



EVERYTHING UNDER THE ~~SUN~~ SON

Ron Pickell

Leader's Guide

Everything Under the Sun Son – Leader's Guide

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Introduction

...is about the search for the meaning of life on planet earth. *Qoheleth* (Hebrew for teacher or critic) sums up human existence as life sucks and then you die!

Interestingly enough, I have discovered over the years as a college chaplain that the book of Ecclesiastes has a warm place in students' hearts. I never really understood this until I faced some of my own life questions. Solomon's swan song is well fitted to the cynical young adult perspective—ancient themes for a good Coldplay song or U2's *Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*. But after reading and rereading Ecclesiastes and having my own narrow escape with death, I have come to understand something about this book that I never really got before. Ecclesiastes is an honest critique of life under the SUN missing clear assurance of an afterlife.

It's not that Solomon doesn't believe in God. It's more like he had a lot of questions that his current theology wasn't answering. He's actually right where many people find themselves in a world of so many inconsistencies. So many of our God questions get answers when we reflect deeply into God's revelation of Himself in Jesus. This is Solomon's problem. Solomon needs to meet God in Jesus Christ. The Apostles commented on their good fortune of learning about God in Christ that previous generations only understood opaquely—see I Peter 1:10-12.

Due to its straightforward and honest indictment of life outside of God's personal intervention in Christ, Ecclesiastes might be the book to begin with when reading through the Bible. It is traditionally grouped among the wisdom literature of the biblical canon along with the other works of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs. In addition, the Apocrypha includes the Book of Wisdom and Sirach. Jesus referred to the three divisions of the Old Testament as "the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). The wisdom literature was lumped in with the Psalms or Writings.

Many groupings today include Law, Prophets, History, and Wisdom. The Law lists what God requires, the Prophets show what God reinforces or reminds us of, the History books serve as the timeline that groups all the books together, and the Wisdom literature is a reflection on how to think about life with God and its meaning.

This is why I am suggesting that Ecclesiastes should be at the beginning of any reading of the Bible or at least inserted right after the story of the fall of the human family in Genesis 3, since it describes life on planet earth as a result of sin in a closed system separated from God and the prospect of eternal death.

The Critic (Qoheleth) concludes that life under the sun is a vapor—a hopeless chasing after the wind. But what if Solomon had met Jesus and learned about the Gospel? What if he had been given a glimpse into God's vision and purpose for the human family in the mission and ministry of Christ? How would life have appeared to him if he could have captured a view of life in the SON instead of the narrow, limited perspective of life under the SUN?

St. Augustine considers this very idea in the *The City of God* where he argues about the fleeting happiness of life in the city of man compared to the city of God. Like many of today's philosophers and poets, the stoics claimed that given the proper balance of action and repose, one can achieve happiness in this life. But Augustine masterfully demolishes their arguments step by step, and, like Solomon of old, unmask the many illusions that people down through the ages have maintained about the "good life." His strongest argument is in the area of relationships. In a nutshell, Augustine argues, like Solomon, that relationships are the most important and valued experience in life under the sun, but even our cherished relationships disappoint as evidence for the good life at the thought of losing those we love through suffering or death.

Solomon tells the truth about life under the SUN. The illusions of the good life even for someone who had it all (his own assessment) were "*dust in the wind*," to quote the song by

Kansas. But what if there is more to life than living under the SUN? What if Augustine is right? What if Aslan is real and like the valiant Reepicheep in C. S. Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a glorious life in Aslan's land awaits us just beyond the surf of this world? What if our life under the SUN because of Jesus' victory over sin and death is just the trailer and life in the SON was God's intention all along? What if the *city of man* life is only the first leg of the journey on to a *city of God* life as we pass through the portal of Jesus' resurrection?

This is what we want to consider in this Journey series. There have been many, many Bible study guides written for the book of Ecclesiastes, but this one is inviting us to rethink it from the perspective of life in the SON in place of life under the SUN as Solomon critiqued it. In this journey through Qoheleth's account of the meaning of life I want to challenge us to see this book from the new perspective as a bridge between the despair of the Old Testament trailing off in broken covenant after broken covenant and hopeless future outside of God's intervention into the bright light of a new agreement between God and the human family. From this new horizon God takes on human flesh and enters into a new covenant with Himself and Jesus on our behalf as the federal head of our species to save the human family from sin and death. He is the SUN SON or light of God coming into our world (John 1:4, 5), penetrating the dark, hopeless, and meaningless life lamented by wise king Solomon.

Did God provide Solomon a prism of this light when he wrote about "eternity being set in our hearts" (Ecclesiastes 3:11), "who knows if the spirit of man rises up" in death (Ecclesiastes 3:20), and "going to our eternal home" (Ecclesiastes 12:5)? Certainly, but outside of God's promise and provision in Christ, these too are more of a vapor of light compared to Solomon's overall assessment echoed in the phrase "no one knows the future and who can tell what is to come" (Ecclesiastes 8:7; 10:14). Solomon is right—outside of the SON "we still haven't found what we're looking for" (Bono) and never will without the SON of righteousness lighting the way!

Titles and
Topics
Covered in
*Everything
Under the
SON*

Journey through Ecclesiastes doesn't follow a typical linear pattern from one chapter to the next as in "*round and round goes the wind*" (Ecclesiastes 1:6). Instead, we have opted for more of a thematic approach touching on the key criticisms of life under the SUN.

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Breaking
Down *Journey*

Journey was created for larger weekly on or off campus meetings in a teaching format and small group discussion. The beginning story or illustration introduces the topic of study. **Journey Together** helps ease participants into the topic through ice-breaker related questions. **Road Map** is the main passage for discussion followed by questions that help draw out the topic. If you are leading Journey, feel free to depart from these as needed and come up with your own questions, while staying on track with the main direction of the study laid out in the leader's guide. **My Story**

has been prepared as a continuation of the larger group meetings for smaller groups that meet during the week to check in with one another and reflect on how God is using Journey in their daily life. We recommend these groups be flexible in terms of location and meeting time. Also, the amount of questions are limited in the My Story section, allowing for more personal interactions and life application. **Back Story** is a helpful guide for those leading out in the Journey Series and is only included in the leader's book.

Getting the most out of *Journey*

Here's what you're going to need for Everything Under the SUN SON.

- Good soil—An open and receptive heart
- Working the soil—Determination and diligence
- Hunger & thirst—Desire to follow God as He leads

We also strongly advise reading the entire book of Ecclesiastes since Journey only zeroes in on selected passages. Use this study guide for your group reading/discussion. The important thing is to really lean into Solomon's life critique. Let Journey guide you through his lament. In fact, set it aside if it's getting in the way of hearing the Teacher. Remember, Ecclesiastes is the real study, not Journey!

Best Practices: The five S's of hearing and discerning God's voice

- **Seek**—Pray for God to open up the passage for you. Is there a promise for you to claim, a sin to confess, a word for you to follow, an insight to share?
 - **Soak**—Read the passage each day and write down any observations, thoughts, questions, connections, or anything God speaks to you about the passage.
 - **Seal**—Seal God's word to you deep within your heart by taking some time to meditate on the most important truth to you this week. Ask God to open the deeper recesses of your heart to teach you what you need most for your life this week.
 - **Script**—Journal or write if even a few lines, noting the ways that God spoke to you from the passage, your meditation, or our group time together. This will help you keep better track of God's voice and the way He is speaking through scripture.
 - **Share**—Share with someone what you are learning from your time with God in Journey. As you share what you are learning, it will help drive God's word home to you even more and you will notice how God will use what He has revealed to you to bless others.
-

Journey Covenant

I want to follow Jesus in the noble purpose He has for me. I want to participate in Journey to enhance my own relationship with God this year. I will commit to doing the weekly assignments and small group meetings.

Signature _____

My best times of availability are:

Morning: _____

Evening: _____

Email address _____

Phone _____

Life Meaning Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

Anne and Ben were both enthusiastic members of our college group. However, after their young marriage fell apart, Anne was disillusioned about life and God. How could she have been so wrong about Ben? Where was God? The break-up and divorce shook her to the core and left her questioning everything. She was a very new Christian and could not understand how God could have led her into such disappointment with Ben. The divorce caused her to back away from our fellowship and from God, and we lost touch for a while. A few years down the road I ran into her and asked her about her life now. She had met someone who she was truly in love with, but he was an agnostic. When I asked about her faith, she said she also had many doubts. She could no longer call herself a Christian. Her new religious label was *pedestrian*. She had given up on any grand purpose in life. She was on a journey with no certainties of what lay ahead.

That's the feeling I get from King Solomon in this first chapter of Ecclesiastes. Life under the sun had dissolved into an uncertain day after day existence. He had become a pedestrian journeying through life with no idea where it was going to end up. Life under the sun turned into one day after another, but life under the Son opens up a whole new vista of possibilities that could have changed everything for him. Let's compare the two perspectives.



1. What gives you the most joy in life and why?
2. What would you like printed on your tombstone?

Dead End Road Map 1: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

3. Can you identify with Solomon? Have you ever felt life has lost its meaning?
4. Would you consider Solomon to be depressed here? Have you ever felt trapped or depressed by the seeming monotony of life? How do you handle such disillusionment?



Road to Life Map 2: Romans 8:18-30

1. Solomon complains that there's nothing new going on. What are some new things you are experiencing right now in your life? What new thing is Paul waiting/hoping for in his message to the people of Rome?
2. What future hope are you looking forward to? What do you think Paul means by the glory to come?
3. How does the Spirit help us with the disillusionment of life under the sun? How have you experienced the Holy Spirit's help in forming a prayer to God?
4. How is God bringing something good out of a bad situation in your life? Describe what that looks like. What do you think Paul means by "all things working out for good"?
5. How does Paul describe life under the Son in this passage in comparison with Solomon's assessment of life under the sun in chapter one?
6. How can this group pray for you today?

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” Ephesians 1:17-19



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
2. What are you learning about God’s purpose in your life?
3. Who do you know that is struggling with life purpose? How can you help?



Backstory

Solomon had it all—all the money he could spend, all the power he could exert, more lovers than he could ever sleep with in a lifetime, and yet he writes how empty and meaningless it was. We might be tempted to want his life for even just a week and a week might not be long enough, but I’m willing to bet that if all we had was Solomon’s life—as luxurious as it might be to be us—we would still feel cheated watching it all come to an end in death.

What is life about? Why are we here? What is it for and where are we headed? These are the questions no matter how much money we have accumulated, how great our career, how stellar our reputation, and regardless of our race, gender, creed, or nationality. What was it all for? Why were we so fortunate to exist in the first place?

There are a couple of words in the Hebrew that place even more emphasis and importance on Solomon’s penetrating questions. The first is *hevel*, Hebrew for wind or vapor. It’s translated as meaningless throughout the book which isn’t necessarily the best rendering since a better English word for *hevel* might be confusion or unclear. The idea here is not that life has no meaning. It’s just that life’s meaning is not all that clear.

The three main ideas about life shared by the critic concern time, fate, and death. Life under the sun is bound by time and a person’s experience in life appears random and guided by fate with the end for all life on the planet—animal or human—in death. This makes the meaning of life indiscernible. In the chance that God has planned for our future, even His plans are unknowable. Life appears to have no meaning—*hevel*.

The other key word in this very first chapter is Qoheleth, teacher or critic. Solomon is credited as the author and is the critic of life under the sun. We get more background information in the very last chapter when we learn about the redactor or narrator who has compiled all the life insights and accumulated droplets of wisdom of King Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 12:9-14).

Solomon is said to have been the wisest man in all the earth (1 Kings 4:29-34). However, he appears to have lacked the first evidence of biblical wisdom—fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7). Solomon is also credited with many of the wise sayings in the book of Proverbs which provide a much more positive view of life and the book of Song of Songs—a very positive book about love and marriage. This begs the question—how does he get so far off the rails in this book? It has been suggested that Ecclesiastes was Solomon’s mid-life crisis. Whether that is true or not, leaning into God and putting Him first over his reputation and sensual pleasures might have afforded him more understanding of God’s greater purpose for his own life and the meaning of life in general.

Fortunately, God did have a plan. Life has not been left to chance and death is not our final destiny. If only Solomon could have seen and understood this, life could have meant so much more to him. Paul’s glorious picture of life under the Son in Romans 8 is a foretaste of

Wisdom

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

The first bit of wisdom I picked up in college was nobody owes me anything. Like many nuggets of wisdom, I learned it the hard way. I was sharing a place with a friend I had not known very long but got along with really well. We had a lot of fun together and were learning to trust one another. I was also becoming good friends with a girl that I was very attracted to. She was smart, fun to be with, had a great personality, and like my friend I was living with—a fairly new Christian. I thought things were going well with the “girlfriend” when the hard lesson landed upon me. My roommate met the girl I was hoping to woo into a dating relationship and jumped ahead of me. The two of them started going out.

I was surprised, hurt, and angry that my roommate had asked out the girl I liked. I imagined us better friends than for him not to consider my own intentions with her. His response was, “I don’t owe you anything!” I had to ruminate on what he said. Like I said, it was a hard lesson learned. The “girlfriend” had a right to date whomever she pleased and in the end I knew he was right. I had to chalk it up to an important lesson learned. I still believe that good friends are considerate and look out for one another. But as the old saying goes—all is fair in love and war and no one owes us anything. I have tried to incorporate that into my life ever since. It has saved me a lot of grief when things don’t go the way I want them to.



1. What are some of the life lessons you have learned?
2. Who is the wisest person you know and what makes them so wise?

Road Map of Fools: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 7:1-5

3. What is meaningless about wisdom under the sun?
4. What is the heavy burden that God has laid upon us and why is it a burden?
5. How is wisdom like an inheritance or shelter in Ecclesiastes 7:12?



Road Map of the Wise: I Corinthians 1:18-25

1. How does Paul compare the wisdom of life under the sun with the wisdom of God and life under the Son? How would the wisdom God expressed here make Solomon even wiser?
2. How does the cross of Christ reveal the wisdom of God? How does it confound the wise?
3. Why does the cross seem foolish to the Greeks and present a stumbling block to Jews?
4. When did the cross of Christ begin to make sense to you? How would you explain the wisdom of God that Paul talks about here to someone else?
5. How can this group pray for you today?

“Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? Wisdom makes one’s face shine, and the hardness of one’s countenance is changed.” Ecclesiastes 8:1



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about the wisdom of God?
 3. How can you help someone else discover God's wisdom?
-



Backstory

Solomon prayed for wisdom so he could be a wise and discerning king (1 Kings 3:7-10). Wisdom and knowledge were traits he prized greatly. We can tell by the number of Proverbs ascribed to him and by the account of the narrator of his personal search of wise sayings (12:9, 10). Still, he lamented how wisdom had escaped him. There were many things that he still did not understand—like what the future holds for anyone or what is really going on under the sun (8:17).

Chokhmah is the Hebrew word for wisdom in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and was considered the primary beginning force of the creative process. The Septuagint or Greek translation of the Old Testament renders Chokhmah as the feminine—Sophia.

The wisdom of Solomon 7:22b-8:1 is a famous passage describing Divine Wisdom:

"For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore, can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness. And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new: and in all ages entering into holy souls, she maketh them friends of God, and prophets" (Wisdom 7:25-27). Solomon fell in love with Wisdom: "I loved her, and sought her out from my youth, I desired to make her my spouse, and I was a lover of her beauty" (Wisdom 8:1).

In Solomon's great search for wisdom in Ecclesiastes, he seemed to be missing the very thing referred to in the apocryphal wisdom of Solomon, for in Proverbs 8, wisdom, like a virtuous woman, is calling out to us. We don't actually have to search for wisdom. The wisdom of God that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 1 is the wisdom in search of us. Like the virtuous woman in Proverbs 8, this wisdom is personified in Christ Jesus. He is the wisdom of God, but this wisdom doesn't appear so wise to us. It was foolishness to the Greeks because it seemed foolish to imagine how a crucified man could help anyone. It was a stumbling block to Jews because the transcendent God of the universe could never become human and if He did, could never be killed. Yet, the cross of Christ is the very demonstration of God's brilliant plan to redeem the planet and the human family by joining it and facing eternal death in our place.

The cross was the wisdom of God since it implicates the entire human family in our corporate sin-filled relationship to God. It pulled back the curtain on human sin and demonstrated in dramatic fashion the benevolent grace and mercy of God. God did not suddenly become gracious in the act of Christ's suffering and death. The cross provided a public display of who God is and always has been to the universe. God's love has always been the love of the crucified. Jesus' cross simply brought it all out in the open.

Wisdom under the sun is a wisdom we must search for—a wisdom we sometimes happen upon by hard knocks and bad decisions. Often, it's like a vapor—undiscernible, here today and gone tomorrow. But wisdom under the Son reaches out to us—calls to us, goes to the cross for us. This is the wisdom of God. It is the pearl of great price which when a person finds she is willing to sell all she has to have it, but the good news about this wisdom is how it searches us out and comes without price as God's free, wise, and wonderful gift!

Prosperity Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

Back in the day, Publisher's Clearing House was the mail order get rich scheme. Receiving the coupon in the mail addressed personally to me was one of my first realizations of transitioning into adulthood. I thought of all I could do with the money if I would be so fortunate to win. I could just imagine the sweepstakes van pulling up to our door and Ed McMahon (who was the face of Publisher's Clearing House back then) knocking on my door with our winning check.

I stood in the post office hallway holding the reply card, bargaining with God about how generous I would be with my winnings and then it hit me—I could be rich if I wanted to be. With all the advantages of living in a free capitalist country like the USA, theoretically anyone can be a millionaire if they want it bad enough. You just have to make it a priority. But prosperity is more than a fat bank account achieved by personal effort or having the winning number. Let's see what Solomon and Jesus have to say about living the good life from their diverse perspectives.



1. What was your first job and how much did you get paid?
2. What does prosperity look like for you?

Road Map of an Impoverished Soul: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

3. Solomon talks about being tested with pleasure. Have you ever been tested with pleasure? What do you think he means by that?
4. What are some of the great projects he undertook in his lifetime? Why does he consider all these endeavors meaningless?
5. What was missing in Solomon's prosperity?



Road Map to a Heavenly Inheritance: Matthew 19:16-30

1. What about the Rich Young Ruler story reminds you of Solomon's disillusionment? What wisdom could Solomon offer the young man about "the good life"?
2. How does Jesus define prosperity to the young man? How do their views on prosperity differ?
3. What did Jesus promise the disciples about prosperity in this life and the life to come? What is the key to prosperity in life under the Son?
4. Why does Jesus say it's hard for someone rich like Solomon or the young man to inherit eternal life?
5. How can this group pray for you today?

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:19-21



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about the good life?
 3. What do you need to let go of to receive more in return from God?
-



Backstory

It just makes sense that the more we have the more prosperous we should expect to feel, but Solomon's assessment on the good life goes contrary to that. Money, sex, and power—the things most people desire and never seem to get enough of—did not translate to a life filled with joy and happiness for him. It obviously wasn't enough for the Rich Young Ruler either or he wouldn't have been searching for more from Jesus.

So, why is less more? Jesus' recipe for the good life is the opposite of acquiring more and more. As I once heard in a sermon many years ago, life under the sun is about getting all we can, canning all we get, and sitting on the lid. But life in the Son is about letting go of the pursuit of happiness in this world to inherit so much more in the world that Jesus came to give us. The Rich Young Ruler was holding onto a small earthly fortune compared to unlimited eternal riches in the generous hands of Christ.

Christian author C. S. Lewis once remarked that the problem is not that our desires are too great, but in fact too small:

"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*

Solomon spells out the issue perfectly: *"The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity."* Ecclesiastes 5:10

So, what will satisfy? What will fill and complete us so that we hunger and thirst no more? Like the selfish, greedy Edmond in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the pleasures of this world only leave us wanting for more. There will never be enough Turkish Delight to satisfy the cravings of our soul.

Solomon, the young man in Matthew's gospel and all of us in truth, will only find true prosperity in life under the Son. German Catholic theologian Meister Eckhart explains this beautifully:

"For God does not give us anything in order that we should enjoy its possession and rest content with it, nor has he ever done so. All the gifts which he has ever granted us in heaven or on earth were made solely in order to be able to give us the one gift, which is himself. With all other gifts he simply wants to prepare us for that gift which is himself. And all the works which God has ever performed in heaven or on earth served solely to perform the one work, that is to sanctify himself so that he can sanctify us. And so, I tell you that we should learn to see God in all gifts and works, neither resting content with anything nor becoming attached to anything. For us there can be no attachment to a particular manner of behavior in this life, nor has this ever been right, however successful we may have been." Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*

Again, life under the sun will never equal life under the Son. This world will only leave us with a God-shaped void filled only by God Himself.

"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."
Augustine, *Confessions*

Time

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

I once had a nightmare where time was running out. In my dream I was back in college and had a paper due that I was feverishly working on but getting nowhere. My notes were scattered, I couldn't even identify a coherent theme, and the paper was due the next day. Suddenly the dream shifted to anxiety about relationships. Why was I not married yet? How could I meet someone? Time was getting away from me and I needed to get on with my life. As I explored potential prospects in my dream, different people I had dated came to mind and I thought of how I might get back in touch with them. Then my wife came to mind and I thought I should contact her to see how her life was going. As I considered how we might reconnect, suddenly reality kicked in. I woke up and calmed down, realizing we were connected and married. Carolyn and I were completely happy together.

When I woke up I was so thankful to have her in my life and to not have to rejoin the dating scene. I was also aware that college and seminary were distant memories with no papers due. I'm not sure what time crunch I was facing, but time under the sun was definitely bearing down upon me about something. Let's see how life under the Son blows apart the space/time continuum!



1. What is your favorite season and why?
2. What is the most important date you ever missed?

Road Map Through Time: Ecclesiastes 3:1-17

3. Solomon says there is a time for everything under the sun. Is assigning a time for everything a good thing or a bad thing—why or why not? What do you never seem to have enough time for?
4. What do you think Solomon is suggesting by God setting eternity in our hearts?
5. Is Solomon promoting hedonism or gratitude in verses 12 and 13? Explain why you answered the way you did.
6. What is the relationship between time and God bringing everything into judgement?



Road Map to Eternity: Acts 17:22-31

1. Paul claims that times and habitations are fixed by God in order that we might find Him. How can the limitation of time help in our search for God?
2. Paul also states that a day (time) has been designated by God in which He will judge the world by the person of Christ. What does the judgement of Christ reveal about the future?
3. Why did the philosophers of Athens scoff at Paul's message of the resurrection of Christ?
4. What are the implications of the resurrection of Jesus concerning time under the sun?
5. How can this group pray for you today?

"Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." II Peter 3:8



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How is God using this week's study to set eternity in your heart?
 3. How is God helping you find a time for everything under the Son?
-



Backstory

Another problem under the sun that Solomon is fixated with is time. Maybe you can identify with him. He says that there is a time for everything, but I sometimes wonder about that since I never seem to have enough time. Take for instance the writing of this Bible study series. I felt pushed for time to complete these lessons before our upcoming ACF Institute for which they are being prepared.

Time is one of the fixed laws of nature that keeps us moving in a linear forward motion. The famous astrophysicist Stephen Hawking was working on a unified theory to solve the limitation of time when he died. Time caught up with him like it does with all of us.

The limitation or constraint of time is one of the main reasons why Solomon determined life is a meaningless vapor. The struggle to define life's meaning is unknowable because of the time constraint. Why is the universe so perfectly designed for life, yet contingent on time?

In the Genesis creation story, life under the sun as God willed and created it was not contingent on time, but on human trust and obedience. The beings God made in His own image were designed to live forever in the idyllic garden, eating from the tree of life. Sin brought in the contingent of time (Genesis 3:22-24). Still, the human family lived much longer in the antediluvian world before the flood. The longer duration of life after sin only served to speed up world destruction and judgement (Genesis 6:3). In this case, the constraint of time and a shortened life span was God's safeguard for the planet. Confusing the common language and human dispersion was another protection from God against world annihilation (Genesis 11:5-9). This is probably what Paul has in mind when he talks about God determining our times of existence and the boundaries of our habitations in order for us to find Him protecting us from human destruction (Acts 17:26, 27).

The time constraint that Solomon refers to in Ecclesiastes 3 is then a grace from God to save us from ourselves, but the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the ministry of Christ is a true time travel taking us back to the garden before sin entered, imposing the consequence of death and the limitation of time. Christ's resurrection dismantled the power of sin and death was ended. Paul mocks the power of death and its time constraint in his letter to the Corinthians:

"What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'" I Corinthians 15:50-57

The contingency of time under the sun has been split wide open by the death of death in Christ's resurrection. Life in the Son is the answer to Solomon's lament about a time assigned for everything under the sun for He has made everything beautiful in His time!

Justice

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

We had some work done on our house recently and were basically taken for a ride. Job performance was poor and workers were inexperienced. Our contractor finally left the job unfinished with construction materials piled up in our backyard. We contacted the finance company that disbursed our loan money to the contractor, but they were unable to do anything more than exert some limited pressure on him. We even submitted a construction complaint to the Contractor State Licensing Board against him, but they lacked the authority to do anything more than pressure and cajole him to do the right thing. In the end, we were left to either sue the builder or continue to put pressure on him to reimburse us for work we paid for that he never completed.

Solomon complains that another sour note about life under the sun is the issue of injustice—the injustice of wickedness in place of justice and righteousness, and of the similar fate of animals and humans that both end their life in death. Is God just? This is the moral question of the universe. Life under the sun leaves it an open question, while life under the Son is an emphatic yes!



1. When was the last time you were treated unfairly?
2. If you could choose one of your pets to go to heaven, which one would it be and why?

Road Map to Indifference: Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

3. What is unjust about life under the sun according to Solomon?
4. What do you think is meant by, "I said in my heart..."? Is Solomon posing a wish here or stating a fact about God's justice?
5. Where do you think animals or humans go when they die?
6. How does knowing something about the hereafter provide meaning and purpose to what happens in the present?



Road Map to Justice for All: John 8:1-11

1. What are your thoughts, concerns, or questions about the story between Jesus and the woman caught in adultery?
2. What is different from this story about justice in life under the Son compared to life under the sun?
3. What do you think Jesus wrote in the sand that turned the woman's accusers away one by one?
4. In life under the sun, Solomon considers in his heart what God will do in deciding the fate of all living things. What could he have learned about God's sense of justice in life under the Son from this story?
5. How can this group pray for you today?

"The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." John 5:22, 24



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How do you compare the justice of God in life under the sun with life under the Son?
 3. Why is it important to know that God has committed all judgement of the human family over to Jesus?
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Backstory

The unfairness of life under the sun permeates the entire book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon is critical of the many injustices of life such as the wicked receiving what should be given the righteous, wisdom going unrecognized and unappreciated, uncertainty about the future, a similar fate for animals and humans, and the seeming capriciousness of God who has all the power to do whatever He chooses with the affairs of men. These are just some of the things that he lists as life's inequities and contributes to the meaningless of life under the sun.

Underneath all the complaints is Solomon's basic uncertainty about God and His purpose for the world. This is somewhat surprising since he seems to also be in the dark about God's original plan in creation and provision for the fall with one exception:

"God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes." Ecclesiastes 7:29

Is God just? Job also questions this. He longs for a mediator who will help decide his case and declare him innocent or guilty, but God is nowhere to be found:

"For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand on us both." Job 9:32, 33

Unfortunately, life under the sun leaves us hanging. If we could only get a meeting with God, but He is in heaven and we are on earth and our issues seem so small in comparison with all that's going on throughout the universe.

But life under the Son provides a different story about God and His justice. In life under the Son, God comes to us, spends years with us, walks in our sandals, eats our food, and experiences the raw side of human injustice first-hand. Jesus not only understands how unjust we are to each other; He was personally treated unjustly as the religious leaders did their best to trap Him but could bring no charge against Him (Luke 23:1-4).

Still, Jesus could easily and understandably condemn us. He was without sin and in the case of the woman the one who could rightfully cast the first stone. But thankfully, Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17). When others wanted Him to judge the woman, Jesus stooped down to her level and sat with her on the ground. Instead of throwing her sin in her face, he wrote with His finger in the sand that could easily be blown away in the wind.

Justice is one of the clear and present evidences of Jesus' kingdom. Others were love, God's authority over sickness, disease and the devil, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. But wherever the message of the kingdom was proclaimed, injustice was also addressed, and this story was one of the clearest examples. She was caught in the very act. She deserved to be stoned, but where sin had bound her life, Jesus set her free first from God's wrath, but even more importantly from sin's firm grip on her life. He told her, *"Neither do I condemn you. Now go (in the power of my love) and sin no more."*

Life under the sun is about the endless search for fairness in a world of injustice, while life under the Son is about being wrapped in the arms of a just and merciful God. We are no longer in search of justice. Justice has found us and invites us to come home!

Relationships

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

Our son Brian (pseudonym) learned about friendship the hard way. He was so excited to finally attend the middle school where many of his neighborhood friends were going. He would be with other kids he knew. He had been planning this with his good friend Jason for a couple of years and his mom and I finally agreed to let him transfer from church school to public school. But things didn't actually work out as he had planned. Jason treated him badly and acted like he didn't even know him. He was an outcast in a much larger school and an environment he had never been in before.

Another neighborhood friend suggested he transfer to the magnet school where he attended. Mark was a true friend. When others made fun of him for being the new kid, Mark stood up for him. He brought him in to meet all his buddies. He did whatever he could to make Brian feel welcome. Brian tells the awkward story of one time being caught with his zipper down. To support his friend, Mark unzipped his own pants to show all his friends how cool Brian was. Mark taught Brian how to be a true friend. It was a lesson he never forgot and has shown up in his own life when others have been left out or marginalized. Relationships under the sun were at the top of Solomon's list, but even these could easily dissolve into envy and bitterness. If only he could have seen how different relationships could be under the Son.



1. Who was your closest childhood friend?
2. What lessons have your friends taught you about relationships?

Road Map to Envy and Strife: Ecclesiastes 4:4-12

3. According to Solomon, what is the primary motivation in life under the sun?
4. What do you think Solomon means by two folded hands as opposed to one? Why is one hand with tranquility better than two folded hands?
5. How easy is it for you to ask for help or to help someone else?
6. What was meaningless about the business described in v. 8?



Road Map to Intimacy: John 15:9-17

1. What do we learn in these verses about love and friendship under the Son?
2. What is the relationship between the love that Jesus received from His Father and His love for the disciples?
3. Why is it important to note that Jesus chose the disciples as opposed to them choosing Him? How does our love for one another demonstrate life under the Son?
4. Do you feel more like a servant of Jesus or a friend? What does a friendship with Jesus look like for you?
5. How can this group pray for you today?

"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death." 1 John 3:14



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about relationships under the Son?
 3. Why is it important that Jesus considers you His friend?
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Backstory

In this dog-eat-dog world, relationships are the lifeline that keep us going, yet Solomon admits that relationships under the sun can easily dissolve into envy and strife. He seems to be addressing or getting close to the sin of covetousness—the tenth commandment—the one which led to the first murder of Cain killing his brother.

We desperately need one another, but under the sun we compete and become jealous of each other so much so that it keeps us from our own success as in folding our hands and refusing to do anything to help ourselves. We lack balance and the ability to appreciate each other and to work together.

“Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh. Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind.” Ecclesiastes 4:5, 6

The thought is this: The fool who folds his hands in idleness and defiance consumes his own life-strength. Better is the balance between personal effort and rest than the struggle of windy effort in an endless rivalry.

Still, Solomon acknowledges the huge benefit of the support of another (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Solomon says that it’s better to be with someone else—two are better than one. Being alone is a miserable business. But under the sun even good relationships become “empty wind.” First, everyone dies—so in the best of relationships, there is an end to it. And the Critic rightly asks, what’s the point? Second, most every relationship under the sun is transactional—give and take. I give what I think will enable me to take: What do I have to do to get what I want? I want to be safe, so I find someone else to become my ally. I want to be warm, so I find someone to share the covers. I want to succeed, so I find someone else to share my dreams/efforts/goals. In the earthly context, relationships are usually full of self-interest.

But life under the Son is different—relationships between people flow out of relationship with Christ. And Christ simply loves—without judgment, expectation, negotiation, or condition. Jesus announced a new commandment: “Love each other as I have loved you.” Relationships based on that kind of love are not transactional or self-serving. Such love—*agapē*—can only come from God, who is love. And love that is from God never comes to an end.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” 1 John 4:7-12

Loving relationships with God and one another are what we were made and meant for. They provide meaning and purpose to life. They are what Solomon was searching for, but the missing ingredient was God’s love—the love of the Son. Life in and under the Son is the antidote to envy, bitterness, and the empty transactional relationships resulting from life under the sun!

Work

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

I can personally identify with Solomon on the disappointment of building something beautiful just to release it to someone else. As an undergrad, I took a woodworking class and built our own oak trestle table (Ethan Allan design). It had pull out extension leaves on either end with seating capacity of up to sixteen. I also made some benches to match since we couldn't afford chairs.

Over the years many, many people gathered around our beautiful table for holidays and special occasions. Unfortunately, when we moved to our current house, the dining room was too small for such a big table and we had to store it in our dingy basement. Unfortunately, the basement was not kind to our table. It collected moisture and needed minor structural repair. What to do with it? Sell it? Donate it? We pulled it out and began a restoration. After refinishing the surface, it looked beautiful again—like new! But we still lacked the space to keep it in our dining room. Imagine our disappointment after building it and refurbishing it only to loan it out to some family friends that had space for it. This is Solomon's relent in all the work we undertake under the sun. Whatever beautiful thing we create or accomplish will one day be left to others after we are gone. How is human toil under the Son more satisfying than toil under the sun?



1. Describe something you made with your own hands. How important is it to you and why?
2. What is something you have given away or lost that you wish you still had?

Road Map to Hard Labor: Ecclesiastes 2:17-23

3. What about toil under the sun causes Solomon to hate life?
4. When has your *heart begun to despair over all your toilsome labor under the sun*? Describe what that feels like and how it contributes to a meaningless existence.
5. How do you feel about someone else enjoying the benefit of your accomplishments?
6. What is the difference between job and vocation and how does understanding the difference help answer Solomon's question about *what people get for all their toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun*?



Road Map to Lasting Treasure: Matthew 6:19-24

1. What do these verses advise about building up treasures on earth? What do earthly treasures reveal about our hearts?
2. What does bad eyesight or blurred vision have in common with what Solomon refers to as *the vexation of work* under the sun?
3. How do you keep an eternal perspective in the work you do and how does it guard against the futility of work under the sun?
4. How can this group pray for you today?

"Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God."
1 Corinthians 10:31



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about the difference between a job and vocation?
 3. How is your work more than a job and glorifying God?
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Backstory

Karl Marx must have read Ecclesiastes 2. He condemned capitalism as a system that alienates the masses since workers produce things for the market and market forces—not workers—control things. People are required to work for others who have full control over the means of production and maintain power in the workplace. Marx's ideas sound vaguely similar:

"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." Ecclesiastes 2:21

Selecting a major and breaking into the job market is what college is all about. Still, it doesn't take long after graduation for many students to chafe over the long road of a life of employment—regardless of how much they appreciate their boss or enjoy what they do. Solomon and Marx have a point. Having a job is more than acquiring wealth or padding the pocket of rich CEOs—as President Joe Biden is famous for reminding us (a piece of wisdom he received from his father). The importance of a job is about the pride of accomplishing something and becoming part of a community while also paying your bills.

But Solomon or Marx would not necessarily disagree with Biden. There's nothing wrong with work. The problem as they define it is about working hard to pad the pocket of someone else instead of reaping the benefit for ourselves. Here's where Jesus comes in. As with many of His criticisms, Jesus actually agrees with Solomon. Why work for what we have, build, or accomplish, only to be reduced to rust, eaten by moths, or stolen by another? Jesus' answer to Solomon and Marx is to see the bigger picture of working for eternal realities instead of building treasure for life under the sun. It's all about perspective. What are we building and building for? This is why Jesus talks about our eyes. What are we seeing? Consider the bricklayer who was working on rebuilding St. Paul's Cathedral in London after the great fire of 1666 that had leveled London. When asked what he was doing, unlike his previous colleagues who answered, *"Laying bricks to feed my family"* or *"I'm building a wall,"* the third man answered, *"I'm a cathedral builder. I'm building a great cathedral to The Almighty."*

What is it for? Are we working for a greater purpose? What is our life work producing and for whom? Our eyes are a window into our soul and our soul is what Jesus is concerned about. If our window (eye) is blurry or fixated on the wrong object, then our soul will be led to cherish the wrong things. What are we focused on? Do we see our work, possessions, and accomplishments from the narrow perspective of personal benefit and life under the sun? Or, have our eyes opened to the world that Jesus sees—an endless world where all we do, the people we touch, and whatever we build and accomplish lives on forever?

Jesus' broader vision of a world without end where what we build, invest in, or acquire can never be stolen, eaten by moths, or rusted away makes everything we do now and forever of eternal worth. It is the difference between having a job or pursuing a vocation. Are we merely working to make money or are we also working for what gives us meaning, for the good of others, and for the eternal glory of God's kingdom? When our toil under the sun honors the Son then all we do will benefit us, bless others, and advance the glorious purpose of God.

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.'" Revelation 14:13

Balance

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

I love food and the saltier, the sweeter, and the richer tasting, the better. But ... I recently learned that I have cardiovascular disease and am now forced to go on a low sodium, low fat, and low sugar diet. While I was in the hospital recovering from a major heart attack, my family scoured the refrigerator and dry goods cabinet for anything that did not meet the new requirements and gave away nearly eight bags of groceries. Embracing the new dietary restrictions have been painful, but as much as I love food, I love living more so I am learning to appreciate the new austere measures.

I am also learning about balance. The pendulum had definitely swung too far to the rich food's category. On the other hand, I could not imagine keeping up the bland diet forever. I am now learning to find a healthy, tasty medium–thesis, antitheses toward synthesis. I'm learning to watch my salt intake without eliminating it altogether. The same holds true about my sweet tooth. As for fat and animal products, I have adopted a basic vegan diet that is still taking some getting used to. As Solomon suggests, stay measured in all things—especially work and fun. But how can we achieve that when we feel so pushed by the clock of time? Here is where life under the Son again is the answer to the unbalanced neurosis of life under the sun.



1. What have you ever done to the extreme in religion or revelry?
2. Where are you finding the most balance in your life right now? Explain.

Road Map to Instability: Ecclesiastes 7:15-18

3. Can you think of anyone who has perished in their righteousness? What do you think Solomon means by this?
4. How can being too righteous or wise lead to our destruction?
5. What is the balance between wickedness/foolishness and righteousness/wisdom? How does imbalance with these lead to an early death?
6. What do you think Solomon means by "fear of God" and how does it lead to life balance?



Road Map to a Perfect Rhythm: Matthew 11:28-30

1. Jesus offers rest to all. How does proper rest lead to life balance?
2. What does Jesus mean by taking on His yoke? What is the yoke He is referring to here and how does taking it on lead to soul rest?
3. What is the relationship between Jesus' invitation to come to Him and the "fear of God" that Solomon referred to?
4. How has the yoke of Jesus been easier than being unyoked? How has being yoked up to Christ brought a restful balance to your life?

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Philippians 4:12b, 13



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about the importance of life balance?
 3. Where do you need more balance in your life right now?
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Backstory

Balance is what all of us are looking for in life under the sun. It's why we do yoga, practice mindfulness, pray, take vacations, and go on spiritual retreats. We are looking for the pause button on the endless treadmill of life. Solomon reveals his wisdom here when he emphasizes finding the healthy medium, but is there a medium between being righteous and wicked—wise and foolish? Do we really want to find a middle ground between these? Have you ever met a religious fanatic? One definition I heard for fanaticism is redoubling our efforts when we've lost our aim.

The truth is that religion can often become a place for neurotic people to hide in their neurosis rather than deal with it. When perfection is misinterpreted as righteousness, the more neurotic one is, the more righteous one can appear. In this case righteousness in balance looks like non-commitment or divided devotion. On the other hand—is it possible to be balanced and partly wicked? As Solomon seems to argue, if we are going to be wicked, balance means not going all the way. Here again, is there such a thing as a balance between wisdom and foolishness? If so, would that be mediocrity? It makes sense for him to wrap up his argument by appealing to the fear of God, but what does it mean to fear God?

In this case, God is the very definition of balance. He is the one we look too for a truly balanced life. Still, Solomon lived in the Old Testament, and the God of the Old Testament did not always appear so balanced. Considering God as foolish or wicked in the Old Testament is unimaginable. He is the very definition of wisdom and righteousness, but interestingly enough, God searched His own wisdom in creating the world when He saw how sin had brought so much destruction on the earth (Genesis 6:5-7), and His righteousness led Him to burn with anger to the point of nearly wiping them out on the spot when the Israelites disobeyed Him by forming and worshipping a golden calf idol (Exodus 32:9, 10). Job also wrestled with a balanced picture of God (Job 9:2-13).

Fearing the God of the Old Testament borders on real fear instead of respect and awe. This view of God will never help us avoid extremes.

Solomon, the antediluvian world, the Israelites, and Job were all in need of a new picture of God if fearing God under the sun would ever translate into respect over abject fear. Enter Jesus—a more human revelation of God and life under the Son. In Jesus we discover the true balance we are looking for. His balanced life shows up in the life rhythm of trusting completely and unequivocally in His Father. This is the pattern He invites all into:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." Matthew 11:28-30 (Message)

Jesus lived the balanced life that He invites us all into. Taking on His yoke means to adopt His life as our own. When He was tempted, He turned to God's word (Matthew 3:17; 4:4). When He needed ministry direction, He sought it from His Father in prayer (Mark 1:35-39). When it was time to celebrate mission achievements, He attributed all ministry success to His Father (Luke 10:21-24). In His deepest distress, He resolutely clung to His Father without fault (Luke 22:39-44).

Balance in a scale comes from the perfect center point. Jesus is our center point of balance. Righteousness and wisdom are personified in His perfect love for sinful human beings and unwavering trust in God. Balance will never come from balance—between righteousness and wickedness/foolishness and wisdom or anything else—but from Jesus as our perfect aim and focus. Living under the Son instead of the sun results in balance and equilibrium as a way of life—*"the unforced rhythm of grace!"*

Fate

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

When I was serving as a chaplain at the University of Tennessee, I had a student come to me about his life purpose. He had been in a terrible automobile accident that he believed he should not have survived, nevertheless here he was. He was left with many physical disabilities, but even more importantly, serious brain injuries, making speaking difficult. The question he had was, "Does God exist, and could I prove it?"

Before the accident he considered himself an atheist, yet surviving the accident made him wonder if fate, God, or the universe had somehow spared his life. If God did exist and allowed him to live, he wanted to know why. I tried to help him with the evidence for God while making clear that proving God is impossible. Only God can prove His existence. Nothing seemed to satisfy him.

Finally, he agreed that a simple miracle performed by God would be enough for him to believe. I asked, "What kind of miracle?" He replied that something as simple as praying for the lights in the room to turn on though the switch was in the off position. I wanted to make sure that simply having the lights turn on would be enough. Initially he said, "Yes." Then he thought for a moment and said, "Well, I guess there could be another explanation for the lights coming on while our eyes are closed." The bottom line is it is easier for people to believe that life under the sun is controlled by fate than to believe in the providential working of God. Let's see how life under the Son challenges the fatalism of chance.



1. When have you ever questioned God's existence?
2. When was the last time you experienced God's providence?

Road Map to Chance: Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

3. How do you feel about poverty or prosperity as our lot in life?
4. What is the difference between Solomon's understanding of God's interaction with our lives and fate?
5. Have you ever felt that your life is completely outside your control—that God is pulling all the strings for good or evil?



Road Map to Providence: Ephesians 1:3-14

1. How is being predestined in Christ different than determinism or fate?
2. Sin was the choice made by the human family signaling our eternal fate. But here, Paul spells out that we have been *chosen* by God, *included* in Christ, and *marked* by His Holy Spirit for salvation. What does this say about choice and fate?
3. How is life *in the heavenly realms* different than life under the sun?
4. Paul blesses God for acting on our behalf in Christ. How has God intervened in your life? What difference has it made?

"God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating." Colossians 1:13, 14



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about God's providential workings?
 3. How are you helping others discover their destiny in Christ?
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Backstory

Time, fate, and death is why Solomon complains that life is a vapor and its meaning difficult to discern. If all we have is our life under the sun, then he is right—we are left to fate, the fate of pain or pleasure, prosperity or adversity, the good life or bad. According to Solomon's world-view, the pursuit of pleasure and getting all we can out life makes sense.

A good friend commented the other day that the universe doesn't care. He kept repeating it. It was in response to someone in our group who was concerned about their life, career, and how others perceived them. I thought about digging into his comment but chose to let it go since it was meant to relieve his friend rather than as a fixed life axiom—still, he was right. The universe doesn't care and yet so many behave as if—or at least hope that—it does. I often hear things like “throw it out to the universe and see what comes back,” or hear of people praying to the universe as if the universe had a conscience and a will. It's like expecting answers from your astrological sign or the reading tarot cards. As I stopped to reconsider it, my friend had discovered a truth that even the wisest man on earth didn't quite comprehend—the universe doesn't care.

But questioning if God exists and if He cares is another thing. This is closer to what Solomon was referring to. He suggests that God is in control of everything and because of the boundaries of space, time, and the certainty of death, God is a kind of divine puppeteer and human beings His minarets. There's not a lot we can do to improve our circumstances. We live in a kind of celestial class system with God over and above the life cycle.

Job presents a similar view of God and the human family. In fact, the whole book, from the heavenly court scene in the beginning where the representatives from different worlds convene to talk about life on their planets to the closing chapters where God addresses Job with the answer that Job is not God and lacks a divine perspective, how God interacts and plays the puppet master is never really addressed. We are left with Solomon and Job's view of God controlling the affairs of life under the sun and were it not for Jesus and the New Testament corrective this would be our reality.

From the new and human revelation of God in Christ we learn that God is in control of the affairs of people, but not in the way that Solomon and Job describe. The freedom to disobey and reject God's interaction in our lives affirmed by God in the garden (Genesis 2) is upheld. We have been given a choice and God respects our choice for independence. However, independence from God is a death sentence since He is the source of life. To be truly independent of God is to unplug from the life source. This poses a dilemma for maintaining our freedom yet intervening to save us from death. How can God truly respect our freedom and keep us from eternal death at the same time?

Look at Paul's answer to this question:

“He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.” Ephesians 1:4, 5

God predetermined life for the human family in case we chose death by independence from Him. This does not mean that individuals are predetermined for salvation or destruction. It means that from the very beginning the human family was predetermined by God for life even if we chose death by rejecting Him. We had a real choice in the beginning, and we have another choice now. God's answer to the sin problem was to become human and destroy the power of death by accepting the consequence of our sin and offering us the choice of life in and through Him. But it is a real choice. We can take our chances and live by the fate we have chosen. This is our lot in life under the sun, but life under the Son is a whole different story!

Judgement

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

I recently was given a speeding ticket while transitioning from a higher speeding zone down to a lower one. I didn't realize I was speeding and wondered why I was being stopped. I tried to plead my way out of it making the usual excuses that I had never noticed the change in speed zone, but to no avail. To dismiss the points against my driving record and avoid the fine, I would need to plead my case in traffic court before the judge.

I decided to go for it and gamble that the police officer might not show up to prosecute my case. I rehearsed what I was going to say to the judge. Imagine my relief when the judge called my name, and the officer didn't show. The judge asked how I wanted to plead. Of course, I told her not guilty and since my accuser hadn't bothered to show, she dismissed the case.

One day, according to Solomon, we will have a hearing before the judge of the universe and trust me that the prosecuting attorney will definitely be there to accuse and prosecute our case. The Devil knows every infraction we have ever committed under the sun. Fortunately, our judge is also our advocate, knows our case, and has already served our sentence. Like the judge I went before, He has the power to dismiss the case. This is the difference between divine judgement under the sun and judgement under our perfect attorney and judge—the living Son of God.



1. What are some things you wish you hadn't done as a child?
2. When was your last court appearance?

Road Map to Reckoning: Ecclesiastes 3:15-18

3. What concerns you most about God calling the past to account in your life?
4. Where have you seen wickedness in the place of justice and judgement? What do you think Solomon means by this?
5. Solomon argues that there is a time for everything—even a time for judgement. Why is divine judgement important and necessary for life under the sun?
6. What deeds do you think will weigh heaviest in our judgement?



Road Map to Acquittal: John 5:24-30

1. How would you compare divine judgement according to Solomon and Jesus?
2. According to Jesus, a time has been set of life or death for the human family. Even the dead will rise for divine judgement. What or who is the basis for this judgement and the only way to prepare for it?
3. Jesus says there is a way to avoid God's judgement altogether. How is this possible and how does it offer peace for the future?
4. Solomon says that justice and judgement under the sun is subject to wickedness. What is shielding judgement under the Son from this?

"For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." John 9:39



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What are you learning about judgement under the Son?
 3. How can you help others prepare for divine judgement?
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Backstory

Judgement is a recurring theme in Ecclesiastes. On the one hand Solomon says, “a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil” (Ecclesiastes 2:24). But he also reminds us that, “God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed” (Ecclesiastes 3:17).

According to Solomon, life meaning is difficult to discern so we might as well enjoy it and grab as much pleasure as we can. Still, God will bring our lives and the way we live under divine scrutiny to determine eternal rewards. But how pleasurable can life be knowing that “we better watch out, we better not cry, we better not pout, I’m telling you why—God is coming to town!”

Why is judgement necessary? If God is omniscient, He already knows the verdict. Surely hosting a session of divine judgement is not for Him. Is the Devil calling for judgement? Does he even have a right to demand justice as the ultimate cause of human sin and rebellion? Is the judgement for us, and if so, why?

A lot of things have gone wrong on planet earth and a full review of the facts are necessary. As I write this study, the United States House of Representatives just passed a bill for a bipartisan commission to review the events of January 6, 2021, when rioters stormed the US Capitol. Many feel that a bipartisan commission is the best and only way to get a full account of what led up to the attack, what happened, and who was ultimately responsible. If storming the capitol to deny an American election needs a full review, then how much more important and necessary is a full and complete accounting of how things got so far off the rails with planet earth, the universe, and the human family? Billions of people from every generation on earth have a right to know why life under the sun can seem so meaningless or downright horrific given that scripture affirms a good and loving Creator!

What then is God’s defense of His actions on how things took such a turn from paradise in Genesis 1 & 2 to what life under the sun turned into? It is a far cry from what scripture lays out as God’s original plan.

As our Good, Good Father, God’s answer to the wrong course of human history is to accept the consequences, but not the responsibility. Responsibility for the Fall has been left to our accuser—the Devil—for leading the human family away from God into rebellion and sin. The counter approach to divine judgement in John 5 is that God joins the human family in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who not only becomes human but assumes the role of federal head of the human race in place of Adam, head of the human family who plunged the world into sin.

Jesus is the new Adam. In Him God is pressing the restart button by forming a new humanity through Him. But first Jesus must accept the virus of human sin, nailing it to the cross and burying sinful humanity in the grave. However, since Jesus never succumbed to sin Himself, and only accepted the consequence of sin on our behalf, the grave could not hold Him. He rose from the ashes of human sin in His own sinless life to offer us an end of our life in Adam and a new and sinless life in Him.

As our perfect sacrifice for sin, Jesus is our defense attorney pleading our case for life. He is also judge since He alone knows the full weight of sin’s demise. In the end, only He could dismiss our case—not by merely forgiving us, but by bearing sin’s consequence of eternal death.

Judgement is necessary to review all the facts and atone for the guilty. Judgement under the sun leaves us facing it on our own, while judgement under the Son has already occurred and left us free from death and assured of eternal life in Him!

“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”
I John 5:12

Destiny

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

The year 2020 seemed more like an apocalyptic movie where the earth stood still, held captive by a tiny virus that during the writing of this lesson had swallowed up the lives of 3.4 million people worldwide. Fortunately, in our family the pandemic was more of an interruption and inconvenience. We found ways to continue working online and to even hold virtual church and campus ministry services. None of our immediate family contracted the virus with the exception of a cousin from my wife's side of the family who also suffered with many other extenuating health issues.

However, all this changed when a good friend of mine who was a doctor came down with the virus and surprisingly succumbed to it. He always seemed invincible to me, but as Solomon complains—no one escapes death. Not even the wisest man in all the earth, which is one of his greatest complaints. The meaning of life under the sun is not easy to discern due to time, fate, and the inescapable reality of death for all—animal and human. The sun sets for all in life under the sun. How does life under the Son change all that? Let's compare these together!



1. What are two things on your bucket list?
2. What do you think happens to people after they die?

Road Map of Destiny: Ecclesiastes 9:3-6, 10

3. How would you describe Solomon's understanding of death?
4. Of all there is to dread about death, what is most distressing? What concerns you most about death?
5. Solomon claims that death is final—no awareness, no knowledge, no afterlife. How do you feel about that? What do you think about those who disagree with Solomon and hope in an afterlife?
6. Who do you miss most that has died? Who would like to see again and why?



Road Map to Eternity: John 11:1-44

1. What surprises you most about this story?
2. Why was Jesus glad that Lazarus had died?
3. How does Jesus define death under the sun? How is death under the sun different than death under the Son?
4. What is the connection between the raising of Lazarus and Jesus' own resurrection from the dead? What hope do you glean from these stories for your loved ones who have died and our own impending death?
5. How can this group pray for you?

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'" John 11:25, 26



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What does Jesus' victory over death mean to you?
 3. Who do you know that could benefit from hope in the resurrection?
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Backstory

Impending death seems to be Solomon's worst nightmare with life under the sun. It pops up over and over again. We don't like talking about death, but Solomon can't stop mentioning it. No matter how good life has been for some, whether rich or poor, blessed or cursed, happy or sad—death comes to all, making life under the sun very temporal.

In Ecclesiastes 9, Solomon's lament hits fever pitch with the hard truth of the finality of death.

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." Ecclesiastes 9:10

But Solomon wasn't the only one who viewed the realm of the dead as permanent. Hades, god of the dead in Greek mythology, controlled the afterlife. Unlike Solomon, the Greeks viewed death differently. The dead had a continued existence, but it was of no importance or meaning. The dead were more like zombies. Hell was a prison house of the soul and there is no record of anyone ever leaving it to reenter the land of the living.

This is probably why those who listened to Paul's account of Jesus on Mars Hill and witness to His resurrection from the dead laughed at him, since no one in Greek mythology had ever returned from hell (Acts 17:32). Still, this is what the apostles taught about Jesus' brief visit to the underworld (Acts 2:32). In fact, some have misunderstood or misinterpreted I Peter 4:6 where Peter refers to the gospel being preached to the dead. Without providing much detail, the New Testament understanding and affirmation concerning Jesus and the realm of the dead is that He entered Hell, but death could not hold Him. By the power of His sinless life, Jesus was victorious over the grave. As the Athenian philosophers mocked Paul's witness to Jesus' resurrection, so he, meaning Paul, mocked death over Jesus' valiant victory!

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" I Corinthians 15:55

Jesus did much the same in the raising of Lazarus. He actually waited for him to be really dead in the grave for three days before making His way to the tomb. In raising Lazarus, Jesus refused to refer to his demise as death. Death to Jesus was sleep since one day every person who has ever lived will one day hear His voice coming forth from the grave just as Lazarus did, either to eternal life or eternal judgement (John 5:28, 29).

The New Testament witness of Jesus and life under Him is that death is not permanent. Jesus' journey into the underworld marked the end of tyrant death. Jesus said that the "gates of Hell would not prevail" against the testimony of Jesus and the good news of salvation (Matthew 16:18).

Life under the sun is a sentence of death with no hope of any meaningful future. This was Solomon's greatest regret. Life under the sun could never be the good life while death was waiting at the end. But life under the Son is a brand-new story. In Jesus' journey to hell and back, death lost its grip. Jesus conquered death and became master over hell and Hades.

"Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years." Revelation 20:6

God

Under the ~~SUN~~ SON

Momi was a Japanese international student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. We became acquainted through a weekly dinner hosted in our Advent House student center. She was a delightful, energetic, and curious person that we all loved and appreciated. Momi was raised as a Buddhist, but like anyone who travels abroad to other countries, she was interested in religion and culture in the States and was visiting Christian churches and campus fellowships like ours.

After one of our dinners, she asked about my faith. I shared with her how I came to believe and follow Jesus. I asked if she would be interested in learning about the God of the Bible and she was very interested. We started reading and discussing the book of Genesis. She was very intrigued. In one of our studies, she mentioned how impressed she was with the God of the Bible as very busy with creation and establishing the earth. In another conversation I asked her thoughts about Jesus. She said, "If there is a God, I would hope He would be like Him." Like Momi, Solomon knew God under the sun and refers to Him again and again, but more as an authority figure we will all one day have to answer to, and not as a personal, loving being. Like my friend Momi, I can't help but think that Solomon could have wished that God was really like Jesus!



1. What were your first impressions of God as a child?
2. How would you explain God to a friend?

Road Map of Duty: Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13, 14

3. How do you feel about Solomon's picture of God?
4. Solomon says that fearing God and keeping His commandments is the conclusion of the matter. Is this merely a concession or an answer to the critic's questions?
5. What is our whole duty and what does it have to do with the meaning of life?
6. What are you doing to remember about your creator in the days of your youth? Why is this so important to Solomon?



Road Map of Grace: Luke 15

1. What surprises you most about these stories?
2. How does Jesus describe God here?
3. How would you compare God under the sun that Solomon describes with God under the Son in the stories that Jesus tells?
4. What more would you like to learn about life under the Son?

"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:15-17



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How is life under the Son shaping your view of God?
 3. How would you describe the good life after this study?
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Backstory

Good friends, good work, good times, and good God is how I would describe the good life. How about you? Life under the sun was confusing and disappointing for Solomon. If we are honest, there are times when we all feel the same way. In the end, God is Solomon's issue. God is responsible for life under the sun.

"What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." Ecclesiastes 1:13, 14

God is responsible for life's meaning. He is the very definition of wisdom. Poverty, prosperity, and time itself are in His hands. Relationships are defined by Him. He is the standard of justice. Even our work is meaningless without Him since what we produce doesn't last. Because of God's distance life is out of balance and lacks an ultimate purpose. God's reward for the righteous and the wicked is death for all, and finally God offers no answer except to respect Him and keep His commands.

Solomon's God is deistic—a supreme being distant from His own universe. He demands and expects our allegiance but remains non-personal and remote. God is the problem. Life under the sun is a life of divine fate.

"I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him." Ecclesiastes 3:14

Many share Solomon's view of God, and feel cheated by life. Like him they begin with great wisdom and a hopeful attitude (Proverbs). They may even celebrate a wonderful marriage and family like Song of Songs and Job, but they end up bitter and confused and in a kind of midlife crises (Ecclesiastes) watching all they had slip away. And if this was all there is, what else could life be except confusing and meaningless?

But what if there was another story, a hopeful future instead of a disappointing end? What if God wasn't aloof and distant? What if God was actually personal and cared deeply about His creation? What if He would do anything—go to any measure—to turn things around for the universe? What if God had preordained life for a glorious future even at the cost His own life?

That's a different story. That's the story of life under the Son! This was the life that Solomon glimpsed—*placing eternity in our hearts*. Life under the Son was only a wish for Solomon, but thankfully the Old Testament has a New Testament or new testimony about God—the testimony that all the apostles shared about Jesus, God's new and distinct revelation in Christ.

"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." John 1:9-13

Jesus is the good life that Solomon and Job longed for. In Jesus, God is for us. He is with us, living for us, and dying for us. He has prepared a place for us in eternity with Him. Most of all Jesus is the God that Solomon never knew. Jesus introduces us to something so much greater than life under the sun. He offers us abundant life in Him. Jesus said it best...

"This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." John 17:3

We will never settle for life under the sun. Life under the Son is why we were made and what we were made for. Get life under the Son and share Him with anyone and everyone who will listen!

