

ECCLESIASTES
FINDING
MEANING

LOTVLAYTON.ORG



Read through of Ecclesiastes

While it is good to read and study individual portions, verses, and words of the Bible slowly and methodically, the overarching narrative and context may be missed. Some difficult phrases are explained and other questions are answered if we keep reading. With that in mind, we are going to read through the entire book of Ecclesiastes for our first lesson. Use this page and the next to write down questions you have. Leave space for possible answers that may come up as we continue to read. At the end, pick two or three unanswered questions that you want answered and share them with the Pastor.

Ecclesiastes (Kohelet)

מִגִּלַּת קֹהֵלֶת
(mə-gee-LAHHT koh-HEH-leht)

Title: What's in a Name?

Ecclesiastes, the English title of this book, is derived from the Greek name for the book. The word "Ecclesiastes" is not a personal name like Solomon or David, but is a title given to a person who gathers together a group of people to speak to them.

Possible translations include the teacher, the preacher, the assembly leader, the after-dinner speaker, or the keynote speaker. Since none of these renderings convey the whole meaning of this title, we continue to use the title Ecclesiastes, the title that was chosen to serve as the name for this book in the English Bible.

In English literature about this book, the speaker is sometimes also referred to by the Hebrew form of his title, namely, Kohelet (קֹהֵלֶת). The format of the book is a transcript of a talk given by Ecclesiastes to an assembly of colleagues, perhaps young trainees for government service.

The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to convince the reader of the uselessness of any world view which regards the created world or human enjoyment as ends in themselves. The only truly adequate world view is one which recognizes God himself as the highest value. The only meaningful life is one lived in God's service. This is a lesson that Solomon learned the hard way.

Ecclesiastes does not spoon-feed the reader with answers intended to resolve the frustrations that life brings. He wants you to wrestle with the problems of life along with him. Throughout the book he keeps coming back to the same problems without finding satisfactory answers to them. The first time you read Ecclesiastes, read it straight through, without studying the footnotes. Then after you have struggled to find meaning along with Ecclesiastes, go back a second time and read the book with the notes, in order to receive some of the solutions others have found as they pondered these questions along with Ecclesiastes.



Outline of Ecclesiastes

There are about as many outlines of Ecclesiastes as there are commentators. No two completely agree. Yet amid the disagreement there are two main schools of thought. The first believes that Ecclesiastes can be arranged in some sort of logical outline. The second group argues, with more plausibility, that Ecclesiastes represents a “stream of consciousness” style of writing, which defies detailed outlining.

Stream of consciousness, of course, does not necessarily imply disorder. There is a progression of thought through the book. Solomon begins on a note of emptiness. He talks about life without God, “under the sun.” But in **chapter 7** he changes his emphasis and talks about life under God. He continues to build on this theme (while still weaving in the other) until in the closing verses he declares, “Here is the conclusion of the matter” (**12:13**).

Alongside this gradual buildup to the conclusion, Solomon, skillful artist that he is, has other things going. His stream of thought is not a steady one, but is distinguished by various ebbs and currents. Just as a stream or river of water has its still spots as well as its rapids, Ecclesiastes alternates between quiet moods and powerful outbursts.

Rather than attempting to make a detailed outline for Ecclesiastes, we’ll simply divide the book into these four major sections:

Prologue	(1:1–11)
Life under the Sun	(1:12–6:12)
Life under God	(7:1–12:8)
Conclusion	(12:9–14)

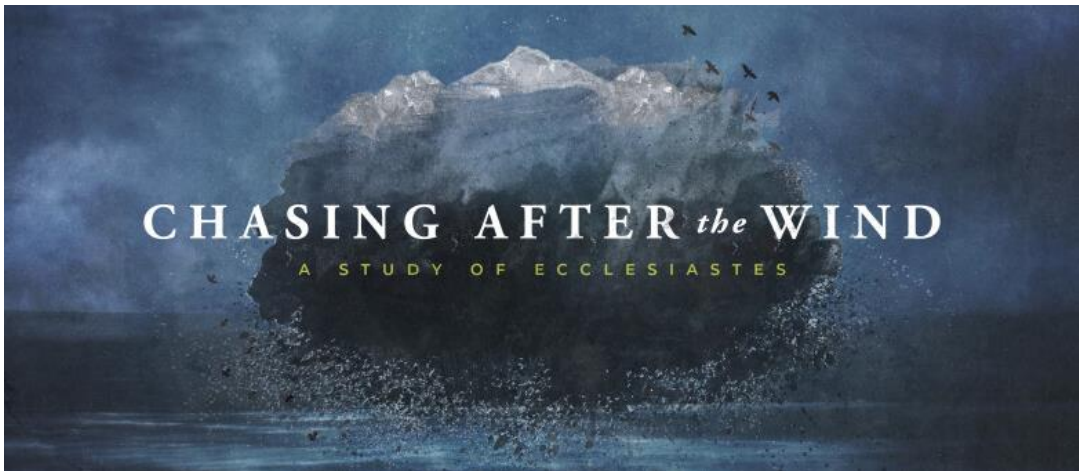
Ecclesiastes 1:1



The son of David who was also the king in Jerusalem is King Solomon, who reigned from 970-931 B.C. Given the clues within Ecclesiastes, we can determine that Solomon wrote this book towards the end of his life.

Read **1 Kings 3:1-15 & 4:29-34**. What made Solomon uniquely qualified to write a book about earthly wisdom?

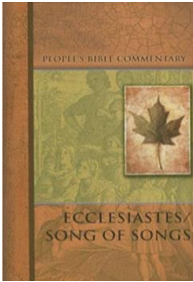
Read **1 Kings 10:14-11:13**. Describe Solomon's life.



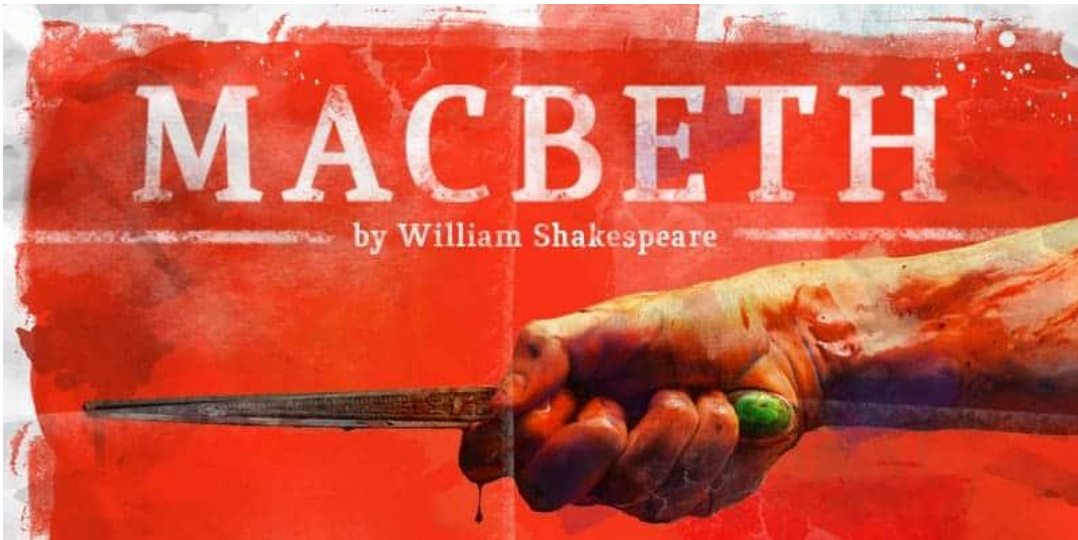
Ecclesiastes 1:2-11

What thought-provoking question does Solomon raise in **verse 3**?

PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Meaningless



Since this word is so important and occurs so frequently in Ecclesiastes (37 times), we'll take a minute to look at it. The original idea behind the term is "breath." This idea becomes very vivid on a cold day, when we see our breath, only to see it quickly vanish. Saint James captured this thought when he wrote, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (**James 4:14**). Because it is so fleeting and unstable, life seems to be vain, frustrating, without purpose, empty—in a word, meaningless...It is interesting to note that the name Adam and Eve gave their second son, Abel, is the Hebrew word for "meaningless." Perhaps this was their commentary on life after the fall.



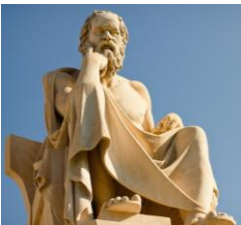
In his play *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare wrote, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player (actor) that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." How do Shakespeare's words compare with those of Solomon in **verses 2-4**?

What examples does Solomon cite to show how everything is meaningless?

Look at **verse 10**. Is this true? Don't we come up with new ideas, stories, inventions, etc. all the time?

Reflecting on **verse 11**, is there really no remembrance of the former generations, of former people? What is Solomon getting at?

How could everything be meaningless? When have you felt this way? Pair up with someone at your table, take a moment, and discuss these two questions.



SOCRATES: *"The unexamined life is not worth living."*

Do you agree or disagree with Socrates? What makes life worth living?

TERMS WHEN CONSIDERING MEANING

Meaning: Typically either has to do with purpose (A man bursts into the room and you respond, "What's the meaning of this?) or signification ("the meaning of the word is..."). Both can be applied to life.

Cosmic Meaning: An overall meaning or purpose to the universe. A positive answer to the questions, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" "Why are we here?" "What's the purpose of human life?"

Moral Meaning: The ability to say that life is transcendentally or objectively good or I can do good things. This depends on objective morality existing independent of whatever humans happen to be thinking is right or wrong. Note that often when people say, "This is the meaning/purpose of life," what they mean is, "This is how you ought to live."

Short-term (Terrestrial) Meaning: As autonomous humans, we can choose for certain things to be meaningful and have value for as long as we value them. Before we valued it, it had no value, and when no one is around to value it, it will no longer have value.

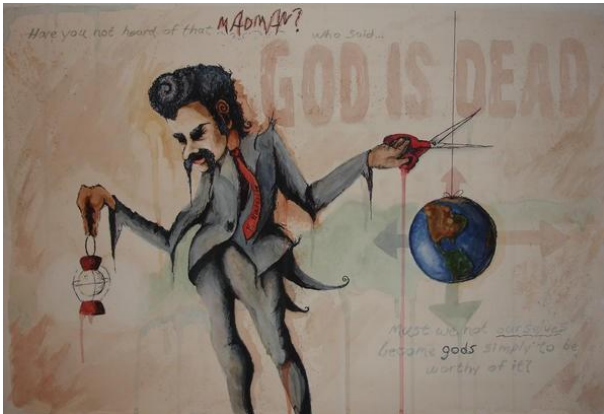
Metanarrative: An over-arching or transcendent story or idea within which all other stories or ideas fit and are legitimized.

Scientific Naturalism: a worldview that holds the universe is composed of (and can be fully explained in terms by) matter and nothing more. This worldview usually assumes atheism, since God is an immaterial being.

Naturalistic Fallacy: statements of fact concerning the natural world cannot lead to ethical principles. Popularized by the work of David Hume.

Essence: the fundamental center of what a thing is, without which it would not be what it is. The property of a thing that persists over time which keeps that thing remaining what it is.

NIETZSCHE: THE MAD MAN



"Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"---As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter...

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell

you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?...There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us---for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time."

Nietzsche published the words above in 1882. Has the event finally arrived, when people can exist without God, when they have "killed" him? And why call this man mad (insane)?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18



Consider **verse 13**. What's the heavy burden?

Look at **verse 15**. What's the meaning of this statement? What are some of the lessons learned after a lifetime of learning as Solomon did?

Reflecting on **verse 18**, in what ways does wisdom lead to sorrow and grief?

How does believing the metanarrative of Jesus change how you look at wisdom?

IS → HUME'S GUILLOTINE → OUGHT



WORLD
OF FACTS



YOU SHALL NOT PASS



WORLD
OF VALUES

HUME'S GUILLOTINE

"In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it."

According to Hume, what will the sciences never be able to lead us to know? What is the only way a person can know what she ought to do?



Materialism is incomplete even as a theory of the physical world, since the physical world includes conscious organisms among its most striking occupants.

— *Thomas Nagel* —

AZ QUOTES

NAGEL: MATERIALISM AND MEANING

"The conflict between scientific naturalism and various forms of antireductionism is a staple of recent philosophy. On one side there is the hope that everything can be accounted for at the most basic level by the physical sciences, extended to include biology. On the other side are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, purpose, thought, and value can be accommodated in a universe consisting at the most basic level of physical facts--facts, however sophisticated, of the kind revealed by the physical sciences."

What kinds of things does Nagel believe scientific naturalism (or materialism) (c.f. page 9) will never be able tell us about? Is it possible to live without believing in an explanation for these kinds of things?

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

What did Solomon pursue when seeking meaning?

For someone who likes a good joke, how is it that laughter and pleasure are foolish? (c.f. **Verse 2**)

Solomon calls the lifespan of people "the few days of their lives" in **verse 3**. How can the average lifespan of over 70 years be called "a few days"?

As he did all these things, Solomon said in **verse 9** that his wisdom stayed with him. What did he mean by that?

After gaining so much, why does Solomon declare that he has gained nothing? (c.f. **Verse 11**)

If Solomon had gained nothing through all these endeavors, why are we seeking the same things as him (success, money, possessions, etc.)?

Ecclesiastes 2:12-16

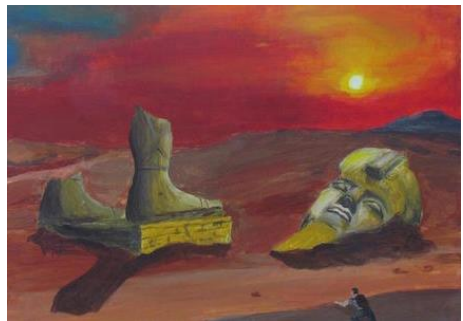
What is the fate of the wise? What is the fate of the fool?

Even though wisdom is better than folly, what can wisdom not do?

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

OZYMANDIAS by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveler from an antique land Who said:
"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.



What is Percy Shelley telling us with his sonnet *Ozymandias*?

What meaning do you find out of work?

Relate an experience when something you worked for shared the fate Solomon described in **verses 22-23**.

What's the problem of making life's goal leaving a legacy for children (or a community or country or whoever)? How does a never-ending universe (billions of years before us and after us) compound this problem?

CAMUS: THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS



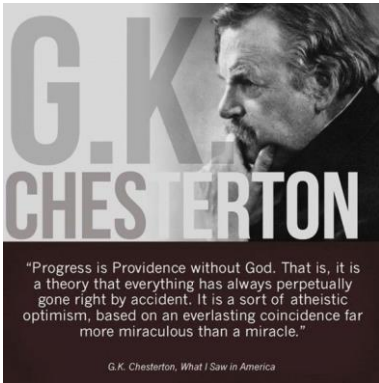
"The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor...

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his fortune. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth...

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Camus believes one can find meaning in life by consciously choosing to struggle despite the absurdity of trying to accomplish something that can't be accomplished. Is this a useful solution for the atheist?

CHESTERTON: IS PROGRESS POSSIBLE?



"Progress by its very name indicates a direction; and the moment we are in the least doubtful about the direction, we become in the same degree doubtful about the progress. Never perhaps since the beginning of the world has there been an age that had less right to use the word 'progress' than we." "Without the doctrine of the Fall all idea of progress is unmeaning."

If one's desire is to at least contribute towards the progress of the human race, why is this not possible for the atheist, according to Chesterton?

What is the best meaning Solomon says that someone can find out of work? What's the solution to work being meaningless?



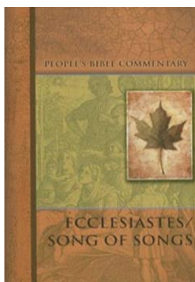
Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

We rightly focus on how the bad times follow the good and negate our toils. But the opposite is also true—good times follow the bad. What comfort can we draw from this?

Describe the burden Solomon speaks about in **verse 10**. (Hint: Piece together what we know about God and eternity with what we are not able to do with that knowledge.)

In **verse 11**, what is the eternity set in the human heart?

PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Eternity (verse 11)



It is interesting that the Hebrew word for eternity basically means “the hidden time.” Although we have a natural sense of eternity, we lack a corresponding ability to see into the distant past or future. It is hidden from us. Happily, God has given us some information in the Bible. He tells us something about the beginning and creation (Genesis 1) and about the end—judgment, heaven, and hell (the book of Revelation and many other portions of Scripture). He also tells us the way to heaven: through Jesus Christ, who is “the way” (**John 14:6**).



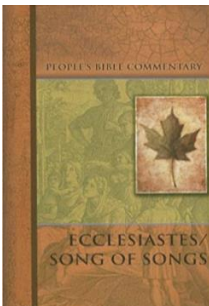
Listen to Hamlet's soliloquy. What's great about death, according to Hamlet?

What's "the rub" when it comes to death?

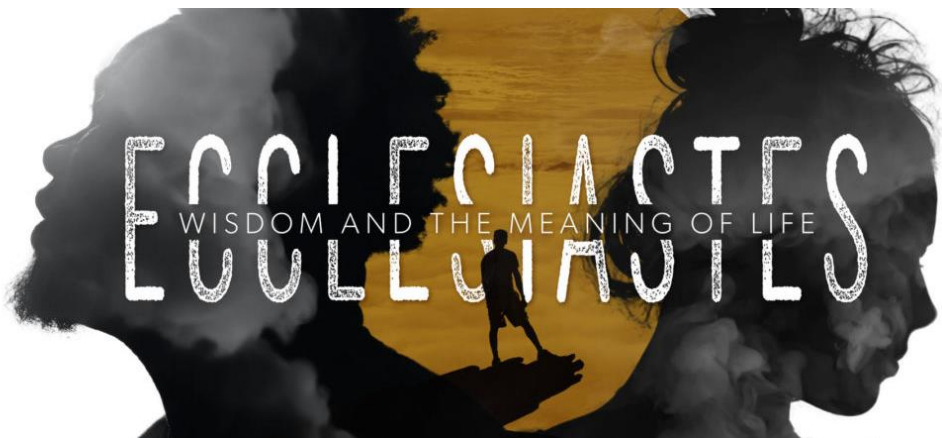
What experience in life is Solomon describing in **verse 16**?

In **verses 18-22**, why is Solomon talking this way? Isn't he a believer?

PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Spirits of humans and animals



A footnote in the NIV indicates that **verse 21** may be translated in another way: "Who knows the spirit of man, which rises upward, or the spirit of the animal, which goes down into the earth?" This is quite different from the other rendering. One asks, "Who knows the spirit of man?" The other asks, "Who knows where the spirit of man goes?" Yet both of these acceptable translations point out the same truth. By himself man is unable to know anything spiritual. He can't know anything about his spiritual life. Nor can he know anything about the spirit's life after death. He is as ignorant in these matters as are the animals.



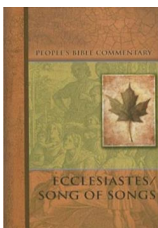
Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

What makes life meaningless according to **verse 1**?

In **verse 2**, Solomon says that the dead are happier than the living. How is this true?

Then, in **verse 3**, Solomon “ups the ante” and declares that those who have never been born are better off. How can he say that?

What other things contribute to the meaninglessness of life?



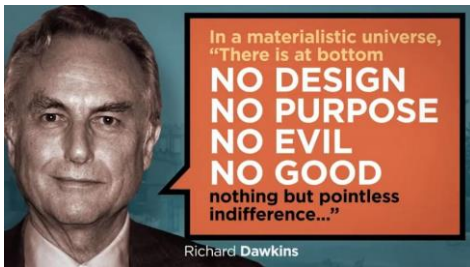
PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Why so meaningless?

One commentator, Ernest Hengstenberg, explains the purpose of the Teacher's constant emphasis on human misery: “By thoroughly disgusting us with the world, and by making us realize its absolute vanity, God means to draw us to himself... Through much tribulation must our hold on earthly things be loosened and ourselves enter into the kingdom of God.”

Thinking especially of **verses 9-12**, what wisdom does Solomon give us regarding the pros and cons of being a loner?

What does it matter if this is an unjust (or ethically neutral) world? How does that affect the types of lives we're going to live?

DAWKINS: PITILESS INDIFFERENCE



"During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering in fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease... In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic

replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."

If nature can be described as a world of pitiless indifference, as Dawkins describes it, what does that mean for our own lives?

SARTRE: EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE



"What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees he is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself... [T]o say that we invent values means neither more nor less than this; that there is no sense in life a priori. Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the values of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose."

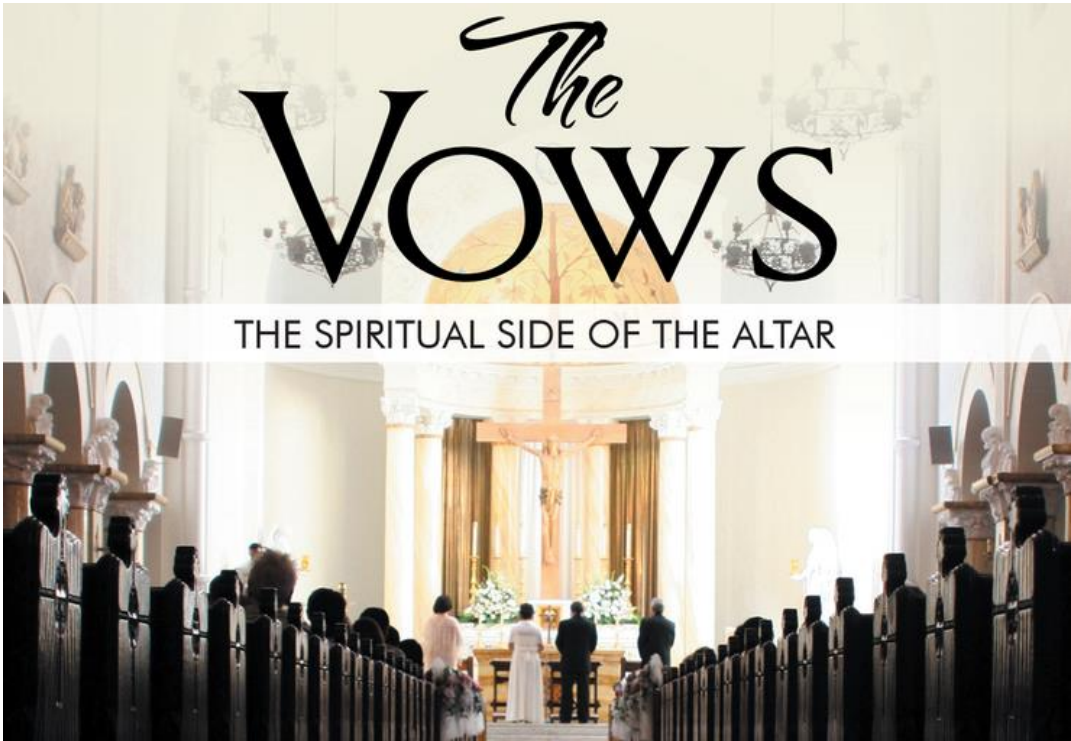
JOEL MARKS: DISLIKE

"I knew in my soul, with all of my conviction,... that they were wrong, wrong, wrong. I knew this with more certainty than I knew the earth is round. But suddenly I knew it no more. I was not merely skeptical or agnostic about it; I had come to believe, and do still, that these things are not wrong. I used to think that animal agriculture was wrong. Now I will call a spade a spade and declare simply that I very much dislike it and want it to stop."

List all the implications on human life without God that Sartre mentions. Can we regain what was lost? What has Marks shown he has lost?

What meaning does Paul give us to live instead of die?

Philippians 1:23-25 (NIV) I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith...



Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

What is the "sacrifice of fools" (**verse 1**)?

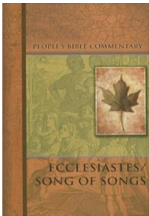
How can we be helped to take church seriously?

There was a lot of talk of vows in this section. In accordance with Old Testament law, people made formal oaths to God in response to blessings he had given them. New Testament Christians do not have such laws, but in freedom they may make promises to God. Have you made any vows to God? What might be some God-pleasing modern vows?

Ecclesiastes 5:8-17

Solomon in his wisdom tells us that wealth is meaningless and a source of difficulty for those who have it. Why?

Do you think the sin of materialism is still on the rise or are more people getting this spiritual truth that life isn't about stuff?



PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Empty Hands

It's said that when Alexander the Great lay on his deathbed, he commanded that contrary to the usual custom his hands not be wrapped. He wanted everyone to see his empty hands as he was carried to his grave. And so in death the great conqueror and king of nations was on equal terms with the poorest beggar.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

How do we apply these verses to our lives?

What is a good, godly attitude towards wealth?

1 Timothy 6:6-10 (NIV) But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹ Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Job 1:21 (NIV) "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."



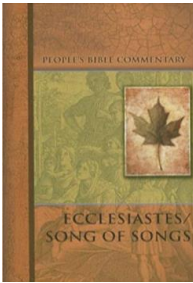
Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

On what basis can the teacher say that a stillborn child is better off than a prosperous person who cannot enjoy his or her blessings?

What are ways that you have seen God give a man wealth, possession, and honor, lacking nothing that his heart desires, but God did not enable him to enjoy them?

Why is there really no such thing as a self-made man?

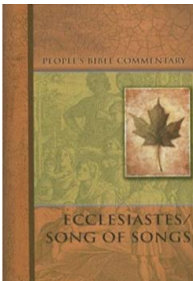
PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: God's "Mask" of Human Endeavors



Luther describes it this way: [All human activities] are our Lord God's masks; beneath these he chooses to be hidden and to do everything. Had Gideon not cooperated and taken the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been defeated. Yet God was able to smite them without Gideon. No doubt he [God] could create children without man and woman, but he does not intend to do so. Rather he joins man and woman to make it look as if man and woman do the procreating. Yet he, hidden under this mask, is the one who does it. They say: ... God bestows every good thing; but you must "pitch in" and "take the bull by the horns," that is, you must work and supply God with a reason and a covering.

Where does quality of life come from?

PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Quality of Life



"Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite." The word translated "appetite" here as in verse 7 literally means "soul." The soul, as one commentator puts it, is the "seat of the appetite." When we come right down to it, most of our "roving" desires are spiritual problems. Many married men are not satisfied with their own wives, but, to use Jeremiah's expression, are like "well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for another man's wife" (**Jeremiah 5:8**). Others never have enough money, but always want more and more. Still others are never satisfied with their position in life. Such people are constantly restless. Beneath their restlessness lurks one of two problems: either they are longing for God (perhaps without even being aware of it), or they know about God but are dissatisfied with what he has given them. Saint Augustine addressed both problems when he said, "The soul is restless till it rests in God," and "He who is not satisfied with God alone is much too greedy." In either case, the problem is spiritual. It is a sickness of the soul.

Looking at **Verse 11**, how do more words equal less meaning?



Ecclesiastes 7:1-10

The first six verses of chapter 7 play on a theme. Sorrow is better than laughter. Look at each verse from that standpoint, and then state why sorrow is better than laughter. Why is a funeral dinner better than a victory celebration?

Have you ever yearned for the "good old days"? Evaluate that yearning in the light of **7:10**.

THE NARROW LUTHERAN MIDDLE

Following the Scriptural Road



Ecclesiastes 7:11-18

According to **verse 13**, what must history lead us to conclude?

What aspect of meaninglessness does Solomon speak about in **verse 15**?

How do **Romans 8:28** & **Hebrews 11:1** help us get through good and bad times that God makes?

Romans 8:28 (NIV) And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

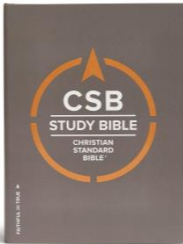
What is the advice of **verses 16 & 17**?

Ecclesiastes 7:19-8:1

What is the wise advice of **verses 20-22**?

Why do you think Solomon despaired of ever becoming wise (**verse 23**) and then set out to understand and search out wisdom (**verse 25**)?

CHRISTIAN STANDARD BIBLE STUDY BIBLE: One Upright Man



7:25–29 This passage seems to say that women are more evil than men. However, it needs to be understood in its context; this was a male sage giving advice to other male sages and to men generally. Because Ecclesiastes was originally intended for men (few women were literate), it predominantly reflects the man’s point of view. Furthermore, this text is a reflection on the fall into sin, alluded to in **v. 29**. The point is that because of sin, the fundamental relationship between male and female, especially husband and wife, is broken (as implied in **Genesis 3:16**). This is why men often have better friendships with other men (in the sense that they encourage and accept one another) than they have with their own wives. The phrase none of those was a woman does not mean that women are intrinsically evil, but that Solomon, as a man, could not find a woman with whom his relationship was without guile, tension, or conflict. He also found that such honest friendships were extremely rare (I found one person in a thousand). If Ecclesiastes were written more for women, it would reflect their point of view, rightly stating that many women have more caring relationships with other women than they have with their husbands. As it stands, both genders benefit from the God-given wisdom found in this book.

How does wisdom brighten a man’s face?

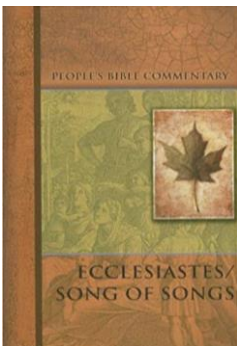


Ecclesiastes 8:2-8

How might we apply these words to our current government?

Compare this coming before a king to coming before God.

PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Do Not Be in a Hurry to Leave the King's Presence

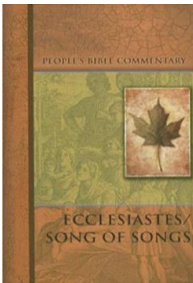


It is difficult for us to appreciate the injunction, "Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence." In ancient times people stood in awe of their rulers. One did not enter or leave a king's presence without his permission. The expression "to leave the king's presence" was another way of saying "to leave without permission." Simply to turn one's back on a king and walk out was a terrible insult to the monarch. To do so would invite almost certain death. To leave God's presence is nothing short of forsaking him. **Genesis 4:16** uses a similar expression when it says that Cain "went out from the Lord's presence." To turn against God invites certain and eternal death.

Ecclesiastes 8:9-17

Verses 12-14 seem to contain a contradiction. What is the contradiction and how is it solved?

How do you respond to injustice?



PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Injustice in Ecclesiastes

Each time Solomon brings up the topic of injustice, he does so from a slightly different angle and with a somewhat different lesson to teach. Here he uses it as a reason to "commend the enjoyment of life." You're not going to change the world. Do the best you can to live your faith and share it. And enjoy the gifts God gives you. As you enjoy them, think of how good God is. Then you'll find satisfaction in your work during the time God gives you under the sun.

Thinking of **verses 16-17**, How much trust should we put in to philosophers to comprehend what goes on under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

We would like to think that the righteous and the wicked share different destinies. But Solomon says it doesn't happen that way. What is his conclusion about the destinies of the righteous and the wicked? (**verses 1-3**) How do you see truth to what Solomon says?

Solomon had said that the dead are happier than the living (**4:1-4**), for they no longer see what happens under the sun. What does Solomon say by contrast in **verses 3-6**?



WHAT IS HEDONISM?

PHILOSOPHICAL DOCTRINES

EPICURUS: HEDONISM

"pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. We recognize pleasure as the first and natural good; starting from pleasure we accept or reject; and we return to this as we judge every good thing, trusting this feeling of pleasure as our guide."

How would you define "the good life"? How would you respond to a friend that says the good life is basically pleasurable experiences (as Epicurus might say)?

KIERKEGAARD: THE AESTHETE

“My life is utterly meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word Schnur in the dictionary, which means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word Schnur should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust brush.”

Kierkegaard’s point is that we can’t simply be sum of our experiences. Humans need something behind it all that ties the experiences together into something meaningful. What could do that?

PLANTINGA: PLAY AND ENJOYMENT

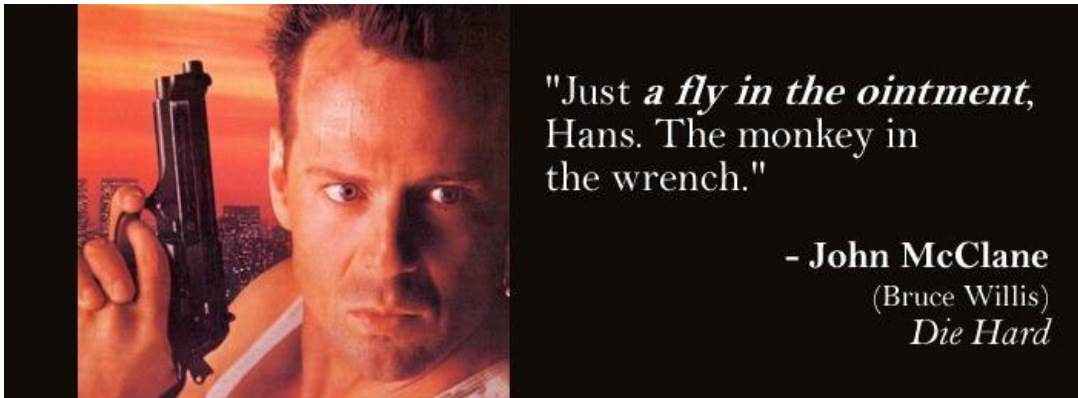
“The argument [for God’s existence] from Play and Enjoyment: Fun, pleasure, humor, play enjoyment. (Maybe not all to be thought of in the same way.) Playing: evolution: an adaptive means of preparing for adult life (so that engaging in this sort of thing as an adult suggest a case of arrested development). But surely there is more to it than that. The joy one can take in humor, art, poetry, mountaineering, exploring, adventuring (the problem is not to explain how it would come about that human beings enjoyed mountaineering: no doubt evolution can do so. The problem is with its significance. Is it really true that all there is to this is enjoyment? Or is there a deeper significance? The Westminster Shorter Catechism: the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him (and his creation and gifts) forever.”

Plantinga argues that an evolutionary explanation for play and joy seems entirely inadequate to explain its significance. Within the Christian metanarrative, what explanations might we suggest?

Identify two changes you could make so that your life is a more joyful celebration of God’s goodness without abandoning him or his commandments. (**verses 7-9**)

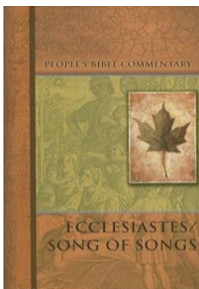
Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

Solomon extols the value of wisdom and the meaningless of life at the same time. Explain.



Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

If you've ever heard the phrase "fly in the ointment," it actually originates from this verse in Ecclesiastes. The meaning is that something so little can spoil a whole batch. Solomon compares this to a little folly corrupting a good amount of wisdom. How is this true when it comes to wisdom and folly? What can we do about it?



PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: To the Right and to the Left

Comparing the wise man and the fool, Solomon uses the directions "right" and "left." Right frequently symbolizes good, and left, bad, as when Jesus says he "will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" on judgment day (Matthew 25:33). Solomon is comparing godly wisdom with the lack thereof. The wise man trusts in God. The fool, on the other hand, disregards God and his Word. In the end such a person will end up on the left. He will be damned.

List additional examples of the meaninglessness of life under the sun according to the following verses.

verses 4-7,16,17,20

verses 8,9

verses 10,11,15

verses 12-14,18

verse 14

verse 19

In this chapter, Solomon points out circumstances that add to the meaninglessness of life. But he also gives us wisdom to deal with them. What pieces of wisdom did you take to heart and want to implement?

Plant your seed in the morning and keep busy all afternoon, for you don't know if profit will come from one activity or another—or maybe both.

- Ecclesiastes 11:5-6 NLT -



Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Why does Solomon encourage us to cast our grain/bread upon the waters (**verses 1,2**)?

How does Solomon underscore the vanity of life in **verses 3 & 4**? In view of this, what should we never do?

What should be our attitude toward the opportunities God has given us? How might we apply this to sharing our faith with others? (c.f. **verse 6; Isaiah 55:10-11; 1 Corinthians 3:5-7**)

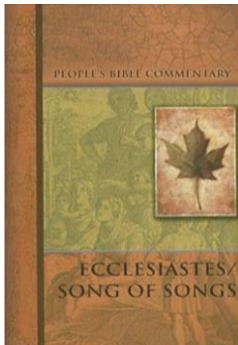
Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8

Why is it good to remember the many days of darkness?

What advice does the Lord give to young people? What tempers and directs this advice? (**verse 9**) How do we deal with those who look at the church / religion as putting a hamper on their fun?

Why does old age contribute to the meaninglessness of life?

PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Ecclesiastes Symbolically Describing Old Age



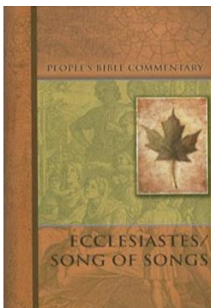
With various figures of speech the Teacher pictures death: the cutting of a silver cord, the breaking of a golden bowl, the shattering of a clay pitcher, the breaking of a wheel. The first two images, of silver and gold, depict life's preciousness. Some have seen in the silver cord a reference to the spinal cord. But it's unlikely that Solomon is making any sort of anatomical statement. Rather, he is describing life as a golden lamp-bowl hanging by a silver cord. When the cord is cut, the bowl crashes to the floor and breaks. With the pictures of the broken pitcher and wheel, the Teacher represents death as the end of life's usefulness. The ancients used clay pitchers to carry water from the spring or well. The wheel also served in this process. A rope running over a wheel would make it easier to draw water. The constant wearing upon the wheel would finally bring about its collapse. Shattered bits of clay and worn-out wheels—more sad images of death.

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14



What goal did Solomon strive for in writing the book of Ecclesiastes?

In what two ways are the God-given words of Ecclesiastes intended to help us?



PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY: Goads & Nails

Goads are sharp sticks used for driving oxen or by shepherds to prod their sheep forward. Like goads, the inspired Scriptures drive people to action. God's Word pricks our consciences, pierces us to the heart, drives us to repentance, and directs us to faith. While goads depict action, embedded nails symbolize stability. They hold things together and strengthen them. God's Word holds our lives together; it is our strength and stability. Indeed, it is the only solid foundation in this world of instability and change.

Why is the warning given in **verse 12** an important addition to this book?

What should people do in life?

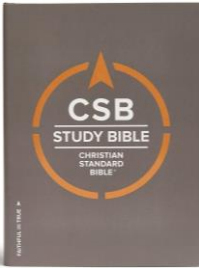
What do you think of Solomon's conclusion to Ecclesiastes?

Watch "[The Expert](#)" video. Similarly to the video, to say there's no God and yet the universe can be meaningful is to use absurd language. Why?

Conversely, to say God exists and some things are meaningless is also absurd. Why?

How has the study of Ecclesiastes been a help to your life?

CHRISTIAN STANDARD BIBLE STUDY BIBLE: The Value of Ecclesiastes



The Bible is never shy about confronting painful truths or hard questions. The book of Ecclesiastes faces the issue of how we can find meaning in life in light of the seemingly futile nature of everything. It will not allow the reader to retreat into superficial answers. It does not answer this problem by comforting us with hollow slogans. To the contrary, its motto is “Everything Is Futile.” But by forcing us to face the futility of human existence, it guides us to a life free of empty purpose and deceitful vindication.

Ecclesiastes shows us that since we and our works are futile—that is, destined to perish—we must not waste our lives trying to justify our existence with pursuits that ultimately mean nothing. Put simply, Ecclesiastes examines major endeavors of life in light of the reality of death. The book warns us about the pursuit of several different purposes in life.

1. *Intellectual accomplishments.* Ecclesiastes affirms that wisdom helps us cope with life, but it denies that acquiring knowledge as such is meaningful. Ultimately, the wise person and his works, like the fool and his deeds, perish.
2. *Wealth and luxury.* Wealth does not give life purpose. Those who pursue riches sometimes waste their lives in bitterness, anxiety, and toil. Money does matter, and Ecclesiastes affirms that we need a strategy for maintaining a basic level of prosperity. But wealth of itself is a fraudulent substitute for true contentment.
3. *Politics.* Political power is inherently corrupting, and the worst evils in the world are committed by cruel or incompetent people with power. At the same time, government is necessary. Ecclesiastes counsels the reader on how to survive in a world of political competition, and thus how to have a stable, peaceful life.
4. *Religion.* Zeal for religion also comes in for criticism in Ecclesiastes. Its two warnings are that we should not try to impress God, and we should not wear ourselves out with irrational excess.

Positively, Ecclesiastes recommends that we do two things in light of the brevity of our days.

1. *Enjoy life.* This is not a philosophy of hedonism, nor does it involve neglect of other duties because there is a time for everything under the sun. But a life without enjoyment is no life at all.
2. *Fear God.* This is an honest humility before God arising from an awareness of our weakness and sin. It includes awareness of our dependence on him and a remembrance of the fact that he is our judge.

1:1
THE WORDS OF QOHELET, SON OF DAVID, KING OF JERUSALEM

HEBREW: ONE WHO GATHERS PEOPLE



"TEACHER"

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON AUTHORSHIP

- KING SOLOMON?
- ANOTHER DESCANDANT OF DAVID?
- ISRAELITE TEACHER USING A SOLOMON-LIKE PERSONA

KEY POINT: THE TEACHER IS DIFFERENT THAN THE AUTHOR



ECCLES



"HEVEL, HEVEL, EVERYTHING"

HEBREW: VAPOR, SMOKE

1 TEMPORARY, FLEETING

1:1
INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHER

1:2

1:3-11 TIME

TIME WILL EVENTUALLY ERASE YOU, ME, AND ALL WE CARE ABOUT

CAREER

STRESS

AGE

LEAVE IT BEHIND

PLEASURE

MONDAY ALWAYS COMES

THE TEACHER

- WEALTH
- CAREER
- STATUS
- PLEASURE

- WISDOM
- FEAR
- THE LORD

(SEE 9:13-15)

HEVEL
NO GUARANTEES
ENIGMA

THE AUTHOR

IASTES

THING IS UTTERLY HEVEL"

→ USED 38 TIMES

2 ENIGMA, PARADOX



THE AUTHOR'S BASIC GOAL

TO LET THE TEACHER DECONSTRUCT ALL THE WAYS WE FIND MEANING & PURPOSE APART FROM GOD



(1:3-12:7)

HOW DO YOU LIVE LIFE IN THE MIDST OF HEVEL?

ACCEPT THAT ALL OF LIFE IS OUT OF YOUR CONTROL



FRIENDSHIP



FAMILY

THE GIFT OF GOD



GOOD MEAL



SUNNY DAY

11:7-12:7

DEATH



GONNA DIE



GONNA DIE

FOOLISH

12:8



GONNA DIE



GONNA DIE

POOR

THE GREAT EQUALIZER

12:9-14

CONCLUSION & EVALUATION OF THE TEACHER



THE CONCLUSION: FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDS - THIS IS THE WHOLE DUTY OF HUMANS: FOR GOD WILL BRING EVERY DEED INTO JUDGMENT, EVERY HIDDEN THING, WHETHER GOOD OR EVIL

(12:13-14)

(1:1, 12:9-14)

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This Bible study was written and produced by Pastor Jon Klein.

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