

# Introduction To Ecclesiastes

## *Purpose and Theme of the Book*

The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to convince people of the uselessness of any view that does not rise above the horizon of man himself. It pronounces the verdict of "vanity of vanities" upon any philosophy of life which regards the created world or human enjoyment as an end in itself. To view personal happiness as the highest good in life is absolute folly in view of the preeminent existence of God Himself and His created universe. Having shown the vanity of living worldly goals, the author clears the way for a truly adequate world view which recognizes God Himself as the highest value of all, and the meaningful life as the one which is lived in His service.

Only as a vehicle for the expression of divine wisdom, goodness and truth, does the world itself possess any real significance. It is only God's work that endures, and only He can impart abiding value to the life and activity of man. Ecclesiastes 3:14 says, "I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him."

The book of Ecclesiastes is a book about life. Its writer was a realist who wrote about all our concerns. He writes with great candor about frustration, fulfillment, sex, work, injustice, friendship, worship, happiness, insecurity, suffering, temptation, folly, confusion, and emptiness. His observations are really the conclusions that life itself forces upon us -- if we have the stomach for the truth. In reading the book, one gets the impression that the author was not trying anything different than what our society tries today. It seems many would save themselves from much heartache, pain and suffering if they would read this book, learn its message, and benefit from the mistakes of the past. We can learn from past mistakes, both those of our own and those of others. The mass of society today is searching for the meaning of life in all the wrong places. If the world will not learn from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, at least you and I can.

There is little dispute over the destiny of the book. It was primarily written to the godly in Israel. Like all other books of the Bible with the qualities of practical application, it must be accepted in the Christian age for its contribution to our understanding of and participation in the redemption process. It has been stated that Ecclesiastes asks the questions that the rest of the Bible answers.

If the book did nothing more than demonstrate the futility of living apart from God's grace and revelation, it would have a pertinent place in every age. If the average non-Christian individual would read the book

today, it could bring him much more quickly to Christ. It would save him the difficult, arduous journey of a wasted life. He could see immediately that God is the only alternative to this world and its offerings, and that Jesus is God's first and last argument to man's claim to genuine fulfillment and peace.

Ecclesiastes was intended to be a book in celebration of "joy" and God's "good" creation. In Judaism, this book was read on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The writer constantly advocated joy and rejoicing, because life is a gift from God.

### *Authorship and Date*

The writer gives himself the name *Qoheleth* seven times in the book: three times at the beginning (1:1, 2, 12), three times at the end (12:8, 9, 10) and once in the middle (7:27). The word is derived from the Hebrew word *qahal*, meaning "to call together, to assemble, to collect." This title referred to the preacher's office and then became a term for the preacher himself. The Greek equivalent, *ecclesiastes*, also means "preacher" and is derived from the word "assembly."

In 1:1, the writer stated that he was the son of David, king in Jerusalem. In 1:12, the writer stated that he became king over Israel in Jerusalem. Because Solomon was the only immediate son of David who was king over Israel, reigning in Jerusalem, there can be little doubt that he is the one specified. When we compare statements in Ecclesiastes with those in the book of 1 Kings, the evidence for Solomon's authorship becomes overwhelming. For example, compare the following verses:

- Ecclesiastes 1:16 with 1 Kings 3:12 which shows Solomon's unrivaled wisdom.
- Ecclesiastes 2:4-10 with 1 Kings 5:27-32; 7:1-8 which shows Solomon's unsurpassed wealth.
- Ecclesiastes 2:4-10 with 1 Kings 9:15-25 which shows Solomon's huge assortment of servants.
- Ecclesiastes 2:4-10 with 1 King 10:14-29 which shows Solomon's extensive building programs.
- Ecclesiastes 7:20 with 1 Kings 8:46 which contains the statement, "There is no man who does not sin."
- Ecclesiastes 7:28 with 1 Kings 11:1-8 which draws the similar conclusion that there is not a God-fearing woman among a thousand.
- Ecclesiastes 12:9 with 1 Kings 4:32 which shows that Solomon studied, weighed and arranged his many proverbs.

In the book, there is an air of repentance and humility for past thoughts and actions. Given the fact that Solomon wrote the book, it will be best placed not before his apostasy, for the questions and sins of

Ecclesiastes did not trouble him then, nor during his years of rebellion, for then he had no occasion to use the language of spiritual matters. Ecclesiastes is best placed after his apostasy, when both his recent turmoil and repentance were still fresh in his mind. There is no record that King Solomon repented and turned to the Lord, but the message of Ecclesiastes suggests that he did. Since Solomon ruled from 970 B.C. to roughly 930 B.C., the best date for the book would be approximately 940 to 935 B.C.

Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity during all the 40 years Solomon reigned over her as king. As king, his resources were without limits. He could afford to do about anything he wanted to do. This book is his biography. It is like reading a diary of a man who is desperately searching for the meaning and purpose of life. He will find that purpose and meaning of life, but not where he sought it at the first.

### *Structure of the Book*

There have been an infinite number of schemes suggested for discerning the outline of Ecclesiastes. As we have seen, the word *Qoheleth* means "to call an assembly," but Solomon did more than call an assembly and give an oration. The word *Qoheleth* also carries with it the idea of debating, not so much with the listeners as with himself. He would present a topic, discuss it from many viewpoints, and then come to a practical conclusion. Ecclesiastes may appear to be a random collection of miscellaneous ideas about a variety of topics, but Solomon assures us that what he wrote was orderly (12:9).

The most satisfactory division of Ecclesiastes is one that separates the text into four parts. The most obvious advantage of this division is that each of the first three sections climax with a formal refrain that is given in almost identical terms: "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God" (2:24; 5:18; 8:15).

The first section provides a preliminary argument from Solomon's own experience designed to show that happiness is not in man's own power. All striving and toiling, though it may surround man with every gratification his heart can desire, is powerless to give that gratification itself.

The second section demonstrates that God has a scheme in which every event and all the diverse actions of men, with the time of their occurrence, are definitely arranged. This scheme, revealed in 3:11, is a beautiful one, though from their prevailing worldliness men do not comprehend it. He next proceeds to allege that various facts or anomalies which seem to be so serious an exception to this grand doctrine, which states that justice rules in the world and happiness

attends righteous behavior, that He first utters a caution. This caution covered three circumstances: being seduced to irreligion, to neglect of religious duty, or to inconsiderate language reflecting upon God's providence. These wrongs, which are acknowledged to exist, find restitution in superior government instituted by God.

The third section, which constitutes the central portion of the book, is to apply this plan (i.e., that enjoyment of the world is a gift of God, bestowed by God and regulated by His grand plan) to the explanation of the inequalities of divine providence. Hence, we will find that prosperity may not be good while adversity or affliction is not necessarily evil. A right application of these considerations will remove a large portion of the apparent inequalities of providence.

The fourth section is occupied with the removal of discouragements and the enforcing of practical lessons. The remaining mysteries of this subject should not be an obstacle to human joy or activity. In both joy and activity men should be mindful of death and judgment. The conclusion of the entire discussion is a command to fear God and keep His commandments, for in these does man find true happiness and meaning to life.

### *Key Terms And Phrases In The Book Of Ecclesiastes*

In the first several verses, Solomon introduces some of the key words and phrases that are used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes. Understanding these phrases and words will help us to better grasp the message of the book.

1. "Vanity of vanities" -- Solomon used this phrase thirty-eight times in this book. It means "emptiness, futility or vapor." The name "Abel" probably comes from this word (Genesis 4:2). Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is vanity. Whether he considers his wealth, his works, his wisdom or his world, Solomon comes to the same sad conclusion: all is "vanity and vexation of spirit" (2:11).
2. "Under the sun" -- This phrase occurs twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes. It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and not necessarily from heaven's point of view. He applies his own wisdom and experience to the complex human situation and tries to make some sense out of life.
3. "Profit" -- This word is used ten times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Old Testament. Its basic meaning is "that which is left over." It may be translated "surplus, advantage or gain." The word "profit" is just the opposite of "vanity."
4. "Labor" -- This word is used twenty-three times in Ecclesiastes. It means "to toil to the point of exhaustion and yet experience little or

no fulfillment in your work." It carries with it the ideas of grief, misery, frustration and weariness. A person's daily work might seem to be futile and burdensome, but the Christian can labor gladly in the will of God (1 Corinthians 15:58).

5. "Man" -- This is the familiar Hebrew word "Adam" (Genesis 1:26; 2:7, 19) and refers to man as made from the earth. Of course, man is made in the image of God; but he came from the earth and returns to the earth after death. Solomon used the word forty-nine times as he examined "man under the sun."
6. "Evil" -- This word is used thirty-one times and is also translated as "sore," "hurt," "mischievous," "grievous," "adversity," "wickedness" and "misery." It is the opposite of "good" and covers a multitude of things: pain, sorrow, hard circumstances and distress. It is one of Solomon's favorite words for describing life as he sees it "under the sun."
7. "Joy" -- In spite of his painful encounters with the world and its problems, Solomon does not recommend either pessimism or cynicism. Rather, he admonishes us to be realistic about life, accept God's gift and enjoy them. Words related to joy are used seventeen times in Ecclesiastes.
8. "Wisdom" -- There are thirty-two references to "fools" and "folly" and fifty-four to "wisdom." Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kings 4:31) and he applied this wisdom as he sought to understand the purpose of life "under the sun."
9. "God" -- Solomon mentions God forty times and always uses "Elohim" and never "Jehovah." Elohim is the mighty God; the glorious God of creation who exercises sovereign power. Jehovah is the god of the covenant; the God of revelation who is eternally self-existent and yet graciously relates Himself to sinful man. Since Solomon is dealing exclusively with what he sees "under the sun," he uses "Elohim."

#### *Outline Of The Book*

#### **I. *Enjoying Life As A Gift From God (1:1-2:26)***

- A. The restlessness of life examined (1:1-11).
- B. The pleasures of life examined (1:12-2:11).
- C. The purposes of life examined (2:12-23).
- D. Conclusion (2:24-26).

#### **II. *Understanding The Plan Of God (3:1-5:20)***

- A. The principle of God's plan (3:1-15).
- B. The facts of God's plan (3:16-4:16).
- C. The implications of God's plan (5:1-17).
- D. Conclusion (5:18-20).

III. ***Explaining The Plan Of God (6:1-8:15)***

- A. An evaluation of man's outward fortunes explains inequalities in providence (6:1-7:14).
- B. An evaluation of man's character explains inequalities in providence (7:15-29).
- C. God's righteous government removes inequalities in providence (8:1-14).
- D. Conclusion (8:15).

IV. ***Removing Discouragements And Applying The Plan Of God (8:16-12:14)***

- A. Remaining mysteries must not diminish human joy (8:16-9:9).
- B. Remaining mysteries must not prevent us from working with all our might (9:10-11:6).
- C. The daily reminder of death should affect our God-given joy and activity (11:7-12:8).
- D. Conclusion (12:9-14).