

INVITATION to ECCLESIASTES

OPEN: 1. What was your greatest ambition when you were 10-12? Have you achieved it? What (if any) new ambition did you substitute for your childhood ambition? 2. What have you done that proved futile at the time but which you can smile about today? Why did you do it in the first place?

DIG: Read this invitation page and leaf through Ecclesiastes. Note captions and other clues to the book's meaning. 1. What are some things to look out for in this book? What are your first impressions? The key ideas? The common refrain? What is the general tone of the book? 2. List the many things the writer calls "meaningless." Which of these (all, some, none?) are problems today? Which do you find closest to your own experience? 3. How do you picture the writer of this book: Young or old? Conservative or liberal? Faithful or rebellious? Explain. 5. What modern book, play or movie deals with similar themes to those in Ecclesiastes? How do the treatments compare? 6. If you could ask "the Teacher" one question about either the content of the book or his purpose in writing it, what would it be? 7. If Ecclesiastes were dropped from the Bible, what would be missing from the story of God's redemptive work in history?

REFLECT: 1. Where in your life do you find things that are "meaningless"? How might you bring meaning to them? 2. How do people you know deal with questions and doubts? How do you respond to people who ask questions that challenge your beliefs? What sort of responsibility do you feel when responding to such questions? 3. Over time, we adopt the faith of others; then we may drop it for a faith of our own; that faith may in turn be revised with maturity. Where are you along that continuum of faith? What did you once believe about God, the Christian life or evil in the world which, upon further inspection, you have changed? 4. What topics of study raised in this overview most interest you? 5. To get the most out of Ecclesiastes, what will you put into it? How will you apply yourself to the group disciplines (of study, prayer, shared leadership, outreach, confidentiality, accountability, etc.)?

Agenda/60 minutes: Start off your group study with this one-hour invitation, using the questions in the margin of this page and these suggested times: (1) OPEN/15 minutes; (2) DIG/30 minutes; (3) REFLECT/15 minutes. Then agree on either the 7-week or 13-week plan below, using the questions which accompany the focus text. Use other sources to amplify the invitation page, including the maps at the back of this book.

Author: Traditionally attributed to Solomon, though no writer is named in the book (see 1:1, 1:2). However, Ecclesiastes may have been the product of a writer from a later period who felt that his teaching was akin to the great wisdom which Solomon possessed.

Date: Perhaps after the return from exile, in the fifth century B.C. If Solomon is the author, the book would date from c. 950 B.C.

Theme: The significance of human life.

Historical Background: With so little information available about the author or date, it is difficult to place Ecclesiastes into a historical context. One possibility is that it was produced by a wisdom movement in Judaism that was responsible for collecting stories and sayings.

Characteristics: This book has always raised questions concerning its appropriateness in the OT canon. Its apparent pessimism and questioning of beliefs that are central to Judaism and Christianity has led many to reject or ignore it. Others have tried to explain it as what Solomon would have said on an "off" day, or suggest that it clearly demonstrates the futility of the agnostic and therefore acts as a warning against such a position. It may be, however, that the work is a foil against which we discern our tendency to overestimate or overspiritualize our relationship with God. The book is unsparingly forthright in recording the author's desperate search for meaning. While he might be accused of overstating his case, hints of his true piety are evident (see 7:29), and the conclusion challenges the reader to obey God (12:13-14).

7-week plan	13-week plan	Preliminary Reading	Focus Text/Subject
1	1	1:1-18	1:1-11/Life's Meaninglessness
2	2	2:1-24	2:1-10/Wealth's Passing Value
3	3	3:1-22	3:1-15/God's Sovereignty
4	4	4:1-5:7	4:1-3:5/Change and Honesty
5	5	5:8-6:9	5:8-6:9/Riches
6	6	6:10-7:14	6:10-7:14/The Truly Good
7	7	7:15-8:1	7:15-8:1/Extremism and Sin
8	8	8:2-17	8:2-17/Response to Injustice
9	9	9:1-12	9:1-12/Chance and Destiny
10	10	9:13-10:15	9:13-10:15/Wisdom and Folly
11	11	10:16-11:6	11:1-6/Investing Wisely
12	12	11:7-12:8	11:7-12:8/Life's Backside
13	13	12:9-14	12:9-14/Conclusion

Ecclesiastes

Everything Is Meaningless

1 The words of the Teacher, ^ason of David, king in Jerusalem:

²"Meaningless! Meaningless!"

says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

³What does man gain from all his labor

at which he toils under the sun?

⁴Generations come and generations go,

but the earth remains forever.

⁵The sun rises and the sun sets,

and hurries back to where it rises.

⁶The wind blows to the south

and turns to the north;

round and round it goes,

ever returning on its course.

⁷All streams flow into the sea,

yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,

there they return again.

⁸All things are wearisome,

more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,

nor the ear its fill of hearing.

⁹What has been done will be again,

what has been done will be done again;

there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰Is there anything of which one can say,

"Look! This is something new?"

It was here already, long ago;

it was here before our time.

¹¹There is no remembrance of men of old,

and even those who are yet to come

will not be remembered

by those who follow.

Wisdom Is Meaningless

¹²U, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ¹⁴I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁵What is twisted cannot be straightened;

what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

OPEN: 1. What clothing was in style when you were thirteen? Would you be "caught dead" in them today? 2. What was the first large thing you saved your pennies for? 3. Which story from your childhood would you like to pass on to your descendants?

DIG: 1. The word for "meaningless" (v. 1) can also mean "breath" or "vapor". What, then, is meant by the motto, "everything is meaningless"? 2. What does the phrase "under the sun" (vv. 3, 9) tell you about the perspective of this thesis? 3. How does mankind's labor compare with the earth's cycle (vv. 3-7)? 4. What problem does verse 8 point out? 5. What is the theme of verses 9-10? What qualifies as "something new" by this Teacher's definition? 6. In verse 11, what tone of voice do you hear? What logic do you see? Is verse 11 the logical extension or inevitable conclusion of careful reasoning? Or is this an emotional lament of an embittered old man?

REFLECT: 1. What areas of life do you take too seriously? 2. What parallel do you see between this passage and Christ's saying, "What does it profit a man..." (Mk. 8:36)? 3. For what have you spent your life laboring? What do you have to show for it? 4. For what would you like to be remembered after you are long gone?

OPEN: 1. In which subject did (or do) you get the best grades? 2. At what age did you first say, "I know more than my teachers (or parents)?"

DIG: 1. Where has the Teacher searched for wisdom? 2. What is the "burden" in verse 13? Why is God blamed for it? 3. Why does wisdom bring sorrow and knowledge bring grief?

REFLECT: 1. Where "under heaven" have you searched for meaning? Where have you found it? 2. In what instances has knowledge caused you sorrow?

OPEN: 1. What crazy stunt in high school are you remembered for? 2. What creative science project do you remember from those days? 3. What material goods are on your all-time wish list?

DIG: 1. What paradox does the teacher find in hedonism (vv. 1-3)? 2. What do these key phrases tell you about the perspective of this passage: a) "During the few days of their lives" (v. 3)? b) "Under the sun" (v. 1)? c) "In days to come" (v. 16)? 3. What "great projects" does he undertake (vv. 4-8)? What desires were such projects meant to satisfy? 4. During these projects, what is the Teacher's relation to wisdom (vv. 3, 9, 12-13)? 5. In verses 12-16, to what does "wisdom" refer: Spiritual insight? Street smarts? Survival skills? Upright behavior? 6. Does "folly" here mean something similar to wisdom, or something opposite? 7. How is light better than darkness? What does this say about the difference between wisdom and folly? 8. Why is this Teacher so unhappy with what so many would call success?

REFLECT: 1. What is the most important project you have undertaken in the last year? How do you measure your success in that? 2. Do you see yourself as more led by your heart, or by your head? In what areas do you find yourself controlled more by your desires than by wisdom? 3. Do you regard death as the final tragedy or the final triumph? Is the death of the fool different from that of the wise? How can you prepare yourself for death? 4. How does a passage like this help you focus on the truly important things in life? What are they?

OPEN: What is your most valued possession? Who would you like to leave it to when you die?

DIG: 1. Why did the Teacher hate life? 2. Who is said to be the real beneficiary of someone's work (vv. 18-21)? Why is that? 3. How do verses 24-26 contrast with the preceding? 4. What does it mean to "please God" in this

¹⁰For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Pleasures Are Meaningless

²I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless.³ ²"Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" ³I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

⁴I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem^a as well—the delights of the heart of man. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor.

¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Wisdom and Folly Are Meaningless

¹²Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly.

What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?

¹³I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

¹⁵Then I thought in my heart,

"The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?"

I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless."

¹⁶For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!

Toil Is Meaningless

¹⁷So 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. ¹⁸I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰So my heart began to despair over all my toilsom-

ness under the sun. ²¹For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²²What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶To the man 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.

A Time for Everything

³There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:

- 1 a time to be born and a time to die,
- 2 a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- 3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
- 4 a time to tear down and a time to build,
- 5 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
- 6 a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- 7 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
- 8 a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
- 9 a time to search and a time to give up,
- 10 a time to keep and a time to throw away,
- 11 a time to tear and a time to mend,
- 12 a time to be silent and a time to speak,
- 13 a time to love and a time to hate,
- 14 a time for war and a time for peace.

¹⁵What does the worker gain from his toil? ¹⁶I have seen the burden God has laid on men. ¹⁷He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹⁸I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. ¹⁹That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. ²⁰I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.

²¹Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.^c

²²And I saw something else under the sun:

In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

²³I thought in my heart,

"God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."

²⁴I also thought, "As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ²⁵Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath^d; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything

context? 5. What does God have to do with satisfaction in work? 6. Who is the "sinner"? Why does God favor the one over the other?

REFLECT: 1. Why do you work when you most feel like not working? 2. Do you see your work as a gift from God, as drudgery, or both? Does that make you grateful even for the drudgery, or hateful? Why?

OPEN: 1. What is the most important date you ever forgot? Which are you like at a party: (a) Party animal? (b) Party pooper? (c) Hostess helper? (d) Wreath flower? 3. What was your favorite season as a child? Why? Which your favorite now?

DIG: 1. In the list of opposites (vv. 1-8), is the Teacher describing what is, or prescribing what one should do? Why do you think so? 2. What is "the burden God has laid on man" (v. 10)? 3. Who does it mean to "set eternity in the hearts of men" (v. 11)? 4. What the Teacher encouraging verses 12-13: Hedonism? Gratitude? Or what? 5. Toward which end does all of this point (vv. 15)? 6. What is meant by "God will call the past to account" (v. 15)?

REFLECT: 1. What "time" is it for you? At what "times" (vv. 1-8) do you doubt that God is in control? 2. Would you rather spend your time fathoming God's work (v. 11) doing good (v. 12), or eating and drinking (v. 13)? Why? 3. How do you differentiate enjoying yourself from going too far? 4. Do you believe in God's sovereignty for you to enjoy life? How so?

OPEN: 1. Which childhood pet do you miss most? Is your dog pet in the ground or in "animal heaven"? Why do you think so? If you died and revisited this life: an animal, what would you be?

DIG: 1. How does the theme this passage (vv. 16-17) relate the previous one? 2. How a humans like, and unlike, animal? 3. How does the "wickedness" verse 16 relate to this comparison with animals? 4. What does it passage teach concerning the destiny of humans? Or animals?

REFLECT: 1. How do you respond to those who act as if the

¹⁰ The meaning of the Hebrew for this phrase is uncertain.

¹⁵ Or: God calls back the past

^d Or: spirit

is no God or final judgment? 2. How does the promise of eternal life (in 5:24) help you deal with injustice?

OPEN: 1. When in life were you most in need of a friend? Did one come? 2. Which of your neighbor's possessions do you most covet?

DIG: 1. Who are the "oppressed" in verse 1? The "oppressors"? 2. Why does the Teacher say that the dead are happier than the living? 3. What does he say is the primary motivation for mankind (v. 4)? 4. What is the meaning of each of the proverbs in verses 5-6? What do they imply is the Teacher's view of labor and competition?

REFLECT: 1. Do you see yourself more often in the role of the "oppressed" or the "oppressor"? How so? 2. How much does someone's wealth or status affect the way you treat him? 3. Do you presently have "one handful" or "two" (v. 6)?

OPEN: 1. What job have you tackled by yourself that you should have asked someone to help you with? What were the results? 2. If you were starting a new business, whom would you choose to be your partner? Why?

DIG: 1. What is the status of the man in verse 8a? How materially successful is he? At what cost? What is he questioning? 2. Why does the Teacher see the "business" in verse 8 as "meaningless"? 3. What are the benefits of "two" in verses 9-12? How is the proverb in 12b a fitting conclusion?

REFLECT: 1. For whom (yourself, God, others) do you toil in the different areas of life (work, home, school, church)? How much satisfaction do you derive from your toil and your companions? 2. How easy is it for you to allow someone to help you? Or, to let someone know that you need help? 3. Where would you be spiritually were it not for others' "help"? 4. How can you be part of a "three-fold cord", strengthening others?

is meaningless. ²⁰All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

²²So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

Oppression, Toil, Friendlessness

4 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comfort; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comfort.

²And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive.

³But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

⁴And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

⁵The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.

⁶Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

⁷Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

⁸There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

"For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless—a miserable business!

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: ¹⁰If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹²Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Advancement Is Meaningless

¹Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. ¹⁴The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. ¹⁵I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. ¹⁶There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Stand in Awe of God

5 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

²Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

³As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. ⁶Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, 'My vow was a mistake.' Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

Riches Are Meaningless

⁸If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. ⁹The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

¹⁰Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.

¹¹As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? ¹²The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.

¹³I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:

¹⁴ wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him.

¹⁵Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.

OPEN: 1. How do you react guest preacher (vs. the regular pastor)? 2. What hasty promise did you later regret making?

DIG: 1. These two passages (4:13-16; 5:1-7) focus on our relationship to lordship. What if lordship is the focus in the first the second? 2. In 4:13-15, what the old king so unpopular? the successor so popular? Why those who come "later" pleased with the successor? 3. In 5:1-7, what is the fool's error? What is meant by exhortations to "listen," "keep silent," and "not delay"? What the potential results of "quick mouths"? 4. How does ver summarize the message of 5 Of 4:13-16?

REFLECT: 1. Facing poor leadership in a particular group when are you most patient? prayerful? Most pious change? Most "quick with mouth"? 2. How do you bear part of its solution instead of problem? 3. What do you do you make a hasty promise cannot keep?

OPEN: 1. What was the physically exhausting job ever did? 2. What effect does work have on you: a) invitation? b) Frustration? c) Excitation? d) Boredom? 3. What if ure in life do you not get er time for?

DIG: 1. What is the reason the oppression in 5:8-9? should we not be surprised? 2. Why do the three verbs (5:10, 11, 12) prove meaningless? 3. What money is he berating him? The addiction to money? emptiness? (c) The swahangers-on? (d) The indul of money? 4. What is the "ous evil" of 5:13-15? Of 5:1 How do "wealth hoarded" "wealth lost" (5:13-14) fit in observation? 5. What isn't about: going out as naked arrive? Is the Teacher asking life more than it can ever give in 5:18-20, what does the Teacher conclude is "good and pr Why (see 2:24-26)? 7. Why blessing not to "reflect" w mind but to "enjoy" with the What might the Teacher be about himself here? 8. What other evil in 6:1-2 and 3:6?

of influences the Teacher's discussions (v.5b)? 9. How does 9 continue the thought of the preceding? What is "better" (v.9)?

LECT: 1. Do you view the position at the top of your organization as getting rich off the others below? Where are you on corporate ladder—getting rich or getting poorer? 2. What does the pursuit of wealth have in your life? Is this necessary? What are you expecting? 3. Are you more inclined to help the poor and needy when the situation is similar, or when there is a difference? 4. How much "honesty of heart" do you experience in your "labor for the sun" (5:20)? What does it help you enjoy your work? 5. In the Old Testament, "dream of a lifetime" was a reward of children and thousands of years on earth (6:3, 6). Is your life's dream? When do you most enjoy your life's moments?

1. If you compared your a product in a Sears catalog which item is it most like: (a) Solia? (b) Solia? (c) Lawn? (d) Grey Flannel pajamas? Other: ? Would you be good, better, or best? 2. Who in your family is most accomplished (funeral)? What sets him apart? 3. Was the last person to "tell it"? Why? How did you do? 4. Dream a bit: If all goes that do you predict for your next year?

- In 6:10-12, the Teacher some observations and that introduce the next 1. What are the observations? 2. In 7:1-12, how does the Teacher go searching for answers to question, "What is good"? Is it absolutely good, or are things only relatively better?

10This too is a grievous evil:

As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? 17All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.

18Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. 19Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. 20He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

6 I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: 26God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

3A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. 4It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. 5Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man—even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

7All man's efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied. 8What advantage has a wise man over a fool?

What does a poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others? 9Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

10Whatever exists has already been named, and what man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he.

11The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?

12For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?

Wisdom

7

A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.

2It is better to go to a house of mourning, than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart.

3Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. 4The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,

but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

5It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than to listen to the song of fools. 6Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless.

7Extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

8The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. 9Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.

10Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions.

11Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. 12Wisdom is a shelter, as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.

13Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten what he has made crooked? 14When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.

15In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.

16Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? 17Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?

18It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.

19Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful than ten rulers in a city.

20There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.

21Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—22for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

23All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "I am determined to be wise"—

114 Ch will follow them both

3. In each of the couples or comparisons in 7:1-4, which is the better thing and why? 4. What is the reason behind the advice given in verses 5:7-5. Why is the question in verse 10 so unwise (see 7:8-10; 1:9)? 6. In 7:11-12, what is meant by comparing wisdom to "an inheritance"? To a "shelter"? How does wisdom preserve life?

REFLECT: 1. How sincere is your quest for the "good" things God provides in life? How do you recognize them? 2. When you are confused, how do you decide who to listen to? How do you know when to give advice? Rebuke? Praise? 3. As compared to dwelling on the past or longing for the future, how much do you live in the present? How much do you enjoy it? What can you do to enjoy the "here and now" more? 4. Would you say these days are good times or bad times for you? Is your answer based on nostalgia (for the past) or hope (for the future)?

OPEN: 1. What gossip about yourself got back to you and made your blood-boil? How did you react? 2. In trying new things, which are you: (a) Cautious? (b) Venturesome? (c) Uninterested? In what areas are you most likely to experiment?

DIG: 1. What observations inspire these warnings (vv.15-19)? What is meant by "over-righteous" (v.16)? By "over-wicked" (v.17)? 2. Would the Teacher ever say, "Nothing to excess, everything in moderation"? How does such a view square with genuine fear of God (v.18)? 3. Is verse 20 a confession, an excuse or an accusation? What light does verse 20 shed on verse 19? 4. What is the danger in paying attention to gossip or hearsay (v.21)? What theme unites verses 19-22? 5. In verses 23 and 25, what are the Teacher's goals? How do they differ? What does he conclude about these goals? What is meant by "the scheme of things" (v.25, 27)? 6. How do the two stories about "woman" (vv.26, 28-29) differ?

sunbeam" (a) Sampling of "husband" wives (v.28). soon 14:32? (b) Experience with human nature (v.20)? (c) Revealed truth Creation and the Fall (v.29)? 7. the "search of many schemes" 29) our fault or our fate? Why? a night of 7-24, how is 8:1 best understood? What is the advantage of wisdom in this verse?

REFLECT: 1. Who sees you as extremist? In what? Has such extremism helped, or hindered, your ability to minister? How so? What do you do when you find it in your life? How does this affect your self image? 3. When it you "curse" others (v.23)? Can you break that habit? 4. You ignorant of the scheme of life, or all too aware? In what ways can you can in-36 in such wisdom? 5. Are 1 "snare" to others (v.26), or mightier (v.28-29)? How so?

1. Who was the first you stood up against? With results? 2. When you hear "the good die young", do you think of? At such are you: (a) Sorrowful? (b) Disgusted? (c) Disillusioned?

What reasons are given for the "wise heart" know "the time and procedure" (v.5-3:1-15)? 2. Who would you be for "no man" in verses every sentence? 3. Who to be the subject in verses How does the "fading it verse 9 contrast to having over" in verse 8? 4. What problem in verse 11, and o blame for it? In verses what injustice does the "see? In what ways will it be" for the God-fearer 3? Why? 5. How is the depicted in verse 14 liest? How does verse 15 u: (a) Realistic? (b) Sar- c? Cop-out? (d) Joyful? the link between verses 4? 6. What is the differ- seen seeing all that God

has done" and grasping "what goes on" (v.17)? What advice is implied in the Teacher's realization (vv.16-17)?

REFLECT: 1. What sort of injustices (personal, family, global) are most likely to arouse you to act? Where do you draw the line ("To here, and no farther"? 2. How does your search for answers to life's problems affect your relationship with God? How easy is it for you to trust him when the answers are unattainable? What can be done to develop such trust?

OPEN: 1. Everyone knows the phrase, "You can't take it with you." If you could, what one exception to this rule would you like, when your time comes? 2. What oaths or vows have you ever taken (scouts, marriage, secrecy, etc.)? How easy is it for you to keep them?

DIC: 1. What does the Teacher conclude about human destiny (vv.1-2)? What people "take oaths"? Who are afraid to (v.2)? 2. What theme unifies verses 3-6? How is death described here? In this context, what is the "madness in their hearts" (v.3)? Evil? Cruelty? Apathy? Hope? Love? Hate? Jealousy? 3. To whom is this madness ascribed? In this context, are you "mad"? 4. To what actions does the Teacher exhort us in verses 7-10? To what attitude? What motivation does he suggest for such a lifestyle? What does it mean to be "clothed in white" (v.8)? 5. What explanation is offered for the apparent contradictions in verse 11? How does this relate to the "evil times" in verse 12?

REFLECT: 1. Do you feel you deserve a reward in life for your righteousness? Or would some kick-in-the-pants be more appropriate? What trophy, buddy prize or punishment do you feel you deserve? 2. In what ways do you feel you receive the benefits of faith in this life? Are there benefits that you have ignored or rejected? Why? What are they? 3. Given the unexpected nature of life (vv.11-12), how do you prepare yourself for such disruptions? How can you best help others through them?

but this was beyond me.

2a Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound—who can discover it?

25 So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things and the madness of folly.

26 I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

27 "Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered:

"Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—

28 while I was still searching but not finding—

I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all.

29 This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."

8

Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance.

Obey the King

2a Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. 3 Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. 4 Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

5 Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.

6 For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

7 Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?

9 No man has power over the wind to contain it, nor so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

9a All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt. 10 Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.

11 When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. 12 Although a wicked

man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. 11 Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. 15 So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night— 17 then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

A Common Destiny for All

9 So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him. 2 All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them.

1 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. 4 Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.

6 Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.

7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. 8 Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. 9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

11 I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant

12 Septuagint (Aquila, Vulgate and Syriac); Hebrew does not have and the dead then is to be consistent with all other things, there is hope

14 Or What

822 Or leader of the assembly

9a Or over his spirit to retain it

110 Some Hebrew manuscripts and Septuagint (Aquila), most Hebrew manuscripts and are joyful

1. In games of strategy, could you rate yourself: (a) ss? (b) Reunited? (c) First? 2. If you could learn any one thing, what would it be? 3. What was the last time you lost? Where were you? Did you ever get there?

The Teacher derives two from the example story in 6. What are they? 2. How the first pair of proverbs correspond to the pre-1 example story? What is a similar? Do they agree take issue with, the story? 3. What is the main point? 4. In this context (vv. 3-5), wrong with leaving your 5. What is the "evil" in 10-12? 6. In 10-12, where is it found? 7. In 10-12, where do you see poetic justice? 8. Cause and effect? 9. How does the 10 relate to 11? 7. What topic is addressed in 10-12-15? What problem is evident in 10-12-14a? 12. Does the contention in 13 add to the problem of the 14? What hope, if any, is there in 15?

ECT: 1. How does one's social position affect respect for his opinions? In ways could that person's "m" help you? 2. How do are you in the various of life (family, friendships, ministry)? In which areas do need to develop greater? How can this best be done? 3. How has something foolish said affected others and 4? To whom do you need to give because of it (no 5)? What practical steps can take to avoid such "foolish" reason?

or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. 12 Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Wisdom Better Than Folly

13 I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: 14 There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. 15 Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. 16 So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.

10

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. 27 The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left. 3 Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is. 4 If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest.

5 There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: 6 Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones. 7 I have seen slaves on horseback, while princes go on foot like slaves. 8 Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. 9 Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them; whoever splits logs may be endangered by them. 10 If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success. 11 If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. 12 Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious, but a fool is consumed by his own lips. 13 At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness—and the fool multiplies words.

No one knows what is coming—who can tell him what will happen after him?

11 A fool's work wears him out; he does not know the way to town.

16 Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant! and whose princes feast in the morning. 17 Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness.

18 If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks.

19 A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything.

20 Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

11

Bread Upon the Waters

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. 2 Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

3 If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. 4 Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

5 As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. 6 Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

Remember Your Creator While Young

7 Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. 8 However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless.

9 Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.

Follow the ways of your heart, and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

OPEN: Ever quit a job due to the boss? What made the boss a "royal pain" to work for?

DIG: 1. What makes a leader good or bad (vv. 16-17)? Why the "woe" and "blessing" of the land? 2. What do verses 18-19 say about government? How is money the "answer" (v. 19)? 3. Why should we not revile those in power?

REFLECT: 1. As a leader, how conscientious are you? How generous? 2. What is your duty to those over you? To those under you?

OPEN: What is the worst investment (of time, money, etc.) you ever made? Why?

DIG: 1. What does "bread" symbolize? What happens when you "cast your bread" (v. 1)? How will the giving of "portions" help in a time of disaster (v. 2)? 2. What do the matter-of-fact observations in verse 3 imply? 3. Why are those who just "watch" so unproductive and ignorant (vv. 4-5)? 4. How do the observations in verses 3-5 lead to the concluding advice (v. 6)? How does this relate to the advice in verse 1?

REFLECT: 1. How well do you manage your time? Money? Emotions? 2. In what areas of life are your "investments" too concentrated? Spread too thin?

OPEN: 1. Who was the wisest classmate when you were growing up? What has happened to that person? 2. On the scale of 1 (= blissfully ignorant) to 10 (= painfully aware), how well do you see the consequences of your actions? Give an example of underestimating the consequences. 3. As you grow older, which do you want to hold on to most: (a) Youthful body? (b) Youthful mind? (c) Youthful heart? 4. What do you imagine you'll be like at age 100?

DIG: 1. What are "the days of darkness" (11:8) and why does the Teacher want us to "remember them"? What light do the other exhortations to "remember"

¹⁰So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body for youth and vigor are meaningless.

21.6. School on thing 2. What was the Toucher's response in 9:10? What qualifies the joy experience? How are youth d vigor "meaningless"? 3. What is the long sentence in 12:1-5a describe? What sort of despair is this? Positive, negative, or ultra? Realistic or imaginary? In regards of pipe dreams? 4. What events is described in 12:5b-6? Is this akin to the Christian use of eternal life? Or is he making merely of finality? Which the book as a whole? 5. In 12:8 motto is repeated (see 1.2). at does this signal? What does even about any change of perspective by the Teacher?

¹⁰So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body for youth and vigor are meaningless.

Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“Find no pleasure in them.”

2**before** the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
3**when** the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim,
4**when** the doors to the street are closed

and the sound of grinding fades;
when men rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
when men are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags himself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then man goes to his eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.

Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
or the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
or the wheel broken at the well,
and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

⁸“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.^a
“Everything is meaningless.”

⁹Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. ¹⁰The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

¹¹The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. ¹²Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.

Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

¹³Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

ECT: 1. In retrospect, how I respond to the reflections in your book? 2. What do you feel about the author? 3. Which discuss the most impact on your life? 4. How do you think it would want you to apply it to your life? How do you feel about it?

ps Or the leader of the assembly, also in verses 9 and 10

INVITATION to

Agenda/60 minutes: Start off your group study with this one-hour invitation, using the questions in the margin of this page and these suggested themes: (1) OPEN/15 minutes; (2) DIG/30 minutes; (3) REFLECT/15 minutes. Then plunge into the 7-week plan below, using the questions which accompany the focus text. Use other sources to amplify this invitation page, including the maps at the back of this book.

Author: Traditionally, King Solomon is thought to be the author of this book. However, its title, "Solomon's Song of Songs" (1:1), can mean a song *by*, *for*, or *about* Solomon. For this and other reasons, the identity of the author remains an open question.

Date: Perhaps during Solomon's reign, c. 970-930 BC, but the presence of Persian loan-words suggests a later date for the final editing.

Theme: A celebration of love between a man and a woman which is akin to God's love for his people.

Historical Background: Solomon's dynasty, his unsurpassed wisdom and wealth, and his many wives and concubines are perplexing contrasts to the simple rustic purity of the Song of Songs.

Characteristics: Interpretations of this "best of all songs" vary widely. Some view it literally, as a human love poem about King Solomon and his bride. Others see a third character in a triangle of relationships: a shepherd figure who is the true lover and who wins the Shulamite girl's hand over against the advances of Solomon. Some understand the book to be an anthology of unrelated love poems, with no overall story to tell. Many interpret this love song as an allegory, depicting either God's love for Israel or Christ's love for his bride, the Church. Still others think that the song makes no such connection to God's love, but that it is only natural that the wonders of human love inspire thoughts of its divine source. Readers are sometimes surprised to find an explicit love song in the Bible, hence the many attempts to spiritualize away its occasionally erotic lyrics. Still other readers who try singing these same lines to their lovers will be disappointed to find that the eroticism gets lost in the translation. Another problem in understanding the Song of Songs has to do with the frequent change of voice and scene. Questions in the margin, along with the captions in the text, are designed to help follow the lovers' dialogue.

7-week plan	Focus Text/Subject
1	1:1-2:7/The First Meeting: "The Bid of Romance"
2	2:8-3:5/The Second Meeting: "The Blossom of Courtship"
3	3:6-11/The Third Meeting: "The Wedding Song"
4	4:1-5:1/The Fourth Meeting: "Some Enchanted Evening"
5	5:2-6:3/The Fifth Meeting: "The Absence of the Lover"
6	6:4-7:9a/The Sixth Meeting: "The Return of Love"
7	7:9b-8:14/The Climactic Meeting: "A Romp in the Woods"

QHE: 1. From your family photo album, pick four snapshots (of your early dating life, courtship days, wedding day or non-day, gymnosocial) to bring to the small group. Share these with the group. Which one is the most telling in terms of your own "love story"? If you are not married, share a love song that is particularly meaningful to you and explain why. 2. Complete this sentence: "Love is" Compare your definition. What do they have in common? 3. When was it you first fell in love?

DIG: Read this invitation page and leap through Solomon's carefully edited family album, noting each change of voice and scene. 1. What are some things to look out for in this book? What are you for in this book? 2. Who did you peeped refrains? 3. What do you see in the various "snapshots"? What picture, in particular, caught your eye? Why? What caption would you assign to it? 3. If you were a librarian, where would you file this book: Under fiction? Poetry? Love and Sex? R-rated? Gothic Romances? History? 4. How would you describe the Song of Songs in a book report: The writing style? Choseny? Drama? Purpose? 5. What, if from chapters 1 and 8, what of significance must have happened in between? 6. What modern song, book or movie for lovers parallels this book? How? 7. If the Song of Songs were dropped from the Bible, what would be missing from the story of God's redemptive work in history?

REFLECT: 1. Given the current trust level of your group and any couples in it, how willing are you to discuss the questions in the margin regarding love, sex and marriage? (It must test: Role play some of the lover's lines on one another. Are any of you blushing "red"? 2. What do you hope to learn from this book about love between you and yours? Between you and Christ? 3. To get the most out of the Song of Songs, what will you put into it? How will you apply yourself to the group disciplines (of study, prayer, shared leadership, outreach, confidentiality, etc.)?