

Message Discussion Guide

VANITY AND THE DIVINE DESIGN

The Church at Brook Hills

Dr. Bart Box

June 20, 2010

Ecclesiastes

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

Connect . . .

Use one or both of the following options to introduce the discussion time to follow.

Option 1

Ask members of your group to share about a specific time or experience when they felt life, or an aspect of life (education, pleasure, job), was meaningless, futile, or pointless. Why did they come to feel that way? How did they deal with those feelings of dissatisfaction? Can they now see God's design in that situation? Did they allow that experience to make them more aware of sin and more dependent on Christ?

Option 2

Many have heard the expression, "Life is hard, and then you die." Consider "hard" to mean not only "difficult" but also "frustrating" and "unsatisfying." Does the Word of God affirm this statement? As believers, how does the Word of God point us far beyond this statement and beyond despair? For unbelievers, how does the Word of God speak on this issue?

Review the Message . . .

The Question Before Us All...

What is the meaning of life?

Understanding Ecclesiastes

- We must understand the basic genre.
 - Ecclesiastes is located in the wisdom tradition of Israel.
 - Thus, we must exercise great care in our interpretation.
- We must understand the overall structure.
 - Two voices are apparent in the text:
 - The voice of the Preacher.
 - The voice of the narrator.
 - The key to understanding Ecclesiastes is found in the beginning and end.
 - In the beginning, we have the Preacher's basic message.
 - In the end, we have the narrator's final assessment.
- We must understand two key ideas:

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- “Vanity”...
 - “Vanity” refers to meaninglessness, futility, or pointlessness.
- “Under the sun”...
 - “Under the sun” denotes life without reference to God.

Discussion . . .

- Should we take everything in Ecclesiastes as truthful statements? Why or not? How does genre affect interpretation? Why is it always important to use care in our interpretation of God’s Word?
- Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 and 12:8-14. How do these two passages help us interpret the entire book?
- What does the author mean by “vanity”?
- What does the author mean by “under the sun”? Do you think a person can live like an atheist (without reference to God) but still claim a belief in God? Do you think a person can have an intimate relationship with God and live like He does not exist or care?
- Read Ecclesiastes 10:19. In a world without God, what would take on ultimate significance? Would there even be ultimate significance?

Application . . .

- Regarding the meaning of life, do you think most people are searching for meaning?
- From whom or from what do people seek answers to the question of meaning in life? (books, TV, education, friends, etc) How can Christians have an influence in these areas?
- In what things do people often think they will find meaning and satisfaction? (beauty, health, hobbies, family, work, money, etc) How can Christians avoid these traps? How can Christians enjoy blessings without turning them into gods?
- In general, do the lives of the world’s rich, successful, and famous suggest they are happy and satisfied? Nevertheless, why do you think so many people aspire to be like them?
- Is there anything inherently wrong with riches, success, or fame? Why or why not? In any case, what question(s) do these things not answer?
- How does Christ give life meaning?
- How do we sometimes keep the answers we’ve found to ourselves? How can we help our family, friends, neighbors, and all nations find meaning in life?
- What is lasting in life? What is fleeting?

Hearing Ecclesiastes...

- In the Old Testament context:
 - The Preacher observes two problems:
 - What we see “under the sun” is permanent.
 - What we see “under the sun” is pointless.
 - Wisdom is pointless.

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- Pleasure is pointless.
- Labor is pointless.
- Life is pointless.
- The narrator offers two guidelines:
 - Fear God.
 - Keep His commandments.
- In the New Testament context:
 - All of us live under the curse of God.
 - This curse is by divine design.
 - The curse alerts us to the problem of sin.
 - And the curse points us to Jesus.
 - Jesus redeems us from the curse of God.
 - Suddenly, in Christ, there is something new “under the sun.”
 - And, in Christ, no longer is anything vanity.

Discussion . . .

- Read Ecclesiastes 1:2-11. What do these verses suggest about the world? Is real change possible according to this outlook? Is there any ultimate meaning “under the sun”?
- Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 and 2:12-18. How is wisdom pointless “under the sun”?
- Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. How are the pleasures of this world frustrating, fleeting, and unsatisfying? What pleasures are our generation pursuing thinking they will satisfy them?
- Read Ecclesiastes 2:18-26. How is our labor/work/performance “under the sun” pointless?
- Read Ecclesiastes 9:1-6. How is life itself pointless “under the sun”?
- Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. What are the two guidelines given by the narrator?
- Do we fear God and keep His commandments? What does Romans 3 say? (Look at verses 10, 18, and 23 in particular).
- How does the curse (pain, illness, evil, death) alert us to our most pressing problem in life? How does the curse point us to Jesus? Can you see God’s mercy even in this? Have you seen times when God used pain to draw people to Himself?
- Read Galatians 3:13-14. Who did live a perfect life, fearing God and keeping His commandments? How did He redeem us from the curse?
- In what sense is Jesus Christ something new “under the sun”?

Application . . .

- In Christ, is wisdom pointless? Why or why not? What did we learn from Proverbs? What is true wisdom?
- In Christ, can the good pleasures of this world (food and drink, rest, family, sex, comfort) be enjoyed? Why or why not? If yes, how so? How can they be shared? How can they be abused?
- In Christ, is our labor pointless? Why or why not? How does this apply to our jobs and/or our education? How does this apply to our ministry?

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- In Christ, is life pointless? When we are in Christ, What becomes the meaning of our lives?
- How does Christ's life, death, and resurrection provide hope for change in the world and in our personal lives?

Applying Ecclesiastes...

- Be warned about empty pursuits.
- Be laboring in the Lord.
- Be longing for His return.

Discussion . . .

- Read John 6:27. What/who alone ultimately satisfies?
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:58. How does this verse give us hope and encouragement to continue working for the Lord?
- Read Revelation 21:4-5. Is our hope found in this life? Can anything on earth compare to what is ahead of us as God's people?

Application . . .

- What empty pursuits do we need to repent of? What aspects of our lives do we need to put into a biblical perspective?
- How can we increase our desire for the eternal, lasting things of Christ?
- If our labors for the Lord are not in vain, how does this fact spur us on to continuing good works? How is 1 Corinthians 15:58 a helpful antidote to despair and depression in ministry?
- How does the vision of Revelation, an eternity with Christ, help us battle despair in life in general? Will the effects of the curse one day be no more?
- What is worth our time in life? What is not?
- Spend time in prayer seeking God's best for your life.