

Living the Message

OPEN THE BIBLE *Make the Connection*



January 2012 Ecclesiastes Reading & Discussion Guide

January Dates to Note:

MEETING WILL BE HELD:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

Person to Contact with Questions: _____

PASTOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES:

- Mpls:** Monday, January 9, 7:00 p.m., Room 482-486
- West:** Thursday, January 5, 7:00 p.m., Room 310 CFL Bldg.

BEFORE YOUR SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Read the Book of Ecclesiastes

- a) We suggest you read through "Ecclesiastes: Theme and Purpose" and the glossary "Who or What Is . . . ?" on page 4 before you begin your reading of Ecclesiastes.
- b) Use the "To Guide Your Reading" section on pages 5 - 7 to help you think through what you have read, paying particular attention to questions in boldface.

2. If possible, **attend, listen to, or watch the DVD of the Pastor's Introduction.**

3. Read and recite **this month's memory verse** often! **It is:**

There is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. – Ecclesiastes 3: 1

Our goal and prayer is that you will walk away from each study having had at least one important insight that informs your faith and your knowledge of God's Word. In other words, we hope you will discover a "message" just for you!

AT YOUR SMALL GROUP MEETING

Welcome

Welcome to the January meeting of your *Living the Message* Bible discovery group. In order to keep to your agreed-upon time frame, place a clock where it is clearly visible, or ask someone to be “timekeeper” and let the group know when 15 minutes remain for discussion and closing.

Opening Prayer

Pause to quiet your hearts and minds with a few moments of silent prayer. Then have someone open with his or her own prayer or pray the following together:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for bringing us together once again to study your Word. Thank you for challenging us to think past the surface of what we read, so that we may discover the depths and richness that is there. Thank you, too, for the opportunity to share our questions, insights, and opinions without fear of being thought “dumb” or wrong. Open our hearts and minds to each other, knowing it is not we, but the working of the Holy Spirit among us who will bring whatever understanding you choose to grant or truth you choose to reveal. In Your Name we pray, Amen.

This Month’s Memory Verse

Recite this month’s memory verse (including the book, chapter, and verse) together as a group.

There is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. – Ecclesiastes: 3: 1

Getting Under Way

Take time for each person to share thoughts on the following:

- **Read the recital of times and season in Ecclesiastes 3:1-9 which begins, *There is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.* As the world enters 2012, what time is it?**

Setting the Scene

Before beginning discussion, invite your small group facilitator and anyone else who attended, listened to, or saw the DVD of the Pastor’s introduction to Ecclesiastes to share what they learned.

Discuss Together

Go to “To Guide Your Reading” on pages 6 - 8. Discuss together the questions in boldface and/or others of the questions that are of particular interest to your group. Remember, a good

discussion on fewer questions is better than rushing through all the questions. If you wish, ask if any of the questions (boldface or not) were of particular interest to someone and begin there.

Closing Remarks and Prayer

FOR NEXT MONTH

Our next meeting will be in February:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

Person to Contact with Questions: _____

February's Reading Assignment: Genesis 1:1 – 12:9

February's Memory Verse:

"I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing." – Genesis 12: 2

Save the date! Next Pastor's Introductions:

- Mpls:** Monday, February 6, at 7:00 p.m., Room 482-486
- West:** Thursday, February 2, at 7:00 p.m., Room 310, CFL

CLOSING PRAYER

Gather requests for prayers, encouraging both things for which God's help and guidance are needed and also things for which people are grateful. If someone is comfortable doing so, ask that person to pray aloud a prayer bringing these concerns to God, or take time for silent prayer during which these concerns can be brought to God. End with a prayer of your own, by reciting the Lord's Prayer, or by praying the following together:

Dear Lord,

To everything there is a season and a purpose under heaven. Help us to find the comfort, not frustration, in these words when questions of "Why now?" or "For what reason?" trouble our hearts. Grant peace and strength in our times of need and trial, and free us to live lives that honor you and all the blessings you bestow. Be with us all now as we go on our separate ways, and make us better followers and more effective witnesses to your love so that others will want to know the source of joy with which we live. In your name we pray, Amen.

FOLLOWING YOUR SMALL GROUP MEETING

Ponder

How would God want me to apply something I read in or learned from Ecclesiastes to my life?

Ecclesiastes: Theme & Purpose

Ecclesiastes is one of the “wisdom” books in the Bible. In general, these books offer insight into and seek understanding about God, humanity, the meaning of life, and issues such as evil and suffering in the world. The book’s writer is identified simply as the “Teacher” (1:1, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10). Despite some passages that suggest a king, often supposed to be Solomon, is the author, it is best to stay with this designation, ascribing the book to *Qoheleth* (Hebrew) or “Teacher,” that is, one steeped in Israel’s wisdom traditions (see 12:9-10), preparing a lesson for people who needed to hear what that wisdom had to say to their own lives.

In spite of his efforts, the writer shares that he is unable to find meaning in life by living for work, by searching for the answers to life’s big questions (seeking wisdom), accumulating wealth, or by pursuing more and more sophisticated pleasures. All of these efforts result only in a sense of emptiness (Hebrew *hevel*, traditionally translated “vanity”).

The human reality, our writer says, is that our earthly existence is marked by problems such as injustice and evil, the whims of chance, the impossibility of understanding what God is doing or is about to do, and the inevitability of death. There are many questions that we have about God, about what God is doing, and about death. Know that, he suggests, it is better for us to learn to live with these questions, accept these realities, and enjoy the everyday gifts God gives, such as times with family and friends, and faithfully remember and worship God.

Is it true, then, that Ecclesiastes marks the “low-water mark” of Old Testament thought, as some have suggested? Is it really an especially gloomy essay? As noted, the book does indeed recognize life’s frustrations and problems, such as injustice and evil (3:16-17), oppression (4:1-3; 5:8-9), greed (5:8-17), unfairness (7:15-18; 8:14; 9:11-12), and finally death (2:14-17; 3:19-21; 6:3-6; 7:2; 12:1-8). But the central message of the book is expressed in those passages that call for celebration of life together with family and friends and appreciation of the everyday good gifts that God provides (see 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-12:1).

As Martin Luther wrote in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, “[Ecclesiastes 5:20] is the interpreter of the entire book: [The writer] intends to forbid vain anxieties, so that we may happily enjoy the things that are present and not care at all about the things that are in the future, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away” (*Luther’s Works* 15:93).

Who or What Is . . . ?

Hevel. (“vanity,” NRSV). Translated in the NRSV as “vanity,” this word occurs thirty-seven times in Ecclesiastes. The literal meaning is *breath, vapor, or cloud of steam*. As a metaphor, it can mean emptiness, nothingness, or meaninglessness.

Wisdom Literature. Traditionally, Jews divided their holy books into three major divisions: the Law (Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. Included in the Writings are Psalms and wisdom materials such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (also probably the Song of Songs [Solomon]). This “wisdom literature” usually is associated with people who were assumed to have acquired a great deal of knowledge and understanding of the world and humanity. In both practical and philosophical ways, they wrote about how best to live and order one’s life, the challenges and ambiguities of the human experience, and the relationship between God and humanity.

To Guide Your Reading

Use the following divisions and questions to guide your reading and personal reflection, jotting down your thoughts in the space between each question. For those who wish, we have suggested a three-week schedule to help you in your reading and reflection.

Questions in boldface are the ones we suggest for consideration at your small group meeting. Groups are free, however, to focus on whatever questions are of most interest.

WEEK 1 – Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 3:15

Where the NRSV Bible uses the word *vanity* in Ecclesiastes, other translations use words such as *meaningless*, *senseless*, or *empty*, which you may find more helpful as you attempt to follow the writer's train of thought.

In Chapters 1 and 2, the author writes about his search for meaning in life and how ultimately, all that he tries leaves him unsatisfied and empty. In Chapter 3, he acknowledges that God controls the timing of all things, demands much of us, and is the only one who knows what the future holds.

1. After reading 1:1-11, how would you describe our author?
2. In 2:1-23, are there things our writer says that resonate particularly with your own experiences—if not as a whole, perhaps during a particular period of your life? What do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with in his concluding remarks in 2:24-26?
3. **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 has been used as a whole or in part in greeting cards, songs, posters, and other written and spoken reflections for a variety of occasions. Why do you think it has such appeal?**
4. Ecclesiastes scholar James Limburg suggests that an appropriate title to Chapter 3 might be “Who Knows?” What things does the author say with which you would agree or disagree? What is one thing the author “does know” (3:12-15)? Given everything else he has said to this point, does this come as a surprise? Why or why not?

WEEK TWO – Ecclesiastes 4:1 – 7:29

Chapter 4 deals with matters such as evil, envy, injustice, friendship, and so forth, while Chapter 5 deals with matters of reverence for God, humility, contentment, money, and wealth. Chapters 6 and 7 focus in great part on issues of human mortality and life's "riddles."

1. In 4:1-8, what are some of the things that dismay the author? What do you think about his statement in 4:3?
2. In 4:9-12, he says that "two are better than one." When have you experienced or observed the value of having a friend or another person to count on?
3. In Chapter 5, what are some of the things the writer advises for us who are on earth? To what degree do you agree or disagree with what he says about the poor and about money and wealth in 5:8-17?
4. What are some of the writer's frustrations in Chapter 6? What would you advise or say to a friend who was feeling some of these same frustrations?
5. **In Chapter 7, the author presents a series of ancient proverbs (verses 1-14) followed by musings on life's riddles (verses 15-29). Which, if any, of the proverbs or riddles speaks to something in your own experiences?**

WEEK THREE – Ecclesiastes 8:1 – 12:14

In Chapter 8, our writer admits humanity's inability to understand life's great mysteries and suggests enjoying whatever days God grants. In Chapters 9 – 12, he reminds us of our mortality and the uncertainties of life and advises us to enjoy whatever the gifts God gives, to not worry too much about what we cannot know, and to honor God and live as God would want us to.

1. In what ways do you share the writer's frustration in 8:16-17 with not being able to understand or know God's ways or what your earthly future holds?

2. Are the words in 9:11 familiar to you? What examples have you experienced or observed when this was true? How do or would you help someone accept or deal with this type of "unfairness" in life?

3. "So you do not know the work of God," says 11:5 (see also 3:10-11 and 8:16-17). For Ecclesiastes, there appears to be a gulf between God in heaven and people on earth. To what extent or in what ways do you agree or disagree with this idea?

4. 12:1-7 is a poem about growing old. How does it fit with your own ideas of what happens as we age? Is there any way in which it inspires you to live differently?

5. **God is at a distance, our writer tells us, but God also creates (3:11; 7:13-14, 29; 12:1), gives humans life (5:18; 8:15), and takes us to him when we die (12:7). Knowing that, he suggests we remember and stand in awe of God and keep God's commandments (3:14; 5:1-2, 7; 12: 1,13). He encourages us also to enjoy God's gifts (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-12:1). In your opinion, then, which of these best sums up the message of Ecclesiastes for you, **and why?****

 - *Life is fleeting and makes no sense*
 - *Revere God while enjoying whatever gifts he gives*