Week of Nov 1, 2026 | 5 Day Devotional Guide

Schooled | Joy Under the Sun

THE BRANCH CHURCH

Day 1: The Limits of "Under the Sun"
Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 2:1-11

Solomon had everything the world considers worth having. Wealth, pleasure, accomplishment, and influence were all within his reach, and he reached for all of them. His conclusion was not the complaint of a man who never got what he wanted. It was the testimony of a man who got everything he wanted and discovered it was not enough. This is the honest starting point of wisdom. Before you can receive something better, you have to stop pretending that lesser things are satisfying you. The book of Ecclesiastes does not ask you to abandon joy. It asks you to find the real thing.

What are you currently treating as a source of ultimate satisfaction? What has that pursuit cost you, and what has it actually delivered?

> ***Write down two or three things you have chased hoping they would bring lasting fulfillment. Next to each one, honestly note whether they delivered what you expected. Bring that list to God in prayer and ask Him to redirect your pursuit.***

Day 2: Wisdom for When Wisdom Does Not Work
Reading: Job 1:1-22; 2:11-13; 42:1-5

Job's friends were not entirely wrong. Proverbs teaches that choices have consequences, and that is largely true. The problem is they applied a general principle as though it were an absolute law, and in doing so they added to Job's suffering rather than relieving it. Sometimes the shrapnel of a broken world hits people who do not deserve it. Suffering is not always a receipt for a bad decision. Sometimes it is simply the cost of living in a world where love gives everyone freedom, and freedom has been misused on a massive scale. Job teaches us that God is still present and still worthy of trust even when He has not explained Himself.

Have you ever suffered and been tempted to believe God was punishing you? Have you ever applied that same logic to someone else's pain?

> ***Identify someone in your life who is walking through unexplained difficulty. Resist the urge to offer explanations. Instead, commit to simply being present with them this week the way God was present with Job, without requiring understanding before offering compassion.***

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Day 3: The Gift Hidden in Mortality

Reading: Ecclesiastes 9:1-10; Psalm 90:1-12

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Solomon's meditation on death is not despair dressed up as philosophy. It is a call to attention. The fact that life is finite is not a reason to give up. It is a reason to show up, fully and gratefully, to the life you have been given right now. Moses makes the same argument in Psalm 90, asking God to teach us to number our days so that we might gain a heart of wisdom. Awareness of mortality is not morbid. It is clarifying. It strips away the illusion that there will always be more time, and it places weight and dignity on the ordinary moments you might otherwise rush past. The fragility of life is an invitation to presence.

Are there relationships or experiences in your life that you have been postponing full engagement with, assuming there will always be more time?

> ***Choose one relationship or ordinary moment today and give it your complete, unhurried attention. Put your phone away. Make eye contact. Be where you are. Let the brevity of life make the moment feel sacred rather than small.***

Day 4: Joy as Resistance and Revelation

Reading: Ecclesiastes 9:7-10; Acts 14:15-17; James 1:2-4

Paul's first recorded sermon to a completely pagan audience did not begin with commandments or doctrine. It began with rain and harvest and food and gladness. He told people who had never read a word of Scripture that God had already been speaking to them through joy. This is a remarkable claim. God has not left Himself without testimony. He has been filling your heart with joy as a form of self-disclosure. Every moment of genuine delight, every meal shared with people you love, every laugh that catches you off guard is a signal pointing toward its source. Joy is not a distraction from God. Rightly received, it is a road that leads directly to Him.

When you experience genuine joy, do you let it point you toward God, or do you receive it as an end in itself? What would it look like to treat gladness as a form of worship?

> ***For the next 24 hours, practice what might be called sacred noticing. Each time you experience something that brings you genuine delight, pause and silently acknowledge God as the giver of that moment. Let joy become a form of prayer.***

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Day 5: The Joy That Goes All the Way Through
Reading: John 16:20-22; Romans 8:18-25; Revelation 21:1-5

There is a kind of lightness that ignores the darkness. It is fragile and dishonest and it will not survive contact with real life. But there is another kind of joy, the kind Ecclesiastes is pointing toward, that has looked directly at the darkness, has not flinched, and has found something on the other side of it. Jesus did not promise His followers the absence of sorrow. He promised that their sorrow would be turned to joy, and that no one would be able to take that joy from them. This is the joy that Paul carried into prison. It is the joy that sustained believers through centuries of suffering. It is not produced by favorable circumstances. It is anchored in the certainty that in Christ, the worst things are not the last things. Solomon could see that life was fragile and fleeting. What he could not yet see fully was the resurrection. You can. Let that knowledge go all the way down into the places where you are most afraid, most grieved, and most uncertain. The tomb is empty. The story is not over. That is the ground on which durable joy is built.

Where in your life are you most tempted toward either false cheerfulness or settled cynicism? What would it look like to replace both with a joy that is honest about the darkness and anchored in the resurrection?

> ***Write a brief statement of what you genuinely believe about the future God has promised. Keep it simple and personal. Return to it this week whenever circumstances press against your ability to feel joy. Let conviction carry you when feeling cannot.***