

VERSE BY VERSE

BIBLE STUDY SERIES

Ecclesiastes

CHASING THE WIND



with

ALISTAIR BEGG

Ecclesiastes

CHASING THE WIND

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IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS THE ANSWER
TO ALL THE DEEPEST HEARTACHES,
LONGINGS, AND ABERRATIONS OF THE
HUMAN CONDITION.

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Truth For Life, Cleveland, OH 44139

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VERSE BY VERSE

BIBLE STUDY SERIES

The Verse by Verse Bible study series is inspired by Alistair Begg's decades-long pattern of and passion for expository preaching. The aim of these studies is no different than the mission of Truth For Life: to teach the Bible with clarity and relevance so that unbelievers will be converted, believers will be established, and local churches will be strengthened. Each of those three facets can be realized only because God's Word is "living and active" (Heb. 4:12); indeed, it is a seed meant to be sown in order that it might fall into good soil, grow, and yield much fruit (Luke 8:4-15).

The great inherent danger when we study the Bible is that we want to move immediately from our reading of the biblical text to personal application. To combat that temptation, each session in this volume follows the following structure, which will help you spend adequate time meditating on and studying each passage before attempting to apply it to your own life:

Open the Book — Read the passage in view, observing key themes, verses, or questions that arise from the text.

Study the Book — Using commentary from Alistair Begg, consider the passage's meaning in its context by answering questions and making theological connections.

Live Out the Book — Respond to God's Word in faith and repentance, applying its principles to particular areas of life.

Praise and Prayer — Use the provided prompts to turn the truths learned into praise and prayer, thank God for His love, confess sins, and go forth to serve Him with joy.

Further Study (*Optional*) — Supplement the session's content with related Bible passages and additional resources.

To reinforce good Bible reading habits, the questions in the **Study the Book** and **Live Out the Book** sections follow a basic progression from *interpretation* to *application*. Each session adapts the same set of four questions to pertain specifically to the biblical passage in view. These are:

- What is the main point of this portion?
- What does God—Father, Son, or Holy Spirit—reveal of Himself?
- What insight am I given into myself and into my life situation? Is there an example of a warning to heed? A promise to claim?
- What does Christ require of me now, in thought, word, or action?¹

¹ Used with permission from Scripture Union. <https://scriptureunion.org/how-to-read-pray/>.

Tips for Individuals

- Follow the provided Reading Plan in the Introduction to maximize comprehension of the material.
- Read or listen to the entire biblical book in a single sitting prior to beginning the study to familiarize yourself with its structure and themes. For Ecclesiastes, this should take around thirty minutes.
- Use a good study Bible for reference as you work through the content.
- For each session, aim to memorize at least one key verse.
- Share what you learn with others as you progress to solidify your knowledge and application of the material and to encourage someone else.

Tips for Groups

- Come to the meeting prepared, with participants having read the Scripture, familiarized themselves with the content, and completed the **Open** and **Study** sections.
- Read the passage for each session out loud together as a group, breaking it into smaller sections for several people to read.
- Spend most of your discussion time in the **Live Out** section, working through the questions together and using the **Study** content for reference. Take liberties to emphasize a particular question or two if it lends itself to greater discussion in the group.
- Utilize the **Praise and Prayer** section to share personal requests with the group, committing to pray for one another throughout the week.
- Consider asking your pastor for insight on any difficult questions or themes that arise during the study.
- Studies in this series are typically arranged in twelve or twenty-four sessions so that they work well for those who meet weekly, biweekly, or even monthly.

Leading a group through this study? See Appendix A for additional tips.

Before you begin, ponder this reality: Of all the places you could be, among all the circumstances that you could be facing, God has providentially ordered your steps in order that you would open up this study, search the Scriptures, and hear from God Himself through His Word.

MAKE THE BOOK LIVE TO ME, O LORD,
SHOW ME THYSELF WITHIN THY WORD,
SHOW ME MYSELF AND SHOW ME MY SAVIOR,
AND MAKE THE BOOK LIVE TO ME.

R. Hudson Pope, "Make the Book Live to Me"



INTRODUCTION

ECCLESIASTES: CHASING THE WIND

“The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.” —Ecclesiastes 12:11

Trapped in a dark world without a clear view of God, the writer of Ecclesiastes sought frantically for some light on the path—but indulging in everything this world had to offer left him empty and unfulfilled. After climbing high on life’s ladder, he made the tragic discovery that it was propped against the wrong wall. Cynical about worldly achievements, he began to question—rightly—whether anything mattered or everything was only vanity.

In this study, we’ll consider what this challenging and relevant Old Testament meditation has to say about life’s apparent futility and will be reminded that there is only one true hope that can give our existence lasting meaning. When so many pass their days running down dead-end streets, we can live with purpose. First, though, we must discover and embrace what it means to fear God, which is the beginning of true wisdom.

Key Themes

- the vanity of life
- fear of God
- effects of the fall
- toil and labor
- enjoyment of God’s creation

Setting

Likely written sometime during the period of Israel's monarchy (900–576 BC), Ecclesiastes addresses a diverse group of Israelite God-fearers—people with backgrounds as royal counselors and day laborers alike (Eccl. 8:1–9; 11:6). The book calls God's people to heed wisdom and fear their Creator (Eccl. 12:9–14).

Characters

The Preacher: The title given to the author of Ecclesiastes (1:1). The Hebrew word translated into English as “the Preacher” is *Qoheleth*, from the Hebrew verb *qahal*, which means “to assemble.” It suggests the picture of a respected Israelite king standing before an assembly of his people, instructing them in wisdom. Ecclesiastes reveals that the Preacher was a Davidic king (1:1), was greatly wise and wealthy (1:12–2:11), and arranged many proverbs (12:9). Though the book is technically anonymous, Solomon best fits the description.

Words/Phrases/Definitions

Vanity: Translated from the Hebrew word *hevel*, it literally means a “mist” or “vapor.” It is used throughout Ecclesiastes in this sense but can also refer figuratively to something that is transient, fleeting, or elusive—an enigma or paradox.

Under the Sun: In the Preacher's view, this phrase refers to the time and the place in which life occurs. Ecclesiastes is written not from the vantage point of the infinite, personal creator God but from that of His creation.

Fear God: This repeated phrase refers to the heart disposition of God's children before Him—one not of terror but of reverential awe in response to God's character.

READING PLAN

WEEK	PRIMARY TEXT
1	Ecclesiastes 1
2	Ecclesiastes 2
3	Ecclesiastes 3
4	Ecclesiastes 4
5	Ecclesiastes 5:1–7
6	Ecclesiastes 5:8–6:12
7	Ecclesiastes 7
8	Ecclesiastes 8–9
9	Ecclesiastes 10
10	Ecclesiastes 11
11	Ecclesiastes 12:1–8
12	Ecclesiastes 12:9–14

SESSION ONE

ECCLESIASTES 1

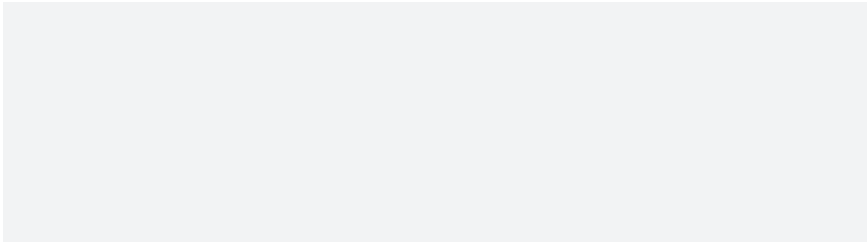
A WORD TO THE WISE

“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.” —Ecclesiastes 1:14

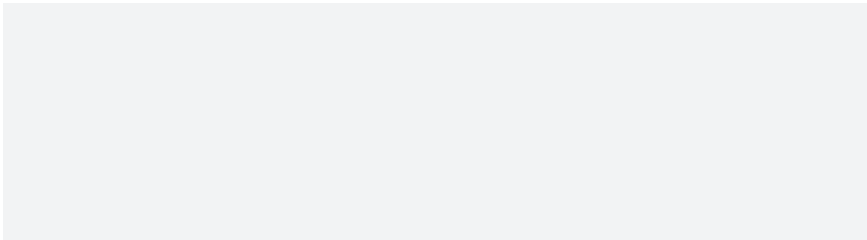
Open the Book

Go to the Lord in prayer, asking Him to help you understand and receive His Word. Then read Ecclesiastes 1.

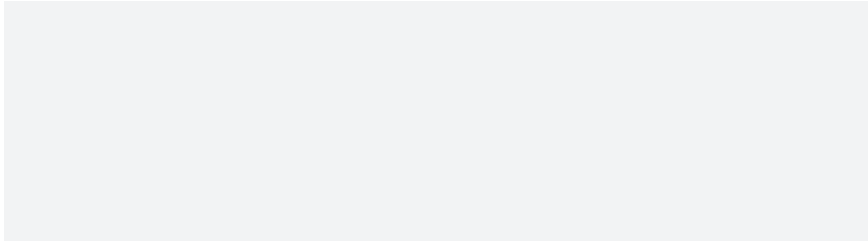
In a sentence or two, summarize what this passage says. (For this response, focus on understanding what the words themselves communicate. Don't move yet to application.)



What literary features are present in this passage? (Look for repeated words, contrasts, metaphors, questions and answers, illustrations, and references or allusions to other parts of Scripture.)



What lingering questions do you have?



Study the Book

T. S. Eliot once remarked, “Human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.”² What we find throughout Ecclesiastes, however, is a heavy dose of just that: reality.

In most of our twenty-first-century cultures, entertainment takes us to worlds of fantasy and mirage, to that which is out and beyond us. We falsely believe that if we could only get out of *our* reality, then perhaps we could find the answers. But the book of Ecclesiastes provides us no such escape. Instead, this ancient meditation continues generation after generation to shine its searchlight on matters of real life.

Verse 1 introduces us to the Preacher. He does in writing what few people are willing to do even in their minds: He wrestles with the enigmas of life, searching tirelessly for answers. The Preacher doesn’t approach his subject like a distanced university professor, raising questions only to watch his students debate one another. Rather, he’s involved in the very questions he raises. He has built an observation tower at ground level, so to speak.

Who was “the Preacher”?

The Preacher (also known as “the Teacher” or “Qoheleth” in other translations) introduces himself here in verse 1 as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Although he doesn’t actually say, “I am Solomon,” Solomon best fits the description.

² T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets* (1943).

What does the Preacher observe? Our answer is in **verse 2**, which reads more like a conclusion than an introduction: “All is vanity.” In Hebrew writing, it was customary to put the most important point up front. The Preacher follows this pattern, piquing our curiosity right away: *How can he say that everything is vanity?* It’s an invitation to read on to learn how the Preacher arrived at such a conclusion—and whether his insights will persuade us of the same.

The Preacher points out in **verse 3** that his survey of life “under the sun” is conducted not from God’s vantage point but from man’s. The Preacher will show us that in any framework that fails to account for God’s existence, everything under the sun, from birth to death, is meaningless.

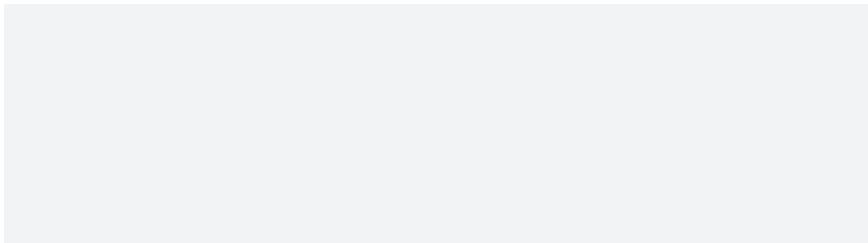
In **verses 3–18**, the Preacher unpacks his conclusion in six points:

1. *Life is marked by drudgery.* Again, in **verse 3**, the Preacher asks, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” Put simply: Life can be boring! It doesn’t matter our vocation; for everyone—mothers at home, college students, CEOs, retirees—much of life possesses an inherent monotony.
2. *Life is marked by transience.* In **verse 4**, the Preacher’s observation of generations coming and going testifies to our lives’ frailty and brevity. As our days go by and familiar faces pass away, the words of Psalm 90:10 seem to resonate with us: “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; ... they are soon gone, and we fly away.”
3. *Life is repetitive.* The Preacher observes in **verses 5–7** several features of our natural world: the sun, wind, and streams. The sun, he points out, is in its same course every day; it never goes on vacation. The wind may blow somebody’s hat off, provide a refreshing breeze, or make the aircraft bounce around—but it doesn’t cease. Streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. The Preacher wants us to see that our human experience closely mirrors the natural world. Life is repetitive.

4. *Life is insatiable.* As **verse 8** says, “All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” In other words, life has an appetite that can never be satisfied.
5. *Life is the same old, same old.* “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. ... It has been already in the ages before us” (**vv. 9–10**). Just when we think we’ve had a new idea, we discover it’s already been done. In the framework of life “under the sun,” there are no surprises; there are no true breakthroughs.
6. *Life is marked by insignificance.* In **verses 12–18**, the Preacher raises for us an essential question: Is there true life before death, or are we limited to mere survival? While king in Jerusalem, he saw everything done under the sun, concluding that it was merely a striving after the wind. “What is crooked cannot be made straight,” he says, “and what is lacking cannot be counted” (**v. 15**). Life is like a Rubik’s Cube with two blocks missing: No matter how many times we spin it, it can’t be solved, because it’s inherently flawed.

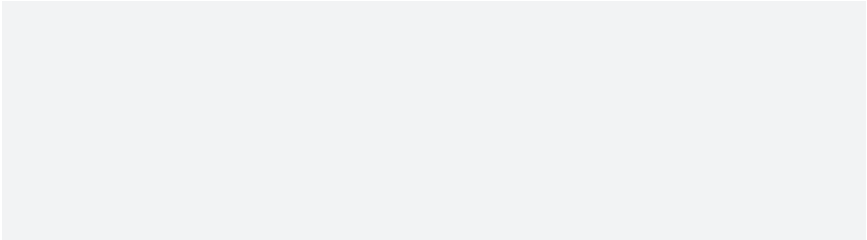
The Preacher concludes chapter 1 with **verses 16–18**, which tell us that in his intellectual pursuits of wisdom, madness, and folly, he wound up vexed and sorrowful. This, too, he discerned, is a striving after the wind.

In two or three sentences, summarize the main point of this passage. How does it fit into the broader picture of God’s revelation?

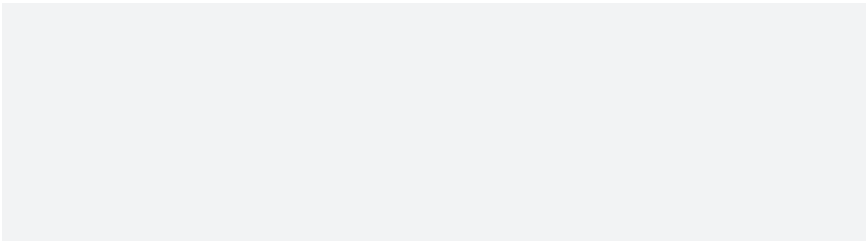


Life “under the sun” apart from God is ultimately meaningless. But for those asking, “Is there life before death?” ~~there is~~ there is the promise of Jesus, which came centuries after Ecclesiastes: “I am the way, and the truth, and *the life*” (John 14:6, emphasis added). We know today what it would take the Preacher eleven more chapters to discover in part: that in the Lord Jesus Christ is the answer to all the deepest heartaches and greatest longings we experience. In order to fully appreciate that fact’s implications, however, we must first come to terms with the vanity of life apart from Him.

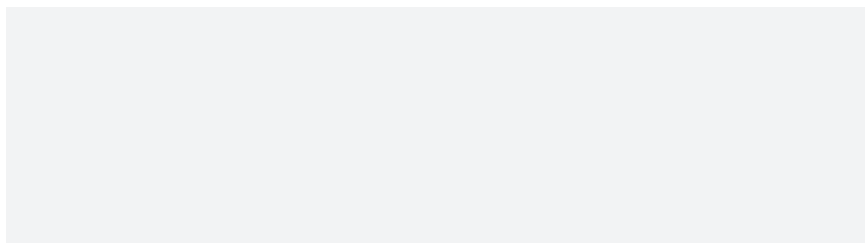
God does not appear as a character in Ecclesiastes 1, but we may be reminded of Him as we think of the vanity the Preacher describes. How does God stand in contrast to what we see here?



Of the six points the Preacher makes, which are most relevant to your life situation? Are any of them particularly hard for you to believe? Why?



Jesus offers us a significance and permanence that the world cannot. Are there any worldly promises that you tend to put your hope in? How might you lay those at the feet of Christ?





Praise and Prayer

USE PSALM 90:9–17 FOR
PRAISE AND MEDITATION:

For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.
The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
Who considers the power of your anger,
and your wrath according to the fear of you?
So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.
Return, O LORD! How long?
Have pity on your servants!
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be shown to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish the work of our hands upon us;
yes, establish the work of our hands!



Praise and Prayer

USE THE TRUTHS LEARNED FOR PERSONAL PRAYER:

- **Thank** the Lord for showing you the emptiness of life apart from Him.
- **Repent** of your tendency to search for fulfillment apart from God Himself.
- **Ask** God to satisfy the longings of your heart through His Word and presence.
- **Ask** for Christ's wisdom as you strive to honor Him in a life marked by drudgery.

Further Study

- **Related passages:** 1 Kings 4:29–34; Psalm 90:10–14.
- **Related sermon:** “A Word to the Wise”
- **Related article:** “Is There Life Before Death?”



Scan the QR code to find links to the additional resources, or visit tfl.org/ecclesiastes-list.