

ECCLESIASTES

ENJOYMENT EAST OF EDEN

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON
and **DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL**


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REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

All boxed quotations are taken from Douglas Sean O’Donnell’s *Ecclesiastes in the Reformed Expository Commentary* series. Page numbers in quotations refer to that source.

The quoted phrase at the beginning of the boxed quotation on page 33 is from Anne Bradstreet, “The Vanity of All Worldly Things,” quoted in *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible*, ed. Robert Atwan and Laurence Wieder, vol. 1, *Genesis to Malachi* (New York: Oxford University Press), 354.

The quoted phrase at the end of the boxed quotation on page 34 is from Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World; A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 129.

The quoted material in the boxed quotation on page 70 is from Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 177.

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING ECCLESIASTES

The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7 states that “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all” (1.7). The book of Ecclesiastes is one of the books that illustrates this: it is certainly less plain and less clear than other parts of Scripture. Put simply, it is a tough read. That said, we can make both head and tail of the book by looking carefully at its head (the beginning) and tail (the end).

The book begins,

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,

vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

What does man gain by all the toil

at which he toils under the sun? (Eccl. 1:1–3)

Here we are introduced to the **author**, who is labeled “the Preacher” (*ekklēsiastēs* in the Greek; *Qoheleth* in the Hebrew), followed by two key descriptors: “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Although Solomon’s name is nowhere attached to the work, these phrases, along with later autobiographical testimony (for example, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me”—1:16; and “I . . . gathered for myself silver and gold . . . and many concubines”—2:8), suggest that Solomon was the author and that Ecclesiastes was written during his reign (ca. 970–931 B.C.). Whoever the human author was, we know that God, our “one Shepherd” (12:11), inspired this sacred Scripture.

The opening verses of Ecclesiastes also introduce us to the book’s **key word**, *vanity*. This word is repeated throughout the book—it appears five

times in 1:2, three times in 12:8 (as a thematic bookend), and twenty-nine other times—and it might best be translated “mere breath.” This word in turn provides an image that answers the book’s **key question**: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). Nothing! Our work on earth is remembered as long as an exhale of hot breath on a cold day.

Although I take this book to have been designed by God to depress us into dependence on him, not all is dark. I say that because of its final verses of Ecclesiastes. Note the sentence in italics.

The end of the matter; all has been heard. *Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.* For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (12:13–14)

In light of God’s coming judgment and the fleeting value of human toil on earth, the wise person trusts in the everlasting Lord, who repeatedly promises that joy can be found through fearing and obeying him as he commands. Fearing God “turn[s] a vain, empty life into a meaningful life.”¹

We could sum up the **theological themes** of Ecclesiastes in the following way: as we live our *earthly* lives (“under the sun,” mentioned 33 times), recognizing that *death* (alluded to 21 times) will render the profits of our *toil* (33 times) *fleeting* (“vanity,” 38 times), let us embrace true *wisdom* (53 times), which is to fear *God* (40 times) and *enjoy* (17 times) the *gifts* he *gives* (16 times).

Of course, if we keep in mind that our Lord Jesus taught us to read the Bibles as having him at the center (see Luke 24:44), then we must believe that the **purpose** of even the book of Ecclesiastes is to bear witness of him (see John 5:39) and “make [us] *wise* for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). For example, what Jesus taught in John 15:10–11 echoes the wisdom of Ecclesiastes:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These

1. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 22.

things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Moreover, our search for joy, meaning, significance, rest, justice, life, and wisdom is found in Christ alone—the ultimate demonstration and embodiment of the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24; see also Col 2:3), who crushed the curse of death on the cross, brought hope through his resurrection, and will bring justice at his return. As I write in my commentary,

Jesus Christ redeemed us from the vanity that Pastor Solomon so wrestled with and suffered under by subjecting himself to our temporary, meaningless, futile, incomprehensible, incongruous, absurd, smoke-curling-up-into-the-air, mere-breath, vain life. He was born under the sun. He toiled under the sun. He suffered under the sun. He died under the sun. But in his subjection to the curse of death by his own death on the cross, this Son of God “redeemed us from the curse” (Gal. 3:13). By his resurrection, he restored meaning to our toil. And by his return, he will exact every injustice and elucidate every absurdity as he ushers those who fear the Lord into the glorious presence of our all-wise, never-completely-comprehensible God.²

Douglas Sean O’Donnell
Author of *Ecclesiastes* (REC)

2. Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 12–13.

LESSON 1

ALL IS VANITY

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

THE BIG PICTURE

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with the “Preacher” (whom we will refer to as “Solomon”) repeatedly proclaiming that all is “vanity” (1:1, 2). The word in Hebrew means something like “breath” and carries with it the idea of transience or impermanence. With this word, the book introduces one of its central themes: life without faith in God is nothing more than a passing vapor. It is only through faith in God that human beings find lasting meaning, joy, wisdom, and hope.

This first passage of the book focuses on the vanity of work, as well as on the seemingly endless repetition of existence (1:2–11). Human beings live, work, and die . . . and the earth remains unaffected by their hopes, dreams, and efforts (vv. 2–7). Solomon posits that nothing is “new” in the world; everything continues just as it has for generation after generation (vv. 8–11). Human life seems to repeat a familiar cycle of birth, work, death without transcendent purpose or meaning. What a blessing and privilege we enjoy as readers in this new covenant era. We know that God gives true meaning to our lives through the work of his promised Messiah.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11.

GETTING STARTED

1. Some people question Christianity, or even reject it outright, because of difficult questions or perceived contradictions. In what ways could Ecclesiastes serve people who are asking hard questions about life on earth?
2. What aspects of their jobs do people tend to find discouraging? What causes work to be a great joy for some and yet a great burden for others?

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. What do we learn from Ecclesiastes 1:1 about the book's author? What expectations does his description give us about the purpose of this book?

Darkness and Light, pg. 9

Like a Rembrandt painting, in which darkness and light play off each other and blend together in seemingly inexplicable ways, [the] gray pieces of Ecclesiastes do eventually connect with God, who is at the center of the picture and is bright in all his incompressible glory and wisdom.

4. What does the “Preacher” focus on in the opening verses of this passage (1:3)? Why do you think he starts his examination of the meaning (and “vanity”) of human life in this way?

5. What are your initial thoughts as you read the opening passage of Ecclesiastes? What seem to be its mood and tone?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. In 1:2, the word that is translated *vanity* means something like “breath” and, in the original Hebrew, also sounds like a quick release of breath. Through both its sound and its meaning, what does this word convey? Why is it a good word for Solomon to use?

7. What question does Solomon raise in 1:3 about the ultimate purpose of our toil? Why is this an important question?

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read 1 Kings 10:14–25 for some background on King Solomon at the height of his wealth, power, and influence. What did God give him? Why ought we to listen to him?

13. Read 2 Peter 3:3–7. What similarities do you see between what those verses portray “scoffers” as saying and what Solomon says in this lesson’s passage? What is Peter’s response to such claims?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins where Ecclesiastes ultimately concludes: with the assertion that life on earth must be about *God* in order to have meaning. “What is the chief end [or purpose] of man? . . . To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” With this end in mind, how should you think about the work you have in front of you today?

15. Although Solomon wrestles with the feeling that existence on earth is *cyclical*, and therefore meaningless, the Bible as a whole is clear that human life on earth is progressing to an eventual end, when Jesus will return as King and Judge and eternal life will begin. How does our view of the world change when we hold this truth in mind?

APPLYING THE TEXT

16. What struggle does this passage say that we all have with *meaning*? Based on the passage we studied in this lesson, how do you think this book of the Bible can speak to your life and questions?
17. What effect does this passage have on you as you consider your place in the world and within the unfolding generations? Why do you think God wants you to have this awareness of your place?
18. Jesus Christ came to live a real life on earth as a real human being who engaged in real work. What was “new” about Jesus? What hope does his life and work give you?

PRAYER PROMPT

As you conclude this first lesson within your study of Ecclesiastes, ask God to help you to wrestle honestly both with life's difficult questions and with your own fragility and mortality. Ask God to help you to trust more and more in the Savior who came into this world to bring salvation, life, and meaning to those who are living and laboring under the sun.

The Son of God under the Sun, pgs. 12-13

Jesus Christ redeemed us from the vanity that Pastor Solomon so wrestled with and suffered under by subjecting himself to our temporary, meaningless, futile, incomprehensible, incongruous, absurd, smoke-curling-up-into-the-air, mere-breath, vain life. He was born under the sun. He toiled under the sun. He suffered under the sun. He died under the sun. But in his subjection to the curse of death by his own death on the cross, this Son of God "redeemed us from the curse" (Gal. 3:13).