

# Living a Life that Matters

A Bible Study on Ecclesiastes

Lamb of God Lutheran Church - Winter 2016

## Lesson One – Introduction, 1:1-11

Lesson Two – 1:12 – 3:15

Lesson Three – 3:16 – 6:12

Lesson Four – 7:1 – 10:19

Lesson Five – 10:20 – 12:14

## Introduction

1. Author: King Solomon (1:1, 1:16, 2:4-11, 12:9-10; cf. 1 Kings 3:5-14)
2. Date of Writing: 930s BC (near the end of Solomon's reign)
3. Title: "Ecclesiastes" comes from the Greek translation (also carried over into Latin) of the Hebrew word "Qoheleth" (v. 1), which is usually translated as "Teacher" or "Preacher." It seems to be based on a word for gathering; the teacher is the one who gathers an audience to instruct them.
4. Theme:  
"The summary and aim of this book, then, is as follows: Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future and are, as Paul says, without care and anxiety (Phil. 4:6)." (Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," *Luther's Works*, vol. 15, p. 7)

"Thus the subject or matter of this book is simply the human race, which is so foolish that it seeks and strives for many things by its efforts which it cannot attain or which, even if it does attain them, it does not enjoy but possesses to its sorrow and harm, as the fault not of the things themselves but of its own foolish affections." (Luther, p. 10)

"To reiterate, the point and purpose of this book is to instruct us, so that with thanksgiving we may use the things that are present and the creatures of God that are generously given to us and conferred upon us by the blessing of God. This we are to do without anxiety about the things that are still in the future. The important thing is that we have a tranquil and quiet heart and a mind filled with joy, that is, that we be content with the Word and work of God." (Luther, p. 10)

5. Recommended Reading: *Ecclesiastes, Song of Song (People's Bible)*, by Roland Cap Ehlke (Northwestern Publishing House).

6. Outline: As a poetical work, it lacks a tight, identifiable structure. Recurring phrases show a unified subject, but its style is the introduction and evaluation of pertinent topics about life under the sun. A couple of outlines that have been suggested are:

Prologue (1:1-11)  
Life Under the Sun (1:12-6:12)  
Life Under God (7:1-12:8)  
Epilogue (12:9-14)

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**title:** author mentioned in third-person (1:1)  
**a** poem about the brevity and insignificance of life (1:2-11)  
**b** wisdom's failure to discover life's meaning (1:12-2:26)  
**c** poem about time (3:1-15)  
**d CENTER:** fear God! (3:16-6:12)  
**c'** poem about time revisited (7:1-14)  
**b'** wisdom's failure revisited (7:15-10:19)  
**a'** poem about life's brevity revisited (10:20-12:8)  
**conclusion:** author mentioned in third-person (12:9-14)

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Discussion:

1. List things in which people have sought meaning for life in this world.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Explain: The problem with most human quests for meaning is that they put the gifts of the Creator in the place that properly belongs to the Creator

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

3. By what do people measure success in this world? Which of these things did Solomon have? (1 Kings 4:29-31; 10:23-25; 11:1-2)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. "Everything is meaningless," Solomon writes. Literally, the word means "breath." How is that a powerful picture of worldly pursuits?

5. The name Abel is the same word that is translated here as “meaningless” (or “breath”). How does the name Adam and Eve gave to their son show their understanding of how life had changed since the fall into sin?
  
6. The implied answer to Solomon’s question in verse 3 is “nothing.” How can he say that man gains nothing from all his labor?
  
7. How does Solomon’s statement in verse 4 stand in contrast to those who say of someone after their death, “They lived a full life”?
  
8. Solomon uses three examples from nature (sun, wind, sea) in verses 5-7. Do you think Solomon is making a comparison or a contrast to human life in the way that he describes these things? Defend your answer.
  
9. Verse 8 describes the general lack of satisfaction humans have with whatever they experience or achieve. Luther writes:

“So great is the variety of human affections and desires that the eyes are never satisfied. They want first one thing, then another, and when they obtain it, the heart still is not satisfied. The heart is a constantly yawning chasm; it wants everything, and even if it obtained everything, it would go on looking for still more. Look at Alexander the Great. He was lord of almost the whole world. Yet when he heard that there were more worlds, he sighed: ‘And I have not yet conquered even one!’ Thus his heart wanted innumerable worlds. How could anyone, even the most eloquent, adequately describe the enormous vanity of this man’s heart? The vanity and insatiability of the human heart are unspeakable. What a man has does not please him; what he does not have, that he yearns for.” (Luther, p. 19)

Where do you see the greatest evidence of dissatisfaction in our world today?

Where do you see the greatest evidence of dissatisfaction in your own heart?
  
10. In the context of these verses, in what sense is “nothing new under the sun”?

11. Our culture is perhaps more enamored with the "new" than any culture before it. What dangers do the infatuation with the new present?
  
12. The goal that some people have for life is to leave a legacy, to be remembered for something they did, some way they lived, some difference they made. What startling, sobering truth does Solomon apply to such goals?
  
13. How do Exodus 1:8 and Judges 2:10-13 illustrate Solomon's point? And what lesson is there for us to learn here?
  
14. Describe things in your life that have left you thinking thoughts like those that Solomon expresses here.
  
15. Read Psalm 77:12 and Isaiah 40:6-8. Since earthly life is but a "breath," upon what does the Lord want us to set our minds?

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## Looking for Meaning: Plan A – Wisdom (1:12-18)

1. List places where people seek (or claim) to find wisdom in our world today.
2. Explain how the subject of this wisdom quest (hint: what word occurs most often in these verses) and the location of the quest (v. 13-14) impact the success of the quest (and keep us from misapplying what Solomon writes here).
3. How did the wisdom that Solomon found increase rather than ease his burden (cf. v. 13,18)?
4. Agree or disagree: Solomon is suggesting that growing in worldly wisdom and knowledge are a waste of time (or perhaps even bad for you).
5. What dangers do you see in today's pursuits of wisdom?

Luther: "For anyone who is very wise has many reasons to become angry, as one who daily sees many things that are wrong. Someone whose eyes are closed knows nothing and does not become indignant. Therefore learn to keep quiet, to commit the kingdom

to God, and to pray: 'Lord, Thy will be done.' Otherwise you will wear out your heart and your body, and you will waste time and eventually your life." (Luther, p. 28)

### **Looking for Meaning: Plan B – Pleasure (2:1-11)**

6. Solomon seems to have said to himself, "Since trying to figure things out only creates more stress and worry, I'll stop looking for answers and just make myself happy." As Luther summarized it, "I shall create ease and tranquility, take delight in good things, let everything happen as it happens and chooses, and live a life of pleasure" (p. 29). This approach to life seems to have a place in every generation of this world's existence. Where do you see it in our world today?
  
7. Pleasure is not always bad (see Ecclesiastes 2:24-25; 3:4; Genesis 2:8-9). When can pleasure become dangerous (see Genesis 3:6; Deuteronomy 8:10-14)?
  
8. How does the accumulation of wealth and possessions actually often serve to increase stress rather than relieve it?
  
9. What does Solomon mean in verse 10, when he says, "this was the reward for my labor"? (cf. Matthew 6:1-6)

### **Looking for Meaning: Plan C – Folly (2:12-16)**

10. Why does Solomon conclude that wisdom is better than folly?
  
11. In what way is wisdom no better than folly?

### **Looking for Meaning: Plan D – Work (2:17-26)**

12. What potential problem did Solomon identify with everything that he had gained from years of hard work?

13. What happened to Solomon's kingdom (that for which he toiled) after his death? See 1 Kings 12.
14. Identify the glimmer of hope that Solomon expresses in the midst of his despair over the meaninglessness of toil (v. 24-26). What lesson can we apply to the way that we receive our blessings? (cf. Luther's explanation of the 4<sup>th</sup> petition of the Lord's Prayer; 1 Timothy 4:4-5)
15. How is the "wealth" gathered up by "the sinner" handed over to the one who pleases God? (cf. Luke 16:25)

### **A Time for Everything (3:1-15)**

16. The HCSB translation better renders verse 10: "I have seen the task that God has given people to keep them occupied." How does help our understanding of the point of v. 1-8?
17. How does the fact that "God has set eternity in the hearts of men" serve as a blessing to us in our own lives? in our ministry?
18. While eternity is where the ultimate meaning is, what blessing does Solomon mention again here for our life on earth?
19. How does Solomon contrast the works of man and God's works? How does a quest like Solomon's help us to appreciate the importance of this contrast?

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## **The Injustices of Life (3:16-22)**

1. How has sin perverted justice in our world?
2. In what sense is evolutionary thought correct, if we take God out of the picture?
3. How is this comparison of man and animals a preaching of God's law and judgment?
4. How do the limitations of a purely human perspective on life affect a person's priorities and approach to life?

## **Life in a Sinful Society (4:1-16)**

5. Identify some of the evils of society that make us question whether life is truly a blessing:
  - v. 1-3
  - v. 4-6
  - v. 7-12

6. List ways that we (as individual Christians or as a congregation) can help those who are struggling with each of the ills described in the previous question.
  
7. While verses 7-12 are true about life in general, even apart from faith, what special comfort and encouragement do they offer to Christians?
  
8. How can age and experience sometimes become our downfall? What prevents that from happening?

### **Be Quiet and Listen! (5:1-7)**

9. What does Solomon say should be our primary activity when we come into God's presence? Why?

10. Read Jeremiah 23:25-32. Apply God's words through Jeremiah to Solomon's words here.

### **Oppression and Wealth (5:8-20)**

11. Identify truths about the proper and improper use of wealth in verses 10-20.

12. What two extremes do we want to avoid in our attitude toward the material world?

### **Satisfaction and Enjoyment (6:1-12)**

13. Why might God commit the "grievous evil" of not enabling a man to enjoy his possessions?

14. How does God give the gift of being able to enjoy our blessings? (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-9; Matthew 6:31-33; Hebrews 13:5, etc.)

Luther: "For 'the traveler with an empty purse can sing in the presence of a robber.' But the rich man is frightened by every bramblebush, and at the height of his happiness he is as miserable as possible...He thinks of nothing, wonders at nothing, yearns for nothing—except money. In the same way the ambitious man looks at nothing except honors. The lover does not look at his own wife but is always looking at another woman. That is, such people do not enjoy the good creatures that are present now. Thus the wicked begin their hell in this life, because they are deprived of the use of all the creatures and gifts of God, so that they never see the sun, which we nevertheless have every day. In other words, they do not rejoice in the gifts of God but are always looking for something else." (Luther, pp. 96-97)

Luther: "No one is able to consider the good things he has or to be content with his lot; if he were to consider himself, he would not long so much for what belongs to others. If, for example, old men could see the dangers that afflict youth, they would not want to be young. On the other hand, if young men could see the many discomforts of old age, they would be willing to bear their own discomforts and would not begrudge the elderly their comforts. But we do not do this; instead, we are always looking at what belongs to others and despising what belongs to us. Thus the rich miser looks at and desires what he does not have, but neglects what he does have. For "his soul is not satisfied," that is, he does not stick to his assigned task. No one is content with his lot. The spectator of a play always imagines that he would perform it better. If I hear someone else preach, I think that I would be able to surpass him in many ways. A servant thinks likewise: 'If I were king, I would administer everything with the utmost prudence.'...But the soul neglects its own job and is completely preoccupied with someone else's job, and so it does not do either one right. For whoever does not take care of his own things will do very poorly at taking care of other people's things. God has given me an assignment to keep me from becoming idle. But look how I desert my own work and become busy with someone else's." (Luther, pp. 98-99)

15. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. On what basis does St. Paul urge us to be content with the gifts and opportunities that God has given to us?

16. Read Philippians 2:6-8. What comfort do we find in Jesus' attitude toward wealth and power and honor?

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## Introduction

There is a clear shift here in Solomon's tone. He has spent much of the first six chapters of this book evaluating different potential sources for meaning and purpose in life. He begins here to draw some conclusions and to share wisdom and advice with his readers, advice that will keep the Christian from hopeless pessimism and encourage him toward a meaningful and joyful life lived in service to the Lord.

Luther: "Therefore let this be a passage of exhortation or comfort inserted into the midst of the catalog of vain efforts and desires addressed to those who are impatient. For in this life the human heart experiences nothing but offenses and impatience....He who sees and hears much has a great opportunity for sorrow and indignation, because he sees and experiences the things that bring injury to the heart....A man's spirit is broken, so that he does not want to do anything more....Christians should be exhorted to live in the very midst of the crowd, to marry, to govern their household, etc. Moreover, when their efforts are hindered by the malice of men, they should bear it patiently and not cease their good works. Do not desert the battlefield but stick it out. Do not let yourself be broken by trouble or impatience, and do not let yourself be overcome by anger. Therefore this is a very good and joyful exhortation, yet one which no one but a Christian will listen to." (Luther, pp. 105-106)

## Pursuing What is Better (7:1-14)

1. What is the advantage of the day of one's death over the day of one's birth from an earthly perspective (cf. Job 3:11-13,26)? from a spiritual perspective (cf. Philippians 1:23)?
2. How can sorrow be better than laughter? (cf. Proverbs 14:12; Matthew 5:4)

3. In verses 1-8, Solomon mentions seven things that are better than seven other things. Which is the most surprising or unexpected to you? Why?
  
4. How can the following make someone a fool?
  - greed (v. 7)
  
  - impatience (v. 8)
  
  - anger (v. 9)
  
  - nostalgia (v. 10)
  
5. Explain the admonition given in verses 13-14.

## **There is Not a Righteous Man on Earth (7:15-8:1)**

6. Explain how the context of the surrounding verses helps us to understand the extremes that Solomon warns against in verses 15-18.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Note that “upright” is not in the original Hebrew text in verse 28, although “upright” or something similar seems to fit the context. Here is how a few translations handle this:
  - <sup>28</sup> while I was still searching but not finding— I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. (NIV)
  - <sup>28</sup> which my soul continually searches for but does not find: among a thousand people I have found one true man, but among all these I have not found a true woman. (HCSB)
  - <sup>28</sup> which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. (ESV)

Solomon is not pitting men against women here. He is perhaps just relating his own experience (cf. the 1000 women in his life). Whether wisdom/uprightness exists in 0 out of 1000 or 1 out of 1000 makes little difference; it is rare if not non-existent. According to verse 29, what is the only way that changes?

## **Living a Godly Life in Society (8:2-17)**

8. The first verses of this section could refer to an earthly king or to the King of kings. Which do you think fits better? What, if anything, is the difference in the application of what Solomon writes here? (cf. v. 2; Romans 13:1-4).
  
9. What wisdom, consolation, and encouragement does Solomon offer, when we are troubled by the apparent injustices of the world?
  
10. What comfort can a Christian find in the incomprehensibility of God? (cf. Romans 11:33-36)

## **All Share a Common Destiny (9:1-12)**

11. Luther applies the following caution to verse 1: "Here one must be careful to remember the argument of the book, so that we do not listen to those who have applied this text to the question of man's worthiness of the hate or love of God and who wickedly teach that no one can be certain about grace." (Luther, p. 144). Even in the apparent fickleness and injustice of the world, how do we know God's grace rests upon us and eternal life is ours? (cf. Galatians 3:26-29; 1 John 2:2)
  
12. Instead of hopelessness and despair in view of the coming death that awaits all people, how does Solomon encourage Christians to live? How does a Christian perspective make such an approach possible?

## **The Blessing of Wisdom (9:13-10:19)**

13. List biblical examples of unlikely heroes with the "wisdom" necessary to overcome impossible odds. How were those heroes sometimes forgotten?

14. Chapter 10 is a series of proverbs that emphasize the importance of wisdom. Apply the key thoughts you read in this chapter to Solomon's encouragement to enjoy life in this world as a gift from God. In other words, how could failing to be wise in these different areas (work, speech, leisure, etc.) rob someone of the enjoyment God wants them to have?

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## Hard Work and a Trusting Heart (10:20-11:6)

1. Luther explains verse 1 this way: "He says *Cast your bread*, that is, 'share your food, which the Lord has given to you.' *Upon the waters*, that is, 'give it simply and generously, even though your kindness seems to you to perish and your bread seems to sink into the water.'...For God does not let Himself be surpassed in generosity, but surpasses our generosity in endless ways." (Luther, p. 171).

Agree or disagree: Solomon is teaching us to be generous in helping others because we know that eventually it will come back around to us. (cf. Luke 14:12-14; 2 Corinthians 9:7-8)

2. This section of the book reminds us that not only can't we foresee the outcome of our efforts, but we often don't even fully understand the events of the past or present. How does Solomon want that truth to affect the way that we approach our work?

What are the implications of this encouragement for our work as God's Church? (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6; Matthew 13:1-23)

## Encouragement for the Young (11:7-12:8)

3. Summarize Solomon's advice in 11:7-12:1 for the young, who are filled with energy, enthusiasm, and optimism, but who will face many "days of darkness" in their lives.

4. Why is it so important that young people remember their Creator in the days of their youth? How can we help and encourage them to do this?
  
5. "Getting old is not for sissies." "Don't get old." I've heard these and other similar sentiments from many of the older members I've been privileged to serve in my ministry. Verses 1-7 use a series of metaphors to describe the process of aging and dying. Here are possible interpretations of those metaphors:
  - growing darkness – sadness, loneliness, etc.
  - clouds return after the rain – one trouble follows another
  - keepers of the house – hands
  - strong men – legs
  - grinders – teeth
  - those looking through the windows – eyes
  - doors to the street – ears
  - rising at the sound of birds – sleeplessness
  - fear of heights and dangers – instability and limited mobility
  - almond tree blossoms – white hair
  - grasshopper drags himself along – stiff, unsteady walking
  - desire no longer stirred (literally, "the caperberry," a fruit possibly used to stimulate hunger or sexual desire, "fails") – loss of appetite, sexual desire, desire to learn, etc.
  - broken cord & bowl; pitcher & wheel – end of worldly usefulness

Why do you think Solomon takes so much time and writes in such picturesque language describing the unpleasant effects of aging?

6. What do you think is the significance of Solomon's repeating the thesis with which he began the book ("Meaningless! Meaningless!...")?

## **Conclusion (12:9-14)**

7. What is the purpose of "goads" and of "firmly embedded nails"? How does each picture apply to God's Word?

8. What is Solomon's warning regarding the wisdom of the world (v. 12)? What makes Solomon's wisdom different (v. 11)? What is the application for our work as God's Church?
  
9. Solomon concludes his search for meaning and purpose in life with this advice: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man." "Duty" is not part of the original text. What does he mean when he says that fearing and serving God are "all of man"?
  
10. How does it change our perspective on all of the "meaningless" realities of life, if we "fear God and keep his commandments"?
  
11. List three people (specific or general) whom you would encourage to read or study the book of Ecclesiastes. Why do you think they should read it?