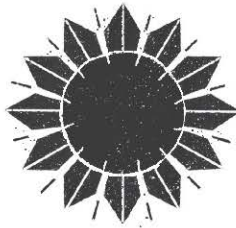




**FLOURISH
BIBLE STUDY**

ECCLESIASTES

FINDING MEANING WHEN LIFE
FEELS MEANINGLESS



LYDIA BROWNBACK

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“Lydia Brownback’s Bible study series provides a faithful guide to book after book. You’ll find rich insights into context and good questions to help you study and interpret the Bible. Page by page, the studies point you to respond to each passage and to love our great and gracious God. I will recommend the Flourish series for years to come for those looking for a wise, Christ-centered study that leads toward the goal of being transformed by the word.”

Taylor Turkington, Bible teacher; Director, BibleEquipping.org

“Lydia Brownback has a contagious love for the Bible. Not only is she fluent in the best of biblical scholarship in the last generation, but her writing is accessible to the simplest of readers. She has the rare ability of being clear without being reductionistic. I anticipate many women indeed will flourish through her trustworthy guidance in this series.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“Lydia Brownback’s Flourish Bible Study series has been a huge gift to the women’s ministry in my local church. Many of our groups have gone through her studies in both the Old and New Testaments and have benefited greatly. The Flourish Bible Study series is now my go-to for a combination of rich Bible study, meaningful personal application, and practical group interaction. I recommend them whenever a partner in ministry asks me for quality women’s Bible study resources. I’m so thankful Brownback continues to write them and share them with us!”

Jen Oshman, author, *Enough about Me* and *Cultural Counterfeits*; Women’s Ministry Director, Redemption Parker, Colorado

ECCLESIASTES



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**FLOURISH
BIBLE STUDY**

ECCLESIASTES

FINDING MEANING WHEN LIFE FEELS MEANINGLESS

LYDIA BROWNBACK

■ ■ CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Ecclesiastes: Finding Meaning When Life Feels Meaningless

© 2024 by Lydia Brownback

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Crystal Courtney

First printing 2024

Printed in China

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8328-5

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRDS 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

With gratitude to God
for Russ

With all my heart, I hope you'll hear the Preacher's message.

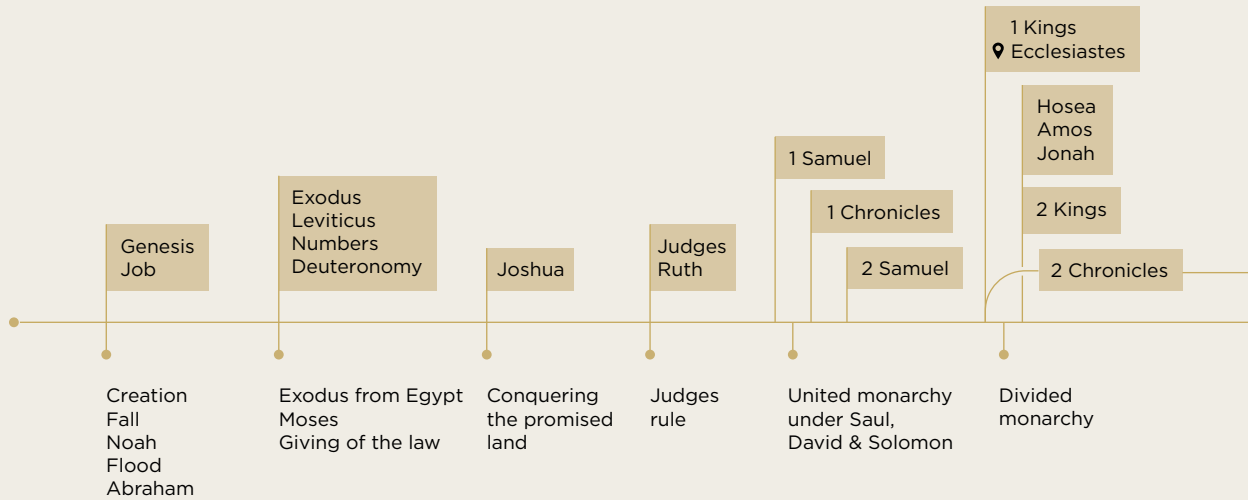
“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.
. . . He has made everything beautiful in its time.” —Ecclesiastes 3:1, 11

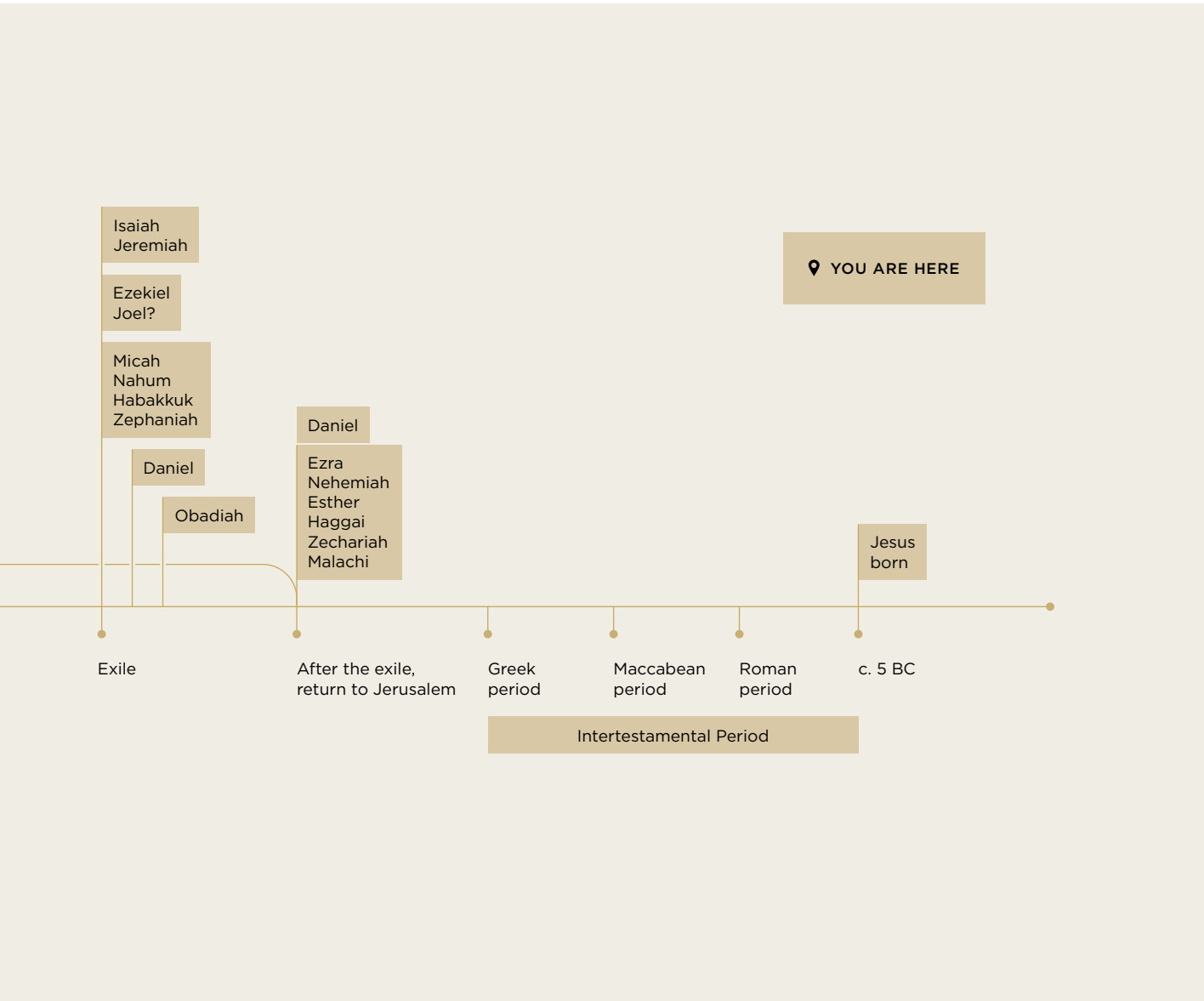
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THE PLACE OF ECCLESIASTES IN BIBLICAL HISTORY





INTRODUCTION

GETTING INTO ECCLESIASTES

Happiness is right around the corner—or is it? We don't say it out loud, and we might not consciously think it, but somewhere in the stresses of the right here, right now of our lives, we suspect it's true. Maybe the new job, that other church, or a different set of friends will finally bring about the satisfaction and meaning we can't seem to hold on to. As we live in the rhythms of our routine lives, we can't help but wonder, in our quieter moments, if there's meaning in all this mundane. What's the point of it all?

That's exactly what the Preacher, the author of Ecclesiastes, determined to find out. He embarked on a quest for meaning and purpose, using his acquired wisdom as his guide. Over the next ten weeks we will follow him on his “purpose journey” as he recounts what he saw and experienced and ultimately discovered. His journey wasn't easy, so get ready for some heavy stuff. This is no lighthearted Bible book! But we'll find joy mixed in. And hope. We'll also learn about true, biblical wisdom and how to live wisely in whatever circumstances God has placed us. Most of all, we'll be guided toward our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.



WHO'S WHO IN ECCLESIASTES

The Preacher is the primary figure in Ecclesiastes. This title, “Preacher,” is an English translation of the Hebrew word *Qohelet*. (The Greek translation of *Qohelet* is *Ekklesiastēs*, which is how the book gets its title.) The traditional view is that Israel's King Solomon is “the Preacher” who wrote the book as a way of reflecting on his life in his old age and passing along the wisdom he gained. Today, however, many scholars believe someone else wrote it, perhaps borrowing Solomon's name and reputation to lend weight to the message. Our study takes the traditional view, that the author was Solomon himself. After all, the Bible itself points us this way. In the very first verse of Ecclesiastes, the author identifies himself as King David's son and as king in Jerusalem. He also claims to excel in

Key Terms in Ecclesiastes

Fear God: The Bible's Wisdom Books teach that the essence of wisdom is to live in the "fear of the LORD" (Proverbs 9:10). This is the conclusion the Preacher reaches here in Ecclesiastes (12:13). It's to love what God loves (righteousness) and hate what he hates (sin).

Folly / Fool: In the Bible's Wisdom Literature, fools are those who reject the Lord God to embrace sin and worldliness, which leads ultimately to ruin.

Striving after wind: Linked with the word *vanity*, the phrase is another way the Preacher conveys futility.

Under the sun: The Preacher uses this expression frequently to refer to life in a fallen world.

Vanity: The original word used by the Preacher was *hebel*, a Hebrew word that we translate as "vanity" or "vain." It means "vapor" or "mist" and is used to indicate something that is elusive or fleeting.

Wind: In the Bible, the word *ruah* is translated as "wind," "breath," or "spirit" depending on context.

Wisdom / Wise: To be wise is to revolve oneself—affections, thoughts, decisions, actions—on God and his kingdom. The result is "skill in the art of godly living."¹



wisdom more than anyone else (1:16), which ties back to Solomon's story in 1 Kings. There, in answer to Solomon's prayer, the Lord responded:

"Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days." (1 Kings 3:12–13)

Solomon went on to become the wealthiest king in world history at that time. Regrettably, Solomon rejected the wisdom he'd been granted, making terrible relationship decisions that led him away from the Lord and also abusing those under his authority. If you read Solomon's history in 1 Kings, it's very easy to see the connection to the Preacher's story in Ecclesiastes. This biblical evidence is why we will approach our study of Ecclesiastes as though Solomon wrote it.

Although the Preacher is the primary figure in Ecclesiastes, he is not the most important. That honor belongs to God, who, even when not explicitly mentioned, underlies and

overarches every single aspect of the book. His special covenant name, Yahweh, which appears as LORD in our Bibles (with small capital letters) is not found in Ecclesiastes. Instead the Preacher uses *Elohim*, which we translate as “God,” most likely because he shaped his book not only for God’s people but also for those outside of Israel who did not yet know Yahweh.²

In Ecclesiastes we also find people who are righteous and wise and others who are wicked and foolish. In the Bible’s Wisdom Literature, *the wise* are those who orient their entire lives around God and his ways. *Fools* are those who reject God and the paths of righteousness and suffer personal and relational destruction as a result.



SETTING

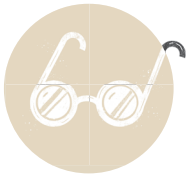
Bible scholars and pastors over the centuries have been baffled by Ecclesiastes. Some find this book utterly depressing and lacking in any sort of cohesive message. There isn’t one agreed-upon opinion of who wrote it, when it was written, and what the takeaways should be. Bible scholars even disagree about when Ecclesiastes was written. If Solomon was indeed the author, we can assume it was written in the latter part of his life (he was Israel’s king from about 970–930 BC).



THEMES

Ecclesiastes is one of the Bible’s Wisdom Books, which also include Job and Proverbs, and a few of the psalms can be classified as wisdom psalms. The overarching theme of the Wisdom Books is, of course, *wisdom*, but biblical wisdom isn’t so much about head knowledge as about heart knowledge. Biblical wisdom is defined as “the fear of the LORD” (Proverbs 9:7), which is all about living by, under, and for God and his ways. Threaded throughout Ecclesiastes are *the effects of sin*, which permeated the world after the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. The Bible tells us that because of sin, “the whole creation has been groaning” (Romans 8:22), and all this groaning is put on display in Ecclesiastes. The word *vanity* appears numerous times in the book, a word that means “vapor,” or “elusive.”³ *Enjoyment* is a surprising theme in this somber book, but it stands out all the more clearly in all this somberness. Finally, the Preacher compels us to think a good bit about *death* as we make our way through the study.

“Ecclesiastes was written in order for us to despair in ourselves and depend on our joyous God and his blessed will for our lives.”⁴



STUDYING ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes has both poetry and prose, and it's helpful to know a bit about how to approach these genres as we begin our study. Simply put, poetry is an art form, and therefore we aren't to take each word literally the way we are with narrative prose. More generally, we can keep in mind the unique ways the Preacher writes: “As a genuine wisdom teacher, he has a gift for penetrating observation and for stating things in a profound and challenging manner that spur the listener on to deeper thought and reflection.”⁵

At the beginning of each week's lesson, read the entire passage. And then read it again. Marinating in the Scripture text is the most important part of any Bible study.



GROUP STUDY

If you are doing this study as part of a group, you'll want to finish each week's lesson before the group meeting. As you prepare, you can work your way through the study questions all in one sitting or by doing a little bit each day. And don't be discouraged if you don't have sufficient time to answer every question. Just do as much as you can, knowing that the more you do, the more you'll learn. No matter how much of the study you are able to complete each week, the group will benefit simply from your presence, so don't skip the gathering if you can't finish! That being said, group time will be most rewarding for every participant if you have done the lesson in advance. When you gather, read the entire passage aloud before your discussion time. Then you can discuss your answers to the questions, or just talk through the Scripture passage, using your lesson prep to guide your discussion.

If you are leading the group, you can download the free leader's guide at <https://www.lydiabrownback.com/flourish-series>.



INDIVIDUAL STUDY

The study is designed to run for ten weeks, but you can set your own pace if you're studying solo. And you can download the free leader's guide (<https://www.lydiabrownback.com/flourish-series>) if you'd like some guidance along the way.

Marinating in the Scripture text is the most important part of any Bible study.



Reading Plan

	Primary Text	Supplemental Reading
Week 1	Ecclesiastes 1:1-18	Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 8:20
Week 2	Ecclesiastes 2:1-26	1 Kings 4:21-34; 11:1-3
Week 3	Ecclesiastes 3:1-22	Psalm 107
Week 4	Ecclesiastes 4:1-16	
Week 5	Ecclesiastes 5:1-6:12	Luke 12:13-21
Week 6	Ecclesiastes 7:1-29	
Week 7	Ecclesiastes 8:1-17	
Week 8	Ecclesiastes 9:1-18	
Week 9	Ecclesiastes 10:1-11:6	
Week 10	Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14	1 Corinthians 1:18-31





WEEK 1

VANITY OF VANITIES!

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-18

Elevator rides are rarely memorable, but one in particular lingers in my mind. On-boarding with me were several men, obviously together as business colleagues, and, in unspoken but universally understood elevator protocol, we began the descent in silence. As we neared ground level, the businessmen tossed out a comment or two about sports and lunch, and then one of them said, “Hey, today’s my birthday.” Another uncomfortably long silence immediately followed until one of his colleagues took pity on him and replied, “Hey, man, that’s great. Hope it’s a good one.” It was so awkward! There’s something off-putting about self-stated birthday announcements, isn’t there? They seem so, well, attention-seeking and convey a desire to be celebrated. But a more charitable interpretation results if we realize that most people aren’t so much looking to be *celebrated* as simply *remembered*. That very human longing is brought front and center in this week’s lesson, and we’ll see that it goes much deeper than birthdays.

1. VANITY OF VANITIES (1:1-3)

The author identifies himself in the very first verse:

¹The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (v. 1)

He refers to himself as “the Preacher,” which is the way our English Bible translates the original Hebrew word *Qohelet*. It can also be rendered “Convener” or “Collector.” Since many of King David’s descendants rose to kingship and ruled from Jerusalem, we have no way of identifying which one is in view in verse 1, but in the chapters ahead, there

are clues that this particular king was likely David’s son Solomon. As we noted in the introduction, many scholars believe, for a variety of reasons, that the author was someone else, but the plainest reading of the text points to Solomon. For the purposes of our study, identifying the author isn’t what ultimately matters—it’s grasping his message.

After his personal introduction, the author announces his overarching theme:

² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (v. 2)

We find this exact expression, “Vanity of vanities,” only twice in the book—here and near the very end (12:8). It’s the Preacher’s way of bookending his primary point.

✦ Notice how many times in just this one verse that he uses the word *vanity*! The original Hebrew word conveys the idea of vapor or mist, something fleeting or elusive.⁶ To what does the Preacher apply this term *vanity* here in verse 2?

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The Preacher is going to back up his vanity claim with several examples. He begins with man’s work:

³ What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun? (v. 3)

✦ Here Solomon asks what’s called a “rhetorical question,” which is a question with an obvious answer. In light of the expression he uses in verse 2, what is the answer to his question in verse 3?

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2. FROM HERE TO THERE (1:4-7)

The Preacher backs up his thesis, that everything is vanity, with observations from nature:

- 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
- 5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.
- 6 The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
- 7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again. (vv. 4–7)

✦ In what way do these natural occurrences reinforce the Preacher’s theme?

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3. NOTHING NEW (1:8-11)

The Preacher goes on to describe the sameness of life from generation to generation:

- 8 All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
- 9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.
- 10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?

It has been already
in the ages before us.

- " There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after. (vv. 8–11)

- ✚ We can summarize his poetic description this way: life on this earth is unsatisfying. What does Psalm 63:1–5 reveal about where all this earthly dissatisfaction is intended to direct us?

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- ✚ Summarize what the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1:8–11 about the ultimate end of every earthly endeavor.

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- ✚ There is only one way to alter the outcome of what the Preacher describes in verses 8–11. According to 1 Corinthians 15:58, what is that alternate way?

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4. A NOBLE QUEST (1:12-13)

Now the Preacher begins to share his personal experience. Linking the Preacher with Solomon seems logical, based on what he writes here:

¹²I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. (vv. 12–13)

Not only does the Preacher remind us of his kingship; he also describes how he applied wisdom to understand the way the world works. If we look back at what the Historical Books of the Bible tells us about Solomon, we’re told, “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:29–30). The connection between this history of King Solomon and the words of the Preacher here in Ecclesiastes are by no means definitive, but it certainly gives us a valid reason to link them.

✦ What conclusion does the Preacher reach in verses 12–13 as a result of his search?

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✦ After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, unbroken fellowship with God and the paradise they’d enjoyed in the garden were over. As a result of their sin, life for all mankind would be very different thereafter. What link do you see between God’s words to Adam in Genesis 3:17–19 and the words of the Preacher here in Ecclesiastes 1:13?

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✝ If we are wise like the Preacher, we won't refuse to face the reality he describes—much of life is “an unhappy business” (v. 13). And as we look back on Genesis 3, wisdom calls us to face the reason for this unhappiness—sin. Only as we face this reality will our hearts be gripped by our need for help and hope. How does Romans 8:20–21 provide this help and hope?

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5. STRIVING AFTER WIND (1:14-15)

The Preacher continues his recall and concludes twice, each time with a proverb, that everything is “a striving after wind.” First is this:

¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted. (vv. 14–15)

✝ We can best understand his word “crooked” not as something bent or broken but as something unknowable or hidden. What do you think his proverb in verse 15 means, and how does it reinforce his thesis, that everything is “a striving after wind” (v. 14)?

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“People say, ‘It is what it is.’ On the contrary, it is not what it could have been. We all live east of Eden.”⁷

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6. SOLOMON’S QUEST (1:16–18)

After setting out his credentials once again, he repeats the pattern:

¹⁶ I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. (vv. 16–18)

✦ What is his point in verse 18, and what makes it “a striving after wind”?

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LET’S TALK

1. Each one of us has a craving to be remembered, to leave a lasting mark on the world. Where do you observe this in your world, and how does this craving show up in your own life?

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2. In our information age, we crave knowledge and wisdom. Discuss where and how you've seen the Preacher's proverb—"In much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:18)—play out in your life and in the world around you.
