



LIFE UNDER THE SUN

ECCLESIASTES

2016

How to be in a small group

Another year, another Bible study group. Time to sign up, turn up and get things rolling for another year. Time also perhaps to ask some questions about your small group. Do you feel as if you just go along because that's what you're expected to do? Does the group have a clear purpose, or does it just exist because it has always existed?

More to the point, what part are you going to play in this year's group? What can you be doing to make the group a success? There are many books and guides and training materials for small group leaders (like *Growth Groups* from Matthias Media), but what about the humble group member? What can each of us be doing to make the most of our small groups?

Why go in the first place?

People go to small groups for all sorts of reasons to fulfil expectations, to make friends, to pursue romantic possibilities, to receive encouragement and counsel, to learn, and so on.

While most of these might be perfectly acceptable reasons to join a small group, the first and indispensable reason must be clear in our minds. Our primary reason for belonging to a small group is to give us opportunity to love and encourage other people in Christ. It's not about Me; it's about Them. And it's about Them because of Christ.

This after all is what the Christian life is about. Our most basic principle is to love other people as Christ has loved us, to lay down our lives for them as Christ did for us. This applies as much to small groups as it does to marriages, families, workplaces, and larger Christian meetings. We go to small groups not primarily to have our needs met, but to meet the needs of others. Of course, we have needs too, and no doubt they will be met along the way—but we can let others worry about that. In fact, paradoxically, the more we focus on loving others, and doing whatever we can for them, the more encouragement and strength we find ourselves.

There are many ways we can love and encourage the other people in our groups. Here are five powerful ones (complete with alliterative titles).

1. The power of presence

This is the simplest and most obvious, but is no less powerful for being so. Just being there each week without fail is a powerful encouragement to the other members of the group. In making the group time a solid commitment, to be missed only in times of emergency, you send a very clear message to the other members: "Being with you matters very much to me. Unless something very important comes up, you can expect me. Encouraging you is a top priority."

Conversely, inconsistent attendance sends a somewhat less encouraging message: "I don't mind coming, but it's not that important. If I feel a bit tired or something else crops up, don't expect me. Being with you and encouraging you isn't really a very high priority for me."

Turning up regularly requires no extraordinary gifts or talent, but it is a powerful way of loving other people.

2. The power of preparation

Most small groups complete their evening's Bible study with a plaintive plea from the leader for people to read the passage and prepare for next week's study. The leader knows full well that most people won't, but there's no harm in trying!

However, preparing for the group time is another powerful way to love the members of the group. Of course, having read the

passage, or done the homework, greatly increases the benefit you yourself receive from the discussion. More importantly, however, it equips you to encourage others by what you say. Rather than throwing in whatever occurs to you at the time, you have actually thought about the Bible passage and the issues that it raises. You are much better prepared to say things that stimulate and encourage and teach others if you have bothered to give it some thought beforehand.

3. The power of prayer

Paul's friend and fellow worker, Epaphras, would have made an ideal small group member. According to Paul, he was always "wrestling in prayer" for the Colossians, that they might "stand firm in all the will of God". Paul was able to vouch that in doing so, Epaphras was "working hard for you" (Col 4:12-13).

Praying for others is hard work, but real work. It is one of the most loving things we can do for our fellow group members, not only because it is through our prayers that God does his work in people's lives, but because it is such a quiet, inconspicuous form of ministry. Making a casserole for someone, by comparison, is much more satisfying—you see something very tangible for your efforts, and you have the pleasure of delivering it to the person and receiving their warm expressions of thanks. Prayer has none of those rewards. You do it for one reason only: that you care for that person and want what is best for them in Christ. And so you pray for them.

4. The power of personality

The alliteration may be starting to stretch a little thin here, but the point is solid enough—that a powerful way of loving others in your small group is to be willing to share your own life and personality with them.

This is by no means an easy thing to do. Many of us would much rather keep quiet and not give too much away. However, by opening up and sharing our lives and thoughts and struggles and joys, we do others a great service. We not only show them that we have the very same struggles that they have (but thought they were alone in suffering); we also encourage them to open up as well.

Of course, it is anything but loving to indiscriminately dump everything we are thinking or feeling onto the group. We need to heed the advice of Proverbs and think carefully before we speak; as well as the words of Ephesians 4: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph 4:29).

5. The power of love

Whatever you do in the group—every word you say, every action—do it for the sake of others. Look for how you can support and help the leader. Look for ways to care for the members of the group—those who could really do with a phone call or visit; those who would benefit from having someone to pray or read the Bible with; those who need financial or other material help; those who just need a friend to have pizza and a video with.

Belonging to a small group can be a very demanding exercise. It can cost us our lives, because that is what it means to be a follower of Christ—to lay down our lives for the sake of others. If we grasp the possibilities, small groups represent an enormously fruitful opportunity for doing just that.



Introduction to Ecclesiastes

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

This is probably the most infamous part of Ecclesiastes. It’s how the book starts (1.2) and ends (12.8). The word ‘meaningless’ in Hebrew is *hebel*. Literally ‘a small breath’. Metaphorically it means fleeting, transient or insubstantial. The Teacher says that’s what life under the sun is like.

The phrase ‘life under the sun’ appears more than 25 times in Ecclesiastes. That’s because Ecclesiastes is forcing us to face the reality of this life we’re living. The reality that all we value, all we work so hard for, all we worry about, all we chase after in the end slips away. We die, and our dreams die with us, and the world goes on without us. It forces us to see the unsettling, contradictory, and absurd aspects of life under the sun.

Many people consider Ecclesiastes to be a depressing book. But it’s far from it. Ecclesiastes is uncomfortable—it won’t let us off the hook with easy answers, it helps us see life the way it really is, so that we live appropriately in response. We need to see the meaninglessness of life under the sun, so that we see the full brilliance and glory of what God has done in this world in Jesus Christ. Ecclesiastes teaches us not to toil for meaningless gain (1.3) but for what can be gained through our Lord and Saviour. Ecclesiastes is a book of wisdom. It is a book that shows us reality, in order to show us Jesus.

Chapter 1 verse 1 tells us that this book is the words of the *Qoheleth*. The Hebrew word *Qoheleth* comes from the word *Qahal*, meaning ‘assembly’. The *Qoheleth* may be the one who leads the assembly, the Teacher (NIV) or the Preacher (ESV). Or he may be the one who assembles the people, or assembles wisdom in order to teach the people. In Greek *Qahal* is *Ekklesia*, and *Qoheleth* is *Ekklesiastes*, which is where we get the name of the book. The author says the words of this book are the words of a son of David, and a king over Israel in Jerusalem (1.12). Although the book doesn’t mention the author’s name, the only person who fits that description is Solomon.

1 The preparation questions in these studies are adapted from *One-to-One Bible reading*, by David Helm.

Prepare 1; Ecclesiastes 1

- Complete this page of preparation **before** you meet at Small Group.

Reading the passage before Small Group greatly increases the benefit you receive from the discussion. But it's also a powerful way to love the others in your group as you share what you have discovered.

- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 1

Remember that Ecclesiastes wants you to confront reality. Try to let that reality sink in.

Are there repeated words, phrases, or ideas? If so, what point is being made?

What pictures does the Teacher paint and what life situations does the Teacher describe here? What feeling is he trying to convey about 'life under the sun'?

What does the Teacher see that is *good*? What does he see that is *evil*?

What conclusions does the Teacher make about God, his people, and life in his world?

How does Jesus provide meaning to what the Teacher is observing here? Is the gospel anticipated or foreshadowed or longed for in some way?

Study 1; Ecclesiastes 1

Everything is Meaningless!

Think over your average week. What does most of your time/effort/energy/love go in to?

Read Ecclesiastes 1.1 & 12-13

Ecclesiastes doesn't tell us its author's name. But check out 1st Kings 4.29-34. Do you think Solomon fits the bill? How qualified is he to offer an opinion on the matter?

Read Ecclesiastes 1.2-11

What is the main theme of Ecclesiastes (verse 2, see also 12.8)?

How does the Teacher illustrate this point (verses 3-11)? Are his observations still true today?

The word 'meaningless' or 'vanity' literally means 'a small breath'. What is the Teacher trying to say by telling us life under the sun is 'a small breath'?

When the Teacher talks about 'life under the sun', he's talking about life in this world. He's talking about the world we can see, feel, taste, touch, and smell. Not life as God defines it and not life like the new life we have in Christ, but life in the world that we can observe. Life under the sun. This is important to keep in mind as we read Ecclesiastes...

People busy themselves with all sorts of things in life. How often do you think the average person stops to ask themselves where it's all going and what it all means?

Read Ecclesiastes 1.12-18

The Teacher notices also that there is something wrong with the world. Something broken. Why does this upset him so much?

When you look at your life and the world around you, what things are there that would lead you to the same conclusions as this chapter (that life is meaningless, contradictory, futile)?

How does that make you feel? How do you usually shield yourself from those feelings?

Solomon could only observe all that is meaningless and all that is wrong with the world. Luke 11 tells us that one greater than Solomon has arrived—Jesus. Jesus is greater, because he can straighten what is twisted and provide all that is lacking. How does confronting the reality of life under the sun help us appreciate Jesus? How can you use the wisdom of Ecclesiastes to 'wake people up' to their need for Jesus?

Pray

What would God want you to pray about after reading this part of Ecclesiastes?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

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Prepare 2; Ecclesiastes 2

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 2

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Study 2; Ecclesiastes 2

Pleasure, Wisdom & Work are Meaningless!

Where do people look for meaning and significance in life?

In Ecclesiastes 2 the Teacher turns to three key areas of life where many people look for meaning and significance. They are pleasure/success, wisdom, and work/satisfaction. He sets himself up as a living experiment, to find out whether or not meaning and significance can be found in these things.

Read Ecclesiastes 2.1-11

List all the things the Teacher experiences in verses 3-9. What is the modern-day equivalent of this life?

What does this life bring (verse 10)? What does it not bring (verse 11)? What's the difference?

Read Ecclesiastes 2.12-16

What is the advantage of being wise?

What can wisdom not do for you?

Read Ecclesiastes 2.17-26

How does the teacher respond to all this—what emotions and feelings does he go through in verses 17-23?

What does work bring (verses 24-25)? What does it not bring (verses 22-23)?

Discuss the Teacher's conclusion in verses 24-26.

This chapter has highlighted many ways in which people try to give their life meaning and significance—pleasure and fun, alcohol, projects and achievements, gathering possessions, sexual fulfilment, fame and greatness and recognition, wisdom and intellect, and hard work. List some specific ways in which people try to find meaning in these things.

Which of these pursuits are most appealing to you? Does your attitude or behaviour need to change in any of these areas?

Check out Luke 12.15-31. In what way does Jesus come to the same conclusion that the Teacher did?

Why are these words such a comfort coming from Jesus?

Pray

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Prepare 3; Ecclesiastes 3

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 3

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What pictures does the Teacher paint and what life situations does the Teacher describe here? What feeling is he trying to convey about 'life under the sun'?

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Study 3; Ecclesiastes 3

Life Doesn't Make Sense

Should life make sense for Christians more than it does for non-Christians?

Read Ecclesiastes 3.1-11

The poem in verses 1-8 is about time. How much control do you feel you have over time? How much control do you feel you have over the things mentioned in this poem? Can you escape death? Can you even keep your clothes from tearing? Can anyone guarantee lasting peace? Can you hold on to the good times and avoid the bad?

Verse 11 says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time." In light of the poem in verses 1-8, is this statement beautiful or tragic?

Discuss what is meant by verses 10-11.

Read Ecclesiastes 3.9 & 3.12-15

What's the difference between God's work and humankind's work?

Read Ecclesiastes 3.16-22

What's so senseless about verses 16-17?

What's so senseless about verses 18-22?

The Teacher looks at life under the sun and sees nothing but inconsistency, injustice, and humankind's powerlessness. Not only that, he sees that God uses all this to humble us so that we fear him! Now that's uncomfortable!

How do your life circumstances (positive or negative) make you feel about your relationship with God?

Read Acts 3.13-18. There is one senseless, terrible, unjust, and confusing event in history that God has fully explained. What has God shown us about this event?

Read Ecclesiastes 3.11-14 again. How does knowing what God has done through Jesus enable us to be happy, find satisfaction, and be comfortable knowing that God is in control?

Sometimes we want to know exactly what God is up to in our lives. It makes us anxious when we can't see exactly what he's doing! Of course it's good to reflect on God's work in us, but often our anxiety comes from a lack of trust. We think God needs our help. We think his work would be a little better if he'd just let us in on it! Spend some time writing out and praying a prayer asking God to help you trust his control and fear him.

Pray

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Prepare 4; Ecclesiastes 4-6

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 4-6

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Study 4; Ecclesiastes 4-6

The Meaninglessness of Riches

If you asked around, I suspect not many people would say that money buys happiness or meaning in life. Why then is money so important to so many people?

Read Ecclesiastes 4

What does the Teacher say drives people (verse 4)? Do you think this is true today? What examples of it can you think of?

Read Ecclesiastes 5

From the following verses, note the downsides of chasing riches.

Ecclesiastes 4.7-8

Ecclesiastes 4.13-16

Ecclesiastes 5.8-9

Ecclesiastes 5.10-11

Ecclesiastes 5.12

Ecclesiastes 5.13-14

Ecclesiastes 5.15-16

Read Ecclesiastes 6

In chapter 6 verse 3, the Teacher graphically states his conclusion: money can't buy happiness. We can work for money, for security, for comfort, and for purchasing power, but in the end, it is not what brings joy.

What bitter reality shows the promises of hard work to be the empty promises they are (verse 12)?

Read Luke 12.13-21. Jesus says, "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." You might want life, and life to the full—you might want success, and the power to live how you want, and comfort and security. You might want to be able to relax and enjoy the pleasures of life. Jesus' parable about the rich farmer shows that money won't give you that. Your hard work and ambition won't get you that. What does Jesus say is the alternative to chasing riches (verse 21)? Why is this better?

Read Ecclesiastes 5.18-19 again. Do you think you look for more meaning in your work than the Teacher says you should?

Work brings money, and money brings power. How much power do you have? What can that power be used for?

Pray

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Prepare 5; Ecclesiastes 7.1-8.9

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 7.1-8.9

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Study 5; Ecclesiastes 7.1-8.9

The Limits of Wisdom

What is wisdom, and what is it useful for?

Read Ecclesiastes 7.1-18

The Teacher describes wisdom. What does a wise person understand about the reality of life under the sun (verses 1-6, verse 7, verses 8-9, and verse 10)? What can this kind of wisdom do for you (verses 11-12)?

The Teacher goes on to highlight the limitations of wisdom. What are the limitations described in verses 13-18?

Read Ecclesiastes 7.19-29

As he searches for wisdom, what conclusions does the Teacher come to about the state of humankind (note especially verse 20 and verse 29)?

Wisdom faces up to reality, especially the reality of death. Wisdom knows its own limitations. Wisdom knows that people are sinners. Why is the gospel good news for wise people? Why does the gospel seem irrelevant to foolish people?

Read Ecclesiastes 8.1-9

In these verses the Teacher describes a situation where the king has commanded something that one of his subjects disagrees with. How does the Teacher's wise advice...

Face up to reality (verses 3-4), and the reality of death (verse 8)?

Recognise it's own limitations (verses 5-7)?

Recognise that people are sinners (verse 9)?

Why does this kind of wisdom 'brighten your face' and 'change its hard appearance'?

Is wisdom the answer in our search for meaning in life under the sun? Why?

Read 2nd Timothy 3.15-17

What can make us wise, and what does it make us wise for?

Ecclesiastes 7.16-18 expresses the need for balance – don't put all your hope in wisdom, but don't ignore wisdom altogether either. In light of 2nd Timothy, discuss how you can better achieve this balance in life.

Pray

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Prepare 6; Ecclesiastes 8.10-9.12

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 8.10-9.12

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Study 6; Ecclesiastes 8.10-9.12

Injustice & Death

What injustices – big or small, personal or social – really get you riled up?

Read Ecclesiastes 8.10-17

What truth does the Teacher remember about God when he is faced with injustice (verses 11-13)?

What immediate evidence can he see of this truth (verse 14)?

Discuss the Teacher's response in verses 15-17. Why do you think he has this response?

Check out Acts 17.31. Do you think we can have the same response?

Discuss the following questions...

Should Christians take revenge for injustice?

Should Christians fight to right injustice?

Should Christians despair in the face of injustice?

Read Ecclesiastes 9.1-12

What is the ultimate injustice (first half of verse 3)?

What reality of life under the sun does the Teacher observe in the second half of verse 3? Is this true today?

The Teacher's response to his depressing observation might surprise you (verses 7-10). But it makes sense. Life, with all its suffering and injustice, is ultimately out of your hands. So don't get bitter, and don't despair. Enjoy your food and drink, don't mope, enjoy your wife (or husband) and your work too. These are all gifts from God.

What can you do now to guarantee your future (verses 11-12)?

If this life under the sun was all there was, how would you feel?

Read and discuss 1st Corinthians 15.12-32. What has Jesus done that guarantees our future? How does Paul confirm the Teacher's wisdom? What does Paul add? How does all this change how we think about injustice? How does it change how we think about death? How does it change how we think about the meaningfulness of this life?

Pray

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Prepare 7; Ecclesiastes 9.13-11.8

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 9.13-11.8

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Study 7; Ecclesiastes 9.13-11.8

Wisdom's Value

How do we know whether or not someone is wise?

Read Ecclesiastes 9.13-10.15

Wisdom is good, but what is wisdom's weakness (9.13-10.1)?

What are the advantages of wisdom listed in verses 2 to 15?

What are the limitations of wisdom listed in verses 2 to 15?

What happens to the fool in verses 2 to 15?

Read Ecclesiastes 10.16-20

Discuss the scenario described in verses 16-20.

Read Ecclesiastes 11.1-8

Verse 6 summarises this section. What point(s) is the Teacher making, and what truths does he observe to make his case?

It will rain where it will rain, says the Teacher in verse 3. If you want to go on a picnic, by all means, check the weather forecast and choose a day you think will be sunny. Of course, no matter how well you plan, it may still rain and your picnic may be ruined. But that doesn't mean you should never go on picnics! So it is with all of life. Every decision we make is a risk...

Fear of taking risks and anxiety over making decisions can be paralyzing. How does the Teacher show us that wisdom can help us get on with life?

There are two types of foolishness described in this section. The foolishness of taking too many risks, and the foolishness of taking too few. Which end of the spectrum do you tend toward?

Read Romans 8.23-28. What is the hope Paul is talking about? How does he describe it?

How does this hope help us as we consider the risks of our decisions (verses 26-27)?

How does this hope help us make decisions with humble confidence (verse 28)?

Pray

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Prepare 8; Ecclesiastes 11.9-12.8

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 11.9-12.8

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Study 8; Ecclesiastes 11.9-12.8

Rejoice in Your Youth

You're only as old as you feel, so they say. How old do you feel?

Read Ecclesiastes 11.9-12.1

How does the Teacher advise young people to approach life (verses 9-10)? Why does he advise this (11.10-12.1)?

Read Ecclesiastes 12.2-8

How does the Teacher use pictures to describe old age?

How are life and death described in verses 6-7?

Why do young people need to remember their creator before this happens to them?

What advantage do you have if you're young? What advantage do you have if you're old?

Why does the Teacher say (again!) that all this is meaningless (verses 7-8)?

Read 1st Timothy 4.8-15

1st Timothy is a letter from Paul to a young man, Timothy. Paul has some things to say about how Timothy should spend his youth. What does Paul tell Timothy to train for, to labour and strive for, to devote himself to, and to be diligent in? For what reason?

If the Teacher's instruction can be summarised as, "enjoy your youth because one day you'll grow old and die and answer to your creator", how would you summarise Paul's instruction?

Is what the Teacher says about youth and what Paul says about youth compatible?

Think about how our world values youth. What evidence is there that we don't value youth enough? What evidence is there that we value youth (or at least youthfulness) too much?

If you're young, are you 'remembering your creator'? What might you need to do differently?

If you're older, why is it so important that you 'remember your creator'? How can you do this?

Pray

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Prepare 9; Ecclesiastes 12.9-14

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- Pray and read Ecclesiastes 12.9-14

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Study 9; Ecclesiastes 12.9-14

The Shepherd's Wisdom

Can you sum up the message of Ecclesiastes in a brief phrase or statement?

Read Ecclesiastes 12.9-14

What do verses 9-10 tell us about the words of wisdom we've read in Ecclesiastes?

Why do you think these wise words are likened to goads and nails?

Who do you think is the one Shepherd in verse 11?

If you were to investigate life under the sun like the Teacher did, do you think you would discover anything different? Do you think you would find anything to add?

What do you think of the Teacher's conclusion (verses 13-14)?

What would the Teacher have to say to Christians who think that if you're good God will guarantee you with health, wealth, success, and control? What would the Teacher have to say to Christians who think it's wrong to enjoy life's pleasures?

As we reflect on the message of Ecclesiastes two of the Teacher's observations stand out. The first is about death. We all die, our lives are like a small breath, they are quickly over and come to nothing. There really is nothing we can do about this. The second observation is about life. We can't know the future. God's put a sense of eternity in our hearts, but we still don't know and can't control what will happen tomorrow. From these two observations the Teacher draws conclusions about how we should live life. He says we are to enjoy life, and enjoy what we have rather than chase what we don't have. He says we are to get on with life rather than let ourselves be driven to despair. We live a life of balance—we thank God for the good things, and acknowledge that we can't fathom the bad. It is what it is. And it is what it is for a reason—so that we fear God and keep his commandments.

Read John 10.1-18

Who is the one Shepherd here? What does it mean to listen to his voice, or fear him and keep his commandments?

King Solomon was a living experiment – remember study 2 – who gave his life to discover the truth about life under the sun. Jesus the Good Shepherd also gave his life to reveal truth to us. Although Jesus doesn't change the message of Ecclesiastes, he certainly adds something very important. What is it (10, 17-18)?

Have a look back over the book of Ecclesiastes. Find one truth about life under the sun that that really stood out to you and challenged how you live. If you're comfortable to do so, share how it made you rethink life.

Pray

What would God want you to pray about after reading this part of Ecclesiastes?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?