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ECCLESIASTES

A 6-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

THE COMPLETE STUDY • WEEKS 1-6 • ECCLESIASTES 1:1-12:14
GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

Ecclesiastes: A 6-Week Bible Study

A 6-Week Bible Study • ESV® • 6 Sessions of 75-90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

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WEEK 1 OF 6

Week 1: Vanity and the Royal Experiment — Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26

Scripture Scope: Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

- **The title:** "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). "Preacher" translates the Hebrew Qoheleth, one who gathers or addresses an assembly. The speaker takes up the role of a wise and wealthy king like Solomon, whether Solomon himself wrote the book or the Preacher speaks in his voice.
- **The voices:** The Preacher reports what he has seen "under the sun," with repeated calls to enjoy God's gifts. A closing narrator (12:9–14) commends the Preacher and states the end of the matter.
- **Its form:** A wisdom inquiry, not a story. Reflections, poems, and short sayings are woven into a search for what lasts.
- **The structure:**
  - Title and thesis (1:1–11).
  - The royal experiment (1:12–2:26).
  - Time and eternity (chapter 3).
  - Toil and companionship (chapter 4).
  - Worship, vows, and wealth (5:1–6:12).
  - The limits and value of wisdom (7:1–8:17).
  - Death, enjoyment, and folly (9:1–10:20).
  - Bold generosity, youth, old age, and the closing words (11:1–12:14).
- **Why it matters:** Life "under the sun" cannot carry the weight of meaning we ask of it. Work, wisdom, pleasure, and even justice are real gifts, yet they are also hebel: vapor, fleeting, and at times frustrating. The way through is not cynicism but the fear of God, receiving daily gifts from his hand, and remembering the Creator who will bring every deed into judgment.

How This 6-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Ecclesiastes to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, this is a 6-week study rather than the series' usual eight weeks. Ecclesiastes has 222 verses, and its units are tightly argued, so six weeks follow the book's own turns without padding. Each week invites you to listen honestly to the Preacher together through six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's chapters inside the structure of Ecclesiastes and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.

- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. Longer focal passages are read aloud together from the ESV.

Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Ecclesiastes:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

The 6-Week Ecclesiastes Study at a Glance

Week	Title & Passage	Movement 1 / Movement 2	Canonical Horizon
1	**Vanity and the Royal Experiment** (1:1–2:26)	Vanity of Vanities (1:1–18) / The Royal Experiment (2:1–26)	Life in the Lord is not in vain; something greater than Solomon is here
2	**Time, Toil, and Companionship** (3:1–4:16)	A Time for Every Matter (3:1–22) / Two Are Better Than One (4:1–16)	The fullness of time; Christ the companion and the judge
3	**Fear God; the Vanity of Wealth** (5:1–6:12)	Guard Your Steps in the House of God (5:1–7) / The One Who Loves Money (5:8–6:12)	Treasures in heaven; let your words be few; God in heaven, we on earth
4	**Wisdom's Limits** (7:1–8:17)	The House of Mourning (7:1–29) / Who Can Find Out the Work of God? (8:1–17)	Wisdom from above; the only one who does good and never sins
5	**Death, Wisdom, and Folly** (9:1–10:20)	One Event Comes to All (9:1–12) / Wisdom Is Better Than Strength (9:13–10:20)	Death swallowed up; making the best use of the time
6	**Remember Your Creator** (11:1–12:14)	Cast Your Bread; Rejoice, O Young Man (11:1–10) / The End of the Matter (12:1–14)	The Creator who became flesh; the judgment seat of Christ

Scripture Scope: Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26 • **Focal Group Readings:** Ecclesiastes 1:1–3; 1:12–18; 2:1–3; 2:9–11; 2:24–26 (ESV) • **Session Pacing:** 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

Opening: Vanity and the Royal Experiment (Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26)

Opening

Ecclesiastes opens with a startling line: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The word means vapor or breath, like a mist that cannot be grasped. Then comes the question behind the whole book: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" Generations come and go, the sun rises and sets, the wind circles, and rivers run to a sea that is never full. Nothing is new under the sun.

Then the Preacher, speaking as a king with everything at his disposal, runs an experiment. He tests wisdom, pleasure, laughter, wine, great building projects, gardens, wealth, and music. He withholds nothing from himself. When he looks back on it all, his verdict is the same: vapor and a chasing after wind. Yet at the end of chapter 2 a different note sounds: to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in one's work is a gift from the hand of God.

Week 1 At a Glance

Scripture Scope	Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26 (the title and thesis, a poem of endless cycles, the Preacher's search for wisdom, his testing of pleasure and great works, wisdom and folly meeting the same death, and the first word that enjoyment is God's gift)
Focal Passages	Ecclesiastes 1:1–3; 1:12–18; 2:1–3; 2:9–11; 2:24–26
Literary & Structural Anchor	"Vanity of vanities" is a Hebrew way of saying "the most vaporous thing." "Under the sun" frames life as seen from the earth, not a denial that God is above it. The Preacher speaks as a king: if anyone could secure lasting gain by wisdom, pleasure, and great works, he could. 2:24–25 introduces the book's other refrain: joy in work is received from God.
Big Idea	Nothing under the sun can secure lasting gain, but enjoyment of daily life is a gift from the hand of God.

Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	**Know the Question:** Learn the book's key words (vanity, under the sun, gain, toil) and the Preacher's royal experiment.
HEART	**Find Lasting Gain:** See that in Christ, something greater than Solomon, our labor is not in vain.
HANDS	**Receive the Gift:** Take one step to stop chasing gain and to receive one daily gift from God with thanks.

Opening Frame: Vapor Under the Sun

Proverbs ended by calling charm deceitful and beauty fleeting. Ecclesiastes now takes up that same theme of transience and looks hard at the places where life does not follow the usual pattern. "The words of the Preacher" open with a thesis, "Vanity of vanities," and a question: what does anyone gain from all the toil under the sun? Then the Preacher reports a royal experiment, testing wisdom, pleasure, great works, and labor to see whether any of them can hold the weight of a life. This is a 6-week study, following the book's own turns, and it will end with the fear of God. The question for this week: what are we asking our work, pleasures, and achievements to give us that only God can give? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question): What is something you worked hard to get or achieve that did not satisfy you as much as you expected?

Section 1.2

Historical & Literary Context: Vapor Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26)

Entering the World of the Preacher

1. Historical Background

The speaker calls himself "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). His experiment should be heard against Solomon's wisdom, wealth, and later unraveling (1 Kings 1–11), without forcing a strict historical identification in every line.

2. Cultural Setting

Other ancient Near Eastern texts include royal reflections on death, the limits of achievement, and advice to enjoy food and drink while one can. Palace building and royal parks were standard marks of kingship, so the inventory of chapter 2 would have sounded like success. The verdict of "no gain" is the shock.

3. Literary Structure of Ecclesiastes 1:1–2:26

- **Title and thesis** (1:1–3)
- **A poem of cycles** (1:4–11)
- **The Preacher's project** (1:12–18)
- **Pleasure, works, and wealth** (2:1–11)
- **Wisdom and the same death** (2:12–23)
- **The first gift text** (2:24–26)

4. Key Themes

Hebel (vapor); "under the sun"; a royal "I"; gift, not trophy.

5. Theological Considerations

"Nothing new under the sun" does not mean that nothing is ever invented. It means that the human condition does not change into something new by a new project. Ecclesiastes is honest about life's frustrations but never abandons faith in God.

6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

Hebel is the book's leading word, used often. It means breath or vapor: fleeting, unable to be grasped, and sometimes frustrating, not simply "meaningless."

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

> **1.2 Q1:** The Preacher's key word means "vapor" or "breath." How is life like a vapor, and how does that picture differ from saying life is "meaningless"?

1.2 Q2: The phrase "under the sun" appears again and again. What changes when we look at life only "under the sun," without looking to God above it?

1.2 Q3: Proverbs often describes how life usually works under God. Why do you think God also gave us a book like Ecclesiastes that looks at where life does not seem to work?

Section 1.3

Movement 1: Vanity of Vanities (Ecclesiastes 1:1–18)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Ecclesiastes 1:1–3** (focal passage) — The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: all is vanity, and what does anyone gain by all the toil they do under the sun?
- **Summary of Ecclesiastes 1:4–11** — Generations come and go while the earth remains; the sun rises and sets, the wind goes around and around, and the streams run to a sea that is never full; the eye is never satisfied with seeing; there is nothing new under the sun, and people of the past and future are forgotten.
- **Reader 2: Ecclesiastes 1:12–18** (focal passage) — The Preacher, as king in Jerusalem, set his heart to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; he calls it an unhappy business; everything is vanity and a striving after wind; what is crooked cannot be made straight; and in much wisdom is much vexation.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2: The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1:3: What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:9: 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.

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

Teaching Narrative: Vanity of Vanities

1. The Preacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1)

The voice of the book.

2. Vanity of Vanities (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

The thesis word. Hebel means vapor or breath: life under the sun is fleeting and cannot hold the weight of meaning we ask of it, which is not the same as saying life is worthless.

3. What Gain? (Ecclesiastes 1:3)

The book's question.

4. Endless Cycles (Ecclesiastes 1:4–8)

Retold briefly. Creation's repeating cycles, always moving yet never reaching completion.

5. Nothing New (Ecclesiastes 1:9–11)

The human condition and forgetting.

6. The King's Search (Ecclesiastes 1:12–18)

Wisdom that brings vexation.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

1.3 Q1: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). When have you felt this way, and what brought it on?

1.3 Q2: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3). How would you answer that question if you looked only at life under the sun?

1.3 Q3: "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (1:4), and "the eye is not satisfied with seeing" (1:8). Why do you think people are so often restless and unsatisfied?

1.3 Q4: "There is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). Do you find this statement discouraging or comforting? Why?

1.3 Q5: "For in much wisdom is much vexation" (1:18). Why can knowing more sometimes make life feel heavier rather than lighter?

Section 1.4

Movement 2: The Royal Experiment (Ecclesiastes 2:1–26)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Ecclesiastes 2:1–3** (focal passage) — The Preacher decides to test pleasure, but he finds that laughter and pleasure accomplish nothing lasting; he tries wine while still guiding himself with wisdom, to see what is good for people in their few days.
- **Summary of Ecclesiastes 2:4–8** — He builds houses, plants vineyards, gardens, and parks, makes pools, acquires servants, herds, silver, and gold, and gathers singers and every delight.
- **Reader 2: Ecclesiastes 2:9–11** (focal passage) — He becomes greater than all before him in Jerusalem and keeps nothing his eyes desire from himself; but when he considers all that his hands have done, all is vanity and a striving after wind.
- **Summary of Ecclesiastes 2:12–23** — Wisdom is better than folly, as light is better than darkness, yet the same death comes to the wise and the fool, and both are forgotten; he hates his toil because he must leave it to someone who may be a fool, and his days are full of sorrow and restless nights.
- **Reader 3: Ecclesiastes 2:24–26** (focal passage) — There is nothing better than to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in one's work; this is from the hand of God, for apart from him no one can eat or have enjoyment; to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

Ecclesiastes 2:11: 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.

Ecclesiastes 2:24–25: 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, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

Teaching Narrative: The Royal Experiment

1. Testing Pleasure (Ecclesiastes 2:1–3)

Laughter and wine under the guidance of wisdom.

2. The Royal Inventory (Ecclesiastes 2:4–8)

Retold briefly. Everything a king could gather.

3. The Verdict (Ecclesiastes 2:9–11)

Nothing gained under the sun.

4. The Same End (Ecclesiastes 2:12–17)

Wisdom is better than folly, but death comes to both.

5. Leaving It Behind (Ecclesiastes 2:18–23)

The sorrow of handing on our work.

6. From the Hand of God (Ecclesiastes 2:24–26)

Enjoyment as a gift.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

1.4 Q1: The Preacher says, "I will test you with pleasure" (2:1), and later, "whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them" (2:10). What do people today hope pleasure or possessions will give them?

1.4 Q2: After all his projects, he says "all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11). Why can even meaningful achievements fail to provide lasting identity or ultimate satisfaction?

1.4 Q3: "There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness" (2:13), yet the wise and the fool both die. How does death change the way we think about success?

1.4 Q4: The Preacher grieves that he "must leave it to the man who will come after me" (2:18). What do you hope to leave behind, and how much of it can you control?

1.4 Q5: "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" (2:24). What everyday gifts from God's hand do you most often overlook?

Section 1.5

Canonical Horizon: Life in the Lord Is Not in Vain; Something Greater Than Solomon Is Here

Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

The Preacher's search for lasting gain under the sun points to Christ, something greater than Solomon, in whom our labor in the Lord is not in vain. Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

1. The Rich Fool (Luke 12:15–21)

Jesus says life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, and tells of a man who built bigger barns and lost his life that night. Ecclesiastes 2 is that parable at royal scale.

2. Something Greater Than Solomon (Matthew 12:42)

Christ is the true Son of David, whose works are not vapor.

3. Labor Not in Vain (1 Corinthians 15:58)

In the Lord our labor is not in vain. Christians do not escape toil, but their toil is gathered into resurrection hope.

4. Fullness of Joy (John 15:5, 11; 1 Timothy 4:4–5)

Apart from Christ no one has true enjoyment, and in him joy has a lasting source that life under the sun cannot provide. Daily food and drink become gifts received with thanksgiving.

Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Ecclesiastes 2:11:** 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.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

1.5 Q1: Jesus said, "for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15), and God told the rich man, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you" (Luke 12:20). How does this parable echo the Preacher's royal experiment?

1.5 Q2: Jesus said, "something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). How is Jesus greater than the king who tried everything under the sun?

1.5 Q3: Paul writes, "knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). How does the resurrection answer the Preacher's question, "What does man gain"?

Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	The Preacher asks what lasting gain there is under the sun and finds that wisdom, pleasure, and great works cannot secure it.
HEART	In Christ, something greater than Solomon, our labor is not in vain, and joy has a lasting source that life under the sun cannot provide.
HANDS	Faith stops chasing gain for its own sake and receives daily gifts from God's hand with thanks.

Section 1.6

Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

1.6 Q1: Where are you most tempted to look for lasting gain under the sun?

1.6 Q2: What is one ordinary gift (a meal, work, friendship, rest) you could receive this week as from the hand of God?

1.6 Q3: How could knowing that your labor "in the Lord" is not in vain change the way you approach your work this week?

Looking Ahead to Next Week

Recap: In Week 1, we heard the Preacher's thesis and his royal experiment, and the first word that enjoyment is God's gift.

Transition: Next week the Preacher reflects on time, eternity in the human heart, oppression, and companionship.

Week 2 Overview — Time, Toil, and Companionship (Ecclesiastes 3:1–4:16): Movement 1, A Time for Every Matter (3:1–22), covers the famous poem on time and God's eternal work. Movement 2, Two Are Better Than One (4:1–16), covers oppression, envy, loneliness, and friendship. The Canonical Horizon traces the fullness of time and Christ the companion and judge.

Focal Readings to Preview

- Ecclesiastes 3:1
- Ecclesiastes 3:9–15
- Ecclesiastes 3:16–17
- Ecclesiastes 4:1–6
- Ecclesiastes 4:7–12

My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

Closing Group Prayer

God above the sun, you give every good gift. We confess that we have chased gain, pleasure, and achievement as if they could fill us. We pray for those among us in burnout, disappointment, or weariness. Thank you for daily food, work, and friendship as gifts from your hand. Thank you for Christ, something greater than Solomon, in whom our labor is not in vain. Teach us to receive joy from you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.