

Ecclesiastes

IGNATIUS CATHOLIC STUDY BIBLE QUESTIONS

Welcome

“You are approaching the ‘word of God’. But for thousands of years, . . . the Word of God has been approaching you.”

The following guide is provided to enhance your reading of the Book of Ecclesiastes using the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*. If you are new to this resource or to reading the Bible, we recommend you read the general Introduction before you begin. It explains what it means that Scripture is the Word of God as well as how we understand and interpret it as Catholics. It also introduces the special features of the Study Bible and tells how they can enrich your reading and study. Additionally, the *Introduction to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* will provide valuable context for your reading.

A simple rhythm of prayer followed by reading and reflection is offered below to guide you through the book one chapter at a time. Questions draw attention to key footnotes and word studies to lead you into a deeper understanding of what you read and then prompt you to consider how to apply what you have learned. For a deeper dive, take advantage of additional features as you go: not just the other footnotes but also cross-references to Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* that are provided above the footnotes as well as any maps, charts, or essays that are not touched on in the questions.

Don't miss these helpful icons as you read! They highlight footnotes that pertain to the Church's criteria for interpreting Scripture (see CCC 112–14):



Be attentive to the content and unity of Scripture

Notes marked with a Bible icon connect Old Testament passages and New Testament mysteries, fostering appreciation for God's unified plan.



Read Scripture in light of the Church's living tradition

This icon marks notes drawn from the Holy Spirit's guidance of Church teaching and the spiritual senses of scripture. Here you'll find official teaching as well as interpretations from Fathers, Doctors, and saints of the Church.



Be attentive to the “analogy of faith”

Explore notes marked with an icon of keys to learn how the mysteries of faith, revealed in Scripture and defined by the Church, clarify and connect with one another in a unified, coherent way.

May God bless you as you read his word!

of God,* did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself,[†] taking the form of a servant,[‡] being born in the likeness of men.[§] And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.[¶] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,^{||} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,^{|||} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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12 Therefore, obeyed, so now much more in salvation with f work in you, bo pleasure.
14 Do all thi tioning,¹⁵ that y children of God crooked and per

2:9–11: Rom 10:9; 14:9; Eph 1:20–21. 2:13: 1 Cor 15:10. 2

2:7 emptied himself: The Greek verb *kenōō* means “empty out” or “render void”. The idea is, not that Christ divested himself of divinity when he united himself with humanity, but that he restricted his rightful exercise of certain divine abilities during his earthly life and accepted certain limitations of the human condition. In effect, the Son of God made himself poor in order to make us rich with his grace (2 Cor 8:9) (CCC 472). • Christ emptied himself by compressing the glory of his Godhead within our smallness. What he always was remained perfect and incomprehensible, but what he assumed was in proportion to the measure of our nature (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinarius*).

2:8 death on a cross: The ultimate indignity. Death by crucifixion was the most awful and degrading form of criminal execution in the ancient world. The Romans reserved it for slaves and insurrectionists. See note on Mk 15:24.

2:9 exalted him: By raising him from the dead, enthroning him in heaven, and clothing his humanity with divine glory. A similar destiny awaits all who humble themselves as Jesus did (3:21; Lk 14:11).

2:10 every knee should bow: An allusion to the divine oath in Is 45:23. • Yahweh swore that all peoples, to the very end of the earth, would acknowledge his Lordship and bow before him in homage. Paul moves Christ into the center of this prophecy as the divine Lord destined to be revered by all. **heaven . . . earth . . . under the earth:** The three principal realms in the world view of ancient Israel (Ex 20:4). Homage will come from all creatures great and small—the angels and saints above, the family of man and beasts spread over the earth, and the dead and the demons of the underworld.

2:11 confess: I.e., acknowledge. Included in this open dec

serious that we pur sense of awe at ser the prospect of sinn Encouragement con readers that God's g desire (intention) at 21; CCC 308) (CC “work”, he address and trembling”, he good deeds were th not boast of your g within you (St. Augu **2:15 pervers** • Deuterono poetic lawsuit that and ingratitude du

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Prepare

Read the Introduction to Ecclesiastes, paying particular attention to the *Themes and Characteristics* of the book and the *Christian Perspective* on it. What one thing stands out to you, that you would like to remember?

Read the Outline of Ecclesiastes to get an overview of the book. What are its major divisions?

Pray

Use the following questions to guide your reading of Ecclesiastes, going at a pace that is comfortable to you. Before you begin each new section, pray simply for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit, open my heart to hear and receive these words as what they truly are, the Word of God. Enlighten my understanding and give me grace to put what I read into practice in my life. Amen.

Read and Reflect

Read and reflect on Ecclesiastes as follows:

- Pray before you read
- Read a section of biblical text by itself
- Read the text again, referring to the notes that accompany the text
- For deeper understanding and to aid in applying what you read, answer the questions that follow. The references at the top of each numbered question correspond to particular notes.

At the end of each chapter, review what you have written and linger where you feel drawn, asking the Lord to speak to your heart and into your life. What do you hear? Respond in prayer and ask his help to live what you hear in your attitudes and actions this week.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

For understanding

1. **1:1.** What does the Hebrew term *Qoheleth* appear to mean? What is not certain about the term? To whom does the royal title “son of David” refer?
2. **Word Study: Vanity.** What does the term *hebel* or *habel* literally denote? What is it often used in the Bible to signify? What types of life experiences are pronounced vain?
3. **1:2.** What does the expression “vanity of vanities” mean? To what does the expression “all is vanity” apply? To what does it *not* apply?
4. **1:14.** To what does the saying “a striving after wind” refer? How do ancient Greek and Latin translations understand it?

For application

1. **1:3.** The note for this verse quotes the paraphrase of Ecclesiastes found in *The Imitation of Christ*: “Vanity of vanities and all is vanity except to love God and serve him alone.” How would you evaluate your life as it stands right now from this perspective?
2. **1:4–7.** The expression “The more things change, the more they stay the same” is proverbial in our society. What does that expression mean to you? With what sorts of conditions, circumstances, or events do you tend to associate it (e.g., political developments)? What types of sins do you find yourself committing over and over again?
3. **1:10.** What do you think Qoheleth’s opinion of the technological discoveries of the last century might be? Why might he dismiss them as vanity?
4. **1:11.** What have you learned from what has happened to you in the last year or so? Given what you have learned—or forgotten—how likely is it that you will retain the life lessons of the coming year?

Chapter 2

For understanding

1. **2:1–11.** In reporting on his experiment with pleasure, what did Qoheleth find? Why does he decide that overflowing riches are vain? According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, why is there no advantage for those who labor for what is vain?
2. **2:12–17.** Qoheleth partly endorses and partly disputes the traditional view that wisdom is better than folly. What does he dispute? While it is hard to refute Qoheleth’s logic from a this-worldly standpoint, how else might one do it?
3. **2:24.** For what does the expression “eat and drink” stand? How do we know this is not an endorsement of hedonism and Epicureanism? What, then, is Qoheleth’s point about eating and drinking?
4. **2:26.** How do the interpretations of the RSV translation and those of other commentators differ over how God distributes gifts? Of the two versions, which better coheres with the author’s perspective?

For application

1. **2:4–9.** What have been some of the chief pursuits of your life? For example, if you have a business, military, or artistic career—or if you have been engaged simply in raising a family—what have you accomplished? How satisfied do you feel with what you have accomplished?
2. **2:9.** Qoheleth claims that he has engaged in every sort of luxury and self-indulgence and yet retained his wisdom. Do you agree that he has retained it? Why or why not?
3. **2:10.** Giving free rein to one’s eyes by looking on whatever one wants (for example, looking at pornography) can be extremely dangerous for one’s emotional and spiritual life. How would you describe some of these dangers to yourself? How have you dealt with temptations to look at what you should avoid?
4. **2:18–21.** As you reflect on these verses, what is your attitude to leaving everything you worked for to others when you die? Does it matter to you what they might do with your bequest?

Chapter 3

For understanding

1. **3:1–8.** What is the point in these verses of the litany of times and seasons that are ordained by God? What must man do about these times?
2. **3:5.** To what do the “casting away” and “gathering” of stones refer? What determines times to embrace or refrain from embracing?
3. **3:11.** What does the Hebrew term for *eternity* denote? What has Qoheleth’s statement been taken to mean? What understanding does the divine gift *not* include? Why does St. Augustine believe that the Lord moves us to take pleasure in praise?
4. **3:17.** For what does Qoheleth say that God will hold men accountable? When? What was the early OT belief about when blessings and curses were meted out? What belief eventually emerged to replace it? What does Christian faith teach?

For application

1. **3:1–8.** Read the notes for these verses. How would you characterize the “times and seasons” in your life? Which “times and seasons” have already passed for you? Which may be still to come? With what satisfaction do you recall the past, and how do you anticipate the future?
2. **3:11.** The note for this verse gives two different understandings of what Qoheleth means by *eternity*. In your reading, with which do you agree? Why? How do you understand the concept of *eternity*?
3. **3:12–13.** What difference does it make whether you regard the good things in your life as God’s gift to you or as a result of good luck? How *do* you regard the good things in your life?
4. **3:16–21.** Like Qoheleth, many people today believe that men and beasts suffer the same ultimate fate—they both have the same breath; both die and go down to the dust, and no one knows whether the human spirit is any different from that of an animal. What differences do you believe there are between men and animals? How does your belief influence your behavior toward animals?

Chapter 4

For understanding

1. **4:1–3.** What does Qoheleth lament in these verses? Why would he consider future generations more fortunate than the living and the dead?
2. **4:5.** Of what is the expression “folds his hands” an image? What does it mean that the fool “eats his own flesh”?
3. **4:9–12.** What practical advantage do these verses illustrate? What does Qoheleth have in mind, and how does the image of a rope illustrate it? How does St. Gregory the Great understand the image of the rope?
4. **4:13–16.** What illustration does the popularity of a king shifting to his successor provide? What biblical figure rose from poverty to royal power on the merit of his wisdom?

For application

1. **4:1–2.** These days, many people conclude with Qoheleth that conditions of oppression or disease make a person better off dead than alive. In your opinion, how can faith make life, even in the midst of terrible suffering, worth living?
2. **4:3.** Given the crime and other evils that occur in the world, what do you think is the value of begetting and raising children, especially if you will not be able to protect them from evil? How does your view compare to the Church’s view that the begetting and raising of children is a great good?
3. **4:5–6.** These verses seem to talk about opposite extremes—of an extreme laziness, on the one hand, and workaholism, on the other. Toward which end of the spectrum of industry do you incline? What do you think is God’s view of how hard you should be working and for what?
4. **4:9–10.** What resources are available through your church or community for the elderly who live alone and have no one to visit or aid them in trouble? If you are able, what can you do to assist such people?

Chapter 5

For understanding

1. **5:1.** How are readers advised to approach God? What does the Hebrew notion of *hearing* include? How could one’s worship of God be unacceptable?

2. **5:4.** What does a vow to God impose? What must be done before such a pledge is made?
3. **5:6.** Who is the “messenger” in this verse? How does the Greek LXX interpret “the messenger”? If verse 6 is a continuation of verses 4–5, from whom does the excuse in this verse come, and why is he excusing himself?
4. **Word Study: Lot.** What does the Hebrew word *heleq* denote? For what things does the Bible use the term? In Ecclesiastes, what shades of meaning are evident? According to Qoheleth, why is it good to accept one’s lot in life?

For application

1. **5:1.** How does your daily conduct reflect your religious beliefs? How can you ensure that the two coincide in practice?
2. **5:4–5.** What spiritual resolutions have you made to improve or enhance your spiritual life, such as through prayer, spiritual reading, or attendance at Mass? Have you kept them? How do you maintain your current level of spiritual activity when you feel depressed or dry? If you allow yourself to skip your spiritual disciplines at those times, how can you get back on track?
3. **5:6.** What system of spiritual accountability do you have in place, such as with a spouse, trusted friends, or a confessor? If you have none, what prevents you from establishing one? If you do, how often do you take advantage of it by being open about failures or weaknesses and listening to advice?
4. **5:12–15.** In terms of your material resources or investments, what are some chief areas of concern or anxiety? How pervasive (in Qoheleth’s words) is darkness, grief, vexation, sickness, or resentment? What spiritual resources do you have for dealing with these things?

Chapter 6

For understanding

1. **6:3.** How did biblical Israel regard having a large family and a long life? Why is a stillborn baby better off, from Qoheleth’s jaded perspective?
2. **6:7.** How is the never-ending quest for food emblematic of our desire for the goods of the world? How does St. Jerome understand the passage in the context of scriptural learning?
3. **6:12.** Of what is Qoheleth rightly skeptical in this verse? Of what is a shadow an image here?

For application

1. **6:1–2.** In terms of your overall outlook on life, would you consider yourself primarily optimistic or pessimistic? In other words, do you think that in the long run things will turn out well or badly for you? Considering the effort it takes to support yourself, how worthwhile is it to keep building an estate that others will inherit?
2. **6:6.** How often do you find yourself thinking about your own death or the value of your life? To what conclusions have you come? To what extent are these thoughts influenced by Scripture and the teaching of the Church?
3. **6:7.** Read the note for this verse. How satisfied are you with your current level of scriptural knowledge? What would you like to do to learn more? How might you pursue that desire?
4. **6:12.** This chapter ends with a couple of questions. How would you answer them? How would you assess your strength in the Christian virtue of hope and the answers it provides? If hope is a weak area for you, how might you strengthen it?

Chapter 7

For understanding

1. **7:1–14.** With what does this collection of wisdom sayings deal? How is the Hebrew term for “good” (*tob*) variously translated in this section? By using exaggerated language, what does Qoheleth contend?
2. **7:15.** What is the conventional theory of rewards and punishments that Qoheleth is questioning? What does experience show about it? How does Christian faith regard the issue?
3. **7:16.** What three interpretations are given for this verse? How can the third interpretation (that moral heroism can be personally disadvantageous) make sense to someone like Qoheleth?
4. **7:29.** How was man created in the beginning? What responsibility does God bear for sin and evil? What does the Church teach about mankind before the Fall? What does the expression “sought out many devices” mean?

For application

1. **7:1.** Christian spiritual tradition recommends that we reflect often on the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. From a Christian perspective, how can the day of death be better than the day of birth? Why is the date of a saint's death regarded as his birthday?
2. **7:5.** Christianity praises fraternal correction (see Mt 18:15), though most people avoid either giving or receiving it. Why is fraternal correction necessary in the Christian life? How should you respond when someone corrects you? How might you correct someone with love, without giving offense?
3. **7:16.** Read the note for this verse. Of the alternative interpretations given, which comes closest to your own? Since Jesus commands you to "be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48), how can you strive for holiness without becoming sanctimonious?
4. **7:20–22.** What are some of the ways you have been offended by others' speech? What are some of the ways you have offended others by your speech; for example, by uncharitable criticism, verbal put-downs, gossip, barbed humor, and so on? What should you do to speak more charitably? How can prayer help?

Chapter 8

For understanding

1. **8:1–17.** On what is Qoheleth insisting here? Of what is it a reminder?
2. **8:8.** What does the expression "retain the spirit" mean? What is God's authority in this context? What does the expression "no discharge from war" have to do with matters of life and death?
3. **8:14.** What evidence is this verse providing? Lacking fuller revelation concerning the afterlife, what is the only view Qoheleth can take? What does God's mercy determine for the righteous and the unrighteous, according to St. Gregory the Great?
4. **8:17.** What does Qoheleth dispute about reason's ability? Although traditional wisdom has undeniable merits, with what is the wisest left?

For application

1. **8:3.** How do you approach unpleasant tasks or assignments? Do you procrastinate, perform them first to get them out of the way, try to delegate the task to someone else, or avoid them as much as possible? What are some of the advantages of learning to do unpleasant tasks well?
2. **8:5.** Is obeying the command of an authority always right? What is the responsibility of a citizen who is faced with an unjust exercise of authority, such as an immoral law (CCC 1900–1904)? What harm might come to you if you were to determine that your faith prevents you from obeying a law in good conscience?
3. **8:10–13.** When you hear of a person who has lived a wild and profligate or perhaps truly evil life dying, being buried with honor, and being hailed as a cultural icon, what is your reaction? How does your Christian faith suggest you should respond? (Compare your answer with Mt 5:44–45 and Mt 7:1–2.)
4. **8:16–17.** When you consider the direction your life has taken so far, how do you feel about it? How do you see the difference between resignation to God's will and acceptance of it? Have you thanked him, even though you do not understand why things have turned out this way?

Chapter 9

For understanding

1. **9:1.** What does the expression "in the hand of God" mean for the wise and righteous? What will it mean later when a clearer concept of life after death emerges in Israel's theology? What might be the point of the ambiguous reference to love or hate?
2. **9:5.** In this verse, of what are the dead no longer capable? Whether Qoheleth is citing a common view of his times or his own speculation, what do his inspired words reveal? What do we learn from Christian revelation about what happens after death?
3. **9:7–10.** To what do these verses appeal? What prompts these words? To what do some scholars consider these words indebted?

4. **9:11.** What does Qoheleth think of the reasons for success and failure in life? What is the ultimate factor to be reckoned with?

For application

1. **9:1.** What do you think of the common idea that God experiences emotions like love and hate? Assuming that God does not experience emotion, what does it mean to you that God loves you? How has he shown it?
2. **9:3.** How do you understand the Christian doctrine of Original Sin? Compare your answer with that of CCC 402–5. As you read paragraph 405, ask yourself how the weakness of Original Sin affects you personally—and, then, how the graces of Baptism have influenced your life. If you see no evidence of such graces, ask why not?
3. **9:7–10.** On the subject of the common priesthood of the faithful, the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (no. 34) regards relaxation and enjoyment as among the “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (quoted in CCC 901). How can you make your enjoyment of life a personal sacrifice?
4. **9:13–16.** When you are called upon to give advice, how readily do you give it? How do you understand your role in dispensing advice? How do you respond when people ignore it, especially when you are confident that your advice is sound? What remedy does prayer provide?

Chapter 10

For understanding

1. **10:2.** What does the inclination of a person’s heart to the right or left symbolize?
2. **10:5–7.** What does folly do to the world? In the words of Proverbs, what is it “not fitting” to do for fools?
3. **10:14.** Of what is excessive speech a mark? What about guarded speech? What is Qoheleth acknowledging here?
4. **10:19.** How do people interpret the meaning of the expression “money answers everything”?

For application

1. **10:1.** Which do you remember more—words of praise or of criticism? In the raising of children or the education of minors, which is more effective? How should one best use both of these?
2. **10:4.** What do Qoheleth’s words indicate you should do if an employer or superior becomes angry with you? How does the virtue of meekness apply in a situation like this?
3. **10:12–14.** Have you ever betrayed a confidence or said something that should have been kept to yourself? What was the outcome? What should you do when you find that you have spoken imprudently, especially if your speech has harmed or endangered someone else? (Compare your answer with CCC 2487.)
4. **10:20.** Have you ever been the subject of someone else’s gossip or acted on what “a little bird” told you about someone else? What was the effect on your relationships? When does careless speech become a sin? (Refer to CCC 2475–82.)

Chapter 11

For understanding

1. **11:1–2.** In what respect is the subject of these verses disputed? If the subject is charitable giving, what is one urged to do? If the subject is about commercial trading, how should the trader handle his affairs? What do both readings presuppose?
2. **11:5.** What does Qoheleth say about the ways of God in the formation of a preborn baby? Using similar language, what comparison does Jesus make?
3. **11:9.** What is Qoheleth encouraging youth to do? But of what is he reminding them to temper their enjoyment?
4. **11:10.** What is he reminding youth about the elderly? What other interpretation can the Hebrew translated as “the dawn of life” have? What does the word “vanity” mean in this context?

For application

1. **11:1–2.** Do you regularly engage in charitable donations? How do you determine how much to give and to whom or for what cause? If you give money to an organization, what do you know about where it actually goes?
2. **11:4.** How often has timidity or fear kept you from sharing your faith with others? Has prayer entered into your efforts to overcome timidity and fear? (See 2 Tim 1:7–8.)

3. **11:6.** How often has boldness in sharing your faith paid off? Even though you may not have seen the outcome in others, what has such boldness done for your own faith?

Chapter 12

For understanding

1. **12:2–6.** What do the images in these verses represent? With what are the images connected? Interpreted as an allegory, what may be the meaning of these verses?
2. **12:6.** Regarding the images in this verse, to what do the silver cord, the golden bowl, the broken pitcher, the wheel, and the cistern refer?
3. **12:9–14.** What is the function of these verses? Who may have added these verses? Although this is uncertain, what two observations support that opinion? What is an alternative view of what Qoheleth has been doing?
4. **12:13.** What is the importance of reverence for God in the book, and what is its association with Solomon? What does this duty include? With the statement “fear God”, what does the Preacher do? According to St. Gregory Nazianzen, what is profitable about the fear of God?

For application

1. **12:1.** Why is it important to train the young in practices of the spiritual life, such as prayer and reception of the sacraments? Of what benefit are these things as one grows older?
2. **12:5–8.** What are your thoughts about growing old? How confident or fearful of old age are you? What experiences of life lie behind these attitudes? How do you envision the nearness of God in your old age?
3. **12:11.** How often do you read Scripture? Which are your favorite passages? What is important for you about them? How do they build up your relationship with God?
4. **12:14.** Of the “four last things” referred to earlier, how often do you reflect on God’s judgment? What are some of the “secret things, whether good or evil”, in your behavior that God is likely to judge most strictly? How can reflection on his judgment help you improve your behavior?