

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Ecclesiastes

Scripture: Ecclesiastes

Code: MSB21

Title

The English title, Ecclesiastes, comes from the Greek and Latin translations of Solomon's book. The LXX, the Greek translation of the OT, used the Greek term *ekklasiasts* for its title. It means "preacher," derived from the word *ekklesia*, 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 (1 Kin. 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 (1 Kin. 2:6, 9) before God gave Solomon an additional measure. After he received a "wise and understanding heart" from the Lord (1 Kin. 3:7–12), Solomon gained renown for being exceedingly wise by rendering insightful decisions (1 Kin. 3:16–28), a reputation that attracted "all the kings of the earth" to his courts (1 Kin. 4:34). In addition, he composed songs and proverbs (1 Kin. 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 people of the east" (1 Kin. 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 (Gen. 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. 1 Cor. 1:18–31; 2:13–16).

The key word is "vanity," which expresses the futile attempt to be satisfied apart from God. This word is used 37 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"; Rom. 8:19–21). Solomon's experience with the effects of the curse (see Gen. 3:17–19) led him to view life as "chasing after the wind."

Solomon asked, "What profit has a man from all his labor ...?" (1:3), a question he repeated in 2:24 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 were also deeply troubling to the king, as they were 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 chord 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. John 10:10). However, one who looks

to be satisfied apart from God will live with futility regardless of his 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. James 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.

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)

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