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Ecclesiastes

Why read this book?
If the deep and perplexing issues of life intrigue you, take a look at Ecclesiastes—but be prepared for a few surprises. On the surface, Ecclesiastes seems to challenge essential biblical truths. It dares to face hard questions. It shows the unglamorized life of a sinful world. It offers a glimpse at the secular mind. It looks at suffering and struggles to find meaning in it all. But most importantly, in the end Ecclesiastes points us to a solution.

Who wrote this book?
Solomon, according to tradition, though many now doubt this view. Some believe the writer was an unnamed Teacher or assembly leader who merely played the role of a king (1:1). Others say a wise man collected the views of the Teacher as a means to instruct his son (12:11–12).

When was it written?
It is impossible to say. Those who think Solomon wrote it place it in the tenth century B.C. Others think it was compiled some time later.

Why was it written?
Ecclesiastes offers a philosophy of life—and shows how God fits into it. Part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes was used by the Hebrews as a book of instruction. It showed them how to find spiritual significance in a life that would otherwise be meaningless (12:8, 13).

What to look for in Ecclesiastes:
Expect surprises. Ecclesiastes has lots of them: honest confessions of doubts, struggles with faith and disillusionment. A prologue (1:1–11) and an epilogue (12:9–14) frame its contents to reveal a proper God-fearing attitude toward life. Watch out for isolated statements. They must be understood within the context of the whole book and, ultimately, that of the whole Bible.

From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)
Ecclesiastes: The Detour Signs of Life – Study 1

LEADER’S GUIDE

Education Avenue

Solomon had an unsatisfying pursuit of wisdom and knowledge.

Whether we are focused on getting a degree, enjoy learning, like to figure things out, or just wish we had more answers to life, any of us can become detoured by Education Avenue. The desire for more answers, more information, more facts, and more intellectual achievement plays a central role in our culture and is hard to resist. But Christians can learn to take a stand against its extreme manifestations by studying the example of Solomon—a man who proves that education alone will never bring satisfaction in this life. You can never know enough to experience true satisfaction, so trust the God who does.

Scripture:
Ecclesiastes 1

Based on:
The Series Builder sermon series “The Detour Signs of Life,” by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
Identify the Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

This course will look at four detours on the road to true satisfaction: education, pleasure, wealth, and success. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes and he tried all of those paths. These are all good things; but by themselves, they will never give us the abundant life God promises.

This study looks at the limits of education. Even those of us who consider ourselves educated may not know as much as we think we do. Take the following quiz:

The World’s Easiest Quiz

1) How long did the Hundred Years War last?
2) Which country makes Panama hats?
3) From which animal do we get catgut?
4) In which month do Russians celebrate the October Revolution?
5) What is a camel’s-hair brush made of?
6) The Canary Islands in the Pacific are named after what animal?
7) What was King George VI’s first name?
8) What color is a purple finch?
9) Where are Chinese gooseberries from?
10) How long did the Thirty Years War last?

Answers to the quiz: 1) 116 years, from 1337 to 1453. 2) Ecuador. 3) From sheep and horses. 4) November. The Russian calendar was 13 days behind ours. 5) Squirrel fur. 6) The Latin name was Insularia Canaria—Island of the Dogs. 7) Albert. When he came to the throne, in 1936 he respected the wish of Queen Victoria that no future king should ever be called Albert. 8) Distinctively crimson. 9) New Zealand. 10) Thirty years, of course, from 1618 to 1648.

Leader’s Note: Give everyone in the group a few minutes to jot down the answers to these questions, then give the mostly surprising answers.

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Life is a vapor.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11.

The word translated “meaningless” refers to a mist or a vapor—something you can’t get your hands on. Solomon isn’t saying that life is not worth living; he’s saying that we can’t figure it out. It’s a mystery we can’t fully grasp.
Solomon is uniquely qualified to teach this lesson because he has dabbled in most things we humans desire—education, pleasure, wealth, and success. He’s tried it all and found it unsatisfying.

Hunter S. Thompson, the so-called gonzo journalist, committed suicide on February 16, 2005, leaving instructions that his ashes should be shot out of a cannon, which happened in August of the same year. Thompson was 67 when he died, and his family and friends said that he was in pain from hip replacement surgery, back surgery, and a recently broken leg. He’d talked about suicide for years.

February was a particularly grim month for him because football season was over. The brief suicide message, scrawled in black marker and titled “Football Season Is Over,” reads as follows:


At the bottom of the page Thompson reportedly drew a “happy heart,” the kind found on Valentine’s Day cards. ¹

Unlike Thompson, Solomon’s message is not one of depression, but a call to be careful about where we search for satisfaction.

**[Q]** Why did Solomon, who had everything the world has to offer, think life is meaningless?

**[Q]** If we accept that life is meaningless and just a vapor, how do we avoid feeling despair?

**[Q]** What was Solomon’s point in verses 3–11?

**[Q]** We obviously have to work, explore new things, establish some kind of financial security, and look for ways to enjoy life. How can we do those things without them becoming our focus in life?

  ▶ What should be our focus in life, and how do all those other things fit into it?

**Teaching point two: Wisdom does not bring satisfaction.**

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12–18.

Solomon—the wisest man that ever lived—identified wisdom as a detour to true satisfaction. Whether you have a degree, enjoy learning, or just wish you had more answers to life’s questions, we all can be detoured by Education Avenue.

Achievement and advancement are central pillars in today’s culture. Ecclesiastes 1 explains the heavy burden that Solomon discovered. The word translated “twisted” in verse 15 refers to something bent—it evokes the futility of someone hammering on a bent nail.

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¹ Reuters, on AOL News (9-8-05).
No matter how many answers we come up with, we can’t fix what’s fundamentally wrong. Nor can we supply what is missing in our lives. Wisdom helps us to understand the world, but not to control it. Vance Havner said: “We’re so smart in America we can walk on the moon, but it’s not safe to walk in the park.”

**[Q]** The Book of Proverbs often advises us of the importance of seeking wisdom. So why did Solomon find wisdom meaningless?

**[Q]** Tell us about someone you’ve known (without using names) who has a lot of knowledge but fails to apply it.

**[Q]** Why would much wisdom lead to sorrow and grief (v. 18)?

Fortunately, Jesus came to straighten what is crooked and to reveal what is hidden. Read Luke 3:4–6 and 1 Corinthians 4:5.

**[Q]** How does Jesus make straight crooked paths? If you’re willing to talk about them, what parts of your life do you wish could be made straight?

**[Q]** Why should we wait for Jesus to bring to light what is hidden in darkness and expose the motives of men’s hearts (1 Cor. 4:5)? What difference will that make?

**[Q]** Which of the following do you think best expresses Ecclesiastes 1?

- We should just wait for Jesus to return because nothing makes sense otherwise.
- We should gain as much wisdom as we can, but realize that in the end it won’t satisfy us.
- We should accept that life is meaningless and just try to get by until our real life starts in heaven.
- We should avoid amassing wisdom, because it will just lead us to despair.
- Other.

Why did you choose the one(s) you did?

**Optional Activity**

**Purpose:** To put the accumulation of wisdom and knowledge into its proper place.

**Activity:** Determine whether the following people have a balanced view of accumulating wisdom and knowledge. If not, how could they achieve balance?

- Pamela comes from a long line of blue-collar workers. She is determined to get her college degree and become a teacher.
- Millie is working on her third degree. She just likes being a student.
- Paul spends all his time in Bible study. He knows Scripture backwards and forwards and loves to argue his points.
- John is a trivia expert. He loves to accumulate facts.
- Babs is a new Christian and wants to know everything she can about the Bible.
PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Baron Von Hugel said: “The deeper we get into reality, the more numerous will be the questions we cannot answer.” You can never know enough to experience true satisfaction, so trust the God who does.

Action Point: Have you put your hopes in accumulating wisdom and knowledge? How can you put this back into perspective? How can your wisdom and knowledge help your relationship with Christ? In what ways might it be hindering it? Share your answers with the group and pray for each other.

—Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon
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Scripture:
Ecclesiastes 1

Based on:
The Series Builder sermon series “The Detour Signs of Life,” by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1

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PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Life is a vapor.

Teaching point two: Wisdom does not bring satisfaction.

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—Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon
Jim Carrey once said, “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.” Most Christians would agree with him that happiness doesn’t come about through wealth and fame. Still, most Christians probably wouldn’t mind testing that principle out for themselves. We need to understand Solomon’s warnings concerning the emptiness of Pleasure Drive, and we need to find God’s path to true satisfaction. If we seek God and are content with the blessings he gives us, true pleasure will follow.

Scripture:
Ecclesiastes 2

Based on:
The Series Builder sermon series "The Detour Signs of Life," by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1

Identify the Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

Optional Activity

Purpose: To show us the limits of worldly pleasures.

Activity: Provide everyone with a magazine that contains a lot of ads. Ask each person to find one picture of someone whom they would enjoy being like, and to share why.

Or prior to meeting, tape an ad on TV or on the internet that displays our desire to have it all, and show it to the group. Ask the group how the ad makes them feel.

We are a nation of consumers. But even as we consume, we need help. Consider the following warnings that were found on consumer products:

- On a Duraflame fireplace log: “Caution—Risk of Fire.”
- On a Batman costume: “Warning—Cape does not enable user to fly.”
- On a bottle of hair coloring: “Do not use as an ice cream topping.”
- On a cardboard sun shield for a car: “Do not drive with sun shield in place.”
- On a portable stroller: “Caution—Remove infant before folding for storage.”

Solomon was also of a consumer mindset—a man who had it all. When he wrote Ecclesiastes, he wrote it as a warning label for life.

In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, celebrity Brad Pitt reflected on his lead role in the movie Fight Club, which is about a man who has the American dream and yet remains unsatisfied:

Pitt: Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that’s the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don’t want that.

Rolling Stone: So if we’re heading toward this kind of existential dead end in society, what do you think should happen?

Pitt: Hey, man, I don’t have those answers yet. The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. [smiles] I’m sitting in it, and I’m telling you, that’s not it. I’m the guy who’s got everything, I know. But I’m telling you, once you’ve got everything, then you’re just left with yourself. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: it doesn’t help you sleep any better, and you don’t wake up any better because of it.

Discussion Questions:

Q: What kinds of things tempt you? Why do you think they will make you happy?
[Q] Share an example from your own life when you thought a certain thing would make you happy, but it failed to do so.

[Q] So what is the answer? What will make us happy?

PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Solomon tested the detour of worldly pleasure and found it wanting.

Solomon ultimately determined that pleasure doesn’t provide lasting meaning or bring ultimate satisfaction to life—but his journey is interesting. Read Ecclesiastes 2:1–11.

Solomon realized that joyful experiences, no matter how fun and pleasure-filled, have no lasting effects. He cites laughter, alcohol, estates, landscaping, being waited on hand and foot, great wealth, concerts, and women—many of the things people hope will bring them happiness today.

Solomon spent years and immeasurable resources to recreate paradise on earth and found that traveling down Pleasure Drive transforms you into an empty shell; the rewards you find there drift away like wisps of smoke.

[Q] Look again at this passage. Come up with a modern-day equivalent to each of the things mentioned.

➤ Why do these things fail to provide happiness?
➤ What do we do with that knowledge? Go live in a cave? Not smile? Avoid parties? Live a life of somber devotion? How can we find balance?

What one thing do you tend to think will bring you happiness? (If I just could ___, If I just knew ___, If I just went ___, etc.)

How can we find pleasure in what God has given us without putting our hope in those things?

How can we reorient our lives if we are hooked on worldly pleasure?

Teaching point two: True pleasure comes only from God.


The best thing we can do is learn to appreciate and enjoy what we do have—to be careful of the purpose, pursuit, and parameters of pleasure. As the people of God, we should have a greater capacity to enjoy all of life more than anybody else, because we recognize that joy is under the control of God.

When you acknowledge and seek God as the source of pleasure, he gives you gifts that satisfy—wisdom, knowledge, and joy. If you focus on accumulating and acquiring in this visible world, you will know God’s judgment—lack of satisfaction and joy.
What does Solomon mean when he says, “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work”?

If we see everything good as being from the hand of God (v. 24), how will that affect our attitude? Our happiness?

Why can we not eat or find enjoyment without God (v. 25)?

Can we have godly pleasure? If so, what would it look like?

Explain how each of the following can be enjoyed with godly pleasure.

- Eating and drinking
- Having a comfortable home
- Working around the house
- A good joke
- A good concert
- Living with your spouse
- Working at your job

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Nancy Walker of Newport Beach, California, was invited to attend the burial of a goldfish owned by her 5-year-old neighbor, Jimmy Yeargan. Since Jimmy was not yet able to write at the time, he asked Ms. Walker to do the honors for him, handing her a small cardboard tombstone he had brought with him to the ceremony.

“What do you want to say?” she asked.

“His name,” Jimmy replied, “was Mobert.”

Dutifully, Ms. Walker inscribed the name. “Do you want anything else?” she asked.

Jimmy thought for a moment, then nodded. “Put down,” he said, “he was fun while he lasted.”

Momentary fun is ultimately meaningless, a vapor that we can’t grasp. But if we seek God, pleasure will follow.

Action Point: What kind of pleasure has a hold on you? Is it having a designer home, clothes, or car? Is it having the latest technology? Is it a lust for pornography? Is it an addiction to a relationship? Be honest with yourself, and if you feel comfortable, share your answer with the group and pray for each other.

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Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon
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**Scripture:**  
Ecclesiastes 2

**Based on:**  
The Series Builder sermon series "The Detour Signs of Life," by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1

Identify the Issue

Solomon, like Americans, was of a consumer mindset—a man who had it all. When he wrote Ecclesiastes, he wrote it as a warning label for life.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Solomon tested the detour of worldly pleasure and found it wanting.

Teaching point two: True pleasure comes only from God.

[Q] Explain how each of the following can be enjoyed with godly pleasure.

- Eating and drinking
- Having a comfortable home
- Working around the house
- A good joke
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- Living with your spouse
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PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Momentary fun is ultimately meaningless, a vapor that we can’t grasp. But if we seek God, pleasure will follow.

Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon
Material Lane

*Solomon had an empty experience with more, more, more!*

Many people have interpreted 1 Timothy 6:10 (“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil”) to mean that money itself is evil. This is not the case. However, Solomon’s pursuit of money does alert us to four potential dangers we expose ourselves to when we crave wealth and possessions. In addition, Solomon teaches us one valuable principle that can help us be satisfied with the blessings God does bring our way. As Christians, we can avoid the emptiness Solomon experienced by praising God for whatever he gives us.

**Scripture:**
Ecclesiastes 5:10–20

**Based on:**
The Series Builder sermon series "The Detour Signs of Life," by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1

Identify the Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

On September 26, 2005, wildlife researcher Michael Barron was making his way through Florida’s Everglades National Park when he stumbled onto a gruesome demonstration of the consequences of an oversized appetite.

In the preceding days, a 13-foot long Burmese python had attacked and subdued a 6-foot long American alligator. Apparently, the python gained the advantage during the initial phases of its assault, wrapping the alligator in its powerful, constricting body. Amazingly, it was even able to swallow the massive reptile whole! However, victory was short-lived, as the snake’s abdomen burst while it attempted to digest its prey.

When Mr. Barron discovered the remains of the two combatants several days later, the python’s stomach still covered the alligator’s head, shoulders, and forelimbs, but the gator’s hindquarters were protruding from the snake’s midsection. Neither animal survived.

Solomon has a similar message: I’ve tried it all. I’ve attempted to fill myself with the most and the best, and it doesn’t satisfy. It ends in death.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Why do those who have a lot still want more?

[Q] How does the desire for more sneak up on you? Give an example.

[Q] Finish this statement: I wouldn’t want anything else if I could just have _____.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: There is no satisfaction in accumulating more and more.

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10–20.

The quest for wealth is like addiction. You always have to have more. When asked how much money was enough, John D. Rockefeller replied, “Just a little bit more.”

When that desire for wealth and love for goods is our driving force, it only adds to the meaninglessness of life. It takes a great amount of time and energy to accumulate more, so the letdown is acute when we realize that it doesn’t make us happy.

[Q] Why do those who love money never feel they have enough (v. 10)?

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3 Denise Kalette, “Alligator, Python, Battle to the Death in Everglades,” Orlando Sentinel (10-6-05).
Have you ever experienced an addiction to accumulating money or possessions? If so, what fueled that addiction?

- What helped free you from that addiction?

What do you think hoarding wealth looks like in our society? Can people who are not wealthy hoard their possessions? Explain.

Name ways that our society bases success on a person’s possessions.

- Name a time that you felt you weren’t a success because your possessions didn’t measure up.
- How can we combat such feelings?

**Teaching point two: Great wealth threatens our relationships and our peace of mind.**

There was a man who worked all his life and saved as much as he could. He loved money more than anything. Just before he died, he said to his wife: “When I die, I want you to take all my money and put it in the casket with me. I want to take my money to the afterlife with me.” His wife promised she would.

At his funeral, just before the undertakers closed the casket, his wife put a box in the casket. The undertakers shut the casket and rolled it away.

The wife’s friend said, “I know you weren’t foolish enough to put all that money in there with that man.”

She said, “I can’t lie. I promised him I would put that money in the casket with him.”

“You mean to tell me you put that money in the casket with him?” her friend asked.

“I sure did,” said the wife. “I wrote him a check.”

Ecclesiastes 5:11 points out that no matter how much money you have, more and more people will show up to consume the extra. At the other extreme, your money may cause you to trust no one—to be fearful that everyone in your life has wrong motives. You will never know if people love you for who you are or for what you can give them.

Ecclesiastes 5:12 points out that a rich person has more trouble relaxing and is less likely to have peace of mind. Wealth brings with it an all-consuming desire to protect and expand it. And if we base our happiness on our wealth, the fear of losing it is intense. It can also make people more resistant to spiritual things. Read Matthew 19:23–24.

Salvation means that no matter what I have or don’t have, I desperately need Jesus Christ.

Ecclesiastes 5:13–17 warns that holding on to wealth is difficult in life and impossible in death—so you end up chasing the wind.

**[Q]** Give an example of how money negatively affects relationships.

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4 “Money in the Casket,” GCFL.net (7-29-02).
Is this true even when money isn’t abundant? Explain.

How does that demonstrate that it’s the heart attitude more than the actual possessions that destroy us?

Q Explain how the abundance of money can destroy our peace. Give examples.

Q Which of the following attitudes do you think we should have toward money?

- Our goal shouldn’t be to amass as much wealth as we can, but it’s okay to be financially successful as long as we’re generous.
- Christians should not amass wealth under any circumstances. If God so blesses them, they should give it away.
- Christians should amass as much wealth as they can so that they can be influential in society and give to the Lord’s work.
- Christians should earn as much as they can without compromising their beliefs and give as much as they can without causing their family to suffer.

Why did you choose the one(s) you did?

Optional Activity

*Purpose:* To put money in perspective.

*Activity:* Ask each person to write down what their ideal income would be. Then ask them to divide that income into three broad categories: what they would spend on themselves, what they would save, and what they would give away. Without sharing their answers, discuss what guided their decisions.

**Teaching point three: Praise God for your portion.**

Look again at Ecclesiastes 5:18. The word translated “lot” means your share, your piece of life—whatever God hands you.

Enjoy food, drink, and work not as sources of meaning for life, but as part of the gift of life God gives. When we praise God for our portion, we are seeing everything we have as belonging to him, to do with as he chooses. So when we look back on our lives, we are not consumed by the pain, failures, and losses of the past. Instead we feel gladness and joy that God provided, and that we learned to love and follow him.

Q What seems to be the key to enjoying our possessions instead of letting them control us (vv. 18–20)?

Q Has God ever kept you “occupied with gladness of heart”? Explain.

Q Read Ecclesiastes 5:1–3. What insight do these verses give us for finding that gladness of heart?
PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Read 1 Timothy 6:17.

God has given you everything you need for enjoyment; enjoy whatever he has given. If you’re not content—repent.

**Action Point:** As a group, praise God for his provision—not only materially but in every regard. Ask him to make your heart content and thankful and to put money and success into perspective.

*Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon*
Many people have interpreted 1 Timothy 6:10 (“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil”) to mean that money itself is evil. This is not the case. However, Solomon’s pursuit of money does alert us to four potential dangers we expose ourselves to when we crave wealth and possessions. In addition, Solomon teaches us one valuable principle that can help us be satisfied with the blessings God does bring our way. As Christians, we can avoid the emptiness Solomon experienced by praising God for whatever he gives us.

**Scripture:**
Ecclesiastes 5:10–20

**Based on:**
The Series Builder sermon series “The Detour Signs of Life,” by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1

Identify the Issue

Solomon’s message was: I’ve tried it all. I’ve attempted to fill myself with the most and the best, and it doesn’t satisfy. It ends in death.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: There is no satisfaction in accumulating more and more.

Teaching point two: Great wealth threatens our relationships and our peace of mind.

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Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon
Ecclesiastes: The Detour Signs of Life – Study 4

LEADER’S GUIDE

Youth Street
Solomon discovered the futility of youth.

We live in a culture that worships youthfulness. It seems like everyone wants to look younger, feel younger, and live longer. In one year, Americans collectively spend over $50 billion on anti-aging products. But Solomon discovered that such endeavors are ultimately futile. Instead, he identified two keys to finding joy and satisfaction at any age. Whatever our season of life, we can find joy and satisfaction by fearing and obeying God.

Scripture:
Ecclesiastes 11:9–12:14

Based on:
The Series Builder sermon series "The Detour Signs of Life," by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1

Identify the Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

We live so much of life thinking: I can’t wait until I graduate, get my license, get married, have a job, have children, get promoted, the children leave home, I retire … .

It’s hard for us to enjoy the stage we’re in. This is one of life’s side streets that leads away from satisfaction. Solomon has much to say about youthfulness and aging, which are huge in our culture. We worship youthfulness. We want to look young, feel young, and live longer. This is not new. Throughout history people have hungered for this. Cleopatra bathed in donkey’s milk and Ponce d’Leon chased the fountain of youth. Americans spend over $50 billion on anti-aging products each year. Solomon says whether you are young, working to stay young, or experiencing the effects of old age, don’t let that detour you from what really matters.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] What part of youth do you wish you could maintain and why? (The appearance of youth? The energy of youth? The carefreeness of youth?)

[Q] Do you ever wish you could reach the next stage of life? If so, which stage?

➢ What are some good things about wishing for this stage? Some bad things?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: In your youth, remember God.


Youth is a gift from God—use it, enjoy it, and don’t waste it. George Bernard Shaw said, “Youth is such a wonderful thing; it’s a shame to waste it on young people.” So enjoy your youth with the realization that God is watching; control your youth with the knowledge of God’s judgment.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Actress Halle Barry, one of People magazine’s 50 Most Beautiful People, said the following regarding physical beauty:

Beauty? Let me tell you something, being thought of as a beautiful woman has spared me nothing in life—no heartache, no trouble. Love has been difficult. Beauty is essentially meaningless, and it is always transitory. I can’t believe what people do to themselves to make themselves look beautiful. ... They still have that hole in their soul.5

Augustine said, “Love God and do what you like!” How does this reflect what Solomon is saying about youth?

- How does knowing that God will bring us to judgment give parameters to Augustine’s advice (Eccl. 11:9)?

Q Give an example of something that used to give you pleasure but no longer does.

- How does that demonstrate the good part of getting older? The bad part?

Teaching point two: Enjoy life at every stage.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 says that youth is the time to find God. Seek him before it is too late. In Ecclesiastes 12:3–4, the word translated “grinders” refers to our teeth; “those looking through the windows” are our eyes. Since youthfulness doesn’t give life meaning, you can live with satisfaction whether you are young and healthy or not.

In August of 2006, Newsweek magazine interviewed Billy Graham. Amazed by Billy’s attitude in spite of deteriorating health, the author of the article wrote, “He seems congenitally incapable of surrendering completely to the weakness of the body.”

One of Dr. Graham’s daughters, Anne Graham-Lotz, recounted a conversation with her father on the subject of aging. “All my life, I’ve been taught how to die,” Billy told her, “but no one ever taught me how to grow old.” She replied, “Well, Daddy, you are now teaching all of us.”

Lotz also noted that she had learned an important lesson about aging after observing her father: “When you get older, secondary things, like politics, begin to fall away, and the primary things become primary again. And for Daddy, the primary thing is, as Jesus said, to try to love God totally and to love our neighbor as ourselves.”

We need teachers. Not chronic complainers, grumpy old men, or people pathetically clinging to youth. We need saints who know that with God, every age can be enjoyed.

Assurance of where we will spend eternity makes it possible to enjoy life at every age. Read Isaiah 35 with feeling.

Q Name the things that will be good about this time prophesied in Isaiah.

Q Why does this promised time outweigh any agony of growing old?

Q How can that help our perspective on aging?

Q What balance is there between trying to stay fit and healthy and accepting our aging?

Q What is the secret to enjoying life at any stage?

Q Does God want us to enjoy life? Explain your answer.

Q Name ways to enjoy a meaningful life during the following stages:

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Optional Activity

Purpose: To learn how to enjoy life at every stage.

Activity: Ask two people who enjoy such things to role play each of the following situations. One should play the person with the difficult life situation. The other should play a friend who is advising them on how to enjoy their stage of life. Each role play should last only a few minutes. Go quickly to the next one.

- Shannon is studying to be a pediatrician and is exhausted with her schedule. She wishes she was done with school.
- Carolyn is a single mom with two young children. She wishes they could do more for themselves.
- Brent has a rebellious son. He can’t wait until he is old enough to move out.
- Jack doesn’t like his job anymore and can’t wait until retirement.

Teaching point three: In everything, fear and obey God.

Look again at Ecclesiastes 12:6–7. We need to appreciate how transitory this life really is, and we need to remember God. Life is like a silver cord with a golden bowl attached. When you cut the cord, the bowl falls and breaks. Before you return to dust, before life ends, remember God. Death is the smashing of the jar.

Whatever you do in life, be guided by the fact that you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (v. 14). Life is short; fear God.

All side streets have led nowhere. All detours have been dead ends. There is one thing that does matter. Here’s what it’s all about: Fear God and obey him. That’s how you can find satisfaction in this uncertain world. Enjoy life at every stage, but don’t neglect God. Live large, but live within his boundaries.

[Q] How are the words of the wise like goads (Eccl. 12:11)? Give an example from your own life.

[Q] What does it mean for your everyday life to fear God and keep his commandments?

[Q] What does it mean to “live large, but live within [God’s] boundaries”?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

In our youth, we take life for granted. Seek God now.
In our advancing age, we can be weighed down by disintegrating bodies and spend our time chasing a fading youth. Remember your Creator before it’s too late.

Enjoyment and satisfaction don’t flow from our youth, health, or strength—they flow from fearing and obeying God.

**Action Point:** What vestiges of youth are you clinging to that are gone forever? Admit those to your group and pray for each other to be able to enjoy the stage of life you are in by God’s grace.

*Study by John Beukema, with JoHannah Reardon*
We live in a culture that worships youthfulness. It seems like everyone wants to look younger, feel younger, and live longer. In one year, Americans collectively spend over $50 billion on anti-aging products. But Solomon discovered that such endeavors are ultimately futile. Instead, he identified two keys to finding joy and satisfaction at any age. Whatever our season of life, we can find joy and satisfaction by fearing and obeying God.

Scripture:
Ecclesiastes 11:9–12:14

Based on:
The Series Builder sermon series "The Detour Signs of Life," by John Beukema, PreachingToday.com
PART 1
Identify the Issue

We live so much of life thinking: *I can’t wait until I graduate, get my license, get married, have a job, have children, get promoted, the children leave home, I retire ... .*

It’s hard for us to enjoy the stage we’re in. This is one of life’s side streets that leads away from satisfaction. Solomon has much to say about youthfulness and aging, which are huge in our culture. We worship youthfulness. We want to look young, feel young, and live longer. This is not new. Throughout history people have hungered for this. Cleopatra bathed in donkey’s milk and Ponce d’Leon chased the fountain of youth. Americans spend over $50 billion on anti-aging products each year. Solomon says whether you are young, working to stay young, or experiencing the effects of old age, don’t let that detour you from what really matters.

PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: In your youth, remember God.

Teaching point two: Enjoy life at every stage.

[Q] Name ways to enjoy a meaningful life during the following stages:

- As a student
- As a young parent
- As a parent of teenagers
- At middle age
- As a retired person

Teaching point three: In everything, fear and obey God.

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

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