

What's the Use?

The wise person seeks to find meaning in life from God.

ECCLESIASTES 1:12-15; 2:18-26

MEMORY VERSE: ECCLESIASTES 2:26

STUDY Ecclesiastes 1:12-15; 2:18-26, focusing on Solomon's search for wisdom. Identify repeated words and phrases. Consult a Bible dictionary for additional clarification, along with **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: "Vanity" and "Under the Sun" in Ecclesiastes*), reviewing Solomon's references to *vanity*. Note that the Christian Standard Bible uses the word *futile*. Focus on Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, as Solomon brings clarity to his reflections.

CREATE a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 90–92. Be sensitive to individuals in your group who may be struggling with the loss of a job. Analyze your own attitude toward work and how it reflects your dependence on God.

GATHER the following items:

- Extra Personal Study Guides (PSGs)

Prepare to Display:

- Pack Item 1** (*Map: Ancient Near East during Patriarchs*)
- Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*)
- Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*)

Make Copies of:

- Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Ecclesiastes Time Line*)
- Pack Item 11** (*Handout: "Vanity" and "Under the Sun" in Ecclesiastes*)

CONSULT the Explore the Bible website for ways of using a current news event to start and conclude the session (goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras).

REINFORCE the study by contacting the group by email or text to encourage them to continue looking for joy in the work they do. Ask them to search for ways they can minister to other people through their work.

KEY DOCTRINE

Stewardship

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him (2 Cor. 9:8).

FIRST THOUGHTS

People throughout history have tried to take their wealth with them when they died. Items placed around mummies and in caskets point to that effort. The great equalizer in life is death, regardless of how much or how little one accumulates. The writer of Ecclesiastes observed that people who focus solely on work and amassing material possessions come to the end of life without any eternal gains to show for it.

(In PSG, p. 73) **In what activities do people engage in their pursuit to find meaning in life?**

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary to gain insight into a word.

Read the entry about “vain,” “vanity,” or “futility” in a Bible dictionary. Examine some of the Bible passages included. How does the way vain or vanity is used outside of Ecclesiastes give you deeper insight into the emotions expressed by Solomon? What modern words might you use to convey what Solomon meant when he used the word translated as vanity or futility?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–2:26

Ecclesiastes begins and ends with the declaration that “everything is futile” (1:2; 12:8). In Hebrew, the word translated “futile” or “futility” means “vapor” or “breath.” From this, the word came to mean “temporary,” “fleeting,” “inconsequential,” or even “absurd.” The phrase “under the sun” (1:3) was Solomon’s way of referring to life on earth. It is here the Teacher often asked the key question of the book: “What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?” (1:3). The answer is futility.

Solomon’s thesis is expanded under the idea that generations come and go, but the earth remains the same (1:4). Life on this earth is fleeting and temporary, but the earth continues to turn on its axis. Solomon illustrated the futility of his search by explaining that all of his efforts were like chasing after the wind (1:14).

Solomon delved into numerous pursuits he undertook in the search for life’s meaning. He is a good teacher to learn from here, for he had all the earthly resources and pleasures at his disposal as king of Israel. He tried education and intellectual endeavors but discovered that trying to understand the meaning of life is too perplexing for even the most educated and greatest of human intellects. In the end, it is a bewildering puzzle (1:12-18). Solomon found that even the wisdom one may gain in life is of no real ultimate value. In the end, both the wise and foolish share the same fate—death (2:12-17).

Next, he turned his attention to pleasure and the accumulation of possessions. He discovered these “delights of men” were in the end a disappointment (2:8). Moreover, when one dies, it is likely that those who inherit these possessions will squander them, so all the work was for nothing. It is best to go through life being content with what one

has (2:18-26). All of this indicates the answer to life's meaning is outside of human achievement. It should lead humanity to look to God who provides the answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" The answer ultimately is in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

LIMITED PERSPECTIVE (ECCL. 1:12-15)

Verses 12-15

In this passage, **the Teacher** (Solomon) introduced himself and his life quest while expressing the struggle and frustrations that accompanied him along the way. The Teacher was the **king over Israel in Jerusalem**, and with his office came all the resources that one can imagine at his disposal. In this study of Ecclesiastes, we will journey with the Teacher as he goes on a grand experiment, searching far and wide under the sun in an attempt to experience everything life has to offer. From the teacher's perspective **under the sun**, after all that he had experienced, learned, and done, he declared that it was all vanity or **futile**. The word *futile* suggests that which is meaningless, transitory, and of no lasting value.

The king was in a position to teach wisdom to his readers, but ironically his words offer challenge and discomfort. In wisdom literature, fear of God is the foundation for all human wisdom. (See Prov. 1:7.) Here however, the Teacher's quest centered on his own efforts of learning from experience. From this limited perspective, he found only enigmas that he could not resolve on his own.

We've all heard the saying, "knowledge is power." This assumes that the more you know, the more you can achieve, and the more you can achieve, the more power you'll have. Yet here was one of the wisest men who has ever lived telling us that he had applied his mind and examined and explored all that is done under heaven. In the end it was **a pursuit of the wind**. This imagery illustrates that one cannot fully grasp the meaning of life by human ability or by utilizing resources *under the sun*.

Ecclesiastes teaches us not to depend on ourselves and our own resources.

Why did he land on this conclusion? Because in the end, **what is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted**. All the wisdom in the world cannot fix the deepest problems of humanity. Ecclesiastes teaches us not to depend on ourselves and our own resources, but rather to depend on God and His provisions for our lives. In reality, anything other than dependence on and trust in God is an attempt to grasp the unattainable (to chase after the wind).

VERSES 12-15

¹² I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied. ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

The teacher’s quest was an attempt to find meaning in life. Even though there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, “with much wisdom is much sorrow” (1:18). As knowledge increases, grief increases. In the end, the same fate comes to both the wise and the fool. This is the first lesson we learn from the Teacher, namely, there is something bittersweet about the limits to human wisdom. On the one hand, the more you know, the better. At the same time, the more you know, the more your sorrow increases because you become more aware of the pain and suffering in the world.

This is the tension of living life under the sun. The world doesn’t always make sense, and we cannot fix it. We can all attest to this fact. There are times you wish you knew more and times you wish you knew less. Worldly wisdom can tell you how things are in the natural world, but worldly wisdom does not always provide an answer. The longings of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes tell us there is something beyond the parameters of this life, something beyond the sun that gives us an answer and provides lasting meaning and purpose.

As believers, we understand that there is a wisdom that does not lead to despair. Those who have their sights fixed within the parameters under the sun will never see it. The truly wise are those who know Jesus. He is for us wisdom from God. (See 1 Cor. 1:24.) The wise of this world glory in their worldly wisdom. The wise of the world to come boast in Christ as their only hope. Those have found Christ—they are the ones who have found power over death and the true meaning of life. This eternal perspective gives meaning that wisdom in this world cannot obtain.

Why is searching for ultimate meaning using only a natural perspective (limited knowledge and earthly resources) futile?

INHERITANCE BLOWN? (ECCL. 2:18-21)

Verses 18-21

Why do we get up in the morning to go to work? Why do we do what we do? There is a sense of purpose that comes in working, producing, and contributing. Perhaps this explains why the first question we often ask each other is, “So, what do you do?” We also realize that work is not easy or always enjoyable. Even still, work is good. In fact, work was given before the fall in Genesis 3 and was included in everything that God declared good. We were originally created to work under and for God in a meaningful and fulfilling way. Our work was meaningful because it was part of God’s plan (Gen. 1:26-28). In the garden, God provided Adam and Eve with meaningful work (work and keep the garden) and with good food (freely eat of every tree in the garden).

But work after the fall, ***under the sun***, is difficult toil. After the fall (Gen. 3:1-7), we still strive to work meaningfully but are continually frustrated in this effort (3:16-19). In Ecclesiastes 2:18-21, the Teacher described work as ***futile***.

As Christians it is important to remember that the curse over all of creation will one day be lifted because Jesus became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). Therefore, we are to live out our lives under the heavens, looking forward with hope to a day when we will live fully in the joy of fellowship with God (Rev. 21-22). Until that day, there is fulfillment after a hard day's work, yet still at the end of the day it is hard on us. Work does, however, allow us the ability to provide for our needs. But what happens to all of the resources that we collect in this life? The teacher tells us plainly. When we die, the stuff we have goes to someone else: ***he must give his portion to a person who has not worked for it.***

The Teacher lamented that he had no control over his own legacy—what would come after his life. He envisioned his successor and revealed a bit of cynicism realizing that his life's work would be left in the hands of the one who came after him. The teacher admitted he had no control over who inherited his work. The implication is clear; since his successor had not worked for all he had been handed, he may be utterly foolish in how he stewards his inheritance.

This uncontrollable outcome is also shown to be an enigma that the Teacher could not remedy on his own. Therefore, Solomon despaired to think that a person might work hard and with great skill only to die and have nothing of lasting gain. Solomon's self-indulgence reflects the natural inclination of the human heart when unchecked (2:1-11). Living prior to Christ, Solomon would not have had the more developed perspective of the afterlife and the renewal of all things that the New Testament affords the modern reader.

For this reason, New Testament readers should have sympathy toward Solomon and his limited perspective. Coming to grips with death without the clearly espoused eternal perspective through Christ is in itself an enigma. In the natural world, death is the last enemy. From a purely naturalistic perspective, death is the one enigma that no one has faced and lived to tell about it. This is why bringing God and His work through Christ into the discussion makes all the difference.

In Christ, death becomes the gateway into the presence of God. For a Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. To be present with the Lord is to enjoy eternal pleasures forevermore. In 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, the apostle Paul reminded us that we are not to build our lives on the foundations of gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw. In the end, these things will not last and will be exposed as vain and futile. On the other hand, we are told to build on the eternal foundation of Christ and His kingdom, which will lead to eternal reward. Focusing solely on work and amassing material possessions leads to no eternal gains. Focusing on Christ, however, leads to rewards that moths and rust cannot destroy.

VERSES 18-21

¹⁸ I hated all my work that I labored at under the sun because I must leave it to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will take over all my work that I labored at skillfully under the sun. This too is futile. ²⁰ So I began to give myself over to despair concerning all my work that I had labored at under the sun. ²¹ When there is a person whose work was done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and he must give his portion to a person who has not worked for it, this too is futile and a great wrong.

How does Solomon's lament about the temporary nature of human achievement give us proper perspective on what we should expect from this life?

VERSES 22-23

²² For what does a person get with all his work and all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?

²³ For all his days are filled with grief, and his occupation is sorrowful; even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is futile.

ENJOY WORK (ECCL. 2:22-26)

Verses 22-23

Solomon established that when we die, the stuff we have goes to someone else. Moreover, he established that we have no control over whether our successors will be wise or foolish with their inheritance. To make us feel even more sheepish with this enigma, the Teacher said this is the reason we stay up **at night** and the **mind does not rest**.

Have you ever asked of your work, how will I ever get it all done? As we lay awake, we are haunted by the reality that there is too much strain without much gain. Indeed, our work is never done! This is another sense in which work takes its toll on us. But perhaps it takes its toll on us and we stay awake because deep down inside we have made work something it was not meant to be.

We cannot make the mistake of making a good thing the ultimate thing.

Verses 24-26

The direct references to God in Ecclesiastes are few and far between, but He is referenced in 2:24 as the giver of joy. Thus, these verses give us proper perspective on life under the sun. If we understand that divine gifts of creation are meant to be enjoyed as matters of stewardship rather than as possessions, we see that they have their limits. So we cannot make the mistake of making a good thing the ultimate thing. We cannot look to the gifts to give us what can only come from the Giver Himself. When we receive good things in life as a gift rather than an entitlement, we experience genuine joy and can keep our focus on what truly matters.

The Teacher said to savor the pleasure you have when you **eat** and **drink**, find enjoyment in a good day's work. These are gifts to us **from God's hand**. In fact, according to Solomon, there is nothing better than to stop and enjoy life for what it is and to stop trying to make it what it was never meant to be. Eating, drinking, and enjoying one's labor are here positively evoked as the gift of God. Enjoying food and drink is a gift often expressed in biblical texts. In Revelation, we read of a meal called "the marriage

supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:6-9). In the end, we shall see provision of food and healing that will last for eternity in the new earth as God dwells with man (Rev. 22:1-2). Therefore, the gifts of eating and drinking here and now simply foreshadow a life of eating and drinking in the presence of God that is to come.

Many of us, like the Teacher, labor under the sun and see life’s gifts as an entitlement. However, consider Jesus, who instead of working to gain all for Himself, sacrificially gave His life for others. Which pattern of life is most fulfilling? When we take in all of what the Teacher has said, there are different responses we might make. We can become a bitter skeptic suspended over the abyss of despair, or we might place all of our hope in this life, which is ***a pursuit of the wind***.

For the Christian, however, there is another way that gives us both humble realism and hopeful optimism. The good news of the gospel gives us a humble realism. Nothing in this life can satisfy our souls; only Christ can. But it also gives us a hopeful optimism: we can have hope that this life is not all that is.

Living life as if it is all defined by what is “under the sun” misses the whole point. We all want our lives to be connected to something beyond the mere pleasures and comforts of this life. We all want to be significant and to contribute something more lasting. What defines our end goal?

It seems that the teacher realized that God gave humans life and work as a means of joy, not despair. Despair arises when humans seek to enjoy life apart from God. As believers, we should enjoy our work, thanking God for His provisions. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

**How can the good gifts of this life be a means to turn our worship to God?
How can the good gifts of this life be a distraction from our attention to God
and become objects of worship themselves?**

VERSES 24-26

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God’s hand, ²⁵ because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? ²⁶ For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God’s sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION

INTRODUCE: Prior to the session, secure a photo of an Egyptian mummy. Display the picture and draw the group's attention to it. Relate that throughout history and even today people have tried to take their wealth with them when they die. Relate that regardless of what is accumulated during our earthly existence, death comes to all of us and our material gains are left to others.

DISCUSS: Direct the group to turn to a neighbor and discuss the following question: *In what activities do people engage in their pursuit to find meaning in life?* (PSG, p. 73)

ASK RHETORICALLY: *Have you ever felt like you were caught in a rut of sameness and didn't know how to get out of it?*

TRANSITION: *As we begin a study of the Book of Ecclesiastes, we find the author, Solomon, reflecting on the meaning and purpose of life and where it can be found.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CONTEXTUALIZE: Ecclesiastes 1:1 identifies that the author is the son of David, the king in Jerusalem. Solomon is considered the author since he was the only descendant of David who ruled all of Israel from Jerusalem. Solomon referred to himself as "Teacher" in his reflections and musings. Point to page 9 in the PSG or **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*) for a brief overview of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Highlight Ecclesiastes 1:3 as a key question repeated throughout the book.

GUIDE: Explain that 1 Kings 3:7-15 provides insight into Solomon's request to God for discernment to understand justice. In addition, 1 Kings 4:32-34

reveals Solomon "spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs numbered 1,005." People everywhere came to listen to Solomon's wisdom. Even with all of the wisdom God provided Solomon, he recognized that he had made many mistakes along the way and that he could never surpass God's unending wisdom.

TRANSITION: *In Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, Solomon revealed what he had learned from nature. Beginning with verse 12, he moved to what we can learn from his experiences.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Ecclesiastes 1:12-15, as the group listens for Solomon's reflections on wisdom.

PARAPHRASE: Guide the group to work with a partner to restate or paraphrase these verses.

GUIDE: Using **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Ancient Near East during Patriarchs*), point out the locations of Jerusalem and Egypt. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Ecclesiastes Time Line*), noting the heavy influence of the Egyptians on Israelite culture. Explain that Solomon witnessed many human inventions and the accumulation of great wealth, yet he still found "everything to be futile" (v. 14). Ask: *How does the futility of human achievements reveal one's need for God?* (PSG, p. 75)

HIGHLIGHT: *Solomon may have been wiser than anyone, but as he wrote Ecclesiastes, he recognized that he had sought meaning in the wrong places.*

DISCUSS: *What motivates a person to find meaning and purpose? How does that motivation work for and against a person?* (PSG, p. 77)

READ: Invite someone to read aloud **Ecclesiastes 2:18-21**, asking the group to picture what Solomon's body language might have been while writing these words.

EXAMINE: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 11** (Handout: "Vanity" and "Under the Sun" in *Ecclesiastes*). Direct the group to identify how many times the phrase "under the sun" is included in verses 18-21.

DISCUSS: *Why are people prone to focus solely on work and the amassing of material possessions in their lives without any regard for God?* (PSG, p. 78)

CLARIFY: Invite a volunteer to read the paragraph beginning "After all his investigation ..." on page 78 of the PSG.

STATE: *Solomon was obviously quite disturbed by the futility of working only to consider that it might be totally wasted in the future.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 2:22-26**, as the group listens as Solomon begins to find hope in the midst of his despair.

ASK: *How does your attitude toward work coincide with what Solomon taught? What joy have you found in your daily schedule?*

COMPARE: Read aloud Colossians 3:23-24, guiding the group to compare these verses to Solomon's words in *Ecclesiastes*.

COMPARE: Direct attention to **Pack Item 4** (Poster: *Worthwhile Pursuits?*), indicating that Solomon examined each of these as he pursued the meaning of life. Note that we will continue examining these pursuits and discussing how we find joy in the midst of what can feel like "a pursuit of the wind" (Eccl. 1:17).

TRANSITION: *In these last verses of Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon admitted that joy in life comes through a relationship with God and that without Him everything is futile or vanity. Believers recognize that our relationship with Christ is what brings joy to our everyday lives.*

HIGHLIGHT: Stress the Key Doctrine (Stewardship) on page 80 of the PSG: *God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him (2 Cor. 9:8).*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Call for a volunteer to read aloud the Summary Statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 81). Invite the group to contemplate living out these statements as believers. Ask: ***What is one action that could be taken in light of each statement?***

ANALYZE: Lead the group to complete the first question set on page 81 of the PSG: ***On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your dependence on God for your life's purpose? What adjustments need to be made to increase your dependence on Him?*** Direct them to record their responses in the margin of their copies of the PSG.

STATE: *Solomon's words apply to our lives today as we look for meaning in our lives. The wise person seeks to find meaning in life from God and to exhibit joy in his or her everyday life.*

PRAY: Conclude the group time with prayer, thanking the Lord for His provision each day. Pray that God would focus everyone on Himself rather than on amassing material possessions.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Lead the group to sing or listen to “In Christ Alone,” by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend. Lead the group to discuss how Christ provides hope in a mundane world. Emphasize that Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 reveals that enjoyment in life can’t be found apart from God.

PHYSICAL

Prior to the study create four posters, each with one of the following words or phrases from songs: “Is There Life Out There?,” “Breakaway,” “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” and “Dust in the Wind.” Post each poster in a different area of the room. To begin the session, guide the individuals to move to the poster that best describes their feelings about life as they are currently experiencing it or have experienced it in the past. Allow time for each group to share either with the whole group or with a partner why they selected a particular poster.

CASE STUDY

Guide the group to develop a list of attitudes and actions that people exhibit in their work worlds. Divide the group into teams of three or four people. Direct each team to develop a case study based on ways people handle their work. After the case studies have been shared with the group, discuss how the various scenarios reflect work as God’s gift. Discuss changes that might need to be addressed in each situation to more fully illustrate Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 and Colossians 3:23.

INTERVIEW

Prior to the session develop three to five questions that someone might ask of Solomon based on Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26. Either enlist one person to respond to the questions as Solomon or ask someone to be the interviewer while the leader responds to the questions.

RESEARCH

Call attention to the Bible Skill on page 76 of the PSG and distribute Bible dictionaries to volunteers. Call for them to read the entry about “vain,” “vanity,” or “futility” in a Bible dictionary and read some of the Bible verses included in the dictionary. As a group, discuss the following: ***How does the way vain or vanity is used outside of Ecclesiastes give you deeper insight into the emotions expressed by Solomon? What modern words might you use to convey what Solomon meant when he used the word translated as vanity or futility?***