



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Ecclesiastes

Theme: Significant

Overview: Ecclesiastes is an experiment to make sense of life "under the sun," without God in the equation. In this unit, students will learn where true significance is found: in fearing the Lord, in lifting up one another, in the God-given work of our hands, and in getting wisdom and enjoying its benefits.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

INTRODUCTION

Author

The author calls himself “the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). Jewish and Christian tradition identify him as King Solomon, who was famous for his wisdom, wealth, and building projects (1 Kings 4:29-34).

Audience

Ecclesiastes was written for the people of Israel and for anyone searching for meaning in life. The Teacher shares what he learned from his own search, so that others can see what matters and what is “meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

Date

If Solomon is the author, the book comes from about the tenth century BC, likely late in his life after he had experienced great wisdom, wealth, and pleasure. This was about 900 years before Christ.

Setting

Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible, along with Job, Proverbs, and Song of Songs. The Teacher looked at life “under the sun”—learning, pleasure, possessions, work, time, friendship, injustice, and death—and found that none of these can give lasting meaning without God.

Theme

Significant. Life apart from God is “meaningless” (literally, “vapor” or “mist”), but God “has made everything beautiful in its time” and has “set eternity in

the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The Teacher’s conclusion is this: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (12:13).

Why Study Ecclesiastes?

Ecclesiastes shows that every search for significance without God ends in emptiness. This study calls believers to find true significance by fearing the Lord, by caring for one another, by receiving their work as a gift from God’s hand, and by getting wisdom that comes from above.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Ecclesiastes 3:14; 8:10-13; 12:13, 14

WEEK 2: Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

WEEK 3: Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 3:12-14

WEEK 4: Ecclesiastes 2:13; 4:13; 7:5, 11, 12, 19; 8:1

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Know that the fear of the Lord brings significance to life.**

STUDY: Ecclesiastes

THEME: Significant

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 3:14; 8:10-13; 12:13, 14

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 34:9; 111:10; 128:1, 2; Proverbs 9:10; Job 28:28

FEAR THE LORD

BY MARK SCOTT

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve did not have to wonder about their significance. They had been created by God in his image (Genesis 1:26, 27). Their identity was not an issue. But when sin stained the planet their identity and sense of significance was compromised and marred. Humankind continued to search for significance until it reached an apex in the account of the Tower of Babel. The people wanted to “make a name for themselves” (11:4). Bruce Parmenter said, “They had to reach so high because they felt so low” (*What the Bible Says About Self-Esteem*). Any search for significance without God in the picture will end in desperation. This lesson and the three that follow will deal with the theme of significance from the book of Ecclesiastes.

The books that comprise the wisdom literature of the Bible (primarily Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) help balance one another. Proverbs says, “Live according to this wisdom and all will be well.” Job says, “Not so fast. It does not always work that way.” Ecclesiastes says, “Life is meaningless.” Song of Songs says, “Not if you find true love.” Some people think Ecclesiastes is just a pessimistic book written by a grouchy old king. Actually, it is a scientific experiment to make sense of life “under the sun” (without God in the equation). Today’s lesson says, “If you fear the Lord, you will find significance.”

Fear the Lord Because What God Does, Lasts*Ecclesiastes 3:14*

Solomon announced the book’s theme (meaninglessness) in chapter one. In chapter two, he surveyed attempts (wine, women, and wisdom) at finding significance. In chapter three he added “time” to the component of this search. There is a time for everything (3:1-8). God made everything beautiful in its time and put eternity in the hearts of people (vv. 8-13)—see Don Richardson’s book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, about how God has placed redemptive analogies in every culture.

The purpose of this “time” argument is that people would fear the Lord. In contrast to what time-bound humans do, God’s activities endure forever. Solomon said that he “knew” (know intimately or well) that. The Bible uses the word *forever* just like we do. Sometimes it meant “unending.” Sometimes it meant “a long time.” Context makes clear that the former meaning is being intended here. No addition or subtraction is needed. God’s activities endure. In contrast, human life is a vapor (James 4:14).

Fear the Lord Because God Will Judge the Wicked*Ecclesiastes 8:10-13*

Solomon’s search for wisdom led him to compare the rich and the poor (chapter 4), consider worship (chapter 5), consider the value of food and work, and contrast the wise with the foolish (chapters 6, 7). In chapter 8 Solomon stressed the importance of obeying the king because he is God’s representative and stressed the importance of doing God’s will even though at times it might not seem worth it.

One temptation for the righteous person is to believe the lie that the wicked “get away with it.” This is mentioned in the Bible many times (see Psalm 73 in particular). It seems that their wickedness is not punished or is at least delayed indefinitely. They even live longer than the righteous at times. But Solomon reminded his readers that the *wicked* (the first word for evil in the Bible) get buried too. They might look like they hang around the temple and receive praise from others (see John 12:43), but, in the end, the praise they receive is *meaningless* (the key word in Ecclesiastes meaning “vapor or mist”). Solomon reminded his readers that it still goes better for those who fear God and are reverent. If the wicked lengthen their days, it will be like a shadow.

Fear the Lord Because That Is the Whole Duty of All People*Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14*

Preaching and teaching from Ecclesiastes is challenging because of the temptation to get to the conclusion too soon. It does help to work through the book so as to arrive at this large crescendo. But the best argument for fearing the Lord is that, at the end of the day, it is the “whole” of life. [The word *duty* is supplied by the translators. The text actually just says, “This is the ‘whole’ . . . of all mankind.”]

Everything has been *heard* (see Deuteronomy 6:4). The conclusion of this *matter* (word)—fearing God and keeping his commandments (what Jewish boys learned by age 12) is what matters in life. Since God is the judge for good or evil, and he will bring hidden things into the open (Matthew 10:26), serving him with everything is the only thing that makes sense in life.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

IN PURSUIT OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE

BY DAVID FAUST

Long before American patriots called the pursuit of happiness an inalienable human right, Solomon pursued it with a vengeance. He wondered, ***Is education the key?*** He studied arts and sciences, writing thousands of proverbs and songs, and becoming an expert on animals and plants (1 Kings 4:32, 33). But in his pursuit of information, Solomon discovered many problems he couldn't solve. "The more knowledge, the more grief," he said (Ecclesiastes 1:18). Education has great value, but knowledge alone isn't the key to life.

Is pleasure the key? Solomon became an expert at fooling around and making people laugh. He said, "I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly" (Ecclesiastes 2:3). But even if you're the life of the party, what will you do when the party is over? Vacations and holidays eventually come to an end. What then? There has to be more to life than merely surviving from one weekend to the next. Solomon's experiment with pleasure left him unfulfilled.

Are possessions the key? Solomon built houses, vineyards, gardens, and parks. He lived in an enormous palace half the length of a football field, in rooms paneled with fragrant cedar. He said, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure" (2:10). Scrumptious food filled his table. Choirs of singers entertained him. His treasury overflowed with silver and gold. Hundreds of women met his sexual desires. But all these material comforts couldn't fill his empty heart.

Is work the key? As he achieved one success after another, Solomon's royal career earned him worldwide fame, but he found that if work alone defines your purpose for existence, your mind won't rest when you try to sleep at night. Eventually you will retire or die, and someone else will take over the treasures you worked so hard to accumulate.

Solomon wearily declared, "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (v. 17). That's pretty depressing! Is the goal of life merely to squeeze out a little bit of happiness before you die? At the end of Ecclesiastes, notice three lessons Solomon learned from his quest for happiness.

1. Don't waste the here and now. "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (12:1). Give God your energy and vitality while you can.

2. Remember what holds things together. "The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd" (vv. 11, 12). Like a goad, the wise words of Scripture—given by the Good Shepherd himself—prod us and get under our skin, motivating us to action. Like firmly embedded nails, God's truth holds things together.

3. Live with the end in mind. Solomon's ultimate conclusion? "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment" (vv. 13, 14). Fearing God doesn't mean living in terror. It means taking God seriously, holding him in reverence, treating him with the highest respect, and orienting our lives around him. A meaningful life is found not merely by discovering ourselves, but by trusting in Jesus Christ, who came to give us life "to the full" (John 10:10).

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- What is something you were afraid of when you were a child?
- Do you have a hero, someone you are in awe of because of what they've done or who they are?

Read Ecclesiastes 3:14

1. Solomon wrote this short verse about God's works and his relationship with us. What do you learn here about God's timeless, eternal works and character?
2. What does it mean to be in awe of or to revere someone? In this verse, the word often translated *fear* comes from the Hebrew word *yaré*. The phrase can be translated, "so that men will stand in awe before (God)." Talk about how this may change your understanding of the verse or of what God is like.

Read Ecclesiastes 8:10-13

3. Have you ever been hurt or deeply wounded? Have you known someone who was? Witnessing evil or wickedness, have you asked, "God, are you there? Would you please do something?" Have you ever wanted to take matters into your own hands? Discuss what Scripture says about evildoers and how we don't have to scheme to do wrong, even when it seems there is no justice on earth for the wicked.
4. Read the following Scriptures: Psalm 34:9; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10. Notice that they all contain the phrase, "fear of the Lord," but each also shows the benefits of having reverence for him. Armed with a better understanding of the word *fear*, discuss what it means to live in holiness under the protection and blessings of God.

Read Psalm 128:1, 2 and Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14

5. What does Psalm 128 promise to those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways? What will this look like in a modern Christian life? (It might be helpful to look up different translations of verse 2!)
6. In Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14 Solomon offers his final analysis and conclusion about being intentional. Our duty is to obey God and to stand in awe and reverence before him. How does the fact that every deed will one day be judged change or confirm the focus in your life and the things you do every day?

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Lord, help us to walk in daily awe and reverence of you, obeying your directives and following Jesus' lead. Show us how to live intentionally with Holy Spirit-infused praise and with wonder that you are all-powerful and eternal.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **We are better when we
have each other to care
for and to care for us.**

STUDY: Ecclesiastes

THEME: Significant

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Proverbs 18:24; 27:10; Matthew 18:20

LIFT UP ONE ANOTHER

BY MARK SCOTT

Ecclesiastes is full of sound advice: know what really matters in life, redeem pleasure, use time wisely, be judicious with your words, think properly about wealth, act well toward government, think eternity, give generously, and enjoy work, food, and friends. In our digital age where people are addicted to their screens, thinking rightly about friendships is vital. C. S. Lewis talked about friendship when he said, “Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in common interest” (*The Four Loves*).

Tucked away in Ecclesiastes between teaching about time and work (chapter 3) and worship (chapter 5) is a section about friendships. We are hardly ever at our best alone. We are often at our best when caring for others. As Reuben Welch wrote years ago, *We Really Do Need Each Other*. Some years ago, Gene Getz alerted the evangelical world to the many “one another” passages in the New Testament epistles (*Sharpening the Focus of the Church*). But 900 years before Christ, Solomon was underlining the importance of lifting up one another.

Life Alone*Ecclesiastes 4:7, 8*

In his scientific experiment called Ecclesiastes, Solomon tried to make sense of life *under the sun*. This important phrase occurs 29 times in the book and means “down here on earth without God in the equation.” Put simply, oppression, work without significance, and interpersonal strife all make the grind so daily. To go it alone is just not good. Being alone is one thing—even extroverts need a break. But being lonely is something else.

Solomon illustrated this truth by pointing to a man who had no siblings or children. He was *all alone* (literally “has no other”). His dilemma was that he was working his fingers to the bone, but for what? Since he was alone, he had no one to whom he could even pass his inheritance. There is no end to his *toil* (misery, pain, or weariness). In addition to that, his wealth had not brought him contentment—something Solomon knew all too well. He might as well have spent his legacy. Since he was alone he was only *depriving* (diminishing or decreasing) himself of *enjoyment* (goodness or gladness). Like everything else under the sun, the lonely man found his work and wealth to be meaningless and labeled the appendix a *miserable business* (evil

occupation or job). Profit without someone to share it with is of small comfort.

Life Together*Ecclesiastes 4:9-12*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book with the title, *Life Together*. It is not a bad description of the church. This paragraph is one of the few in Ecclesiastes with a smiley face. Solomon traced four advantages of doing life together. The first is meaningful or lasting profit. Two are *better* (good) than one because they receive a *good return* (price, worth, economy) for their *labor* (sorrow). Profits are more fun to receive when they are shared and celebrated in unity. Second, there is assistance when needed. Falling down is rarely good, but if a friend is close by, then help is on the way. Solomon added a contrasting parallel phrase by saying, “But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.” A helping hand makes our falls more bearable.

Third, there is intimacy. Solomon would not have to have marital intimacy in mind here, but it fits. Like the earlier Lewis quote he could simply have in mind friendship. Either way, warmth takes place best with a duet—not a solo. The word for “warm” does refer to hot or passionate. Finally, there is conflict. There might be a few Samsons out there who could kill 1,000 Philistines single-handedly (Judges 15:15), but conflicts in the ancient world were almost universally won by pure numbers. The more soldiers, the greater the victory. At least with two a *defense* (a persistent stand) can be marshalled.

The famous line, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” is not a fifth advantage of life together. It seems to be a concluding metaphor of life together. *Strands* were cords or lines or strings. Apart they can easily be snapped. Together they can hardly be *broken* (torn apart). Sometimes this passage is used in weddings with each strand representing a three-way relationship between the bride, the groom, and God. That is not the phrase's context but could be an application of the principle. There is a certain peril to isolation. We are most often better together.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

DON'T FORGET THE THIRD STRAND

BY DAVID FAUST

It's easy to break a slender thread. Two pieces of string will be stronger, but if you braid three strands together, you can form a rope that is difficult to break. Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." Over the years, this verse of Scripture has found its way into wedding ceremonies, for wise couples recognize it takes more than a bride and groom to make a marriage successful. The Lord himself is the third strand who fortifies the bond between the husband and wife.

Marriage, however, isn't the only relationship where this principle applies.

Friends need the Lord to be the third strand. David and Jonathan had a lot in common as warriors in Israel's army, but they were more than casual pals. They had "sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord" (1 Samuel 20:42). God's presence and power took their friendship to a new level of transparency and spiritual depth.

Parents need the Lord to be the third strand between them and their children. Family life has never been easy, and moms and dads especially need God's help in today's tough cultural environment. Psalm 127:1 reminds us, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain." Parenting requires godly wisdom and patience. What parents wouldn't benefit from the heavenly Father's assistance?

Teachers and students need the Lord as their third strand. In a public school classroom, a college lecture hall, a church building, or any other educational setting, it's a serious responsibility to shape the minds of children and adults. James cautions about the educator's influence when he says, "Not many of you should be teachers . . . because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). No teacher should begin a new semester or speak before a

group of students without first praying for God's guidance and strength.

Business leaders and their employees benefit when the Lord is their third strand. In a day when slavery was common, the apostle Paul urged, "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1). The principle behind those words should be taken seriously by today's managers and directors who have workers reporting to them. The best companies not only produce a handsome profit; they also operate according to values of honesty, fairness, and respect. I heard about a leader who would occasionally retreat inside his office so he could spend a few minutes in prayer, and he would post a sign on the office door that said, "In consultation with the Boss."

Church leaders and their congregations need the Lord to be their third strand. That seems obvious, but in the daily grind, busy ministry leaders sometimes forget to "keep the main thing the main thing." The church's elders and staff members need to keep their own relationship with God vibrant and growing. It's hard to feed others when your own soul is starving. You can't lead someone else to a place where you haven't gone.

In all kinds of relationships, we need more wisdom and strength than our own energy can generate. We need God's help to hold things together. Aren't you glad the Lord is willing to be the third strand?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- What is something you would never want to attempt alone? Why?
- What was it like the last time you helped a coworker, friend, or neighbor out of a tight spot?

Read Ecclesiastes 4:7, 8

1. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the character Ebenezer Scrooge is much like the lonely man Solomon described. Toiling endlessly for no one but himself, he doesn't enjoy his wealth and isn't content with his life until confronted with a friendless death. In the end, Scrooge finds significance through helping others with his resources, gaining not only friends, but a family. The man described in this section of Scripture is like Ebenezer in many ways. To whom is the man addressing his questions in verse 8? Discuss how you could counsel someone you know like this who might be asking the same questions.
2. The *why* of what we do is as important as the *what*. Talk about what motivates your daily actions and discuss how the reason behind why you work significantly impacts others and how they may or may not see Jesus.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-11

3. In the U. S. Army, every soldier is assigned a battle buddy who assists and protects them in and out of combat. Soldiers are more productive and safe when they work together, as they are constantly keeping an eye on one another. Talk about how this section of Scripture correlates to the idea of a military battle buddy.
4. Are you someone people regularly call for help? Proverbs 27:10 talks about the importance of being a good friend and having good neighbors. Consider your relationships with your neighbors and brainstorm ways to strengthen those bonds every day with the people who live next door to you.
5. Many companions may bring you to ruin, but true, God-centered friendships can be better than family, says Proverbs 18:24. Do you have companions and acquaintances, or do you have deep, true friendships? Examine what kind of friendships you have. Talk about how you can best care for and cultivate true Christian friends.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:12

6. Jesus said where two or three come together in his name, he is there, too (Matthew 18:20). Discuss how this ties in perfectly with Ecclesiastes 4:12.
7. The people we spend the most time with influence us the most. They also tend to be a reflection of who we are. What positive, Christlike people will surround you and with whom will you intentionally share the love of Jesus this week?

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Jesus, thank you that you call us your friends, always care for our needs, and strengthen and protect us. Show us how to be good friends to others, to shine your light in our lives, and to be good neighbors to everyone. Amen.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **The work of our hands is designed to bring joy and meaning to our lives.**

STUDY: Ecclesiastes

THEME: Significant

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 3:12-14

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 90:17; Proverbs 12:14; 21:25; Ephesians 4:28

WORK WITH YOUR HANDS

BY MARK SCOTT

Toward the end of the 1800s, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, the average American worked 12-hour days and seven-day weeks just to eke out a basic living. In some states, children as young as 5 or 6 toiled away in mines and in horrible working conditions without sufficient fresh air, sanitary facilities, and breaks. The holiday does more than mark the end of summer. It honors work and workers.

It would do us well to discern a doctrine of work from Scripture. Work was what God did for six days in creating the world (Genesis 2:2). Work was part of the perfect world of Eden (2:15). When creation experienced the fall (Genesis 3), work became laborious. Sabbath was put in place by God to take some of the sting out of the work from the “six days you shall labor” imperative (Exodus 20:9). If we use the Creation, Fall, Redemption arc of interpretation and apply it to work, we find that work was meant by God to bring us joy. But when sin entered the picture, work brought angst. Our redemption in Christ puts work back into the meaningful categories of bringing glory to God and helping people (Colossians 3:23, 24; Ephesians 4:28). Solomon noted that work was an indication of the hand of God and was a gift from God.

The Hand of God Enables Us to Work

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

This section of Ecclesiastes followed the experiment of attempts at meaningfulness. Solomon tried “wine, women, and song” to gain deep joy. But all attempts under the sun proved futile. The partial resolution of this dilemma was to find some level of satisfaction in work that was given from the *hand* of God. *Hand* was a metonymy for strength or power. It is nothing less than God’s power that enables us to enjoy our lives—even in this “not yet” redeemed world.

Eating, drinking, and finding satisfaction in the toils of this life (something mentioned twice in our lesson texts today) are not bad. In fact, the word *satisfaction* is actually the word for soul (Hebrew, *nephesh*, or our livingness). Our souls experience an extra skip in our steps when we realize that God’s hand has enabled us to work and thereby find pleasure.

Solomon added another idea to this providence from God. He went on to say that if we *please* (do good to) God, he in turn will provide *wisdom* (prudence), *knowledge* (perception), and *happiness* (gaiety or joy). By contrast, the *sinner* (this is the normal noun for one

who transgresses God’s law) will not find the soul refreshed. Instead the sinner will have to hand wealth over to one who pleases God. Working outside of the hand of God garners the repeated phrase in Ecclesiastes, “This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

The Gift of God Rewards Us for Our Work

Ecclesiastes 3:12-14

This section of our lesson comes immediately following Solomon’s discourse on time. Everything has its time. God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has placed time (and time unending) in our hearts. Out of eternity God carved time. Imagine trying to organize your days without the advantage of time. While we fight the constraints of time, it is a gift from God to help us mark our days of labor.

At the end of the day, and to cut our losses, the best we can hope for in a time-bound and fallen world, is to be *happy* (glad and rejoicing) and to *do good* (take pleasure) while we live. It may seem like a cheap consolation prize, but actually it is a sane way to live.

Once again Solomon called upon his people to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in their work. He called that a *gift* (reward) of God. Verse 14 is repeated from the first lesson in this series to remind us that God’s work endures forever. Rejoicing in this gift of work will help us have the proper *fear* (respect or reverence) for God.

This teaching finds parallels in other texts. Moses’ psalm, that dealt with time, ends by pleading that God would establish the work of our hands (Psalm 90:17b). Proverbs 12:14b says that “the work of a man’s hand comes back to him” (*English Standard Version*). Paul told the Ephesian elders that he had worked hard with his hands (Acts 20:34, 35), and then he told the Ephesian church that they should do honest work with their hands (Ephesians 4:28). In fact, if a person will not work, he should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10).

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

PAINTING IN THE DARK

BY DAVID FAUST

I'm not the greatest handyman, but painting is one home improvement I'm pretty good at doing. Put me in a room with a paintbrush, a roller, and a can of paint, and I can make things happen (including splatters and drips). Painting can be a messy enterprise, but at the end of the day, you see the results of your work. In my work as a minister, outward evidence of transformation isn't always so obvious.

When my wife and I moved into our current house, I painted several rooms. One day Candy was gone and I had the whole day to work by myself, so I decided to paint the hallway that leads down to the basement. It was dark in there. I flipped the switch and turned on the overhead light, but the area remained dimly lit. I rigged up an extension cord and set a couple of lamps on the floor, but throughout the day I struggled to see the walls in the less-than-ideal light.

That evening Candy came home and surveyed the work I had done. Looking at the hallway walls, she nodded her approval, but she asked, "Why is it so dark in here?" Before I could respond, she pushed a little knob on the side of the light switch, which I hadn't noticed. It was a dimmer switch. All day I had labored in semi-darkness, when I could have been working in the light.

On the Job With Jesus

Unfortunately, many in today's workforce are laboring in the dark. According to an article in *Forbes* magazine, 80 percent of American workers feel stressed at work, only 30 percent feel "engaged and inspired," and 18 percent are "actively disengaged"—present at work but hate every minute of it.

Jesus wants to go to work with you. The Lord doesn't stay cooped up in a church building all week. He's at home in factories, offices, schools, stores, and construction sites. Jesus worked as a carpenter, teacher,

healer, leadership trainer, foot washer, and breakfast cook. The CEO of the universe knows what it takes to run a business, and he can infuse your work with a higher purpose.

Obviously, we work in order to earn an income, but the Bible mentions several additional reasons for labor as well:

- **To honor our Creator** (Genesis 2:15; Exodus 20:9). Work has dignity because God designed us to do it.
- **To provide for others** (Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 5:8). We earn money so we can care for our families and have something to share with those in need.
- **To exercise our gifts** (Romans 12:6-8). Christians should approach our daily work with a sense of calling. It's a privilege to serve God with the abilities he has given us.
- **To exert influence for the Lord and his church** (1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12; Titus 2:9, 10). The workplace is a mission field. Reliable, diligent employees build relationships, earn respect, and set an attractive example for a watching world.

Thank the Lord, there's more to life than merely enduring our daily work until we finally retire and die. Don't waste your days painting in the dark. Let the light of Christ shine in your job so that whatever you do, you "work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23).

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- Is your work satisfying and does it provide meaning to you?
- Do you enjoy your life and find daily fulfillment?

Read Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

1. The word meaning “toil” or “labor” is *amal* in Hebrew and Solomon used some form of it 22 times in this book. In verse 24, he spoke of satisfying work whereas in an earlier verse (22), he talked about work being an anxious striving. Talk about the way you view your work and labor. What needs to change for you to be satisfied?
2. What are the benefits of pleasing God? Discuss how these blessings tie in to finding fulfillment and relishing the life and opportunities you’ve been given.
3. Read Proverbs 21:25. A more modern translation for “sluggard” might be “slacker.” Do you know someone like this, someone who refuses to work and be productive? How could you motivate such a person?
4. Paul wrote about productivity and labor in Ephesians 4:28. In what ways do people who could work, but don’t, steal from the common resources and hurt those in need?
5. Psalm 90:17 was written by Moses, a man who labored long and hard for the Lord. Consider his words and talk about how this encouraging prayer could help you and others today.
6. What you think + what you say = what you produce. Thinking about this statement, what intentions and thoughts occupy your mind? How do they affect the way you speak? How do they correlate to your productivity? Read Proverbs 12:14 and discuss.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:12-14

7. Here Solomon echoed earlier statements about the importance of being happy, doing good, and enjoying our work. Why would Solomon, the wealthiest, wisest man in history, say this twice? Discuss how this sage advice can change your attitude as you are going about your activities this week.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Oh, Lord, establish the work of our hands! Direct and guide us in the work you have before us to bring joy and meaning to our lives and to enrich and enhance the lives of those around us. May our joy be so attractive and evident to others that they can’t help but ask the reason for it! Amen.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Get wisdom and enjoy its benefits.**

STUDY: Ecclesiastes

THEME: Significant

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 2:13; 4:13; 7:5, 11, 12, 19; 8:1

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Proverbs 1:5-7; James 1:5-8; 3:13-18

GET WISDOM

BY MARK SCOTT

School has started. While some schools begin in August, most all are in session following Labor Day. For decades the overriding purpose in going to school was to acquire knowledge. While acquiring skills for future education and the workplace and helping students to be physically, emotionally, and psychologically healthy were also desired outcomes, the main purpose in going to school was to increase in knowledge. Now, given our digital age, knowledge can be obtained without a teacher. Maybe a good question would be, “Can a student extrapolate genuine wisdom from all that knowledge without a teacher?” Perhaps a teacher is necessary for helping students manage the information. To do that takes wisdom.

The wisdom literature of the Bible provides not only knowledge but also wisdom. This wisdom sometimes comes to us in snippets and proverbs. A collection of them is called a *catena*, which is an arranged catalog or list. Our texts today function as a *catena*. Solomon said, “Get wisdom” (Proverbs 4:7), and our *catena* says, “Enjoy the benefits of wisdom.”

Wisdom Beats Foolishness*Ecclesiastes 2:13*

The context indicated that all the things Solomon tried still ended in meaninglessness. In fact, even wisdom (turned in on itself) can lead to foolishness. Wisdom does not make a good savior, but it sure beats being dumb. Solomon said that wisdom is *better* (the word is unique to Ecclesiastes, occurring seven times, and it means “profitable” or “advantageous”) than folly. He likened it to the difference between light and darkness. One benefit of wisdom is that it is preferable to foolishness.

Wisdom Gives Warnings*Ecclesiastes 4:13; 7:5*

Wisdom sounds warning notes all the time. The wise hear them and heed them. The foolish refuse such a *warning* (to be taught or admonished). One would like to assume that age improves one’s ability to hear and heed wisdom. But that is not always the case. Age and wisdom do not always go together. Young and wise beats old and *foolish* (simpleton)—even if the old one is a king. Wise people, regardless of age will heed the rebuke of a wise person. Wise people are always trying to grow and improve. They accept criticism well. Adversity and prosperity (the context of chapter 7) can cause one to abandon wisdom. But the wise will avoid the *song of fools* (lifestyle of the foolish) and accept rebuke.

Wisdom Preserves People*Ecclesiastes 7:11, 12, 19*

Ecclesiastes 7 reads like the book of Proverbs. Several contrasts are given. In the midst of those comparisons Solomon gave a simile, a metaphor, and a comparison. The simile and metaphor have to do with money. Wisdom preserves people like an inheritance does for a family. The people who go on living (*those who see the sun*) benefit when the inheritance is distributed. Wisdom is a *shelter* (some form of protection) in a similar way as money is an inheritance for a family. It *preserves* (sustains) those who have it.

The comparison has to do with power. A wise person has power. A wise person outstrips those usually viewed as powerful—to the tune of ten rulers in a city. While Solomon admitted struggling with the seeming futility of wicked people advancing without difficulty (Psalm 73), he knew down deep that wisdom protects people in a powerful way.

Wisdom Explains . . . Things*Ecclesiastes 8:1*

Much like Paul and James (1 Corinthians 1:20; James 3:13), Solomon asked, *Who is like the wise?* A wise person can explain things. The word *explanation* is a special Hebrew word. It is the word *peshet*. This word means, “This means.” It is what rabbis did when they explained Scripture. Homiletically speaking it has come to mean going through a text verse-by-verse. It is similar to what Ezra did in Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8:8)—translating, giving the sense, so the people understood. It is what Christian scribes do who are trained in the things of the kingdom (Matthew 13:52). It is what Paul wanted Timothy to do with the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). It is what happens in believers through the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:18; 1 John 2:27).

When a wise person who has proper decorum explains things it shows in the countenance. Wise people’s faces *brighten* (are illuminated). Wisdom helps a face that was once hard become soft and gentle (James 3:17, 18). Wisdom just makes a difference at several levels. Knowledge is good, but wisdom is better.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

WISE UP

BY DAVID FAUST

Two families built identical new houses using the same kind of lumber, siding, and shingles. One of the homeowners, however, skimmed on the amount of concrete used in the foundation. After a cold winter and spring rains, the house with the weak foundation is full of cracks and leaks.

A group of young women, excited to participate in their friend's wedding, paid a dressmaker to create beautiful gowns for the big event. Some of them got everything ready ahead of time, but others procrastinated and planned to pick up their dresses at the last minute. When they arrived at the dressmaker's shop on Saturday morning, the day of the ceremony, a sign on the shop door said, "Closed for Vacation." The bridesmaids showed up at the wedding embarrassed and unprepared.

An investor made it big in the stock market. Every morning he drove his BMW to work, where his spacious upper-story office provided a spectacular view of the city skyline. On weekends he headed to the golf course and went night-clubbing with friends. He never prayed or went to church. Who has time for that, when you're making money and having a good time? As his business prospered, the rich man bought vacation homes in Florida and California. He attributed his stomach pains to job-related stress, but his physician frowned as he scanned the test results. Shocked, the wealthy man learned he had stage four cancer and only months to live. Steering his BMW out of the doctor's parking lot, he drove to his office, stared out the window, and wept.

Do you recognize these three stories? They are contemporary retellings of stories Jesus told about the Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24-27), the 10 Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), and the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21). In the latter parable, the Lord called someone foolish that most would call a success. It's possible to be physically healthy, financially wealthy,

skilled in business, and enjoying many pleasures, but at the same time be spiritually bankrupt. How foolish it is to ignore God and be unprepared to die!

Living Wisely

In James 3:13-18, the brother of Jesus explained what it means to make wise choices.

True wisdom is practical. It's a lifestyle marked by godly common sense. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life" (v. 13).

True wisdom makes us humble, not arrogant. It's foolish to be cocky and puffed up with pride. Wisdom leads to "deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (v. 13).

True wisdom "comes from heaven" (v. 17). It's a gift of God that enables us to see life from his point of view instead of allowing our personal whims and cultural trends to shape our worldview. We should pursue wisdom as if it were silver and "search for it as for hidden treasure" (Proverbs 2:4-6). God delights in giving wisdom to those who ask for it (James 1:5).

True wisdom is spiritually enriching. It makes those who possess it "pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (3:17).

King Solomon impressed the world with his wisdom, but someone "greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42). It's foolish to ignore Jesus Christ, for in him are "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3).

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- What is wisdom?
- What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

Read Ecclesiastes 2:13

1. In his search for the meaning of life, King Solomon discovered that some things were better than others. How is wisdom better than foolishness? Why do you think Solomon used light and darkness as analogies for wisdom and foolishness?
2. Does wisdom always come with age and achievement? Read Ecclesiastes 4:13, 14 and discuss whether or not wisdom requires gray hairs or advanced social, educational, or economic levels.

Read Ecclesiastes 7:5, 11, 12, 19

3. List several characteristics of wise people. Talk about people you know personally who exhibit them. What do they do to grow in wisdom?
4. Are you wise—or just knowledgeable? Referring to Proverbs 1:5-7, discuss the difference between knowledge and genuine wisdom. If you have a Bible app on your phone, read alternate translations in *The Message* or the *Amplified Bible* for different takes on the subject.

Read Ecclesiastes 8:1

5. How does wisdom change a person's life? Have you ever had a wise teacher, one who is good at explaining complicated things? Or seen someone's face light up with understanding? Talk about the last time you gave or received understanding and wisdom like this and how it changed your outlook on life.
6. In the Old Testament, people did not have the benefit of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to help them discern God's will and connect with his presence. Fortunately, James, the brother of Jesus and pillar of the early church, recognized and wrote that wisdom is only a prayer away. Read James 1:5-8. To whom does God give wisdom and how does he give it? What conditions are placed on this wisdom?
7. Wisdom has spiritual indicators that make it discernible, too. In James 3:13-16, we read about two kinds of wisdom: heavenly and demonic. What are the characteristics of each? What kind of wisdom do you display?
8. Read James 3:17, 18. How are peace and wisdom connected? Discuss practical ways to live out wisdom in your life this week.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Father, your Word says that if we want wisdom, we need but ask you and you will give generously without finding fault in our request. Pour out your Spirit of wisdom on us, Jesus, and let us be wise to lead in our day! Amen.

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.