

The Search for Meaning

Ecclesiastes



**9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

The Search for Meaning

Ecclesiastes

by Tim McMahon

The Search for Meaning
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How to make the most of these studies

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Ecclesiastes, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot 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

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read. Interspersed throughout the text are three types of ‘interaction’, each with their own symbol:



For starters

Questions to break the ice and get you thinking.



Investigate

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



Think it through

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own. Each study also concludes with some suggestions for prayer.

3. Suggestions for Individual Study

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Ecclesiastes and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

4. Suggestions for Group Study

- 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 threesomes. Get together with a friend/s 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.
- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- 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 important sections of text to emphasize, 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.
- 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 Ecclesiastes, 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.

1

First impressions

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

So begins and ends the book of Ecclesiastes. And on 28 occasions in between, the author exclaims that particular things are meaningless; 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.



Investigate

1. 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

2. Note the response of people 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 worldview?
3. What else resulted from Solomon's wisdom (1 Kgs 10:23-25)? How would this affect his ability to conduct a major research project?

The great wealth and wisdom of Solomon qualifies him above all others to undertake the research project which is the book's chief subject. If Solomon cannot find answers, no-one can. The magnitude of his project is as breath-taking 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 Teacher', 'the Preacher', '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 NIV translation of 'Teacher'.

At first glance, his great research project seems to be a failure. The recurring verdict is that everything is "meaningless" (as the NIV puts it). This 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 Teacher 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. Other English translations of the Bible use words like 'vanity' or 'futility' to reflect this nuance.



Investigate

1. 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 threesomes. Each of these sub-groups can take a different section of the book, read through it, discuss the questions, and then report back to the main group.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26

Ecclesiastes 3:1-5:7

Ecclesiastes 5:8-8:17

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12:14

- a. In what areas of life does the Teacher conclude there is no hope of finding meaning? Who or what is responsible for this?

- b. What responses to life does the Teacher describe?

- c. Where does God fit into the Teacher's conclusions?

Now look more closely at the Teacher's conclusion in Ecclesiastes 12:9-14.

2. Given the Teacher'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!

3. 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 Teacher’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 Teacher 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 Teacher’s negative conclusions. We need to think through why we might be reluctant to do this.



Think it through

1. 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?

Why?

2. 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’ 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

3. 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?

If we are to benefit from the book of Ecclesiastes, we must not move too quickly to New Testament passages which seem to offer answers to the problems the Teacher raises. We must first let the truth of what the Teacher 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 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.

Pray

1. 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.
2. Pray that you will increasingly develop an attitude of humble dependence on God through these studies.