



ECCLESIASTES

A 12-WEEK STUDY

Justin S. Holcomb



J. I. Packer

THEOLOGICAL EDITOR

Dane C. Ortlund

SERIES EDITOR

“This series is a tremendous resource for those wanting to study and teach the Bible with an understanding of how the gospel is woven throughout Scripture. Here are gospel-minded pastors and scholars doing gospel business from all the Scriptures. This is a biblical and theological feast preparing God’s people to apply the entire Bible to all of life with heart and mind wholly committed to Christ’s priorities.”

BRYAN CHAPPELL, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

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GRAEME L. GOLDSWORTHY, former lecturer, Moore Theological College; author, *According to Plan, Gospel and Kingdom, The Gospel in Revelation, and Gospel and Wisdom*

“What a gift to earnest, Bible-loving, Bible-searching believers! The organization and structure of the Bible study format presented through the *Knowing the Bible* series is so well conceived. Students of the Word are led to understand the content of passages through perceptive, guided questions, and they are given rich insights and application all along the way in the brief but illuminating sections that conclude each study. What potential growth in depth and breadth of understanding these studies offer! One can only pray that vast numbers of believers will discover more of God and the beauty of his Word through these rich studies.”

BRUCE A. WARE, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

KNOWING THE BIBLE

J. I. Packer, Theological Editor
Dane C. Ortlund, Series Editor
Lane T. Dennis, Executive Editor

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Genesis	Ecclesiastes	John	Colossians,
Exodus	Isaiah	Acts	Philemon
Leviticus	Jeremiah	Romans	Hebrews
Joshua	Daniel	1 Corinthians	James
Ruth, Esther	Hosea	2 Corinthians	Revelation
Ezra, Nehemiah	Matthew	Galatians	
Psalms	Mark	Ephesians	
Proverbs	Luke	Philippians	

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J. I. PACKER is Board of Governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College (Vancouver, BC). Dr. Packer earned his DPhil at the University of Oxford. He is known and loved worldwide as the author of the best-selling book *Knowing God*, as well as many other titles on theology and the Christian life. He serves as the General Editor of the ESV Bible and as the Theological Editor for the *ESV Study Bible*.

LANE T. DENNIS is President of Crossway, a not-for-profit publishing ministry. Dr. Dennis earned his PhD from Northwestern University. He is Chair of the ESV Bible Translation Oversight Committee and Executive Editor of the *ESV Study Bible*.

DANE C. ORTLUND is Executive Vice President of Bible Publishing and Bible Publisher at Crossway. He is a graduate of Covenant Theological Seminary (MDiv, ThM) and Wheaton College (BA, PhD). Dr. Ortlund has authored several books and scholarly articles in the areas of Bible, theology, and Christian living.

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 **CROSSWAY®**

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Knowing the Bible: Ecclesiastes, A 12-Week Study

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S E R I E S P R E F A C E

KNOWING THE BIBLE, as the series title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. Each volume in the series consists of 12 units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise study of that book of the Bible. In this way, any given volume can fruitfully be used in a 12-week format either in group study, such as in a church-based context, or in individual study. Of course, these 12 studies could be completed in fewer or more than 12 weeks, as convenient, depending on the context in which they are used.

Each study unit gives an overview of the text at hand before digging into it with a series of questions for reflection or discussion. The unit then concludes by highlighting the gospel of grace in each passage (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifying whole-Bible themes that occur in the passage (“Whole-Bible Connections”), and pinpointing Christian doctrines that are affirmed in the passage (“Theological Soundings”).

The final component to each unit is a section for reflecting on personal and practical implications from the passage at hand. The layout provides space for recording responses to the questions proposed, and we think readers need to do this to get the full benefit of the exercise. The series also includes definitions of key words. These definitions are indicated by a note number in the text and are found at the end of each chapter.

Lastly, for help in understanding the Bible in this deeper way, we would urge the reader to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available online at www.esvbible.org. The *Knowing the Bible* series is also available online. Additional 12-week studies covering each book of the Bible will be added as they become available.

May the Lord greatly bless your study as you seek to know him through knowing his Word.

J. I. Packer
Lane T. Dennis

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW



Getting Acquainted

Ecclesiastes states powerfully and repeatedly that everything is meaningless (“vanity”) without a proper focus on God. The book reveals the necessity of fearing God in a fallen and frequently confusing and frustrating world.

People seek lasting significance, but no matter how great their accomplishments, they are unable to achieve the significance they desire. What spoils life, according to Ecclesiastes, is the attempt to get more out of life—out of work, pleasure, money, food, or knowledge—than life itself can provide. This is not fulfilling and leads to weariness, which is why the book begins and ends with the exclamation “All is vanity.” This refrain is repeated throughout the entire book.

No matter how wise or rich or successful one may be, one cannot find meaning in life apart from God. In Ecclesiastes, the fact that “all is vanity” should drive all to fear God,¹ whose work endures forever. God does what he will, and all beings and all of creation stand subject to him. Rather than striving in futile attempts to gain meaning on our own terms, what truly is significant is taking pleasure in God and his gifts and being content with what little life has to offer and what God gives. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 1193–1196; available online at www.esvbible.org.)

Placing It in the Larger Story

Like the other Wisdom Literature in the Bible, Ecclesiastes is concerned with imparting wisdom and teaching people to fear the Lord. However, Ecclesiastes serves as a balance for the practical wisdom of Proverbs. Although Ecclesiastes finds practical wisdom beneficial, it comes to it along a more reflective path. Where Job asks for personal vindication, Ecclesiastes shares in Job's intensity but its search is for happiness and something that will endure. Ecclesiastes is consistent with the rest of Scripture in its explanation that true wisdom is to fear God even when we cannot see all that God is doing. We can leave it to him to make sense of it all.

Ecclesiastes describes the meaninglessness of living without God. We see that God created the world and called it "good." But despite this original goodness, humanity fell into sin, and all creation was subjected to the curse of God. This brought into the world meaninglessness, violence, and frustration. Graciously, God did not leave his creation to an endless round of meaninglessness. God's response to sin is to redeem, renew, restore, and recreate. The Bible traces this history of salvation² from beginning to end. While this process starts immediately after the fall,³ God's rescue mission culminates in Jesus Christ, who has rescued us from the meaninglessness of the curse that plagues us. Christ rescues us from the vanity of the world by subjecting himself to the same vanity of the world. He who is God chose to subject himself to the conditions of the world under covenant curse in order to rescue the world from the effects of that curse.

Key Verses

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccles. 1:2).

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity" (Eccles. 12:8).

"Whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him" (Eccles. 3:14).

Date and Historical Background

The book of Ecclesiastes is named after its central character, *Qoheleth* (translated "the Preacher" in the ESV). *Qoheleth* is the Hebrew title translated *Ekklesiastēs* in Greek.

Traditional Jewish and Christian scholarship has often ascribed authorship to Solomon (10th century BC), since the book describes the Preacher as the "son

of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1) and as someone who was surpassingly wise (1:16) and had a very prosperous reign (2:1–9).

Other scholars think it was a writer later than Solomon. The term “son of David” could be used to refer to anyone in the line of David—it is used of Joseph, for example (Matt. 1:20). Also, the language of the book differs in a number of ways from that found in Solomon’s other writings. The Hebrew language used in the book is widely believed to indicate a date later than the 10th century BC.

Strictly speaking, the book is anonymous, given that no personal name is attached to it. Since Scripture is silent on the matter, we cannot be confident in identifying the Preacher. In any case, the book claims its wisdom comes ultimately from the “one Shepherd” (12:11), the Lord himself (Gen. 48:15; Pss. 23:1; 28:9; 80:1).

Outline

- I. Introduction and Theme (1:1–3)
- II. First Catalog of “Vanities” (1:4–2:26)
- III. Poem: A Time for Everything (3:1–8)
- IV. Fear God, the Sovereign One (3:9–15)
- V. Second Catalog of “Vanities” (3:16–4:16)
- VI. Fear God, the Holy and Righteous One (5:1–7)
- VII. Life “Under the Sun” (5:8–7:24)
- VIII. The Heart of the Problem: Sin (7:25–29)
- IX. More on Life “Under the Sun” (8:1–12:7)
- X. Final Conclusion and Epilogue (12:8–14)

As You Get Started . . .

What is your understanding of how Ecclesiastes helps us understand more fully the whole storyline of the Bible? Do you have an idea of how aspects of the book’s message are found elsewhere in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament?

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

What is your current understanding of what Ecclesiastes contributes to Christian theology? From your current knowledge of Ecclesiastes, what does this book teach us about God, sin, salvation, Jesus Christ, the church, the gospel, and other doctrines?

What aspects of Ecclesiastes have confused you? Are there any specific questions you hope to resolve through this study?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a few moments now to ask the Lord to bless you, change you, and help you understand and apply the unique aspects of the gospel to your life.

Definitions

¹ **Fear of the Lord** – Fear of the Lord is a godly, wise fear that demonstrates awe and reverence for the all-powerful God (Prov. 1:7).

² **History of salvation** – God’s unified plan for all of history to accomplish the salvation of his people. He accomplished this salvation plan in the work of Jesus Christ on earth by his life, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (Eph. 1:10–12). The consummation of God’s plan will take place when Jesus Christ comes again to establish the “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13).

³ **Fall, the** – Adam and Eve’s disobedience of God by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, resulting in their loss of innocence and favor with God and the introduction of sin and its effects into the world (Genesis 3; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22).



THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES powerfully conveys the meaninglessness of life without God. The world promises fulfillment, but in the end, it cannot truly satisfy the longings of the human heart.

In this accessible study, Justin S. Holcomb helps Christians understand the necessity of fearing God in a fallen and frustrating world, pointing us to God's ultimate mission to restore creation from the curse through the power of the gospel.

ABOUT THE *KNOWING THE BIBLE* SERIES

Over the course of 12 weeks, these studies explore books of the Bible and:

- Ask thoughtful questions to spur discussion
- Show how each passage unveils the gospel
- Tie the text in with the whole story of Scripture
- Illuminate the doctrines taught in each passage
- Invite you to discover practical implications
- Help you better understand and apply God's Word

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author, *According to Plan*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JUSTIN S. HOLCOMB (PhD, Emory University) is an Episcopal priest and teaches theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He is the author of *On the Grace of God* and the coauthor of *Rid of My Disgrace, God Made All of Me, and Is It My Fault?*

BIBLE STUDY

