

## **Study 1: No God, no gain!**

Important words:

Qoheleth: The Preacher or Teacher

The one addressing the assembly (ekklesia) of God's people

Hebel: Hebrew literally means vapour or mist

Metaphor for that which is fleeting, futile and therefore meaningless

Under the sun: life in this world without reference to God

### **Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

The question

The evidence

The conclusion

So, how to live?

Read through the following sections of Ecclesiastes and answer the questions below.

Group 1: Chapters 1 & 2

Group 2: Chapters 3-5

Group 3: Chapters 6-8

Group 4: Chapters 9-12

1. What does the Preacher turn his attention to?
2. What frustrates him?
3. Is there anything good or satisfying?

In your groups, discuss the following questions:

1. What makes everything futile under the sun?
2. Is the world of Ecclesiastes a Godless world?
3. ***Ecclesiastes 1:9 observes there is nothing new under the sun. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Revelation 21:1,5. Where is the hope of something new to be found?***
4. ***Read Luke 12:15-21, and 1 Corinthians 15:58. How can we help each other to toil for that which will last?***

## **Study 2: Wisdom, pleasure and work – what are they good for?**

### **Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18**

1. What project does the Preacher apply himself to?(v13,17)
2. What conclusions does he reach?
3. How do the proverbs (v15,18) sum up the futility of wisdom?

### **Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11**

4. What project does the Preacher try next?
5. What is his conclusion?
6. Do you think he could have done any more in his pursuit of pleasure?
7. ***Do you know people who live only for the pursuit of pleasure? Why do people do this?***
8. Why do you think the Preacher finds it ultimately futile?
9. Did he find any reward?

**Read Ecclesiastes 2:12-23**

10. In what way is wisdom better than folly?

11. What realisation causes the Preacher to despair? (v16)

***12. Have you seen examples of people who have spent their life building a legacy only for it to be wasted by the next generation? Why do people strive for this then?***

**Read Ecclesiastes 2:24-26**

13. Where does the Preacher see God's hand?

***14. What do you think of the Preacher's conclusions so far?***

***15. Read Genesis 2:15-16 and Genesis 3:17-19. How do these verses help us understand why toil can bring both pleasure and despair?***

***16. Read Matthew 6:25-34. What does Jesus teach about striving after the things of this life?***

***17. Read Colossians 3:1-4. It is so easy to be caught up in the pursuit of pleasure or building a name or legacy. How can we help one another keep our hearts and minds on the things above?***

### **Study 3: All in good time**

#### **Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15**

1. What lesson is being taught by the poem of verses 2-8? How is this not just fate, or karma?
2. How does the ebb and flow of seasons and times make you feel?
3. Who sets the times?
4. What perspective does God enable people to have? (v11)
5. What limitations has he placed on them?
6. So what does the Preacher conclude is the best thing to do?
7. How does the Preacher contrast our changing lives (v2-8) with the things of God (v14)?
8. What response does God require from us?
9. ***Read Mark 1:14-15, Romans 5:6 and Galatians 4:4-5. What happened at the right time? How do the Preacher's musings on time help us appreciate God's salvation timing?***

**Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-22**

10. What wrong is identified in v 16?
11. How does the Preacher's understanding of God's time help him face this?
12. The Preacher perceives that God wants us to know our place (v18), but what does he not know?
13. If, like the Preacher, we don't know what comes after death, what is the best way to live?

**14. Read Acts 17:31, John 5:24-29 and 2Corinthians 5:5-10.**

- a. *What do we know that the Preacher didn't?*
- b. *What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make to our understanding of judgement?*
- c. *What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make when we see injustice go unpunished?*
- d. *What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make to how we live?*

## **Study 4: Some things are better than others**

### **Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3**

1. What does the Preacher notice?
2. What is his response?
3. *How satisfactory do you feel this response is?*

### **Read Ecclesiastes 4:4-8**

4. Here the Preacher reflects on ambition. What does he identify as the root cause of ambition?
5. What makes blind ambition an unhappy business?
6. What does the proverb of verse 5 teach about the opposite extreme?
7. What does the proverb of verse 6 teach is the better way? (See also Proverbs 15:16, 16:8, 17:1)
8. *Can you relate to these observations about ambition?*
9. *Can ambition and contentment coexist?*
10. *Read Luke 12:15, Philippians 4:11-13 and 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. How do these passages build on the teaching of the Preacher?*

**Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12**

11. What are the benefits of companionship?

**Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12**

12. In this little story, what is better?

13. What happens to leave the Preacher concluding it is all vanity?

**14. Do you think there is a connection between this story and the earlier teaching about ambition?**

**Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7**

15. What advice does the Preacher give to those wanting to worship God?

16. What reasons are we given to be very careful with our speech?

**17. How might these instructions apply to us as we meet together as God's people today?**

**18. Read Matthew 5:33-37. What does Jesus say about swearing oaths in God's name?**

**19. Would your family and friends say you were someone whose speech has integrity?**

**Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-9**

20. The Preacher comes back to where he began, considering oppression and injustice. The situation of each official taking their cut is one that is familiar to us! What kind of leadership does a nation need?

***This study has considered many areas of life. Look back and review: what are the things that are better? How can we pray for our nation, our church and ourselves in the light of today's study?***

## **Study 5: Money, money, money**

### **Read Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:9**

1. At first reading, what things grieve the Preacher?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What does he see to be good?

Today's passage can be arranged in a particular structure called a chiasm.

**5:10-12** The person who is not satisfied

**5:13-17** One way riches are an evil

**5:18-20** Good gifts from God

**6:1-6** Another way riches are an evil

**6:7-9** Another person who is not satisfied

The focus of a passage structured this way is at the centre.

### **Read Ecclesiastes 5:10-12 and 6:7-9**

3. Who does the preacher say will never find satisfaction?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Why will wealth not satisfy? (See also Proverbs 23:4-5)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. *Why do people think that wealth will bring satisfaction?*

### **Read Ecclesiastes 5:13-17 and 6:1-6**

6. What are the "evils" the Preacher has seen?

- 7. *Have you seen examples of either of these situations?***
  
- 8. *Read 1 John 2:15-17. What 2 “loves” does John identify?***
  
- 9. *What does our attitude to the things of this world reveal about our love for God?***
  
- 10. *How do John’s words echo and add to those of the Preacher?***

**Read Ecclesiastes 5:18-20**

11. In this central section, the Preacher’s tone brightens. What is different about the person described in this section compared to the others we have met today?
  
12. Why is this person able to enjoy the results of his toil?
  
13. What can we learn from the Preacher about contentment?
  
- 14. *Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19. What attitudes towards wealth does God want us to cultivate?***
  
- 15. *How can we keep on encouraging one another to centre our hope in the God who richly provides for us, and to lay up treasure that lasts?***
  
- 16. *Are there any changes to your attitudes or actions you need to take as a result of today’s study?***

## **Study 6: What is good?**

### **Read Ecclesiastes 6:10-12**

1. How does the Preacher seem to be feeling about his quest to understand life?
2. What two questions does he ask in verse 12?

### **Read Ecclesiastes 7:1-14**

3. Which of these proverbs do you find surprising or challenging?
4. How do these proverbs begin to answer the first question of Ecc 6:12?
5. In verses 13-14, what are we urged to consider? Why?
6. What does the Preacher say we will not find out?
7. ***Read Romans 8:18-19 and 2 Corinthians 4:13-18. What do we know that the Preacher didn't? How does this change our response to adversity?***

**Read Ecclesiastes 7:15-29.**

8. What situation is observed in verse 15?

9. What is the Preacher's response?

10. Does the Preacher think there is any value in wisdom and righteousness?

11. What does he want to find? (v25,27)

12. Is he successful?

13. What does he find? (v29)

**14. Read Romans 1:18-25; 3:10; 3:21-22. Now read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 30. If the Preacher was sitting at your table, how could you use these passages to respond to his search for understanding?**

**15. In today's passages the Preacher has pondered some big issues: knowing how to make the best of life; the sovereignty of God (especially in times of adversity or when the wicked prosper) and the limits of wisdom. Do you have friends grappling with these kinds of issues? How could you speak God's word to them?**

## **Study 7: Life is short – be wise!**

**Ecclesiastes 8:1      Who is like the wise?  
                                 And who knows the interpretation of a thing?  
                                 A man's wisdom makes his face shine,  
                                 And the hardness of his face is changed.**

There is much we cannot know, but it is always good to apply wisdom!

### **Read Ecclesiastes 8:2-9**

1. What is the wise response to those who exercise power?

### **Read Ecclesiastes 8:10-15**

2. What is the wise response when evil prospers, and is even honoured?
3. What difference does the Preacher hope the fear of God makes? (v12-13)
4. Is this in fact his experience?
5. ***Read John 5:24-29. From Jesus' words, what assurance could you give the Preacher?***

### **Read Ecclesiastes 8:16-17**

6. What does the Preacher say we cannot know?
7. Why is this? (See also Isaiah 55:8-9 and Romans 11:33-36.)
8. ***How does it make you feel to realise there will always be questions you won't have answers for?***

**Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-6, 11-12**

9. What is the event that happens to all?

10. Why does the Preacher call this an evil?

**11. *The Preacher is distressed that we're all going to die, and we don't know when. Do you share his negative view of death?***

**12. *What difference does belonging to Christ make in the face of death? (See Philippians 1:21-23.)***

**Read Ecclesiastes 9:7-10**

13. What does the Preacher recommend?

**14. *Does this seem like good advice to you?***

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 50-58**

**15. *What did Jesus' resurrection do to death?***

**16. *How sure are you that death is not the end?***

**17. *What difference will this knowledge make to how you live today?***

## **Study 8: Wisdom, Foolishness and Faith**

### **Read Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:4**

1. What do we learn from this anecdote and these proverbs about the value of wisdom?
2. What do we learn from this anecdote and these proverbs about the effects of foolishness?

### **Read Ecclesiastes 10:5-20**

3. What do we learn from this anecdote and these proverbs about the dangers of foolishness? *(Note: v 19 is probably quoting the foolish leaders)*

**4. *How can we guard against foolishness in our daily lives (v8-11)?***

**5. *How can we guard against foolishness in our speech? (v12-15, 20)? (See also Ephesians 5:15-20 and Colossians 4:5-6.)***

### **Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-6**

6. What do we not know?

7. What does the Preacher recommend we do?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Why do you think the Preacher reminds us here that God is the one who makes everything (v5)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. ***Read James 4:13-17. How does this echo and build on the Preacher's advice?***

In reflecting on Ecclesiastes chapters 9-11, one writer has said this:

We show faith by living “under the sun” with no expectation that God has to explain himself to us; we show faith by not giving in to paralysing despair just because we cannot understand the strange twists and turns of life. Faith recognises that we are creatures totally dependent on our Creator, and gets on with living life to the full in his creation.

Tim McMahon, *The Search for Meaning*, Matthias Media

10. ***Does your faith in Christ cause you to live your life differently from your non-Christian friends?***
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
11. ***How could you explain this difference to them?***

## **Study 9: Remember and Rejoice!**

1. Do you think people consider God more when they are young or when they are old?

### **Read Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8**

2. What advice does the preacher have for the old? (11:8)
3. What advice does the Preacher have for the young? (11:9-12:7)
4. **12:2-5 paint a picture in metaphors of the effects of age on the human body. How does this make you feel?**
5. The images in 12:6-7 are of a golden bowl held by a silver cord, filled with oil to give light; the pitcher and the cistern wheel are needed in the collection of water to drink. How does the preacher use these images speak of death?
6. What is it about God that he especially wants the young to remember? (11:9, 12:1)
7. 11:8-9 call on both old and young to rejoice. Is there a connection between remembering and rejoicing?
8. ***The Preacher ends as he began, declaring that everything is hebel – a vapour or mist that cannot be grasped. How can realising this truth be a positive thing?***

Read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

**9. A goad is a sharp stick, used to direct cattle. Reflect back on what we have studied together. Have you found words of delight and words of truth? What has prodded you?**

**10. How would you answer someone who asks you what Ecclesiastes is all about?**

**11. How does your answer compare with verses 13-14? (Note v13 in the Hebrew reads "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man.") How does this conclusion get to the heart of the Preacher's message?**