



## **“Lesson In Futility”**

### ***FUEL***

#### **Small Group Plan**

The voice of the Old Testament has so many styles and so many approaches. Almost everything is there. The passionate preaching of the prophets, the reflective words of the wise man, the careful record of the historian. There is poetry, law, storytelling, songs and visions.

But in all its diversity there is nothing quite like Ecclesiastes, if that’s the way you pronounce it. Landon Saunders told of a friend who was reading the Bible for the very first time. He was a practical man, but not a religious man. One day he told Landon, "My favorite book so far is Ek-le-ak-tes." Why was it his favorite book? As he put it, "That man really tells it like it is." And he does! He pulls no punches. He deals with the edges of life. He asks the difficult questions. No other book quite has its tone. In fact, if you will allow me to twist one good saying into another, a major theme of this powerful book is, "The power of negative thinking." Now, I believe in the power of positive thinking, but I also know that often I am not equipped to even see the positive opportunity, until I have faced the negative reality.

#### **OPEN IT / INTRODUCE IT ...**

- Do you take more of a positive or negative outlook on life? Explain.
- Has your outlook changed as you have grown older? Why or why not?

#### **LOOK AT IT / STUDY IT ...**

### ***FOUR MAJOR THEMES***

#### **— *MEANINGLESS, MEANINGLESS* —**

- Solomon uses this word 38 times in Ecclesiastes. It means emptiness, futility, vapor. One Hebrew scholar defined it as “what’s left when you pop the bubble.”
- Why does Solomon use this word so often? Why is he so cynical?
- Is there any positive value to being negative? What is it?

### — **UNDER THE SUN** —

- Solomon uses this word 30 times in Ecclesiastes. It defines the viewpoint of the writer – ground level, horizontal, temporary viewpoint, under the sun.
- When we have achieved as much as is “humanly” possible, what have we accomplished? How far have we come?
- How would an “above the sun” viewpoint be different?

### — **GAIN** —

- Solomon uses this word 10 times in Ecclesiastes. It means, “that which is left over” and can be translated surplus, advantage, profit.
- From an “under the sun” viewpoint, what kind of “gain” are most people looking for in life? What are most people working towards as they look towards retirement?
- Why do so many collect more than they need?

### — **LABOR** —

- Solomon uses this word 23 times in Ecclesiastes. It means to work to the point of exhaustion and carries the idea of frustration and weariness.
- How does it feel to work hard, but to experience little or no fulfillment?
- On the other hand, what does it feel like to accomplish something truly permanent?

## **FOUR DEPRESSING CONCLUSIONS**

### ***THERE IS NO PURPOSE***

#### **Ecclesiastes 1:1-3**

<sup>1</sup> *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:* <sup>2</sup> *“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”* <sup>3</sup> *What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?*

- Why does Solomon say that everything is meaningless?
- How can a deep sense of purpose change a feeling of meaningless?
- How can God provide that sense of purpose?

### ***THERE IS NO CHANGE***

#### **Ecclesiastes 1:4-7**

<sup>4</sup> *Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.* <sup>5</sup> *The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.* <sup>6</sup> *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever*

*returning on its course. <sup>7</sup> All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.*

- Circles don't really go anywhere. Why was this cyclical point of view so disturbing to Solomon?
- What is the difference between motion and promotion?
- What would a life that is growing and changing look like?

### ***THERE IS NO NEWNESS*** **Ecclesiastes 1:8-11**

*<sup>8</sup> All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. <sup>9</sup> What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. <sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.*

- Why does the consumer industry repackage an old product to look new?
- Why can't life "under the sun" provide true newness?

### ***THERE IS NO UNDERSTANDING*** **Ecclesiastes 1:12-18**

*<sup>12</sup> I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! <sup>14</sup> I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. <sup>15</sup> What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. <sup>16</sup> I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." <sup>17</sup> Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. <sup>18</sup> For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.*

- How can education and learning become a cul-de-sac?
- Why would Solomon say that wisdom brings sorrow and knowledge brings grief?

### **USE IT / APPLY IT ...**

- What are the positive strengths of facing and examining the negative?
- Can negativity be over-stated?
- What does "hoarding" look like? What does it do to the hoarder?

- List some truly permanent endeavors. How does it feel to be involved in accomplishing them?
- Under the sun there is no purpose, change, newness or understanding. What about above the sun. How can all of them be accomplished there?
- Spend some time in prayer asking for God's guidance to an above the sun viewpoint?