

## *Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey*

Bible Survey Lesson 38: The Book of Ecclesiastes, Part I

### **INTRODUCTION: THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**

#### ***Introduction***

Solomon was rich. Perhaps the richest man who ever lived. He had unlimited power, unlimited resources, and unlimited appetites. He was also wise, the wisest man who ever lived. He had unlimited learning, unlimited creativity, and unlimited skills. Add to all this he had a long and proud family heritage, a famous and godly father, and a personal knowledge of God and His word.

This should have made him highly qualified to experience and observe the world and develop a proper view of personal self-fulfillment in relation to God. How did he do?

Solomon tried everything "*under the sun*" everything the natural world system has to offer, and came up dry and depressed. How can this be? Is there something he missed? Is there something outside the natural world? What if there is an afterlife? *But, what if there isn't?*

Solomon may, or may not have understood that there was an afterlife.

*(We'll look at the O. T. view of death, resurrection and the afterlife later.)*

Most of the ancient Jews probably didn't, just as most modern Jews don't.

They envisioned living on in their good deeds and through their children and hoped for the day when they, or their families, would see the Messiah come and set up his kingdom on earth. But, either way, it is vital to "*fear God and keep His commandments.*"

For us, knowing the rest of the story, this book shows the insufficiency of all earthly encounters to bring happiness and prepares us to receive the message of true fulfillment when Christ redeems us. But they didn't have that message in clear terms. And, I ride the train with "Christians" who say, **"Why, if only I'd win the lottery I'd be so happy!" ...I don't think so!**

Perhaps we don't all get the right message either.

***Perhaps we need the Book of Ecclesiastes.***

#### ***Theme***

The abiding value of the Book of Ecclesiastes is that it proves that, even in this natural, here and now world, only God can satisfy the longing of the human heart. *Only a personal relationship with Him can "fill that God-shaped vacuum" created in the human being.*

John MacArthur sums Ecclesiastes up like this: *"This book shows that if one perceives each day of existence, labor, and basic provision as a gift from God, and accepts whatever God gives, then that person lives an "abundant life" (John 10:10). However, one who looks to be satisfied apart from God will live with futility regardless of their accumulations."*

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### ***Background***

Where in the world did the title Ecclesiastes come from? The Hebrew word used to name this book was taken from the title given to an important person who called a group together to speak on an vital topic. It could be translated *preacher*. In the Greek language preacher is derived from their word for assemble ECCLESIOS, therefore the Septuagint translators chose the term Ecclesiastes.

In the Hebrew Scriptures it is placed, along with Ruth, Song of Solomon, Esther, and Lamentations, in a series of five scrolls called the Megilloth. These scrolls are read publicly by rabbis on special occasions, i.e. Ruth is read at Purim and Ecclesiastes is read on Pentecost.

It is not unusual for a person reading Ecclesiastes to be troubled or puzzled by it. It is clearly negative, with everything declared as meaningless and virtually nothing that seems positive. Some even wonder why this book is in the canon.

But, carefully studied, it brings us face to face with the "real world" and drives us to God like few other books do.

### ***Author***

Ecclesiastes itself tells us it was written by a "*son of David, king in Jerusalem,*" (v 1) and "*king over Israel*" (v 12). This would naturally point us to Solomon and arguments against this assumption are weak.

Solomon makes sense because:

1. Only David and Solomon ruled over both Judah (Jerusalem) in the south and Israel in the north.
2. Solomon's life paralleled the life described in the examples of this book. Few others had all the resources and circumstances to be able to live that life.
3. Solomon was a "*wise man, . . .who taught the people knowledge; and pondered, searching out and arranging many proverbs.*" (12:9)
4. Solomon would have the education and knowledge displayed by the writer. Certain passages, especially chapters 3 and 9, closely resemble other ancient literature of the Near East. There are terms and illusions in the Egyptian *Song of The Harper*, and Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh Epic* which parallel the style and content of Ecclesiastes. Solomon was a scholar of these periods (I Kings 4:34) and could easily have borrowed these styles.

Ecclesiastes was most probably written in the late 930 B.C.s, during the late years of Solomon's reign and demonstrated his experience and disillusion.

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## ***Audience***

Most scholars believe that the first readers of Ecclesiastes were not the common, ordinary people of Solomon's kingdom, but the wealthy and powerful with access to the royal court. It was like a teaching text and deals with the study of wisdom (education), the value of wealth and problems of a privileged lifestyle. Since we are all rich, these things apply to all of us. It spoke to the people who tended to build their lives on success, education, power, achievement, and pursuit of pleasure. This can lead to boredom, disappointment and depression.

They need a reason for living. They need an answer. **They need God!**

There is a list of "Vanities" in the *MacArthur's Study Bible*. As I studied it I noticed that it read like a list of goals in our modern American society:

### **1. The Value of Education**

*The key to success and money in the modern world is a degree. We believe this so completely in America that we try to educate everyone whether they want it or not.*

### **2. The Value of Work**

*Even though there is a substantial loss in the "Protestant work ethic" we still believe that achievement comes through hard work, long hours, and sacrifice. The average work-week of Fortune 500 executives is 80 hours.*

### **3. The Value of Accomplishment**

*We give awards for everything, from the "citizen of the month" in pre-school, to the "athlete of the year" in the pros. (Toy Department)*

### **4. The Value of Man**

*Man is viewed as just another animal that allows for such actions as abortion, doctor-assisted suicide, and rampant crime against ones own social or family group.*

### **5. The Value of Competition**

*We can make a competition out of anything. The "X-Games" now include street skating, sky boarding, and bike stunt jumping. These can't compare with the dung throwing and spitting contests of yore.*

### **6. The Value of Possession**

*There is a cult of people following a philosophy of working just to amass for themselves. They have no family, they have no cause, they have no purpose, they don't even have time for fun, they just work.*

### **7. The Value of Position**

*We love to hate our politicians but we continue to give them great power over our lives, and then in history we tend to trash them all.*

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### **8. The Value of Money**

*Money is power, but money has a power of its own. I have yet to meet a man who is into money who has enough. I ride the train with a number of very well paid artists, technicians, and executives who still play the lottery every week.*

### **9. The Value of Hoarding**

*The Bible talks about this problem as "an evil." It is the man who has everything, "his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires," but he can't enjoy any of it.. Or he has a big family but doesn't have a relationship with them. His purpose of having is just to have.*

### **10. The Value of Belief**

*Since good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people, any form of religion will do. "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something."*

#### ***Definitions***

One important and helpful fact is that the word translated "wisdom" in Ecclesiastes means "science," or evidence gathered by observation, while in Proverbs, the word used meant "pious learning."

The other important word is, of course, "vanity" (used 37 times). There are three distinct uses of this word in Ecclesiastes:

1. Transitory--Here today, gone tomorrow.
2. Meaningless--The curse has stripped the universe and living of some of the glory God intended for man.
3. Confusing--We cannot understand what God is doing most of the time without God's revelation to us.

#### ***Problems***

##### **1. Ecclesiastes seems to be a book of doom. " is no hope under the sun."**

It is true that Solomon's entire argument is based on the thesis stated in verse 2, "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" This turns this poem into a dirge of hopelessness. "*What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?*" (v 3) We just have to be really patient.

We spend an entire book in the "pit of despond" to get to two verses:

*"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or bad."*

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It was well-stated by John Phillips when he said,

*"Power, popularity, prosperity, prestige, and pleasure all in abundant measure and all combined cannot quench the burning thirst in man's soul which can only be satisfied by God alone."*

There is *"nothing good under the sun,"* but there is something very good **beyond** the sun. There is a living God who will fill the hearts of those who allow Him, and bring meaning to day to day living.

**2. Ecclesiastes seems to teach that there is nothing after death so we need to *"enjoy life" and "fear God and keep His commandments."***

Another problem is Solomon's reaction to his disappointment. He seems to say, since all of this stuff and striving is worthless, we have nothing left to live for except to "enjoy life" as best we can. Or, wisdom according to bumper sticker, "Life's a beach, and then we die."

For much of his life Solomon suffered from an imbalance of trying to enjoy life without regard for YHWH and His commandments. In fact, he only refers to God as Elohim, which is the name which serves to emphasize the creator/creature relationship rather than YHWH, which points to a redeemer/redeemed relationship. He had a shallow relationship to God.

He squandered much of his life and God's blessings on his own personal pleasure rather than spending it for God's glory. The book is obviously written to warn young adults not to make the same mistakes he made.

### ***Homework:***

Read: Read or re-read the Book of Ecclesiastes

Think: Do I take advantage of the knowledge I have in my thinking of God?

Apply: Try hard this week, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to see God at work in the "little" things you do.

Bible Survey Lesson 39: The Book of Ecclesiastes, Part II

## **OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**

### ***Introduction***

Remember, the title The Book of Ecclesiastes or The Book of the Preacher was chosen because Solomon is presenting a monologue, a lecture, a sermon. He has thoroughly researched life and come to several definite conclusions which he will now present to his spoiled, self indulgent, materialistic audience:

1. Man is incapable of finding satisfaction by his own devices.
2. Fear of God and obedience to His commands is the only alternative.

There are three ways to research and investigate a subject: Experimentation (do it), Observation (watch it), and Education (learn it). Solomon did all three and now he reports his findings to us.

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### I. PRESENTING HIS THESIS (Chapter 1:1-11)

Every good treatise has a thesis statement. By now you should know Solomon's.

#### A. Thesis Stated (1-2)

*"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What advantage does a man have in all his work(s) which he does under the sun."*

The Hebrew word (HEBEL) translated vanity means, in this case, breath, or something insubstantial or fleeting. To Solomon everything of the world with no eternal value is pointless. As James says it, *"it is like a vapor."*

#### B. Thesis Supported (3-11)

In primary support of his thesis Solomon writes a poem of life. **Read vv. 3-9** It presents life as a rat race of activity that never gets anywhere and accomplishes nothing permanent. Nothing ever breaks into the cycle to give meaning. There is "nothing new under the sun" (v 10). Much as in Romans 8, "all creation groans as it awaits something new, something supernatural. **Read vv. 10 and 11**

### II. PROVING HIS THESIS (Chapters 1:12-10:20)

*Solomon begins his scientific research:*

#### A. Experimentation (1:12-2)

*"I set my mind to explore (experience) . . . all that has been done...I've seen all that has been done (experienced) under the sun."(vv. 13-14)*

##### 1. His Search (1:12-2:10)

**He started in the world of the mind**, with observation and intellectual pursuits. He tried to solve the unsolvable riddles, complete the impossible problems, but the more he knew the more he knew he didn't know. *"In much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain."* (v 1:18)

**He moved on to the world of pleasure**, (v. 2:1) with luxury and carefully planned stimulation including wine, art, architecture, horticulture, collecting, music, concubines . . . *"And all my eyes desired I did not refuse them, I did not withhold from my heart any pleasure."* (v. 2:10)

##### 2. His Summary (2:11-26)

**The quest for wisdom is hopeless.** Wisdom is of little value because it doesn't alter destiny. The wise may know what's happening, but so what, they are still doomed just as the fool.

**The spending of money and energy on pleasure is pointless.** You can't take it with you. Your children may just blow it all. You're working to impress others you don't even know. This is nuts!  
*"This too is vanity and striving after the wind (a vapor)."*(v. 26)

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### B. Observation (3-6)

Looking at life Solomon saw an existence in flux. Man is not really in control, God is. *"I have seen (observed) the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves."* (v. 3:10)

**1. Time is in God's hand.** *"He has made everything appropriate in its time,"* The timing of events and situations are all "appointed" (v 3:1) and we as creatures of time must conform to those limitations. This is especially frustrating because, *"He has also set eternity in our hearts."* (v 11) so we can't be content with what we are or understand what God is doing.

Tied to this lack of control is our lack of power over death (Chapter 3) or wealth (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

**2. Politics is in God's hand.** Remember, Scripture teaches that governments, good and evil, are under the control of God. He holds them accountable for how they treat people (Chapter 3), judges them for corruption and abuse of power, and controls how long they reign (Chapter 4). He ordained them to bring order to a chaotic world (Chapter 5).

### C. Education (7-10)

This portion moves into things Solomon has learned by study. It starts with a series of proverbs, the major teaching tool of his day.

#### 1. Frustration (7)

This chapter discusses the problem of finding our way with the limited wisdom we have because of our humanness. This makes it hard to make decisions in the areas of: finances (1-14), justice (15-24), and relationships (25-29).

#### 2. Fallacy (8)

Chapter 8 looks at some common fallacies accepted by the world:

We can be powerful (1-9) -- *"No man has authority over the wind..."* (v 8) *or over the day of death."*

We can be wicked (10-13) -- *"...it will not be well for the evil man . . . because he does not fear God."* (v 13)

We are rewarded fairly (14) -- *"there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, etc."*

We can party (15) -- *"...there is nothing good under the sun except to eat and drink and to be merry,..."*

We can know (16-17) -- *"...though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover."*

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### 3. Failure (9)

This chapter presents three areas of failure that all men experience:

We all die (1-10)--*"It is the same for all, There is one fate for the righteous and the wicked (v 2) ...they all go to the dead (v 3)." Not only do we all die, but...*

We all don't know when (11-12)--*"man does not know his time."*

We all tend not to listen (13-18)--*"...Wisdom is better than strength! But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded."*

### 4. Facts (10)

Here, provided in proverb form, is the bottom line:

1. Folly will often win over reason and right. (1-7)--*"folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places," (v 6)*

2. God will often undo man's work, wisdom, leisure, or recreation. (8-20)--*"...No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?" (v. 14) So why fight for a legacy?*

## III. PRESENTING HIS FINDINGS (Chapters 11-12)

At the end of every good scientific lecture the speaker presents findings based on his research. Solomon has experienced, observed, and studied, and now he will summarize his material and present his conclusions.

### A. Summary (11)

Solomon's summary is divided into three categories:

#### 1. Future (1-6)

Prepare as best you can, but realize that God is in control. Plan, invest, diversify, be cautious, speculate, but realize that you are not the one in control. *"...you do not know the activity of God who makes all things (happen)." (v 5)*

#### 2. Present (7-8)

Live as best you can, but realize that there will be the good and the bad.

Youth is made for joy not anxiety, and adulthood can be productive, but always live righteously. *"...Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all."*

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### 3. Past (9-10)

Forget as best you can, but learn from God's judgments. As we age, we tend to look back at the glory of victory and the agony of defeat. As Paul taught us, we need to *"forget those things that lie behind* (victories that could make us proud or defeats that could make us depressed) *and press toward those that lie before."*

*"...childhood and the prime of life are fleeting."* (v 10)

### C. Conclusions (12)

We are often willing to follow an expert's advice based on several years of research. Now, based on a lifetime of experience, observation and study, Solomon advises us:

#### 1. Remember who God is! (1-8)

*"Remember also your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come."* (v 1)

Remember Him as death approaches (v 5). And as the earth winds down (v 7).

#### 2. Remember who you are! (9-14)

*"...fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person."* (v 13) Why? *"For God will bring every act of judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil."* (v. 14)

The pursuit of wealth, knowledge, and power is not evil, but it is boring (*"wearying to the body"* v 12) and unfulfilling.

Don't expect it to take the place of a relationship with God.

**There is then, only one hope to fill the void...God!**

#### *Lesson*

1. Live in the "real world," which God created and controls, rather than the "dream world," which man creates and controls .
2. The search for meaning can be fun or painful, but it is futile outside the control of God and His Word.
3. The vanity of life can drive us to depression or to God.
- 4 .Practicing the *"fear of God and keeping His commandments"* allows us to really enjoy life.

**"Life is a beach . . . and then we live FOREVER . . . WITH THE LORD!**

#### *Homework:*

1. Read: The Book of the Song of Solomon
2. Think: Why is this song in the Scriptures?
3. Apply: Try to enjoy life this week. *Have fun*, God is in control!