David Jeremiah
Study Bible

LET US HEAR THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER

ECCLESIASTES

Fear God and keep His commandments,

for this is man's all.

For God will bring every work into judgment,

including every secret thing,

whether good or evil.

ECCLESIASTES 12:13, 14

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Ecclesiastes

Book Introduction

From a purely human perspective, the two wisest men in history—certainly two of the best teachers—were Jesus of Nazareth and Solomon, king of Israel. But if the two traveled the same road in terms of skill, their paths diverged at a crossroads called integrity. Jesus never lost his pure perspective, willingly facing death for what He knew to be true. Solomon, on the other hand, began swapping his kingdom-colored glasses for lenses shaded with cynicism and doubt in the latter half of his life.

Instead of taking God at His word—that we live in a fallen world where life only has meaning when acted out against a backdrop of God's presence—Solomon decided to test the theory himself. His conclusion? Life has meaning only when God is the context for it all.

It is possible to track Solomon's spiritual and intellectual progress by reading what he wrote: Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The Song of Solomon represents Solomon as a young king—virile, energetic, and full of zeal for God. Proverbs seems to represent Solomon's mature years as a king—the height of his literary output, scientific inquiry, and kingly stature (1 Kgs. 4:20–34). And Ecclesiastes represents Solomon's reflective, sunset years, when he looks back and summarizes.

Somewhere along the way, Solomon set out on a journey to find meaning—in money, possessions, wisdom, being king, his work and accomplishments, and being smarter than anyone else. Perhaps his most blatant attempt for meaning is recorded in 1 Kings 11:3: "And [Solomon] had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines." As verses 3 and 4 in that text go on to explain: "*His wives turned away his heart* . . . after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David" (italics added).

Solomon's wives were from the sworn enemies of Israel—nations that God had expressly forbidden the Israelites to consort with (11:1, 2; Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:1–3; 17:17; Josh. 23:12, 13). From this point forward in Solomon's life, the bloom was off the royal rose. He was attacked and hounded by neighboring enemies, he built temples for the vile demon-gods of his foreign wives, and his reign began a downward slide that matched the erosion of his faith. At the time of his death, 10 of the tribes of Israel followed a would-be king named Jeroboam who was not from the house of David, while only two followed Solomon's son, Rehoboam. A kingdom united and prosperous under a wise and wealthy king became a bitter and fractured monarchy.

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WHAT IT SAYS | *Life Is Meaningless Unless . . .*

While the book does not bear Solomon's name as author, there are plenty of internal indications that only he could have written it. The references to being king, being wealthy, being wise, and having the freedom to pursue unlimited options in a quest for greater meaning—all point to Solomon as the author.

The theme of the book reverberates in 1:2. Life is meaningless ("futile, absurd") unless . . . God is acknowledged. Solomon had looked everywhere for meaning in life and found worldly answers lacking. Yet he persisted.

In the first two chapters alone, after he introduces his essay in 1:1–11 (which is his setup for his message, not necessarily what he believed), we find that he pursued ultimate meaning in wisdom (1:12–18; 2:12–16), in mirth and material possessions (2:1–8), and in works (2:9–11). And he found that when pursued as ends in themselves, they held no lasting satisfaction. Not one of these pursuits on its own gave meaning to life (2:17–23).

WHAT IT MEANS | *From Dust to Dust*

Woven through the 12 chapters of Ecclesiastes are three unmistakable themes:

- **Fear of God:** "Fear of God" has a range of meaning in the OT—from the emotional response of "being afraid" to reverential awe that recognizes God's sovereignty over all of life and leads to worship and humble obedience. The latter is primarily in view in Ecclesiastes. The one who fears God recognizes that He gives meaning to every area of life and that no area of life has meaning apart from Him (3:9–15; 8:10–13; 12:13, 14).
- **Meaning in Life:** Life is like the blink of an eye compared to the scale of eternity. Life certainly does have meaning—God created it and uses it to accomplish His purposes. But the brevity of our years is strong reminder not to seek ultimate meaning in things that are "here today and gone tomorrow." It is the reason Jesus counseled against laying up treasures on earth as opposed to heaven (Matt. 6:19, 20).
- **The Fall:** Although not mentioned explicitly, the effect of the curse of sin upon humanity and all creation is evident throughout Ecclesiastes (Rom. 8:18–25). One labors against the elements all of one's life, and to what end? Humans return to the dust from which they came, sharing the same fate as animals. So what is the point? Ecclesiastes reveals all the ways life apart from God is futile while implying the opposite: that satisfaction is found only in Him.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU | *Eternity in Our Hearts*

Solomon wrote: "He has put eternity in [men and women's] hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" (3:11). God has created us as spiritual beings. Solomon points out the irony that people want—even crave—to understand ultimate realities, and yet they can never figure out life using their minds alone. In fact, the farther we drift from a day-by-day, faith-walk with Christ, the more frustration and confusion we will experience.

Without that eternal dimension, we will always be looking for substitutes—shallow, stand-ins for God that only make us feel emptier than ever. Our head might tell us we need a vacation, a hobby, a new car, a night on the town, or a new romance to bring life back into our days. But those fixes are temporary at best. The only venture that will satisfy us to our very core is to reconnect with the Creator who loves us and the Savior who died for us. The good news is, He is right at the door—and knocking (Rev. 3:20).

Scan with your smartphone to access Dr. Jeremiah's digital library on Ecclesiastes, or go to www.JeremiahStudyBible.com/Ecclesiastes/library

John MacArthur
Study Bible

THE
BOOK OF

ECCLESIASTES

TITLE

The English title, Ecclesiastes, comes from the Greek and Latin translations of Solomon's book. The LXX used the Greek term *ekklēsiastēs* for its title. It means "preacher," derived from the word *ekklēsia*, translated "assembly" or "congregation" in the NT. Both the Greek and Latin versions derive their titles from the Hebrew title, *Qoheleth*, which means "one who calls or gathers" the people. It refers to the one who addresses the assembly; hence, the preacher (cf. 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8–10). Along with Ruth, Song of Solomon, Esther, and Lamentations, Ecclesiastes stands with the OT books of the Megilloth, or "five scrolls." Later rabbis read these books in the synagogue on 5 special occasions during the year—Ecclesiastes being read on Pentecost.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The autobiographical profile of the book's writer unmistakably points to Solomon. Evidence abounds such as: 1) the titles fit Solomon, "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1) and "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12); 2) the author's moral odyssey chronicles Solomon's life (1Ki 2–11); and 3) the role of one who "taught the people knowledge" and wrote "many proverbs" (12:9) corresponds to his life. All point to Solomon, the son of David, as the author.

Once Solomon is accepted as the author, the date and occasion become clear. Solomon was writing, probably in his latter years (no later than ca. 931 B.C.), primarily to warn the young people of his kingdom, without omitting others. He warned them to avoid walking through life on the path of human wisdom; he exhorted them to live by the revealed wisdom of God (12:9–14).

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Solomon's reputation for possessing extraordinary wisdom fits the Ecclesiastes profile. David recognized his son's wisdom (1Ki 2:6, 9) before God gave Solomon an additional measure. After he received a "wise and discerning heart" from the Lord (1Ki 3:7–12), Solomon gained renown for being exceedingly wise by rendering insightful decisions (1Ki 3:16–28), a reputation that attracted "all the kings of the earth" to his courts (1Ki 4:34). In addition, he composed songs and proverbs (1Ki 4:32; cf. 12:9), activity befitting only the ablest of sages. Solomon's wisdom, like Job's wealth, surpassed the wisdom "of all the sons of the east" (1Ki 4:30; Job 1:3).

The book is applicable to all who would listen and benefit, not so much from Solomon's experiences, but from the principles he drew as a result. Its aim is to answer some of life's most challenging questions, particularly where they seem contrary to Solomon's expectations. This has led some unwisely to take the view that Ecclesiastes is a book of skepticism. But in spite of amazingly unwise behavior and thinking, Solomon never let go of his faith in God (12:13, 14).

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES

As is true with most biblical Wisdom literature, little historical narrative occurs in Ecclesiastes, apart from Solomon's own personal pilgrimage. The kingly sage studied life with high expectations but repeatedly bemoaned its shortcomings, which he acknowledged were due to the curse (Ge 3:14–19). Ecclesiastes represents the painful autobiography of Solomon who, for much of his life, squandered God's blessings on his own personal pleasure rather than God's glory. He wrote to warn subsequent generations not to make the same tragic error, in much the same manner as Paul wrote to the Corinthians (cf. 1Co 1:18–31; 2:13–16).

The Heb. word translated "vanity," "vanities," and "vain life" expresses the futile attempt to be satisfied apart from God. This word is used 38 times expressing the many things hard to understand about life. All earthly goals and ambitions when pursued as ends in themselves produce only emptiness. Paul was probably echoing Solomon's dissatisfaction when he wrote, " … the creation was subjected to futility" (Solomon's "vanity"; Ro 8:19–21). Solomon's experience with the effects of the curse (see Ge 3:17–19) led him to view life as "chasing after the wind."

Solomon asked, "What advantage does a man have in all his work … ?" (1:3), a question he repeated in 2:22 and 3:9. The wise king gave over a considerable portion of the book to addressing this dilemma. The impossibility of discovering both the inner workings of God's creation and the personal providence of God in Solomon's

life was also deeply troubling to the king, as it was to Job. But the reality of judgment for all, despite many unknowns, emerged as the great certainty. In light of this judgment by God, the only fulfilled life is one lived in proper recognition of God and service to Him. Any other kind of life is frustrating and pointless.

A proper balance of the prominent "enjoy life" theme with that of "divine judgment" tethers the reader to Solomon's God with the sure cord of faith. For a time, Solomon suffered from the imbalance of trying to enjoy life without regard for the fear of Yahweh's judgment holding him on the path of obedience. In the end, he came to grasp the importance of obedience. The tragic results of Solomon's personal experience, coupled with the insight of extraordinary wisdom, make Ecclesiastes a book from which all believers can be warned and grow in their faith (cf. 2:1–26). 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 (cf. Jn 10:10). However, one who looks to be satisfied apart from God will live with futility regardless of their accumulations.

INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

The author's declaration that "all is vanity" envelops the primary message of the book (cf. 1:2; 12:8). The word translated "vanity" is used in at least 3 ways throughout the book. In each case, it looks at the nature of man's activity "under the sun" as: 1) "fleeting," which has in view the vapor-like (cf. Jas 4:14) or transitory nature of life; 2) "futile" or "meaningless," which focuses on the cursed condition of the universe and the debilitating effects it has on man's earthly experience; or 3) "incomprehensible" or "enigmatic," which gives consideration to life's unanswerable questions. Solomon draws upon all 3 meanings in Ecclesiastes.

While the context in each case will determine which meaning Solomon is focusing upon, the most recurring meaning of *vanity* is "incomprehensible" or "unknowable," referring to the mysteries of God's purposes. Solomon's conclusion to "fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13, 14) is more than the book's summary; it is the only hope of the good life and the only reasonable response of faith and obedience to sovereign God. He precisely works out all activities under the sun, each in its time according to His perfect plan, but also discloses only as much as His perfect wisdom dictates and holds all men accountable. Those who refuse to take God and His Word seriously are doomed to lives of the severest vanity.

OUTLINE

The book chronicles Solomon's investigations and conclusions regarding man's lifework, which combine all of his activity and its potential outcomes including limited satisfaction. The role of wisdom in experiencing success surfaces repeatedly, particularly when Solomon must acknowledge that God has not revealed all of the details. This leads Solomon to the conclusion that the primary issues of life after the Edenic fall involve divine blessings to be enjoyed and the divine judgment for which all must prepare.

OUTLINE

I. Introduction
- A. Title (1:1)
- B. Poem—A Life of Activity That Appears Wearisome (1:2–11)

II. Solomon's Investigation (1:12–6:9)
- A. Introduction—The King and His Investigation (1:12–18)
- B. Investigation of Pleasure-Seeking (2:1–11)
- C. Investigation of Wisdom and Folly (2:12–17)
- D. Investigation of Labor and Rewards (2:18–6:9)
  1. One has to leave them to another (2:18–26)
  2. One cannot find the right time to act (3:1–4:6)
  3. One often must work alone (4:7–16)
  4. One can easily lose all he acquires (5:1–6:9)

III. Solomon's Conclusions (6:10–12:8)
- A. Introduction—The Problem of Not Knowing (6:10–12)
- B. Man Cannot Always Find Out Which Route Is the Most Successful for Him to Take Because His Wisdom Is Limited (7:1–8:17)
  1. On prosperity and adversity (7:1–14)
  2. On justice and wickedness (7:15–24)
  3. On women and folly (7:25–29)
  4. On the wise man and the king (8:1–17)
- C. Man Does Not Know What Will Come After Him (9:1–11:6)
  1. He knows he will die (9:1–4)
  2. He has no knowledge in the grave (9:5–10)
  3. He does not know his time of death (9:11, 12)
  4. He does not know what will happen (9:13–10:15)
  5. He does not know what evil will come (10:16–11:2)
  6. He does not know what good will come (11:3–6)
- D. Man Should Enjoy Life, But Not Sin, Because Judgment Will Come to All (11:7–12:8)

IV. Solomon's Final Advice (12:9–14)