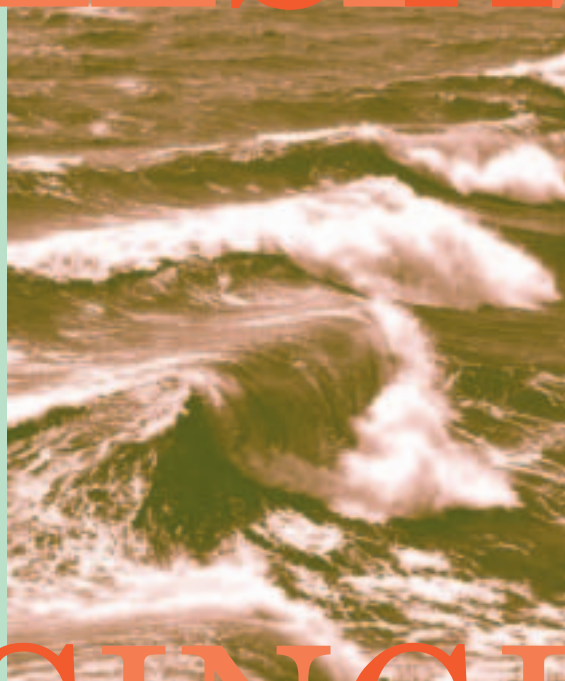


THE
BOOK
OF
ECCLESIASTES



SINGING
THE
BLUES

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by John C. Purdy

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ECCLESIASTES

Singing the Blues

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Ecclesiastes

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introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reason for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God’s Word” (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study.

The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of these seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and

moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically

they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study there are Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each session to suggest where a study might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Ecclesiastes

INTRODUCTION

Singing the Blues

What is a gnarly book like Ecclesiastes doing in our nice Bible? It is best to ask that question right at the beginning, because it is bound to come up again and again as this study proceeds. If you take a quick look at the introductory sections of each of the seven sessions, you will find that Ecclesiastes plays to very mixed reviews among biblical scholars. The men in your group will not be the first to wonder how this book got into the Bible. Each generation raises that question—as it should. For struggling with that problem will prove more profitable than any study method that could be suggested. At the end of the series, some of the men may feel like Jacob—who wrestled all night with God and was sore and lame in the morning—but also blessed!

Why Ask the Question?

But why should the place of Ecclesiastes in the Bible be questioned? Isn't it enough for us to know that our fathers in the faith included it in the canon? What's the big deal? So it's a piece of religious wisdom literature—more like Proverbs and Job than like Genesis. Isn't there room in the Bible for various kinds of literature?

Why raise the question of the rightful place of Ecclesiastes in the Bible?

That question is usually raised on several grounds:

1. Many Christians do not like listening to the voice of Qoheleth, as the author of Ecclesiastes is sometimes called. It is a very distinctive voice, as clear and personal as the voice of Amos, Paul, or John. It is a wry, skeptical, almost cynical voice. Qoheleth is not big on progress, piety, or positive thinking. Norman Vincent Peale he is not!

2. Not only does the voice of Qoheleth sound surprisingly harsh to Christians, but also his point of view: "It is impossible to discern what God is doing," he says, "so let's not try." And further, "Live for each day and do not concern yourself with large matters."

3. Also, Ecclesiastes resists rigorous, demanding theological analysis. There are inconsistencies in point of view. Sometimes the author seems to advance a kind of determinism, or even fatalism. "For a living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4b). And yet the book concludes with the admonition, "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12:13b).

4. There are also some who say that Ecclesiastes does

not begin to measure up to The Book of Ecclesiasticus (also known as The Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach), which is included in the Roman Catholic Scriptures but not in ours. Ecclesiastes is included in the Hebrew Scriptures and hence in the Old Testament recognized by all Christians. Ecclesiasticus was included in the Greek version of the Old Testament and is therefore recognized by Roman Catholics. (The similar names of each can be traced to the Greek word *ekklesia*, from which we get "ecclesiastical"—belonging to the church. So both could be said to be "church books.") It seems very arbitrary to recognize the one as canonical—and not the other.

Why Not Ask the Question?

Some Christians are made very uncomfortable by questions about the inclusion of one of the books of the Bible. But why not ask about the proper place of Ecclesiastes in the Scriptures? When we ask "How did this book get into the Bible?" we are really asking: "How does this particular book fit with the other books—like Genesis and Psalms and Mark and Revelation? And once we ask about its relationship to other books, our way of reading it changes dramatically! We do not read it the same way as we would if we tried to read it simply as a piece of pious religious literature.

So at various steps along the way in this study, the question of the place of Ecclesiastes in the canon will be raised in several different ways.

When that happens, the leader ought to let the men have at it. It is not the business of the leader to defend the Bible; it can defend itself.

Some Preliminary Responses

In the three-year cycle of scriptural texts listed for reading in Sunday worship in the Common Lectionary used by many Presbyterians, there are no readings from Ecclesiastes. The author of this study hopes that when it is concluded, the men will think that this is a shame. Here are some reasons why:

1. There are themes in this book that touch upon the lives of all of us. The seven passages chosen for study in this series deal with the following matters:

Session 1. The question of whether there is really anything that can be called “new,” and whether progress is therefore an illusion (If there is a single article in the American creed that might be called most basic, it is a belief in progress.)

Session 2. The futility of human ambition and the strive for success (What is it we most want for our children? Is it not that they be successful?)

Session 3. The possibility of daily work as the chief agent of joy and satisfaction in life (This is the only book in the Bible that deals seriously with daily work. Religion that does not touch “the toiling core” of men will have little effect on their lives.)

Session 4. The impossibility of finding the will of God in day-to-day decisions and affairs (Tell that to your preacher!)

Session 5. The pursuit of wealth as a snare and delusion (Our *Declaration of Independence* avows that we are granted by God Himself the right to pursue happiness, by which the founding fathers understood the pursuit of material well-being.)

Session 6. The subjection of human life to chance and accident (We like to think that life is fair.)

Session 7. The special challenges of youth and of old age (We know more than we want to know about generation gaps.)

2. The book presents a philosophy that challenges many of our suppositions and values.

We do not expect to hear from a biblical writer the blunt exhortation: Take enjoyment in the daily gifts of eating and drinking and work—because that’s the best life has to offer. That challenges us to state our own viewpoint as clearly and succinctly as we can. If there is a distinctively Christian philosophy, what is it?

3. The voice and viewpoint of the author sound strangely contemporary. There are those who would credit Qoheleth with being a “post-modernist.” His skepticism, his realistic view of the limits of human intelligence—these are not foreign concepts to those of us living in the last decade of the twentieth century. Members of the so-called “Generation X” ought to find this book quite to their taste.

4. For those who love language, there is poetry and imagery in Ecclesiastes. With “Turn! Turn! Turn! (For Everything There Is a Season),” The Byrds, Pete Seeger, and Judy Collins made Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 a part of the American consciousness. But 1:3–11 might do just as well

if set to a haunting tune. (It could serve as a welcome alternative to “Que Sera, Sera!”) And as a lament for the onset of old age, what is the equal to 11:7–12:7?

5. Ecclesiastes belongs in the Bible in the same way that the blues belong to the canon of American music. So Ecclesiastes isn’t a statement of classic Reformed theology. Neither does the blues fit the categories of classic Western music. But who would want to banish the blues and hear only Bach and Beethoven and Bernstein?

Ecclesiastes is a statement of personal experience of the world “with the bark on,” so to speak. It comes to us from a man who prized realism above optimism, who preferred dark glasses to rose-colored ones. If we are correct in placing the book in the third century B.C., it comes from a man whose people knew both the misery of captivity and the disillusionments of freedom. Who of us, in listening to a blues singer, has not nodded his head and said to himself, “Tell us, baby, that’s how it goes down!” The sound of the blues is an authentic, necessary musical voice. It is an essential part of what we call American culture. It serves as an antidote and corrective to our almost incurable cheerfulness. In the same way, Ecclesiastes is an essential voice among the many voices sounding in Scripture—one that we need to hear. Hence the title to this seven-session study, “Singing the Blues.”

Hearing the Blues

The realities of publishing and the costs involved with copyrights and permissions make it impossible to provide you with examples of the music we call “the blues.” But surely you can find your own ways to make this music a part of your study experience. Ask the men to bring tapes or records to play for the group. See if the “songs” in Ecclesiastes don’t have some of the same tough, gritty qualities as a good blues song. That may prove to be the key that opens the door for Qoheleth to get a hearing with the men in your group.

session

Nothing **NEW**

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

To the leader(s): If this is the first time the men have met together, take a few minutes to allow each man to introduce himself. Suggest that each give his name and the title of his favorite song.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

You may choose to begin the study of Ecclesiastes by asking participants to read to themselves the following statements about the book, or by reading them aloud.

“Within the Biblical canon [Ecclesiastes] fulfills a necessary role, warning against human hubris and preserving the divine mystery.”¹

“Ecclesiastes is the strangest book in the Bible . . . in place of religious faith and hope and obedience, this writer expresses a mood of disillusionment and proffers a philosophy of resignation. His ethic has no relationship to divine commandments, for there are none. It arises rather from the necessity of caution and moderation before the inexplicable, on the acceptance of what is fated and cannot be changed, and finally on grasping firmly the only satisfaction open to man—the enjoyment of being alive.”²

“The rebuilding of Jerusalem, and especially the rebuilding of the Temple, during the benign reign of the Persians had been undertaken in the high hopes that once the holy city and the Temple were restored, the promised day of God would come. But the Temple was completed, the sacrifices and rituals were painstakingly observed, the foreigners had been excluded. . . . Yet things remained as before except that the lot of the Jews had become harder year by year until at the time this book was written an unsympathetic dynasty ruled over the city and land of David. . . . Disillusionment, therefore, and a dependence upon political intrigue and secular forces characterized the times.

Out of such a background came the book of Ecclesiastes. Unable to accept the message of the great prophets, the author complains that God’s ways are impossible to understand. He rebels against the easy solutions of life’s problems which are put forward by his fellows, but, like them he fails to find the meaning of his own and his people’s life.”³

Write on the chalkboard or newsprint the following questions:

What shall we call the author of this book?

What is his philosophy of life?

What is meant by “vanity”?

What view of life was he attempting to put down or discredit?

Ask the men to read on their own Ecclesiastes 1:1–11. Then invite them to add questions of their own to those already written on the chalkboard or newsprint.

To the leader(s): While raising and answering questions is the process that will occupy most of your time, every question does not have to be dealt with the moment it is raised. One of the purposes of writing questions on chalkboard or newsprint is to save them for the time when they can best be addressed. But remember—the act of writing down a man’s question is an implicit promise that eventually it will be dealt with!

If this is the first time the men have met together and each has given his name, suggest that you also need to help the author of Ecclesiastes to introduce himself by name. How will you choose to refer to him during your sessions?

Discuss the following possibilities and then, by a show of hands or some other way of taking a straw vote, choose one and try to stick to it.

1. Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes, from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (NRSV) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 841 OT.

2. R.B.Y. Scott, “Proverbs, Ecclesiastes,” in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 191–92.

3. *The Westminster Study Edition of the Holy Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948), pp. 897–98.

- The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible refers to “the Teacher” (1:1). This is how the translators choose to render the Hebrew *Qoheleth*.
- Some commentators like to retain the name *Koheleth* or *Qoheleth*.
- The author implies in 1:1 and 2:1–11 that he is King Solomon, the son of David and one reputed to be a very, very wise man.
- The name Ecclesiastes is derived from the Greek *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly or congregation. So Ecclesiastes would seem to mean “the leader or teacher of an assembled group.”

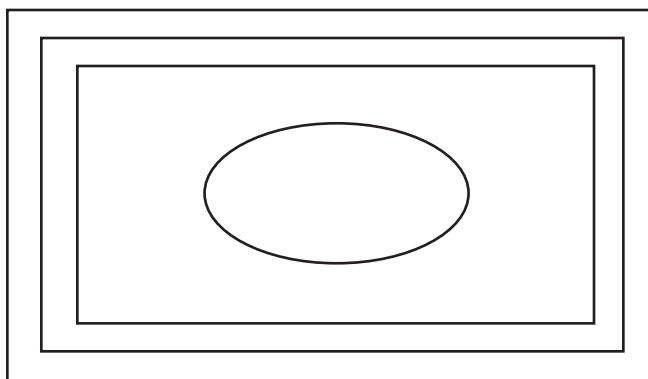


YOUR PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

At some time in this study, each man should be challenged to state in as few words as possible his own philosophy of life. This might be a good time to start work on that project. Write on the chalkboard or newsprint, “There is nothing better for mortals than _____.”

Ask the men to complete that statement in 25 words or less. Tell them that the results will not be shared with the group at this time, but will be worked on more fully later in the study.

In working on this statement, it might be useful to share this exercise developed by Bernard C. Linnartz Jr. of Empowerment Experts.⁴ He asks persons to identify three things that really matter in their personal lives and three things that really matter in their work lives. Then he asks them to record these on the following diagram. The oval in the center is for what matters most, what is dearest to the heart. The other things are placed in relationship to it.



4. Bernard C. Linnartz Jr., *Empowerment Techniques*. Used by permission of the author, pp. 1–3.

There is nothing better for mortals than _____

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

A key word in Ecclesiastes is vanity.

The thesis of the author is that “All is vanity” (1:2). This would seem to mean that all plans and efforts go for nothing. The author supports this claim by appeals to nature: “All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full” (v. 7). A further observation is that “there is nothing new under the sun” (v. 9b).

Ask the men if there are currently any popular philosophies that seem a close match to that of Ecclesiastes.

Can anyone think of popular songs, bumpersticker slogans, folk sayings, movies, or novels that express that same philosophy?

Can anyone suggest an appropriate name for it? Fatalism? Skepticism? Cynicism? Realism? Pessimism?

Does it seem strange to you that an author with this outlook should have his teachings incorporated in the Bible? Why? Why not? What current ways of looking at the world contradict the view of Ecclesiastes?

In the lifetime of the members of the group, what truly new events, inventions, attitudes, discoveries can they identify?

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): Most learners find sessions more satisfactory if there is some kind of closure—some way of ending reflection and conversation. Something more formal than a wave of the hand and a cheery “That’s all, folks!” Some leaders keep an eye on the clock and allow a few minutes at the end of the session for one or more of the following:

- A closing prayer
- A quick summary of what has been discussed
- A review of questions left unanswered until a future session

In addition to one or more of those, call attention to the various pieces in the Afterword section. These pieces are designed primarily for men to think about after the session is over.

Afterword

I dreamed a thousand new paths . . .
I woke and walked my old one.

—Chinese proverb

Stars, I have seen them fall,
But when they drop and die
No star is lost at all
From all the star-sown sky.
The toil of all that be
Helps not the primal fault;
It rains into the sea,
And still the sea is salt.

—A.E. Housman.⁵

AIDS. The very thing I wanted least to happen happened to me. And what happened? Nothing at all. Phil died. Nothing happened. I got pneumonia. Nothing happened. Jasper died. Eugene died. Matt died. Gene died. Goyo died. Billy died. Nothing happened. I got pneumonia again. Nothing happened. I had to stop working. Nothing happened. My best friend died. Nothing happened. I didn’t die. Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

It all adds up to zero. It doesn’t add up at all. AIDS has its own logic, its own arithmetic. Life has its own method. Nothing ever really happens, in sum. It doesn’t matter if it’s what you want or what you least want. Nothing happens = it’s all happening. One big now . . . and now . . . and now,

and still I’m alive. My friends sicken and die, and I’m still hopeful. My T cells dissolve, and I’m still joking. I see the big nothing happening for me around the corner, and I turn left and it’s still there. We Act Up—we have support groups and workshops—and we’re still dying. Scientists and doctors study and theorize; politicians and bureaucrats orate and debate; Mother Meera and Mother Teresa heal and preach; and AIDS is still here. Nothing is happening.⁶

Sometimes “the best” is the enemy of “the good.” If you allow yourself to measure existence against a perfect standard, life will certainly be miserable. Things, by definition, could always be better than they are now. On the other hand, succumbing to the way things are now is to cease dreaming. The balance, perhaps, is to accept the way things are because, like it or not, for better or for worse, that is literally the only way things are.⁷

Dear Ann Landers: In a recent column, you said, “Many prisons are ‘graduate schools’ where neophytes learn the real tricks of the trade. I welcome suggestions on what can be done to cure this insidious and costly problem.”

I have a suggestion that has been proven to work in Fort Wayne, Ind., based on statistics. An organization called “One Church—One Offender,” originated by Rev. Clyde Adams, identifies non-violent, one-time offenders who have served their sentence and are on parole or under house arrest.

To be accepted into the program, the offender may not have been implicated in a crime that involved a handgun or other lethal weapon. Once identified, the individual is assigned to a five-member group affiliated with a local church. This group serves as a family, provides direction and encouragement, and helps the individual complete his education or locate a job.

I have witnessed complete turnarounds and heard individuals make testimonials at our annual dinners attesting to the help they received and how it changed their lives. Many speakers become emotional when they relate how close they came to becoming just another statistic. Think of the difference! Five individuals helping you get on track vs. being one in 100 assigned to a probation officer. It’s not hard to see why it works.

6. Steve Dobuszynski, “Nothing Happened,” from *Catch Our Breath: Writing from the Heart of AIDS* (Santa Fe: Mariposa, 1996), p. 72.

7. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living Spiritual Talk* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 133.

5. A.E. Housman, “More Poems,” from *The Collected Poems of A.E. Housman* (New York: Holt, Henry & Co., 1971).

The proof is in the statistics. The Allen County Jail in Fort Wayne reports a recidivism rate of 50 percent of the inmates, while the rate for One Church–One Offender is 15 percent. It is estimated that this program saves the community \$600,000 annually. People of all races and religions participate as church volunteers and board members. The board of director is composed of local ministers as well as business men and women.

The organization has the support of local judges, enforcement officers and the mayor. It is working. So here, Ann, is one solution to the question you put to your readers.⁸

8. "One–Church, One–Offender seems to work," by Ann Landers, from *The New Mexican* (June 5, 1996), p. B-7.

session *two*

Chasing the

WIND

Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

“The principle thesis of the book is found . . . in the word with which it begins and ends—‘A vapor of vapors! All is vapor!’ It is echoed in the constantly recurring phrases ‘a vapor and a grasping at the wind,’ and ‘this too is a vapor.’ The word *hebel*, ‘vapor’ or ‘breath,’ connotes what is visible or recognizable, but unsubstantial, momentary, and profitless. The rendering must be varied to bring out the particular shades of meaning in different contexts. Thus the traditional translation ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’ can be freely expanded to read: ‘Everything in life is hollow and utterly futile; it is the thinnest of vapors, fleeting as a breath, and amounts to nothing.’ Man’s self-conscious existence, his experience of life’s struggle and all he tries to accomplish, turns out to be the merest vapor. ‘What has a man to show for all his trouble and effort during his brief lifetime under the sun?’ . . . The answer is—nothing!”¹

To the leader(s): Most of the suggested learning activities consist of raising questions and pressing the men for answers. Keep in mind these three kinds or levels of questions:

- 1. There are questions designed to help the men understand what the text says. These are essentially knowledge questions. For example: Who is the famous person that the author of Ecclesiastes pretends to be? (Answer: King Solomon)*
- 2. There are questions designed to uncover the various meanings the text may have. These are analytical questions. For example: Why might the author want to assign his work to King Solomon? (Answer: Possibly his work would get a better hearing if it were attributed to a great man.)*
- 3. There are also questions that go to the value of the ideas and meanings. These are evaluative questions. For example: Does it lessen the importance of Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 to know that the author was not King Solomon? Why? Why not? (Each man might have a quite different answer to this question. There is no “right” or “wrong” answer.)*

1. Scott, pp. 201–2.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the men to read Ecclesiastes 2:1–11. If one or more of the men have a version of the Bible other than the New Revised Standard Version, invite them to read the passage aloud from their version while the others follow the text of the NRSV.

Then pursue the following line of questioning:

What are your best guesses about the person whom the author represents when he writes: “I said to myself . . . I made great works . . . I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem” (2:1, 4, 9)? Is it Koheleth himself, or is he pretending to be someone else? If so, whom? _____

If the author is indeed pretending to be a great figure in the city’s past or present, why does he do this? What does he hope to achieve? _____

What is the conclusion to which the author and/or his alter ego comes? _____



DREAMING OF GREATNESS

Invite members of the group to tell about the person or persons that they considered to be “great” when they themselves were twelve years old. These names might be listed on the blackboard or chalkboard. Then discuss the following questions:

What had these persons achieved that made them special?

Did you dream of doing comparable things?

Would we call anyone “great” who could not point to remarkable achievements?

What do you now understand to be “greatness” in a human being?

Who are some of your present-day heroes?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Pay careful attention to the concluding verse of the passage under consideration: “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11).

Invite members of the group to express those same sentiments in their own words. Some men may want time to write out their statements.

See if the group can come to a common understanding of what Koheleth judges to be “vanity and a chasing after wind.” Is it worldly success that he disdains? Achievements? Honors? Social status? If not these, what?

How might we define his philosophy of life? Is he a pessimist? a cynic? a realist?



POPULAR SONGS

On chalkboard or newsprint make a list of popular songs that encourage listeners to persist against difficulties, such as “Climb Every Mountain” and “Accentuate the Positive.” Ask the men to suggest songs that underscore the dark side of life—failure, pain, futility, betrayal—e.g., “Old Man River” and “I Got a Right to Sing the Blues.”

Then compare and contrasts the two lists. Should Christians be discouraged from singing songs that are not positive, upbeat, encouraging? Why? Why not?

Carry this discussion over to a consideration of the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. Would some of the men like to challenge the right of this book to be in the Scriptures?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Make a list on the chalkboard or newsprint of things “good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (2:3). The author of Ecclesiastes lists a number of these:

- building houses
- planting gardens
- creating parks
- accumulating possessions

After you have listed his examples, ask the men to add some of their own.

Look together at the final list and weigh the author's conclusion that the reward is all and only in the doing—nothing more. Are there some men who agree with this conclusion? Some who disagree?

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): In some groups it will be helpful to share with the men the three-step process of asking questions:

(1) What does the text say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does all that matter? They will have more confidence in the question / answer method of inquiry if they understand something of the process.

Conclude the session with whatever worked best at the end of the first session: a summary statement, a prayer, things to think about between sessions. If you decide to conclude with prayer, first ask the group to reflect on the kinds of prayers that Koheleth might offer. What might he have prayed for?

Afterword

A friend of the author of this study moved from Waukesha, Wisconsin, to Madison, where his two children enrolled in a suburban high school. After several weeks, the guidance counselor summoned him for a conference. "Tell your kids not to try so hard," the counselor said. "I looked at their test scores, and they don't have the aptitudes to compete with the best and the brightest in this high school." The father was furious! How would you feel in his place? _____

Few persons realize how much of their happiness is dependent upon their work, upon the fact that they are kept busy and not left to feed upon themselves. Happiness comes most to persons who seek her least, and think least about it. It is not an object to be sought; it is a state to be induced. It must follow and not lead. It must overtake you, and not you overtake it. How important is health to happiness, and yet the best promoter of health is *something to do*.²

They sailed. They sailed. Then spake the mate:
"This mad sea shows his teeth tonight.
He curls his lip, he lies in wait,
With lifted teeth, as if to bite!
Brave Adm'r'l, say but one good word:
What shall we do when hope is gone?"
The words leapt like a leaping sword:
"Sail on! sail on! sail on! and on!"

Then, pale and worn, he paced his deck,
And peered through darkness. Ah, that night
Of all dark nights! And then a speck—
A light! A light! At last a light!
It grew, a starlit flag unfurled!
It grew to be Time's burst of dawn.
he gained a world; he gave that world
Its grandest lesson: "On! Sail on!"³

Long ago an Eastern monarch, plagued by many worries, harassed on every side, called his wise men together. He asked them to invent a motto, a few magic words that would help him in time of trial or distress. It must be brief enough to be engraved on a ring, he said, so that he could have it always before his eyes. It must be appropriate to every situation, as useful in prosperity as in adversity. It must be a motto wise and true and endlessly enduring, words by which a man could be guided all his life, in every circumstance, no matter what happened.

The wise men thought and thought, and finally came to the monarch with their magic words. They were words for every change or chance of fortune, declared the wise men . . . words to fit every situation, good or bad . . . words to ease the heart and mind in every circumstance. And the words they gave the monarch to engrave on his ring were:

This, too, shall pass away.⁴

2. John Burroughs, from *Light From Many Lamps*, Lillian Eichler Watson, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), p. 5.

3. Joaquin Miller, "Columbus," from *Light From Many Lamps*, pp. 139–40.

4. *Light from Many Lamps*, p. 74.

Boomerang

When I was ten, I was tall and gawky, and smaller kids could push me around in quarrels. I remember being very depressed for a year or more, and then I began to develop a fierce resolve to win.

One day, my grandfather came along with a book about Australia and told me, “This book says that nobody but an Australian bushman knows how to make and throw a boomerang.”

“Here’s my chance,” I thought. “I will be the first man in America to make and throw a boomerang.” Well, any kid could have a notion like that. It might have lasted two days or two weeks. But mine was a power drive that kept on for six months, till I made a boomerang that swung around the church yard in front of the house and almost hit my grandfather in the head when it came back.

Emotionally, I had begun the fashioning of another sort of boomerang, one that almost killed me later on.⁵

5. *As Bill Sees It* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1967), p. 185.

session *three*

Nothing BETTER

Ecclesiastes 2:18–26

“Ecclesiastes is the most original book in the Old Testament. At numerous points it conflicts with traditional orthodoxy. It shows no hope for life after death, sees no apparent solution to the mystery of moral government of the world, and admits of no easy answer to the problems of life’s essential meaning. The usual pursuits of human endeavors are admitted as folly, and the best positive advice the Preacher can give is the natural enjoyment of life.

“But to think of the Preacher as one who is skeptical of the faith is wrong. The Preacher never doubted the existence of God or his control of cosmic and human destiny. He did serve as a goad to the unthinking pious who thought of life in superficial terms. The Preacher was honest in his thinking, and his strict honesty often led him up unconventional paths. The presence of this book in the Bible is a constant warning against glib answers to life’s perplexities. A superficial optimism can never stand in the face of this honest thinker’s realism.”¹

To the leader(s): Each of the seven passages chosen for this study has a theme. The first session was about newness. The second was about success. This third session is about work. In 2:18–26 the author of Ecclesiastes sets forth his philosophy in a positive statement: “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil” (2:24). This statement gets at the heart of men’s lives, for it has mainly to do with work; and it is by work that most men define themselves.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the men to read Ecclesiastes 2:18–26 and to underline the various terms that refer to work. Then make a list of their findings on the chalkboard or newsprint. To this list add other terms that are commonly used to refer to work.

Such a list might include:

work
toil
labor
labors

job
occupation
calling
vocation

Spend a few minutes comparing and contrasting these various ways of describing the work that men do. Invite the men to write brief definitions of these various ways of talking about work.



MY JOB

If the members of the group are not familiar with the daily work that the others do, take some time for each man to give a thumbnail sketch of his job, i.e., what he does, to whom he reports, standards of performance, etc.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Write on the chalkboard or newsprint: *There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.* Compare Ecclesiastes 2:24a; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–10. This seems to be a basic tenet of the author of the book. Discuss this notion, using the following questions:

1. John W. Wevers, *The Way of the Righteous: Psalms and the Books of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 83.

What do eating, drinking, and toiling represent in the life of human beings? Could one describe the nature and activity of humans without referring to these? Why? Why not? _____

What do you think the author means by “drink”? What clues do you find in the list of verses suggested above?

What does the author mean by “toil”? Does he mean the expenditure of effort necessary to provide oneself and one’s family with food, clothing, and shelter? Or something more? _____

Consider what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says in the Afterword section about “optimal experience.” Might this be what the author of Ecclesiastes means by finding enjoyment in one’s toil? What else might he have meant?



Refer the men to the statements they made in the first session that began, “There is nothing better. . .” See if some of the men want to revise their statements after this discussion of eating, drinking, and working.

Concluding the Session

Note that in the Lord’s Prayer, the first of the petitions that deal with the human condition is “Give us this day our daily bread.” It may seem appropriate to close with a prayer or prayers asking that each be given honest and rewarding work to do. The following prayer from The Book of Common Worship would be suitable:

Eternal God,
our beginning and our end,
be our starting point and our haven,
and accompany us in this day’s journey.
Use our hands
to do the work of your creation,
and use our lives
to bring others the new life you give this world
in Jesus Christ, Redeemer of all.
Amen.²

Afterword

This fall, [William] Wilson will publish his magnum opus, “When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor.” Based on a survey of the ghetto poor in Chicago, and also of employers who regularly decide whether or not to hire inner-city African-Americans for jobs, Wilson’s book provides an unflinching view of unemployment and its symptoms. . . . Joblessness in the inner city is the root of the problem, Wilson says. . . . Work is all-important. “Regular employment provides the anchor for the spatial and temporal aspects of daily life,” he writes. “It determines where you are going to be and when you are going to be there. In the absence of regular employment, life, including family life, becomes less coherent.”³

“Factory work’s easier on the back . . . and I don’t mind it, understand, but a man becomes what he does. Got to watch that. That’s why I keep at farmin’, although the crops haven’t ever throve. It’s the doin’ that’s important.”⁴

—A Tennessee farmer

In the course of my studies I tried to understand as exactly as possible how people felt when they most enjoyed themselves, and why. My first studies involved a few hundred “experts”—artists, athletes, musicians, chess masters, and surgeons—in other words, people who seemed to spend their time in precisely those activities they preferred. From their accounts of what it felt like to do what they were doing, I developed a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of flow—the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. . . .

With the help of this theoretical model my research team at the University of Chicago and, afterward, colleagues around the world interviewed thousands of individuals from many different walks of life. These studies suggested that optimal experiences were described in the same way by men and women, by

2. *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 500.

3. David Remnick, “Dr. Wilson’s Neighborhood,” in *The New Yorker* (April 29–May 6, 1996), p. 96.

4. John C. Purdy, *Parables at Work* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 8. Used by permission of the author.

young people and old, regardless of cultural differences. The flow experience was not just a peculiarity of affluent, industrialized elites. It was reported in essentially the same words by old women from Korea, by adults in Thailand and India, by teenagers in Tokyo, by Navajo shepherds, by farmers in the Italian Alps, and by workers on the assembly line in Chicago.⁵

George MacLeod, founder of a religious community at Iona, Scotland, would occasionally volunteer to scrub the toilets. “So I won’t be tempted to preach sermons on the nobility of work,” he explained.⁶

(From the promotional flyer for the Standing Stone Vineyards, Valois, NY.)

Winemakers’ dinners are for you—we share our love of food, wine and winemaking with you. The theme of the dinners is that food and wine is fun!!

Friday, August 16, 1996

Hors d’oeuvre

Cherry tomatoes with a bleu cheese dipping sauce
Pesto filled phyllo triangles
1995 DRY VIDAL

Salad

Orzo salad with shrimp in an herb vinaigrette
1995 CHARDONNAY

Main course

Grilled quail with a tomato salsa
Gratin of potato with boursin and spinach
Braised fennel with cremini mushrooms and julienne of beets
1995 GEWURZTRAMINER

Dessert

Fresh peach clafouti
1995 SEMI DRY RIESLING

“ . . . A lot of people, it’s drudgery to go to work. Not me. I don’t say I love work, I don’t say I hate work. I do it. It’s a normal thing for me than just not doing anything. I figure that I’m kinda needed. If you don’t show up, you might be putting somebody out a day. If I took off and walked down the street for an hour, I like to hear him say, “Where in the heck have you been? Gee whiz, it was busy. I needed you.” . . . I like to feel kinda needed. It kinda feels good. You say, well, you’re of some value.”⁷

No thoughtful Christian scorns humdrum, repetitive, monotonous, or sordid work just because it does not give scope for craftsmanship and because it is very difficult to find zest in such work. He doesn’t refuse, on Christian grounds, to work on a production line, for example, or to clean lavatories, or to wield a broom on the streets. . . . We need to guard against any view of work that does not see as its first justification the necessary and not the artistic quality of a job. Our self-centered and subjective-minded generation tends to think that work is justified only if it assists in the development of personality or some such thing. It is a good thing if work is creative and artistic in that sense, but that is not its first justification. Its first justification is the service of God, which it achieves if it contributes to the common good in practical and material ways.⁸

. . . Studies show that of the main things adult Americans do during an average day, eating is the most intrinsically motivated. . . . Teenagers report the second highest levels of positive affect when eating (after socializing with peers, which is the most positive) . . .⁹

“It’s hard to take pride in a bridge you’re never gonna cross, in a door you’re never gonna open. You’re mass-producing things and you never see the end result of it. . . . I got chewed out by my foreman once. He said, ‘Mike, you’re a good worker but you have a bad attitude.’ My attitude is that I don’t get excited about my job. I do my work but I don’t say whoopee-doo. The day I get excited about my job is the day I go to a head shrinker. How are you gonna get excited about pullin’ steel?”¹⁰

5. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 4.

6. Purdy, p. 16.

7. A pharmacist interviewed by Studs Terkel, in *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 315.

8. Alexander Miller, *Christian Faith and My Job* (New York: Association Press, 1959), pp. 79–80.

9. Csikszentmihalyi, p. 263.

10. Terkel, pp. xxxi–xxxii.

session *four*

Now or NEVER

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

“Most people who are familiar with Ecclesiastes will think of it as a rather pessimistic or even cynical book, expressing the conviction that very many of the normal activities of life are ultimately pointless and unsatisfying, and that death levels all differences. On the other hand, they may also think of it as a work rich in shrewd observations about human foibles, which puts forward a recipe for contentment in the midst of ultimate pessimism by stressing the need to accept that all things happen in an appropriate way and at an appropriate time: the most famous passage being, of course, 3:1-8.”¹

To the leader(s): This fourth session marks the middle of the series. It is common in the middle of series, seminars, and semesters for a certain state of disenchantment to manifest itself. The novelty of the subject has worn off; some of the learners seem to be talking too much; and the leader is starting to repeat himself! It is sometimes helpful to set aside a few minutes at the beginning of the middle session to ask: How are we doing? Are we meeting each man's expectations? Are questions being fairly dealt with? If some of the men have dropped out, why? What can we do as a group to make the study more challenging?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

After the men have read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, invite them to make a list of popular sayings, proverbs, aphorisms, etc., that have to do with time. Prime the pump by putting on the chalkboard or newsprint the following:

- He was in the right place at the right time.
- His time wasn't up yet.
- Time passed him by.
- It's now or never.
- The time was ripe.
- Your time will come.
- It's time for a change.
- You only go around once in life.

Then compare and contrast the items on your list with the Teacher's comments in Ecclesiastes 3:1-15.

He says that there is "a time to be born, and a time to die." Is that the same thing as saying that a soldier escaped death in a battle because "his time wasn't up yet?"

He says that there is "a time for war, and a time for peace." Does that mean that war is an inevitable part of human history?

He says that "there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." Is that the same as saying "children should be seen and not heard?"

He says that "there is a time to mourn, and a time to dance." Does that mean that there are periods of grieving during which dancing is inappropriate?

How are we to understand his conclusion: "[God] has made everything suitable for its time?" How is this idea to be distinguished from what we call "fatalism," which Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines as "a doctrine that events are fixed in advance for all time in such a manner that human beings are powerless to change them"?

1. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 62.

If Koheleth is not a fatalist, what might we call him? A skeptic? (Skepticism is defined by Webster's as "the doctrine that true knowledge or knowledge in a particular area is uncertain.") _____



A TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN

Many of us were required to study William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in high school and to commit to memory these lines:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
 Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,
 Omitted, all the voyage of their life
 Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
 On such a full sea are we now afloat;
 And we must take the current when it serves,
 Or lose our ventures.²

How is this philosophy both like and unlike that expressed in *Ecclesiastes* 3:1–15? _____

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Consider the implications of verse 11: "He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future in their minds, *yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end*" (*italics added*).

How are we Christians to understand that in the light of our belief that in Jesus Christ is revealed "what God has done from the beginning to the end"? _____

Consider this comment from an Old Testament scholar:

There is something a little naive about thinking that we can read part of the Bible as though it existed

2. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act IV, Scene III, from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1945).

all on its own; at least, it is hardly surprising that, when we try to do so, we are then faced with the question how this isolated work can possibly have anything to say to today's Church. It is as though one were to remove a pillar from a great cathedral and insist on studying it in its own right; and then were to ask what use such a detached fragment could possibly have.³



GOD'S GIFT

In 3:12–13 the advice given in 2:24 is repeated: ". . . [T]here is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil." However, there is something new added in this version of that advice: it is God's gift.

How does that addition affect our understanding? _____

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): By now you have probably discovered that in reading *Ecclesiastes*, we listen not so much for an argument as for a voice. Suggest to the men that they tape record the seven passages selected for study in this series and listen for that peculiar voice. It is unique in Scripture.

This might be an appropriate time for the "Serenity Prayer," used in some Twelve Step groups and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr:

"O Lord, grant us the courage to change the things that can be changed, the patience to accept the things that cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Afterword

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!"

Most people would find the picture of our universe as an infinite tower of tortoises rather ridiculous, but

3. Barton, pp. 82–3.

why do we think we know better? What do we know about the universe, and how do we know it? Where did the universe come from, and where is it going? Did the universe have a beginning, and if so, what happened before then? What is the nature of time? Will it ever come to an end?”⁴

An inch of gold cannot purchase an inch of time.

—*Chinese proverb*

“Life’s race-course is fixed; Nature has only a single path and that path is run but once, and to each stage of existence has been allotted its own appropriate quality; so that the weakness of childhood, the impetuosity of youth, the seriousness of middle life, and maturity of old age—each bears some of Nature’s fruit, which must be garnered in its own season. Each has something which ought to be enjoyed in its own time.”⁵

Days

What are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.⁶

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. . . . I once had a dramatic demonstration of the close link between the loss of faith in the future and this dangerous giving up. My senior block warden, a fairly well-known composer and librettist, confided in me one day: “I would like to tell you something, Doctor. I have had a strange dream. A voice told me that I could wish for something, that I should only say what I wanted to know, and all my questions would be answered. What do you think I asked? That I would like to know when the war would be over for me. You know what I mean, Doctor—for me! I wanted to know when we, when our camp, would be liberated and our sufferings come to an end.”

“And when did you have this dream?” I asked.

“In February, 1945,” he answered. It was then the beginning of March.

“What did your dream voice answer?”

Furtively he whispered to me, “March thirtieth.”

When he told me about his dream, he was still full of hope and convinced that the voice of his dream would be right. But as the promised day drew nearer, the war news which reached our camp made it appear very unlikely that we would be free on the promised date. On March twenty-ninth, he suddenly became ill and ran a high temperature. On March thirtieth, the day his prophecy had told him that the war and suffering would be over for him, he became delirious and lost consciousness. On March thirty-first, he was dead. To all outward appearances, he had died of typhus.⁷

A Singing

*The singers and the dancers will say
“All my fresh springs are in you.”*

—*Psalm 87*

O wrap us in death,
in the lightening-flash truth
that we are born
to die—

that this is a generous
destiny, that we should praise you
for our reliable
fate:

not doomed to huddle always inside
darkening rooms of these bodies staunch only
in their faltering
mortal ways,

but rather travelling at last with them,
each cell obedient, right in its work,
deep into another country
where you, our mercy, wait

to capture us, to pardon relentlessly
our stubborn resistance, our long
impassioned loyalty
to despair: its grim

suppression of the naive language
of our flesh; its ancient plan
of war—the iron and constant
will to give

ourselves away, one morning after
one morning, in burning rays
of a sun that is dying
with us,

to the fierce, nearly perfect desire
to keep always proudly alone.
However desperate.

Sad.⁸

4. Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988), p. 1.

5. Marcus Tullius Cicero, from *Light from Many Lamps*, p. 262.

6. Philip Larkin, “Days,” from *An Introduction to Poetry*, 4th edition, X.J. Kennedy, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978), p. 241.

7. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), pp. 117–20.

8. Ivy Dempsey, “A Singing.” Used by permission of the author.

session *five*

The Money

TRAP

Ecclesiastes 5:10–20

“The purest and highest religions—highest because of their depth of thought—are not characterized by a naive optimism in regard to the world of man. . . . The faith of Christianity is founded not only upon a belief in the Incarnation but also on the historical event of the Crucifixion. This event is ultimately related to the evil in man’s nature, and the profound conception of sin which is inherent in biblical thinking leaves no room for optimism so far as man by himself is concerned. The Christian optimism is attached to the doctrine that God has revealed himself in Christ as redeemer. It may be profitable to contrast the spirit of Koheleth’s reflections with the spirit of the evangelists, whose teachings, when the new age dawned, were aglow with faith, hope, and love. But we cannot remove Koheleth from the place in history which he occupied. In that place he is a link in the chain of thought and divine revelation of which the Old and New Testaments are records. We must appreciate Koheleth’s integrity of mind, the clarity of critical judgment with which he reviews all the things ‘under the sun,’ as he sees them, which seem to him to be worthy of consideration by men. The placing of his book in Scripture pays honor to a work which is alone of its kind in Israel’s wisdom literature and which in its ‘tragic sense of life’ throws a searching light upon our human nature and, indirectly, upon the need of that nature for reconciliation with the divine.”¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

After the men have read Ecclesiastes 5:10–20, ask them to take the following test, marking their answers as indicated:

Multiple Choice

Which of the following statements best sums up the teaching of Ecclesiastes 5:10–20? Check one.

- The love of money is the root of all unhappiness.
- The pursuit of wealth is vanity—a chasing after wind.
- The rich will always be miserable.

Agree/Disagree

Which of the following statements about the pursuit of wealth are consistent with the teachings of Ecclesiastes 5:10–20? Circle “Agree” if you feel the statement is consistent or “Disagree” if you feel it is inconsistent.

No matter how much money a man acquires, he will never be satisfied, but will always want more.

Agree/Disagree

The more money you make, the more others will become dependent on you for handouts.

Agree/Disagree

People with a lot of money don’t sleep well.

Agree/Disagree

It is like a sickness to have had money and then to have lost it.

Agree/Disagree

1. O. S. Rankin, “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” from *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 4–5.

You can't take it with you.

Agree / Disagree

After the men have compared their answers, compare and contrast the teaching of Ecclesiastes 5:10–20 with the teachings of Jesus in Luke 12:13–21—the parable of the Rich Fool.

Do the men find echoes of Ecclesiastes in the words of Jesus? _____



EAT, DRINK, ENJOY

Point out that for a third time we hear from the author that it is fitting to “eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun . . .” (5:18). Each time, the saying is given a different spin. The first time the author asserted “there is nothing better” than this (2:24). In the previous session this was set forth as “God’s gift” (3:13). Now the author asserts, “for this is our lot” (5:18). Does this all add up to the same thing? Or do members hear something different being sounded in each of the three sayings?

Ask: In all of these teachings, do you hear a single voice speaking? Or is there some suspicion on the part of members of the group that Ecclesiastes is a collection of sayings from different persons? If the men think they hear a single voice, how would they characterize that voice?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Call the attention of the group to the final two verses of the passage under discussion. What do the men make of the idea that to some, “God gives wealth and possessions” as well as the capacity to enjoy them? Then read these questions and answers from the Shorter Catechism in *The Book of Confessions*:

Q: Which is the Eighth Commandment?
A: The Eighth Commandment is, “Thou shalt not steal.”

Q: What is required in the Eighth Commandment?
A: The Eighth Commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

Q: What is forbidden in the Eighth Commandment?
A: The Eighth Commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth, or may, unjustly hinder our own, or our neighbor’s, wealth or outward estate.²

Discuss what these questions and answers suggest about the proper relationship of men to wealth, God, and neighbor. Do the men find in these questions and answers any trace of the idea that somehow the pursuit of wealth is spiritually hazardous? _____

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): By this time in the series of lessons, you have probably settled on a regular scheme for concluding the session. There is no reason to vary that scheme. However, with just two sessions left in the series, you may want to take a few minutes before your closing exercise to look back to the expectations with which the series began: Ask the men if the study has fulfilled, exceeded, or fallen short of their expectations. Encourage them to give reasons for their answers. Then, in preparing for the final sessions, take into account what the men have said.

Afterword

Every man is rich or poor according to the degree in which he can afford to enjoy the necessaries, conveniences, and amusements of human life. But after the division of labour has once thoroughly taken place, it is but a very small part of these with which a man’s own labour can supply him. The far greater part of them he must derive from the labour of other people, and he must be rich or poor according to the quantity of that labour which he can command, or which he can afford to purchase. The value of any commodity, therefore, to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labour which it enables him to purchase or command. Labour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities.³

At birth we come
At death we go . . .
bearing nothing.

—Chinese proverb

2. *The Book of Confessions*, © 1991 Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 7.073–7.075.

3. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 1961), p. 36.

The Church proclaims, following the Biblical-prophetic line carried to its final expression in Jesus Christ, that the entrance to the Kingdom is closed to the “rich,” to the extent that their riches are the products of violence and injustice; and, in a specific way, it points out to all and especially to the Christian believers, the fact that the Capitalistic System of social organization, in order to endure, has to maintain a manipulated and enslaving education that produces egoists who distort the meaning of human life and see as the supreme ideals of human life, unending consumption, insatiable satisfaction of getting rich, materialistic fetichism and the drive for luxury and ostentation.⁴

With money a dragon
Without money a worm.

—Chinese proverb

How to Get Riches

The Art of getting Riches consists very much in Thrift. All Men are not equally qualified for getting Money, but it is in the Power of every one alike to practice this Virtue.

He that would be beforehand in the World, must be beforehand with his Business: It is not only ill Management, but discovers a slothful Disposition, to do that in the Afternoon, which should have been done in the morning.

Useful Attainments in your Minority will procure Riches in Maturity, of which Writing and Accounts are not the meanest.

Learning, whether Speculative or Practical, is, in Popular or Mixt Governments, the Natural Source of Wealth and Honour.⁵

Cautionary Tales

In addition to Jesus’ parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13–21, Western literature provides any number of “cautionary tales” about the dangers of pursuing wealth. Here are some favorites:

Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, who is made to see that the pursuit of money for its own sake is the worst of follies.

During the 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, about a man who made a great fortune in order to win back a woman who, in the end, tossed him over.

Jane Smiley won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *A Thousand Acres*, which tells how a rich Iowa family lost its farm because of greed.

Empty Warriors

the men.
occupying bedrooms and unemployment lines, on corners, in bars,
stranded between middle management and bankruptcy, caught in warped mindsets of “success in america,” the kind taught to first generation immigrants at local trade schools and jr. colleges, taught to people lost and unaware of history or future, ignorant of the middle passages.

the men,
occupying space with men and motives, in prisons, in safe houses, shooting up with juice and junk, many with hairless noses and needle-marked toes, searching for missing history, searching for the when and how of “making it in america.”

the men
escaped and taken, twice and three times absorbed in life and sharing,
absorbed in locating the mission and magic, the manner and muscle, the answer and aims, walking the borders between smiles and outrage.⁶

4. “Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian–Reformed Church in Cuba,” from *Reformed Witness Today: A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches*, Lukas Vischer, ed., 1977, p. 181.

5. Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, 1749, from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin & Selections from His Writings* (New York: Random House, 1944), p. 208.

6. Haki R. Madhubuti, “Empty Warriors,” from *Killing Memory, Seeking Ancestors* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987).

session *six*

Time and CHANCE Ecclesiastes 8:10—9:11

“At several points Qoheleth laments the breakdown of the retribution that was a ‘given’ in Israelite belief (e.g., 4:1–3; 7:15; 8:5–11). A just God prospers the good and punishes the evil; otherwise, where is the divine justice? There are many texts in Deuteronomy that enunciate this principle, and it is also the basis for the prophetic preaching against the rich who oppress the poor. In 7:15 Qoheleth registers the fact that the just perish despite their goodness and the wicked survive despite their wickedness. In 8:11 he recognizes the deleterious effect of this failure: people are emboldened to do evil because there is no penalty to be paid (‘The sinner does evil a hundred times and survives,’ 8:12a). This lack of proper retribution he calls a vanity (8:14, *hebel*). As he says in 9:11–12, a time of calamity comes to all, because of ‘falling time,’ or the evil time that comes suddenly. . . .

“That God is a judge over humans is one of those undeniable factors in Israelite belief (and in belief throughout the ancient Near East, in fact). Qoheleth therefore could affirm this, but he could not draw any consolation from it; the *manner* of divine judgment is wrapped in mystery. The ways of God are simply inscrutable. It is impossible for Qoheleth to make sense out of what God is doing (3:11; 8:17; 11:5).”¹

To the leader(s): Reading the Bible has been compared to overhearing a person talking on the telephone: How much more we could understand if only we knew who was on the other end of the line! A good deal of biblical interpretation consists in trying to figure out—from clues we are given in a particular portion of Scripture—just what the original audience was like. That is the task that will occupy you in this session.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Write on newsprint or the chalkboard these statements:

The fastest runner wins the race.

The strongest always win the fight.

The wise never go hungry.

Smart people always get rich.

The skillful—like cream—rise to the top.

Ask: Is this how it is in life? And then, without discussion, read Ecclesiastes 8:10—9:11 and discuss the passage, following this line of questioning:

What can we deduce from this passage about the dominant philosophy or ideology of the day? What conventional wisdom was the author of Ecclesiastes trying to combat—or at least to modify? _____

What view of life is reflected in the aphorisms written on the chalkboard? Can you sum it up in a sentence or two? _____

How does this view of life differ from that of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes? _____

1. Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 57.

Do you agree with the author of Ecclesiastes that life does not seem to be fair? Why? Why not? _____

Is it possible to find satisfactory explanations as to why accidents happen to some and not to others? _____



LIVING WITH CALAMITY

Invite members of the group to give personal accounts of having to cope with disaster: business calamity, flood, accident, untimely death in the family, and the like. What did it feel like? What difficulties did these experiences create for faith in the reliability of God? What meanings, if any, did men gain from these experiences? Do they agree or disagree with the author of Ecclesiastes that: “no one can find out what is happening under the sun” (8:17a), i.e., no one can discern the meaning of particular events?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Bring in a copy of your local newspaper and scan it for one or more accounts of disasters such as the following:

Some survived by crawling atop the capsized ferry. Others clutched at floating debris. Godfrey Simango, 23, clung to a life preserver and made himself the crucial link in a human chain. “Somebody was holding my foot, and then somebody was holding that guy’s shoulder. . . . I realized that if I let go, everybody would go down with me.”

Simango did not let go, and neither did those depending on him. But around him he heard people yelling, “Oh God, we’re dying! Oh God, save us! Jesus, we are dying.” Soon, dozens of floating corpses surrounded him.

Tanzanian officials said Wednesday that 549 of the 663 passengers known to be aboard the ferry MV Bukoba perished in Lake Victoria’s chilly waters when the overloaded vessel sank Tuesday morning eight miles north of its destination here in Mwanza . . .²

Discuss such questions as the following:

Why did this calamity happen to these people at this time?

What can one say other than what the author of Ecclesiastes said: “Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them” (9:12)? _____



ENJOY LIFE!

In 9:7–10, the author follows his observation that “the same fate comes to everyone” (9:3) with yet another exhortation to his contemporaries to take what enjoyment they can from the “givens” of life: eating, drinking, work, marriage, clothing. Ask the men if they find anything incongruous about this advice in this setting. Is this just one more version of the adage, “Eat, drink, and be merry—for tomorrow you die”?

Concluding the Session

Ask the men how they would like to respond to what scholar O. S. Rankin calls “the tragic sense life” presented in Ecclesiastes. Are they getting fed up with the author’s pessimism? Would they like to tell him to his face, “Get a life!”? Do they share Rankin’s view that the book belongs in Scripture? Would they vote—if they could—to have it removed from the canon? Why? Why not?

Afterword

(An excerpt from a review of three recent books written by fathers about the death of their daughters)

Two universally human yet intensely private experiences divide those who have been through them from those who haven’t: the delights of sex and the sorrow of loss. Americans discovered sex in 1964, and now they have discovered death. And, as is their custom, they want to talk about it, complain about it and control it. . . . Taken together, these books reveal two defining characteristics of today’s middle-class, middle-aged generation. The first is how unfamiliar these folks are with death—particularly unjust, untimely, random death, once and still all too familiar to families devastated by disease, war or poverty. . . . The second defining characteristic is the decline of

² “Survivors of ferry capsizing are few” from *The New Mexican* (May 23, 1996), p. A7.

community and of a shared religious or philosophic framework that makes the death of loved ones bearable. For these authors, God is dead or is “an accomplice to murder”. . .³

Thousand years a ghost . . .
Ah, better one day a man.

—*Chinese proverb*

In dying my mother taught me a lesson. She refused every word of assurance, every consolation of religion. Then I realized that it wasn't only in the novels of Bernanos that the servants of God die abandoned and apparently in revolt . . . As she lay dying my mother's faith, as regards its human supports, formulations, and religious objects, suddenly crumbled. This good woman lived through an agony of abandonment. I experienced it with her, insofar as such words can mean anything. Pride was already mingled with her pain. Pride in what? That she had crossed the line before dying, as far as I could judge, and had understood something, although I couldn't say what.⁴

The Inner Part

When they had won the war
And for the first time in history
Americans were the most important people—

When the leading citizens no longer lived in their
shirt sleeves,
and their wives did not scratch in public;
Just when they'd stopped saying “Gosh”—

When their daughters seemed as sensitive
As the tip of a fly rod,
And their sons were as smooth as a V-8 engine—

Priests, examining the entrails of birds,
Found the heart misplaced, and seeds
As black as death, emitting a strange odor.⁵

What is this grief that tears me now?

No fear of death or any hereafter. During our last summer at Madison, I would write in my diary when I couldn't sleep. “Look Death in the face. To look Death in the face, and not be afraid. To be friendly to Death as to Life. Death as a part of Life, like Birth. Not the final part. I have no sense of finality about Death. Only the final scene in a single act of a play that goes on forever. Look Death in the face; it's a friendly face, a kindly face, sad, reluctant, knowing it is not welcome but having to play its part when its cue is called, perhaps trying to say, ‘Come, it won't be too bad, don't be afraid, I understand how you feel, but come—there may be other miracles!’ No fear of Death, no fight against Death, no enmity toward Death, friendship with Death as with Life. That is—Death for myself, but not for Johnny, God, not yet. He's too young to miss all the other parts of Life, all the other lovely living parts of Life. All the wonderful, miraculous things to do, to feel, to see, to hear, to touch, to smell, to taste, to experience, to enjoy.”⁶

—*Written by Frances Gunther on the death of her
seventeen-year-old son*

“For me the most striking thing about the young people of Generation X is that many indeed have lost their faith in traditional or institutional religion. But they also have lost their faith in the opponents and critics of religion. They have lost faith both in Holy Church and in Science and Progress.”

—*Professor Harvey Cox, from a televised address
on “Jesus and Generation X”*

3. Carol Tavis, “After Great Pain: Three Fathers Write About Their Daughters' Deaths,” in *The New York Times Book Review* (May 12, 1996), p. 18.

4. Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 12, 36.

5. Louis Simpson, “The Inner Part,” from *At the End of the Open Road* (Wesleyan University Press, 1963).

6. John Gunther, *Death Be Not Proud* (New York: HarperCollins, 1949), pp. 255–56.

session *seven*

Youth and AGE Ecclesiastes 11:7—12:8

“The very strangeness of [Ecclesiastes] in its literary and religious context in the Bible is part of its fascination. The author’s mood of doubt and pessimism is one into which many reflective persons fall from time to time, and in which not a few of the more skeptical remain. At the same time, there is a deep wisdom even in Qoheleth’s melancholy reflections, and in the courage with which he affirms life’s values in the teeth of its brevity and frustrations, of the unalterable ‘givenness’ of existence, and the surrounding dark. On his premise that God is unknowable by man, his conclusions are not easily proved wrong. Hence it is all the more strange that his book came to be numbered among the sacred writings whose basic premise is the very opposite of Qoheleth’s—that God, the sovereign Creator, not only is knowable but has spoken to man through Moses and the Prophets, and has revealed his will and power in historic events in the life of his covenant people Israel; that he is the source of man’s highest aspirations, the support of man’s moral struggle, and the only final security in which man’s mind can rest.”¹

To the leader(s): In this final session on *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, there are several choices open to you and your group:

1. *Ecclesiastes 11:7—12:8 is yet another statement of the author’s view of life: Carpe diem. Seize the day. Enjoy the full measure of youthful vitality while you have it, because old age brings increasing disability and finally darkness. Ours is a “youth-oriented” culture; the men might find it useful, even important, to talk about youth and age and the relative advantages of each.*

2. *If you have not in previous sessions put much emphasis on the place of Ecclesiastes in the Bible, you might want to spend most of the time discussing how and why it was included. The introductory statements for each session provide differing points of view about the book.*

3. *Most probably the writing and views of Ecclesiastes may be placed in the third or second century B.C. There had been no restoration of an independent kingdom following the return from exile; the lands of Israel were under foreign domination—the Persians, then the Greeks.*

The purposes of the God of Israel seemed to many to be hidden. Your group may want to consider the apparent skepticism of Ecclesiastes as a reasonable response to such a situation.

Consider setting before the group these three options for emphasis, and then be guided by the men’s preferences.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

A passage with such vivid imagery as Ecclesiastes 11:7—12:8 deserves to be read aloud; ask one of the men to do so. Then ask if within the past months or year any of them have been to a high school or college graduation and listened to a commencement address.

This passage from Ecclesiastes is clearly addressed to the young. How does it compare with the typical commencement address? What do commencement speakers typically lay on the young? _____

Ask if any have recently been to the funeral of an elderly person. How suitable would this passage be as a funeral address? Clearly it deals with the infirmities of old age and the inevitable slide into the grave. Would it be proper for the preacher to urge the living to make the most of their few days on earth? _____

1. Scott, p. 193.

Ask the men to give their considered opinions about the age of the writer of Ecclesiastes. Does this sound like a young man? An old man? A man somewhere between youth and infirmity? _____

Has the author given a fair picture of the ages and stages of life? Is youth—as he describes it—a Golden Age of joy, vitality, cheerfulness, and desire? Is old age necessarily a time of increasing feebleness, darkness, fear, and infirmity? _____

Ours is a culture of strong generational differences, even conflicts. (See the Afterword section on Social Security.) Encourage an honest exchange of feelings about youth, aging, attitudes of the young towards the elderly, and the elderly towards the young. Ask: How many of you remember your late teens and early 20s as a Golden Age? How many feel you wasted those years because of ignorance, shallowness of purpose, etc.? _____



ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE

Consider what happens when it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to discern the hand of God in the events of the day. In the several centuries before Christ, these various schools of thought developed:

—Stoicism, Epicureanism. The teachings of men like the author of Ecclesiastes: *Make the most of ordinary living; that's all we really can know about.*

—Apocalypticism. Notions such as those found in the Book of Daniel: *Things have gotten so rotten that there is no fixing them. There will be a sudden and surprising disclosure of the hand of God at the end of this age.*

—Sectarianism. Society is not redeemable. *But small sects, groups, and individuals can be obedient to the will of God revealed in commands, rituals, and sacred texts.*

Challenge the men to identify parallels to these various schools of thought in our time. Can they find persons or groups that hold views similar to those of Ecclesiastes? For example: How many are familiar with the “God is dead” advocates of the 1960s? What about the presence of sects, especially those sects with radical notions about the end of the world? What of the cult of narcissism of the 70s and 80s?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Suggest that each man write a brief response to the author of Ecclesiastes in the form of a letter. This could be a “Thank You” note; a protesting “Letter to the Editor”; the personal response of one believer to another; or a young man speaking frankly to his elder.

Dear Qoheleth: _____

Sincerely,

Allow time for sharing the letters with the total group.



WHAT ABOUT THE LECTIONARY?

Bring to the attention of the men the fact that there are no selections from Ecclesiastes in the readings from Scripture recommended for Sunday worship in the Lectionary in our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship. Ask the men what they think of that omission.

Why should we not hear the testimony of all Scripture?

Concluding the Session

To the leader(s): Allow a brief time at the end of the session for an evaluation of the study. Assume a “learning contract”—an agreement to work together toward certain ends, with shared responsibilities and shared expectations. You may want to prepare a written instrument in which you ask the men to tell what they liked most and liked least about the study. Or you may want to ask each man, individually, to say what parts of the study appealed to him the most—and what parts the least.

The following prayer from the Book of Common Worship might be appropriate as the closing exercise:

O Lord, support us all the day long
until the shadows lengthen
and the evening comes
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over,
and our work is done.
Then, in your mercy,
grant us a safe lodging,
and a holy rest,
and peace at the last;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.²

Afterword

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.³

—Dylan Thomas

As I like a young man in whom there is something of the old, so I like an old man in whom there is something of the young; and he who follows this maxim will possibly be an old man in body, but he will never be an old man in mind.⁴

In the family album or in one of those little frames that stand upright on an end table in your mother's apartment is a photograph of you when you were a child. You have come a long way since those days in many beautiful ways and in a few shameful ones. If you were given a time machine, what would you tell the child in the photo who once was you? Just looking at who you were seems to awaken the possibility that you could go back to that time and, if not relive your life, at least begin again. Just this is the beginning of the return.⁵

Americans have recently uncovered the explosive and unsustainable nature of government entitlement programs, including the unseemly legacy which older Americans are leaving for those who follow them. Our national debt is approaching \$5 trillion, with a yearly interest payment of \$300 billion. Part of federal government spending today is financed with Social Security taxes paid by current workers, funds that should be set aside for the retirement of the baby-boom generation.

The founders of our current social policy did not intend for older Americans to spend their children's inheritance. In fact, the final report of the 1938 Advisory Council on Social Security warned: “The protection of the aged must not be at the expense of adequate protection of dependent children, the sick, the disabled or the unemployed; or at the cost of impairing such essential services as education and public health or of lowering the standard of living of the working population”. . . Today we have no excuse for not confronting the facts. In its present form, Social Security is an unsustainable form of welfare for a class of people who generally are no longer poor.⁶

2. From *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 942. Used by permission.

3. Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” from *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1946).

4. Marcus Tullius Cicero, from *Light From Many Lamps*, pp. 262–63.

5. Kushner, p. 33.

6. “Justice Among the Generations,” by Robin Klay and Todd Steen, in *Christian Century* (October 25, 1995), p. 986.

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