



Bible Study

ECCLESIASTES 1-4



Canadian Lutheran
World Relief

CLWR BIBLE STUDIES

CLWR's Bible Studies have been designed to help congregations delve deeper into the challenges leading to injustices around the world, to explore related Bible stories, to discuss how these connect and how God calls us to act together.

These studies are meant to be adapted for your congregation's needs and are free to use. Each study includes discussion questions for children to adults, as well as suggestions to connect this discussion to action.

As CLWR continues to grow our resource collection, we would love to hear suggestions and insight from you. Please feel free to contact Heidi Van Schaik, our Church Relations Manager at heidi@clwr.org with ideas and feedback.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- This study will explore the book of Ecclesiastes 1-4, factors leading to oppression and increased security risks, the right to safety and how we can combat gender-based violence locally, nationally, and globally. One suggestion for the author is Solomon and as early as the 10th BCE. But because of the Hebrew language that is found within the text, it is likely to be dated later and attributed to an anonymous author.¹
- Most scholars believe this to have been written somewhere within the 3-5th centuries² with the most likely accurate date to be after 539 BCE in the post-exilic period³.
- The author is referred to as Qohelet (Qoheleth) which in Hebrew means “gatherer” or “Acquirer” and the Greek translation of this work is Ecclesiastes and adds its own meaning as “one who gathers the assembly” or “preacher.”⁴
- The book as a whole reflects on the fears and hopes of people during this time.⁵
- It is believed that the author is a wealthy man who travels among the upper classes who can only empathize with the oppressed and his audience are people who live under the oppression of toil, worry of losing possessions, and frustrated by the loss of justice.⁶
- The purpose of this writing is to impart wisdom on the population as well as teaching the people to fear God.⁷
- This writing is reflective rather than practical and is considered to be poetry and wisdom literature.⁸

1. Ecclesiastes – A 12-Week Study, Justin S. Holcomb, J. I. Packer (Theo. Ed.), Dane C. Ortlund (series ed.), Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, 2016.

2. Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Ecclesiastes, William P. Brown, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2011.

3. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, An Ecumenical Study Bible, Michael D. Coogan, Editor, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A Newsom and Pheme Perkins Associate Editors, Oxford University Press, 2010.

4. Ibid

5. Interpretation – A Bible Commentary

6. Ibid

7. Ecclesiastes – A 12-Week Study

8. Ibid

CULTURAL CONTEXT

- This writing takes place during a time when the cultural malaise that enveloped much of the ancient world since the Persian period is entering a time of turbulent socio-economic change.¹
- It is best understood against a background of the ancient Near East² (think modern day Israel, Turkey, Mediterranean coast, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon).

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

- Going with the most likely time period, Judah has suffered defeat and exile by the Babylonians, and while they enjoy a measure of autonomy, they still remain under foreign control.³
- The economy of the area is growing and expanding quickly⁴ - standardized coinage was introduced (515BCE)⁵, society is becoming increasingly commercialized and an efficient and aggressive taxation system has been implemented.⁶
- Money meant opportunity – the poor had the opportunity to gain wealth, but in a rapidly changing economy, there were also risks. A volatile economy means insecurity for many.⁷

1. Interpretation – A Bible Commentary
2. New Oxford Annotated Bible
3. Interpretation – A Bible Commentary
4. Ibid
5. New Oxford Annotated Bible
6. Interpretation – A Bible Commentary
7. New Oxford Annotated Bible

Ecclesiastes 1

Reflections of a Royal Philosopher

1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

3 What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?

4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.

5 The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.

8 All things[c] are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1 (continued)

10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
‘See, this is new’?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.

11 The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come
by those who come after them.

The Futility of Seeking Wisdom

12 I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, **13** applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. **14** I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

15 What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’ **17** And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

18 For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 2

The Futility of Self-Indulgence

1 I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, 'It is mad', and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' 3 I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. 10 Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 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,^[h] and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2 (continued)

Wisdom and Joy Given to One Who Pleases God

12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. **13** Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

14 The wise have eyes in their head,
but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. **15** Then I said to myself, 'What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity. **16** For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? **17** So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2 (continued)

18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me 19 —and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, 21 because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 23 For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 3

Everything Has Its Time

1 For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:

2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

5 a time to throw away stones,
and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3 (continued)

The God-Given Task

9 What gain have the workers from their toil? 10 I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. 11 He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13 moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. 14 I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Ecclesiastes 3 (continued)

Judgement and the Future Belong to God

16 Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. **17** I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. **18** I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. **19** For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. **20** All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. **21** Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? **22** So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

Ecclesiastes 4

1 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. 2 And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; 3 but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

4 Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

5 Fools fold their hands
and consume their own flesh.
6 Better is a handful with quiet
than two handfuls with toil,
and a chasing after wind.

7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 8 the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. 'For whom am I toiling', they ask, 'and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

Ecclesiastes 4 (continued)

The Value of a Friend

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. **10** For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. **11** Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? **12** And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

13 Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. **14** One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom. **15** I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king; **16** there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

STUDY

Read Ecclesiastes 1

What do you think the author means by the use of the word ‘vanity’?

- The word ‘vanity’ is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes.¹
- The Hebrew word used is *hebel* meaning ‘vapor’ or ‘mist’ in this context ‘meaninglessness’ or ‘emptiness’²

Read Ecclesiastes 2

How does the author search for happiness?

Where does the author say true fulfillment comes from?

- 2:24b-25

Read Ecclesiastes 4

What is the cause of the oppression the author is referring to in v. 1-6?

- inequity of power
- injustice in the society
- people are being ruled by greed and selfishness
- ‘one persons envy’ v. 4

1. Lutheran Study Bible, NRSV, Augsburg Fortress 2009.
2. Ibid

STUDY (CONTINUED)

Where have you seen or experienced this kind of oppression in our world today?

- Be prepared for sharing of stories – ensure the group is aware and commits to holding each other’s stories and experiences lightly and with discretion.

In verses 9–11, what is the author saying about the relevance of community?

In verse 12, what is meant by a “threefold cord”?

Read Isaiah 61:1–2

- In this section of Isaiah, the prophet is reassuring the people of God’s promises following their exile (Exodus).

Where else have you heard these words?

Read Luke 4:16–22

What does this say to us about oppression?

Did you know: In many parts of the world women are still actively oppressed.

- Globally, about 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have been subjected to some form of violence.¹
- Almost one third (27%) of women worldwide aged 15–49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of violence by their intimate partner.²
- Experts emphasize that the financial empowerment of women can reduce the risk for intimate partner violence, especially if coupled with attempts to improve gender equity norms.³
- In 2022, the Canadian Women’s Foundation reported that 184 women and girls were violently killed in Canada and \$7.4 billion was spent on the aftermath of intimate partner violence.⁴
- As of 2023, police believe the remains of Morgan Harris and Mercedes Myran, two Indigenous women, are in the privately-owned Prairie Green Landfill north of Winnipeg. The demand for a search continues.⁵
- Gender-based violence is now widely recognized as a serious human rights abuse, and an important public health problem with substantial consequences to physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health.⁶

What do you know about gender-based violence?

What are some of the things that contribute to gender-based violence?

1. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

2. Ibid

3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8140306/>

4. <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/> Sept. 6, 2023.

5. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/rcmp-indigenous-women-remains-1.6900594> Sept. 6, 2023.

6. <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-015-0072-1> Sept. 6, 2023.

WONDERINGS

Consider your local community, where can people get help if they are experiencing gender-based violence?

Consider our Indigenous communities in Canada, why might they be more at risk for gender-based violence?

Consider the world, what factors contribute to gender-based violence?

ACTION BRAINSTORM

How can you/your parish draw attention to gender-based violence?

How can you/your parish support those experiencing gender-based violence locally?

How can you/your parish draw attention to gender-based violence nationally?

How can you/your parish support those experiencing gender-based violence nationally?

How can you/your parish draw attention to gender-based violence globally?

How can you/your parish support those experiencing gender-based violence globally?

ACTION SUGGESTIONS

Host an event to raise awareness and funds for victims of gender-based violence on Nov. 25, International Day to End Violence Against Women.

Invite in a speaker to help the congregation/community understand local and global issues surrounding gender-based violence. You can connect with local women's shelters, police detachments, or the Canadian Women's Foundation (<https://canadianwomen.org/>) to find speakers or ways to help support them in their ministries.

Connect with your local women's shelter to see what supplies they need and have a fundraiser to help fill the need – be sure to also include some education and draw attention to this issue.

Read the final report (and background reports) from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Invite a speaker from a local Indigenous community to come and speak. There are resources available at www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/

ACTION SUGGESTIONS (CONTINUED)

Participate in *Thursdays in Black*, an ecumenical campaign that originated with the World Council of Churches during their *Solidarity with Women* awareness campaign (1988–1998), in which stories of rape as a weapon of war, gender injustice, abuse, and violence became increasingly visible¹. You can find more information here:

https://www.globalministries.org/thursdays_in_black_gender_based_violence_during_the_pandemic/

Support the CLWR initiatives to Give Women the Opportunity to Thrive by:

- Hosting an event (a meal, a plant sale, a concert, etc.) to collect food items for the local women's shelter, with financial proceeds going towards supporting Solar Lights for Safety (\$100–\$500), Safe Spaces for Women (\$200 – \$800), Women in Business, Skills Training or Technical Scholarships to help women move from the insecurity and oppression of poverty to a life of fulfillment and safety.
- Supporting CLWR's Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Technical and Vocational Education and Training (GRIT) project which provides a promising path for employment and self-employment for women in the West Bank, particularly those with disabilities. More information on the project can be found here: <https://www.clwr.org/grit>

1. https://www.globalministries.org/thursdays_in_black_gender_based_violence_during_the_pandemic/ Sept 6, 2023.

FOR CHILDREN

Be ready for possible stories of children being bullied – be prepared to follow up with them and their families.

Ask children what they know about bullying.

Is it good to be a bully?

What does it feel like to be bullied?

What are you supposed to do when you know about bullying?

Jesus tells us that we are supposed to love each other.

How can we treat each other so that others will know about God's love for us?

PRAYER

Creator, comforter, protector,

Your Son came to deliver the oppressed.
Watch over those who live with injustice, terror, disease,
and death as their constant companions.

Help us to work towards the elimination
of violence and cruelty towards one another,
strengthen those offering protection,
and equitable opportunities for all,
and guard those who are in need
of your deliverance in this time.

Amen.