



## **Bookends”**

### **FUEL**

#### **Small Group Plan**

A cartoon shows two young boys in a library. One is excitedly looking through a section labeled, *“How to books.”* The other is cynically looking through another section labeled, *“Why bother books.”* Have you ever felt like the second boy? When the excited search of “how to” became the resigned depression of “why bother?”

Over the past several weeks we have seen that Solomon has been on the brink of why bother through the entire book of Ecclesiastes. And his experiments, explorations and writings remind me of another theological writer of our own time, Karl Barth, who once described a re-occurring dream. He saw himself arriving at heaven’s gate pulling a child’s little red wagon. In the wagon were stacked all his many writings. Barth believed that the dream was telling him that, in the final analysis, all his knowledge, all his writings, were just child’s play compared to God’s great reality.

You might remember that it was this same Karl Barth who, when asked what was the most profound truth his long life of study had revealed, answered, *“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”*

And so Ecclesiastes, this ancient book of profound truth, is bookended with one consistent message. Be careful where you go in your search for meaning and purpose. Most of what you will find won’t work. Almost all of what is promoted and showcased by the culture is empty and pointless. This is because it all comes from “under the sun.”

#### ***Ecclesiastes 1:2***

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.*

*“Utterly meaningless!*

*Everything is meaningless.”*

#### ***Ecclesiastes 12:8***

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.*

*“Everything is meaningless!”*

And so, here at the close of Ecclesiastes, Solomon steps back to defend the process behind this unusual book and to describe where it finally led him, above the sun.

## OPEN IT / INTRODUCE IT ...

- Have you ever had that “why bother” feeling? When and why?
- How did you work through it?

## LOOK AT IT / STUDY IT ...

### CAREFUL QUESTIONS

#### **Ecclesiastes 12:9-12**

<sup>9</sup> *Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.* <sup>10</sup> *The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.* <sup>11</sup> *The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd.* <sup>12</sup> *Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.*

- Solomon “pondered and searched” for the right words (v. 9). As a group, think of several synonyms for “ponder.”
- How is pondering done? What is required? What is the best setting? How long does it take?
- How can “upright and true” words sometimes be painful to hear (vs. 10-11)?
- The Biblical Scholar JB Phillips once wrote:

*If words are to enter men’s hearts and bear fruit, they must be the right words, shaped cunningly to pass men’s defenses and explode silently and effectually within their minds.*

- Why did Solomon take the time to choose “just the right words” (v. 10)? What were his motives?
- Solomon says, in effect, there is more to life than study. If seeking is not the goal or the end, what is?

### FINAL ANSWERS

#### **Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**

<sup>13</sup> *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man.* <sup>14</sup> *For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*

- Solomon gives a final answer. But some are only interested in seeking, not finding. Why are some people addicted to research, in love with questions and uncomfortable with answers?
- What does it mean and not mean to “fear” God (v. 13)?

- The devotional writer Oswald Chambers once wrote:

*The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else; whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.*

- Do you agree with Chambers? Explain.
- What are proper and improper motives behind obedience (v. 13)?
- Your translation probably has “duty” in brackets. This is because it is not in the original language and has been supplied by the translators. What the text literally says is “*this is the whole of man.*” How and why do we find, not only our duty, but also our “wholeness” in God?

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

- As a group, list some of the benefits of careful pondering?
- How has the pace of our culture robbed us of pondering time?
- What could you do to put careful “*searching*” and “*pondering*” back in place?
- Have you ever had to say something that was both true and painful? How did you do it?
- Why do some people only like seeking, but not finding?
- C.S. Lewis once Wrote:

*There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.”*

- What did Lewis mean?
- Close in prayer asking God to help us see like above the sun, where godly obedience, fear and respect is the norm for our lives.