



by Sue Edwards

Ecclesiastes

Discovering Meaning in a Meaningless World



LEADER'S GUIDE



Ecclesiastes: Discovering Meaning in a Meaningless World
Leader's Guide © 2018 Sue Edwards

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Before You Begin . . .

I'm delighted that you've chosen *Ecclesiastes: Discovering Meaning in a Meaningless World* to enrich your understanding of God's Word and help others in the process. Familiarize yourself with this overview as you prepare to lead the study and invite women to join you.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Many Christian women become sidetracked by the empty promises of this fallen world. How they look, what they own, who they know, whether people love and value them—many concerns woo women away from investing in their relationship with God and desiring to know and live his Word. Ecclesiastes, interpreted correctly, shatters the lure of these false idols and helps women redirect their lives toward what's truly meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile. This study walks you through Solomon's "journal" verse by verse so that you don't miss any of its treasures. Encourage women in your group to set aside quality time during the week to work through each lesson. There is rich truth to be mined in Ecclesiastes, and unlimited spiritual benefit in the study of God's Word.

GENRE OF THE BOOK

Ecclesiastes joins Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Job as divine "wisdom literature." These books fall into this category because they are written by an older, wiser person, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to a younger, more inexperienced person for the purpose of guidance and instruction. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as a warning to learn from his experiences. It's helpful to understand the book as Solomon's journal during his later years as king in Israel. To learn how to interpret Ecclesiastes as Solomon's journal, digest "Why Study Ecclesiastes" (page 9) as well as the introduction and "Historical Background" section of lesson 1 (pages 11–12). This information will help you explain the study to interested women and lead your group correctly. Emphasize the importance of these insights with participants before you move into lesson 1.



PROPER INTERPRETATION

Solomon peppers proverbs throughout the pages of his journal. We must understand how to interpret them. A proverb is a short, pithy couplet that teaches truth in a memorable way. Here are two examples:

What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted. (Ecclesiastes 1:15)

The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether they eat little or much,
but as for the rich, their abundance
permits them no sleep. (Ecclesiastes 5:12)

Proverbs are *principles* that are true in general terms. They show us the way the world works and how to live wisely in it. If we live by wisdom principles, we will not bring calamity on our heads by our own foolish actions and attitudes. Foolishness is the source of many people’s problems. When we are our own worst enemies, we bring problems upon ourselves either by being unaware of how the world works or by ignoring what we know.

Proverbs are not *promises*. If we interpret proverbs as promises made to individuals, we’re guilty of saying that God promises us something that he has not promised at all, and we confuse people regarding the Bible. It is crucial that we interpret the Bible in the way the author intended.

We must examine each word of a proverb carefully and then discern the overall meaning. When Benjamin Franklin said, “A stitch in time saves nine,” he was not promising that if you stitch up a hem before it unravels, it will never unravel again. He was explaining that if we attend to a situation early, we’ll most likely encounter fewer problems later. Franklin was using figurative language to paint a picture of the way the world works. Solomon was his predecessor.

A mother who has a grown child who is defying God may read the proverb, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6 KJV), and be tempted to claim that as a promise from God that her child will come to or return to God. Through prayer and Scripture, God may certainly give a mother assurance about her particular situation, but God doesn’t make that promise on the basis of this particular proverb. To insist that he has is to use bad interpretive principles. Instead, this proverb tells us that *in general* parents who do their best to understand their children and raise them in a godly home are *more likely* to see children remain in the faith than parents who never instructed their children in the first place. But turning to God is ultimately the child’s choice. God does not

override free will for anyone. That’s a principle he set in place from the foundation of the world.

Our task is to decipher the proverbs in order to learn timeless lessons about life, and then to live in light of their truth. These proverbs’ purpose is to propel us into a relationship with God so we might live out the truths he shows us in Ecclesiastes. They’re valuable principles, but they are not promises. When we interpret proverbs as promises, we mishandle God’s Word and mislead ourselves and others—and that gets us into trouble!

Once you’ve equipped yourself to thoroughly understand Ecclesiastes as Solomon’s journal that records his ups and downs and understand how to interpret the proverbs, then you are ready to lead others into the marvelous truths in Ecclesiastes!

A NOTE ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

The 2011 New International Version (NIV) is the version used throughout this study. Because it uses gender neutral language where that fits with the intent of the original text, the author recommends this version for clarity. If you use another version, you’ll need to keep in mind that the 1984 NIV and many other standard Bible translations use “man” and “sons” to represent people in general.

PREPARATION FOR THE STUDY

Leading the small group. Whether your group is small enough to meet all together or whether you are working with a Bible study that’s large enough for the women to break up into smaller groups, be sure to take time to train yourself and your leaders in the basics of leading small groups well. For help, go to www.discovertogether.com and under Supplements click on Training Guide. You’ll find a simple downloadable manual that you can use to equip your discussion leaders. For more information, see Sue’s book *New Doors in Ministry to Women*, chapters 6, 7, and 8. An updated edition is scheduled for release in 2019.

Leading a small group is a skill. Even if you are leading a small group in your home or church, learning how to lead the group according to sound principles is still needed for the group to thrive. It takes support, practice, and feedback.

Resources for leading small groups.

Boren, M. Scott. *Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Donahue, Bill. *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

- Edwards, Sue and Kelley Mathews. *New Doors in Ministry to Women*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002, 2019.
- Gorman, Julie. *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.
- Zempel, Heather. *Community Is Messy: The Perils and Promise of Small Group Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Will there be teaching? Resources to sharpen your teaching skills are provided on the following pages. If you believe that God may want you to teach the Bible, step out and try. Women love to hear their own leaders teach them rather than virtual teachers on screens. At first, your skills may not be as honed as those of more experienced teachers, but in time and with practice, you should improve. And you have advantages over a virtual teacher. Women need models they can watch, hug, and talk to. And when one of their own steps out and is used by God, everyone is inspired to step forward and use their gifts too. So if something in you says, “Teach!”—then go for it!

Enlisting women to teach with you. Other women have something to say that would benefit the group. Listen attentively when they talk about how God works in their lives. Identify women who inspire others, hold a high view of the Bible, enjoy studying, walk close to Jesus, live wisely, are organized in their thinking, and are articulate, passionate, growing, and mature. Of course, they may not fulfill all these qualities, but if you see that they are on the road to spiritual maturity and evidence the gift of teaching, however developed, your role is to help equip them to develop their gifts more fully.

If you have decided to add a teaching element to your Bible study format, consider asking one of these women to share a short testimony or deliver a message to the entire group one week. She will need a cooperative attitude. When you give a woman the platform, you give her influence. I’ve worked with a few women who took advantage of this opportunity. They spoke twice as long as the allotted time, or they refused to prepare, wandering aimlessly, or they became so emotional that they broke down, upsetting women in the study.

To alleviate these problems, set a time limit and ask women to write out what they plan to say. Stress that cutting into group discussion time will irritate participants. Insist that they review their message with you. Use wisdom as you select women presenters, but consider how much the group will benefit by hearing a variety of voices.

Resources for teaching with accuracy and skill.

- LeFever, Marlene D. *Creative Teaching Methods*. Colorado Springs: Cook Ministry Resources, 1985.

- Mathews, Alice P. *Preaching That Speaks to Women*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.
- Robinson, Haddon. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.
- Stanley, Andy, and Lane Jones. *Communicating For a Change*, Colorado Spring: Multnomah Books, 2006.
- Stott, John. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Swindoll, Charles R. *Touching Others with Your Words: The Art and Practice of Successful Speaking*. New York: Faith Words, 2013.
- Willhite, Keith, and Scott Gibson, eds. *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.
- Resources for help in studying the book of Ecclesiastes.*
- Constable, Tom. *Notes on Ecclesiastes*. Sonic Light. 2017 edition. <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/ecclesiastes.pdf>.
- Garrett, Duane A. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture 14. Nashville: Broadman Press, 2002.
- Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1979.
- Swindoll, Charles R. *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985.

PLANNING YOUR FIRST SESSION

You might want to ask women to come prepared to discuss the first lesson, or you might plan a launch of the study and then assign the first lesson for the following meeting. Whichever you choose, you'll need to plan your time accordingly.

Pray. Open with prayer. Should you pray or invite one of the participants to do so? Be sensitive to the women. If they are comfortable praying out loud, give them the opportunity. If not, you, as the leader, pray.

Break the ice. If time allows, spend your first meeting connecting with questions or icebreakers that allow you to get to know one another. For example, ask each woman to introduce herself by telling something about her family, hobbies, what she likes to do on a Saturday night, pet peeves, or what she hopes to gain from the study. For an extended community builder, ask participants to name the wisest person they have ever known and explain why. Or give participants time to discuss why they do or don't write in a journal as a way to process their faith. Make sure this discussion honors different perspectives and practices.

Get focused. Look over the study guide with your group and express your excitement about the topic. Discuss ground rules. You may want to create Discussion Group Guidelines for your group so everyone knows the parameters and what to expect. Include issues you prefer not to discuss, such as politics or different denominations. Help women understand the way you want the group to function. If women join later, remember to orient them. Stress the importance of confidentiality.

Some women come to Bible study for the sole purpose of studying Scripture. Others come for community, to find friends. Regardless of your own bent, honor both desires. We all need a relationship with God through serious Bible study *and* relationships in authentic community. Be sure the schedule reflects time for both.

Watch the video. The first week you meet, you may want to view our introductory video available at www.discovertogetherseries.com/ecclesiastes (or via the QR code on page 10), or you may want to plan an introductory message of your own. (See the “Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders” for teaching tips.)

Open discussion. Each lesson in the book opens with a short introduction focused on the day’s topic. Quickly summarize the introductory material and then guide the group through the study by reading the questions and drawing the women into discussion and discovery. Plan ahead. If you find the lessons contain too many questions for the group to discuss in depth in the time you have allotted, don’t discuss every question. You can quickly summarize some of the questions and skip others when it will not interfere with the flow of the lesson.

Choose blocks of questions to cover and eliminate others. Or skim over observation questions and spend more time on opinion and application questions. Tailor the questions to work with your particular group, but do all you can to maintain the flow of the text to help women understand what you are studying in context. Be careful not to skip so many questions that you miss the depth and beauty of the text; after all, this is a *Bible study!* Do everything you can to make it an interesting *conversation* involving all group members and not a question-and-answer session between the leader and an individual group member.

As leader, your role is *not* to illumine the group with your own answers but to provide a safe place for participants to share what God is teaching them. Set an atmosphere where they can respectfully explore different ideas. Roadblocks to spiritual maturity dissolve in these kinds of groups.

Don’t expect deep sharing for the first few weeks. Occasionally women will bond quickly, but often they need time to learn to trust one another.

Wrap up. Leading small groups and teaching are different skills. The “Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders” provides sound principles to help you lead your group. Note that when you wear your small-group leader hat, you do *not* lecture. But you may want to end your time by putting on your teacher hat. Participants often enjoy hearing a message to crystallize biblical truth.

Your wrap-up might be a ten-minute informal presentation, allowing for interaction and questions, or a thirty-five-minute formal lecture, in a style more like a pastor’s Sunday message. If your study consists of several small groups, you may prefer to gather everyone for a formal lecture. If you’re meeting in a home, your group may prefer a more interactive format. Use what works for you and your group.

If you plan to include lectures in your format, you may want to familiarize the women with the life of Solomon the first week. A thorough investigation of Solomon’s life in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles illustrates the importance of not just knowing what God says in his Word but actually living in a vibrant and obedient relationship with God. Solomon is the quintessential example of someone who knew God and how to live well but refused to follow through, and as a result he reaped horrendous consequences both in his own life and in the lives of his family and nation. It is commonly thought that Solomon wrote Song of Solomon in his youth, the book of Proverbs as a young king, and Ecclesiastes later in his reign to teach us not to make the same mistakes he made.

Will you pray together as a group? Encourage your group to support one another in prayer throughout the week, but give your group the freedom to decide whether or not they will also pray together as a group. If they desire to spend time in conversational prayer, see the “Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders” for suggestions.

Resource for prayer.

Dean, Jennifer Kennedy. *Heart’s Cry: Principles of Prayer*. Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1992.

CREATE A POSITIVE GROUP ETHOS

Ethos (e-thas) is the distinguishing environment or atmosphere of a group. As the leader you set the ethos, and although you cannot see it, women respond or shut down in response. Every home has an ethos. In some homes children experience unconditional love and fair discipline. As a result, they usually grow up confident and secure. Other homes exude a chill—children walk on eggshells knowing that performance earns affection, which is easily withdrawn when they mess up.

Ethos impacts classrooms. In some classes, students are comfortable asking ques-

tions, even dumb ones. Students know the teacher won’t intentionally embarrass them and has their best interest at heart. In others, students don’t dare open their mouths. The classroom is a threatening place. Why? Ethos.

And women in your small group are influenced by the ethos you create. Will it be a place where women can voice their deep hurts and difficult questions? Can women be honest and work through their questions and struggles in your group? Only then can the process of forgiveness and healing take root. To learn how to create positive group ethos, review the “Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders” at discovertogetherseries.com. This resource focuses on the importance of affirmation and controlling your own talking. Remember the group time is not about you! It’s about giving the women a safe place to discuss what *they* learn, try out *their* new ideas, and articulate *their* convictions.

LESSON 1

Under the Sun or Under the Son?

LESSON CONTENT

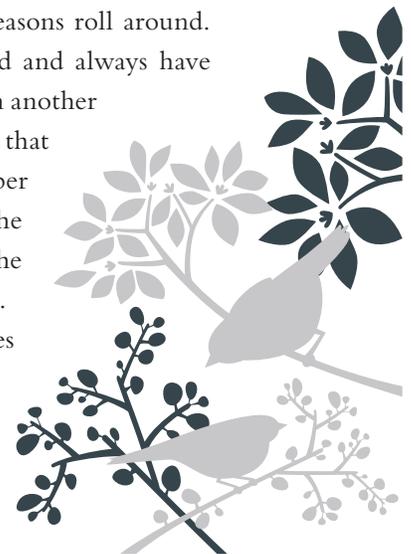
The first eleven verses of Ecclesiastes set the tone for the depressive entries we observe off and on throughout the journal. Solomon has tried all the world has to offer in terms of pleasure, projects, and fame. He's dined to the full on the best foods, enjoyed sexual conquests of hundreds of women, been hailed by the known world as the wisest man alive, and yet he has found life unfulfilling and meaningless. Why is that? He's abandoned a relationship with his Creator and followed his own path. Earlier in the book of Proverbs, he wrote, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (3:5–6). Sadly, he failed to follow his own advice and now he's reaping the consequences. So he begins with a journal excerpt that reflects what happens when we turn away from God and live "under the sun" instead of "under the Son."

TROUBLESHOOTING

If women have not previously understood Ecclesiastes as a journal, revealing the author's ups and downs, they will likely be befuddled by this first lesson. Reiterate the introductory sections of the study guide and lesson 1. Help women relate to Solomon's feelings and experiences, especially during times when they themselves have been unfaithful or stubborn and followed their own ways. Help them identify the hopelessness that eventually follows if we attempt to satisfy ourselves with the world's empty promises the way Solomon did.

Question 11 asks, "In what sense is 'there is nothing new under the sun' true? In what sense might some people disagree?" Women may come up with different perspectives on this question. In one sense, life generally continues in a monotonous pattern: The sun comes up each day and goes down at night. Seasons roll around. People everywhere face similar struggles that plague humankind and always have since the fall. So in that sense, nothing is new under the sun. But in another sense, humankind creates new inventions, like new energy sources that relieve some of the challenges people face on earth. Just remember that Solomon is speaking from a downhearted perspective; that's the main point of this part of the journal. He wants us to enter into the sadness and grief that ultimately accompany rebellion against God.

Question 14 asks, "Although your ancestors or future relatives



won’t remember you, who will?” and then asks us to reference Isaiah 43:1–2, 5–7 and Revelation 2:17. Isaiah tells us in verse 1 that God created us, knows us intimately, and calls us by name. He knows your name. He knew it before he created the world and he will know it forever. Revelation 2:17 reveals an exciting mystery: God will give each of his children “a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.” Your earthly parents gave you an earthly name, but in the kingdom your heavenly Father will give you a new name. Before the invention of paper tickets, people wrote on stones and used them as tickets. We aren’t told what criteria God will use to create our new name, only that it serves as a reward and may reflect a special bond between us and God, possibly somewhat like a special nickname between two who are deeply committed to one another. What an incentive to abandon making a name for ourselves in this world, which will only be quickly forgotten, and instead to invest in names that will follow us through eternity!

CREATIVE ARTS IDEA

Create and then laminate a bookmark with the words from Ecclesiastes 1:2, but add the words shown in capital letters below:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless! Everything WITHOUT GOD is meaningless.”

As women use the bookmark during the study, they will be reminded of that key concept.

LESSON 2

When Having It All Isn't Enough

LESSON CONTENT

This lesson chronicles Solomon's initial quest for satisfaction in life. He began by attempting to figure out what life is about through his intellect. He looked to various sources apart from God to discover what he needed to know to be happy, and he found them insufficient. However, be careful. Don't assume that Solomon is instructing Christians to neglect developing their minds. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

Solomon isn't condemning study and developing your mind, but he is warning us that true wisdom begins with a reverence for God and his Word. Make sure your discussion keeps Matthew 22:37 in mind.

In Ecclesiastes 2:1–11, Solomon continues his quest by pursuing pleasure, popularity, possessions, and projects without God in the picture. Remember that most of these pursuits are not wrong in themselves, but they become wrong when we go to extreme degrees and when we allow them to replace our relationship with God and our desire to know him through his Word.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Part of question 6 asks, "What is 'the fear of the Lord'?" Women who've been raised in religious homes or churches that used guilt and fear to motivate or control them may easily distort the meaning of the phrase "the fear of the Lord." It doesn't mean that God wants us to cower in terror when we think of him. Certainly we should reverence him as the mighty, awe-inspiring, holy, righteous God that he is. He deserves our greatest respect and worship. But he is also our Father and we are his beloved daughters. He loves us so much that he sent his Son to die in our place, providing grace—undeserved favor—in this life and the next. The motivation to live for his glory results from our deep awareness of what he's done for us followed by an overwhelming gratitude. Life becomes about wanting to serve God above all else, making him first in our relationships and priorities, rather than about fear and guilt if we don't serve him. Be sure women don't misinterpret this truth when you come to question 6.

Question 7 pertains to the concept of godly wisdom. The term *wisdom* in the Bible means "skill in living." It's not enough to know



truth; we are called to live out truth with a loving attitude and actions. We become skilled at knowing what to do as life’s challenges present themselves. It’s like driving a car. We can’t worry about why the sign ahead says “detour” or why the person next to us drives too slow or too fast. Our responsibility is to assess the situation as we find it and drive responsibly and skillfully. A wise woman is one who knows how to navigate life well. Be sure to discuss the meaning of the word *wisdom* before tackling question 7.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEA

Divide the women into small groups and provide a poster board to each group along with several magazines. Ask the women to look through the magazines to find images that represent both foolish and godly wisdom. On one side of the poster board, they will make a collage that illustrates foolish wisdom, and on the other, a collage that represents godly wisdom. Ask them to explain their creations to the other groups.

LESSON 3

Investing in Future Generations

LESSON CONTENT

Lesson 3 intersperses wise counsel “under the Son” with foolishness “under the sun.” The participants will need to discern which is which. Don’t get bogged down in Solomon’s occasional rants and frustrations. Remember, a journal records random thoughts.

This lesson focuses on facing death and ways to leave a better legacy than Solomon. We look at related passages including the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4–9), Psalm 78:4, and Titus 2:1–5. Moses taught the Israelites the *Shema* as they entered the Promised Land to prepare them to thrive there. These instructions emphasized the priority of loving God above all else and passing that love on to the next generation through informal mentoring. Jews continue to memorize and practice the *Shema* today, and its wisdom is equally valuable for Christians. Over five hundred times in the Bible, we are commanded to pass on our faith. Lesson 3 gives us an opportunity to learn more about how to do that.

Titus 2:1–5 provides a biblical pattern for women who are more mature in their faith to walk beside women who are less mature in their faith. This text calls for churches to create resources and space for this dynamic to flourish. Help women understand their own calling to adopt a lifestyle of mentoring those who come behind and seeking someone who is ahead of them on the journey of life.

Additional lesson topics include the value of work and learning to enjoy the simple pleasures of life as God’s special gift. Verses 24–26 are the first of four similar journal entries advising us to enjoy life as a gift from God. Solomon reveals that satisfaction and joy are the result of living out of a vibrant relationship with God and making wise choices.

RESOURCE

Edwards, Sue, and Barbara Neumann, *Organic Mentoring: A Mentor’s Guide to Relationships with Next Generation Women*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEA

If you lead a large Bible study with multiple small groups, enlist a mentor and mentee and give them a short block of time in place of the teaching time to share about the benefits and joys of their relationship. If you have the capability, you may also film their discussion and show it as part of your gathering time.



LESSON 4

Your Life—Beautiful or Burdensome?

LESSON CONTENT

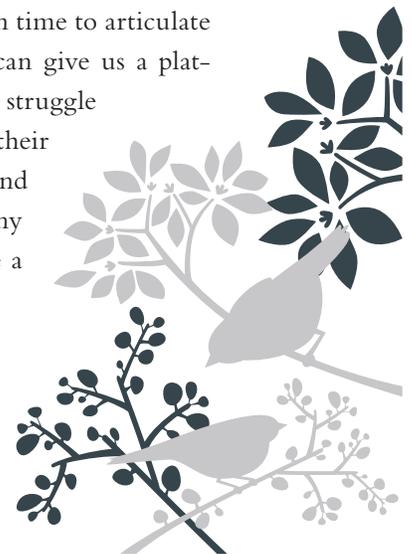
A key quality of spiritual maturity is possessing realistic expectations in life. If we find ourselves constantly muttering, “It’s not fair,” we likely don’t understand that our world is broken, fallen, and full of injustice. Certainly, as Christians, we must do all we can to right wrongs and live with integrity. Nevertheless, the Bible shows us over and over that life is not fair. Lesson 4 should help women with unrealistic expectations recognize and release their fairy-tale beliefs and live in the real world.

The first part of the lesson asks the women to dissect the various seasons of life and their typical events. The latter part of the lesson deals with perspectives that help us make even the burdens of life beautiful. Help women understand that God often uses these difficulties to glorify himself and draw people to faith.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Be sure to emphasize the notes between the questions. Some are designed to help you discern when Solomon speaks from a distorted view and when he’s turned his focus back on God. For example, question 3 focuses on Ecclesiastes 3:9–10 where Solomon describes life “under the sun” as a “burden.” But in question 4 we observe that Solomon switches from his distorted view to a more positive view with God in the picture. In 3:11–14, for the second time Solomon wisely exhorts us to enjoy life and do what good we can, to work hard and find satisfaction in what we contribute, and to realize that God is in control and joy comes from making our relationship with God central to our lives. (The first occasion was in 2:24–26.)

Question 5 asks women to look over the events and activities they marked as burdensome in question 2 and think of ways that God might make these situations beautiful. Answers require deep insight and maturity. Give women time to articulate their thoughts. Some might mention that going through trials can give us a platform to make God look good. Others might reveal a time when a struggle strengthened their faith or gave them an opportunity to share their faith with others. Difficulties can make us value better times and respond with gratitude when we experience them. See how many ideas the women in the group can articulate. This might also be a good topic to speak more about in a teaching time.



CREATIVE ARTS IDEA

Play the song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” by the Byrds, recorded in 1965, sometime during your gathering.

LESSON 5

Wise Up!

LESSON CONTENT

Lesson 5 contains questions related to a hodgepodge of important issues we face daily. Be careful not to veer off into controversy, particularly when the text skirts near politics, justice, and helping the poor. Women often have strong and divergent feelings about how to carry out these mandates, so direct the discussion toward respectful dialogue and away from perspectives that might be divisive. You may want to begin the discussion with a reminder that helps everyone stay on track.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Questions 9 through 12 focus on our need for community. Consider spending time on this block. Questions 13 and 14 simply reveal Solomon's observations about what often occurs as leaders come and go. He's spent most of his life as king, and likely he sees the end of his reign and expresses frustration at those who will carry on after him.



LESSON 6

Choices Matter

LESSON CONTENT

This lesson is packed with proverbs—short pithy sayings that teach us the way the world works. It’s mandatory that we interpret proverbs correctly! Review “Proper Interpretation” at the beginning of this leader’s guide before you lead this lesson, and remind participants of these principles if you think it will be helpful.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Since some of the proverbs are difficult to interpret, I’ve provided headings that should guide the women in a helpful direction.

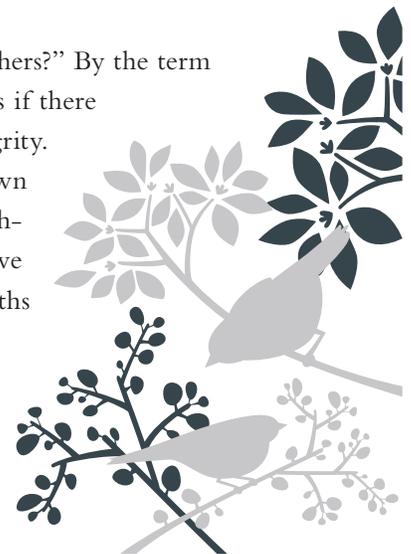
In relation to question 1, a house of mourning forces people to face the serious issues of life and death, especially funerals which wake us up to sobering realities that can cause us to deal with issues we’ve been avoiding. What happens when we die? This question can launch a healthy pursuit of God and provide opportunities to share our faith and hope provided in Jesus.

Question 3 asks why Solomon began this section with a proverb about the value of a good name. Expect a variety of answers. One possible answer is that if women take these wisdom principles seriously and live them out, they can usually expect “a good name.” As with Daniel and Joseph in the Old Testament, a good name can have significant influence on the surrounding pagan culture that results in glory to God.

Question 10 asks about the relationship between anger and pride.” Again, expect a variety of ideas, but one to consider is that we often become angry because our pride has been wounded. If we were more humble and not so defensive, we might not respond with anger so easily.

Ecclesiastes 7:15–19 seems confusing. I’ve provided a note on the bottom of page 76 that should be helpful.

Question 14 asks, “Why should wise people be tolerant of others?” By the term *tolerant* I don’t mean that we should accept everyone’s opinions as if there were no absolute truth. We must hold biblical truths with integrity. However, Solomon’s point here is that we also must admit our own weaknesses and fallibility. Thus we approach conversations with others by first “taking the log out of our own eye” (see Matthew 7:4); we interact with respect and kindness while upholding the clear truths in Scripture.



In the text we look at for question 17, we observe some gender bias, Solomon's own warped perspective, probably brought on by his culture's devaluing of women and his own experiences with multiple wives and concubines. Don't assume that God feels the same way. See the sidebar where I point out that in the book of Proverbs, we see both the temptress to avoid and the wise woman to emulate. Just as there are wise and foolish women, there are wise and foolish men. This is an opportunity to explain to women that we should always interpret Scripture alongside other passages of Scripture. Believing that Scripture does not contradict itself, we look for explanations that clarify seemingly contradictory ideas. In this case, it is easy to see that Solomon's negative view of the world stems from the emotional response he is experiencing.

LESSON 7

Find Purpose and Joy in an Unpredictable World

LESSON CONTENT

This lesson unpacks the reality of injustice in a broken world. If women always expect life to be fair when injustice is the norm until Jesus returns, they'll spend their lives miserable and disheartened. One of the most precious gifts you can give women is realistic expectations for life. Lesson 7 will help them with wise expectations as well as reasons to persevere and live with integrity.

An additional reality we need to accept is our lack of control. Instead of controlling situations and people, we must learn to trust God and live righteously regardless of the way others conduct their lives. Lesson 7 should foster healthy discussion around this truth.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEA

Consider taking time to live out lesson 7 by volunteering as a group to bless your community, especially victims of injustice, poverty, or sexual exploitation. Serving in a homeless shelter, food pantry, or tutoring project with your time or treasure brings women face to face with the realities they've been learning about. Find creative ways to bless your neighbors.



LESSON 8

Are You Judgmental or Are You Discerning?

LESSON CONTENT

One of the highest values in Western culture today is “tolerance.” Many teach that since there are no absolute truths and everything is relative, no one can say someone else is wrong; your truth may not be my truth. The problem with this approach to life is that it results in Solomon’s opening lines, “Meaningless! Meaningless! . . . Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). I know. I lived that way for twenty-four years. Growing up and in college, I was taught that no absolute truth exists. Part of me believed it, but another part of me knew this was faulty thinking. When I accepted Christ as my Savior, I began a transformation of the mind that has resulted in a life based on foundational biblical truth, offering peace and joy.

One of the ways Western culture brainwashes us to accept “tolerance” as the highest value, thus denying the truths of the gospel, is to tell us that we must not “judge.” And sadly, because Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1), many Christians are bamboozled into believing that they must not disagree with others or assess others’ words or actions, even when those clearly contradict God’s Word.

This lesson alleviates this erroneous thinking and helps us understand the difference between passing judgment and practicing discernment.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Be sure to emphasize question 1 that helps women distinguish between *discernment* and *judgment*. When Jesus commanded us not to judge, he was calling out the Pharisees who took it upon themselves to personally determine, in God’s place, whom he rejected and whom he accepted. Their decision kept people from worshipping in the temple and from enjoying the social and economic benefits that accompanied the Pharisees’ favor. And they judged according to the hundreds of laws they made up rather than God’s instructions in his Word. We are forbidden to make these kinds of judgments today. We cannot stand in the place of God, know others’ hearts, or make final determinations as to whether or not others are Christians, whether they are bound for heaven or hell.



However, after assessing our own lives, we are instructed to discern if other believers are taking a wrong path and, through a biblical process under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, confront them gently for the purpose of helping them move back in a positive direction. Passages like Matthew 18:15–17, Philippians 9:1–11, and 1 Corinthians 5 give us direction on discernment, even going as far as expelling a brother or sister from the fellowship of the church in the hope that they will repent and return. But even this action, harsh in some people’s eyes and difficult to do in a society where people legally sue over such issues, isn’t the same as believing we have the power and the right to condemn another to eternal judgment. Only God has that right.

The colloquialism referred to question 13 is “A little bird told me.” People say this when they don’t want to reveal their source. Isn’t it fascinating that biblical passages like this sometimes turn into these kinds of sayings? Even when people may not know where the saying originated, they are using an idea that originated in God’s Word. The Bible has influenced language in myriad ways.

RESOURCE

McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. *The Beauty of Intolerance: Setting a Generation Free to Know Truth and Love*. Uhrichsville, Ohio: Shiloh Run Press, 2016.

SAYING GOODBYE OR GOING ON TOGETHER?

Before beginning lesson 9, you'll need to decide if this a short-term group or if you want to continue meeting and embark on a new study. The first decision is yours as the leader of the group. Count the cost. Is the group thriving? Bonding? Committed? Worth the effort you are investing? Answer these questions honestly. Every group has a beginning and an end. Is this the time for your group to disband? If so, kindly but emphatically tell the group your reasons. Don't be pressured into continuing against your better judgment and God's leading.

If you're excited about leading the group through another study, you may want to poll the group to learn their desires. If they too wish to continue, plan a date to meet for a brainstorming session on what to study and what changes might be in order, if any. Consider tackling another Discover Together study on a book of the Bible to ensure you stay focused on God's Word.

Whether you disband or continue, use this last gathering of the study to reflect, review, and celebrate what has been accomplished. Plan a time that will foster a sense of closure, possibly with festive food, a potluck brunch or luncheon, or some other special activity. One activity might be writing a psalm of praise or listing benefits in the lives of women as a result of the study. Share changes you have observed in the members as a result of sharing this study. In some way, celebrate this final chapter in your group experience. Praise and thank God for what he has done in your lives individually and as a worshipping community. If any of the participants are leaving the group, be sure to say goodbye and to pray for them.

The Creative Arts Idea for lesson 9 has more ideas for an additional wrap-up session of this study.



LESSON 9

The Final Journal Entry—Wisdom for Our Last Days

LESSON CONTENT

This lesson focuses on appreciating youth and painting a realistic picture of aging. We can assume that Solomon wrote these journal entries in his later years when he is experiencing these challenges himself. Then he concludes his journal with wise counsel in 12:13–14 that sums up his main message: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

TROUBLESHOOTING

Ecclesiastes 11–12 contains several passages, including Solomon’s concluding comments in 12:13–14, that could be construed to teach that God judges our works to determine whether or not we will go to heaven. If women struggle to believe that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, refer them to the paragraph on page 105. My view is that God will judge the quality of believers’ lives but not to determine whether or not we will still be part of his eternal family. Our deeds are judged for the purpose of determining our eternal rewards.

Question 8 asks women to imagine what the aging images in the text might represent. They will probably come up with different answers. That’s fine. Some are obvious; others are not. For example, the almond tree blossoming refers to hair turning white or gray. The beautiful blossoms of the almond tree are white. The grasshopper dragging along refers to slowing down, moving without as much energy and steadiness. But many of these aging pictures can be interpreted in different ways. Many are metaphors—figurative language in which one thing stands for another. Simply discuss the overall realities that accompany the aging process. Keep this conversation upbeat and try to emphasize the benefits and opportunities of aging as well. I’ve added additional passages to help turn the discussion in a more positive direction. These may help women realize that whatever they do, they cannot stall the aging process nor should they try. Aging is simply a part of life. This may be an incredibly import-



ant conversation, especially for women who focus on their outer beauty to the neglect of their inner beauty.

Question 19 sums up Solomon’s journal by exhorting us to fear God and keep his commandments. He calls these two mandates our “duty.” Old Testament believers were saved by faith in the promises of God (Genesis 15:6) just as we are saved through our faith in Christ’s work on the cross. They lived before Christ’s payment of sin, but his work on the cross reverts back and covers them also, even though they did not enjoy the privilege of knowing their Savior the way we do. Fearing God means to revere him. And just like the Old Testament believers, we are commanded to live according to biblical truth. Solomon’s journal has informed us of the way the world works, and we are wise if we live according to the wisdom provided there. But as New Testament believers, we are privileged to understand many more of God’s mysteries (Ephesians 3:2–12) and to enjoy an even richer, more intimate relationship with God through the Holy Spirit who indwells us in a way that Old Testament believers did not experience. But Solomon’s mandate in verse 13 is powerful for us as well. Fear God. Live in awe of him.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEA

Encourage women to choose an artistic expression of any sort to convey what they’ve learned during this study. They might share one of their journal entries, write a poem or song, draw, sculpt, sew, or cook. Schedule an optional extra session during which those who chose to participate can have a show-and-tell. You’ll be amazed at the women’s creativity, and these presentations will help the learning stick in new ways.