



LIFE IS VAPOR

A WALK THROUGH ECCLESIASTES

catherine l. morgan

a companion to thirty thousand days

Many, many thanks to Erika Blaine for her invaluable insight, thoughtful feedback, and godly example. “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” Proverbs 31:25-26

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Questions pertaining to *Thirty Thousand Days* come from that book’s Study Guide: Morgan, Catherine. *Thirty Thousand Days*. Christian Focus, 2016.

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“...of all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth—and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one I could say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.”

—Thomas Wolfe, American novelist

Introduction:

Biting off a study of Ecclesiastes is ambitious! Not only are we trying to get our minds around an ancient book, we’ve chosen a book that leaves many people scratching their heads. How are we to understand it? Is the speaker trustworthy? Is he being ironic? How does this teaching accord with the rest of Scripture?

To help us grapple with the central questions of Ecclesiastes, we will be pairing our Bible study with a book study of *Thirty Thousand Days*, a book that also explores eternal perspective. Each week you will read a chapter from *Thirty Thousand Days* and meditate on the study guide questions provided. More importantly, spend some time daily thinking through a chapter of Ecclesiastes.

Pace yourself; there’s a lot to get through every week! Here’s a suggested schedule.

Day 1	Read the chapter of <i>Thirty Thousand Days</i> and answer the first set of questions.
Day 2	Read the chapter of Ecclesiastes and begin to jot down your observations . Focus on comprehension. What does it say? What images does it suggest? What words are repeated? Using the text provided or your own Bible, begin to mark all of the key or repeated words.
Day 3	Reread the chapter of Ecclesiastes. Jot down any questions you have about the text or any big ideas that shine out to you. Take note of the main theme of the chapter.
Day 4	Begin to work through the “For Further Reflection” questions, looking up any relevant cross-references. Now we will broaden our study to think about interpretation . What does it mean?
Day 5	Complete the “For Further Reflection” questions. Pray through this chapter’s application to your life. Is there a verse you might like to memorize? Is there an action step you need to take?

A Little Background:

Author: Ecclesiastes 1:1 tells us that these are “the words of the Preacher [*Qoheleth*], the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” *Qoheleth* is also translated Teacher, Collector, Speaker, Spokesman, or Philosopher. Hebrew tradition usually gives credit to Solomon. I Kings 4:29-30 tells us, “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.”

Title: The title, “Ecclesiastes,” comes from the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Greek term *ekklesiastes* means “preacher” and comes from the word *ekklesia* meaning “assembly” or “church.”

Key Words: As you read through the book, mark any occurrences of these key words and other repeated phrases that you find. You might use colored pencils or invent a symbol for each one. Whatever you do, make them distinctive and easy to spot at a glance. Then consider, what might the author mean when he uses these words? What point is he trying to convey?

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| • vanity/meaningless | • death/die |
| • vapor/breath/air/wind | • better |
| • under the sun | • joy/enjoy/rejoice |
| • sun/light | • heart |
| • darkness | • wealth |
| • wisdom/wise | • satisfy |
| • folly/madness | • fear |
| • toil/labor | • God |
| • evil/wicked | • good |
| • righteous | • other? _____ |

Pay attention to opposites and contrasts. Sometimes there is just a short section contrasting two ideas, and sometimes there's a theme that runs through the whole book (i.e.: the righteous vs. the wicked, wisdom vs. folly, etc.)

Wisdom in particular is a theme throughout Ecclesiastes—in fact, the whole book is an attempt at understanding life through wisdom. Jot down anything you learn about wisdom as we go through the book.

You may also wish to chart the following three points of interaction with the text:



A lightbulb, for anything that shines out to you, or draws your attention.



A question mark, whenever the text raises questions in your mind. This book begs to be bombarded with questions, so don't be shy.



An arrow, whenever you see something you need to apply in your own life.

The lightbulb, question mark, and arrow are described in an article by Tim Challies called "Faith Hacking: The Swedish Method." (<http://www.challies.com/christian-living/faith-hacking-the-swedish-method>)

Chapter Theme Tracker:

As we try to nail down the central teaching of Ecclesiastes, pay attention to the theme of each chapter. (It may or may not line up with the chapter topic in *Thirty Thousand Days*.) Following the author's line of thought throughout the book should help you see the big picture. Jot down themes on the chart below as you go.

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
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12	

A Few Final Tips:

Please pray before you begin to read. As Psalm 119:18 says, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” The Holy Spirit promises to grant us understanding and illumination when we rely on his help in reading the Bible.

As you read, keep an eye out for:

- What does this passage teach about God? (How does it point to Christ?)
- What can you learn about yourself?
- Is there an encouraging verse to memorize and meditate upon?

Please pray after you read. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Psalm 95:7) Don’t rush it; give yourself time to absorb what you’ve studied. Let God work on your heart.

Beth Moore has said, “Lord, do not let us get away with meaningless living.” Let’s make that our overarching prayer as we dive into Ecclesiastes and *Thirty Thousand Days*.

Father,

Give us eyes to see your beauty in this book. Give us hearts to hear your truth. Help us, please, to turn from vanity to purpose, from despair to hope, and from selfishness to love. Help us counter the worldly lies of our culture and reject an under-the-sun perspective. Instead, give us great faith in the One who is above all things, whose purposes are good, and whose love endures forever.

In Christ’s precious name we pray, Amen.

WEEK ONE: Introduction

Take this week to prepare your heart.

What preconceived ideas or expectations do you have of Ecclesiastes?

Which adjective would you be more likely to apply to your life: abundant or broken? If you knew that a Christian friend picked the opposite adjective, what would rise up in your heart? Are you able to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn? What helps you do that well?

As you begin this study, what areas of your life do you sense God working in? Spend some time praying for this study and your own heart. What do you hope God will accomplish in you over the next twelve weeks?

Read over the preface and introduction of *Thirty Thousand Days*. More importantly, familiarize yourself with the entire book of Ecclesiastes. At only twelve chapters, it shouldn't take you long to read the whole thing. What verses stick out to you?

WEEK TWO

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 1: See Eternally

What line of "Be Thou My Vision" strikes you most powerfully? Why?

What are at least two components of eternal perspective? Which is hardest for you to maintain?

Read Psalm 90. How does Moses' understanding of the brevity of life affect his prayer life?

Can you think of several ways eternal perspective might affect our obedience? Our love?

Our perspective clearly affects the way we weather storms. Read II Corinthians 4:16-18. How might it change your experience of trials or crises to meditate on:

- a) God's eternal nature
- b) God's omnipresence (He is all places)
- c) God's omnipotence (He is all-powerful)
- d) God's omniscience? (He knows all things)

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1

Here we go! Lord, help us to see, to understand, and to apply these words.

Chapter 1	Observations
<p>1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.</p> <p>2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.</p> <p>3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?</p> <p>4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.</p> <p>5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.</p> <p>6 The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.</p> <p>7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.</p> <p>8 All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.</p> <p>9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.</p> <p>10 Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.</p> <p>11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.</p>	

Chapter 1	Observations
<p>12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.</p> <p>15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.</p> <p>16 I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.</p> <p>18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.</p>	



For Further Reflection:

A note on the Hebrew word, *hebel*. This one word appears 38 times in the book of Ecclesiastes (more than it's found in the rest of the Old Testament combined.) Your translation may render this word "vanity" or "meaningless." But it's a word with a lot of possibilities, including breath, mist, or even smoke. As one commentary explains, "It can mean 'vapor, deceitful, futile, and fleeting.' It points to what is without real substance, value, permanence, or significance."

With that in mind, how might you paraphrase Ecclesiastes 1:2?

How do different translations of the word *hebel* affect your understanding of this passage?

Where do you see "hebel" in the world around you?

Ecclesiastes 1:14 says, "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind." Read Romans 8:18-25. How does Paul seem to interpret this "vanity"?

Take a look at the nature metaphors in verses 4-7. What do they show us about the Creator?

When other authors of Scripture observe the same kinds of things about the natural world, what conclusions do they reach? Read Psalm 19:1-6 and compare.

If in fact my life is as ephemeral as vapor, then what is worthwhile?

Verse 8 declares, “All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” Is it fair to say that nothing we see can satisfy our hearts? How does our dissatisfaction point us to Christ?

What does verse 15 mean? What do you think about the idea that God is not going to reveal all of the answers to life’s questions to you?

In what ways is God above and beyond our “crooked” world? In what ways has he experienced the same frustrations that we know?

What is the Preacher’s intention in writing Ecclesiastes as suggested in Chapter 1 (see verses 3 and 13)? What is his working thesis (see verse 14)?

Why is verse 18 speaking truth when it says, “in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow”? If this is true, why seek to be wise at all?

Big picture now — what did you learn about God in this chapter? About yourself? About life “under the sun”?

What mental picture do you get as you read this chapter? Feel free to sketch a picture below!

WEEK THREE

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 2: Worship Wholeheartedly

Compare David's "one thing" in Psalm 27:4 with Jesus' "greatest commandment" in Mark 12:30. Are they the same?

What does the Bible have to say about living from the heart? Why do you think God prioritizes our heart condition so highly?

The author says, "let your life flow from the love of God, live in a way that enhances your love of God, or wither." In what ways have you set up a life that contributes to your love of God? In what ways does your life distract from or diminish your love of God?

Think of someone you have known or known about who loves God wholeheartedly. What effect does this love have on his or her life?

How can we cultivate deep satisfaction in God?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 2

Chapter 2	Observations
<p>I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.</p> <p>9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.</p>	

Chapter 2	Observations
<p>12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. 13 Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 14 The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. 15 Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. 16 For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! 17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.</p> <p>18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, 19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? 23 For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.</p>	

Chapter 2	Observations
<p>24 There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.</p>	

For Further Reflection:

Beginning in chapter 2, the Preacher begins systematically testing all of humankind's solutions to the seeming meaninglessness of life. One by one he thoughtfully considers the perspective of the hedonist, the philosopher, and the workaholic.

Derek Kidner, in his book, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, states: "The searching questions he has asked are those that life itself puts to us, if we will only listen. He can afford to ask them, because in the final chapters he has good news for us, *once we can stop pretending that what is mortal is enough for us, who have been given a capacity for the eternal.*"

What are the mortal solutions you are tempted to look to for satisfaction?

Is there inherent good in the pleasure, treasure, wisdom, and work tested by Solomon? What spoils it?

How might Solomon's pursuit in chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes echo the story of Genesis 2-3?

In a Google-driven world, the lines between wisdom, knowledge, folly, and madness have been blurred. How can we discern between them?

"Find your own truth" is a pervasive mantra of our culture. How do you think the Preacher would respond to that idea? What about Jesus? (See John 14:6.)

How can we build bridges for evangelism in a post-truth, knowledge-of-good-and-evil culture?

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 is reminiscent of the old parenting proverb: “Cleaning the house while the kids are growing is like shoveling snow while it’s still snowing.” According to verses 24-26, why bother? How does God redeem our failed attempts at work? Check out Galatians 6:6-10 for further insight.

So often we sacrifice rest and joy for the sake of work, only to find that the work itself was in vain (needing to be done over, falling apart when delegated to someone else, etc.) What is the right motivation or mentality with which to approach work, according to chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes?

Paraphrase verses 24-26.

God has designed us to receive wisdom, joy, and meaningful vocation from his hand. What does that say about his character?

Read Psalm 37. How does Psalm 37 describe life “under the sun”?

In that Psalm, David, considering the brevity of life and the seeming flourishing of the wicked, looks forward optimistically to the day when the righteous shall inherit the land. How can these two passages be reconciled? What should we expect the end of the story to be?

WEEK FOUR

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 3: Walk Purposefully

Have you ever been in a season of overwork? What was going on in your heart during that time?

Take another look at Ecclesiastes 2:18-26. How would you characterize the work being done?

How does that passage pivot at verse 24, offering a corrective to the preceding verses? What does chapter 3 add to the conversation?

We tend to speak of the "calling" of missionaries and ministers, but what about everyone else? What is your calling?

“While God does not always transform our context, He is often willing to gloriously redeem it.” How has God worked sovereignly in the midst of difficult circumstances in your life?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 3

Chapter 3	Observations
<p>For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:</p> <p>2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;</p> <p>3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;</p> <p>4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;</p> <p>5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;</p> <p>6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;</p> <p>7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;</p> <p>8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.</p> <p>9 What gain has the worker from his toil?</p> <p>10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. 12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;</p> <p>13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.</p>	

Chapter 3	Observations
<p>14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.</p> <p>16 Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. 17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. 18 I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. 19 For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. 21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? 22 So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?</p>	

For Further Reflection

Commentator and Bible scholar Sidney Greidanus remarked on Ecclesiastes 3:11, “The sovereign God set the times forever so that people will stand in awe of him.” As a review of Greidanus’ book added, “The point is that God is in control of the times. God is in control!” How do you see the sovereignty of God in this chapter?

Depending on your point of view, the sovereignty of God may seem oppressive and discouraging or life-giving and liberating. How does the Preacher seem to treat God’s sovereignty — as a kindness, or severity (Romans 11)?

What II Corinthians 2:15-16 says about people who are Christians is equally true of certain doctrines that we believe: to some we (or our beliefs) are the beautiful aroma of Christ, to other noses we bring the stench of death. How does Ecclesiastes (from start to finish) seem to illustrate these two perspectives?

Daniel 2 says, “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.” How would you compare Daniel’s conclusion to the Preacher’s?

In Acts 1:7, Jesus said, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” How do you feel about our lack of knowledge? Does The Preacher’s point of view seem to be shifting as you read on in Ecclesiastes?

You have probably experienced many of the seasons described in verses 1-8. What time are you in right now?

“A time to hate... a time for war...” Hmm. Why do you think these are included in the poem? Have you seen any clues in Ecclesiastes so far? Where are other places in Scripture that speak to this?

How do you observe eternity in the hearts of people around you—both believers and unbelievers?

How should we interact with those in our world who maintain that this is it—no life beyond this world is waiting for us?

What three truths about God’s actions do you see in verse 14? How does this verse influence your view of God?

Thirty Thousand Days states, “Your very reason for being here on Earth is to enjoy God and reflect Him powerfully, uniquely, in a particular way that only you can. It begins here, in the muck of Earth, and continues forever, an eternity of joy in Christ.” How do you see this idea playing out in Ecclesiastes so far?

How can you practically apply the teaching that life is short, that death comes to us all? Is there a way to apply this joyfully?

There is a repeated refrain in verses 12 and 22 that we will see throughout this book. What should characterize our lives as believers? What other things should be true of our lives? (For example, see Micah 6:8, Romans 12:9-21, I Thessalonians 5:16-18.)

A helpful acronym for Bible study application is S.P.A.C.E. Did you come away with any of these ideas this week?

- **S**—Sin to confess?
- **P**—Promise to claim?
- **A**—Attitude to change?
- **C**—Commandment to keep?
- **E**—Example to follow?

There is a long series of “better than” statements from this point forward in Ecclesiastes. Jot them down as you notice them, looking for patterns, and watching to see how they advance the themes of the book.

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WEEK FIVE

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 4: Care Passionately

How might having compassion contribute to having an abundant life?

What is the opposite of love? Explain. Could you make a case for several different possible answers to this question? Is it ever easier for you to choose one of these opposites of love when interacting with the "lost and least of these"?

What connection is made between eternal perspective and compassion in the following passages?

Matthew 25:31-46

Romans 14:10

I John 4:16-21

When resources such as time and money are limited, how should we decide when and where to offer compassion or care for the poor? How does our obligation change dependent upon the recipient's integrity, lifestyle, level of need, previous gifts received, or attitude?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 4

Chapter 4	Observations
<p>Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. 2 And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. 3 But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.</p> <p>4 Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.</p> <p>5 The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.</p> <p>6 Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.</p> <p>7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 8 one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.</p>	

Chapter 4	Observations
<p>9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.</p> <p>13 Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. 14 For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. 15 I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. 16 There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.</p>	

For Further Reflection

How does the discussion of oppression in Ecclesiastes 4 build on the preceding verses from Ecclesiastes 3:16-18? “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.”

Where do you see the truth of these words play out in the world today? In your city?

What root sins that lead to oppression are mentioned in chapter 4? Do you struggle with any of these personally?

What should we do when confronted with the injustices of the world?

Thinking about injustice can make an empathetic person despair. What do you think of verse 2 and 3? Do you hear echoes of this in society? Has your own heart grown cynical?

The Psalmist, Asaph, says “my steps had nearly slipped,” and he’d grown weary from thinking about the exploits of the wicked “until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” (Psalm 73:1, 17) How does the Preacher reach a similar conclusion in Ecclesiastes? (See the final verse of the book.)

Romans 12:19-21 says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” According to this passage, how will God deal with injustice? How are we commanded to react?

Why is it sometimes a solace to know that life is short?

In verses 4:4-6 we see two extremes (both negative) and a third, better way. Paraphrase this section in your own words.

What are some of the great blessings of friendship or community listed in 4:9-12?

Perhaps you have experienced seasons of loneliness, or struggled with feeling disconnected. How has God used these seasons positively in your life? How have these seasons led you to drift spiritually?

What steps could you take to better connect in Christ-centered community? Is there anyone you could specifically pursue who seems to be disconnected?

No person can be a perfect companion as described in 4:9-12. How does the Holy Spirit provide the same (or better) blessings? (See Acts 9:31, II Corinthians 13:14, Romans 8:26, John 14:26, Titus 3:5, and I Thessalonians 1:6)

How many of the problems detailed in Ecclesiastes 4 could be solved by an attitude of humility?

In what ways do you need to depend on Christ to rescue you from the pitfalls of chapter 4?

How was Jesus affected by the bitter reality of 4:16? What did he know that helped him bear it without bitterness?

WEEK SIX

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 5: Give Generously

How is giving generously an echo of the gospel? (Romans 8:32, John 3:16) What attributes of God are reflected by generous Christians (in addition to generosity)?

If Jesus showed up on your doorstep and handed you \$1 million, then vanished, how would you invest it for his Kingdom? How would you decide? Do you feel more or less freedom to spend your paycheck than money personally handed you by God? Why or why not?

"Giving generously, in the way that will add to your joy in life, means daydreaming before you give." Daydream a little now. How could you bless someone in Jesus' name today?

Read Psalm 24. How is God described? And in John 1:12, how are we described? How would a deep understanding of these passages affect our giving practices?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 5

Chapter 5	Observations
<p>Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. 2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. 3 For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.</p> <p>4 When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 6 Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? 7 For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.</p> <p>8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. 9 But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.</p>	

Chapter 5	Observations
<p>10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. 11 When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? 12 Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.</p> <p>13 There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, 14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. 15 As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. 16 This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? 17 Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.</p> <p>18 Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. 19 Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. 20 For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.</p>	

For Further Reflection

Chapter 5 opens with a clear reminder that we must view God rightly, not take him lightly. This perspective is important not only for meditation and worship, but right down to the most practical matters of life, including how we see and spend our money. Derek Kidner writes, “Whereas the prophets hurl their invective against the vicious and the hypocrites, this writer’s target is the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough to church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God. Such a man has forgotten where and who he is; above all, who God is.”

According to Ecclesiastes 5:1-7, who is God? Who are we?

What posture should we have when we approach God?

How much of your time with God do you spend talking versus listening? How do you go about listening to God?

Both 5:7 and 3:14 mention “fearing” God. What does it look like to fear God? How is the motivation slightly different between the two passages?

About this passage, Matthew Henry wrote, “Have we vowed to *give our own selves unto the Lord*? Let us then be as good as our word, act in his service, to his glory...” Have you ever made a promise to God? What motivates you to make vows in the first place?

Look back at Ecclesiastes 1:16, 2:1, 2:15, 2:20, 2:23, and 3:18. What has been going on in the Preacher's heart? Now consider 5:2—how should we instruct our hearts?

Verse 10 gives a familiar Biblical perspective about money. What is it? Where else do you find this idea in the Bible? What is Jesus' philosophy concerning money? See Matthew 6:19-24.

What are several ways money is a disappointment, according to verses 10-17?

So... is it better to be rich, or to be poor? What is Jesus' commentary on poverty in Matthew 5:3-6?

How does God use our dissatisfaction for good? Do you think he intends us to be dissatisfied? Is there a difference between satisfaction and contentment?

What is a practical way to prevent your heart from loving money or making an idol of possessions?

Verses 18-20 contain one of the many joyful interludes in the book. According to this passage, what gift does God give? Where do we find the ability to enjoy that gift?

Is there a contradiction between enjoying your possessions and giving generously? Can you do both?

“Let my words be few.” One of the best ways to enter God’s presence is to pray his own words back to Him. Praying through Psalms (or any Scripture) creates really rich prayer time, keeps our focus where it should be, and prevents us from getting off track. Spend some time praying through the following Psalm, making it your own as you go.

24 A Psalm of David.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
2 for he has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.
3 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.
5 He will receive blessing from the Lord
and righteousness from the God of his
salvation.
6 Such is the generation of those who seek him,

who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*
7 Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
8 Who is this King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle!
9 Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
10 Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory! *Selah*

WEEK SEVEN

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 6: Hold Loosely

How do the following individuals exemplify the principle of holding loosely? What did they give, and what did they gain?

- Abraham (Genesis 22)
- Hannah (I Samuel 1-2)
- Paul (Philippians 3:4-11)

Hebrews 10:19-11:40 speaks to the kind of faith God desires from us and illustrates this steadfast faith with stories of Abraham (and others). According to this passage, what are at least three reasons for our hope? How is faith proportional to or affected by our eternal perspective?

Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." What would it look like to delight yourself in the Lord, or as Tozer says, to make Jesus your treasure? How would this help you to hold loosely?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 6

Chapter 6	Observations
<p>There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: 2 a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil. 3 If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. 4 For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. 5 Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. 6 Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?</p> <p>7 All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. 8 For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? 9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: this also is vanity and a striving after wind.</p> <p>10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. 11 The more words, the more vanity, and what is the advantage to man? 12 For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?</p>	

For Further Reflection

Joe Rigney has said, “We need not necessarily fear the intensity of our joy in created things. Provided we are anchored in a supreme love for God, then, when our love for one of His gifts shoots through the roof like a rocket, it carries our love for God along with it, lifting it to new, unforeseen heights. In this sense we rob ourselves of potent worship if we detach from the gifts or rush through the enjoyment of creation.” How can we enjoy God’s gifts in the world while not making an idol of them?

How would you define idolatry? Is there anything in your life that has attained idol-like status? How can you tell? How did it happen? What can you do about it?

In verses 2, 3, and 7, what does the man have going for him? What is he lacking?

What would our culture consider to be the highest of all earthly blessings? Have you experienced any of these? Did they bring you contentment?

Who is responsible for the “heavy evil” of verse 1 according to verse 2? How does this strike you? How do you explain it?

Why do you think the author describes dissatisfaction as an evil? Why is it heavy?

Several things are frequently described in Scripture as a heavy burden: hard service or slavery, the responsibility of leading difficult people, our own sins, and facing the anger of the Lord. Yet Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-29, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” How could Jesus’ offer benefit the Preacher in Ecclesiastes? What might Jesus have to say to you on this subject?

How have you seen God exchange your burdens for rest?

James 4:13-17 returns to the vanity/vapor theme in the New Testament. “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” How would James fill in the blank: Life is short, therefore _____. Would the Preacher agree?

Which verse would you say is the key verse from verses 1-9? Why? Rewrite it in your own words here.

Reread verses 10-12 and walk through the Preacher's argument. Although God is not mentioned, we learn a lot about him here. What is true about God according to these verses?

How does the despairing idea of verses 3-5 show up in our culture? How do verses 10-12 offer a counter-argument?

Are you holding loosely to things of earth? Are you discontent? Do you have a deeply thankful heart? Take some time to confess any areas where you fall short, and spend some time counting your blessings. Can you list 25 things you are thankful for? 50? 100?

WEEK EIGHT

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 7: Love Deeply

Ecclesiastes is nothing if not realistic — bad things are bound to happen under the sun. Financially, vocationally, physically, and relationally, we experience loss and disappointment. How does it affect your relationships to live in a fallen world?

Think about someone in your life who is difficult to love. Do you suppose Jesus ever encountered someone like this person? How would he have loved them? What does he expect from you in this relationship? What does he not expect?

Many Christians have been deeply hurt by other believers, sometimes by the local church itself. What does love look like in that context? How might love practically work itself out in a body of imperfect believers?

How does the notion that life is fleeting affect your perspective on loving others? Does it affect all of your relationships or only those closest to you?

Do you agree with the statement, "The chief end of marriage is to glorify God by enjoying Him together"? Could the same be said of friendship? If an outsider observed your marriage or closest friendship, would he or she conclude that the main purpose of that relationship is to enjoy God together? How could a goal of enjoying God together change your relationships?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 7

Chapter 7	Observations
<p>A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.</p> <p>2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.</p> <p>3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.</p> <p>4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.</p> <p>5 It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.</p> <p>6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.</p> <p>7 Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.</p> <p>8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.</p> <p>9 Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.</p> <p>10 Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.</p> <p>11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.</p> <p>12 For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.</p> <p>13 Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?</p>	

Chapter 7	Observations
<p>14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.</p> <p>15 In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. 16 Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? 17 Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? 18 It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.</p> <p>19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.</p> <p>20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.</p> <p>21 Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. 22 Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.</p> <p>23 All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. 24 That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?</p>	

Chapter 7	Observations
<p>25 I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. 26 And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. 27 Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— 28 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. 29 See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.</p>	

For Further Reflection

From verses 1-12, list several things to avoid, and several things to pursue. Have you known people who epitomize these two lists? What were they like?

Why does the Preacher indicate that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting? When do you think sorrow is to be preferred over joy?

Relationships have an unfortunate tendency to eventually land in “the house of mourning,” since no one we love will live forever. How can we stand it?

What advice does Ecclesiastes have for someone who is weighed down by sadness?

How do you respond to “the rebuke of the wise” (verse 5)? C.J. Mahaney has said, “criticism... is part of God’s sanctification process—a tool that he uses to reveal idols and accelerate... growth in humility.” How have you seen that prove true in your life?

Read verse 8. How are patience and pride opposites? Would you describe yourself as a patient person? What should characterize our hearts when we are waiting?

Why are we tempted to romanticize the past (verse 10)? What does it say about our perspective of God when we do that? What is a better approach?

Look at the comparison in verse 12. Why bother with wisdom?

There are several bits of good relationship advice in this chapter. List them below.

Paraphrase verses 13 and 14. What is the Preacher saying?

Verses 15-20 contain a curious warning against being “overly” righteous or “too” wise. What point is the Preacher making? Compare Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:6, 6:33, 9:13, and 23:28.

In verse 26-29, we see a hint of Solomon’s life story. What was it that ensnared him? (See I Kings 11:1-8.)

How can a relationship be a snare? How can it be an encouragement? How can we practically take steps to help our spouses or friends find freedom in Christ?

Proverbs 31:10 offers a happy corollary to Solomon's bitter assessment in verse 28. According to Proverbs 31, what are some qualities of an excellent woman? How does she bless her family?

The Preacher laments in verse 28 that even though he has tried to find the scheme of things, he has been unable to find what he seeks. What has God promised we will find by seeking? (See Hebrews 11:6.)

According to verse 29, "God made man upright." We see that confirmed in Genesis 1:27. Why then is life under the sun such a mess? How does 7:29 echo Genesis chapter 3?

WEEK NINE

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 8: Stand Firm

Think about your church and your personal life from the perspective of the devil. What could he do to cause the most havoc in your community, your family, or your own soul? Why might he attack you?

What lies has the devil used most frequently to paralyze you? What weak spots does he go after? For each lie that you list, find a corresponding Biblical passage that counterattacks with truth.

In Psalm 144, what connection does David make between spiritual battle and eternal perspective?

Does the idea that an invisible spiritual realm surrounds us encourage or frighten you? Why? How did this understanding affect David in II Samuel 5? Elijah's servant in II Kings 6:11-18? Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane?

How might you, in the words of Jim Elliot, be more "dangerous" this week?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 8

Chapter 8	Observations
<p>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.</p> <p>2 I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. 3 Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. 4 For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" 5 Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. 6 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. 7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? 8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 9 All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.</p>	

Chapter 8	Observations
<p>10 Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. 11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. 12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. 13 But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.</p> <p>14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. 15 And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.</p> <p>16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.</p>	

For Further Reflection

In verse 2, the Preacher introduces the idea of citizenship. Compare his words to Paul's in Romans 13:1-7. Would they agree? How do you respond to authorities?

In a fallen world, our kings and presidents may be godly or corrupt, something both Romans and Ecclesiastes take into account. But according to Ephesians 6:12, "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." How does it affect your response to government authority to recognize this "behind the scenes" dynamic of spiritual battle?

In Psalm 144, the psalmist uses similar vapor/shadow language to The Preacher: "O Lord, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow. Bow your heavens, O Lord, and come down! Touch the mountains so that they smoke! Flash forth the lightning and scatter them; send out your arrows and rout them!" How can weak, short-lived human beings hope to comprehend our mighty God? What is he like in comparison to us?

How is the immensity of God a comfort when you consider the actions of evil men or reality of spiritual battle?

Read verse 8. Who has power over death? Now read Matthew 10:28-31. How do you explain the paradox in verses 28 and 31 (“fear him”/“fear not”)?

Verse 9 records that “man had power over man to his hurt.” How much power do evil men have? Colossians 1:9-12 records a mighty prayer of Paul for all followers of Christ to be strengthened in power. According to this passage, how much power is Satan allowed in the lives of believers? How does this encourage you?

“The heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil,” says the Preacher in verse 11. Sounds ominous! But surely the righteous are off the hook? See Jeremiah 17:9-10.

Take a look at verse 12. How can the Preacher say it will be well with those who fear God, when he has already described how often the poor are oppressed and the righteous die before the wicked? In what sense will it be well?

Whom shall we fear, according to verse 12? Chris Tomlin, concerning his song, “Whom Shall I Fear,” said:

Fear is no respecter of age, socio-economic status, or anything. It is a condition of the heart... Whom shall I fear? In the midst of crisis or anything that comes against, it is powerful to know Who stands behind and goes before us. The God of Angel Armies is always by our side.

The Scripture [II Kings 6:15-18] really came to life for me after we wrote the song... That just really struck me. For myself, for the Church, we need to be praying that same prayer for God to open our eyes. Most of the time our eyes are focused on what's in front of us. If we could see the spiritual realm, our enemy wouldn't cause us fear. Those who are with us are far more than those who are against us.¹

When do you struggle with fear?

Many times in Ecclesiastes we learn that A is better than B. But four times we are told there is nothing better than *this*. Read 2:24, 3:12, 3:22, and finally 8:15. What, according to our old friend the Preacher, is best of all?

A.W. Tozer, Charles Spurgeon, and Randy Alcorn all agree: the people of God ought to be the happiest people on earth, so much so that the contrast between believers and everyone else “under the sun” is remarkable. What reason(s) do we have for joy in this broken world? Why would all other joys pale in comparison?

How would you illustrate this chapter of Ecclesiastes?

¹ Kevin Davis, “#384- ‘Whom Shall I Fear (God of Angel Armies)’ by Chris Tomlin,” New Release Today, http://www.newreleasetoday.com/article.php?article_id=1022.

WEEK TEN

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 9: Choose Light

In Matthew 6, Jesus says "if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness." What is a "healthy" eye? In what sense can a person's life be full of light?

How can gratitude transform difficult circumstances?

"If you have no words to give thanks, borrow some." What Scripture, song, or quotation encourages you most in this area of choosing light?

Colossians 3:1 says, "set your hearts on things above," (NIV) while II Corinthians 4:18 admonishes us to fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal. Is it possible to be, as the cliché would have it, "so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good"? How would it affect your daily life and choices to meditate on heaven more frequently?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 9

Chapter 9	Observations
<p>But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. 2 It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. 4 But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. 6 Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.</p> <p>7 Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.</p> <p>8 Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.</p>	

Chapter 9	Observations
<p>9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.</p> <p>11 Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. 12 For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.</p> <p>13 I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.</p> <p>14 There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. 15 But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. 16 But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.</p> <p>17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.</p>	

For Further Reflection

What is the inescapable event that happens to us all, according to verses 1-6? What is the force that acts on all of us according to verses 11 and 12?

We may not be free from death or time, but one freedom we do have. What can we choose, according to verses 7-10?

Look back at some of the other joyful interludes in this book and take note of the context. What do you notice about the circumstances in which the Preacher is recommending joy?

2:24-26

3:12-13

3:22

5:18-20

8:15

Paul wrote eloquently about joy while in prison. Read Philippians 4:4-13 and reflect on the contrast between Paul's circumstances and his state of mind. What do you think accounts for his joyful tone?

In John 13:1-3 we get a peek at the setting for one of Jesus' long discourses (John 14-17). What is it? Now glance over Jesus' sermon, particularly 14:26-27, 15:10-11, 16:20-24, and 16:32-33. What encourages Jesus in spite of his circumstances?

What do you think of Ecclesiastes' reputation as a despairing book? Does it seem silly to talk about joy against such a backdrop?

The first half of verse 10 reads, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." How does this attitude transform ordinary work into something special?

Verse 10 continues, "for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." The Hebrews talked of Sheol as we might say "the grave," but as Christians, we believe in a New Heaven and a New Earth (Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 21). Do you believe there will be meaningful work in eternity? If so, how does that affect your understanding of work on Earth?

Matt Maher's song, "Christ is Risen," says:

Christ is risen from the dead
Trampling over death by death
Come awake, come awake
Come and rise up from the grave...

O death, where is your sting?
O hell, where is your victory?
O church, come stand in the light
The glory of God has defeated the night

How did Jesus' death and resurrection completely transform our understanding of death? What hope do we have for eternal life because of Easter?

Verses 13-18 tell a story of power and wisdom that might have made newspapers in the Preacher's day. How is quiet, peaceful wisdom received in our current cultural or political landscape?

How could you paraphrase verse 17 to make it applicable in the Twitterverse/Facebook world?

Mark all the symptoms of a fallen world in Ecclesiastes 9. In the margin, jot down why we can have hope in spite of each. On a more personal level, list five ways the brokenness of the world has impacted you recently. For each incident you listed, how can you "choose light," or have an eternal perspective?

Look ahead at 11:7-8 and compare it to 2:13 and 1:5. Does the Preacher place more emphasis on darkness or light in this book?

WEEK ELEVEN

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 10: Rest

How does Psalm 23 encourage you to rest?

Look at Hebrews 4:1-11. How does the author of Hebrews seem to define rest? What special rest awaits the people of God (verse 9)?

How do the concepts of eternal rest and weekly Sabbath connect?

Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). How have you obeyed this command?

Why is rest important to your well-being? In what ways do you feel that you need to change the quality or quantity of your rest (daily, weekly, monthly, annually)?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 10

Chapter 10	Observations
<p>Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.</p> <p>2 A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.</p> <p>3 Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.</p> <p>4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.</p> <p>5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: 6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. 7 I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.</p> <p>8 He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.</p> <p>9 He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them.</p> <p>10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed.</p> <p>11 If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.</p>	

Chapter 10	Observations
<p>12 The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.</p> <p>13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness.</p> <p>14 A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?</p> <p>15 The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.</p> <p>16 Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!</p> <p>17 Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!</p> <p>18 Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.</p> <p>19 Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.</p> <p>20 Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.</p>	

For Further Reflection

Chapter 10 is thoroughly rooted in ancient Palestine, which can be challenging for a modern reader. We may not worry much about kings and rulers, and we may not work in the same kinds of jobs, but we do work, and we do have to deal with bosses. Try reading back over this chapter and subbing the word “boss” for ruler or king. Does that help you frame this portion of the book as good advice for the workplace? What do you think the Preacher’s Ten Commandments for the workplace would be according to this chapter?

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1) | 6) |
| 2) | 7) |
| 3) | 8) |
| 4) | 9) |
| 5) | 10) |

In an age when masses of people routinely broadcast their opinions on anything and everything, how can we spot wisdom or wise counsel based on what the Preacher tells us in verses 12-14? What might Paul add (see Romans 12:1-2)?

Verse 15 reads, “The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.” Under what conditions are you more likely to experience the weariness of toil?

Over a lifetime, how would a lifestyle of regular stillness and Sabbath-keeping combat that weariness? How would it affect your soul? Your family? Your joy?

Speaking of Sabbath... what rationale does God give for the institution of the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8-11? What reason does he give in Deuteronomy 5:12-15? How do these

two reasons reflect the Great Commandment -- to love God and to love your neighbor? How would a community committed to weekly Sabbath contribute to social justice?

Eugene Peterson maintains that when we work we are the most god-like. What does he mean by that? Do you agree? What danger confronts our souls if we refuse to rest?

What is the comparison of feasting princes in verses 16-17 meant to show us? What would a lifestyle of “improper” recreation lead to?

In verse 19, Solomon tells us that money answers everything. How do you interpret that comment? Do you agree? Compare Ecclesiastes 5:10.

What are the dangers of under-your-breath muttering, according to verse 20? How does Jesus push this advice further in the Sermon on the Mount? See his words on anger (Matthew 5:21-26), loving our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48), and speech (Luke 6:43-45).

How is an “under the sun” perspective of work and rest lacking? How does the gospel transform our understanding of work and rest? (Why we work, why we rest, how we work, how we rest...)

Tim Keller has said, ““Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught. Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God’s calling, can matter forever.” How do your endeavors matter? Take some time to think through your calling—not necessarily your ultimate Capital C Calling in life, but the places you are currently called to live and serve. In the chart below, list out your top ten frustrations in that vocation, how the book of Ecclesiastes speaks to those issues, and how Jesus might use or redeem those irritations for his glory. Then take a few minutes to pray for his perspective, endurance, and joy in your work place.

Frustrations	Advice from Ecclesiastes	For the Glory of God

WEEK TWELVE

Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 11: Unhooked and Unhindered

Define, in your own words, "freedom in Christ."

Think of the godliest people you know. Have you observed that they are "unhooked and unhindered"?

In language similar to Hebrews 12, Proverbs 5:22 says, "An evil man is held captive by his own sins; they are ropes that catch and hold him." How have you allowed sin to entangle you in the past? What were the results?

What sins do you tend to tolerate or justify, "in the name of authenticity, perhaps"?

In what ways can fear hamper true freedom? How does the hope of heaven contribute to a life of freedom in Christ?

How can you cultivate childlike freedom to approach God in prayer?

and Thirty Thousand Days, Chapter 12: Home

"When you desire something pure and perfect here on earth, recognize it for what it is, a signpost pointing you on your way. In itself, it cannot satisfy your soul. But does it reflect the love, creativity, holiness, and goodness of God? Look up, see perfection Himself, and worship." List three or four things on earth that you find yourself longing for. In what ways do these specific things point you Home?

In what ways do you think our dreams are echoes of Eden? Take a minute to reread Genesis 1-3. What was true of Eden, of Adam's and Eve's lives, before the fall? And after? What hints do you see in this passage of God's intentions towards us? What has Satan's scheme towards us always been?

What do you think of Billy Graham's statement, "only when a man is prepared to die is he also prepared to live?"

If Heaven consisted of everything delightful, beautiful, and exciting that you could imagine, but was without Jesus, would you want to go there? (You will probably say no to this question, knowing that it's the right thing to say. But deep down, do you struggle with that answer? Why would a Heaven without Jesus be Hell? How does the Hollywood version of Heaven fall short?)

If you knew that tomorrow you would wake up in Heaven, what would change for you today?

Ecclesiastes Chapter 11

Chapter 11	Observations
<p>Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.</p> <p>2 Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.</p> <p>3 If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.</p> <p>4 He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.</p> <p>5 As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.</p> <p>6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.</p> <p>7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.</p> <p>8 So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.</p> <p>9 Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.</p> <p>10 Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.</p>	

Ecclesiastes Chapter 12

Chapter 12	Observations
<p>Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, 3 in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, 4 and the doors on the street are shut— when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— 5 they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— 6 before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. 8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.</p> <p>9 Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. 10 The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.</p> <p>11 The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. 12 My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.</p> <p>13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.</p>	

For Further Reflection

While Ecclesiastes is fascinating, we don't read it simply to gain knowledge. These words are "like goads," the pointed sticks used by shepherds, designed to prod those silly sheep in the right direction. With the Psalmist, we pray, "Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways." (Psalm 119:36-37) This week as we conclude our study, let's ask God to give us "life in His way," to transform our hearts and ultimately our direction in life. How has your perspective shifted over the course of this study? What are your biggest takeaways?

We see the theme of vanity and vapor continue right through the end of the book. Looking back over Ecclesiastes as a whole, what kinds of things have been described this way?

In the opening verses of chapter 11, the Preacher gives some very sound financial advice, counsel that also applies more broadly to how we invest our lives in general. Summarize the wisdom found in verses:

1-2)

3-4)

5-6)

What similar wisdom appears in James 4:13-17?

In 11:8-9, the Preacher gives two great summary statements of the book. Each of them comes with a big “but...” tempering his advice. Paraphrase those verses here.

How should we walk, according to 11:9? Compare Hebrews 12:1-2. Based on the action verbs in that passage, what things do you need to "lay aside"? What things do you want to "run with"? What spiritual disciplines do you need to implement in order to "look to Jesus"?

What is the Preacher's conclusion in 11:9 and 12:14? How is this truth alternately terrifying or comforting based on your point of view? Do you feel differently about the judgment of God after studying Ecclesiastes?

11:10-12:8 give us a vivid picture of aging, from the perspective (probably) of an elderly Solomon. What might have been different in Solomon's life if he had remembered our Creator in the days of his youth? How could an increased focus on remembering our Creator change your life?

We are given a glimpse at the Preacher's writing process in 12:9-12. How deliberate is his word choice? Is he the kind of writer who says things lightly? How has your own study of this book confirmed the truth of 12:9?

Whether or not Solomon was the human author of this book, all the wisdom it contains comes to us from one Shepherd (12:11). How should this statement change the way we sometimes approach this part of scripture? How should it impact the way we approach scripture in general?

How do 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 4:12, and Romans 15:4 build on these verses?

The average human lifespan is somewhere in the neighborhood of 80 years, or 30,000 days. On the following graph, chart your spiritual journey—its high points (receiving Jesus, committing to consistent time in the Word, etc.) and its low points (seasons of doubt or complacency.) How can you get to the place you want to be at the 80 year mark?



If someone asked you tomorrow what the main message of Ecclesiastes is, how would you summarize this book?

“Breath, mere breath, says the Preacher. Mist and vapor, all is fleeting.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, paraphrased.) We see that life is a vapor right from the opening pages of the Bible. In the cloudy dawn of time, “a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*, and the man became a living creature. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.” (Genesis 2:6-8, emphasis mine.) Our lives may indeed be as ephemeral as the clouds that scuttle by, but they are intimately God-breathed and infused with meaning. How has the teaching of Ecclesiastes served to breathe meaning into all of the challenges you face in this life “under the sun?”

**Finally,
A Quick Crash Course on Hermeneutics (Or, How to Interpret the Bible):**

1. Pray.
2. Read the passage in its natural sense, taking note of the genre.
3. Query the text.
4. Take note of context.
5. Take note of grammar.
6. Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
7. Interpret the Bible in community.
8. Read the Bible as a book about Jesus.
9. Respond in faith and obedience.
10. Hold your interpretation with humility.

(Thanks to Michael Morgan for this helpful check list.)

For Further Reading and Study: Check out the following resources.

Barrick, William D. *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament*. Focus on the Bible Commentary Series. Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2011. Print.

Begg, Alistair. "Chasing the Wind: A Study in the book of Ecclesiastes." <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/series/chasing-the-wind/>

DeRouchie, Jason. "Ecclesiastes: Finding Joy Amidst Life's Enigmas." <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ecclesiastes-finding-joy-amidst-life-s-enigmas>

Kidner, Derek. *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Ecclesiastes*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1976. Print.

Rigney, Joe. *Things of Earth*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2015. Print.

Ryken, Philip G. *Why Everything Matters*. Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2015. Print.