

Ecclesiastes

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Author

Some think Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon. This is based on the introduction to the book: *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem.* 1:1 The style of Hebrew in Ecclesiastes shows it was probably written later than King Solomon's time, so it could have been written by someone to comment on Solomon and his thinking.

The book itself doesn't give the author's name; just their title. The Hebrew *qohelah* in 1:12 means 'teacher', 'preacher', or 'philosopher'. The word is always linked to an assembly of people. So the 'teacher' is the leader of an assembly; the one who convenes or gathers a meeting. In some Bible translations the teacher is called a 'Churchman', hence, an ecclesiastical leader.

Type

Wisdom literature. This type of literature uses stories and writings to teach about God and provide wisdom for life. Proverbs and Job are other Old Testament books classified as wisdom literature.

1 Kings 3 describes how God gave Solomon the opportunity to have everything he wanted. Instead of choosing riches, power or material things he chose *a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.* 1 Kings 3:9. In response God said He would give Solomon *a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.* 1 Kings 3:12. The book of Ecclesiastes thus records the thoughts of a spiritual leader reflecting on the society in which he lived and sharing his wisdom.

An important principle to recognize when reading Ecclesiastes is that it is *the words of the Teacher.* 1:1 and that he is reflecting only on what happens *under the sun.* 1:3. The book contains the Teacher's words, not the words of God! Sometimes, the Teacher is right; sometimes he is wrong; sometimes he is just thinking through the evils of the society in which he lived, and is developing his thoughts and understanding. So we can't take isolated verses from this book and say "This is the Word of God". *Everything is meaningless* is certainly not what God thinks!

Date

Possibly around 1900BC.

Theme

Everything is meaningless apart from God. (The word 'meaningless' is used 37 times throughout the book!). As you read the Teacher's thoughts about the meaning of life it can get pretty depressing, but at the end there is hope. Ecclesiastes show us that we that we can have a meaningful life and enjoy the life God has given us. It shows us that meaning, purpose and joy come from having God at the centre of all we do; that we must trust and obey Him in everything, and that we must accept our lot in life. *Meaningless, meaningless* ends with *Remember your Creator, and fear God, and keep His commandments.*

Life not centered on God is purposeless and meaningless. Without Him nothing else can satisfy. With Him, all of life and His other good gifts are to be gratefully received and used and enjoyed to the full. The book contains the philosophical and theological reflections of an old man, most of whose life was meaningless because he had not himself relied on God. NIV Study Bible.

Key verses

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." 1:2

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. 3:1

"God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed." 3:17

It is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him - for this is his lot. 5:18

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them" 12:1

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. 12:13,14

Outline

Unlike most books in the Bible, Ecclesiastes doesn't have a logical development and structure. Rather it is a series of rambling thoughts by the Teacher.

Writer: *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. 1:1.*

Theme: *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." 1:2.*

Everything is meaningless

- 1:3-11. Working hard is meaningless because generations come and go, and everything in life just carries on the same after you have gone. *There is nothing new that happens. What has been will be again, and what has been done will be done again. 1:9.*
- 1:12-18. Seeking for wisdom is meaningless. The Teacher devoted himself to explore wisdom and found that it was just folly; and a chasing after the wind. *For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge the more grief. 1:18.*
- 2:1-11. Pleasures are meaningless. The Teacher tried pleasures like laughter; wine, great projects, possessions; sensuality, self-denial, and work. *Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. 2:11.*
- 2:12-16. Wisdom is meaningless. The Teacher thought that wisdom was better than folly, but then realized that everyone's end is to die; regardless of whether they are wise or fools.
- 2:17-26. Toil is meaningless. The Teacher began to hate life because he saw that when he toiled it was to no avail. The fruits of his labours will be left to *someone who has not worked for it. 2:21.*

Conclusion

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 2:24-26.

A time for everything

There is a time for everything, and *everything is beautiful in its time. 3:11.* God has set eternity in the hearts of men, yet *they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. 3:11.* What God does endures forever, and *what is has already been, and what will be has been before. 3:15,* so all we can do is try to be happy and do good while we live; eat and drink and try to find satisfaction in what we are doing.

The words of 3:1-8 were immortalized in Pete Seeger's song "Turn, turn", recorded in 1962 on his album *The Bitter Sweet*.

There is also a time for God's judgment. *God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.* 3:17. We all end up the same when we die. *All go to the same place; all come from dust and to dust all return.* 3:20. We don't know whether we will go upward when we die, so *there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work; because that is his lot.* 3:22.

Oppression

The Teacher sees the oppression that is going on and that *power was on the side of the oppressors.* 4:1. From this he concludes:

- 4:1-3. Those who are dead are better off than those who are living, and *better is he who has not yet been.*
- 4:4-6. Envying of others is meaningless.
- 4:7-12. Having much wealth, but being lonely is meaningless. *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down his friend can help him up.... A cord of three strands is not easily broken.*
- 4:13-16. Advancement is meaningless. People will always follow a younger person at the expense of an older one. But when the young one gets old he is quickly replaced by someone younger again.

Awe of God

The Teacher then focuses on relationship with God.

- 5:1,2. Talk little and listen carefully when you go to the house of God.
- 5:4-7. Always fulfill vows made to God. *It is better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.*

Riches

The Teacher recognizes that having riches is also meaningless.

- 5:8,9. Whenever someone is rich there will be someone else that has been exploited.
- 5:10-6:12. No-one ever feels they have enough money. Even rich people worry about their money! We all come into the world with nothing and depart from it with nothing, regardless of how hard we have worked, and how much frustration, affliction and anger we have experienced along the way. Therefore we should be happy with our lot, whatever it is. *It is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him - for this is his lot.* 5:18. Even if we have wealth, possessions, honour, many children and a long life ultimately we won't be able to enjoy them because we can't take them with us when we die. *For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?* 6:12.

Wisdom

There is a change in style in chapter 7. It contains a series of proverbs (much like the ones in the Book of Proverbs), and the perspective changes from life being meaningless to the value of wisdom so it is a bit more positive. *Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those under the sun.* 7:11. *When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider God has made the one as well as the other.* 7:14. *The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.* 7:18. Everyone sins and the Teacher recognizes this, and so determines to be wise. *Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance.* 8:1.

Obedience to the King

- 8:2-8. Wise people will obey the King and will then not come to any harm. We don't know the future so are better doing what is right *for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter.*

Injustice

- 8:9,10. There is much injustice in the world, due to people lording it over others.
- 8:11-13. It is better to carry out a sentence for crime quickly, otherwise people will do wrong. *It will go better for God-fearing men, who are reverent before God.*
- 8:14-17. Sometimes the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get



what the righteous deserve. The Teacher's answer to this is to enjoy the life you have got! *So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in the work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.*

Destiny

The Teacher concludes that *all share a common destiny – the righteous and the wicked; the good and the bad; the clean and the unclean; those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.* 9:2.

- 9:3-6. Everyone must die: *never again will they take part in what happens under the sun.*
- 9:7-10. So enjoy your life, and *whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*
- 9:11,12. No-one knows when they will die, and *time and chance happen to all.*

Folly

The Teacher now returns to proverbs to show that *a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.* 10:1.

- 10:2-20. Whenever something good happens or something is done well, soon some folly comes along and destroys or undermines it.
- 11:1-6. *We cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things*, so we should 'cast our bread upon the waters' (i.e. live our life) in such a way that we do our best. *For you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*

Youth

11:7-12:8. The Teacher now brings his positive message. He focuses on young people explaining that if they will live in relationship with God, their lives will be much more meaningful.

You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your hearts give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them." 11:9-12:1

Conclusion

The Teacher believes that what he has written is true: *Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.* 12:9,10.

His conclusion is that meaning in life can only be found in relationship with God.

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of every human being. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. 12:13,14.

Lessons for today from Ecclesiastes

We live in a secular society where values like 'freedom', 'human rights', 'market forces', 'humanism', 'tolerance', and 'political correctness' seem to be the norm, rather than the principles of God's Word. Not so long ago we were a Christian nation but now Christianity and Christian values are often denigrated or mocked. Rather than acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ over our nation and communities, many people now have 'gods' like materialism, sport, intellectualism, pleasure, travel, technology, sexual freedom, drugs and alcohol, spiritualism, and selfishness.

And what are the results of this massive societal change? Are people healthy, happy and fulfilled? Is there little crime? Is there equity between the rich and poor? Do we care for each other and our planet? Are people well adjusted, positive, honest, God-fearing and creative? Are the elderly respected and cared for? Are schools places where everyone pursues learning? Is the business world honest and equitable? Is Jesus Christ honoured and loved? Hardly! For so many people today life is quite meaningless!

The interesting thing is that the 'gods' described in Ecclesiastes are exactly the same as the ones that people are trusting in today! People haven't changed, and the results of trusting in these gods are the same: meaningless. Ecclesiastes isn't just talking about the ungodly, though. Christians can and do put their trust in all sorts of gods, and the results for them are just as the same as when non Christians do it: meaninglessness.

The message of Ecclesiastes is for everyone! Everything is meaningless without God. Only when you know God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and do what He wants you to do will you find meaning and purpose in life. That's what non Christians need to know! That's what Christians need to know! That's what our nation desperately needs to recognize!

Ecclesiastes is sometimes considered a pessimistic and negative book and people don't like reading it! But what Ecclesiastes is commenting on are the 'gods' that people had in Solomon's day: the things that replaced relationship with the true God. That's why the book is pessimistic! But the important message in Ecclesiastes is that everything is meaningless *outside of God*. The Teacher makes this point right at the end. After showing that the gods we follow lead to a meaningless life; he then shows that life with God has meaning. Being in relationship with God is the only way to have meaning in your life!

So ultimately Ecclesiastes teaches us that we all need to take seriously what the Bible says. We need to have God as the Lord of our lives. It's saying that we can have a radical kind of Christianity where we genuinely live God's way.

But getting there is a struggle, and Ecclesiastes describes this struggle. Ultimately there's a choice we all have to make: as individuals, as Christians, as Churches, as communities, as a nation. Will we live God's way or not?

If we don't life will be meaningless: *"Meaningless, meaningless!: says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"* 12:8.

If we do we will recognize that God loves us and is working His purposes out in our lives. We can then accept our lot in life; focus on important things, especially doing God's will; and be realistic in our goals and in the use of our abilities. We will go through life with a greater degree of wisdom, fearing God and keeping His commandments. This gives life deep meaning. *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.* 12:13,14.

Jesus said "I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly". **John 10:10.**

Discussion questions

Is your life meaningless, or meaningful? How do you evaluate this? What makes for meaning in life? What makes life meaningless? What can you do to make your life more meaningful?

When you come to the end of your life what would you like to be remembered for or as?

Ecclesiastes is the writings of the 'Teacher'. Who was the Teacher? What was his background, role and situation in life? How did this enable him to comment on the meaningless of the society he lived in?

What issues does the Teacher say are meaningless? Are these issues still relevant today? How can we find more meaning in these areas of life?

What is wisdom literature? What are the principles we should follow for interpreting Wisdom literature? Are these different for interpreting the other types of books in the Bible like history; teaching; letters; apocalyptic and poetry?

Some verses in Ecclesiastes are often used and are regarded as being truths of the Word of God. eg. 1:9,10; 2:13; 3:1-14; 4:9-12; 5:4,5; 5:18,19; many of the proverbs in Chapter 7; 12:11,7; 12:13,14. Other verses are obviously not in line with the rest of the Bible and could not be construed as being truths of the Word of God. eg. 1:2; 1:14; 2:17-23; 6:2; 8:15; 9:2; 11:1; How do you distinguish truths of the Bible from parts that are not designed to be accepted as truths?

What have you learned from your study of Ecclesiastes? How will you apply this in your life