

FINDING GOD



IN A FALLEN WORLD

Ecclesiastes Reading Guide

Dear Providence,

We are preaching through the book of Ecclesiastes this summer. The main part of the book presents to us the teaching of a wise sage. He has seen and done it all (really), and now he is here to share what he has learned. But he doesn't spoon feed us. Like a philosophy professor, he asks questions and creates tension. His words are like goads, provoking and prodding us.

He wants us to ask the question: How do we find God in this puzzling world?

The answer is refreshingly simple, but getting there is a difficult journey. Along the way we will have to confront our false hopes and limitations. We will have to let go of our desire for control. Then, from that place of humility and trust, we will learn afresh how to enjoy our lives with God.

The purpose of this resource is to help us read patiently and reflectively, because that is the only way to receive the wisdom offered in this book.

This guide offers a simple plan for reading, studying, and reflecting on the scriptures. Each week there will be three touch points that focus on the passage related to the sermon from the previous Sunday. Here's the flow for each week:

Day 1: Read the chapter(s) and take note of key words. You could probably read more than once.

Day 2: Read the chapter(s) and answer a few questions designed to help you dig deeper into the text.

Day 3: Read the chapter and answer a few questions designed to help you reflect and apply what you are learning.

We pray that this guide would help you meditate on God's word this summer and learn to enjoy him right where you are.

- The Providence Staff

WEEK ONE // ECCLESIASTES 1

DAY ONE READ ECCLESIASTES 1

- Notice two voices: the author of the book and the Preacher. **See Ecclesiastes 12:9-14** for the author's conclusion to the Preacher's words.
- Take note of key words: vanity, toil, gain, under the sun, wisdom (we will continue to note these throughout the book, and add more as we go)
- For a good overview, watch the Bible Project's Book video on Ecclesiastes (<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ecclesiastes/>)

DAY TWO STUDY

1. The Hebrew word *hevel*, often translated to *vanity* (ESV) or *meaningless* (NIV), more accurately means *breath* or *smoke*. How does this change your understanding of what the Preacher is trying to say?
2. What does the Preacher's poetic imagery say about the created world and humanity's relationship to it?
3. "Gain" means profit or advantage. In a broader sense, it is about finding meaning or value. According to the preacher, what are some ways we try to find gain "under the sun"?
4. Why does our pursuit of gain in this world ultimately lead the preacher to say that everything is *hevel*?

WEEK ONE // ECCLESIASTES 1

DAY THREE REFLECT

1. What about the Preacher's words in this chapter makes you uncomfortable? Is there anything you find encouraging?
2. In what ways do you find yourself trying to find gain in this world? What has felt like "striving after wind" to you?
3. **Read Matthew 6:19-21** and **Mark 8:31-36**. What is Jesus' definition of gain? How is this good news for you in each of the areas you mentioned in your answer to Question 2?

WEEK TWO // ECCLESIASTES 2

DAY ONE READ ECCLESIASTES 2

- Key words: heart, pleasure, nothing better

DAY TWO STUDY

1. What does the Preacher decide to do at the beginning of ch. 2?
2. Make a list of the various kinds of pleasures he pursued.
3. Why do you think the preacher “hated life” and “gave his heart up to despair”?
4. What does the Preacher ultimately recommend?

DAY THREE REFLECT

1. Which of the pleasures listed in this chapter are you most likely to pursue (i.e. most tempted to find meaning or “gain” in)?
2. The Preacher’s conclusion and expression that he “hated life” and “despaired” can make us uncomfortable. Why might these expressions be appropriate in this context? What does it reveal about God that these views are a part of Scripture?
3. **Reread 2:24-25.** Throughout Ecclesiastes, the Preacher’s prescription for life is to find joy in God’s gift of ordinary, mundane things like food and drink and work. How do you see this message lived out by Jesus throughout the gospels?
4. In what ways are you tempted to overlook these daily gifts in favor of something “bigger”? What is an example of a good thing that you have tried to use for gain instead of simply enjoying as a gift?

WEEK THREE // ECCLESIASTES 3-4

DAY ONE READ ECCLESIASTES 3-4

- New key word: time (*keep marking key words from previous chapters*)

DAY TWO STUDY

1. According to the Preacher, what is the relationship between humans and time? What does he suggest is our proper response to this reality?
2. If humanity was created uniquely distinct from the rest of creation as God's "image-bearers" (Genesis 1), then what truth is the Preacher trying to communicate in his comparison between humanity and animals at the end of ch. 3?
3. What does the Preacher say about the realities of justice and oppression "under the sun"?
4. What does the Preacher have to say about community?

DAY THREE REFLECT

1. In what ways do you find yourself trying to take control of your “times”? What would it look like for you to accept each season as a gift from God, no matter how uncomfortable? What would it look like for you to hand over the unknowable future to Him?
2. How do you see yourself falling into the same temptation that Adam and Eve did by pushing against the limits God has placed on life? What would it look like for you to accept your limitedness, your “creatureliness”? How might this actually be good news for you?
3. **Read 1 Corinthians 4:2-5.** How do these words encourage you when you think about the injustice and oppression in the world? How might these words challenge and humble you when you think of the sin in your own life?
4. In what ways have you seen the Preacher’s words about community and isolation at play in your own life? Praise God for the good things and ask for His help where you still struggle.

WEEK FOUR // ECCLESIASTES 5-6

DAY ONE READ ECCLESIASTES 5-6

- New key word: lot

DAY TWO STUDY

1. How does the Preacher say that we should approach God? Why?
2. According to the Preacher, when a person is fonder of talking than of listening what does that say about their heart?
3. What does the Preacher have to say about the love of wealth and the reality of riches? What does he suggest is the wisest way to relate to money?
4. Who does the Preacher say is better off than someone who cannot be satisfied with their life? Why does he say this is?

DAY THREE REFLECT

1. We are often guilty of remaking God in our own image, rather than wrestling with the unsettling reality of who He actually is (5:1-7). The Preacher's antidote for this is to spend time listening to God and letting Him set the terms of our experience of Him. What does it look like for you to cultivate a habit of listening to God in this way?
2. Are there places in your life where you find yourself talking more than you listen? How might God be calling you to repent and live more wisely in these areas?
3. How have you seen the love of material comforts play out in your life? Praise God for areas where you have seen his grace and ask him for help to live more wisely in places where you struggle.
4. Are there things, places, or people in your life with whom you find it hard to feel satisfied? **Reread 5:18-20.** How might meditating on the person and work of Jesus help you to align your heart with these verses, either within or in spite of the places where you are dissatisfied?

WEEK FIVE // ECCLESIASTES 7-9

DAY ONE READ ECCLESIASTES 7-9

- New key words: fear God, scheme

DAY TWO STUDY

1. We've seen that the Preacher commends eating and drinking and joy throughout Ecclesiastes. In light of this, what sort of feasting and laughter is he disparaging at the beginning of ch. 7? How does it differ from what he encourages throughout the rest of the book?
2. Describe the wisdom that the Preacher praises. What does it look like? How does it function? What is involved in it and what is not?
3. What does the Preacher say about our ability to understand God's work?
4. Describe the way of life that the Preacher commends. What does it involve? What is not included?

DAY THREE REFLECT

1. Throughout Ecclesiastes, the Preacher has confronted many of the most uncomfortable truths about reality—injustice, oppression, and bad things that happen to good people. Which of these, or another that the Preacher exposes, is hardest for you to accept?
2. How are you tempted to distract yourself with entertainment, work, or nostalgia rather than learning to live life wisely in the face of reality?
3. **Reread Ecclesiastes 8:14-17**, then **read Matthew 13:24-30**. How does Jesus both confirm and expand on the Preacher's words? How does Jesus' parable encourage and challenge you?
4. **Reread Ecclesiastes 9:7-10**. What does living in this way, despite the reality of evil, say that we believe about God? In what ways can you bring your life more into line with this way of being in the world?

WEEK SIX // ECCLESIASTES 10-12

DAY ONE READ ECCLESIASTES 10-12

DAY TWO STUDY

1. List the characteristics of folly and of wisdom the Preacher describes in ch. 10.
2. How does the Preacher encourage us to go about our work and life in ch. 11?
3. The opening verses of ch. 12 are an extended metaphor for old age and death. Why do you think the Preacher concludes his words with this?
4. How does the author conclude Ecclesiastes?

DAY THREE REFLECT

1. What characteristics of folly do you see present in your life? What characteristics of wisdom? How can you continue to pursue the latter and let go of the first in light of what you have learned from Ecclesiastes?
2. Are there areas in your life where you are “withholding your hand” or choosing “not to sow”? Why do you think you do this? How does the message of Ecclesiastes encourage you to act instead?
3. **Read Matthew 6:25-34.** How is Jesus’ message here a summation of what the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes? Where in your life can you grow in this sort of living? Where do you see the gospel bearing this kind of fruit in your life?



EMAIL info@providenceaustin.com • WEBSITE www.providenceaustin.com
FACEBOOK [/providenceatx](https://www.facebook.com/providenceatx) • INSTAGRAM [@providenceatx](https://www.instagram.com/providenceatx)