

*Walking with*  
God in  
Every Season

KAY ARTHUR  
PETE DE LACY



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## WALKING WITH GOD IN EVERY SEASON

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# ECCLESIASTES

# INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES



Solomon, the son of David and king of Israel, was the wisest man the world had ever seen. Yet he wondered about the meaning of life. He wondered about the things man can achieve and their value in life and in death.

Perhaps you too have thought of these things, of life's ups and downs, wondering about them and searching your heart and mind to understand what life is all about. As you study Ecclesiastes, you'll find new meaning in this search, and you'll gain new understanding as well. The purpose of Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations is to lead you into a knowledge of the truth.

The key to understanding life better is knowing God, which of course is more than simply knowing about God. If we don't know God, we can't understand His character or ways. God is the source of life, so knowing His character and ways sheds light on our lives. That's how we learn what's important (His purposes for our life) and what's not (the things we plan apart from Him).

Ecclesiastes records Solomon's investigation into the meaning of life, his search to understand what man's life is about and how people can know God. Sometimes it's difficult to put ourselves in the place of someone who lived 3000 years ago. It's hard to shed our present circumstances and think of

life without the revelation we have received in the Lord Jesus Christ. But as we study Ecclesiastes, we discover what Solomon knew about God—what God had revealed about Himself from the time of Adam up to Solomon's day. And by comparing Scripture with Scripture, we discover even more because God continued to reveal Himself after Solomon's time.

Because God reveals Himself today through His Word, we'll learn about God for ourselves. And we'll learn what's best for us—how we can apply God's truth and wisdom to our lives.

# THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN



The sun rises, the sun sets. Nothing is new. Man is born, man lives, man dies. Nothing is new. What then is the point of life? What brings meaning to any person's life? Solomon wanted to know, so he set about to discover this, seeking wisdom.



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## DAY ONE

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We'll begin by reading Ecclesiastes 1 all the way through without stopping to mark or make notes. Simply get the flavor of this opening chapter.


Now read through Ecclesiastes 1 again and put a blue circle around every reference to the author. List what you learn about him by marking these references and by asking the 5 W's and an H.

The author of every book in the Bible emphasizes subjects by repeating key words and phrases. You'll be marking many of these throughout Ecclesiastes, so as we suggested in "How to Get Started," record them and how you plan to mark them on a three-by-five card you can use for a bookmark. Doing this from lesson to lesson will help you mark consistently and will save you time.

Now read through Ecclesiastes 1 and mark *vanity*.<sup>1</sup> The



Hebrew word (*hebel*) is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes and is translated *vanity* or *futility* most of the time in the NASB. Its literal meaning is breath or vapor, so it can be a metaphor for something that is fleeting, temporary, empty, senseless, or worthless, depending on the context. Although *futility* is not used in this chapter, you'll want to mark it and *vanity* the same way throughout the book. Also mark the synonymous phrase *striving after wind*<sup>2</sup> the same way.




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 DAY TWO
 

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In your first readings of Ecclesiastes 1, you may have noticed the repeated phrases *under the sun* and *under heaven*. Read through the chapter again and mark these two phrases the same way. Also mark the key words *wisdom* and *folly*.

Now list what you learned about each of these words and phrases.




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 DAY THREE
 

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Now that you've observed the chapter, it's time to think about its meaning. The goal of interpretation is to understand the message so you can apply it to your life. So, what did the Preacher ("Teacher" in the NIV) mean by "vanity"?

Let's look at the chapter a few verses at a time. What is the subject of verses 3-11? Now look at what the Preacher says in verses 12-18. How is he going to discover "all that has been done under heaven"? Is this a good way to learn what he wants to know?

Does it sound depressing? What is his point? Well, the answer isn't apparent in chapter 1. It will take a few more

chapters to discover what the Preacher means about this in the first chapter. The key is what the Preacher knows about God.

Now, think about all you have seen these last three days and determine the main subject of this chapter. Write this out as a theme for Ecclesiastes 1 and record it on ECCLESIASTES AT A GLANCE on page 51.




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DAY FOUR

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Let's move on to chapter 2 today, keeping in mind what we thought about yesterday, and see if we can discover clues in this chapter to help us understand the Preacher better. Read through Ecclesiastes 2 and mark the key words and phrases you marked in chapter 1. Also mark *labor*,<sup>3</sup> *fate*,<sup>4</sup> and references to *God*.




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DAY FIVE

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List what you learn about *vanity*, *folly*, *labor*, *wisdom* and *God* in Ecclesiastes 2. Making lists is a key tool of careful observation. As you look at each place you marked a key word, ask the 5 W's and an H, and let the text provide the answers.

Also list what the Preacher says he did (the activities he engaged in) and the results.




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DAY SIX

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Now let's put together what we learned from chapters 1–2 about the Preacher's understanding of wisdom, labor, and

vanity. What kind of wisdom (or whose wisdom) is vanity? What kind of labor (or whose labor) is vanity? How does God fit into man's labor and wisdom?

Read Proverbs 1:7; 2:6; 3:13; 4:5; 9:10; 15:33. If you haven't studied Proverbs, you need to know that wisdom is a central theme of the book and Solomon was its principal author. Would Solomon have been likely to mean one thing in Proverbs and something else entirely in Ecclesiastes? Or was he more likely to have been consistent? Remember, Scripture never contradicts Scripture.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-24.

Considering the verses in Proverbs and 1 Corinthians, are all labor and all wisdom vanity, or is the Preacher referring only to a certain kind of labor and wisdom?

Finally, thinking about all you have seen, what's the main subject of Ecclesiastes 2? Write this out as a chapter theme and record it on ECCLESIASTES AT A GLANCE on page 51.

## DAY SEVEN



Store in your heart: Ecclesiastes 2:25

Read and discuss: Ecclesiastes 1-2

### *QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY*

- ☞ Discuss what you learned about the author in Ecclesiastes 1-2.
- ☞ Discuss the relationship between labor and vanity.
- ☞ What did you learn about wisdom?

- ☞ How does God fit into the Preacher's evaluations of labor and wisdom? What part does God play in man's labor?
- ☞ What can you apply to your own life? What's your perspective on your own labor?

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

One of man's most common desires is to feel appreciated, to know that what he does is worthwhile and valuable. Solomon addresses this idea but in a very surprising way. It's somewhat shocking to see him despairing, dejected, and depressed. The first impression you get is that he is completely frustrated with life.

Sometimes we're frustrated because our perspective is flawed. When we stop to evaluate things, we realize that the thing we're frustrated about is not really the issue. The real problem is with our perspective—it needs adjusting. For Solomon the Preacher, the perspective that mattered the most was not his own, but God's.

If we look at Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, we learn the difference between worldly wisdom (man's wisdom) and wisdom from above (God's wisdom). The world's wisdom is inadequate for knowing God: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God..." (1 Corinthians 1:21).

In verse 24, we learn that Christ, who is preached in the gospel, is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. Yes, Christ Himself is the wisdom of God. That's why Jesus told His disciples that something greater than Solomon had arrived (Matthew 12:42). He was referring to Himself. Solomon, who was given great wisdom by God, was less than Jesus, who is God's wisdom.

Because of this, faith in Jesus as the Son of God, our Savior,

is faith in the power and wisdom of God. That faith does not rest on man's wisdom, but on the power of God. It rests on the person of Jesus Christ.

And so when we share the gospel, 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 says we speak wisdom "not of this age nor of the rulers of this age," but "God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory, the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood."

First Corinthians 2:14 goes on to inform us that "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." So God's wisdom is different from man's in several respects. First, it is not understood by the natural man, including the rulers of this age. It is a mystery, hidden from men. Understanding comes only from enlightenment. Second, this wisdom precedes man, having been predestined before the ages. It exists apart from man.

So Solomon evaluates man's unaided efforts to understand God's wisdom and determines they are futile, and Paul tells us God's wisdom was a mystery, it was hidden, and it was not understood. Man can't understand God's wisdom without the Spirit of God. Solomon received wisdom from God, and he knew that man's attempt to understand wisdom on his own is vanity, even "vanity of vanities."

Furthermore, if God's wisdom is beyond man's wisdom, mysterious and hidden, then two things are vain: man's effort to gain God's wisdom and man's wisdom itself.

Now, let's be clear that the subject at hand is wisdom. If wisdom is knowledge that is applied rightly, then the subject is the right application of knowledge, not only the knowledge itself. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon examines man's quest for wisdom apart from God. And he rightly declares that this effort and its product, human wisdom, are vain.