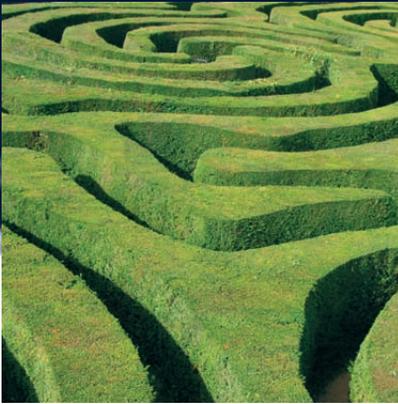


ECCLESIASTES

# THE SEARCH FOR MEANING



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

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## » HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

### 1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## 2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what the passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

## 3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

## 4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

## 5. Bible translation

Previous editions of this Interactive Bible Study have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. So with this new edition of *The Search for Meaning*, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.



## » STUDY 1

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

## [OVERVIEW]

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

SO BEGINS AND ENDS THE BOOK OF Ecclesiastes. And on 28 occasions in between, the author exclaims that particular things are vanity; things which are greatly valued by most people—like work, education, relationships, even life itself. How can such a bleak view of life be reconciled with genuine faith in God? Is there truth in the charge that Ecclesiastes is actually atheistic in outlook? If so, what is the book doing in the Bible?

A cursory study of Ecclesiastes lays

to rest the suspicion that it might be atheistic in outlook. For a start, there are more than 30 references to God in the book, and they are not negative references. The author clearly believes in God, and urges his readers to fear God (e.g. 5:7, 7:18, 12:13). To be sure, he comes to unsettling conclusions as he struggles with the contradictions and absurdities that life throws at us, but he comes to these conclusions as a believer. Here is the first clue as to why the book is in the Bible: to help believers reconcile their belief in God with the confounding experiences of life.



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3. The author points out twice in the opening chapter that he is the king of Jerusalem, sitting on David's throne (1:1, 12). Look up the following passages and note the promise God makes to Solomon, the first son of David to succeed his father. To what extent was the promise fulfilled?

- 1 Kings 3:7-14

- 1 Kings 4:29-34

4. Note the way people responded to Solomon in 1 Kings 4:34. What should be our attitude to the writings of such a king? Should we expect such writings to support an atheistic world view?

5. Read 1 Kings 10:23-25. What else resulted from Solomon's wisdom? How would this affect his ability to conduct a major research project?

---

SOLOMON'S GREAT WEALTH AND WISDOM qualify him above all others to undertake the research project that is the book's chief subject. If Solomon cannot find answers, no-one can. The magnitude of his project is as breathtaking as the magnitude of his wealth and wisdom. He sets out to discover the meaning of life.

His findings are of interest to the whole world—1 Kings 10 records the Queen of Sheba travelling from Africa to hear Solomon's wisdom. The name traditionally ascribed to the book, 'Ecclesiastes', derives from the Greek word meaning 'assembly' or 'meeting'. It reflects the apparent purpose of the book: to present to a great assembly the findings of the most important research project in the world—the quest for the meaning of life. The title the author of Ecclesiastes uses of himself also conveys this 'public speaking' function—it is variously translated in English versions of the Bible as

'the Preacher', 'the Teacher', and 'the Philosopher'. If he were presenting his findings at a major convention today, he might be billed as 'the Keynote Speaker'. For the purposes of this study, we will follow the ESV translation of 'Preacher'.

At first glance, his great research project seems to be a failure. The recurring verdict is that everything is "vanity". The NIV translates this word as "meaningless", which is quite a good translation of the Hebrew word *hebel* that keeps popping up throughout Ecclesiastes. But it could also be misleading if by it we think the Preacher is concluding that there is no meaning to anything at all. As we shall see, his conclusion is not that there is no meaning, but that ultimate meaning is impossible for even the richest and wisest researcher to discover. His quest has been futile. Some English translations of the Bible use the word 'futility' to reflect this nuance.

---

## Read all of Ecclesiastes.

We can begin to get a feel for the message of Ecclesiastes and form some first impressions by reading the whole book through in one sitting. The three questions below will help you keep focused while you read.

*If you are doing these studies in a group, you might like to divide into pairs or triplets. Each of these subgroups can take a different section of the book, read through it, discuss the questions, and then report back to the main group.*

*Ecclesiastes 1-2*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-5:7*

*Ecclesiastes 5:8-8:17*

*Ecclesiastes 9-12*

---

6. In what areas of life does the Preacher conclude there is only vanity (or meaninglessness)? Who or what is responsible for this?

7. What responses to life does the Preacher describe?

8. Where does God fit into the Preacher's conclusions?

**Read the Preacher's conclusion in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14.**

9. Given the Preacher's wider literary reputation described in 12:9-10, what should we expect about the orderliness of argument and the ease of comprehension of this book? Is your first impression of the book consistent with such an expectation? Be honest!

---

**10.** If the form of the book in some way reflects the subject it examines, what would you conclude about our ability to come to a deep understanding of that subject?

AT FIRST READING, THE PREACHER'S conclusion seems bleak indeed: our search for meaning is futile, and our efforts to find it will all be in vain. We cannot make sense of life "under the sun"; we cannot see into its meaning. It is opaque to us.

But it is not a completely negative conclusion. It does leave open the possibility that we might be able to discover the ultimate meaning of life if the impediments to our gaining of knowledge are dealt with—though the Preacher does not give us any reason to expect them to be lifted. But at least he has pointed out the problems that must be dealt with if meaning is ever to become accessible to human beings. Before we can benefit from this knowledge, we must first be willing to accept the Preacher's negative conclusions. We need to think through why we might be reluctant to do this.

---

### **Life under the sun**

If we are to benefit from the book of Ecclesiastes, we must not move too quickly to New Testament passages that seem to offer answers to the problems the Preacher raises. We must first let the truth of what the Preacher is saying really penetrate our minds. Until we confront the unvarnished truth of what life is like "under the sun", we cannot even begin to appreciate the solace held out in the rest of the gospel message. We need to learn that the

### **» Implications**

- Thinking about your life in general, to what extent would you say it has been:
  - satisfying and fulfilling?
  - frustrating?
  - incomprehensible?
  - boring?
  - possessing a sense of purpose and direction?

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Why?

∴ only appropriate response  
∴ to our condition is to  
∴ fear God in the midst of  
∴ it. We should be willing  
∴ to humbly depend upon  
∴ God and not demand  
∴ that the world or our  
∴ lives be comprehensible  
∴ to us. Then we will have  
∴ the right attitude to be  
∴ able to accept whatever  
∴ solace God may offer us  
∴ in the New Testament.  
∴ In short, the message  
∴ of Ecclesiastes will help  
∴ us live by faith. This, of  
∴ course, is the ultimate  
∴ purpose of all Scripture.

- Our predisposition to be optimistic or pessimistic will affect the response we make to the message of Ecclesiastes. At one end of the spectrum are 'happy optimists'—people for whom life is something to be upbeat about, who view problems as being put to right, and who tend to ignore or downplay even obvious evil. At the other end are 'miserable pessimists'—people who cannot escape the disturbing realities of evil and injustice, who do not see matters improving, and who find the world a predominantly unhappy and disordered place. Where would you put yourself on this spectrum? Where would you put the message of Ecclesiastes?

Happy optimist

Miserable pessimist

---

Why?

- 
- How willing are you to be told that you cannot find the meaning of life; that you are incapable of searching out an answer? What makes this proposition such a bitter pill for us to swallow, regardless of our predisposition to optimism or pessimism?

### » Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for answering Solomon's prayer for wisdom, and for making that wisdom available to us in the book of Ecclesiastes.
- Confess those areas of life in which you are sorely tempted to demand an explanation from God as to why he lets things happen the way they do.
- Pray that you will increasingly develop an attitude of humble dependence on God through these studies.