



## CENTRAL truth

True purpose cannot be found in human wisdom—we must look to God.

# 08 session 8 TRUE PURPOSE



## EXPLORE scripture ECCL. 1:12-15; 2:18-26

### ECCLESIASTES 1:12-15

**12** I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

**13** I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! **14** I have

seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

**15** What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

### ECCLESIASTES 2:18-21

**18** I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. **19** And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is

meaningless. **20** So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. **21** For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

### ECCLESIASTES 2:22-26

**22** What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?

**23** All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. **24** 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,

**25** for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

**26** 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.



## EXPLORE options

### 1. Miserable Jobs

Divide students into smaller groups of 3–4 students each. Give each group a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. Instruct them to write down as many jobs as they can think of that they would not want. After giving students a few minutes to compile their lists, ask each group to share a few of their answers. Point out that all of these jobs, despite how students feel about them, have value and are important to human society on some level. Today we are going to see the writer of Ecclesiastes tell us that God gave him a “miserable” job—it was the job of seeking wisdom and knowledge. The point is not that such a job is actually miserable, but that seeking knowledge outside of God is ultimately a waste of time. True purpose cannot be found in human wisdom—we must look to God.

### 2. Human Achievements

Prior to your group meeting, compile a list of accomplished people your students have likely never heard of. Examples could include: Nils Bohlin (invented the seat belt), Althea Gibson (the first African-American woman to compete at Wimbledon), Henry Dunant (founded the Red Cross and won the first Nobel Peace Prize), Lewis Latimer (developed technology that allowed Thomas Edison’s light bulb to burn for hours rather than just a few minutes), and Margaret Hamilton (leader of the MIT team that developed code for the spacecraft that made humanity’s first trip to the moon). Share each name with students and give them a moment to guess what great achievement this person is famous for. After students have made their guesses, share each person’s great achievement. Point out that while each of these people made very meaningful contributions to society, the fact none of us have heard of them tells us something—even if we do really important, life-changing things, there is a good chance no one will remember us. As we begin our study of the Book of Ecclesiastes, we will see that true purpose cannot be found in human wisdom—we must look to God.



### LET’S talk

**What is your least favorite chore or task that you have to at home or at school?**

**Why do you dislike this task or chore? Does it feel pointless to you?**



### THIS WEEK’S focus

We all have to do chores or tasks that we don’t like and that may not even make sense to us. For instance, some people wonder, “Why make the bed if we are just going to sleep in it later that same day?” Or maybe you wonder why you have to clean your room if it is just going to get messy again in a day or two. While there are reasons for these tasks, they can feel meaningless. Today as we begin our study of Ecclesiastes, one of the Bible’s books of wisdom, we will see the author conclude that many of life’s pursuits and tasks are futile or meaningless. What the author means by this, however, is a bit more complicated than it might seem. It’s not that these various tasks actually have no point, but rather that when we untether life from the God who made us, it loses its meaning. True purpose cannot be found in human wisdom—we must look to God.



CONVERSATION

# questions

## READ ECCLESIASTES 1:12-15.

**12** I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

**13** I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! **14** I have

seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

**15** What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

### .01 What did the Teacher apply his mind to? How did he describe this task (v. 13)?



### CULTURE | Why did the Teacher refer to the pursuit of wisdom as a “miserable task”?

The writer of Ecclesiastes (most likely Solomon) refers to himself as “the Teacher,” and devoted his life to the task of acquiring wisdom and knowledge. Yet he described this task as “miserable” (v. 13). A universal theme in wisdom and philosophical writings is that the life of wisdom is the highest of all callings. For Plato, the task of the philosopher was the purest of all. Here, however, it is a grievous task (we could translate the phrase as a “lousy job”). Why is the Teacher’s attitude so negative, and why does he say this job has been imposed on him by God? First, he is challenging the widely held notion that pursuit of knowledge fulfills life and gives people lasting significance. Second, he finds it a hopeless task; the answers he seeks he cannot find. Third, the Teacher sees all of life as under the rule of a sovereign God. The intellectuals and their work are as much under His authority as anyone else (compare with 1 Cor. 3:19).

### .02 How did the Teacher describe all human pursuits (v. 14)? What did he mean by this?

After describing the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge as a miserable task, the Teacher, who was most likely Solomon, goes on to say that he applied himself to experience all human pursuits and tasks and found them all to be futile, like chasing after the wind (v. 14). The Teacher is not saying that there is no point in the various things human beings devote themselves to (things like pursuing a career, getting married, starting a family, etc.). The Hebrew word for futile is ‘hevel’ and it literally means vapor or smoke. The Teacher is saying that every human endeavor is temporary and short-lived. All the things we devote our time to are like smoke—they are doomed to disappear the moment we grab onto them for ultimate meaning. In other words, the

Need more commentary? Use discount code EXPLORESUMMER2021 at [logos.com/explorethebible](http://logos.com/explorethebible) to download more Bible commentary on Ecclesiastes for free.

## SCRIPTURE commentary

Teacher's goal is not to illustrate that various human activities, jobs, and endeavors are worthless, but rather that they do not last. If we think we will find our ultimate purpose in any of these things, we will be disappointed.



### LEADER PACK

**ITEM 6** | For more examples of things the Teacher says are futile and what he means by that, see the **Vapor** poster.

### KEY QUESTION

**.03** What are some things that people devote their time, money, and energy to today? Is there a right way and a wrong way to pursue these things?

We all devote time to various things and pursuits, whether it be romantic relationships, sports, hobbies, video games, or friendships. The point of these verses is not that these pursuits are a complete waste of time, but rather that they are all temporary. So the implication is that if we are going to pursue such things, we should do so while keeping that which matters eternally in mind. Any time we give our time and attention to one of these pursuits, we should ask ourselves, "What would it look like to do this in a way that would glorify God?" We should always keep the greatest commands in mind—to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves. If there is something we want to do that doesn't honor God or that harms our neighbors, it is an unworthy task not worth pursuing. But as we give time and attention to the various tasks and endeavors set before us each day, we can add eternal significance to them by doing these things with our ultimate purpose as Christ followers in mind.

### ECCLESIASTES 1:12-15

**1:12.** This personal reflection gives credibility to the discussion below.

**1:13.** The Teacher gave himself wholly to the task of acquiring wisdom and knowledge, but he found it to be a miserable work with which to be busied (compare with 1 Kings 4:29–34).

**1:14.** The Teacher again asserts here that all work is doomed to disappear in the face of time and death and that none of it is of eternal value. In context he is specifically referring to intellectual labor. The implication of the phrase "a chasing after the wind" may be described as follows: You never can catch it; but if you do catch it, you do not have anything anyway.

**1:15.** The Teacher reinforces the idea of the hopelessness of intellectual pursuit with a proverb. That which is "crooked" refers to a problem that cannot be solved, and that which is "lacking" refers to lack of information (i.e., missing data cannot be taken into account and thus contribute toward finding an answer). Some problems cannot be solved, and some information we can never find. The intellectual more than anyone else should be aware of the futility of the human position. No matter how he or she searches, the intellectual cannot answer some fundamental questions of life. The implication behind this is that God's ways are inscrutable.





# CONVERSATION questions

## READ ECCLESIASTES 2:18-21.

**18** I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. **19** And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.

This too is meaningless. **20** So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. **21** For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

### KEY QUESTION

**.04** What did the Teacher find frustrating about work (vv. 18-19)? Do some of the jobs, chores, or tasks you have to do feel this way?

**.05** Look at verse 21. What injustice did the Teacher identify in work? Can this be avoided? Explain.

Ideally, work provides us with security. We work a job for a certain amount of time for a set wage, and then that wage pays for our food, shelter, and other needs. Sadly, however, much of the work people devote themselves to in this life is not properly rewarded. Sometimes we work really hard and then someone else gets to take the credit, or even gets a greater reward than we do, even though we did most of the heavy lifting. While a lot of the projects we devote time and attention to are really rewarding and worthwhile, it is important that we realize that the broken world we live in is often cruelly unfair. There are countless employers across the globe who pay their workers the bare minimum while trying to get as much labor as possible out of them. Such labor practices are cruel and do not mesh with the way of Jesus. While followers of Jesus should advocate for fair labor practices, it is also important to note that this side of eternity, the greed of human beings will often stand in the way—which may very well mean that our jobs will sometimes feel like they take more from us than they give.

## ECCLESIASTES 2:18-21



### THEOLOGY | Why isn't work always rewarding?

You may have heard people talk about how work is cursed. This idea dates back to the very beginning when Adam and Eve chose to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in direct disobedience to God's clear command. Their choice to eat from the one tree God said not to was their way of trying to gain independence from God, who had graciously placed them in a good garden. God gave them good, meaningful work to do (to work and keep the garden and fill the earth, see Gen 1:28; 2:15). After Adam and Eve made this choice, God said, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life" (Gen. 3:17). The garden produced fruit for Adam and Eve; the ground they would work outside the garden would produce "thorns and thistles" (Gen. 3:18). In other words, one of the results of the fall is that work isn't as rewarding as it was originally designed by God to be. The frustrating aspects of work we experience today (being underpaid or overworked, etc.) are rooted in the age old sinful human desire to live independently from God.

**2:18-21.** This section of Ecclesiastes returns to the subject of wealth and pleasure. But unlike verses 1-11, which focus on the impossibility of finding satisfaction in riches, this text focuses on the absurdity of devoting one's life to acquiring wealth only to leave it all behind to someone else. A person may toil ceaselessly for wealth, so that *All their days their work is grief and pain* (v. 23), but he must lose it all to someone who had none of his skill and who did not work for it.

**2:19.** The Teacher rejects the view that life is made worthwhile by working to provide for one's children or, more generally, for "posterity." Who knows how long it will be before the family fortune is squandered? (For example, compare with 1 Kings 12:16-19; 14:25-26.)

**2:20.** He does not *despair* but decides to disillusion himself. He will no longer live by the myth that hard work and well-earned wealth validate one's life. Otherwise, obsession with fulfillment through work and accomplishments ultimately leads to the crisis point at which one's whole life is seen to have been lived for nothing.

**2:21.** Not only the man's possessions but even the skill and intelligence by which he acquired them are nullified by death. Therefore the fact that he was a great businessman means very little.



CONVERSATION

# questions

## READ ECCLESIASTES 2:22-26.

**22** What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?

**23** All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. **24** 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, **25** for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? **26** 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.

## **.06** How does the Teacher describe the human experience of work in verses 22-23?

### KEY QUESTION

## **.07** What does the Teacher's question in verses 24-25 teach us about enjoying the things God gives us in a way that honors and glorifies Him?

Despite all our hard work, effort, and planning, sometimes work is still really frustrating as it doesn't provide the happiness, security, and rest we hope it will (see vv. 22-23). We do see some hope in verses 24-25 though. When we recognize that all we have is a gift from God, we can begin to seek ways to glorify God with what we have. We can use our hobbies and interests (things like video games, sports, or music) to build friendships that will allow us to point our friends to Jesus. Those who make more money can invest more of it in kingdom purposes like funding missionaries or meeting the needs of vulnerable people. If we really believe that the Lord is the source of ultimate glory, we should constantly be asking ourselves how we might honor Him and invest in His kingdom with all our possessions, gifts, skills, and money.



### BE VULNERABLE

What do you do for a living? What is your occupation? How can you engage in this work in ways that honor God and benefit other people? How can you invest in Christ's kingdom through the work God has given you to do? Consider sharing an example with your students as a means of encouraging them toward a kingdom mindset with regard to whatever work they might do now or pursue in the future.

**.08** Read Isaiah 65:21-23. What kind of work is envisioned in the new heavens and new earth? Why is this good news?

This section of Ecclesiastes on work concludes with a reminder that our work this side of eternity is vapor. It is like chasing the wind—you never can catch it, and if you did catch it, you would not have anything solid anyway. Again the point isn't that the work we do is pointless, but rather that it is temporary. It is important to recognize that this isn't God's ultimate design for work. In fact, for those who trust Jesus, a future of meaningful, rewarding work awaits.

God gave the prophet Isaiah a vision of what life in the new heavens and new earth He would one day establish would be like (see Isa. 65:17-25). One of the most interesting aspects of our heavenly future is that we will still work—but the work described in these verses is rewarding and meaningful rather than frustrating, exploitative, or soul-crushing. If you have ever worked on a project that was fun and rewarding, you have a small picture of the work that awaits us in heaven. The point here is that while work is often difficult, painful, and frustrating now, God promises to one day redeem our work and make it better.

**ECCLESIASTES 2:22-26**

**2:22.** The point here is not what happens to his wealth after he dies but what happens to the man himself as he strives to achieve wealth.

**2:23.** The Teacher describes the plight of the man consumed with his job. He burns himself up for what has no real, lasting value.

**2:24.** The words *person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil* must be understood in context. Ecclesiastes is preoccupied with how death nullifies all of man's accomplishments. It emphasizes that our days under the sun are limited, and thus that it is a tragedy to waste those days with excessive labor and grief. There are obviously many more things to a good life than just eating, drinking, and enjoying one's work, and Ecclesiastes does not suggest that we abandon ourselves to pleasure-seeking or our careers; but we ought to recognize that life is short and not miss out on its basic pleasures. These, too, are a gift of God.

**2:25.** Context implies that "him" in "for without him" refers to God (v. 24). Life is empty without God.

**2:26.** Here again the Teacher notes how God uses those who are opposed to Him. The sovereignty of God is implicit in this concept. God uses the lives of the wicked to achieve His own purpose. This verse does not present God as capricious but does relate to the biblical idea of the grace of God. To believe that one's life is ruled by impersonal fate is intolerable; to believe that life is controlled by a personal God is a comfort.





NOW  
**What?**

---

CENTRAL **truth** 

True purpose cannot be found in human wisdom—we must look to God.

**.09** What are some of your least favorite chores or tasks? How can you do these things in a way that glorifies God?

**KEY QUESTION**

**.10** Why is it important that we think about glorifying God as we engage in things we do each day?

**.11** Why is it crucial that we think about our neighbors as we work or do chores? How can we love our neighbors with our work?

**.12** How does it change your perspective to know that everything you have is a gift from God? How will you use your time or energy differently this week?



**THE STUDENT LEADER PACK** is available for purchase on [lifeway.com/explorethebiblestudents](http://lifeway.com/explorethebiblestudents). It includes valuable posters that are referenced throughout the *Leader Guide*, Family Connection guides that equip families to discuss the Bible on-the-go, a Midweek study of a complimentary book of the Bible, a link to training audio to help leaders prepare for each session, and PowerPoint templates with graphics from the quarter study to help prepare slides for teaching.



# DAILY devotions

The Bible is no ordinary book—it is God’s powerful Word and it is given to us for our good (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:13). So we should read the Bible more carefully and thoughtfully than any other book. This is where the 7 Arrows of Bible Reading come in—these 7 questions will train you and your students to get more out of your time in the Bible and experience its life-transforming power. Your students’ *Daily Discipleship Guide* (item 005646504) contains five days of Daily Devotions built on the 7 Arrows. Here is a summary of the texts they will be studying. We encourage you to follow along and use the 7 Arrows questions to guide your own study of God’s Word.

## 7 ARROWS FOR BIBLE reading



What does this passage say?



What does this passage tell us about God?



What did this passage mean to its original audience?



How does this passage change the way I relate to people?



What does this passage tell us about man?



How does this passage prompt me to pray?



What does this passage demand of me?

## LEADER challenge

### MEMORIZE

Ecclesiastes 2:26

### CONNECT

Send a group email or group message to your students, encouraging them to complete their daily devotions. You might also consider sharing your own insights from the daily readings as a means of encouraging them.

**DAY 1** ECCL. 1:12-18

**DAY 2** ECCL. 2:1-3

**DAY 3** ECCL. 2:4-11

**DAY 4** ECCL. 2:12-17

**DAY 5** ECCL. 2:18-26