UP IN SMOKE
A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
A Study Guide for
the Book of Ecclesiastes

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SMOKE
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Many have sought to categorize the book of Ecclesiastes. Jeffrey Meyers states that it is a book about faith.¹ Mark Driscoll has called it a book about repentance.² Charles Swindoll has written about it as journal entries from the “Ragged Edge” of life.³ However, I would maintain that it is ultimately a book about worship.

Worship, derived from the Old English word “worth-ship”, is all about what we proclaim to have worth—with both our words and lives. Christians declare that Jesus is the only One worthy of our worship: we sing songs to Him, declare and study His Word, and seek to focus our living on Him. Yet, we are under constant barrage by those things which compete for worship: relationships, money, pleasure, power and influence, etc. To find this “songbook,” one need travel no further than the local radio station or the local Barnes & Noble. King Solomon, with more money, influence, power, and wisdom than we can ever hope to amass, sets out to discover whether any of these things “under the sun” are worthy of our worship.

Over the next few months, we will take this journey along with Solomon. Much to the surprise of those who seek to categorize this book as a cranky, pessimistic view of the world, we will find a wise, honest, humble man who is lovingly seeking to direct us towards those things which have real and lasting meaning. Ultimately, we will rest in his ultimate declaration: we should fear God and keep His commandments, for all that is under the sun is only given meaning when our ultimate hope is beyond the sun.

Why study this book? Dr. Philip Ryken answers that question in the following ways: “(1) It is honest about the troubles of life, (2) we will learn what will happen to us if we choose what the world tries to offer instead of what God has

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¹ Jeffrey Meyers, Ecclesiastes Through New Eyes: A Table in the Mist, (Athanasius Press, Monroe, LA, 2006), pg. 16.
² Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, WA.
³ Charles Swindoll, Living on the Ragged Edge, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985).
to give, (3) it asks the biggest and hardest questions that people still have today, (4) it will help us worship the one true God, and (5) it teaches us how to live for God and not just for ourselves.” I would only add that, in a church culture that is so often disconnected from the reality of living, Solomon’s honesty helps us to also deal honestly with the reality of life, which takes our faith from simply spoken to being lived out.

As we begin this study, let me offer a few thoughts and words of encouragement. The topics that Solomon covers are difficult: the existence of suffering and evil, the lure of money and pleasure, and the sovereignty of God, simply to name a few. He deals with them with gut-level honesty. Can I encourage you to do the same? In the questions that will be asked in this study over the next sixteen weeks, it will be easy to give the “right” answer—but the “right” answer, if it’s not the real answer, is really no answer at all. Deal honestly with your heart and with your hang-ups—God is large enough to handle any challenge or question that you might throw at Him.

Allow me to make this personal for a moment. As I’ve studied this great book, I have had to honestly wrestle with significant areas of my life where I was unknowingly pursuing foolishness and not wisdom. I’ve found the words of Solomon to be intensely practical and insightful as it relates to my living for Jesus in our culture and time. I would urge you to deeply engage this study for yourself. The study that you hold in your hand is a great start to that, but it is not intended to stand alone. The primary teaching will take place during our weekly Celebration gathering at York Alliance, and I would urge you to stay connected to the complete message series. If you miss a week, you can always find the audio for the message online at www.yorkalliance.org.

The ultimate message that Solomon delivers to us is not that everything is meaningless. Rather, it’s that until we recognize that there is more to reality than what is experienced under the sun, nothing seems to really matter. However, once we are able to look beyond the sun, in Dr. Ryken’s words, “everything matters!” I pray that, as you study, your life and pursuit of Jesus would be filled with this reality.

Grace and peace,
Brian Kannel
York Alliance Church

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5 Ibid. pg. 281.
How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be used as a companion resource to the Fall/Winter 2011 sermon series on Ecclesiastes at York Alliance Church. While each week’s message will cover a part of the Scripture focus for that week, the study will cover the passage in much greater detail. My hope is that both your personal time with God as well as the discussion time within your LIFE group will be greatly enhanced as you process these truths of God’s Word. Please note that these studies are in no way a substitute for your LIFE group meeting. In fact, I hope that by utilizing this tool, you are even more driven toward interaction in your LIFE group as you wrestle through the application of these truths to your everyday life!

A few specifics about this study guide:

• There are three studies each week. You are welcomed to do them at your own pace—one per day for three days, or a little each day spread throughout the week. Please don’t feel pressured to complete each week! Go at your own pace, and feel free to linger on a specific study.

• Each study will have an introduction, a main section, and a conclusion. On most days, this portion shouldn’t take you more than 15-20 minutes. If that’s all you have time for, or if you feel like you’ve taken in about as much as you can handle that day, skip to the “Application” section, where there will be 1-2 questions for consideration. However, if you’d like to go a little further into the passage, in particular with how it fits into the overall narrative of the Bible, delve into the “Digging Deeper” section prior to doing the application questions. This will also provide an easy “multi-day” approach to the study if you choose to engage it this way. There are a few studies that, due to their longer nature, don’t have a “Digging Deeper” section within them—for those, simply proceed to “Application.”

• Unless marked otherwise, Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV). For some of you, this may be a translation with which you’re not as familiar—it is a very readable, yet extremely accurate, translation that has risen in popularity over the past decade. However,
remember that you’re still reading a translation from the original Hebrew; my encouragement is that you read each section in at least two translations in order to get the fullest effect of the Word. I highly recommend the ESV on the more literal side, but the NIV (New International) and NASB (New American Standard) are also good options. On the less literal and more readable side, the New Living Translation (NLT) or Eugene Peterson’s “The Message” (MSG) are both helpful tools.

- A “Family Time” section is included at the end of each week’s study. These practical sections use object lessons and simple words to drive home the key point or points from each section of the book. They are perfectly suited for use during family devotions or after dinner once a week. Parents, due to the ages and maturity levels of your kids, you may need to slightly adapt any given week’s Family Time lesson. If you don’t have kids in the house, I would encourage you to consider doing these anyway—either by yourselves or with another family within York Alliance. Some of the greatest truths land in our hearts when we see them through the eyes of children. Many thanks to Robin Lechevalier for once again offering her incredible gifting to this project!

If you have questions about how to best utilize the book or have comments on what you’re finding in it and/or on your experiences with it, they are welcomed! Email me at bkannel@yorkalliance.org.

“Father, I thank You for Your Word and the wisdom that we find in it. I pray that, as we study, we would constantly be driven back to Jesus and to His wisdom which Paul reminds us is foolishness to those who are perishing. Jesus, throughout these next several months, I pray that You would draw our hearts deeply into the eternity that You have graciously placed in them, and that we wouldn’t settle for that which can never satisfy. May we be honest in our wrestling. May we uncover the questions in our hearts that often hold us back from a complete pursuit of You. And Jesus, in the depth of our questioning and in the midst of our doubts, may we find Your loving arms beckoning us onward. Teach us what it means for us to live daily in the fear of the Lord—and to be embraced by the mercy of that same Lord. Father, may we at York Alliance Church be people who place all of our hope beyond the sun. Amen.”
Under the sun, everything runs in cycles. Nothing is permanent and lasting, and therefore, nothing is ultimately fulfilling. If we recognize that what we’re really doing is building sandcastles, then we can enjoy it. However, if we think the sandcastle of our life is a permanent structure, we’re doomed to frustration and disappointment. That’s why, at the core, Ecclesiastes is a worship book. It declares that worship is about a life given to something, and anything that I give my life to under the sun will simply bring frustration. I can only find fulfillment beyond the sun.
“Vanity of vanities.” “What is?” you ask? Solomon’s answer: “All is vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) So begins this “cheerful” poem! Throughout the next fourteen chapters, Solomon will teach us carefully and skillfully, circling again and again around just a few major themes.

Before we dig into a detailed study of this first section, it would be best for us to get a feel for all of what Solomon is saying. Take time today to simply read the book beginning to end. Read it slowly. If you find your mind wandering, go back and work to stay focused. You may need to spread this reading over a few days in order to really absorb it.

As you read, find the word in your translation that begins verse 2 in chapter 1. In the ESV, that word is “vanity.” In your translation, it might be “meaningless” or something else. In the Hebrew, the word is “hebel” (see the “Digging Deeper” section for more on “hebel”). Whatever the word is, circle it every time it appears as you read the book.

You’ll find another phrase repeated over and over in the book—it’s found for the first time at the end of verse 3 in chapter 1: “under the sun”. Every time you see that phrase, underline it.

When you’re finished reading, count how many you have of each:

“Vanity”: __________

“Under the Sun”: __________

As you read, what are some other themes and ideas that you noticed?
You might have noticed some of the following:
• Solomon focuses heavily on wisdom and foolishness, or folly.
• The fear of the Lord is found at several pivotal places in the book.
• There are several so-called “enjoyment passages” that emphasize the fact that we should enjoy the life that God has given to us.

You many have noticed some other themes—or you may not have noticed any of these at all. If not, don’t worry! As we study the book, you’ll get more comfortable picking out what Solomon is saying. Remember, this is Hebrew poetry and, like all poetry, it doesn’t always “click” with a first, cursory reading.

Digging Deeper:
The word *hebel*, translated “vanity” or “meaningless,” is most literally translated “vapor.” “Mist,” “smoke,” and “breath” are also good translations. Hebrew is a language full of images, and this is an important image to remember as we study this book. When you think of “vapor,” what are some ideas that immediately come to your mind?

Look up the following verses: Psalm 39:5, Psalm 78:33, Job 7:7, James 4:14. After reading these, what do you think Solomon is saying when he describes life as “hebel”?

Application:
• Are there areas of your life that seem like vanity—that require so much effort, but they ultimately just disappear?

• How would your life look different if you recognized how much like a “vapor” your life really is?
What Creation Says...

For many of us, the lessons in life that stick with us the longest are the ones that are clearly illustrated for us, whether by story, through an object lesson, or through some kind of visual image. God has “hard-wired” us, so to speak, to relate theoretical truths to tangible, concrete objects.

Theologians have long noted that, in the same way, the shape and form of creation is specifically designed to teach us about God. The vastness of the universe, within which we are just a tiny speck, declares the greatness of God. The order of the universe shows the profound plan of God down to the smallest detail. These aren’t new ideas—read what Paul says in Romans 1:19-20. What are we told is clear to all people?

Solomon also makes a case that creation is teaching us something—that life is a continuous cycle that never changes. In Ecclesiastes 1:4-7, what are the images that Solomon uses to describe the natural cycle of life?

His point is not that the rotation of the earth creates the cycles of the sun and moon or the water cycle. Rather, he is showing us how life simply happens, and that there’s nothing that we can do about it. Verses 4 and 11 highlight the ultimate cycle. What is it?

Think about the way that your life works. What are some of the “meaningless cycles” within which you find yourself operating?
Our weekdays are often cyclical: get up, breakfast, work, lunch, more work, home, dinner, TV, bed. And, again the next day. Or our laundry—whenever it’s finished, it begins to pile up again. Washing dishes. Home repair. Mowing the lawn. It seems that all we do, we will just need to do again.

Furthermore, Solomon tells us that not only are we following a cycle, but that those before us and those who follow us will follow essentially the same cycle. They might use different tools to do it, but we all do the same things. What’s Solomon’s indictment of the world in the second half of verse 9?

**Digging Deeper:**
Although creation seems to be repeating itself, there are times that God breaks into our reality. Look up the following passages, and list the “new” things that appear from beyond the sun:

- Ezekiel 36:26
- Ephesians 4:24
- 2 Corinthians 5:17
- 2 Peter 3:13

These are all “new” things that God is doing. While that which is under the sun may look like a meaningless repeating cycle, God is breaking in from beyond the sun, making all things new!

**Application:**

- What are some of the things “under the sun” that you spend a lot of time, energy, and resource pursuing?

- How much effort do you put into the pursuit of things that are from “beyond the sun”? Why do you think that is?
Life as *Hebel*

There are certain names that have taken on meaning beyond simply the person they represent. For instance, names like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett seem to refer less to a person than to the general idea of wealth. For Catholics, the Pope represents an office and position more than an individual person. And, for me as a Cleveland sports fan, a name like Lebron James has a certain significance beyond simply a forward for the Miami Heat.

Interestingly, the word *hebel*, which we looked at earlier this week, appears in the Bible first as a name. As we mentioned in the earlier study, *hebel* literally means “vapor” or “breath.” It refers to something that is here and then gone, hard to grab hold of.


“Abel” is the English translation for “hebel.” As you read this account of Cain and Abel, how might you describe the life of Abel?

We don’t know if the name “Hebel” was given before or after his sudden death. It may have been given later as a description of his life, or it may be that Abel’s short life became the origin of the Hebrew word. Either way, what we have is a very real illustration of what Solomon meant when he called life “hebel”.

What are some of the emotions that Adam and Eve might have felt upon discovering the death of their son?

Jeffrey Meyers accurately points out:

“There were only two options for [Adam and Eve]. They could jettison their trust in the goodness and the love of God or they could jettison all hope of comprehending and controlling the world and more completely place their faith in God...when everything is *hebel*, the only thing left is faith in the Lord, the covenant-keeping, promise-honoring God.”

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Partially through the suffering and difficulty of the death of a son, Adam and Eve learned faith. In speaking to any Christians who have undergone difficult and seemingly senseless suffering, the almost universal response is that their faith has grown.

What are some key events in your life that have grown your faith?

Life has difficulties and circumstances that seem at times to be completely senseless. As we move through Ecclesiastes, we’ll find Solomon honestly questioning God on this very issue! However, it’s often through experiencing difficulty that the greatest growth of our faith occurs.

Digging Deeper:
Charles Swindoll, commenting on this first chapter of Ecclesiastes, says this:

> “Life on planet Earth isn’t a great big bowl of cherries; it’s the pits. It is boring. It is empty. It is a grind. It is a ‘chasing after the wind.’...[but] instead of blaming [God], realize He had a reason for our horizontal lives being so void of purpose.”

As you think about that comment, read all of 2 Corinthians 5, particularly focusing on verses 18-20. In your own words, what do you think God’s purpose is for our “void” horizontal lives?

Based on this passage, on what should our lives be focused?

Application:
• What is one area of your life in which you see yourself pursuing something that doesn’t have any eternal significance?

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7 Charles Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985), pg. 25.
Go for a family hike in a park. Talk about these two things:

• First, imagine you don’t believe in God. Look around. What are you seeing, without any thought whatsoever, of a creator?

• Next, have each family member take turns reading through Psalm 148. Take a good look around you. What are you seeing now?

Spend time praising God for his gift of a beautiful world and your gift of sight to enjoy it. Worship is about a life given to something. Give your heartfelt love to God for his power!
Solomon sets out to find fulfillment under the sun by trying all of the same avenues that we often try: pleasure, power, leisure, work, relationships, etc. However, he has the resources to follow them through all the way to the end and, yet, he still finds them unfulfilling. Since he has experienced them fully, we are called to believe his findings and seek fulfillment beyond the sun, not under it.
Who is This Guy?

There is much argument among scholars as to the author of Ecclesiastes. For most of the history of the church, it was universally agreed upon that King Solomon, the son of King David, was the author. However, over the last century or so, some have begun to doubt this. Many scholars refer to the author by the title Qoheleth, which is the Hebrew title he uses for himself.\(^8\)

However, what is without a doubt is that, in this section of Ecclesiastes (1:12-2:26), the author is either King Solomon or he’s impersonating King Solomon, using a very typical writing technique from this period of literature.\(^9\) Therefore, it’s vital for us to understand “Who is this guy?”.

In 1 Kings 1-11 we find the most comprehensive recording of Solomon’s reign. Read the following passages, and write down some key things that you learn about King Solomon:

- 1 Kings 3:1-15
- 1 Kings 4:20-34
- 1 Kings 9:15-28
- 1 Kings 10
- 1 Kings 11:1-13

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\(^8\) Tremper Longman, Iain Provan, Sidney Greidanus are a few of the many who doubt Solomon is the author. See Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010) pgs. 15-18 for a good discussion of both sides of the argument.

\(^9\) See Tremper Longman, *NICOT: Ecclesiastes*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI), pgs. 2-20, especially *Authorship and Genre*. 
King Solomon was certainly an out-sized character in history. Divinely given the gift of wisdom from God, he was the wisest person to ever live apart from Jesus Himself. He was also the wealthiest person in the world, ruling over a massive kingdom during an unprecedented time of peace. Why is all this important for the experiment that we read about in Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11?

As we chase after these same things in order to have joy and fulfillment, we often tend to believe that we simply didn’t get enough to be fulfilled. However, Solomon’s example stands as a testimony: even when you have all you could possibly amass, it’s still not enough to give you joy.

Digging Deeper:
Solomon very clearly looked for satisfaction under the sun. Look at Numbers 15:39. What did Solomon fail to do according to the commands of God?

Now, read Matthew 4:1-11. What did Jesus do that was distinct from Solomon? What specific temptations paralleled Solomon’s sin?

Application:
• What is something in your life that you believe—consciously or not—that, if you “get it,” you’ll find joy? (A certain amount of money? Possessions? Relationship? Position? Etc.)

• How can you respond to the temptation for “more” in your life, particularly using the model of Jesus in Matthew 4?
The Experiment Itself
We’re all familiar with experimentation. We might try a diet or an exercise plan for a month... and see what happens. Or maybe it’s a new reading plan. Or a new way of attacking household chores. We try it for awhile... and see what happens.

As is often the case, Solomon does the same thing that we do—he just does it in a much bigger way! He wants to find out if anything in life “under the sun” can truly satisfy and bring meaning and substance to our lives. So, he conducts a massive experiment, very systematically and purposefully seeking out everything that the human heart longs after... to see what happens.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11.

With what things did Solomon “experiment?”

• 1:13
• 1:17
• 2:1
• 2:2
• 2:3
• 2:4
• 2:7
• 2:8a
• 2:8b
• 2:8c
• 2:9
Remember yesterday’s study: Solomon had the wherewithal to try these things completely. The record of his kingdom and life says that, more than anyone before or since, he didn’t need to deny himself anything. And yet, in 2:11, he gives us the results of this grand experiment. What are they?

Somehow, even with every resource at his disposal, none of these things could satisfy. Look back at the list you made on the last page. Which of these are you “experimenting” with right now? What can we learn from Solomon?

Digging Deeper:
Buried in the English translation is a fascinating Hebrew word. Solomon uses it for the first time in 1:3: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” The word “gain” is the Hebrew word yithron and it’s a business term meaning “profit” or “advantage”.

Now, re-read the results of the experiment in Ecclesiastes 2:11. Do you see the idea of yithron there as well?

Why might this idea be important for understanding the experiment that Solomon is conducting?

The great reformer Martin Luther said it this way: “If the Lord has given one a wife, one should now hold on to her and enjoy her. [Not for profit, but for joy!] If you want to exceed these limits and add to this gift which you have in the present, you will get grief and sorrow instead of pleasure.”

Application:
• What might help you change your desire for meaning and fulfillment in life to a wholehearted pursuit of Jesus?

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10 Quoted in Philip Ryken, Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010) pg. 54.
The Apostle Paul’s List

As we’ve studied Solomon’s experiment, perhaps you have been a bit unsettled by the excess and the seeming disregard for God as he pursued pleasure and worldly satisfaction. Studying Solomon’s life is a bit like perusing the Hollywood tabloids and seeing the latest examples of excess in the world of the impossibly rich and the incredibly famous.

However, remember that neither Solomon nor the Bible itself will say that any of the things that Solomon chased after are inherently wrong. Whether it’s wealth, pleasure, art, riches, sex or power, the Bible is clear that these in themselves are not the problem.

For example, read 1 Timothy 6:10. What’s really the issue?

In his book The Reason for God, Tim Keller makes the following statement: “Sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things.”  Whether it’s money and pleasure, or legalism and “church” protocol, anything that we make ultimate is equally distasteful before God, and ultimately, equally unsatisfying.

While many of us can’t easily relate to the wealth, wisdom, and power of Solomon, we might be able to relate a bit more to a New Testament figure that had to equally make a choice to look “beyond the sun.” Read Philippians 3:4-11.

What’s on Paul’s list of accomplishments?

If these seem foreign to you, all Paul is saying is that he has the best religious training, he’s read the right books, been mentored by the right people, has a great church attendance record, has served on all of the important committees, and is a member of one of the most impressive families in the church. Pretty impressive, right? What does he say about these things in verses 7-8?

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English translations have a hard time being “frank” enough in vs. 8—Paul literally says that he considers these things to be like *dung or excrement*. Nasty. Worthless. Not that they’re bad in themselves—why does he say that about them? He tells us in verses 9-11.

Like wealth and power, “religion” has just as much of an ability to stand between us and God. If we pursue religion, we will come to the end of our “experiment” (our life) saying with Solomon “it’s all vanity and a striving after the wind.” (Ecclesiastes 2:11)

Digging Deeper:
At the core of dissatisfaction is the focus of our pursuit. If the focus isn’t worthy, the outcome will likewise never be. What was at the core of Solomon’s pursuit?
Go back and read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 one more time. Does any specific word stick out to you? Here’s a hint: how many times do the words “I” or “my” appear?

Including “myself”, I find 36 “I” and “my” references in the ESV. Thirty-six times in 11 verses he refers to his own desires, his own work, and his own effort. Is there any question what (or who) the focus of his pursuit is?

What about your conversation? If you were recording it, how many “I’s” and “my’s” would show up?

Application:
• What are some areas of your “religion” that you’re proud of? Do you consider them “dung” when compared to Jesus?

• What are some of the external things that you tend to look for in others when you meet them, particularly other Christians? In what ways do you think you have a different view of a Christian than Jesus does?
Time for a favorite meal!

Make sure everyone has a favorite thing in this meal and include a yummy dessert! When you are finished, clean up together and then sit in the living room.

Think about that food. How did it taste? Can you still taste it? It’s there one minute and gone the next! Discuss things that last forever on this earth. See if the children can come up with anything at all that is lasting. What *does* last forever that is “above the sun?”

Take turns reading these verses: Genesis 17:7; 1 Chronicles 16:36; Psalm 103:17; Psalm 145:13; Isaiah 9:6; Isaiah 51:11; Isaiah 60:19.

Spend time in praise.
Death will ultimately come to all. When it does, there is nothing that we’ve gained in this life that will matter and that will come with us. With this perspective in mind, Solomon calls us, for the first of several times throughout the book, to enjoy life deeply—but not in order to gain ultimate satisfaction. It’s only when we can see life through this perspective that we are able to enjoy it for what it is, because we then recognize what it can never be. Only in the light of our death can we truly experience life.
Eyes Wide Open

Some would argue that the very intentionality of Solomon’s pursuit was the reason it was not ultimately satisfying. The argument goes like this: real joy comes from spontaneity, not planned fun. The excess of Solomon’s partying, working, sex life, and wealth would have been much more satisfying had it “just happened” and not been so methodically planned out.

Solomon is going to deal with that argument in verses 12-17. Read through this section, and answer the following questions:

• Does Solomon think wisdom or folly is superior?

• Solomon uses two metaphors for this in verses 13-14. What are they?

• What is the ultimate conclusion that Solomon comes to in verses 15-16?

Solomon answers this objection by simply explaining that seeing where you’re going is better than not seeing, even if it means that you’re seeing meaninglessness. “We can see that even in this experience of sin Solomon has not become a relativist. Despite the meaninglessness, Solomon sees that wisdom is still better than folly. Better to go over a cliff with eyes open than with eyes shut.”

However, why is wisdom better than folly? Re-read this section again. What reason does Solomon give for wisdom being better than folly?

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12 Douglas Wilson, Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes, (Canon Press, Moscow, ID, 1999), pg. 34.
Trick question! Solomon instinctively knows that wisdom is better, but, in his “under the sun” experiment, there’s no evidence for it. Look at another piece of Solomon’s wisdom in Proverbs 17:24. What does the fool do in this verse?

The question is: why is looking to the ends of the earth better or worse than looking at what’s in the immediate around us? Under the sun and with no other revelation, it’s impossible to say! However, Solomon isn’t willing to go that far…but we’ll have to wait a bit longer to see why.

Digging Deeper:
Jesus was the wisest person to ever live. In His teachings, we have much to learn about wisdom and folly… and an answer to Solomon’s problem. Read Matthew 7:24-27. What happens to both the wise and the fool in Jesus’ story?

So why is wisdom better?

Suffering and difficulty will come to us. Death is the ultimate end for all of us. Yet, wisdom helps us to endure the storms and to not have lives that fall apart in the wind and the rains of life.

Application:
• Can you think of an area in your life in which you’re living with your “eyes closed”? What would it look like for you to open them?
Facing Death

We’ve all heard the stories, and most of us have experienced it in our own families and circles of friends: the person who eats right, exercises regularly, and is in perfect health—who suddenly drops dead of a heart attack. Or is attacked by an aggressive terminal cancer. Or is killed in a freak accident. No matter what we do, no matter how hard we fight against it, death is coming for all of us.

This is the lynchpin of Solomon’s argument. Read Ecclesiastes 2:15-23.

- What’s his argument about the wise versus the fool?

- Beyond even death itself, what are his complaints about what happens after death for the wise person and those who follow?
  - Verse 16
  - Verses 18-19
  - Verse 21

The truth of Solomon’s argument is compelling: Death does come to all; riches are left to the fool; the lazy living person does enjoy the wealth of the hard-working dead person! Is it any wonder that Solomon was so deeply frustrated with the vanity of life? Philip Ryken says, “We are born with a longing for permanence, a deep desire to do something that will endure or to make something that will last. Yet the under-the-sun reality is that we will spend our whole lives working to gain something that we cannot keep.”

Does the Bible have an answer for such a difficult problem? As in much of the Bible, the Old Testament asks this question—and it’s answered in the New Testament. Read Colossians 3:1-4.

- What does Paul say has already happened to us if we are in Christ?

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• According to Paul, where does this place our focus?

• By faith, is our “death” a past event, or a future event?

• How does this effect the way that we view our present life and stuff?

Missiologist Paul Borthwick asks the question of Christians: “Do we believe in heaven?”  His point, along with the apostle Paul, is that, if we did, we would be much less concerned about hanging onto life and material goods. What about you? Do you believe in heaven?

Digging Deeper:
Paul tells us to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” (Colossians 3:2) However, how seriously do you take his words? Read Matthew 16:13-23.

• According to Jesus, what made Peter rebuke Him?

• With whom does Jesus equate Peter’s mindset?

One of the hallmarks of “anti-Christ” is a focus on the world instead of a focus on eternity. This doesn’t mean that we are to disregard the world around us—we are commanded to care for the world and those in it. However, this will only ever be done effectively by those who have minds focused on eternity.

Application:
• In what ways is your mind too focused on earthly things?

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15 There are more references for this than can be noted, but start with Genesis 1:28, Genesis 12:1-3, Matthew 25:31-46, James 1:27.
A heartbreaking story is told of John D. Rockefeller:

Toward the end of his life, Rockefeller had an income of one million dollars a week. Yet, his doctors allowed him to eat only the bare minimum. “Now, less than 100 pounds in weight, he sampled everything [at breakfast]: a drop of coffee, a spoonful of cereal, a forkful of egg, and a bit of chop the size of a pea.”

The point of the story is clear: there’s no guarantee that we will be able to enjoy what we have. It could be death that robs us. Or, more often, it’s the continual drive for more and the inability to be satisfied with what we have that robs us. Either way, the ability to enjoy what we have is not inherent to us.

Embedded in what seems to be a frustrated conclusion to Solomon’s grand experiment is a deep truth. Read Ecclesiastes 2:24-26.

• What pleasure does Solomon attribute to the hand of God?

“Man cannot be thought of as an artesian well. Nothing inherent in him enables him to enjoy his creature comforts. He has no innate capacity to enjoy... We are given the privilege of experiencing joy here, in the midst of ongoing disobedient and imbecilic chaos.”

But now, look at Solomon’s own words in Ecclesiastes 2:1.

• What does he say about pleasure in this verse?

• What is the difference between 2:1 and 2:25?

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16 Charles Swindoll, Living on the Ragged Edge, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985), pg. 62.
17 Douglas Wilson, Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes, (Canon Press, Moscow, ID, 1999), pg. 37.
The issue that Solomon comes up against is purpose. Are pleasure, or wealth, or relationship, or power, means? Or are they ends in themselves? Jeffrey Meyers says it well:

“What if we regarded our labors and the temporary fruits we sometimes enjoy from them not as a means of power, but rather as gracious gifts?... As long as he does not attempt to misuse work, to transform his God-given activities into a means of leveraging God and his creation for his own purposes, he can rejoice.”

However, it’s only the one who fears God that can make such a jump, because only God is a worthy enough end to make all of the pursuits of man means. When we see the world from this perspective, we are able to enjoy life deeply!

Digging Deeper:
The last verse of Ecclesiastes 2 is the cause of much consternation among scholars, Christian and non-Christian alike. Read 2:26.

• What’s your immediate interpretation of this verse?

As you look at this verse in the context of the rest of today’s study, can you see an alternate way of explaining this verse?

Once again, Solomon is insistent that, unless we are able to look “beyond the sun,” we will never find meaning “under the sun.” When we pursue the latter, we get neither; but if we look to eternity, we get the enjoyment of the temporary as well!

Application:
• Are you able to find enjoyment in the temporary joys of life? Can you see a correlation between the joy you receive and your personal pursuit of Jesus?

Gather together, and then walk from room to room.

Have each family member point out their favorite activities.

Talk about how each thing might be enjoyed for selfish reasons and leave God out, and how they can be enjoyed for the glory of God.

Go back to a main room and read Colossians 3:1-4.

Praise God, thanking Him for providing all of these things you saw in your journey in the first place. Pray for each family member by name that they would use these things for God’s glory.
In this familiar passage, Solomon poetically describes our lives. However, he isn’t giving us a list of choices for what life might look like—rather, he’s describing what goes into all of our lives. Like ingredients in a recipe, they may not “taste” good individually, but they come together to make up the life of a worshiper. All of these things are in God’s control and timing, and the “eternity” that He’s placed inside us means that we can see in part (so we seek the Sovereign One), but will never see in full (because we ourselves are not, and cannot be, sovereign).
The Peace of Sovereignty

The first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3 constitute one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible. Thanks to the 60’s band “The Byrds,” many who are unfamiliar with any other section of Scripture are quite familiar with the Pete Seegar song “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

The message Solomon’s poem and Seegar’s song lyrics stands in direct opposition to the message of another famous poem, *Invictus*:

*Out of the night that covers me,*
*Black as the Pit from pole to pole,*
*I thank whatever gods may be*
*For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance*
*I have not winced nor cried aloud.*
*Under the bludgeonings of chance*
*My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears,*
*Looms but the Horror of the shade,*
*And yet the menace of the years*
*Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,*
*How charged with punishments the scroll.*
*I am the master of my fate:*
*I am the captain of my soul.*

The famous last couplet of *Invictus* and the bold declaration of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 stand in stark contrast. As you read over both of them, can you see why?

Many have fallen into a poor interpretation of Solomon’s poem by understanding it in either humanistic terms (man as center) or fatalistic terms (man as victim). Understanding that Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 act as a sort of “commentary” on this poem, read those verses as well. Remember the “I/my” repetition of 2:1-11? To whom has the focus shifted to in this section?

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19 *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley
How does the realization that this is God’s work, not ours, save us from either humanism or fatalism?

Derek Kidner sums this passage up beautifully:

“Instead of changelessness, there is something better: a dynamic, divine purpose, with its beginning and end. Instead of a frozen perfection there is the kaleidoscopic movement of innumerable processes, each with its own character and its period of blossoming and ripening, beautiful in its time and contributing to the over-all masterpiece which is the work of one Creator.”

Digging Deeper:
When the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language, there were many interpretation decisions to be made. The Greek language contains many more words and is much more exact than the picturesque Hebrew. One such decision was in this poem. The word *eth* means “time” in English, and there are two standard words for time in Greek:

- **Chronos** means time as duration.
- **Kairos** means time viewed as an opportunity.

Can you guess which one was chosen?

Why is *kairos* a better choice for this passage than *chronos*?

Philip Ryken says it this way: “In the divine economy there is a suitable occasion or appropriate opportunity for everything that happens.”

Application:

- Are you more likely to see yourself as the “master of your fate” or “victim of circumstance?” How can seeing the sovereignty of God change that?

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Through the Hands of God

There is a false idea of reality that is advanced by many of our modern-day storytellers in Hollywood. The idea is that there is a dualism in the world—good versus evil—and they are engaged in some kind of cosmic battle. It may be that “good” (God) will ultimately win, but there’s going to be one heck of a battle first. This is the myth.

Here’s the reality. Look at Job 1:6-12 and 2:1-6

• What is the biblical picture of good versus evil?

This is equally seen during Jesus’ ministry on earth. Look at Matthew 8:28-32.

• Does this seem to be a picture of two equal forces in conflict? Why not?

Interestingly, when we are able to see a picture of the “largeness” of God, we are able to trust His work to a much greater degree. This gives us confidence in His activity, even when we don’t understand it.

• Read Ecclesiastes 1:9.
• Read Ecclesiastes 3:15.
• What is the same in these two verses?

• Does Solomon seem to arrive at the same conclusion with both statements? Why or why not?
Read Psalm 115:3. What are the implications of this verse regarding difficulty and suffering in life?

Now read Psalm 115:1. On what does David insist the implication of God’s ultimate control and power should be?

“[Solomon’s] wisdom in 3:14-15 releases us from the overwhelming responsibility of attempting godhood... Ecclesiastes is liberating. It tells you that you need not feel guilty for something you cannot control. All times and seasons are in God’s hands.”  

Digging Deeper:
This declaration of God’s sovereign control over the world is often recognized by those who don’t follow Him as well. Look at the following passages and answer the questions below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Daniel 4:34-35</th>
<th>Jonah 1:14</th>
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<td>Who is speaking?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is their declaration?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the circumstances?</td>
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Application:
• Are there circumstances in your life that bring suffering or difficulty to you? How does it impact you to know that God is in control of those things?

Eternity in Our Hearts

Have you ever stood before something so large that you simply stand in awe? The Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the ocean, a mountain peak—each of these and many others simply inspire awe. When we experience such massive creations, it is impossible for us to declare the glory of even our greatest accomplishments. No one stands before the Grand Canyon and extols the glory of their backyard landscaping!

Solomon’s poetic tribute to the sovereignty of God maintains that He is actively at work, weaving time and circumstance together for His purposes and, ultimately, for His glory. In addition to His sovereign control, however, He has acted in two specific ways towards us. Read Ecclesiastes 3:11.

• What are the two things that God has done towards us?

In the beauty of God’s work, we are able to get just a glimpse of His working and plan. But what does the last section of verse 11 tell us about our perception of God’s working?

“God has put in us a consciousness of—a yearning for—what transcends the present moment... In a real way, if we could simply forget that there is a plan, we would probably be able to better deal with life, but God doesn’t let us forget.... Eternity in our hearts is supposed to reinforce to us that we are not the ones with the plan, but that God has the plan and we can trust him.”

And so, we stand before the plan of God across time and circumstance much as we might stand in awe of Niagara Falls. Our small attempts to dictate and control time pale in comparison to His activity. What does Solomon tell us is the result of such activity? Read 3:14.

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“God does all this [3:1-8] that men should fear. A man who reads without trembling has forgotten the living God.”\textsuperscript{24} This, then, both Solomon and his father David declared, is the beginning point of wisdom:

- Read Psalm 111.
- Read Proverbs 9:10.

Why might the fear of God be the starting point for wisdom?

There are times in our lives when we realize that our backyard landscaping job really isn’t \textit{that} amazing... and so begins real wisdom.

\textbf{Digging Deeper:}

Within Ecclesiastes 3, we find a second of the “enjoyment” passages. Read 3:12-13. Why does Solomon exhort us to enjoy food, drink, and work?

In many ways, this is the biblical equivalent to the Latin phrase \textit{Carpe Diem}, or “Seize the Day.” However, Solomon’s \textit{carpe diem} “is an expression of faith, not of self-fulfillment... a worshipful response to the God of creation.”\textsuperscript{25}

John’s gospel particularly emphasizes Solomon’s philosophy. Read John 4:14, 5:24, and 10:10. How would you summarize these verses?

Eternal, abundant life is to start \textit{now} for Christians!

\textbf{Application:}

- Do you actively live in the fear of the Lord? How might this spur you into the abundant life that Jesus promised?

\textsuperscript{24} Douglas Wilson, \textit{Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes}, (Canon Press, Moscow, ID, 1999), pg. 41.

Week Four: Family Time

Pick out a favorite family cookie recipe.

Put the ingredients in and, one at a time, *taste* each one. (Okay—*not* the egg!)

In view of the Ecclesiastes passage, talk about what each ingredient reminds you of. (*An example might be that sugar is like a family vacation.*)

If this is a stretch for you, read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 while the cookies are baking.

Talk about family events that were/are happy or sad—births or deaths, things falling apart or being put together, etc. How have you grown together through the good and bad?

If you know the song, sing “Blessed Be Your Name.” Don’t forget to eat the cookies! Together!
“Blessed Be Your Name”

Blessed be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your Name
And blessed be Your Name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed be Your Name

Refrain
Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in
Lord still I will say—

Blessed be the Name of the Lord
Blessed be Your Name
Blessed be the Name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious Name

Blessed be Your Name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's all as it should be
Blessed be Your Name
Blessed be Your Name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your Name

Bridge
You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord blessed be Your Name

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God is sovereign, and yet, where there should be goodness and righteousness, there is still wickedness, and ultimately death—this is Solomon’s great dilemma. His answer is simply to rest in the power of God; He will ultimately judge the righteous and the wicked. Seeking to be God and seeking to control God don’t end well; fearing Him and resting in Him is the only place we can have peace.
The Purposes of Suffering
Note: Due to the length of today’s main study, there is not a “Digging Deeper” section.

In every conversation that I’ve had with someone who doubts the existence of God, one of the first questions brought up is “how can a loving God allow...” and then the latest world calamity or historical tragedy is inserted. Even more painful are the personal stories of injustice, sickness, death, and abuse that can accompany such discussions.

If we’re honest, we as Christians often have the same questions. Of course, we don’t often dwell there because it leads us toward doubt—but when we’re willing to wrestle honestly with our hearts, we find this question looming: “[Why is it that] in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness?” (Ecclesiastes 3:16) “Everyone who is honest with himself will admit to being frustrated by wave after wave of experiences in life that apparently contradict our confession of God’s goodness and all-encompassing plan.”

Why is there suffering and injustice in the world?

In order to have some perspective on suffering, we have to answer both sides of the question: what can’t be true, and what must at minimum be true. The reality is, there is much that we don’t and can’t know—this is why we are to fear God. But based on the revelation of the Word, there are things that we can know.

What suffering can’t be:

- Read Romans 3:22-25.
  Why can’t suffering be punishment or wrath from God?

- Read Ephesians 2:1-5.
  Why can’t suffering be the judgment on our behavior?

- Read Psalm 115:3.
  Can suffering simply be the result of chance in a fallen world? Why not?

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Suffering for Christians can’t be God’s wrath, our punishment for evil, or a random occurrence of a fallen world. The Bible clearly tells us that. However, there are several purposes for suffering that are given to us in Scripture:

- **2 Corinthians 4:7-10**  
  What does this tell us that suffering does in us?

- **1 Peter 1:7**  
  What does this tell us that suffering accomplishes in us?

- **James 1:2-8**  
  What does this tell us that suffering accomplishes in us?

- **Hebrews 12:3-11**  
  What does this tell us that suffering is for us?

From the perspective of earth, suffering makes no sense “under the sun.” However, once we move “beyond the sun” and gain God’s perspective through His Word, we see that He is at work, even in suffering. The Word may not give us all of the answers, but through it, we learn to trust in a sovereign God.

**Application:**

- When you experience suffering and pain in your own life, how do you respond to it?

- Understanding some of God’s purposes in suffering, what are some ways that you can respond to suffering in your own life or in the lives of others?
Death Comes to All

In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Dr. Philip Ryken asks the question: What is your response to the certainty of your own mortality? He tells this story in response:

The approach taken by one order of Trappist monks is worthy of emulation. Together they dig a grave. Every day they go out to the grave site, peer over the edge, and ponder their own mortality. When one of their number dies, they lower him into the grave and cover him with dirt. Then they dig a new grave and start the ritual all over again, never knowing for certain who will be the next to die.”

The certainty of death is one of the great themes of Ecclesiastes. In 7:2, Solomon says, “for [death] is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.” In his “Resolutions”, the great Jonathan Edwards “resolved to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.”


• How does he describe man in relation to animals?

• What conclusion does he come to regarding both man’s and the animal’s ultimate destiny?

• In what way is this an accurate description of life “under the sun”?

In verse 21, Solomon asks “who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” The answer, biblically, is that God knows, and that He’s revealed it to us as well.

• Read Hebrews 9:27. What do we learn will happen after death?

• Read Romans 6:23. What is offered to us through Jesus after death?

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27 Philip Ryken, Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010), pg. 104.
• Read Colossians 2:13-15. How did Jesus give us the path to eternal life?

• Read John 1:12-13. What happened in us to give us this life?

The Bible clearly answers Solomon’s question—those who die in Christ are made alive in Him! There are many more sections of Scripture that affirm this same truth. So while, “under the sun,” death looks to be universal, God has revealed to us that death is a door through which we pass into eternal life.

Digging Deeper:
One of the great difficulties for believers to grasp is the reality of hell. While there is much that we don’t understand, the Bible clearly teaches that men and women will ultimately face judgment, and that some will not receive grace, but condemnation. While this is a painful and difficult reality, it is also very clear.

• Read Matthew 25:31-46 and Revelation 14:9-11.
  What can you understand about those who die without faith in Jesus?

Eternal judgment is a sobering reality. While the Bible teaches that the spirit does not simply go into the earth along with the beasts, it does teach that both heaven and hell are eternal, and that the only way to the Father is through Jesus Himself. (Read John 14:6.)

Application:
• Do you think often on your own death? Why or why not? If you thought of your death more, what might be different in your life?
A Model for Embracing Suffering

None of us prefer pain. If given the choice between pain or comfort, sickness or health, tension or peace, or difficulty or ease, no sane person would hesitate with their choice. With no offense to the dentists that are reading this, that’s why we’re not anxiously awaiting our next trip to the dentist’s office!

But there are times when suffering and pain are part of what God has for us. As Solomon recounts for us, there are times when there is wickedness where justice and righteousness should be. In those moments, we need someone to look to—someone after whom to model our lives.

While Jesus is much more than a model to us, He is at least that. And the suffering that He endured was of the most massive proportions—not simply physical pain and emotional abandonment, but Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that He bore the weight of all of our sin.

Read all three of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ prayer before His arrest. Many details are similar between them. Write down all that sticks out to you within these passages:

Jesus was faced with massive suffering. He pleaded with His Father to remove it. However, ultimately, He embraced God’s plan for Him and looked toward the ultimate result of the suffering.

• Read Hebrews 12:1-3. What does the writer call the end result of the suffering that Jesus endured?

Hebrews tells us that we should model our lives after Jesus—looking toward the joy that’s before us as we endure the difficulties and pain of life.

Digging Deeper:
Continue reading in Hebrews 12—read verses 4-13.
• How does the writer describe the suffering of the children of God?

• What does the writer say about us if we don’t experience suffering in our journey with Jesus? (verse 8)

• How does he describe the ultimate fruit of suffering? (verse 11)

Romans 8:28 tells us that God is not only in control, but that He’s working everything out for our ultimate good. We might not always see this, but it’s always true!

Application:
• What is your posture towards God in suffering? Do you argue? Avoid? Beg?

• What are some ways that you can intentionally draw your heart towards God as you go through suffering?
Do you like it when bad things happen to good people? What about when good things happen to bad people?

Jesus knows all about that. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for all the guilty—and that includes you and me. In our ugly, dirty sin, He stooped down and suffered to beautify us.

Read Matthew 26:26-29. Have communion together as a family. Adults should serve each other and, as you serve your children, encourage them to rest in Jesus because He is their lovely, beautiful, sacrificial Savior and He is victorious! And because of His sacrifice, children are victorious too!

Thank Him and sing a song when you are finished.
Although living in the shadow of the sovereignty of God can be “an unhappy business”, we are given one another as gifts with whom we can walk through this life. Therefore, we are called to work and rest and live, not as though those things are ultimate or driving, but as worship. We must be willing to trust one another deeply and listen to one another fully if we are to grow in wisdom and grace.
Work and Community

For many of those who work outside the home, time at work will make up a large portion, if not a significant majority, of waking hours. In our current work environment, “full-time” often means a minimum of 50-60 hours each week, and travel responsibilities and projects can take those totals even higher.

How do we balance work with the rest of life? This is the next “injustice” with which Solomon wrestles. However, in order to see where he’s coming from, we need to recognize some of what he’s already said about work.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:10, 11, 18, and 24. What seems to be Solomon’s attitude toward “work” or “toil?”

Like many of us, Solomon is hard to pin down when it comes to work! In some ways, he recognizes a deep satisfaction in his work—in other ways, he sees that it too is like a vapor. Read how he explains this in Ecclesiastes 4:4-8.

- What does Solomon say drives much of our work?

- Think honestly about your own work, and the results of that work. How much of this drives your work efforts?

“What we see here is that ‘toil and skill’ and ‘quietness’ are not absolute values. They are relative. Work is good if it is done appropriately in a fitting way. Rest is good, too, if enjoyed fittingly.”

Jesus spoke very frankly about those who were unwilling to see work and wealth in the proper perspective. Read Luke 12:13-21.

- What seems to be Jesus’ primary concern in this parable?

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Work, possessions, and wealth must never be seen as ends to themselves. This is the wisdom that came from Solomon’s experiment in Ecclesiastes 2, and it’s the message of Jesus’ parable as well.

- What is the striking similarity between Jesus’ parable (particularly Luke 12:20) and Solomon’s lament in Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 and again in 4:8?

Our work has meaning when it’s a way to express care for someone else, not simply when it’s placed in a vacuum. When wealth terminates on self, as Solomon declares, it’s simply vanity.

Digging Deeper:
In Ephesians 6:5-9, the Apostle Paul gives us a more complete theology of work. As you read that passage, who is ultimately to be the focus of our work?

When we are working for God, what drives us?

What common work practices should we no longer engage in?

Application:
- If you’re honest, what drives you at work, whether it’s work outside of the home, or inside the home? What should drive you?

- In what areas of your life are you seeking “bigger barns”?
God and Moderation

The phrase “all things in moderation” or “moderation in all things” is one of the familiar phrases often attributed to Scripture. However, just like “cleanliness is next to godliness” and that “famous” minor prophet Hezekiah, you will have a hard time finding it in your Bible! The closest “moderation” text you’ll find in Scripture is that written by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:25. Write that verse below:

Some translations will use the word “temperate” where most will use “self-control.” However, even with that definition, which is the last possibility in Strong’s dictionary and that doesn’t even appear in Thayer’s, Paul is clearly talking about a self-denial that goes with training in godliness.

Solomon does seem to espouse the virtues of moderation, at least in some things. Read Ecclesiastes 4:4-6.

Solomon is talking about work here. If you were going to paraphrase his words, how would you do it?

Charles Swindoll paraphrases it this way: “One hand full of contentment and responsible living is better than two fists clawing, scraping, striving, pushing, pulling their way to the top.” The big idea is that an all-out, abandoned pursuit of success and wealth is in vain; but laziness isn’t good either. Moderation!

In fact, Solomon espouses moderation in the Proverbs as well. Read Proverbs 15:16-17. How would you paraphrase this?

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30 This is actually an extrapolation from Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean, found in his work *Nicomachean Ethics*. [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org).
31 Perhaps the most oft-misattributed quote: this was actually the deist founding father Benjamin Franklin.
32 He was a king, but not a prophet—and doesn’t have a book in the Bible bearing his name. You can find him in 2 Kings 18-20.
33 Charles Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985), pg. 120.
It’s clear that Solomon’s intent is not simply “moderation” here but that, with less material goods, there is often found a greater love and fear of the Lord. Again, the goal is not a pursuit of what’s “under the sun.” Rather, when we are pursuing and valuing what’s “beyond the sun,” we are only then able to appropriately enjoy what’s under the sun.

Digging Deeper:
In his book “Not a Fan,” Kyle Idleman describes a conversation he is moderating between a formerly “wild” son (who had made a dramatic conversion and is now involved in the church in every way that he can be) and his “churched” mom. Deeply frustrated with the amount of time, energy, and resources he was spending with the church, she asked, “Can you please tell him that it doesn’t have to be all or nothing?” Here was his very biblical reply:
• Read Revelation 3:15-16. What is the church at Laodicea chastised for?
• Read Luke 14:26-33. Does that sound like “all or nothing” to you? Why?

Moderation, while appropriate in balancing our work and pursuits in this world, is never appropriate in our pursuit of Jesus. In fact, Jesus and the whole of the New Testament will very clearly teach that a “moderate” pursuit of Jesus is not a pursuit of Him at all. Are you pursuing Him with all that you have?

Application:
• Where is your life out of balance? If, on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 was laziness and 10 was a workaholic (like Ecclesiastes 4:7-8), where would you rate yourself?
• In what ways is your pursuit of Jesus “moderate”? What would need to happen for you to have an all-out pursuit?

34 Kyle Idleman, Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011).
**Biblical Companionship**

*Note: Due to the length of today’s main study, there is not a “Digging Deeper” section.*

The core idea of this section of Ecclesiastes is found in 4:9-12. Unfortunately, this passage has been so often used at wedding celebrations that many read this in terms of the marriage relationship. However, it’s unlikely that Solomon had that in mind, otherwise, he would have said, “700+300 on the side are better than one! And just *try* to break a cord like that!”

Although it’s appropriate for us to see these principles in terms of a marriage relationship, we must remember that this is because marriage is simply our most *intense* communal relationship. Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.

With these ideas in mind, read the following biblical narratives, and write down some of the relational principles that you find in each one:

- 1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2
  Who are the companions in this story? What can you learn from them?

- Ruth 1
  Who are the companions in this story? What can you learn from them?
• 1 Samuel 18-20
  Who are the companions in this story? What can you learn from them?

While there are many principles to take away from these stories, Charles Swindoll chooses these three, which are powerful and appropriate:

• Elijah and Elisha show us that companions calm the troubled waters of our souls.
• Naomi and Ruth show us that companions build bridges of hope and reassurance when we are vulnerable, exposed, and self-conscious.
• David and Jonathan show us that companions take our part when others take us apart.  

Application:
• What role do close companions and those in your community play in your journey with Christ? What role do you play in the lives of others?

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Read Proverbs 15: 16-17.

Each person is a gift from God to each other! You have beautiful things to teach each other.

Get a piece of paper for each person—every age included—putting their name on the top. Take turns writing to each person something that you think Jesus wants that person to know. If you have young children, ask them what Jesus wants to tell their Dad, their Mom, their friend—or whomever—and write it for them. Children will amaze you with their answers!

Now it’s time to read the responses. Share with each other.

Stand in a circle and thank God for your family and the community that He’s given you.
There should be a healthy fear to the presence of God. As worshipers, we can, and should, recognize grace. However, Solomon will remind us again and again throughout this book that we are to fear His presence as well. Therefore, as we enter His presence, we do so with respect and reverence, watching what we say and what we do and recognizing that He alone is the judge.
Approaching the Temple

“WATCH YOUR STEP!” A loud call-out like that would immediately make you stop and look at the ground, to investigate what’s ahead of you, and to proceed with extreme caution. You can almost imagine Solomon, in the midst of his exhortations to us, reaching this point at the beginning of chapter 5 and remembering the construction and dedication of the temple of God. The reminder is enough to shock him into a realization: WATCH YOUR STEP!

- Read 1 Kings 5-6, 7:13-51.
In all of those details, what sticks out to you about the temple of God?

The building of the temple was an incredible undertaking, requiring over 180,000 workers seven years to construct. God Himself meticulously designed it. While no building could possibly contain the fullness of God, He chose to dwell there in a unique way, which can be seen in 1 Kings 8:10-11. What happened?

Is it any wonder that Solomon would caution us from “flippantly” walking in to this holy place? After he tells us to watch our step in Ecclesiastes 5:1, he then reminds us of something else—what is it?

As we come to worship, God is the One who should be heard. While it’s appropriate that we speak back to Him and declare His praise, we also listen to Him speak to us through His Word. This is an equal part of worship.
The temple, however, no longer exists. In 70 A.D., the temple was destroyed, and it has never been rebuilt. Sacrifices can no longer be offered there, and we can’t travel to Jerusalem and meet God in His temple. Why is that? Read the following verses:

- Hebrews 9:11-14. Why is there no longer an altar for sacrifices?
- 1 Corinthians 6:19. Why do we no longer travel to the temple to meet with God?

So, if this is the case, we truly need to watch our steps... but not just when we go to church! At all times, in all places, and in all ways, we are “in” the temple of God’s presence, because He dwells in us!

Digging Deeper:
Within the temple, there was a huge curtain. That curtain hung between the “Holy Place” and the “Most Holy Place,” or the “Holy of Holies,” which was where God Himself dwelt.

- Read Matthew 27:51. What happened as Jesus died? What is the significance of the direction of the tearing?
- Now read Hebrews 10:19-25. What is the result of the sacrifice of Jesus for our relationship with God? What are we supposed to do because of this?

Application:
- How often do you have the realization that, if you are in Christ, God Himself dwells in you by His Holy Spirit? If you remembered that more frequently, how different would your life look?
The Proverbial Fear of the Lord

Every several weeks, it seems, you read about them, usually on the back page of the front section of the paper, or on the “Popular Views” section of your favorite internet news site. These are people who don’t seem to have an understanding that wild animals are, well, wild! At the time of this writing, it’s a 17-year old teen named Sam Gottsegan who was mauled by a bear in Alaska. By the time you’re reading this, he will be forgotten and dozens of others will have similar stories... I don’t mean at all to sound callous. It’s just that we should have a healthy “fear” of animals—not to necessarily be afraid of them, but to recognize their power and strength when we are in their presence and that, once we get too close, we’re no longer in control!

That’s exactly the way we are to approach God, but with a greater recognition of His even greater power. I love this Annie Dillard quote:

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return.”

Solomon understood this. He not only highlights it within this passage (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7), but throughout the Proverbs. Read and paraphrase each of the following:

- Proverbs 10:19
- Proverbs 21:23
- Proverbs 17:27-28

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36 CNN.com, July 28th, 2011.
Now, read Ecclesiastes 5:2, 5-6 and paraphrase that.

What is the big idea in all of these verses?

We sometimes miss the reverence and awe that we are to have as we come before God. Later this week, we’ll look at how this is balanced by grace, but our call is clearly to come before God with reverence and awe—a healthy fear.

Digging Deeper:
One very consistent theme in the Bible is the response of people who meet God in His glory face to face. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Apostle John all reacted consistently. Perhaps the clearest is Isaiah. Read Isaiah 6:1-8.

• What was Isaiah’s immediate reaction to God?

• What was his ultimate response?

Application:

• How do you approach God on a Sunday morning? How about during private times of worship?

• As you intentionally approach God, is your attitude in worship different from other times of “normal” living? Why or why not? Should it be?
Grace and Gratitude

The big objection to all of this “fear of God” talk is: but what about grace? Don’t we now have freedom with God? Can’t we forget all that “fear and reverence” stuff and approach God with familiarity and ease?

The answer to this objection is not a simple “yes” or “no.” Derek Kidner makes an insightful comment on this topic: “No amount of emphasis on grace can justify taking liberties with God, for the very concept of grace demands gratitude; and gratitude cannot be casual.”

What are some examples of approaching God “casually” instead of approaching Him with “gratitude”?

During next week’s studies, we’ll look at some incredible parallels between this section of Ecclesiastes and Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7. However, for now, let’s simply consider the most famous passage in that famous address. Read Matthew 6:9-13.

• How does Jesus ask us to address God?

• Immediately following this address, what does He instruct us to pray?

• What might this mean for the question of how we are to approach God?

Luke 11:1-4 gives us context for the time that Jesus likely first gave this prayer to His disciples. Why did He give them this prayer?

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38 Derek Kidner, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Ecclesiastes*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL), pg. 53.
As Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He shocked all of them by telling them to address God as “Father.” This would have been an incredible shift in their view of God. The great preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said it this way: “The essence of true prayer is found in the two words...‘Our Father’. I suggest that if you can say from your heart, whatever your condition, ‘My Father’, in a sense your prayer is already answered. It is just the realization of our relationship to God that we so sadly lack.”

And yet, we know we shouldn’t approach our earthly fathers flippantly, arrogantly, or rudely—but we also don’t need to approach them formally. Instead, it should be with respect and honor, along with a calm assurance of their love for us. We should approach God, our Father, in the same way.

Digging Deeper:
Paul, in his letter to Timothy, tells us a bit more about how we can and should approach God. Read 1 Timothy 2:8-10.

• How are men to approach God? What does every place mean? (Think about the first study from this week.)

• How are women to approach God? Based on 1 Corinthians 6:19, is Paul’s call for modesty limited to church?

Application:
• Do you tend to approach God too casually or too formally? Why do you think that is?

Read Exodus 14. Children can act it out as you read.

Read verse 31 twice. Now have a child look up the word “fear” in the dictionary and see if they can find the correct definition as it’s defined in verse 31. Spend time discussing this.

Now read Joshua 24:14. This can be a verse you can claim for your family. “We will fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness!” Because this verse is referred to often throughout the next few weeks in Family Time, we will call this our “family verse” for this study!

As you claim this together as a family, drive a stake in the ground by a door into your house. If you are unable to do that, have everyone make a picture/poster of this to put in different rooms of the house.

Encourage your family to memorize Joshua 24:14. Make it a challenge!
Throughout Ecclesiastes we find numerous parallels to Jesus’ teaching, particularly the “Sermon on the Mount.” However, what Solomon describes as “vapor,” Jesus describes as “abundant life.” The difference is no less than a new life with new priorities and new values—regeneration. In our sinful nature, we live in a kingdom ruled by wealth, power, possessions and self. In the Kingdom of Heaven, we are able to see those things within their proper perspective, and to participate in the larger plan of God in the world, all the while trusting Him to do what only He can do.
The Kingdom Declarations
Note: Due to the length of today’s main study, there is not a “Digging Deeper” section.

Sometimes the best insights from Scripture come from just “soaking in” the Scripture. Today, I want to ask you to read a significant portion of Scripture. However, I’d like you to think of it from this perspective: what are the underlying values of the way of life being espoused? In other words, what’s the big idea? As you read this way, you’ll likely see parallels in topic, but vastly different points of view. Take time to both jot them down as well as meditate on them. What does that mean for my life?

Ecclesiastes 5:1-6:9

Matthew 5-7
As you read, it’s likely that you found some interesting parallels. We must remember: Solomon was on a search for wisdom “under the sun”, and Jesus was clearly bringing a perspective from “beyond the sun.” In the light of eternity, many things look different. The Puritan writer Thomas Brooks said it this way: “It is a very high point of Christian wisdom and prudence always to look upon the good things and the great things of this world as a man will certainly look upon them when he comes to die.”

Application:
- Which of these kingdoms look more like your life? Write about what it would mean for your life to move further into the Kingdom of God.
Money Talks

One of the things that we often say at York Alliance as we come to the point in our worship gathering for giving of our money is: “God, we just said a lot of words. Now we show You whether we really meant them.” OK, maybe it’s not always that direct, but that’s the general idea—and it’s the truth! It’s easy to give lip service to our devotion to God, but in our culture we have the unprecedented ability to rely completely on ourselves and have no real need for God. We declare our dependence not simply through giving 10% (although for some that would be a great start!), but by giving sacrificially so that we declare our need for Him.

It’s a powerful statement because money has an unusual ability to control us. Douglas Wilson puts it like this:

“Those who love silver and abundance are sleeping with false lovers who cannot satisfy...the more power they acquire, the more powerless they feel. This is because the vanity of increase, the futility of silver and gold, has a life of its own. A man may work hard to acquire money, only to discover at the end of the day that the money has actually acquired him.”

40 Read Ecclesiastes 5:10-12. What is the primary issue that Solomon sees with those who love money?

John D. Rockefeller was once asked, “How much money is enough?” He famously answered, “Just a little bit more.” The reality of wealth and possessions under the sun is that we never get enough!

Think about the last possession that you really wanted to have, and that you ultimately either bought or were given. What was it?

Today, does it still have that same appeal to you?

We’ve all experienced this phenomenon with gift-giving to children. What they desperately desire and can’t live without on December 22nd is cast aside by January 10th and they’re already talking about the “next thing.”

40 Douglas Wilson, Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes, (Canon Press, Moscow, ID, 1999), pg. 63.
What’s the solution? Read the following verses:

- Philippians 4:11
- 1 Timothy 6:6-8
- Hebrews 13:5

What is the common theme?

In what way does the writer to the Hebrews tell us that we should be content?

As Charles Swindoll wisely says, “Money can buy us tons of comfort, but not an ounce of contentment.” Wealth and possessions are a poor substitute for the “eternity in man’s heart” that Ecclesiastes 3:11 describes to us. We will always want for more “under the sun”; fulfillment can only be found “beyond the sun.”

Digging Deeper:
There’s a great reminder buried in the middle of Ecclesiastes 6. Read verse 7. What do you think Solomon is saying?

Think about this—you will likely eat tonight. It might be lobster and steak, or it might be ramen noodles. It might be served by a 16 year-old in a uniform through a window, or it might be a candlelight dinner at a fancy restaurant. Will either extreme mean you won’t be hungry tomorrow morning?

Ultimately, we only work and gain wealth for food and sustenance. That’s it. We mustn’t make it more than it is—eternity awaits us!

Application:

- What’s an area in which you find it hard to be content? How could you learn to exercise trust in God in that area?

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41 Charles Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985), pg. 163.
Loving vs. Possessing

One of the fascinating realities of the Bible is that there is *never* a place where possessing wealth—even great wealth—is forbidden. It’s never even looked down upon. While Jesus declared that the “poor” would be blessed, He clearly said the “poor in Spirit” (Matthew 5:3), not income. The issue clearly isn’t wealth—it’s our attitude *towards* wealth.

Read again Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes 5:10. What is clearly the issue?

Look at Paul’s oft-quoted (and oft-misquoted!) words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:10. What is the issue here?

However, is the problem really the love of *money*? Solomon talks about the love of money and wealth. However, look at the following:

- Matthew 10:37. What is the focus of the wrong “love” here?

- John 12:25. What is the focus of the wrong “love” here?

The problem, then, doesn’t seem to be one simply of money. Rather, it’s wrongly ordered love that is really our issue! What are some other things that you could easily find yourself “loving” more than you should?

In 1 Timothy, Paul gives some clear words to the “rich in this present world” that are intended to keep them from loving wrongly. However, as we’ve seen, this principle goes beyond wealth.
• Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19. What does Paul tell the “rich” to do?

• What might that look like with family, self, or any of the other “loves” that you listed on the previous page?

God’s call for us as believers is to have well-ordered loves—a love of Jesus that overwhelms all others. Jesus’ desire is not to be first on your list of loves but, rather, to be the filter through which everything else flows.

Digging Deeper:
This portion of Ecclesiastes is written in what is known as a “chiastic” structure. Without going into a lot of technical detail here, this simply means that the climax, or pinnacle, of Solomon’s argument is found in the center of the passage, in this case, 5:18-20. Read that section.

• Why might this be the “pinnacle” of Solomon’s argument?

• What is the “gift of God” to which Solomon refers? Is it the wealth and possessions, or something else?

• Based on our study, how can someone “enjoy” these “under the sun” blessings?

Application:
• Are your loves in order? Why or why not? How can they get there?

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Couples, take turns reading each verse from Matthew 5:1-12 from *The Message* (text on next page). After reading each verse, stop and discuss. If the reading of this passage reveals an area of weakness, have that individual share it with the group. Accordingly, take time to pray that God would strengthen that person in this area.

In advance of the Family Time, write down a verse from the Matthew 5 passage that you think would be a good match for each child. (Even the little ones can repeat a few words!) Set out a stool in the middle of the room. Leader, read verses 1-2. Then have the children take turns standing on the stool, just like Jesus stood on the mount, and have them declare their assigned verse in a “preacher” voice! Adults can do it too!

Have a small discussion after each verse to help clear up the meaning.

Finally, the kids can write a story or color a picture about the verse that was chosen for them.
Matthew 5:1-12 from The Message:

1-2 When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

3 "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

4 "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5 "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

6 "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

7 "You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

8 "You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

9 "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

10 "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

11-12 "Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.
Solomon begins the second half of this great book with a heart-to-heart conversation with us. He passes on deep wisdom that comes from a hard-lived and hard-learned life: We learn more from death than life, more from solemnity than frivolousness, and more from living in the present than living in the past. Ultimately, Solomon tells us, God has a plan—and we can’t change it!
Fascinatingly Strange Advice

Have you ever been in the situation where you are getting advice from someone that you know has great wisdom, experience, and insight—yet, you can’t understand exactly what they’re getting at? Recently, I heard a story of how a long-time student ministry volunteer, who had logged many years in youth ministry, passed two words of advice on to a brand new Student Ministry Pastor. The two words? “SpongeBob Squarepants.” That was it. Conversation over. WHAT?!”

That’s what Solomon is about to do to us. He sits us down to give us some advice—and then proceeds to say a bunch of stuff that’s hard for us to understand. Let’s see if we can make any sense of it.

Read Ecclesiastes 7:1-13. Then, re-word each section according to the way that you understand it:

• Verse 1

• Verse 2

• Verses 3-4

• Verses 5-6

• Verse 7

• Verse 8

• Verse 9

43 Any similarity to a conversation between a York Alliance member recently commissioned to the Dominican Republic and the new Director for Student Ministries at YAC might be coincidental. Or not. It was explained later that, just like SpongeBob, teenagers can sometimes start out annoying, but, ultimately, they have a lot to teach you about the important things in life. Or something like that. I’m still not sure I completely understand.
Did you get them? Solomon is unpacking for us the value of wisdom, and what it looks like for us to pursue it. The big ideas?

• We learn more from sorrow and death than from the happy things in life.
• Sometimes we talk and joke too much—we should listen and pay attention.
• There were no “good old days”—only memories that are better than reality.
• The only advantage that we can have in this life, which is fully dictated and controlled by God, is wisdom. Pursue it!

Thanks, Solomon.

Digging Deeper:
Solomon repeats himself again and again in Ecclesiastes, giving us a literal model of the cycle of life that he talked about in chapter 1. Ecclesiastes 7:13 and 1:15 are almost identical statements. Read them both.

• What’s different about them?

This is the difference between fatalism and sovereignty—the hope of a good God who is in control of everything, even the difficult things.44

Application:

• Are there aspects of Solomon’s wisdom that challenge the way that your life looks right now? Write below what you could do to change this in your life.

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Gaining an Advantage

Our world is full of those seeking a competitive advantage. Sports are racked with scandals from those who are seeking advantage through illegal substances, or at least those that are outside the rules of the game. Businesses work tirelessly and extensively fund research and development in order to gain some kind of competitive advantage. Even simple daily tasks are full of possibilities for advantage—from stain treatments that help with laundry to lawn treatments that help with weeds. We all want an advantage.

But what about an advantage in life? This has been one of the subtle themes of Ecclesiastes. We looked at it briefly in the “Digging Deeper” section of “The Experiment Itself” study during Week Two. *(If you didn’t complete that, go back and look at it now.)*

In Ecclesiastes 1:3 and 2:11, we again find the Hebrew word “yithron,” translated “gain” or “profit” or “advantage.” Solomon is looking for a way to get some kind of advantage under the sun. In fact, you can find it all of the following verses:

- 1:3
- 2:11
- 2:13
- 3:9
- 5:9
- 5:16
- 7:12
- 10:10
- 10:11

Could you find them all? Interestingly, Ecclesiastes is the only book in the Old Testament where *yithron* is found. Solomon is clearly trying to make a point.

But what’s his point? Look back at all of the usages of *yithron* in the first six chapters. Do you see anything consistent?

It might be hard to pick out, but everywhere that Solomon looks for an advantage for us, it comes to no avail. Yes, light is better than darkness. Yes,
when the king cultivates his field, it’s better for everyone. But when we work for some kind of advantage? No dice. Nothing seems to work. That is, until 7:13. What does Solomon tell us is an advantage that we can have?

Labor alone won’t provide an advantage. However, wisdom can protect us. However, in verse 11, he compares it with something. What is it?

When do we receive the benefit from an inheritance?

“An inheritance is expected at a future date...so wisdom’s benefits are not always realized immediately. One must be patient.”

But finally—an advantage. And through his advice, Solomon has described what wisdom is. The question is: “Will we take it?”

Digging Deeper:
Jesus also talked about gaining an advantage. And like Solomon, His wisdom is not what we might expect. Read Matthew 16:26.

• What does Jesus tell us is not to our advantage?

• How might we “forfeit” our soul?

Application:

• Have you tried to gain an advantage in life that will ultimately not come to fruition? Think about what you invest your life in. Where will your investment ultimately give you the profit you desire?

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At the time of this writing, there are six different books and one video listed on Amazon.com entitled “When [or Why] Bad Things Happen to Good People.” There’s also a t-shirt that boldly declares, “I’m One of Those Bad Things That Happen to Good People,” which is probably not something to advertise...

The most famous of these books is written by Rabbi Harold Kushner, which, when originally published in 1981, shot to the top of the New York Times Bestseller list in the non-fiction category and remained there for many months. Why? It’s a universal question that seems to have no good answers.

In fact, Solomon’s father David asked a similar question again and again in the Psalms, although he typically worked from the other side: Why do good things happen to bad people? Read Psalm 10 and Psalm 73 as examples.

How do both of these Psalms resolve?

This is also one of the great themes of Ecclesiastes. In this passage, 6:10-11 and 7:13 form bookends declaring the same thing. Read both of these.

- In verse 10, who is “one stronger than he?” What is Solomon saying in this verse?

It’s difficult to wrestle with what Solomon is telling us, not just in this passage, but throughout the book. Douglas Wilson summarizes it this way:

“Will a man be able to bend the world in a different direction than the Almighty has? This central doctrine in the book must be allowed to sink deeply into our souls. Is it crooked? Then the Lord God made it so. But why? If He had wanted us to know that, then He would have told us.”

— Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes*, (Canon Press, Moscow, ID, 1999), pg. 73.
Is this a satisfactory explanation? It seems that it’s the only one that we’ll be getting. Paul, in his great exposition to Roman Christians, wrestled with the same truth as it related to God’s sovereign choice—first of Israel, and then of the Gentiles who would ultimately believe in Jesus. Read Romans 9:1-19.

The argument is set—how can God fault those whom He has not predestined? Read 9:20-24. What is God’s answer?

There comes a point where God simply says, “This is the way it is.” Kind of like your dad saying, “Because I said so.” Which is a great parallel! If you grew up in a loving home, why could you ultimately trust your father when that was the best answer you could get to?

Go back one chapter and read Romans 8:28. Then, continue reading from 8:31-39. Why can we trust God’s final answer, even when we don’t understand it or can’t make sense of it?

At the core, we trust in the love that God has for us. We might not fully understand, but the reality is that we can’t “bend it” in another direction anyway. However, in His perfect love, God is working it out for our best.

Application:
• Can you think of situations during which you’ve experienced a difficult time trusting in God’s love? How do you cope with times like that?
This activity has the makings to be rich with opportunity. In advance, pray that the Spirit will pave the way and that hidden problems might come to light during this time. This is about offering wisdom to each other.

Get out your best tea/coffee cups. Make a cup of everyone’s favorite hot drink.

Sit in the living room (Okay, if you have young children, you may not want it to be your BEST cups!) and give each family member an opportunity to share about anything. For example:

- What happened during their day?
- What makes them happy or sad?

This is a special time to allow the Spirit to give you words of wisdom to speak into their lives. The key is to listen carefully. Enjoy each other’s company. Maybe you could even ask them about something that they can help you with!

If you have very young children, give them an activity to do in the room. You will be amazed at how much of the conversation they will pick up!

Couples, use this time to talk about questions, concerns or circumstances of life to which you feel like you are not sure how to respond. Pray together.
Neither righteousness nor wickedness seems to ultimately be the answer. Each of these amount to pursuing joy either through addition (pursuing that which I think will satisfy) or subtraction (removing that which I think will make me look bad before God or others). However, righteousness cannot be found in either one—instead, real righteousness can only be found in substitution. It's only through the sacrifice of Jesus that we can be truly righteous.

Note: Due to the difficulty of this text, these studies will be a bit more instructive and bit less interactive. Please push through, and seek to wrestle with the text. It's a difficult passage, but it contains very important truths for our lives “under the sun”!
Is There a *Wrong* Kind of Righteousness?

In the spring of 1993, a University of Wisconsin professor of psychology, Dr. Frances Rauscher, played 10 minutes of Mozart music for 36 college students while testing their spatial reasoning, and found that it had a somewhat significant *short-term* improvement. She wrote a one-page paper on her findings, noting the extreme limitations of them, and published the paper in a small journal. However, before the journal came out, the Associated Press picked up the story about the so-called “Mozart Effect.” Within a few years, two states (Georgia and Tennessee) decided to use state funds to distribute Mozart CD’s to all newborn babies. About that time, a young stay-at-home mom and former teacher named Julie Aigner-Clark used $5,000 of start-up funds to create “Baby Einstein” DVD’s, based in part on these studies. In 2001, Walt Disney Company purchased the small company for a reported $25 million cash. In October, 2009, Disney announced that it would be giving rebates to those who purchased DVDs with the understanding that it would boost baby intelligence.47

What makes something like that happen? And what does it have to do with Ecclesiastes?? Again, the answer is the same. it’s *yithron* (Hebrew for “gain” or “profit”). Read Ecclesiastes 7:15-18.

- What could Solomon mean that we shouldn’t be *overly* righteous or *overly* wicked?

This is one of the most difficult passages in a very difficult book. However, we can be sure of what Solomon must *not* mean. Read Matthew 5:48.

- What does Jesus say that the standard of righteousness is?

Read Colossians 3:5-9 and James 1:21.

- How are we supposed to handle wickedness?

What, then, is Solomon trying to tell us? It can’t be that we can be *too* righteous or that we should be *a little* wicked. So what is it? “The basic idea [in most Christian literature] is that your behavior, your prayers, and your righteous living

or giving can ensure from God a long life, prosperity, and whatever else you want.” Solomon is effectively saying that righteousness for the sake of \textit{karma} isn’t righteousness at all! In fact, it’s the \textit{wrong kind of righteousness}!

Why did a tiny, insignificant study on 36 college students in Wisconsin cost taxpayers in two states millions of dollars and create a $25 million business deal? Because we are desperate for \textit{yithron}—an advantage.

As we saw last week, God is sovereign. He does what pleases Him. (Psalm 115:3) Righteousness that is engaged for the sake of changing the will of God is the wrong kind of righteousness.

\textbf{Digging Deeper:}
So why be righteous at all? If our righteousness doesn’t affect our standing with God, why even try? In the book of Romans, Paul tackles this question from two different angles.

- According to Romans 6:1-4, why be righteous?

- According to Romans 12:1-2, why be righteous?

The sacrifice of Christ gave us our righteousness freely. In gratitude, our response is to live the Christ-life, not to earn anything, but out of love for Him.

\textbf{Application:}
- Are there areas of your life where you are trying to earn the favor of God?

- Where does your life need to more fully reflect the love of Jesus to you?

\footnote{Jeffrey Meyers, \textit{Ecclesiastes Through New Eyes: A Table in the Mist}, (Athanasius Press, Monroe, LA, 2006), pg. 146.}
Addition, Subtraction, and Substitution

How do we get to God? Or more accurately, what is the way that we should live that qualifies us before God? How do we have “favor” with Him? This is the ancient question, and it has been asked since there have been people to ask it.

This is Solomon’s main concern in the first part of this passage. Read Ecclesiastes 7:14-24.

Over time, the answers have boiled down to two main categories:

- We are made right with God by \textit{addition}, or by things that we add into our lives, or offer to God, in order to please Him. This has most often taken the form of either \textit{moralism} (I do my best to follow a certain set of rules in order to please God) or \textit{karma} (I do good things for others or for God so that He will do good things for me).
- We are made right with God by \textit{subtraction}, or by not doing certain things that we believe don’t please God. This has historically taken the form of \textit{asceticism} (living either an extremely simple or even painful lifestyle through self-denial in order to please God), but more recently has taken the form of \textit{legalism} (abstaining from a variety of different activities and behaviors in order to please God).

Both seem to make sense when seen logically. However, in order to be good solutions, they also must hold up to biblical scrutiny. Do they?

Righteousness by \textit{addition}:

- Read Psalm 51:16-17
- Read Isaiah 64:6
- Read Ecclesiastes 7:15

What do these Scriptures say about gaining right standing with God through my righteous acts or by the things that I offer to Him?

Righteousness by \textit{subtraction}:

- Read Ecclesiastes 7:20
- Read Romans 3:23
- Read Ephesians 2:1-3
What do these Scriptures say about gaining right standing with God through abstaining from sin and living a holy life?

So, according to the Bible, neither addition nor subtraction gives us an adequate answer to our dilemma. What answer does the Bible gives?

- Read Romans 5:8
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Read Titus 3:4-7

What do these Scriptures say about gaining right standing with God?

The Bible doesn’t teach righteousness by addition or subtraction but, rather, by substitution—Jesus’ life given for yours and for mine, that we might have life.

Digging Deeper:
Although the Old Testament law can alternately look like either righteousness by addition (sacrifices, festivals, etc.) or subtraction (abstain from foods, behaviors, etc.), righteousness by grace through faith was God’s plan from the beginning.

- Read Genesis 15:1-6. What gave Abraham righteousness?
- Read Hebrews 11:6. What does this tell us about pleasing God?

Application:

- Where in your life do you try do things in order to please God?
- Where in your life do you abstain from things in order to please God?
Reversing the Curse

Due to the nature of this text, this study will be slightly longer than a typical study and will not include a “Digging Deeper” section.

The last half of this week’s text is arguably the most difficult and least understood text in Ecclesiastes. There are those who see Solomon as misogynist (male chauvinist) in this text, others who see him as suddenly a careless writer, and many who simply skip over this section altogether. Not sure why it’s so tough? Read Ecclesiastes 7:25-29. Can you understand now? Many have read this section and discounted Solomon’s words all together.

However, I do believe that there is a straightforward meaning to the text, and that, in light of the complete Word of God, we can find it. We need to start back in the beginning. Immediately after creation, when all is well with Adam and Eve. Read Genesis 2:25.

Perfect harmony—with one another, and with God. Then, “the fall” happens in Genesis 3. Read the account in verses 1-7.

As God came to Adam and Eve, He pronounced cursing on the two of them and their offspring (that’s us) because of their disobedience. The key portion of this for our study is Genesis 3:16, particularly the second half (in the ESV below):

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

- How does God characterize the relationship between wife and husband after the fall?

That word “desire” in English is the Hebrew word “teshuqah.” It’s not often found in the Old Testament, but it is found just one chapter later in 4:7 within the story of Cain and Abel:

“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”

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51 I am indebted to Matt Chandler at The Village Church in Highland Village, Texas, where I first heard this interpretation. www.thevillagechurch.net
• Based on this verse, how might you paraphrase “your desire will be for your husband”?

A possibility might be that “you will seek to have dominion and power over your husband, and he will equally seek to dominate you.” The idea here is that this relationship, which was originally characterized by harmony, peace and mutual submission, is now characterized by struggle and an ongoing desire for power over one another.


Now, fast forward to this controversial passage of Solomon’s. Read 7:25-29 once again. Several translations interpret the text to say that Solomon is looking for “upright” men and women. However, the text simply says “found out” which would have meant “figured out or comprehended.” It is the same word used in Ecclesiastes 3:11 (“so he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end”).

• How many men in a thousand did Solomon “figure out”?

For anyone who has sought to find someone with whom they could have a deep, heart connection, this rings true—it’s very difficult.

• What did he say about women?

Women, for Solomon, had simply become objects. When you are the most powerful man in the known world, the struggle for power within a marriage (or within 700 marriages) is limited. (If there was a fight, he could just have you exiled!) However, could it be that Solomon could never maintain a deep connection with any of these women because they were simply objects to him? Now, with this in mind, re-read Ecclesiastes 7:25-29.

• What do you think Solomon means?
When we pervert and abuse the marriage relationship, we lose a part of ourselves. We know this because of God’s original proclamation in Genesis 2:18, 21-24. What does God say about man being alone?

Solomon, while he was surrounded by women, was basically alone because he was unable to engage them. This is vital for us to see in this age of rampant sexual promiscuity and pornography—objectifying the opposite sex has devastating effects on the way that we view one another.

However, the story doesn’t end there. Remember the curse pronounced in Genesis 3. Now, look at Ephesians 5:21-33.

• To what does Paul call wives?

• What parallel is given for this relationship?

• To what does Paul call husbands?

• What parallel is given for this relationship?
• What is the overall call of Christians in relationship to one another? (verse 21)

This is the direct opposite of the curse on wives and husbands. Rather than seeking dominion over one another, they are seeking to submit to, and serve, one another! How is this possible?

• Go back to Genesis and read 3:15. To what is God referring?

In Jesus, Genesis 3:15 was fulfilled. This means that, in the Kingdom of God, the curse can be reversed!

Application:
• If you are married, are you submitting to and loving your partner, or seeking dominion over them?

• In what ways are you guilty of objectifying the opposite sex?

• How can you cultivate a healthy, heart relationship with your spouse or with others of the opposite sex?
Week Ten:
Family Time

You will need a basin of soapy water, waterproof marker or paint, and a towel.

Read Genesis 11:1-9. Discuss how silly it was for these people to think that they could reach heaven. Why did they want to do it?

What are you trying to do on your own to be happy or find satisfaction? (For example: buy things, make certain friends, gossip, “stress-eating”, TV, etc.)

For each one you mention, place an “X” on your hand with the markers/paint. Confess and wash!

Read or sing the following verses from “Rock of Ages.”
Then say together the family verse (Joshua 24:14), holding hands. Close in prayer.

Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.
Solomon talks to us about how organizations and allegiances are built and why it’s so vital that we are careful to whom and what we commit ourselves. Our deepest allegiance must be to Jesus and, out of that allegiance alone, we are called to live lives of joy.
Wise Partnerships

Adam Morrison is one of a long line of “winners by association” in professional sports. Morrison was a basketball star at Gonzaga University, and was drafted by the Charlotte Bobcats. He was largely ineffective there, and was ultimately traded to the Los Angeles Lakers. During his time with the Lakers, his average playing time was less than seven minutes a game, and he averaged only 2 points a game. However, in the short time he played for L.A., he won two NBA championships. It pays to be on the right team!

Ecclesiastes is a part of a group of books in the Bible known as “wisdom literature.” Basically, wisdom literature is focused on the practical, everyday challenges we face in life. The book of Job focuses on suffering. The Song of Solomon on sexuality. The Psalms on the practicality of worship. And both the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes focus on a variety of practical life issues.

In Ecclesiastes 7:29, Solomon makes an observation about every individual. What is it?

Although, in our English translation and our culture, it’s difficult to recognize, Solomon moves from the sinfulness of the individual to dealing with groups of sinful individuals. He gives us some very practical advice about how to handle our connection to these organizations.

Read Ecclesiastes 8:2-4. If you think of “the king” as a government or other kind of organization, how would you summarize the principle that Solomon puts forth?

In many ways, Romans 13:1-5 seems to be a parallel passage to this one. What does Paul say about how we should live in relation to authority?
The main distinction between these two passages is that Solomon seems to focus on allegiances that we choose, not simply those that happen to us. Sometimes we willfully choose to align ourselves with an organization, employer, or leader. In an instance like this, we are called to carefully investigate what that allegiance is. Can you think of some instances in your life where this would be the case?

Digging Deeper:
Within this same section of Ecclesiastes, there is another parallel to the book of Romans. However, this time, Solomon and Paul look at the situation from two very different points of view:

- Read Ecclesiastes 8:11. What is Solomon concerned about, and what is his conclusion?

- Now, read Romans 2:2-4. Why does Paul tell us that this same event occurs?

God is gracious to us, but we mustn’t presume upon His grace by continuing in sin! Are there areas that you are presuming upon the kindness of God?

Application:
- Think about the organizations in which you are involved. What is your role in them? Are you a “good” member/employee? How can you reflect the gospel of Jesus most effectively within that place?
The Will of God

We like to be in control. We make lists and plan our schedule so that we know what’s coming. We wear seatbelts, exercise, and eat green vegetables so that we have control of our health and safety. (Why else would we eat green vegetables??) So much of our lives are built around seeking to gain or maintain control.

But despite our best efforts, we’re not in control. Not really. During Weeks 4 and 5 of this study, we looked at the characteristic of God that theologians call “sovereignty”—basically, the idea that God has ultimate control and power over all things and within every situation. For Solomon, this is a point of great frustration that he returns to again and again in Ecclesiastes. This great king who has “control” over an entire kingdom recognizes that, ultimately, God is the one that’s in control.

Read Ecclesiastes 8:7-8. Over what is Solomon recognizing his lack of control?

Many years after Solomon, a very clear picture of this reality would emerge. After Solomon’s reign, the kingdom of Israel was divided—“Israel” was the northern kingdom, and “Judah” was the southern kingdom. In 1 Kings 22, King Ahab was ruling Israel, and King Jehosophat was ruling Judah.

• Read 1 Kings 22:1-12. What do these prophets tell Ahab he should do?

• Now read 1 Kings 22:13-28. What does Micaiah tell Ahab that the Lord is saying to him?

• In the first part of the chapter, who ultimately is at the root of the words of the other prophets? What is God doing?
Now, read the incredible ending of the story in 1 Kings 22:29-40. How did God display His sovereignty?

There is simply no way around the ultimate control of God. There is no such thing as a “premature” death or a “chance” occurrence. All things are within the hands of God.

Digging Deeper:
So if we aren’t ultimately in control, then how do we keep from simply falling into a fatalistic fog? The answer is found in the character of God Himself. Read Psalm 100.
• What does this Psalm tell us about who God is?

• But this short Psalm doesn’t end there! What does it tell us about our response to these characteristics of God?

Application:
• Is it easy or difficult for you to trust God’s control over your life and circumstances? Why?
Eternity… and Confusion Once Again

Some of our most loved figures of speech have their roots in the writings of William Shakespeare. A phrase that many have heard before is found in *Macbeth* as he reflects on the seeming meaninglessness of life: “It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Since God is in control of all of history, it is obviously not a tale told by an idiot. However, Derek Kidner postulates: “What if it is a tale told to an idiot?”\(^{52}\) That seems to be Solomon’s final conclusion. Read Ecclesiastes 8:16-17.

- What does Solomon say is the limitation of wisdom?

Now, within the context of the first half of chapter 3, go back and look at Ecclesiastes 3:11. What does Solomon say is the reason for our limitation?

This, then, is clearly the context for Solomon’s “commendation” to us in 8:15. What does he tell us that we should do?

If wisdom is so severely limited, how can we do this?

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\(^{52}\) Derek Kidner, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Ecclesiastes*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL), pg. 79.
Jeffrey Meyers says it this way: “Solomon gives us an encouragement to receive God’s good gifts without trying to figure everything out.” Solomon gives us similar advice in Proverbs 3:5-6, but with a much more positive slant.

• What does he say that we need to do?

• What are the benefits of doing this?

Digging Deeper:
Of course, paths must sometime “straighten out” over a long period of time. Solomon speaks to that in Ecclesiastes 8:12-13. What does he say will happen in the end?

The eternity that God places in our hearts gives us the recognition that, through our own wisdom, we can’t figure out the universe. However, it’s that same eternity that gives us hope! We recognize that, in the end, all will be made right. Read Paul’s great declaration in Philippians 2:9-11, and take hope!

Application:
• What stands in the way for you of simply enjoying the life that God has given to you without trying to figure everything out?

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What does “allegiance” mean? Have someone look it up in the dictionary. Do you have this kind of loyalty, or devotion to God?

Read Deuteronomy 11:13-14. To be loyal is the same as being faithful.

Take time as a family to write a Pledge of Allegiance to God! You don’t have to use fancy words and it doesn’t have to be long! And use the word “we” instead of “I.” This is a family pledge. Let each family member contribute, no matter how young.
Week Twelve:
Your Best Life Now!

*Ecclesiastes 9:1-10*

Solomon admonishes us, “There’s still time left!!” While we still have life in us, there’s still time for us to pursue joy. However, as Paul affirms to Timothy, godliness paired with contentment is the pathway to our joy. Wherever we are and whatever we’re doing, that’s where we’re at and what we need to do! Within our current situation, we’re called to live life deeply and fully.
Enjoying What We Don’t Worship

One of the startling themes of Ecclesiastes, particularly because of the way that we stereotype the book, is that we are called to “enjoy” life. Solomon’s not at all saying that we should close our eyes to the difficulties and sufferings of life and just pretend that everything is okay. Rather, he recognizes that life is fleeting (*hebel*, or *vapor*) and that, while we’re alive, we still have time to engage the joys of life.

Let’s do a quick survey of the so-called “enjoyment passages.” As you read them, look for things that are common to all of them, and things that are unique in each of them:

- 2:24-26
- 3:12-13
- 5:18-20
- 8:15
- 9:7-10

Commonalities:

Unique aspects:

One of the fascinating aspects of these passages is that Solomon commends to our enjoyment the very things that he says will never satisfy us! (2:1-11) The answer is found in one of the commonalities, particularly in the first three passages. (Due to context, it’s only implied in the passages in chapters 8 and 9.) Can you find the answer in these passages?
The enjoyment of life is a gift that is given to us by God, not something that is inherent to man. Dr. Ryken says it this way: “Both having things and enjoying them are gifts from God... The world that God created is full of many rich gifts, but the power to enjoy them does not lie in the gifts themselves. This is why it is always useless to worship the gifts instead of the Giver.”

Therefore, the “gift” of enjoyment is really the gift of God Himself! What does Solomon say about all of these things in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11?

He doesn’t say that they are inherently bad or worthless, but simply that they themselves do not satisfy. Why? Ecclesiastes 3:11 states that we were created for something greater. Only as we live the life of a worshiper of God alone can we enjoy the “rest” of life—because we no longer need it to ultimately satisfy.

Digging Deeper:
Isaiah 55 works as a kind of parallel passage to these “enjoyment” passages.

- How does Isaiah start this chapter (verses 1-2) and what does it mean?

- What is the proper goal for our “quest?” (verses 6-7)

- Will we know this through our own logic and reasoning, or some other way? (verses 8-11)

Application:
- What are some of the things in your life that you risk loving so much that they ruin your ability to actually enjoy them?

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The Approval of God

Psychologists and counselors all over the world will tell you that there is one overarching, universal longing that drives both our “function” and certainly our “dysfunction”—the desire for approval. Those who never felt the unconditional approval of their parents spend their lives seeking to gain it. Spouses who don’t feel approved close up and disengage. Workers who aren’t approved and appreciated under-perform and are constantly dissatisfied. There’s something powerful in receiving approval.

This is the haunting question for one who acknowledges the existence of God: Does He approve of me? It’s haunting because of the second question, only ever asked out loud by the most courageous: Why would He? If He’s really the omnipotent, holy God of the Universe, what could I possibly do to earn approval?

Read Ecclesiastes 9:7. What startling pronouncement does God make?

Now, look at the first six verses of this chapter. What is the basic theme?

Outward appearance and circumstance do very little to tell us about the approval of God. Solomon has returned to this theme again and again in the last several chapters—those who are righteous are not always rewarded, and those who are evil often seem to be. But Solomon’s answer to this reality is somewhat predictable: that too is hebel... vanity... vapor...

- Re-read verse 6. What ultimately happens to the deeds that have been done “under the sun?”
Immediately following this realization, Solomon declares that God “already approved” of you. How can this be? Jeffrey Meyers summarizes it beautifully:

“The answer is not to look for signs of God’s favor in our common life under the sun, but rather to listen to the Word of God. Do you want to know what God thinks of you? Is that important to you? Well then, let Solomon tell you: God has already approved what you do...Solomon is teaching us justification by faith apart from works, for [works] are all vapor.”55

Solomon tells us that God’s approval has already been given to us as a reason for something. What is it?

How might the approval of God cause that to happen?

Digging Deeper:
This passage represents yet another time where Solomon references a truth that is still a shadow in the Old Testament, but is “answered” or brought into the light in the New Testament. Read Romans 3:21-26.

• What does this passage say is true of us if we are in Jesus?

• How did this reality come about? (verse 25)

Application:
• What difference does living in the approval of God make to our everyday lives? Do you sense the approval of God in your life? Why or why not?

Duty and Contentment

Dreams can be valuable tools for the Kingdom of God. The Bible tells us that without a vision, the people will perish. (Proverbs 29:18) If we get stuck in the moment and can never see past it, we are never able to prepare and strive toward the next thing toward which God is leading us.

However, dreams can also immobilize us. There are times that we’re so focused on what might be “someday” that we’re unable to fully engage today. Before we’re called to dream about what could be, we are charged with being good stewards of the time and opportunity that God has given us in the present.

Solomon addresses this topic directly. Read Ecclesiastes 9:10. What is the word picture that he uses here?

The idea of “what a hand finds to do” indicates that there are things that are within our reach at any given moment. Those things, when they correspond with the activity of God, are our duty to engage.

• Read Ephesians 2:10. What does this tell us that God is actively doing in our lives?

• Now, read James 4:17. What does this mean for us when we clearly see things “in our reach” that God has placed there for us?

And Solomon doesn’t just tell us to do them—he tells us how! According to Ecclesiastes 9:10, when our hands find something to do, how are we to do it?

Read Colossians 3:23. What does Paul add to Solomon’s admonition?
Our dreams must never stop us from engaging the present work that God has given to us, and we are called to engage it with all our strength. The Puritan William Perkins said this: “We must take heed of two damnable sins... The first is idleness, where the duties of our callings...are neglected or omitted. The second is slothfulness, whereby they are performed slackly and carelessly.”

Digging Deeper:
Only when we are content to be who, where and how we are, will be able to engage that which is “within our reach” and to do it effectively. It’s easy for us to believe that, once a certain set of objectives are realized, we will be “content.” However, the Biblical reality is far different than that. Paul wrote extensively and specifically on the subject:

• Read Philippians 4:11-13. What does he say is the secret to contentment?

• Read 1 Timothy 6:6-11. According to Paul, what are the minimum requirements for being content?

In verse 11, Paul makes a list of things that Timothy is to pursue. Can these be realized in the midst of discontent?

• Finally, although Hebrews was likely not written by Paul, read Hebrews 13:5. What is the reason that we are to be content?

Application:
• What are some of the things that are “within your reach” that you need to be engaging right now? What holds you back?

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56 Quoted by Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010), pg. 216.
Week Twelve: Family Time

Time for some fun!

Do you know a family dinner that you have planned for later this week? You could have this dinner as usual... *or*, you can invite Jesus!

Set an extra place at your table for Jesus (between children, if you can—they would *love* to sit next to him... and he would *love* to sit next to them too! You can tell them this!).

Have kids make a special card to put at His place. Try to involve all family members as much as you can. There is no need to go outside of what you usually wear or what place setting you use. Jesus prefers to come and join you just as you normally are.

As you eat, include Jesus in your conversation. Talk about your day with Him.

Once the meal is over, clean up together and then discuss ways your conversation or attitudes changed during this meal as opposed to other meals. *Should* there be a difference?

Read Ephesians 5: 11-21. And don’t forget to say your family verse!
We live in an environment where fools are exalted and the wise are denigrated. However, Solomon’s admonition to us is to trust in the superiority of wisdom over folly despite appearances, and to run from folly. We each must examine our lives in the context of our culture and circumstance, and turn from folly to pursue wisdom. It only takes a small amount of foolishness to ruin everything.
There Once Was a Man...

Solomon now turns his attention very purposefully toward the tension between wisdom and folly in the world, and he does so with an illustration. There’s no way to know whether Solomon is referencing actual events or if this story is purely fictional. However, his point is made either way.

Read the account in Ecclesiastes 9:13-18. What are some of the key aspects of this story?

While it’s not certain whether this was a historical event or not, there are two Biblical stories that have significant parallels.

• Read 2 Kings 18:17 – 19:37. What commonalities do you see?

  What was the wisdom of King Hezekiah?

• Read 2 Samuel 20. What commonalities do you see in this story?

As you look at these three stories, the main point is the same in all three. What is it?
Solomon states the point himself in Ecclesiastes 9:17-18. However, despite the superiority of wisdom, which he has made a case for throughout the book, he throws an unexpected twist into the story which will serve as a topic heading for the next chapter. What happened to the man who saved the city?

Wisdom can often be severely undervalued. “At the heart of human existence there is a ‘madness’ that leads us to value what we should not and to despise what is truly valuable.”

Digging Deeper:
Charles Swindoll makes this observation about Solomon’s story: “The parable is not a moral tale to show what people should do. It is a cautionary tale to show what they are like.”

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.
• According to Paul, what is wisdom and foolishness?

• What is it that allows us to embrace the wisdom of God? (verse 24)

Paul states this same principle again in 2 Corinthians 3:14. How does this change the way that we should pray?

Application:
• In your life, what are some ways that you trust “power” over wisdom? Are there areas in which you trust wisdom over power?

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Exalting the Foolish

Much has been made of the sliding moral values that are evident throughout American society, particularly within the entertainment industry. Song lyrics, movie content, and reality TV all signal moral decay to some degree. While much outrage has done very little to curb this trend, the lines between what’s “good” and “bad” are clearly drawn and re-drawn.

However, Dr. Ryken makes an interesting juxtaposition when commenting on this section of Ecclesiastes: “Most Christians can distinguish good from evil...The trouble, however, is that some of the most important choices in life are not between good and evil but between wisdom and folly.”\(^5^9\) Within the popular culture of the world today, Charlie Sheen and Paris Hilton can share the spotlight—and the wise seem to be nowhere to be found.


- How would you paraphrase verse 1 in modern language?

- What are some of the ways that a “fool” is evident simply walking down a road? What does this say about direction and purpose in our lives?

In Solomon’s time, the social position of a person was evidenced in part by where people sat and how people travelled. With this in mind, what is he saying in verses 5-7?

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What are some examples in our day of this same thing happening?

There’s something in us as people that makes us “exalt” foolishness and negate wisdom. However, even with this in mind, Solomon writes Ecclesiastes 9:16. Wisdom, while it has its limitations, is still better than the alternative.

**Digging Deeper:**
Jesus’ life portrays many examples of the wisdom of this world being foolishness, and that foolishness being exalted. Of course, the greatest of these was the cross, but nearly every miracle had an aspect of this dynamic. Read Mark 3:1-6.

- What is the foolishness that is exalted in this story?

- What wisdom did Jesus display, and how did the Pharisees respond?

**Application:**
- What are some ways that you, consciously or unconsciously, exalt folly over wisdom in your life?

- What are some of the situations in your life when you need to choose wisdom over folly?
Pictures that Teach

If you think back to some of the most impactful lessons that you’ve learned in your life, it’s quite unlikely that they’ve come from a lecture or from reading text on a page. For most of us, we’re impacted the most by object lessons and illustrations (word pictures—interesting term!), and when those really land, the lesson itself will also sink in.

In the middle of chapter 10, Solomon begins to teach using proverbs. However, these proverbs each have a vivid picture embedded in them. Read Ecclesiastes 10:8-11.

• What are the five pictures that Solomon gives us?

Through these pictures, Solomon is teaching us a series of lessons. The first two verses give a straightforward lesson about the uncertainty and danger of everyday activity. There are times when bad things simply happen—they are not punishment for bad behavior, they aren’t the result of foolishness, and they cannot be avoided by wisdom. Solomon then moves on to a more detailed view of the last image in verse 10.

• How would you summarize his message in verse 10?

• Now, read verse 11. What is his message here?

• Don’t these two messages contradict one another?

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60 Tremper Longman, *NICOT: Ecclesiastes*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI), pg. 244.
The question here continues to be one of wisdom. There is a time for taking your time to work smarter, not harder. However, sometimes we delay too long, and we get “bitten.” Dr. Ryken says it this way: “How sharp is your blade? Are you hacking away at life like a fool or staying on the sharp edge of wisdom? Living wisely may take more time at the beginning, but it saves time in the long run...[but] foolish delay will come back to bite you.”61

Digging Deeper:
Of course, Jesus is known for giving word pictures that teach. Again and again, He would teach in parables that communicated deep truths with simple images. In Week 3 of this study, we looked at one of Jesus’ images that contrasts the wise and foolish, and we saw that difficulty came to both of them. Now, let’s look at how wisdom helps us to weather difficulty:

• Read Matthew 7:24-27. What is the image that is used?

• According to Jesus, what does it take to be wise?

• In contrast, what do the foolish do?

• Practically, what might this look like in our day-to-day lives? For instance, what are some aspects of Jesus’ teaching that we can either obey or not and, should difficulty come, what might be the impact of those decisions?

Application:

• Do you tend to rush ahead without preparing properly, or do you tend to delay things that you could be engaging?

61 Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010), pg. 239.
Week Thirteen:
Family Time

With bags of marshmallows (large for smaller children, small for older children and adults) and toothpicks, have everyone build a house as big as they want!

When everyone is finished, do the “wind” test. Take turns fanning each house with magazines or papers. See if it stays up, or falls. *(Don’t tell them about this part until they are finished, and make sure your house falls down too. It’s for the cause!)*

Read Luke 6:48 and 49. Building the marshmallow houses was tricky. If there was one toothpick too few, the house couldn’t stand the wind. You have to have a good foundation.

How are the members of your family doing with choices? Ask the kids what choices they face *(friends, games, reading, TV, etc.)*. Have they made bad choices lately? What happened?

Leader of the house, pray Ephesians 1:17-19 over each child. Couples, search your hearts. Ask the Spirit to reveal any wicked way in you. Spend time in silence together. Is your house built on a solid foundation with the fortress surrounding you, or is there a “leak?” Pray!
Our lives and our resources are given to us to steward. Solomon calls us to invest our lives wisely, but to do it generously. Whether we are young or old, we are called to invest while we still have life in us, and to trust God to use our investment for His Kingdom. It’s easy for us to get paralyzed by the fear of the unknown, but Solomon’s admonition to us is to engage fully and deeply.
Are you a risk-taker? How do you view your life—as a resource to be protected, or an opportunity to be explored? Do words and phrases like “passionate,” “sold-out,” “totally committed,” “all in,” and the dreaded one... “liberal”—do they apply to you, or only to the crazy guy down the street? *(I’m speaking of lifestyle, of course, not political affiliation. Calm down!)*

Commentators note a significant change in tone as Solomon moves into chapter 11. “Caution had its place [in chapter 10]; now it must give way to enterprise... If [the chance involved in life] can be a paralyzing thought, it can also be a spur to action: for if there are risks in everything, it is better to fail in launching out than in hugging one’s resources to oneself.”

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-8. While there’s certainly some poetry and imagery that may be difficult to understand at the first reading, can you come up with a summary of what Solomon is saying in these eight verses?

Solomon recognized that life is uncertain at best, and that we are called to be faithful stewards of all that we have. But he also recognized that we can trust God enough to live *aggressive* lives for the sake of the Kingdom, and trust God’s protection and provision for us!

Jesus Himself taught similarly:

- Read John 12:24-25. How does this teaching relate to Solomon’s?

Jesus clearly isn’t talking only about a literal loss of life. What kinds of things might we need to be willing to “lose” in order to gain life?

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But Jesus doesn’t end there. Losing one’s life in a figurative way is a thing of degrees, not of a whole. Literal death is immediate and complete; figurative death takes place progressively, over a period of time. However, Jesus encouraged us to be “sold-out” and “all in” as we give our life away!

- Read Matthew 7:2. What does Jesus promise to those who will give their lives away for others and for the Kingdom?

Solomon, after a lifetime of amassing and acquiring, recognizes that it’s only while we have life that we can give of ourselves. His call to us is to jump in, liberally, with faith in God’s provision—now!

Digging Deeper:
We are quick to add: “He’s not just talking about our money.” This is a very American way of trying to keep the truth as inoffensive as possible—and the Bible engages no such tactic. It’s not “just” our money—but this absolutely includes our money, and, when it doesn’t, we have to question the reality of the rest of it!

Listen to Paul’s words:
Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-11.

- How does Paul command us to “sow” in our giving?

- How might you summarize the promise he makes to those who will do this?

Application:

- In what ways do you give yourself away generously? In what ways do you tend to protect rather than release?
Supplied by God’s Providence

The reality for almost all of us is that a multitude of the choices we make in life are driven by money. Many of us wish this wasn’t the reality, but things like how we spend our time, the hours that we work at our job, the activities in which we engage during our free time, etc. all have their root in money. Of course, the way that we give our lives away to others is no exception—whether that giving is in literal money or in time and energy.

But how would that change if you were Bill Gates’ only child, and if he trusted you completely and you had open access to his financial wherewithal. It’s hard to even adequately imagine the situation—would we be *more or less* driven by money? One thing is for certain: as our lives currently stand, the issue would never be whether we would have *enough*!

Our concern with radical acts of giving are all rooted in *limited supply*. Time, money, and energy—all are finite. Once expended, they are gone. The prospect of this can be paralyzing for us! To illustrate this, Solomon gives us the picture of a farmer in his fields in Ecclesiastes 11:3-4.

- What concern does the farmer have?
- What does Solomon observe to be the final result of that practice?

There is always a good excuse for delay! However, Solomon wisely observes that if we constantly delay, we’ll never actually engage. Therefore, we’ll never sow, and therefore, we’ll never reap.

“Rather than watching the wind and the clouds, imagining all the difficulties and waiting for better circumstances, we should try and do what we can with whatever God has given us in life. Pursue the dream you believe that God has given for your calling in life. Get involved in ministry. Show mercy to someone in need. Start a friendship with a neighbor, and pray that God will use that relationship to lead your neighbor to Christ.”

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The teachings of Jesus incredibly parallel Solomon’s words. Consider the following by reading the Ecclesiastes verses, and then the words of Jesus:

- Ecclesiastes 11:2 / Luke 12:15-21
- Ecclesiastes 11:3-4 / Matthew 25:14-30
- Ecclesiastes 11:6 / Matthew 6:19-21 and Matthew 13:3-9

These are just a few of the many parallels. Can you think of others?

**Digging Deeper:**
The epistles also advocate immediacy to our living and our giving. While there are numerous examples\(^6\), a clear one is found in the book of James. Read James 4:13-17.

- How does James say that we are to treat our plans for “tomorrow”?

- In verse 17, that we looked at a few weeks ago, how does he define sin?

- Why might this definition appear after verses 13-16?

**Application:**
- What has God put in your heart to do that you are putting off until the “right time”?

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\(^6\) For examples, look at Ephesians 5:16, 2 Timothy 4:2, and 2 Corinthians 8:2 and 9:6.
The Wind and the Spirit

One of my very favorite things to watch are the giant electricity-generating windmills, particularly large wind “farms” where there are dozens of them all in the same place. For me, they are simply a fascinating sight! (I know, it’s strange... that’s just how I am!) I think part of the draw is that these incredibly large objects, which tower over their surroundings, are moved by an unseen but powerful force. The wind, while being harnessed by windmills for the generation of power, is not itself generated, predicted, or controlled. It simply is!

In both Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, and Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for “wind” and the word for “spirit” are the same. Commentators note that both Solomon and Jesus make good use of that fact.65

Look at the way that Solomon parallels the two in Ecclesiastes 11:4-5:

- What are some of the characteristics of “wind” that Solomon seems to parallel with the spirit?

The unknown, uncertain, and mysterious are an obvious part of this parallel. The sovereignty of God is once again on display. Now, look at Jesus’ use of these parallel images:

- Paying particular attention to vs. 6-8, read John 3:1-15. What parallels is Jesus making between the wind and the spirit in this passage?

- How does being “born of the Spirit” parallel these images?

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Now, put this in the context of the overall theme of Ecclesiastes 11. What is Solomon telling us about the way that our lives should be spent?

There will always be an uncertainty that comes with giving ourselves away. When bread is “cast upon the waters,” we can’t determine its direction or its ultimate destination. There will always be the question of whether we can “afford” to be generous. Solomon calls us to be wise—but not to unnecessarily delay!

Digging Deeper:
Within the John 3 passage that we studied, Jesus makes an interesting observation about the wind as He relates it to the Spirit in verse 8. Can you find it?

The wind is *evidenced* by something—in this case, its sound. But what is the evidence of the Spirit? Much of Paul’s writings deal with that, but the clearest summary is the most famous: read Galatians 5:16-24.

• What is the evidence of the Spirit according to Paul?

Application:
• Are you spending your life according to the reality of the Spirit, or are you too reliant on your own wisdom? Give some examples.

• Do you see evidences of the Spirit in your life? What are they?
Week Fourteen: Family Time

Have the family sit together and talk about a family activity you can do together that would be totally sacrificial, getting nothing in return.

Challenge them to choose something that would be specifically for those who don’t know Jesus. Some ideas are: hygiene packets for the York Rescue Mission (using allowance money), making cards of hope for New Life for Girls and deliver them, having a special prayer time for YAC missionaries, writing and delivering notes of encouragement to the teachers at the Logos Academy, taking a prayer walk in your neighborhood...add a spark by taking along brownies and sharing them with anyone you see, even in January!

God will do amazing things!

Before you perform your choice, remind your family of Philippians 4:13. You can do all things through Christ who gives you strength.

Don’t forget to say your family verse after dinner!
We are called to enjoy our youth, remember our Creator, and pursue godliness all of the days of our lives. We can’t wait until the end of life, for no one knows when that will be and when our capacity will decline. As it does, if we have lived for God throughout our lives, we will grow old with Him as well.
God Remembers…

What does it mean to remember something or someone? We tend to use the word “remember” in a nostalgic sense, fondly recalling personalities and events from our past. There are events from my growing up years that I remember with great joy—and others with less joy! And the same is true of my college years, of early years of marriage, and of the lives of our children. However, it’s rare that these “remembrances” have a profound effect on my life as it currently stands, and on the decisions that I’m presently making. Rather, they represent places in my mind that bring joy as I recall a time that is now past.

Charles Swindoll helpfully notes that this is not the primary Biblical definition of the word “remember.” “This Hebrew word translated ‘remember’ is used somewhat frequently in the Old Testament in a most insightful manner…it means ‘to act decisively on behalf of someone.’”

An Old Testament story that clearly illustrates this is found in 1 Samuel 1. Read verses 1-20, noting “remember” in verse 19.

• What did it mean for the Lord to “remember” Hannah?

• Think about how we view “remember.” How is that different?

Armed with this reality, read Ecclesiastes 12:1. How would you now paraphrase this verse?

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66 Charles Swindoll, Living on the Ragged Edge, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985), pg. 342.
Swindoll says it this way: “[To] ‘remember your Creator when you are young’ means to act decisively on behalf of the living God. This means that we realize He is the one essential ingredient we need for a truly happy lifestyle.”

Now, read Ecclesiastes 11:9-10. These verses are also Solomon’s admonition for the days of our youth. Particularly, how does verse 9 relate to 12:1?

We often see “judgment” as a scary prospect. It’s not that it isn’t a scary prospect, but it’s also a hopeful one! For us, the reality of judgment means that everything we do actually matters. Nothing is throwaway. In that sense, nothing is meaningless.

Digging Deeper:
In Ephesians 1-3, Paul writes a fascinating treatise on the work of Jesus in our lives. Within that entire section, there is only one action verb that is directed towards us as believers—in other words, only one thing that we are called to do. Read Ephesians 2:11-22.

• What is the action verb? (Found in verses 11 and 12)

• Based on what we know of the Biblical meaning of the word “remember”, what is God actually calling us to do as believers?

Application:
• What is the difference between “acting” and “acting decisively” on behalf of someone? How do you need to act decisively towards God?

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67 Ibid.
Removing Vexation

I turned 36 this summer. The average life expectancy of a North American male is still 78, and so I haven’t quite reached the halfway point, at least as it relates to averages. However (though I can’t speak for post-36), in the last several years I’ve noticed something: Weight comes on easier than it comes off. I know this isn’t a big surprise to most of you but, for me, it’s come as somewhat of a shock. While my weight has fluctuated over years, gaining and losing have always happened with relative ease. Well, no more!

The discerning reader is now asking: what does that have to do with anything at all, let alone Ecclesiastes 11 and 12? Let me see if I can bridge the gap. First, turn to Ecclesiastes 11:10 and read it in whatever translation you use for study.

Now, look at these two literal translations of the verse:

• “So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.” (NASB)
• “Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.” (ESV)

I’ve included both translations because, while the ESV is the most accurate, the NASB defines “vexation” for us, which is a combination of grief and anger.

Why would Solomon call us to put away grief and anger from our hearts while we’re young?

Now, look at one final translation, the “Amplified Bible”, which uses many additional words to attempt to capture the fullness of the original:

• “Therefore remove [the lusts that end in] sorrow and vexation from your heart and mind and put away evil from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity [transitory, idle, empty, and devoid of truth].”

Like excess weight, the lusts that end in sorrow and the evil in our bodies simply cause more and more difficulty as we age. What are some of the “lusts” of youth that can create difficulty as we age? (Some may be overtly sinful, others not.)
Solomon’s concern for us is that we deal with our hearts in the present, not at some point in the future. Paul gives similar advice in Colossians 3:1-10.

- Why should our behavior change?

- While Paul isn’t explicit, what seems to be the timetable for this change?

Our old life has died. Therefore, we should put to death the behaviors that weigh us down. As we allow such behavior, attitudes, and strongholds to remain intact, they are progressively more difficult to “lose” and, consequently, they cause more and more damage. We need to deal with them while we’re young—in the faith.

Digging Deeper:
If you continue reading in Colossians 3, Paul will give us the “how,” not simply the “what.” Read Colossians 3:11-17.

- What are some of the things that Paul says we should do as children of God and as those who are dead to sin?

- In verse 16, Paul gives a progression of sorts. Break down that verse phrase by phrase, and list the flow that Paul gives us.

Application:

- In your life, what areas of “vexation” and “pain” need to be dealt with now?
The Autumn Investment

Perhaps the most poetically beautiful section of Ecclesiastes after 3:1-11 is found in the first eight verses of chapter 12. Solomon uses a barrage of images to describe the aging process and the painful realities of growing old.

One of the realities of aging is that the feeling of “usefulness” fades as energy and the ability to freely travel fades. However, both historically and biblically, this is not to be the reality! For today’s study, I’d simply like us to consider several historical examples of older folks being quite “useful”, and then consider Paul’s admonition to older men and women:

The late Canon C.H. Nash, who founded the Melbourne Bible Institute and trained a thousand young men and women for Christian service, retired from his principalship at the age of seventy. At eighty, he received assurance from the Lord that a further fruitful ministry of ten years lay ahead of him. That assurance was abundantly fulfilled. During those years he was uniquely blessed in a ministry of Bible teaching to key groups of clergy and laymen—probably the more fruitful years of his life. When he was nearly ninety, the author [J. Oswald Sanders] observed him completing the reading of volume six of Toynbee’s monumental history as a mental exercise...

Mr. Benjamin Ririe retired as a missionary of the China Inland Mission when he reached the age of seventy. When he was eighty he decided to learn New Testament Greek... Mr. Ririe became proficient in reading the Greek New Testament [in his eighties]. At ninety, he attended a refresher course in New Testament Greek in a seminary. When he was a hundred years old, he was present at a meeting at which the author [Sanders] was speaking. In his pocket was a small well-worn Greek lexicon which he used to brush up on his Greek while traveling by public transport!

Four major poets who lived to be over eighty years of age did more work in the last decade of their lives than they did between ages twenty and thirty. William Gladstone took up a new language when he was seventy, and at eighty-three he became the Prime Minister of Great Britain—for the fourth time... Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote Crossing the Bar when he was eighty. John Wesley was eighty-eight and still preaching daily with eminent success, eloquent power, and diminished popularity. At eighty-eight! Every day! Michaelangelo painted his world-famous The Last Judgment when he was sixty-six.68

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68 All taken from J. Oswald Sanders, Robust in Faith, quoted in Charles Swindoll, Living on the Ragged Edge, (Word, Waco, TX, 1985), pg. 321-322.
If you consider yourself “older” or “aging”, what do you think that you couldn’t possibly do for the Kingdom?

Just as importantly, if you consider yourself “young” or “in your prime”, in what ways do you discount the abilities and contributions of the generation ahead of you?

Digging Deeper:
Paul is very clear that the older men and women of faith have responsibility as long as they have life. Read Titus 2:1-8.

• What are older men and women to do in the Body of Christ?

• Look for action verbs that have “older men (or women)” as their subject. How are they supposed to do this?

Application:
• Are you connected deeply to another generation so that the training, teaching and modeling commanded in Titus is happening in your life?

• What are some practical steps that you need to take in your life to value those of another generation, whether older or younger?
This will be a beautiful family time! Invite family members representing all age groups to a meal. Substitute close friends if relatives live too far away. Enjoy fellowship while you eat.

Go to the living room and have the oldest and the youngest light three candles to represent the trinity. Place the candles in the center of the room.

Follow this with singing hymns and worship songs. Have the host of the house read Psalm 78:1-8.

Now, starting with youngest and ending with oldest, have each person share what Jesus means to him/her. Spend time praying prayers of thanksgiving for one another.

Hold hands and say the family verse. *You may need to teach it to your invited guests first!* 
As Solomon reaches the conclusion of this great book, he gives us a summary statement on his hard-lived and hard-learned life: fear God. At the root of all of living is the realization that God is sovereign, and that God will judge all that we do. Our lives, when lived for others or ourselves, are like vapor—they disappear. However, our souls pass from under the sun to beyond the sun, and we must live with eternity in mind.
Teachings to “Goad” Us

As he reaches the end of his discourse, Solomon terms his teachings, and all the words of the wise, “goads”. Of course, for most of us, that’s not a term that we’re familiar with. A “goad” is a “pointed stick that a shepherd or herdsman uses to jolt the sheep or cattle to keep them from falling off a cliff or running into some other hazard. Goads are painful, but necessary.”

Derek Kidner slyly calls them “teachings with a point.”

Read Solomon’s description of this book in Ecclesiastes 12:11.

Think back over some of the major themes in Ecclesiastes. What are some of the teachings of this wise and experienced king that stick out to you?

Ecclesiastes is part of the Word of God. Paul tells Timothy that it is “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16) How should your life be adjusted around these “nails firmly fixed?”

However, we tend to not be satisfied with this wisdom. What does Ecclesiastes 12:12 infer that we will constantly desire to do?

In C.S. Lewis’ classic work on the character of men and women and eternity, The Great Divorce, there is a scene that depicts this battle between trusting in wisdom and continually searching for more of it. A “White Spirit” invites this “seeker” into heaven:

“I can promise you...no scope for your talents: only forgiveness for having perverted them. Not atmosphere of inquiry, for I will bring you to the land not of questions but of answers and you shall see the face of God.”

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70 Derek Kidner, The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Ecclesiastes, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL), pg. 105.
“Ah, but we must all interpret those beautiful words in our own way! For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through your mind, must it not?...”

“Listen!” said the White Spirit. “Once you were a child. Once you knew what inquiry was for. There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you had found them. Become that child again, even now.”

“Ah, but when I became a man I put away childish things.”71

Our temptation is to always search for more, to interpret again, and to keep our mind and options open. However, Solomon’s words to use in the end are that wisdom has been carefully dispensed to us. We should listen.

Digging Deeper:
From the very beginning, we’ve made the case that Ecclesiastes is a book about worship. (See the first paragraph of the Introduction) In the book of Romans, Paul builds his case for the sinfulness of mankind around the basis of worship as well. Read Romans 1:18-23.

• Who or what does Paul say that we should worship?

• What does he maintain that we do instead?

Solomon affirms through careful reasoning that there is nothing “under the sun” that can bear the weight of our worship. Rather, the God who is beyond the sun is the only One worthy of worship—and it is He alone that we should fear.

Application:
• What is one aspect of Solomon’s teaching that needs to “goad” you toward a different way of living?

Seeing is Fearing

Sometimes it takes experience for reality to truly sink in. As a cyclist, I’ve watched many stages of the great cycling races like the “Tour de France” or the “Giro d’Italia.” While I always admired the strength and endurance of these athletes, there was always something in the back of my mind that said, “What if I were there? Could I do that?” Then, in May 2009, I travelled to Italy and rode the Giro d’Italia course during the centennial running of the race. I climbed the mountains. I pushed through the flats. I logged some (not all!) of the mileage. And I realized... I absolutely can’t do that!

We’ve looked earlier in this study at an example of one who saw the glory of God. (Week 7, The Proverbial Fear of the Lord, “Digging Deeper”) We often hear people make bold declarations of what they will do when they see God face to face: “I’m gonna ask Him...” “I’m gonna tell Him...” etc.

But the experience of those who have seen His glory tell us otherwise. Read the following passages:

- Exodus 3:1-6
- Exodus 33:18-23
- Isaiah 6:1-8
- Ezekiel 1
- Revelation 1:9-17

What are some of the consistent actions of those that see the glory of God?

Now, read Solomon’s conclusion in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

- What actions does he prescribe to us?

Fear, in this context, is not to be a debilitating terror but, at the same time, we can’t remove some element of terror from it. God is not safe. The power and wisdom and beauty and transcendence of God should terrify us to some degree.
As Jeffrey Meyers states, “It is important to realize that fear means fear...you may not evacuate the word ‘fear’ of the element of terror, trepidation, alarm, or dread.”

Why should we fear? Isaiah makes it clear in Isaiah 55:8-11. Read this passage.
• How would you describe this characteristic of God?

Fear, at the root, is about a loss of control. As we’ll see, it doesn’t have to be a negative emotion, but it is a deep realization that, once we see Him, we can no longer be in charge. His ways are not our ways.

Digging Deeper:
Yet, the fear of the Lord does not create a “flee” response! Each of the men who encountered the glory of God face to face stuck around, albeit on their faces. Why is that? Look at Psalm 40:1-3.
• In verse 3, what is the relational progression that “many” will have with God?

• As you read the rest of the Psalm, why is David so convinced that “seeing” and “fearing” will generate “trusting?”

Application:
• In what ways does your life show a “fear” of the Lord? What response does that fear generate in you? Write a prayer to God about that.

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Everything Matters

The last verse of this great book seems to leave us on an ominous note: “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Are you nervous yet? Except for Jesus, there’s no one that has ever lived that shouldn’t be nervous at that statement!

However, is that the response that Solomon is intending to evoke? While there is, and to some degree should be some fear in that statement, it also brings great hope! Why? Think of the most oft-repeated phrase in Ecclesiastes. What is it?

Whether the translation is “meaningless,” “vanity” or “vapor,” the reality is the same: It’s disappearing and, once it’s gone, it didn’t really matter anyway. However, Solomon’s final word is distinct from that. While our lives might feel void of meaning and substance, to whom does Solomon say they matter?

While the following quote is very long, Dr. Ryken captures perfectly the heart of Solomon’s final declaration:

Why does Ecclesiastes tell us about the final judgment here? Because it means that everything matters... If there is no God, and therefore no final judgment, then it is hard to see how anything we do really matters. But if there is a God who will judge the world, then everything matters... At the final judgment, it will matter how we used our time, whether we wasted it on foolish pleasures or worked hard for the Lord. It will matter what we did with our money, whether we spent it on ourselves or invested it in the eternal kingdom. It will matter what we did with our bodies—what our eyes saw, our hands touched, and our mouths spoke. Whether we obeyed our father and mother will matter; so will the look we gave them and the little comment we made as we were walking away. What we did for a two-year-old will matter—the way we made time for her and got down on her level. What we said about someone else’s performance will matter—the sarcastic remark or the word of genuine praise. The proud boast and the self-less sacrifice will matter. The household task and homework assignment will matter. The cup of water, the tear of compassion, the word of testimony—all of it matters.”

The immediate question is, then: doesn’t this push us back to a righteousness by works? The answer, though a bit complicated, lies in our understanding of

73 Philip Ryken, Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2010), pg. 281.
judgment, and in particular, the final judgment. There are those who believe that there will be multiple judgments and those who believe there will be one judgment with multiple components. The end result of both is the same: believers and unbelievers will be judged. As believers, we will be *eternally* judged based on the perfect work of Jesus on the cross. However, there will also be a degree of reward for believers.

- Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. What do these passages say about the eternal reward for believers?

Of course, there are many unanswered questions about this. Our worldly viewpoint makes the dual reality of degrees of reward in heaven mutually exclusive from the joy of *each person* in heaven being full and complete. However, the overarching truth, and the one Solomon drives home to us, is that in the end, everything really does matter.

**Digging Deeper:**

If there are degrees of heavenly reward, how should that affect the way that we live? Our initial Western mindset is a competition to see who gets the most! However, Paul speaks a truth that challenges that way of thinking.

- Read Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:26-27. What does Paul say about us as parts of the body of Christ?

- Since that is true, how does that change the way that we see Hebrews 10:24-25? As we anticipate heavenly reward, why should we engage in this?

**Application:**

- Are there areas of your life that you feel like either don’t matter or are somehow exempt from God’s judgment?

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Week Sixteen:
Family Time

Go back to week 7. If you passed by this activity, this is a good time to do it. If you have done it, here is an activity for you:

Turn off as many lights in the house as you can, while leaving enough to read. Have the head of the household read Revelation 4. As possible, background music would be a great addition.

The entire family can repeat “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (You can write these on papers for everyone ahead of time.)

Quietly, sing the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” acapella, as many verses as you feel the young ones can handle (lyrics on next page).

Head of the house, prepare something to tell your family...something from your heart that you want them to remember. This is the time!

Close in prayer. Hold hands and say, once more, the family verse. AMEN!
Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who was, and is, and evermore shall be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in pow’r, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy Name,
in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, holy, holy; merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!
And so, the study of this great book ends. Like all great poetic literature, Ecclesiastes is not a book to simply be analyzed—it’s to be savored and soaked in. As you conclude your study, I would encourage you to return to the book as a whole a few more times... and maybe again and again throughout life. The teacher “sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth....” As such, they should not be quickly read, processed, and moved beyond.

I want to leave you with an incredible poem from George Herbert, which Derek Kidner uses to close his great commentary:

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessing standing by;
Let us (said He) pour on him all we can;
Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, the wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all His treasure,
Rest, in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said He)
Bestow this jewel also on My creature,
He would adore My gifts instead of Me,
And rest in nature, not the God of nature:
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.\(^{75}\)

\(^{75}\) Quoted in Derek Kidner, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Ecclesiastes*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL), pgs. 109-110.
This study is one that was the fruit of much wrestling. Studying Hebrew poetry is significantly different than Greek prose. However, as is always true in the study of the Word, it has been deeply rewarding. I pray that the same has been true for you as the reader.

I want to personally thank so many of you who offer feedback of various kinds as you study. Please keep sending it to me and talking to me—your feedback is so helpful in formulating changes and making sure these study guides actually communicate Truth. You’re always welcome to talk with me in person, but you can also direct all thoughts, comments, and questions about the study guide or anything else to bkannel@yorkalliance.org.

Writing projects of any size and kind are not solo endeavors. The staff and Elders at York Alliance have continued to encourage me to write and have given me the time and margin to work. Many thanks to Tim Shuey, Kimberly Cole, and Wendy Coons my incredible editors and fact-checkers! Thanks for helping me say what I’m trying to say without letting me completely wreck the English language! A huge thank you to Amy Thornton, who did all of the graphic design for the cover. Amy, your hidden talents continually amaze me! Thanks also to Robin Lechevalier for applying her abundant gifting to “Family Time” again this time around. All of us who engage these are better for it! And, of course, a huge thank you to Amanda, Tia, Ethan, Josiah, and Micah for their patience through the process, and their love and encouragement for me to do the things that God has called me to. I love you all and I’m thankful we get to pursue Jesus together!

Lastly, I enjoy the practice of thanking the artists and bands that have provided the soundtrack for the writing experience. While there were a few—the Decemberists, The Civil Wars, Fleet Foxes, Audrey Assad, Sara Groves, Derek Webb—the majority of the soundtrack was a new artist to me named Josh Garrels. WOW. His new album (Love and War and The Sea In Between) is free at www.joshgarrels.com. For real—get it. Totally blew my mind, and I had to get all the other albums as well. Thanks, Josh.
As a treatise on philosophy, Ecclesiastes stands unparalleled.

Peter Kreeft calls it “the greatest of all books of philosophy.”

Herman Melville, the great agnostic novelist, says that “the truest of all books is Ecclesiastes.”

And Thomas Wolfe declares, “I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one, I could only say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.”

However, beyond simple philosophy, Ecclesiastes presents timeless wisdom for life. King Solomon uses all of his wisdom, all of his resources, and all of his power to conduct a grand experiment: Where can one find meaning “under the sun?” His findings are summarized in the second verse of the opening chapter: “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” And thus begins a fourteen-chapter treatise on life: how we should and shouldn’t live; what is and isn’t worth our time and effort; and ultimately, where meaning can truly be found.

Ecclesiastes is poetic wisdom literature. Upon the initial reading, it can frustrate and even confuse. However, as you engage this study, you will each see how this ancient wisdom is profoundly applicable to 21st century living. The word *hebel*, translated “vanity” or “meaningless” in most English Bibles, literally means “vapor,” “breath,” or “smoke.” Solomon repeats the word 38 times in the book, emphasizing to us that all that we pursue under the sun is as elusive as trying to grab hold of a frozen exhale on a wintry morning; and will be gone just as fast. Ultimate meaning will never be found under the sun. For that, you must go beyond the sun.