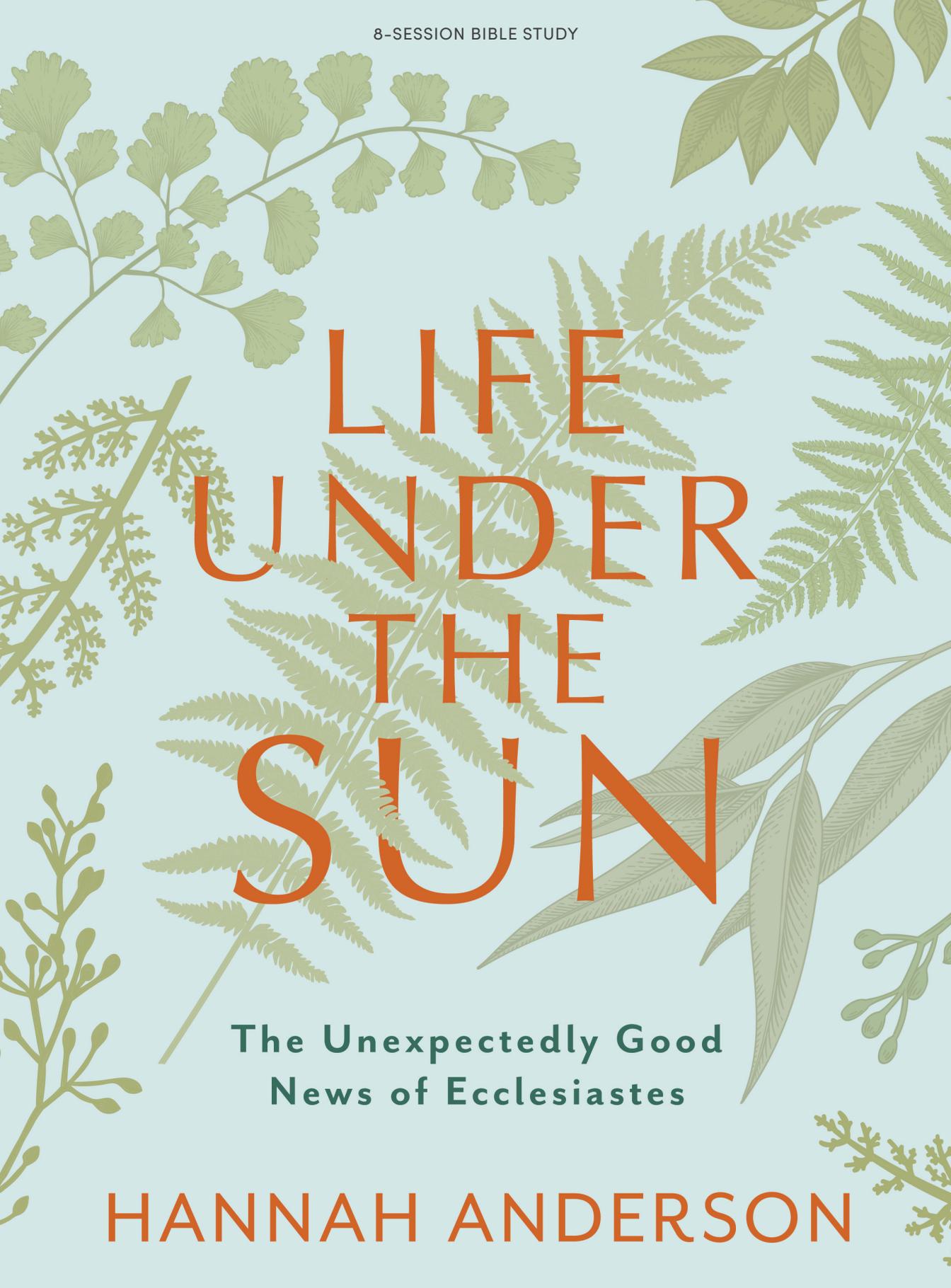


8-SESSION BIBLE STUDY



# LIFE UNDER THE SUN

The Unexpectedly Good  
News of Ecclesiastes

HANNAH ANDERSON

LIFE  
UNDER  
THE  
SUN

The Unexpectedly Good  
News of Ecclesiastes

HANNAH ANDERSON

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Brentwood, Tennessee

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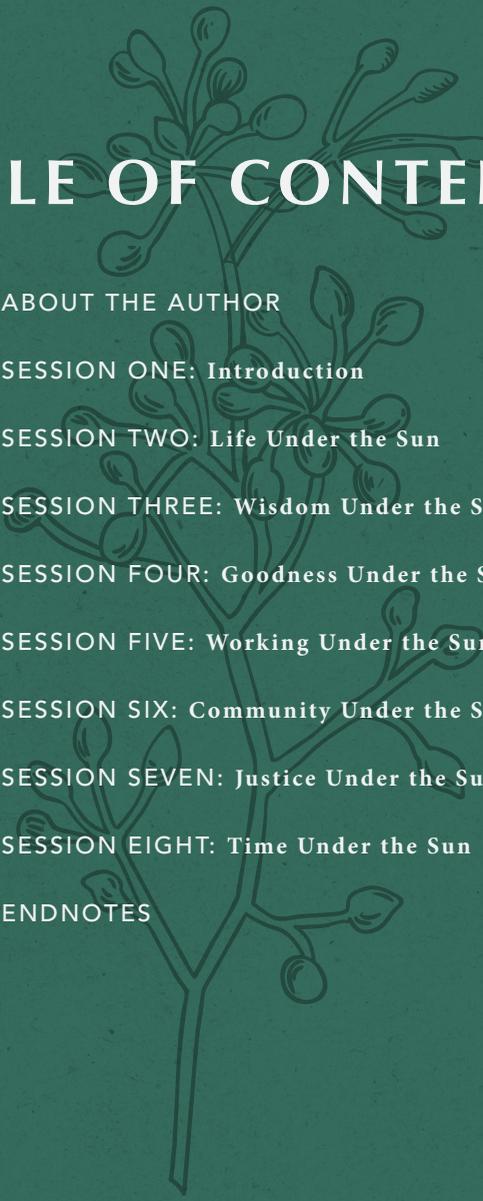
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

4	ABOUT THE AUTHOR
8	SESSION ONE: Introduction
10	SESSION TWO: Life Under the Sun
38	SESSION THREE: Wisdom Under the Sun
66	SESSION FOUR: Goodness Under the Sun
92	SESSION FIVE: Working Under the Sun
120	SESSION SIX: Community Under the Sun
148	SESSION SEVEN: Justice Under the Sun
176	SESSION EIGHT: Time Under the Sun
207	ENDNOTES

ABOUT  
**THE AUTHOR**



Hannah Anderson is an author and Bible teacher who lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Her books include *Humble Roots: How Humility Grounds and Nourishes Your Soul*, *Turning of Days: Lessons from Nature, Season, and Spirit*, and the recently released, *Heaven and Nature Sing*. Hannah's goal is to encourage believers to think deeply and broadly about how the gospel transforms every area of life.

You can connect with her at her blog **[sometimesalight.com](http://sometimesalight.com)** and on Twitter **[@sometimesalight](https://twitter.com/sometimesalight)**.





## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

As long as I can remember, I've loved the wisdom books of the Old Testament—the pithy sayings of Proverbs, the emotional power behind the Psalms, and the unmatched pathos of Job. But the book of Ecclesiastes has always puzzled me. Since you're holding this study in your hands, perhaps it's puzzled you as well. Why did God choose to include such an earthy, contradictory, and even pessimistic book in the Bible? And how is it supposed to make us wise?

Over the years, however, I've come to appreciate Ecclesiastes in all its complexity. As life has chipped away at my naiveté, I've been comforted by the book's forthright manner. As I try to navigate each new season, I better understand why chapter 3 says that everything has its own God-given timing. And these days, more often than not, I find the Teacher's questions are my own.

So when the opportunity came to write this study, I jumped at the chance. And I am thrilled to invite you to jump in along with me.

Here in these pages, I hope you will find a way to make sense of Ecclesiastes that enriches your life and equips you for your journey. I hope that together, in community, you will find you're not alone in your questions, doubts, or fears. And ultimately, I hope that these weeks of study will spark new insights and new questions for you—ones that find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ Himself.

So that maybe, by the time we come to the end of the study, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes will shine in all its splendor, lighting every step of your life under the sun.

Grace,

*Hannah*

# HOW TO USE

Welcome to ***Life Under the Sun: The Unexpectedly Good News of Ecclesiastes***. This study takes an honest look at life under the sun through the eyes of the Teacher. As he wrestles with questions about purpose and meaning, you'll be challenged to see life as God designed it and understand your hope is in Christ and walking in His ways. In the end, we pray you'll find goodness in the life God has given you.

## GETTING STARTED

Because we believe discipleship happens best in community, we encourage you to do this study together in a group setting. Or, if you're doing this alone, consider enlisting a friend or two to go through it at the same time. This will give you study friends to pray with and connect with over coffee or through text or email so you can chat about what you're learning.



## PERSONAL STUDY

Each week features five days of personal study to help you dig into the book of Ecclesiastes. You'll find questions to help you understand and apply the text, plus insightful commentary to clarify your study.



## REFLECTION PAGE

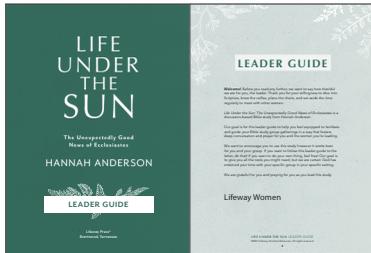
At the end of each week you'll find pages that provide space for you to process what you've learned, and journal thoughts you might share in your group session.



## CALL-OUT BOXES

Throughout the study you'll find boxes with extra information to help set context, deal with difficult passages, and provide other information to enhance the study.

## Extra Resources



## ◀ LEADER GUIDE

A free leader guide PDF is available for download at [lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun](http://lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun). The leader guide offers several tips and helps along with discussion guides for each week.

## BIBLE READING PLAN ▶

An Ecclesiastes Reading Plan PDF is available for download at [lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun](http://lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun). There are three options to choose from to help you read through Ecclesiastes.





*Session 1*

# INTRODUCTION

# REFLECTION

## *Session 1*

*Below you'll find some questions for this introductory session. Be prepared to discuss these if you're doing the study in a group.*

1 **Is there a book you've read recently that you think portrays life as it really is? If so, what book and why did you choose it?**

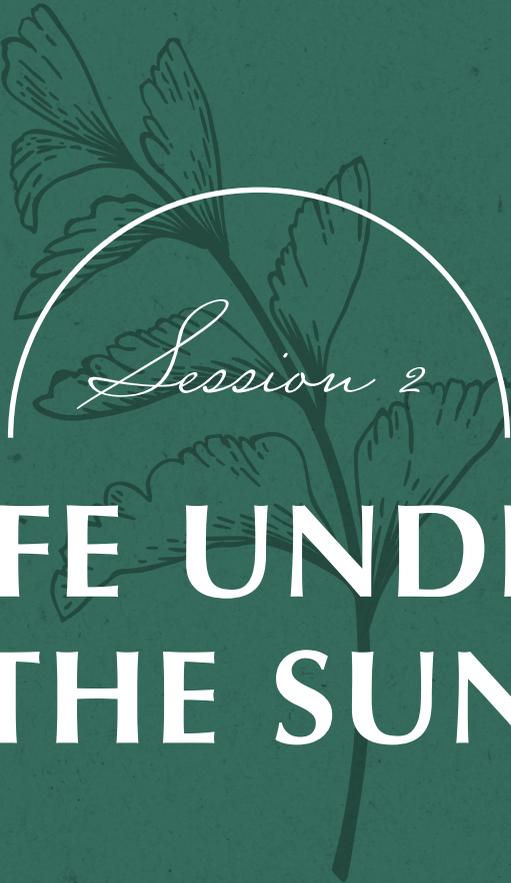
2 **When someone mentions Ecclesiastes, what comes to mind?**

3 **One well-known phrase from Ecclesiastes is “there is nothing new under the sun.” What do you think that means and do you agree with it? Explain.**

4 **What drew you to this study and what do you hope to gain from it?**



*If you're leading a group, check out the leader guide found at [lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun](http://lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun).*



*Session 2*

# LIFE UNDER THE SUN



**F**or many readers, Ecclesiastes can be a perplexing book. Not only does it appear to repeat and contradict itself, it also doesn't seem to have a direct or satisfying point—at least on the first reading. It can be disorienting and leave readers more confused than before they started. Because of this, we'll begin our study by orienting ourselves to Ecclesiastes as a whole. We'll consider its structure, purpose, main voices, genre, themes, and questions by focusing each day on the book's own introduction found in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

# THE WORDS OF THE TEACHER

**READ ECCLESIASTES 1:1-11.**

**According to the text, whose words will we be reading in the book of Ecclesiastes?**

**How would you describe the overall tone of this first section?**

**Does the tone confirm or challenge your understanding of Ecclesiastes as a book in the Bible? What surprises you about it?**

## WHOSE WORDS?

The first verse of Ecclesiastes tells us that we will be reading the words of “the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.” But if we are reading the words of the Teacher, who wrote the words that tell us we are reading the Teacher’s words? Who is quoting the Teacher? Exactly who are we listening to?

The question of “who are we listening to” is an important one to answer at the beginning of any Bible study, but it’s particularly important when you’re studying a book as complicated as Ecclesiastes. How we answer this question will determine how we understand the rest of the book. For example, when the Teacher cries, “Everything is futile” are we supposed to receive it as a direct, authoritative statement from God about life under the sun? Or are



we supposed to read it as the observation of a human being that has been recorded in the sacred text?

To answer these questions, we'll need more information about the structure, context, genre, and literary form of Ecclesiastes.

### ***Think About It***

*At this point, how do you understand the relationship between Ecclesiastes as the words of the Teacher and Ecclesiastes as a book that is both inspired and preserved by God?*

## **THE STRUCTURE OF ECCLESIASTES**

Scholars believe that Ecclesiastes is best understood as an example of frame literature or a “story-within-a-story.” In frame literature, the main part of the book or essay is wrapped by an introduction and conclusion which is often voiced by someone other than the main speaker.

If you've read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or watched *The Princess Bride*, you've seen frame technique in use. Both works open with a narrator telling a story to another person. In *The Princess Bride*, the writers chose to have a grandfather read the book *The Princess Bride* to his grandson. And even though the majority of the movie's action and dialog happens inside the fairytale (not between the grandfather and grandson), the movie begins and ends in the boy's bedroom.

In the same way, Ecclesiastes opens and closes with a Narrator framing the words of the Teacher. Here is a simple outline of the book:

**Ecclesiastes 1:1-11:** Introduction by the Narrator who quotes the Teacher's work

**Ecclesiastes 1:12-12:7:** Observations by the Teacher in his own words

**Ecclesiastes 12:9-14:** Conclusion by the Narrator who summarizes the Teacher's work



### *The Nesting Voices of Ecclesiastes*

With more than one voice speaking in the book of Ecclesiastes, it can be hard to know how they relate to each other. One way to think of the relationship is to imagine the voices as nesting dolls. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Narrator recorded and arranged the words of the Teacher. Or to put it another way, the core ideas are those of the Teacher but the Narrator delivers them to us under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Those who focus on God as the ultimate Author of Scripture can sometimes forget that the Holy Spirit used human beings to give us the Bible. Meanwhile, those who tend to emphasize its human authorship can sometimes minimize its sacred, life-changing authority. At the end of the day, the exact relationship between human and divine authorship is something of a mystery, but we trust that the words of Ecclesiastes—like the rest of Scripture—are simultaneously the words of the Teacher and the Word of God preserved for us today.

## ***Think About It***

*What's the significance of God using human writers and common literary techniques to write Ecclesiastes? How should this reality affect our study of it?*

Just as our physical Bibles are made from natural elements—paper, vellum, leather, and cardboard—the text of the Bible is made from the natural elements of literature. In God's wisdom, He used human authors to reveal Himself through nouns, verbs, sentences, metaphors, parallelism, and other literary devices. This means it's important we pay attention to how these elements work so that we can understand what the text is revealing about Him. Throughout this study, we'll specifically look at how genre and literary elements of Ecclesiastes work together to communicate its underlying message. Rather than diminishing the sacredness of the Bible, this approach helps us appreciate God's kindness to meet us where we are. Our God does not hold Himself aloof; instead, He comes to us in our reality, using language, images, and symbols that we can understand.

## **WHO IS THE TEACHER?**

**READ ECCLESIASTES 12:9-14.**

**What textual clues in verse 9 suggest that the Narrator is speaking and not the Teacher?**

**According to the Narrator, what did the Teacher do with his wisdom? What did the Teacher write? Where might these sayings be found?**

## How does the Narrator summarize the Teacher's message (vv. 13-14)?

Ecclesiastes opens with the Narrator introducing the Teacher and his work. It ends with the Narrator summarizing the message of the book that holds "the words of the Teacher." But we still haven't answered a pretty basic question: Who is the Teacher?

Traditionally, Solomon has been identified as the Teacher. There are several textual reasons for this.

**Read the following passages to see why some hypothesize that the Teacher is Solomon. List the clues given in each passage.**

1. **Ecclesiastes 1:1**
2. **Ecclesiastes 1:12**
3. **Ecclesiastes 1:16**
4. **Ecclesiastes 2:4-9**
5. **Ecclesiastes 12:9-10**

Despite these allusions, however, the Bible does not explicitly name Solomon as the Teacher even though it does name him as the author of other wisdom literature. (See Prov. 1:1.) To complicate things even further, some textual inconsistencies make it difficult to definitely claim Solomon is the Teacher. (We'll look at one example later.) Consequently, the writer of Ecclesiastes technically remains anonymous.



## READING ECCLESIASTES AS WISDOM LITERATURE

Unlike books such as 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles that narrate specific details of Israel’s history, the goal of Ecclesiastes is not to provide a historical account of Solomon’s life. Instead, it aims to provide timeless wisdom to the reader about how to live life under the sun. In fact, keeping the Teacher anonymous helps achieve this goal because the Teacher’s wisdom cannot be restricted to a specific time and place. When we encounter a hard truth, we can’t say “Well, that’s just the way it was in Solomon’s day.” Instead, we must wrestle with it because it lacks a specific context. This keeps the book’s message surprisingly fresh and relevant. The Teacher becomes a kind of “everyman” who gives voice to the struggles we all experience—regardless of where we sit in human history.

The Teacher’s anonymity also invites us to partake of the same wisdom that God offered Solomon in 1 Kings 3:1-15. Scholars may disagree about whether the Teacher is Solomon, but they do agree that the content of Ecclesiastes is “Solomonic”—it is designed to make us think of Solomon and more importantly, to think of the kind of wisdom God gives those who come honestly looking for insight and discernment. It’s the same invitation that James extends to us:

*Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.*

**JAMES 1:5**

As we delve into Ecclesiastes over the next few weeks, we’re going to need the Holy Spirit’s wisdom to understand its message and application. We’ll face questions we didn’t know we had and hopefully find answers for ones we do. With both Solomon and James, we must come humbly asking God to grant us the insight and perspective that we need. And when we do, He promises to give it in abundance.

# ABSOLUTE FUTILITY!

The next step in our study of Ecclesiastes is to identify its overarching themes and repeated symbols. Today we'll look at the central image of life as a vapor.

## READ ECCLESIASTES 1:1-11.

**In verse 2, the Teacher makes a judgment about life. How does he describe it?**

**What examples are given in the passage to prove the Teacher's words about the nature of life under the sun (vv. 4-7)?**

**In verse 8, the Narrator repeats the Teacher's claim that life is futile using parallel—but not exact—language. What phrase in verse 8 mirrors the phrase "Everything is futile" (v. 2)?**

**How does the use of the word "wearisome" add meaning to the word "futile"? What extra emotion does it offer?**

Having established the different voices of Ecclesiastes, we have another question to answer: "How should Ecclesiastes be read?" Literally or metaphorically? Are we supposed to passively accept the Teacher's words or should we wrestle with and unpack their meaning?

Part of the answer lies in the *genre* of Ecclesiastes. Unlike narrative books or the epistles, Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature and is not written in

a straightforward manner. Instead, it uses figurative language and poetic structure to communicate its message. This is common for wisdom books like Job and Proverbs, but it also means we must do a bit of extra work. We have to learn to read Scripture literarily—to read it through the genre and literary features that convey its intended meaning.

### *Literal Reading vs. Literary Reading*

Recent challenges to the Bible’s authority and inspiration have led to confusion about how to read it. In an effort to preserve the Bible’s sacred role, some teachers have suggested a “literal” or straightforward reading that pays little attention to literary forms or structure. This “literal” approach can sometimes hide the text’s intended meaning. Learning to read the Bible “literarily” or as literature, will reveal layers and depth we’d never see with a straightforward reading, and honors the fact that God inspired specific forms and structures to reveal Himself to us.

## CENTRAL IMAGE

Thankfully, Ecclesiastes puts its central theme and main metaphor at the beginning of the book.

*“Absolute futility,” says the Teacher.*

*“Absolute futility. Everything is futile.”*

*What does a person gain for all his efforts  
that he labors at under the sun?*

### *ECCLESIASTES 1:2-3*

The word *futile* is repeated throughout Ecclesiastes nearly forty times. Some Bible versions translate this phrase as *vanity* (ESV, KJV) or *meaningless* (NIV), but none of these English words quite capture the depth of the original Hebrew word *hevel*.

Literally translated, *hevel* means *vapor* or *smoke*. It describes the way mist hovers in the lowlands on cool mornings and burns away as the sun rises.

It's the fog that American poet Carl Sandberg describes as coming "on little cat feet.

*It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on."*<sup>1</sup>

It's your breath on a freezing day that hangs and hovers in the air before it turns to nothing. It's formless, empty, and void.

Translators render *hevel* as *futility* or *emptiness* to capture both the brevity of life and its mysterious nature. The point is this: Life is both short and hard to grasp. You cannot hold onto it nor can you completely understand it while you're living it. Like a vapor, it rises quickly, coiling and twisting upward with no defined shape or direction until it simply disappears.

### **Think About It**

*How does the Teacher's assessment of life hit you? Do you agree with it? Does it make you uncomfortable? Explain.*

The book of Psalms (which is also Hebrew poetry) uses this same word to describe the fleeting nature of life under the sun.

**Look up the following verses, locate the English word that corresponds to the Hebrew word *hevel*, and write it below the reference.**

**Psalms 39:5**

**Psalms 62:9**

**Psalms 144:4**

In the New Testament, James also uses the image of a vapor to describe the brevity and unpredictable nature of life.

*You do not know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like vapor that appears for a little while, then vanishes.*

**JAMES 4:14**

But while the imagery of vapor illustrates the brevity of life under the sun, it also hints to the Source of our life—a Source that might just provide the purpose and meaning we seek.



## Poetic Language in Wisdom Literature

The use of poetic language is a feature that distinguishes wisdom literature from other biblical genres. One benefit of poetic language is that it conveys a lot of meaning in short, powerful phrases and words.

But poetic language also challenges the reader, forcing us to actively participate in unpacking its meaning and application to our lives. In a word, you cannot read poetry passively. You have to dig for its meaning. In the same way, the poetic language of wisdom literature invites readers of the Bible to become active participants in the process of growth. It forces us to slow down and consider the truth being presented. And thus, it seeks not only to inform, but also to transform.

## HEVEL AND THE BREATH OF GOD

As we've seen, Scripture often uses the image of a vapor or mist to describe the brief, enigmatic nature of our lives. Our days on earth float away from us before we have a chance to make sense of them. This reality has curious parallels to how Genesis 2 describes the beginning of human existence:

*But mist would come up from the earth and water all the ground. Then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.*

**GENESIS 2:6-7**

So how did the life that began with the “breath of God” somehow become characterized as a vapor that flies away? And how does the use of *hevel* in Ecclesiastes point us back to God?



Part of the answer lies in the first use of *hevel* which occurs in Genesis 4 only two chapters after God breathes life into mankind. Thematically, the events of Genesis 4 happen outside the Garden in a world marked by toil, sweat, and chaos. It's there, "east of Eden" that we meet someone whose tragic existence represents all the futility and pain that life under the sun has to offer.

The Hebrew word *hevel* can also be transliterated *hebel* or even, *Abel*. That's right. The word that Ecclesiastes uses to describe our brief, confusing life under the sun is the name of Adam and Eve's second son. Why is this significant? Abel's time under the sun was short and tragic. He did what was right but still suffered. His own brother, Cain, murdered him out of sheer jealousy. Abel's life and name are both *hevel*.

Futile. Empty. Meaningless.

But that's not the whole story. Because when God confronted Cain, God said Abel's blood "cries out to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). And there it is: our hope in the midst of a life of futile suffering. Just like mist and smoke ascend to heaven, so too do our cries. God hears and He responds.

Along with the Teacher, we must confess that so often our days are *hevel*. But even here, in *hevel*, we have hope. Just as God was not untouched by Abel's suffering, He is not untouched by ours. And just as He first gave us life through His breath, we will be sustained by this same breath—all the short, vaporous, misty days of our lives.

### ***Think About It***

*How has God shown you He is not untouched by what you are experiencing in this life? How is He sustaining you in your present struggles? How is He preserving your hope, if even in small ways?*

# GOT QUESTIONS?

Today we're continuing to lay groundwork for our study of Ecclesiastes. We've already considered the author, genre, and central image of life as a vapor. Today we're going to look at the book's central question.

## **REREAD ECCLESIASTES 1:1-11.**

**How is our earthly life described in verse three?**

**Summarize the question in verse three in your own words.**

**What examples does the text give as proof that it's hard to move forward or get ahead in life (vv. 4-7)?**

**Verse nine repeats the phrase "under the sun." How does this verse frame the problem of our earthly life?**

Recall that this section is voiced by the Narrator. It acts like a foreword to Ecclesiastes, introducing the Teacher and the major themes of the book while giving us snapshots of what will come later in more detail. If verse 2 gives us a glimpse of the central theme (the futility of life), verse 3 shows us how the Teacher is going to search out wisdom: He's going to ask questions. And the first one on his mind is: "What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?"

## Q&A

You might be tempted to read verse three as a rhetorical statement. If you do, you'll automatically get a negative answer. "What does a person gain? Nothing. There is no benefit. Nothing matters. You work and work and work and have nothing to show for it." This nihilistic answer is why many people struggle with Ecclesiastes. At first glance, it seems the Teacher is saying life doesn't have meaning or purpose, so it doesn't matter how you live.

But we can also read "What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?" as an honest question—in part, because it occurs at the beginning of the book. After all, if the Teacher's mind is already made up, then we might as well close up the study right now. Instead, this question will guide the rest of the book. We'll find it reframed and restated in Ecclesiastes 2:3 with the phrase ". . . what is good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives." And ultimately, we'll have to ask the same question about our own lives.

### **READ ECCLESIASTES 1:12-13.**

**What does the Teacher say is going to be the focus of his work?  
What does he give his mind to examine? (v. 12)**

**What assumptions does he hold about life at the beginning of his project?**



## Under the Sun

The phrase “under the sun” is repeated in Ecclesiastes nearly thirty times and refers to life lived on the earthly plane. The Teacher’s questions emerge almost exclusively from what he observes and experiences about life here and now. Only later in the book does eternity become a consideration.

As you read, try to suspend your knowledge and belief about the next life in order to enter more fully into the Teacher’s questions and dilemmas. Try to hear his observations without answering or correcting them in your mind. This is an important technique to practice for several reasons: First, it will help you unearth the meaning of the text. Second, it will help you gain empathy for the struggles of those who do not share your faith. And third, it will help expose your own hidden fears and questions.

No matter how strong your faith, life under the sun has unresolved and unresolvable questions. Christian maturity means learning how to voice those questions to God, ourselves, and others.

### INVITATION TO QUESTION

If the tone and approach of Ecclesiastes makes you uncomfortable, you’re not alone. Throughout history, some have hesitated to affirm it as part of the Bible because of its forthright, unflinching nature. But by the time of Christ, Ecclesiastes was almost universally understood and accepted as Scripture.

Part of our discomfort with Ecclesiastes lies in our expectations—not of the book itself—but of the Bible. If we are accustomed to coming to the Bible for solutions, Ecclesiastes disrupts our expectations by leaving us with more questions than answers. In this sense, Ecclesiastes is an incredibly honest book, asking the kinds of questions we’d rather avoid.

But Ecclesiastes also teaches us how to ask the *right* questions. Throughout the book, you’ll notice that the Teacher’s questions and tone subtly shift.

In this way, the Teacher is much like Job, whose questions and posture changed when he finally encountered God in the whirlwind. In literary terms, we call this a *developing character*—or a character who shows growth throughout the course of a story. While the reality of the Teacher’s circumstances don’t change, what does change is his ability to live and embrace his God-given life.

One benefit of studying Ecclesiastes is that it helps us realize that our questions need to be refined. Again, it’s easy to come to the Bible demanding answers. It’s much harder to let the Scripture change our questions before answering them. But part of coming to the Scripture honestly means letting it rework and restructure the way we think.

### ***Think About It***

*What does the role of questions in Ecclesiastes suggest about the role questions play in your own spiritual journey? Do you generally feel free to voice your questions to God? If not, why not?*

Our need to ask questions is deeply embedded in human existence. So much so that voicing “whys” is among the first things children learn to do. Early on, my own children began wondering about the world around them. “Why do we wear shoes?” and “why do birds sing?” and “why is the sky blue?” Curiously, as we age, we sometimes lose our ability to ask questions—especially when it comes to our own lives and relationship with God. But like my children, Ecclesiastes assumes that asking questions is an essential part of our humanity. If so, then bringing our whole selves to God must include bringing our questions too. Even more, if God invites us to enter His kingdom like little children, I have to believe He means for us to come with all the curiosity and audacity of a child trying to make sense of her world. And just as we would never shame a child for trying to understand the life she inhabits, so too, our heavenly Father does not shame us when we ask similar questions.



## QUESTIONS IN COMMUNITY

At its heart, Ecclesiastes voices the confusion and disappointment we experience in “life under the sun.” None of us are immune to the feelings and questions the book expresses. But Ecclesiastes also offers a model for asking questions and processing our doubts together. At first glance, it looks like the Teacher is taking his journey in isolation, but the book’s title and main speaker’s name hold a secret. Both come from the Hebrew word, *qohelet*, which means “the one who assembles or gathers.”<sup>2</sup>

In Greek, *qohelet* is rendered *ekklesiastes* (from which we get the English title of the book). This is the same Greek word the New Testament uses for the gathered church (*ecclesia*). Over time, translators kept the Greek title, *Ecclesiastes*, even though they translated *qohelet* from Hebrew to English as “The Teacher” or “The Preacher.” What does this all mean? If nothing else, it means the questions and wisdom of Ecclesiastes was originally read and processed in community. The idea of “assembling” or “gathering” people together to learn wisdom about life is a deeply ancient rhythm and practice.

Unfortunately, in community has not always been a safe place to entertain uncomfortable questions. In fact, you may not yet feel free to voice your questions to others. But if Ecclesiastes offers us anything, it’s the promise that a learning community *should* and *could* become this kind of place. As we commit to this study together, let’s work to become the kind of place where the Teacher’s questions and observations can be engaged, debated, considered, and processed safely.

### ***Think About It***

*What makes you feel safe to ask hard questions and discuss difficult things? How can you foster a culture of safety and openness in your relationships and community of faith?*

# CYCLES OF LIFE

As we continue studying the introduction to Ecclesiastes, we're picking up the paradigms and categories we need to understand the rest of the book. Today, we'll look at the role nature plays in our search for wisdom about life "under the sun."

## READ ECCLESIASTES 1:4-7.

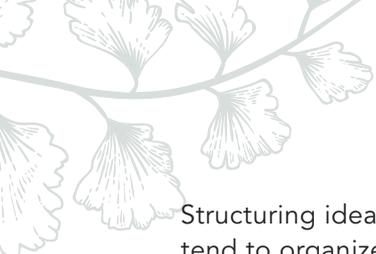
**In verse 4, the text contrasts the brevity of human life with the earth's stability. What is the point of this contrast?**

**In verses 5-7, the text mentions the sun's orbit, weather patterns, and the water cycle. What underlying shape do each of these share?**

**How do the cyclical patterns of the earth contrast the life span of a human being? What is the difference in their shape?**

## NATURAL CYCLES

After introducing the central question of Ecclesiastes, "What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?" the text moves to focus on the created world, showing the difference between our temporary human existence and the earth's seeming timelessness. While our human lives are more linear, with a clear start and end date, the patterns of the earth cycle round and round and round, seemingly never ending. Curiously, these natural cycles predict the shape of Ecclesiastes. As we go through the book, it will feel like certain themes or topics are repeating themselves.



Structuring ideas this way is unusual for us modern readers because we tend to organize our thoughts from point to point, eventually arriving at a conclusion. But this circular structure reinforces Ecclesiastes's underlying message about the shape of life under the sun: Life does not progress neatly from point to point so much as it spins and cycles. We do not get to choose when we encounter different questions and so too, the answers we need are often embedded within our problems themselves.

Because Ecclesiastes does not progress in a straight line, this study will take a topical approach. Each week, we'll focus on a different question or idea the Teacher presents, tracing it through the course of the book. Simultaneously, you'll have the option to read Ecclesiastes straight through to get a feel for its cyclical nature. (See [lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun](http://lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun) for a reading plan.)

### ***Think About It***

*How do the cycles and seasons of nature give us insight on the cycles and seasons of our own lives? How might our perspective on our spiritual journey change if we viewed it less like a straight line and more like the natural seasons we see in creation?*

## **GENERAL REVELATION**

Another reason skeptics have questioned the biblical inspiration of Ecclesiastes is because of how often it uses non-religious arguments. Today's text is a good example. In fact, you'll soon see that the majority of the Teacher's observations and conclusions come from what theologians call "general revelation." General revelation describes those things we can know about God by watching the world around us—things we observe from nature and human reasoning.

## READ ROMANS 1:19-20.

This text states that God Himself reveals what can be known about Him through nature.

**What kinds of things does the creation reveal about God?**

**Based on this text, is nature a reliable source of information about God? Does this surprise you? Why or why not?**



### Nature's Wisdom

While the author of Ecclesiastes is technically unknown, the Teacher shares strong similarities with King Solomon, including valuing the natural world as a source of wisdom. In describing Solomon's own pursuit of wisdom, 1 Kings 4 notes:

*God gave Solomon wisdom, very great insight, and understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore . . . Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs numbered 1,005. He spoke about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop growing out of the wall. He also spoke about animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. Emissaries of all peoples, sent by every king on earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to listen to Solomon's wisdom.*

**1 KINGS 4:29-34**

The relationship between wisdom and studying nature is not surprising when you remember how often Scripture tells us to pay attention to creation as a way to understand God's work in the world. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands," the psalmist sings in Psalm 19. "Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge" (Ps. 19:1-2). In our current culture that is deeply fragmented over the authority of Scripture, with fewer and fewer people affirming it, nature provides a starting point for connection and conversation across the divide.

Not far from where I live, there's a creek that's home to bullfrogs and egrets, muskrats and rainbow trout. But the waterway is probably best known as the setting for Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. First published in 1974, the book details Dillard's search for glory in the natural world and has invited tens of thousands of readers to do the same ever since. While not a theologian, Dillard understands the natural world in much the same way the Bible does—as a source of both mystery and revelation. Writing about the truth that God has built into nature, Dillard calls us to pay attention to it so that we might learn what we might otherwise miss. "The answer must be," she writes of this general revelation, "that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."<sup>3</sup>

### **READ HEBREWS 1:1-3.**

**In what ways had God revealed Himself in the past?**

**How has God revealed or spoken to us in these "last days"?**

**Verse 2 alludes to a connection between general and specific revelation. What word represents general revelation in that verse? Who does the text say is the source of general revelation?**



Ultimately, general revelation and specific revelation are designed to work together like two hands or two eyes; and because they come from the same source, they reveal the same things about God even if they do it in different ways.

## JESUS AND NATURE

During Jesus's earthly ministry, He often used nature and botanical imagery to explain the realities of the kingdom of heaven. He did this in part because His immediate audience lived in an agrarian setting. But He also used natural imagery because general revelation is open and available to the masses. You do not need a theological education or deep knowledge of Scripture to understand that when a seed falls into the ground, it dies to bring forth more fruit than it would if it had never been planted (John 12:24).

By using these widely-understandable images and categories, He was able to move people from general knowledge about God to specific truth. After all, when He spoke of that seed, He was really preparing them to understand and receive His sacrificial death and eventual resurrection. He was also teaching them about their own lives, how the "one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). He was answering the questions that Ecclesiastes asks in much the same way that it asks them.

Today, the average westerner does not live close to the earth and is less familiar with natural rhythms and patterns. But the power of general revelation is still the same. The One who made the sun is the One who governs all our weary days under it.

# THE PARADOX OF LIFE

As the introduction passage of Ecclesiastes closes, the text becomes increasingly pessimistic about life under the sun. Ironically, though, this places us exactly where we need to discover the wisdom that makes sense of it all.

## READ ECCLESIASTES 1:8-11.

**This section opens with the Teacher rephrasing the “everything is futile” statement by saying “All things are wearisome.” What paradoxes or seeming contradictions does the text offer to prove that life is “wearisome” (v. 8)?**

**Even though time passes, the text says, “there is nothing new under the sun.” What do you understand this phrase to mean in this context?**

**According to verse 11, why does it seem like there is nothing new?**

**What emotions does this final section evoke for you?**

As stated, the final verse of this section takes on an increasingly pessimistic tone, almost as if the cycles of the previous verses are now spinning out of control. The turning, turning, turning of the earth has become a chaotic spinning in circles, with rapidly accelerating velocity and centrifugal force. We’re holding on for dear life. In this way, the Narrator brings us right to the edge and leaves us there, setting us up for the rest of the book and the Teacher’s search for wisdom and meaning.

While passages like this can feel deeply disorienting, they do the necessary work of putting us in the right place to receive what’s coming next. As it’s

been said, “You have to know that you’re lost before you can be found.” So too, you must come to a place of honesty about the difficulties of life before you can make peace with them.

Some the most profound spiritual growth I’ve experienced has come from learning to tell the truth about harm that has happened to me. I remember sitting with a counselor and telling him about a particularly difficult relationship and how it had affected me. He listened, then simply said, “I’m so sorry that happened to you. That must have been very painful.” Without warning, tears filled my eyes as I choked back a sob. It had been excruciatingly painful. But until that moment, I had not had the ability or capacity to name it as such. Instead, for years I had soldiered on, minimizing the significance of what had happened, rationalizing it as ‘normal.’ And if not exactly normal, then at least “not the worst thing that can happen to someone.” But once I was able to tell the truth, to name it as painful and harmful, I also found I could begin to make sense of it. And perhaps more importantly, I could finally invite God’s healing work into my life.

### ***Think About It***

*Why do we avoid telling the truth about the hard realities of life? How does denial act as a coping mechanism? What are the risks of denying life’s difficulties?*



### **Paradox**

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11 offers several examples of **paradox**—a seemingly self-contradicting statement:

- eyes that cannot see enough
- ears that cannot be filled with hearing
- time that passes but nothing new comes
- the past that is not remembered

The use of paradox in today’s passage helps underscore the confusing and contradictory nature of life under the sun. Just when you thought you understood how things work, they don’t work how you thought.



## NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

For the second time in these opening verses, the Narrator includes one of the most quoted lines from Ecclesiastes: “There is nothing new under the sun.” On the surface, this is an easy claim to dismiss. A lot has changed since Ecclesiastes was written. Not only do we enjoy new technologies, we also conceive of ourselves in radically different ways. In the modern era, we’re much more concerned with protecting personal rights, and we value individual human life differently. How then should we understand the statement “there is nothing new under the sun”?

At the very least, Ecclesiastes is reminding us that the more things change, the more they stay the same. This applies, in particular, to human nature. Our basic needs, desires, foibles, fears, insecurities, and questions remain the same. In this sense, the fact that there is “nothing new under the sun” lends credibility to Ecclesiastes as a source of wisdom despite it being thousands of years old. The words of the Teacher are just as pertinent today as they were back then.

What is the purpose of life? How can we find meaning and joy? Does our work matter? Where is God in all this?

These deeply human questions are not bound by specific time and place. The same things we wrestle with today are the same things the Teacher wrestled with thousands of years ago. And by giving attention to the *timeless* wisdom of this ancient text, we might just discover how to navigate our present lives.

In the end, this study may not reveal new insights or solve the problem of human existence; but it may help you remember those deeper, stable realities that undergird our life on earth. It may help you discover what C. S. Lewis called, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, “the deep magic from before the dawn of time.”<sup>4</sup> Lewis, was referring to the timeless reality of Christ’s sacrificial love for us—a love so deep and true it reaches back to the very origins of God’s creative work. Or as Ephesians 1:3-4 describes, God “chose us in [Christ], before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love.”

## ***Think About It***

*In modern society, we tend to equate new discoveries and technological developments with progress. If it's new, it must be good. How does the claim that "there is nothing new under the sun" challenge this assumption? How does it temper our expectations about what's possible for humanity?*

## **UNEXPECTEDLY GOOD NEWS**

As the introduction concludes, it presents one final paradox: Despite there being nothing new, people don't remember the old. People don't remember "former things" (ESV) or "those who came before" (CSB). Our human propensity to forget helps explain why history repeats itself. We forget the wisdom that our ancestors learned through hard experience. So, we're destined to repeat their mistakes until we learn wisdom for ourselves. This is the human dilemma—unless we can interrupt the cycle by learning from the past. Unless we can learn from someone who went before. Unless we can learn from someone else's mistakes and successes.

Embedded in this seemingly pessimistic passage is a statement that almost dares us to prove it wrong: We will not remember what came before. But instead of forgetting, could we learn from previous generations? Instead of seeking only new developments, could we seek timeless wisdom? Thus, the challenge and invitation is issued, setting us up for the Teacher's entrance: Don't forget the wisdom of the past. Learn from the Teacher.

Curiously, part of the reason that we can learn wisdom from the past is because the ultimate source of that wisdom—Jesus Christ himself—transcends time (Heb. 13:7-8). While we hear the words of Ecclesiastes from the Teacher, we are actually hearing the words of God. And the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever will guide us all our days under the sun.

# REFLECTION

## *Session 2*

*Below you'll find some questions to help you think through and apply what you've learned in this week of study. Be prepared to discuss these if you're doing the study in a group.*

- 1 Which day of study this week was your favorite and why?**
- 2 How would you summarize the Teacher's view of life under the sun?**
- 3 How does this compare to what Jesus and the New Testament writers taught about life under the sun?**
- 4 What are the main takeaways for you from this week and how do they apply to your life?**



*If you're leading a group, check out the leader guide found at [lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun](https://lifeway.com/lifeunderthesun).*