues

1. Read the following Ecclesiastes passages and identify the issues raised. Which observations resonate with you?

4:1-4

5:8-9

7:15

8:14

9:11

10:5-7

2. Read Ecc 3:17 and 11:9. How do these passages speak to the observations made in Q1?

Other scripture on this issue

3. What do the following passages say about injustice?

Isaiah 61:8-9

Matt 5:43-48

Acts 17: 29-31

Romans 12:19

Romans 13:1-5

James 1:27

Rev 21: 1-8

Responding personally and pastorally

Read Psalm 73. As you read, allow yourself to feel the gut-wrenching plight of the writer, and the sweetness that enters at verse 23.

4. How does this psalm comfort and strengthen us in times of adversity and injustice?

5. What are some actions that might be appropriate for us to take when we see injustice in the world? Let the passages we've looked at in this study shape our responses.

Pray

Take a couple of minutes to reflect on today's study, and if the model has been working for your group in previous weeks, have a time of open prayer perhaps using any combination of the suggested prayer starters below.

Wow, Lord, I'm amazed at you for...

Thank you Lord, for...

I'm sorry Lord for...

Please help me this week to...

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Rend Collectives song, 'Weep with me', is a lament. As you sit with hurt or injustice, remember to turn to the Lord – he cares so much for your heart.

"Weep with me, Lord, will you weep with me. I don't need answers, all I need is to know that you care for me..."

What's true in the light is still true in the dark.

You're good and you're kind and you care for this heart."

Study 4 – The one about money

(selected verses of Chapters 5,6, 10, 11)

Getting started

I've heard it said that money can't buy happiness, yet I feel like the world also tells me I'd be happier with more money. What do you make of these sentiments?

In this study we'll move around a few chapters as the text weaves in and out of many themes. We are focusing on money, wealth, and possessions.

Connecting with the issue

Read 5:10-17

1. What observations is the Teacher making about money and wealth?
2. Do any of his observations resonate with you?
3. What is it about wealth that ruins people's ability to be made happy by it?
(5v10)

Read 5:18-6:2

4. Who is the source of wealth and possessions?

5. The Teacher observes two distinct responses from those who have wealth and possessions. Do we get any sense that either recognise from whose hand these gifts come?

Read 11:1-6.

6. What advice does the Teacher seem to be giving?

7. What do we read here about God's work? (you might like to look at the Doxology at the end of Romans 11).

Other scripture on this issue

8. Read the following passages, and discuss what God says about money, wealth, and possessions.

Matt 6:19-24

1 Cor 16:2

2 Cor 8:1-5

1 Tim 6:6-10

1 Tim 6:17-19

Responding personally and pastorally

9. Thinking particularly about the passages we just read: what are some ways we can use our wealth and possessions to glorify God and love others? Make a plan right now to start!
10. If you were to begin to realise that you were becoming too tied to your wealth and possessions, what could be some practical ideas you could implement to bring about a course correction?

Pray

As a group spend time again in prayer responding to the passages discussed in the study using the same framework as in previous weeks.

Wow, Lord, I'm amazed at you for...

Thank you Lord, for...

I'm sorry Lord for...

Please help me this week to...

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Listen to our Ecclesiastes Spotify Playlist: QR Code page 3
Canyon Hills Worship's song, "Jesus, my Treasure" helps us commit all we have to the Lord. Make it your prayer this week:

***"Whatever it cost me I give it up freely,
Whatever you ask me I gladly release
Cause all that I have is yours to begin with...
Jesus my treasure: you are enough for me"***

Study 5 – The one about the ending

Chapter 12

Getting started

What advice would you give your younger self?

Read Ecc 8:16-9:2.

1. What conclusion/s has the Teacher drawn from all his observations of wisdom and labor?
2. Recalling what we've looked at in previous studies, especially the one about justice, what might be the 'common destiny' that awaits us all?

Hold that thought!

Read Ecc 12: 1-8

3. Linger over v2-8, taking a few minutes to enjoy the poetic language describing the ageing process.

4. What is the salient life advice being given? (hint: v1 and v6)

5. Flick back to Ecc 3:18-21. Combined with what we read in 12:7, what does this tell us about what happens after death? Given this, what do you make of the advice in 2 above?

Other scripture on this issue

Read the following verses, and highlight how they interact with this issue.

1 Cor 15: 17-19

Phil 3:17-21

Heb 4:13-16

Rev 7:9-10

The conclusion of the matter

Read Ecc 12:9-14

Notice that these verses are in the voice of the frame narrator whom we heard from in the opening chapter (1:1-11). Before giving their own final conclusion, the narrator shares a few wrap up comments about the wise Teacher.

6. What is the narrator's view on the credibility of the Teacher? (v9-12)

7. What is meant by v11? (eg, goads, nails, shepherd)

8. What is the narrator's closing point? Is this easy to accept?

9. What do you think it means to fear God?

Responding personally and pastorally

As we finish off this series in Ecclesiastes, take a few minutes to think about the series as a whole.

10. Share any highlights from this series.

11. How has this series challenged or shifted your priorities?

12. How has this series helped you make sense of the world? How has it helped you understand God?

13. Whose voices are the loudest in your life, and why? Whose desires are you pursuing, and why? If you are not living submitted first to the Lord's voice and path, what might be some first steps you could take to course correct?

Close in prayer, perhaps recognising the highlights, challenges, and learnings of this series. Thank him for the loving kindness he's shown you in Jesus, and ask him to help you to live for his glory.

Listen to our Ecclesiastes Spotify Playlist: QR Code page 3

NLC Worship's song, "Ecclesiastes (A Song of Devotion)" has us sing:

"I will love him and fear him even when the sun grows dark."

The second and final track in the playlist is instrumental, entitled simply "Ecclesiastes", by Shawn Halim/Alabaster Co.

I've enjoyed listening to this while writing this series. I love how the piece ends without really finishing: I'm not sure of the composer's intention, but it speaks to me of the things of God which I don't yet know or understand, but that I know one day will be revealed.