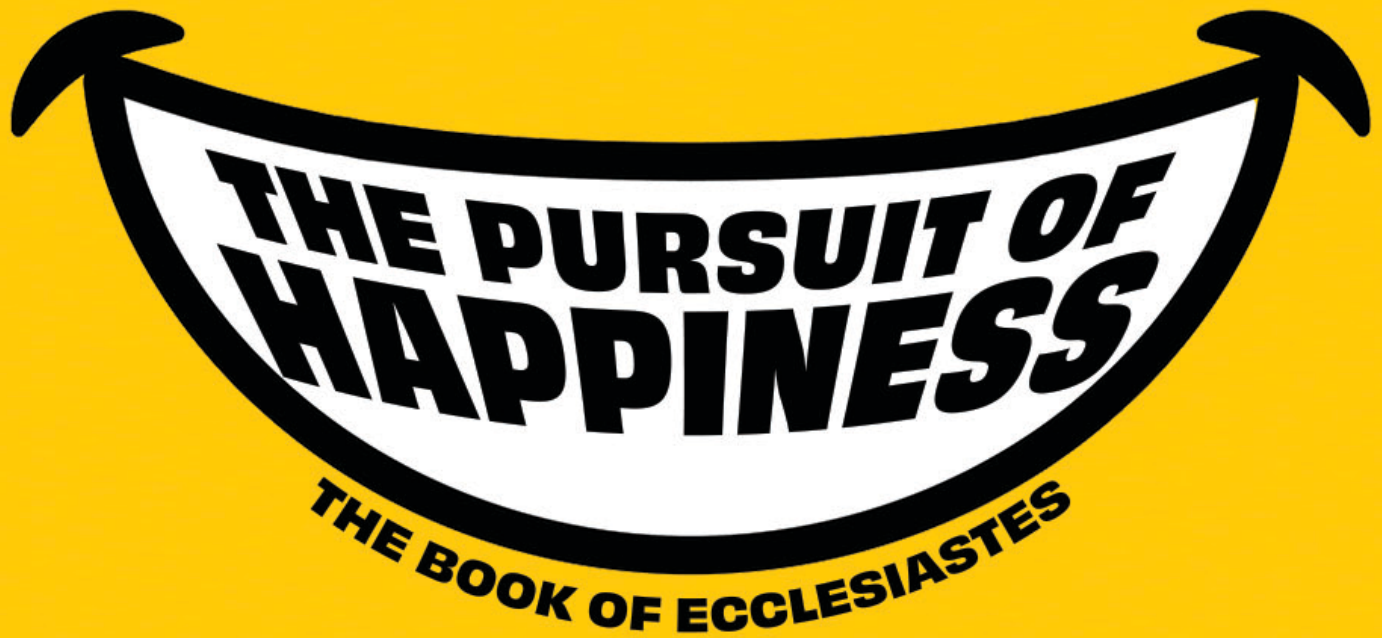


SMALL GROUP GUIDE



CIRCLES 01/03: **EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS**

Stride by stride, every person on the face of the earth is chasing something. They are either pursuing acclaim, success, satisfaction, fulfillment, the perfect vacation, or just their idea of the perfect family in a photo frame. While all of those goals seem drastically different, they remain the same at the core. Everyone is pursuing happiness. We share the pursuit, but how do we get to where we are going? Fortunately for us, the ancient wisdom book of Ecclesiastes offers profound guidance for our pursuit of happiness.

We all want to be happy, don't we? That desire dwells deep down in our hearts. Looking at modern society, you'd think we were all relatively happy. Endless entertainment is at our fingertips. World wealth is at an all-time high. Fifteen thousand self-help books are published every single year. Robots will vacuum your house for you and then return to their little home in your kitchen (unless they get stuck on the stairs). However, while life seems to be getting easier, people are not getting happier.

Sociologist Gregg Easterbrook explained, "The percentage of people who describe themselves as "happy" has not budged since the 1950s, though the typical person's real income more than doubled through that period. Happiness has not increased in Japan or Western Europe in the past half-century."¹ The modern world was built on the foundation of people's collective pursuit of happiness. While we may have assumed that's what we were accomplishing, culture has clearly missed the mark.

So, as we launch into our study on Ecclesiastes, please ask yourself this crucial question. What are you currently pursuing to make you happy? What is that thing you think is the key to the happiness locked away in your heart? Is it success, a new job, a relationship, a trimmer physique, a different city, or a trophy on your shelf? Whatever came to mind, please write it down and keep it in mind as we journey through Solomon's wisdom together.

For Vincent van Gogh, a painter from the 19th century, the answer came easily. Vince wanted to be a famous painter more than anything. Creative energy seeped from his core, and he dreamt of nothing more than making art his life's work. So, what did he do? He painted...a lot. He was a true prodigy, and his talent was unmatched and unmistakable. However, his creations went largely unnoticed. With paint-covered hands, he clasped his face as he dealt with debilitating letdown and financial meltdown.

¹ Easterbrook, G. (2003). *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. Random House.

He poured his heart and soul into his paintings, hoping they would gain some glimpse of recognition, but it never came. His art didn't hang in local coffee shops. No gallery owners called him back. The guy couldn't even get a job painting a mural for a local preschool. Towards the end of his life, he concluded, "The sadness will last forever."²

Tragically, Van Gogh passed away in his mid-thirties after a dreadful battle with depression. He didn't sell a single painting in his lifetime. After his death, everything shifted, though. His art gained the recognition it deserved, and he is now a household name. To this day, Vincent van Gogh is considered one of the few true master painters. His masterpieces are displayed at many of the world's most exclusive museums, with appraisals that would make your head spin.

Van Gogh's impact is unquestionable, but he spent his entire life searching and striving for everything to click and make sense. It never did, though. He meticulously pursued his painting but never saw the success, fame, and fortune he deserved. His story should serve as a warning. We must attach meaning to something much larger than ourselves. Ecclesiastes forces us to wrestle with a pressing question—what is the meaning of life?

Ecclesiastes sits on the proverbial shelf of a literary genre called wisdom literature. Written by King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, this book strikes a tone that shocks most readers. Why? Because it's downright pessimistic. Solomon just seems sad. So, let's dissect the seemingly pessimistic journal entries of King Solomon as we embark on our pursuit of happiness.

READ: Ecclesiastes 1:2-6

“‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.”

While math is not my thing, we will write out some non-numerical equations from Ecclesiastes designed to help us solve life's meaning as we work through this study. Honestly, the first set of equations may seem the most perplexing. As we dig in, you will begin to see an extraordinary message emerge from these two head-scratching equations.

² Van Gogh, V. (2009). *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (Ed. by R. H. Pickvance). Penguin Classics.

Everything = Meaningless

Look at the opening line of the book. Why are you being so harsh, King Solomon? Dial it in, buddy. People are doing their best; why would you call their lives meaningless like that? You may think this is just for the shock factor, but it's actually definitive of Solomon's core message. He surveyed Israel's people toiling in the sun, building their own little lives, and ultimately getting nowhere. It's as if everyone was running on a treadmill while happiness taunted them from the other side of the gym.

By our culture's standards, Solomon should be the happiest person in history. His wealth was staggering. Modest estimates suggest that Solomon's wealth would rack up to nearly \$12 billion today. Money. Chariots. Friends. Parties. Expensive art. Fine meals. Designer sandals. Solomon had it all, but he still concluded that everything "under the sun" proves to be meaningless and repetitious. I imagine Solomon peaked out his window to survey his exquisite estate just to conclude, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Solomon drives it home when he expounds on the repetition of creation. Look at his bleak description. He explains that the sun sets and rises while the tides move in and out. It's an inescapable cycle. Do you ever feel like your life looks like that? You go to school, then come back home just to do it again and again. You feel like your routines are like the tides and your responsibilities are like the sunrise. It's just the same mundane, humdrum sequence every single day. How do we escape it? How do we get off the treadmill? We achieve this when we attach meaning to the mundane.

Eternity = Meaning

The Hebrew word for "meaningless" is *hebel*, which loosely translates as "vapor or breath." Think of when you exhale a deep breath in the middle of winter and a cloud of vapor pours from your lungs. It's there for a moment; then it vanishes. You can see it and perceive it, but it's not lasting. It's there for a moment; then it's gone. This is why understanding biblical language is so helpful.

Solomon's strategic use of *hebel* reveals his core argument. Everything is meaningless because it's not eternal. Your job won't last forever. Your car will break down eventually. Your wealth will run out one day. Not to be morbid, but your loved ones will eventually have funerals. Everything is temporary. It's just a vapor that's here for a moment, then vanishes into thin air.

A random, reoccurring prepositional phrase is the guide map to escaping Solomon's confusing maze of meaning in Ecclesiastes. Twenty-seven times, he points out that we are "under the sun." This is not just a weather update for the sunny deserts of Israel. "Under the sun" is the context of his conclusion.

The wise king wants you to understand that everything under the sun is meaningless because it's all temporary. All physical creation has a shelf life. You discover meaning when you attach an eternal mindset to your everyday monotony. The world in front of you is only a snapshot of ultimate reality. The spiritual world, heaven, and God's Kingdom make our vast universe look like a molehill next to Mount Everest. Live your life with that in mind, and you will discover meaning.

Rev. Rick Warren explained, "Without God, life has no purpose, and without purpose, life has no meaning. Without meaning, life has no significance or hope."³ Life by itself has no meaning. Life, in service to God, is full of meaning. That's your source of significance. Your physical life may be a fleeting vapor, but your soul is eternal. Wake up every day with that mindset, and your life will radically change.

Everything may be meaningless, but everything can bring glory to God. We make meaning when we magnify God amid the monotony of life.

³ Warren, R. (2002). *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Zondervan.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: Do you have a favorite painting? What makes it your favorite?

Q2: What stuck out to you from today's message?

Q3: "We are all in pursuit of happiness." What are some things people think will make them happier?

Q4: "Without God, life has no purpose, and without purpose, life has no meaning. Without meaning, life has no significance or hope." What does this quote mean to you? How can we ensure we live a life of significance?

Q5: What are some ways you can attach eternal meaning to your temporary life?

Application: Simply ask yourself, "What are you currently pursuing to make you happy? What is that thing you think is the key to the happiness locked away in your heart?" Be brutally honest with yourself, then write down your answer and pray for God to help you change that.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

Ecclesiastes 3:15-22

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLES 02/03: **FIND MEANING IN YOUR MISSION**

Ecclesiastes picks up on a downward spiral of pessimism. Solomon sets this up intentionally, though. He wants us to feel the agony of life's monotony before starting to give us little nuggets of practical advice. In our second session, we will examine the first optimistic observation of the book.

Vincent van Gogh chased after his dream for most of his life to no avail. Eventually, darkness overtook him, and he found himself confined to the walls of an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. After decades of creating beauty, he was surrounded by stark white walls and a drab institution that resembled a prison more than a hospital.

On a fateful night in 1889, Van Gogh's heart fluttered when he saw the beauty of the night sky outside his window. Every light in the sky became a beacon of hope for his tormented soul. The artist felt a sense of awe and wonder that inspired him to capture this celestial scene on canvas. On that day, he unpacked his brushes to create his masterpiece—*Starry Night*.

With feverish intensity, Van Gogh got to work. Mixing shades of blues and yellows, he intentionally applied each brushstroke. The swirling lines and thickly applied paint give the painting a hypnotic quality, transporting the viewer to a world of magic and wonder. With good reason, *Starry Night* is considered one of the greatest works of all time.

There are two faulty assumptions about this painting. First, people may assume this was created by an artist on top of his professional career, but we know that's far from the truth. The multicolored canvas came from the trembling hands of an asylum patient with a failed career.

Secondly, some people (usually those who took Art History) assume his masterpiece resulted from his madness. People falsely celebrate it because the work symbolizes his descent into despair. However, that's also not true. *Starry Night* proves the beauty of recovery. At the asylum, Van Gogh began to think more clearly and fight off his dark thoughts. Some of his greatest work came from his time in recovery.

Why is this important? Van Gogh's name shouldn't have lived past his tombstone. By cultural standards, he was a washed-up artist. However, we are still fawning over him a century later. His artwork is recognized and acclaimed the world over. His life was temporary, but what he created was a legacy.

King Solomon has some thoughts on this topic, so let's survey his perspective on one way we can bring meaning to the minutiae of our lives.

READ: Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

"A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

Reject Trophy Collection

As we have discussed, Solomon's accolades were jaw-dropping. The man had a palace, a few dozen Ferrari-branded chariots, and the most lavish wardrobe money could buy. He still concluded that it was all meaningless. If trophies were a thing back then, Solomon would have had a trophy case the size of the art museum housing *Starry Night*. I imagine him drinking from a "world's best king" mug, dusting his trophies, and rearranging his medals just to throw up his hands in exasperation. "Meaningless. It's all meaningless!" he would announce. Why? Because he was the wisest man to ever live.

It's time for a thought exercise. What is in your personal trophy case (not literally, but metaphorically)?

From birth, we have an innate desire to accomplish something and make a name for ourselves. For that reason, we strive to collect and cherish our metaphorical trophies. Trophies tell us we accomplished something significant. Trophies tell us we made a mark on the world. Trophies tell us we matter.

God doesn't want you to fill a trophy case, though. He wants to fill your heart.

Embrace Your True Mission

Vincent van Gogh painted *Starry Night* for one reason. He wanted to create beauty. He wasn't going to sell it. He wasn't going to go on tour. He probably wasn't even going to hang it on his wall. He was just struck by the beauty, so he did something that filled his heart.

Let's take this one step further. Van Gogh filled his heart with beauty, and it brought him some meaning. Unfortunately, that meaning was fleeting, like a vapor. You have a better option. You can fill your heart with God and consume your life with His mission. That's a

serious source of significance. That's why I want us to zoom in on the first positive thing Solomon says in Ecclesiastes. He writes, "A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God" (2:24).

This sentence is a breath of fresh air after all the negativity. While Solomon still refers to work as toil, I get a little jolt of joy from what he says. Solomon wanted us to know that there is true satisfaction and meaning in living a life of mission. That's when someone takes what they're doing with their own hands and allows God to move through their work. When we live life on mission, our work becomes worship.

So what does it look like to live out a life of mission? Here's an equation:

Your Uniqueness + God's Glory = Your Mission

Simply put, when you combine the way God made you with the reason God made you, you will begin to live out a life on mission. Your uniqueness is made up of your quirks, skills, gifts, and experiences. Putting all of these together points to what you can do well to make your mark on the world. However, if you do not add the second part, you are just toiling under the sun. When you incorporate God's glory, mere action becomes mission.

If you love creating art, create it in a way that brings God glory. That's a life on mission. If you are into athletics, make much of God in your pursuits. That's a life on mission. If you are funny, help people find the joy of Jesus. If you are a nurturer, care for people in a Christlike way. If you are a writer, write about God. If you are an influencer, tell people about Jesus.

All of those show life on mission. A life of mission is a life of meaning.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: If you could be known for anything, what would it be? As in, what would you want your legacy to be?

Q2: What stuck out to you from today's message?

Q3: Why do you think people are so driven to collect accolades in life?

Q4: "Your Uniqueness + God's Glory = Life on Mission." What would you say are some things that make you unique? What are some of the skills that God has given you?

Q5: What is a way you can attach your uniqueness to God's glory? How can you use your specific gifts for Him?

Application: Evaluate how you can use your gifts within your community over the next month. Start small, and this will help you live a life of mission.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

Ecclesiastes 5:1-9

Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Ecclesiastes 6

Ecclesiastes 7:1-15

Ecclesiastes 7:16-20

Ecclesiastes 8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLES 03/03: SOLOMON'S SUMMARY

Ecclesiastes can feel a little frustrating, can't it? The teacher is just circling around the same idea with rapid repetition like a broken merry-go-round. Sometimes, we just want to shake Solomon and snap, "Get to the point, man! I have things to do." To which he would probably reply, "Those things are meaningless." Regardless, there is a reason this book is called wisdom literature. It requires a little critical thinking. As we conclude our study, Solomon finally lays it out for us.

Have you ever met someone who talks in circles? They talk and talk, and you cannot quite figure out where they are going. I have an anonymous friend who does this every time we exchange stories. He takes what could be a short, prompt tale and turns it into a drawn-out rambling that knows no end.

His stories usually go something like this: "So, I have this friend, and he was...uhhh...he was driving. I don't know if it was Tuesday or Thursday. It was probably Tuesday because...he works on Tuesdays. But he also works on Thursdays. Well, I think it was Wednesday. He was driving his car to work. It's a red Jeep Cherokee. Have you seen the new ones of those, by the way? How slick are those? They have those LED headlights. I hate when I get in front of one of them at night, though. He does not drive a new one, though; it's from the late 90s or early 2000s...I think. Want me to call him? No? Okay, that's fine. So, where was I? Yes! Back to my friend. His name is Hank. Hank was driving to work; he's a cashier at Kroger. I have never understood why people shop at Whole Foods when Kroger is so much cheaper and they have all the same stuff. I do like the peanut butter aisle at Whole Foods, though. I don't eat peanuts because I am allergic. I just think it's a cool aisle. Anyway, while he was driving, he saw a sign that said the state fair was next weekend. Do y'all want to go?"

It takes every fiber of emotional fortitude to avoid snapping back, "All of that was just to ask me to go to the fair with you?!" We have all been in situations like this. Whether it's a friend telling a story or a teacher delivering a lecture, we have heard something just to think, "Where on earth are you going with this?"

Honestly, it's easy to feel this way while reading Ecclesiastes. You are like, "Solomon, I get it. Everything is meaningless, so what's the point then? Why are we on this blue-green marble floating in space in the first place? And why did you even take the time to write this relatively long essay?" Fortunately for us, Solomon finally answers the question in the last few sentences of his twelve-chapter book. Let's see what he says.

READ: Ecclesiastes 12:12b-13

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.”

Even Solomon grew weary in all his writing. His exhaustive journaling had made his body weary and hands shaky, so he decided to sum it up in one easy sentence. Remember what we said last time? We find meaning by living a life on mission. Solomon uses his conclusion to refine the meaning of a life on mission. We are supposed to “fear God and keep His commandments.” That’s it. We can uncover meaning “under the sun” by living for the One who created the sun. We achieve that with two pivotal practices.

Fear God

The “fear of the Lord” is a central theme in Jewish wisdom literature like Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs. This phrase is used a whopping 42 times on the pages of your Bible. So what does it mean? Does God want me to be scared of him in the same way I am scared of clowns and running into my old gym teacher in public? Not exactly.

To grasp this phrase, we must understand the difference between reasonable fear and bad fear. Yes, bad fear makes you hide from pretend monsters and shiver at the thought of the dark. However, fear can also be healthy. Fear keeps you safe. Good fear prevents you from going off into the woods at night, playing frisbee on the freeway, and trying to break into a maximum security prison. Fear is your friend. It helps you make wise decisions. That’s why it plays such a big role in wisdom literature.

Do you see the core difference between good fear and bad fear? Good fear is a wise response to a valid risk. Bad fear is an unwise response to a fake risk. When you fear God, it means you understand that His sheer magnitude makes you microscopic. That should give you a dose of healthy fear. When you fear God, it means you are aware that He could “Thanos snap” his fingers and obliterate all existence. (Don’t worry. He won’t do that.) That should give you a jolt of good fear.

When Solomon tells you to fear God, he’s telling you to put your life into perspective. You are small; God is big. You are limited; God is vast. You are foolish; God is Truth. When you truly take hold of that reality, you realize that everything under the sun really is meaningless. Why? Because it’s all miniature compared to God. We break from the

meaninglessness by living on mission for the one who gives us meaning beyond anything we're even capable of seeing.

Follow God's Commandments

The conclusion is shockingly simple but so very practical. Do you want to find the meaning of a life on mission? Obey the commandments laid out by God. They won't just help you find meaning; they will also set you free from the misery Solomon saw across the land.

When you look at every single commandment in Scripture, you will see it was there as a source of protection for God's people. Obedience sets us up for happiness. I've heard people ask, "Why does God get so hung up on sin?" Simple. Sin hurts people, and God loves people.

You have seen this play out before. When you obey, you are ultimately protected. When you choose not to exaggerate the truth, you protect yourself from broken trust. When you date according to God's standards, you rise above the complexities of a breakup in a hookup culture. When you give some of your wealth, God rewards you, and you are set free from the grip of greed. When you live out the greatest commandment, to love God and love people, every moment becomes a mission. That means every moment now has meaning.

It all starts in the heart. When you protect your heart, you are protecting the core of your entire being. You will experience true contentment when you walk in God's commandments.

Fear God + Follow God's Commandments = Pursuit of Happiness

Ecclesiastes shows us that everything is meaningless unless we proactively attach meaning to it. How do we do that? By inviting God into every minute. He can give you true meaning within each and every moment. You will experience true meaning because your life is now a mission. That's the true pursuit and root of happiness.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What is the wisest advice you have ever received?

Q2: What stuck out to you from today's message?

Q3: If you were to give a summary sentence for Ecclesiastes, what would it be?

Q4: What is the difference between "good fear" and "bad fear"? How does this play into our calling to "fear God"?

Q5: How can obedience bring us closer to living a life on mission?

Application: What steps of obedience does God need you to take this week to bring you closer to the specific mission He has for you on this earth?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Ecclesiastes 9:1-112

Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

Ecclesiastes 10:1-10

Ecclesiastes 10:11-20

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Ecclesiastes 11:7-10

Ecclesiastes 12

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.