

# FINDING MEANING: WISDOM FROM ECCLESIASTES



## ***What's the point?***

If you've ever asked this question, Ecclesiastes is for you. Solomon, the one who penned this book, asked a similar question. And while he often may sound like he's throwing up his hands in exasperation, it's quite the opposite. Some people even prefer to skip over Ecclesiastes because "it's a bummer," but we can gain much insight from it. In fact, Ecclesiastes is an exciting and fascinating book to study.

In this study we're going to walk with the richest and smartest person in the world. He built an enormous empire. He established trade with the surrounding nations. He was a living encyclopedia of knowledge. He lived a life of unrivaled luxury and pleasure. Yet with all he had, he shows us that all of it—every single bit of it—is nothing!

Nothing, that is, apart from God.

Let's join Solomon on his exploration of life "under the sun." We'll see clues along the way of the purpose and meaning God provides when we live life keeping our perspective "above the sun." We'll be both challenged and encouraged to see how wonderful our God is and how much He wants for us to enjoy this brief life He's given us.



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## SESSION 1

# WHEN LIFE FEELS EMPTY

### ▶ **The Point**

Life without Christ is meaningless.

### ▶ **The Passage**

Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

My daughters asked for hamsters. My first thought was, *What do they do?* My next thought was, *What do you do with them?* Hamsters live in a cage. You give them food and water. They eat. You clean their cage. You repeat the cycle. What's the point? And hamsters are nocturnal, which means they're active at night. So, while we're trying to sleep, we hear that squeaky hamster wheel going round and round for *hours*. It's pointless!

Sadly, life can feel like that sometimes. Now and then we may feel like hamsters in a cage, running hard and fast on the wheel of life, making a lot of noise, but going nowhere fast! And we might wonder: does it all really mean anything?

The Book of Ecclesiastes answers questions about meaning in this life by exposing the absurd futility of viewing life only from a secular perspective. As Christians, we must understand that, apart from Christ, our lives are no more meaningful than living in a cage and running on a hamster wheel.

### ▶ **The Setting**

The English title for Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek word for a person who gathers an assembly. The Hebrew name reflects the writer's title for himself (Qoheleth) and can be translated "Teacher" or "Preacher." Solomon is traditionally recognized as the book's narrator based on his identity as the "son of David, king in Jerusalem" in 1:1. The book focuses on the search for purpose. A connected theme is the futility of life, mentioned first in 1:2 and appearing around forty times across the work.

# What does the Bible say?

## ***Ecclesiastes 1:1-14***

- <sup>1</sup> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- <sup>2</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- <sup>3</sup> What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
- <sup>4</sup> A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
- <sup>5</sup> The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.
- <sup>6</sup> The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
- <sup>7</sup> All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.
- <sup>8</sup> All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
- <sup>9</sup> What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.
- <sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.
- <sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.
- <sup>12</sup> I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.
- <sup>13</sup> And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.
- <sup>14</sup> I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

# GET INTO THE STUDY



Notes



**DISCUSS:** Question #1 on page 13 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “**What’s the most monotonous task you’ve ever had to do?**” Allow time for each person to respond.

**ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL):** In advance, gather some magazines containing various kinds of photos, several pairs of scissors, and some tape. Distribute the magazines and scissors. Ask members to cut out pictures or words representing

things that people use to fill their lives or to find meaning in life. Direct them to tape their pictures to the white board or another focal point. **Say:** “We’re going to be studying why these things are actually meaningless.”

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to “**The Bible Meets Life**” on page 14 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of finding true meaning in life with Christ by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

**LEADER PACK:** Display **Pack Item 1**, “Finding Meaning” poster, to introduce the major theme of this study, along with the special focus of each session.

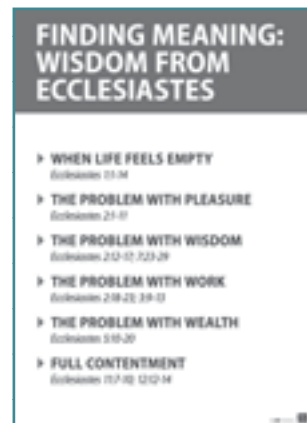
**GUIDE:** Call attention to “**The Point**” on page 14 of the PSG: “**Life without Christ is meaningless.**”

**LEADER PACK:** In advance, make enough copies of **Pack Item 2**, the “Solomon” handout, for your group members. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the significant events in Solomon’s life. Refer back to this handout throughout the unit as appropriate.

**PRAY:** Transition into the study by asking God to help us find the answers about life we need and even to find the right questions about life to ask. Thank Him that our answers and meaning are found in Him.



Want to know about biblical culture, people, archaeology, and history? *Biblical Illustrator* has articles that tie to each session in this study at [lifeway.com/BI](http://lifeway.com/BI).





# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

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## **Ecclesiastes 1:1-7**

***1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. 5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. 7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 1:1-7 on page 15 of the PSG.

**GUIDE:** Use the Commentary for the verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to explain how we know Solomon is the writer of Ecclesiastes and why that is significant.

**RECAP:** In Ecclesiastes, Solomon placed himself in the shoes of the atheist and tried to explain this world from that perspective. Solomon wanted us to know that, apart from God, this life has no meaning.

**DISCUSS: Question #2** on page 15 of the PSG: **“Where do you see futility in our world today?”**

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 16 of the PSG. Even as believers, we can still struggle with the seeming futility of our day-to-day lives. Solomon used three pictures from nature to make this point:

- ▶ Life can seem like the repetitive cycles of the sun (v. 5).
- ▶ Life can seem like the directionless flow of the winds (v. 6).
- ▶ Life can seem like the never-ending flow of the rivers into the oceans (v. 7).

**TRANSITION:** Without Christ, what we do in life can not only feel pointless but it also does not satisfy.

**ALTERNATE QUESTION:**

Which of the metaphors in these verses best captures the futility of life for you?

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## ***Ecclesiastes 1:1-7 Commentary***

**[Verses 1-2]** Scholars have long struggled with the negative nature of Ecclesiastes. However, the emphasis on futility reminds readers that life really is meaningless if God is left out of the equation. **Son of David, king in Jerusalem** identifies Solomon as the writer. However, by identifying himself as **the Preacher**, Solomon made it clear he was speaking as a wise man, not as the leader of the nation. This also informs readers that this is primarily a work of wisdom literature. Solomon challenged readers to fear God and to let Him be the ethical anchor of their lives. The **vanity** of life—specifically life without God—is a major theme throughout Ecclesiastes. Solomon did not waste time jumping into the topic. The word translated **vanity** relates to a vapor or a breath. It emphasizes something is temporary. Solomon contrasted the fleeting value of earthly pursuits with the splendor of eternity. Such pursuits are not inherently wrong, but they must be kept in perspective. The repetition of the phrase increases the intensity of the emotion behind the message. Solomon was not stating creation itself was meaningless; it is a good gift from God. However, trying to navigate creation apart from the Creator is a shameful waste.

**[Verses 3-4]** **Under the sun** underscores the activities of earth and points to the superiority of heaven. Solomon posed his first reflection question, essentially asking, “What’s the point?” Humanity has to work hard to survive. But when all is said and done, we have very little to show from all that labor. In some sense, all our work might seem meaningless. To illustrate the futility, Solomon provided a series of comparisons between humanity and nature. First, even **the earth** has an expiration date, but it seems eternal compared to the lifespan of a person. While kingdoms have risen and fallen, the earth has continued spinning from night to day. It has stood the test of time—unlike humans who have tried to make a name for themselves by worldly standards.

**[Verses 5-7]** Like the earth, **the sun** is a constant. Solomon described it like a runner, quickly going from one spot to the next and **hastens** all the way. But the motion does not produce much. Likewise, humanity chases many things, but those pursuits provide little benefit because life is temporary and passing away. **The wind**, while it is not seen, has been felt for generations. Powerful gusts can either power cities or destroy communities. Solomon used the sun to illustrate the east and the west, the winds to illustrate **north** and **south**. But, in this case, the wind also represents futility. It moves around and shifts from day to day. While its presence is consistent, it is less predictable than the earth or sun. Solomon’s final nature example is water, specifically **the sea**. Rivers and streams flow endlessly toward larger bodies of water. Even the smallest tributaries end up in the ocean or the sea. Yet the sea **is not full**. Likewise, humanity is never satisfied apart from the Lord. Regardless of what people might chase, they can never fill the hole in their hearts. Only God can provide true meaning and purpose.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## NOTES

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### *Ecclesiastes 1:8-11*

***<sup>8</sup> All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. <sup>9</sup> What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. <sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 1:8-11 on page 16 of the PSG.

**GUIDE:** Use the Commentary for these verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to describe how the cycles of nature frustrated Solomon and reminded him of the meaningless monotony of human existence.

**DISCUSS:** **Question #3** on page 16 of the PSG: “**What are some things that people do in an attempt to leave a legacy?**”

#### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

How have you found the statement: “There’s nothing new under the sun” to be true?

**DO:** Direct group members to complete the activity, “Filling the Empty Spaces,” on page 17 of the PSG to help them consider how Christ can make their mundane tasks more meaningful.

*Rank (1-5) the following daily, often boring, routines by how meaningless they feel sometimes. Then answer the questions.*

- \_\_\_ Making the bed
- \_\_\_ Preparing a meal
- \_\_\_ Commuting to work/school
- \_\_\_ Attending meetings
- \_\_\_ Cleaning (house, office desk, etc.)

*How could your relationship with Christ make one of these mundane tasks more meaningful? What could you do to bring your relationship with Christ into alignment in other areas of life?*

**TRANSITION:** The next verses remind us that without Christ, what we do in life is a miserable task.



## ***Ecclesiastes 1:8-11 Commentary***

**[Verse 8]** The cycles of nature frustrated Solomon and reminded him of the meaningless monotony of human existence. Just as nature went around in circles, he believed humanity also exerted much effort with little to show for it. He called people's pursuit to find purpose **weariness**. Turning from nature, Solomon focused on human senses. The word for **things** relates to spoken words, as indicated by **a man cannot utter it**. Weary words never produce anything useful to the speaker or the listeners. Also, **the eye is not satisfied** with anything it sees, nor **the ear filled** with anything it hears. Humans try to find satisfaction with pleasures they can experience. It never lasts. Instead, people feel just as empty as before. In general, the idea of a wearisome world summarizes the philosophy reflected in verses 4-7. The absence of satisfaction reflects the typical human response to that emptiness. Solomon concluded that the constant search for purpose is what makes all things wearisome. Without the fingerprints of God, nothing makes sense or gives life meaning.

**[Verse 9]** Solomon stated that **what has been is what will be**. Likewise, all that had been done in the past would continue to be done. Like nature, individuals would simply stay in their ruts. Few, if any, significant changes would happen. As a result, humanity would never really find anything **new under the sun**. This phrase also serves as a common thread throughout Ecclesiastes. It reinforces the vanity and uselessness the Teacher felt around him. From a contemporary perspective, this statement might not seem valid. Technology and innovation make things obsolete soon after they are introduced. But Solomon was not focused on those kinds of changes. Instead, "nothing new under the sun" refers to the essential condition of humanity. Companies might produce faster computers or fancier cars. A writer or artist might create a new book or painting. But those will never reverse the aging cycle or save one person from the grave. In a very real way, nothing new has been produced since God said, "Let there be . . ." during creation. God, through the work of Christ, continues to make all things new—including transforming sinful people into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

**[Verse 10]** The quest for something new is common to the human experience. People strive for the thing that will impact the world and produce a lasting legacy. Unfortunately, Solomon's question—**Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?**—continues to be answered "no." We can look to **ages before us** and trace the path of what we think is unique or new. Everything once considered new has become old and passed away. Whatever exists today is primarily another version of what has been. Little really changes about the human race over time. People still live, still work, still build families, still wrestle with common problems, and still die. Solomon's implication is that such futility exists anywhere God is removed from the equation. He is the only One who can provide genuine meaning for our lives. But when we refuse to make Him a part of our experience, we are doomed to experience the kind of frustration Solomon described.

**[Verse 11]** Solomon said there was generally **no remembrance** for ancestors. Younger athletes replace veterans on professional sports rosters. New stars in Hollywood take the place of actors who were popular a few years ago. Like the cycles of nature, no one really has "staying power" in our world. Without God, it is impossible to make a lasting, eternal impression on this world.



15 minutes

# STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

## ***Ecclesiastes 1:12-14***

***12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 1:12-14 on page 18 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS:** Question #4 on page 19 of the PSG: **“How does Christ bring meaning and purpose to our lives?”**

**GUIDE:** Use the Commentary for these verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to explain the significance of Solomon’s examining everything “done under heaven.”

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 19 of the PSG. The search for life’s meaning is a noble task. If anybody could find the answer, it would be Solomon.

- ▶ **Solomon was wiser than anyone else in the world.** He could speak and write confidently on any number of subjects (1 Kings 4:29-31).
- ▶ **Solomon was more productive than anyone else.** He spoke three thousand proverbs and wrote more than a thousand songs (v. 32).
- ▶ **Solomon had more wealth than all the other kings in the world (10:14-29).** In fact, he didn’t even use silver, “[because] silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon” (v. 21).

**DISCUSS:** Question #5 on page 19 of the PSG: **“What are some ways our group can help clarify meaning and purpose for our lives?”**

**GUIDE:** Refer back to **“The Point”** for this session: **“Life without Christ is meaningless.”**

**ALTERNATE QUESTION:**

When did you begin to seriously pursue meaning and purpose for your life?

## Ecclesiastes 1:12-14 Commentary

[Verses 12-13] Solomon had made some basic observations about what he had seen around him. Here, though, he announced a shift in his efforts. Instead of just watching things, he recorded his personal experiences. He began with a reminder of who he was, **the Preacher**. But he wasn't just a preacher or teacher. He was also the **king over Israel**. Both titles would have provided the necessary credibility for what he was about to say. He had all the resources necessary to indulge himself in the tests he was about to run. He had the finances to pay for anything he wanted, and he had the authority to make sure no request was rejected.

Solomon was known for his incredible **wisdom**. He determined to apply that God-given gift to his search for purpose and meaning. He said that he **applied my heart**. While this could relate to knowledge, it also includes the idea of a passionate pursuit. Whatever he learned from his study, he would filter through wisdom to gain proper perspective and ensure practical application. He wanted to make his research as comprehensive as possible. While he found nothing new under the sun, he promised to examine everything **done under heaven**. If there was meaning and purpose in life, he was determined to find it. Solomon's observations told him everyday life was a burden for people, what he called **an unhappy business**. Solomon expected his search for human purpose to be anything but a meaningful adventure. It would be just as hard and unpleasant for him. In the end, his work would feel as futile as what he had described in the larger world. Just as living apart from the Creator is meaningless, the attempt to understand life without Him has no purpose. But he also was hinting that just gaining such knowledge is but another example of looking for satisfaction in the wrong place. Knowledge and wisdom, when pursued without God, are equally as futile as anything else humans may seek for refuge.

[Verse 14] Solomon returned to the idea of everything **done under the sun** and to the theme of life's futility. He compared it all to a **striving after wind**. Obviously, the wind has incredible power. But people can never catch the wind or hold it in their hands. It is foolish to even try. And, as Solomon made clear, it is also foolish to chase meaning without the Author of meaning. Jesus echoed this idea during the Sermon on the Mount. He noted that instead of going our own way, humans should pursue God first and foremost. When we do that, the meaning and purpose we seek will fall into place (Matt. 6:33).

Read the articles "The Cyclical View of History" and "Vanity: A Word Study" in the Spring 2019 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous articles relate to this lesson and can be purchased at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.



5 minutes

# LIVE IT OUT

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to page 20 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications to carry out this week.



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Go for a walk.** Go outside to a place where you can enjoy God’s creation. Give thanks to God for what you see. God wants His people to enjoy His creation.
- ▶ **Set personal goals.** One reason life may seem meaningless is because we have no goals. Think about what you want to accomplish over the next twelve months and write it down.
- ▶ **Share the gospel.** Lots of people around us have no meaning in life. Point them to Christ, the One who gives meaning to this world and to our lives.

## Wrap It Up

**TRANSITION:** Read or restate the final paragraph from page 20 of the PSG:

If we fall into the trap of seeing life merely from a secular viewpoint, life will feel like an endless, monotonous hamster wheel. Reset your perspective and view life from above the sun instead!

**PRAY:** Conclude by thanking the Lord for giving us meaning in Christ. Ask Him to help us lead others away from futility and toward the truth.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at [BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra)