

# BIBLE SURVEY: OT WISDOM

## WEEK 5: ECCLESIASTES

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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- In this 6-week series, we are going to go through the Old Testament wisdom and poetry books.
- Our schedule for the next 6 weeks will be:
  - November 13<sup>th</sup>: Introduction and Job
  - November 20<sup>th</sup>: Psalms part 1
  - November 27<sup>th</sup>: Psalms part 2
  - December 4<sup>th</sup>: Proverbs
  - **December 11<sup>th</sup>: Ecclesiastes**
  - December 18<sup>th</sup>: Song of Solomon

### INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

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- The English title, Ecclesiastes, comes from the Greek and Latin translations of Solomon's book<sup>1</sup>. The LXX, the Greek translation of the OT, 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.<sup>2</sup>
- Ecclesiastes is often looked upon as the Bible's resident alien. Other books may be considered perplexing (Job) or as superseded by New Testament revelation (Leviticus).
- **Many read Ecclesiastes, however, with the distinct feeling that this book does not belong in the Bible.**
- No other book immediately meets the reader with such pessimism and despair: Everything is meaningless?

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<sup>1</sup> While it is hotly debated who wrote this book, it has only been since the Enlightenment that anyone has truly questioned it. For the purpose of this study, we are assuming that Solomon was the only author of this book.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB21/ecclesiastes>

- What other book challenges the idea of afterlife (3:19–21)?
- The poetic power of 3:1–8 is evident to all, but the meaning of the words is far less clear.
- Furthermore, it is not helpful that almost every aspect of the book’s origin and background is hotly debated. The authorship, date of composition, purpose, message, and even the original language of the book have all been disputed. In what sense can Ecclesiastes be called a word of God?<sup>3</sup>
- 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).<sup>4</sup>

## SIMPLE OUTLINE<sup>5</sup>

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|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Introduction (1:1–2)            | 19. Transition (7:5–6)                      |
| 2. On Time and the World (1:3–11)  | 20. On Wisdom and Politics (7:7–9)          |
| 3. On Wisdom (1:12–18)             | 21. Transition (7:10)                       |
| 4. On Wealth (2:1–11)              | 22. On Wisdom and Wealth (7:11–14)          |
| 5. On Wisdom (2:12–17)             | 23. On Religion, Wisdom, and Evil (7:15–29) |
| 6. On Wealth (2:18–26)             | 24. Transition (8:1)                        |
| 7. On Time and the World (3:1–15b) | 25. On Politics (8:2–6)                     |
| 8. On Politics (3:15c–17)          | 26. Transition (8:7–8)                      |
| 9. On Death (3:18–22)              | 27. On Theodicy (8:9–9:1)                   |
| 10. On Politics (4:1–3)            | 28. Transition (9:2)                        |
| 11. On Wealth (4:4–8)              | 29. On Death and Contentment (9:3–10)       |
| 12. On Friendship (4:9–12)         | 30. Transition (9:11–12)                    |
| 13. On Politics (4:13–16)          | 31. On Politics (9:13–10:17)                |
| 14. On Religion (5:1–7)            | 32. Transition (10:18–20)                   |
| 15. On Politics (5:8–9)            | 33. On Wealth (11:1–6)                      |
| 16. On Wealth (5:10–6:6)           | 34. On Death and Contentment (11:7–12:7)    |
| 17. Transition (6:7–9)             | 35. Conclusion (12:8–14)                    |
| 18. On Wisdom and Death (6:10–7:4) |   |

<sup>3</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 254.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB21/ecclesiastes>

<sup>5</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 281.

## WHY STUDY ECCLESIASTES?

- 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 despite amazingly unwise behavior and thinking, Solomon never let go of his faith in God (12:13, 14).<sup>6</sup>

### Theological Implications

- Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon uses the word 'vanity' some 37 times, emphasizing vanity by saying 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity' in 1:2. The reason for the double use of vanity is to show that this is vanity at its apex. Solomon also uses the phrase 'under the sun' some 29 times to point the reader to view the world from a natural perspective, attempting to meet his readers where they currently were in their life.
- Solomon starts this book with 'all is vanity', one might draw a conclusion that he thinks there is nothing good in life and whatever is done, is absolutely meaningless.
- But, because man's life is lived 'under the sun', his view or vantage point may constantly look grim.
- It appears that Solomon deliberately leaves God out of the beginning of this letter so he could focus his attention solely on life on earth, or 'under the sun'.
- It also appears Solomon takes the first 11 chapters to show how life, and activities within life, are simply not worth doing. He focuses on how death is final, and all men will ultimately die (2:14), therefore taking all advantages away from people.
- He also talks about life is momentary (6:12) and work is most frustrating (4:4). He talks about the futility of pleasures (10-11), the insufficiency of wisdom (9:13-16) and how injustice seems to abound (8:9-10).
- Ultimately, it seems Solomon simply comes to the conclusion that life is full of unknown factors (11:2), so what is the point of trying.
- One could easily come to the conclusion that Solomon simply found nothing in this life worth living for. Furthermore, upon reading the woes he saw and encountered in his own life, it is also possible to think it was the ramblings of someone who was just simply confused.
- But, when Solomon's writings are taken in light of **12:13-14**, there begins to be much more theological meaning behind his woes. He ends his book with two simple commands, fear God and keep His commands.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB21/ecclesiastes>

- After all Solomon just lamented, his conclusion was simple; as we live ‘under the sun’, man’s chief responsibility is to fear God and keep His commands.
- One needs to have the proper balance between enjoyment in this life, while regarding the judgment of God which will come after this life. If one has no regard for God’s final judgment and lives a life of disobedience, one has nothing to look forward to and this life will be worthless.
- It is the fear of the Lord which brings one to the beginning of wisdom (Pro. 9:10) and with this wisdom, one can properly keep His commands.

## Pessimism

- Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, there seems to be a dark picture of life portrayed that is not found in other books of the Bible. Solomon is attempting to show the utter despair of life when man is simply led by their own knowledge and emotions.
- Some think this book adds nothing to the canon except conveying a life of oppressiveness and a God who stands at a distance, helplessly looking on.
- But this is not the case, as Solomon seeks to show life’s futility without fearing God and keeping His commandments (Ecc. 12:13-14).
- The Teacher’s faith in the justice of God and the goodness of his commands runs deep (e.g., 8:12–13; 11:9).
- Even where the Teacher does not know and cannot explain, his response is a response of faith (3:16–17).<sup>7</sup>

## Preacher of Joy

- 7 pessimistic sections in Ecclesiastes. Each have, usually toward the end, an exhortation to rejoice:

Text	Problem Described	Exhortation to Rejoice
1:12–2:26	<u>Pleasure does not satisfy</u>	2:24–26
3:1–15	<u>Ignorance of the future</u>	3:12
3:16–22	<u>Injustice</u>	3:22
5:9–19	<u>Wealth does not satisfy</u>	5:17
8:10–15	<u>Injustice</u>	8:15

<sup>7</sup> Duane A. Garrett, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, vol. 14, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 272.

9:1–10	<b><u>God inscrutable; death certain</u></b>	9:7–9
11:7–12:7	<b><u>Old age and death</u></b>	11:9–10; 12:1

- The text would seem to be saying that the best thing one can do is to rejoice in the face of life's unresolved problems. Perhaps the teacher is not the teacher of gloomy pessimism but the preacher of joy.
- True joy is not so much an option for the Teacher as mere pleasure and that is not wholeheartedly endorsed.
- The goal of Ecclesiastes is not to drive the reader toward joy, and this emphasis obscures the theological dimension of the book. Its aim is to drive the reader to God.<sup>8</sup>

### Seeming Contradictions

- If we only take Ecclesiastes as a book which presents man's views and thoughts, we can fall into the trap of seeing contradictions throughout.
- Some think that the perceived contradictions throughout the book could be due to multiple authors or one author who simply could not grasp the complexities of life.
- It is because of these apparent contradictions that many have strayed from proper Biblical exegesis, instead attempting to either spiritualize or allegorize the book.
- In handling these apparent contradictions, one must come to the realization that Solomon is offering a 'realistic view of life' that simply offsets the confidence which is usually accompanied with wisdom.
- One such example is found in **1:18** where Solomon says, 'much wisdom is much grief' but then in **7:11** he says that wisdom is 'good and profitable.'
- Though wisdom certainly has its weaknesses (does not prevent death 2:14, folly can make the wise foolish 10:1), it is far better to be wise (2:13).
- It is from wisdom that one can preserve life (7:11-12), find their strength (v. 19) and even cause meditation on what the future life holds (7:4).
- This worldly wisdom, or wisdom 'under the sun', is futile and cannot lead to a life of meaning.
- Therefore, as Solomon says in **8:5**, those who keep God's commands will experience nothing harmful and will be wise in knowing the times and the coming judgment.

<sup>8</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 273.

## POINTING TO CHRIST<sup>9</sup>

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- For all the vanities described in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the answer is Christ.
- According to Ecclesiastes 3:17, God judges the righteous and the wicked, and the righteous are only those who are in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- **God has placed the desire for eternity in our hearts** (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and has provided the Way to eternal life through Christ (John 3:16).
- Striving after the world's wealth is not only vanity because it does not satisfy (Ecc 5:10), but even if we could attain it, without Christ we would lose our souls and what profit is there in that (Mark 8:36)?
- Every disappointment and vanity described in Ecclesiastes has its remedy in Christ, the wisdom of God.

## RELATION TO PROVERBS

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- Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are not contradictory but complementary. Proverbs has a very black and white view, where Ecclesiastes recognizes the righteous order, but points out it is not always obvious to see.
- Where Proverbs generally takes the stance that faith is necessary to know a righteous order exists in the world, Solomon simply says one cannot always observe a righteous order.
- Worldly wisdom has its limitations, it cannot explain why injustices are prevalent in the world. Solomon says, the righteous get the wicked man's punishment and the wicked get the righteous man's reward (8:14).
- This can seem contradictory to Proverbs which says that good men obtain favor from God but He condemns those who do evil (12:2).
- Ecclesiastes is simply observing daily life, not an end-all rule.
- Proverbs, on the other hand, is speaking in general and simple terms to have a good life and God's favor, make good decisions.
- Both Ecclesiastes and Proverbs come to the same conclusion, it is the fear of the Lord that will give a person ultimate meaning in this life (Ecc. 8:12-13; Pro. 2:4-8).
- Without fearing the Lord, one will simply do evil throughout their days (Ecc. 8:11; Pro. 8:13) and will not obtain eternal life with the Lord.
- Therefore, Solomon comes to the conclusion that every work will be judged, and man needs to fear God and keep His commandments (Ecc. 12:13-14).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/Book-of-Ecclesiastes.html>

## FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE ENDING

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- The book chronicles Solomon's investigations and conclusions regarding man's lifework, which combine all his activity and its potential outcomes including limited satisfaction. Wisdom's role in experiencing success surfaces repeatedly, Solomon must acknowledge that God has not revealed all 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.
- Solomon's conclusion to "fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13, 14) 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.<sup>10</sup>

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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- Ecclesiastes offers the Christian an opportunity to understand the emptiness and despair that those who do not know God grapple with. Those who do not have a saving faith in Christ are faced with a life that will ultimately end and become irrelevant.
- If there is no salvation, and no God, then not only is there no point to life, but no purpose or direction to it, either. The world "under the sun," apart from God, is frustrating, cruel, unfair, brief, and "utterly meaningless."
- With Christ, life is but a shadow of the glories to come in a heaven that is only accessible through Him.<sup>11</sup>

## SOME VERSES TO WORK THROUGH<sup>12</sup>

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- **Ecclesiastes 1:2**, "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity'
  - The very meaning of this verse is itself a mystery. The word used here, hebel, הֶבֶל means "vapor" or "breath" and is used in **Isa 57:13** parallel with "wind" and in **Prov 21:6** for "a fleeting vapor."
  - The word can combine being insubstantial and transitory, as in **Ps 144:4**, "Man is like a breath."
  - In this sense the English word that best approximates the meaning of this word is "vapid." The Hebrew word is also used in **Zech 10:2** ("in vain"), which says that idols give vapid comfort; that is, the comfort is empty, fleeting, and therefore a lie.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB21/ecclesiastes>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/Book-of-Ecclesiastes.html>

<sup>12</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 282-341.

- Hebel can also refer to that which is deceitful or ineffectual, especially as used of false gods
- Everything is transitory and therefore of no lasting value. People are caught in the trap of the absurd and pursue empty pleasures. They build their lives on lies.
- **Ecclesiastes 1:18**, “Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.”
- The idea behind this is that the more you know the more grief you have. Solomon, believing that he had mastered the intellectual, now sought to understand the pursuit of pleasure.
  - This is in anticipation of **2:1-2** “I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"
  - We should merely think of pleasure in the sexual context. He is speaking of anything which will bring him joy, although it is perceived joy at best.
- **Ecclesiastes 2:11**, “Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.”
  - Simply put, the payoff did not match the effort which was put forth. All that a man has, when put into activities which do not include God, always come up short.
- **Ecclesiastes 12:1**, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no delight in them’”
  - This final poem, a series of metaphors, exhorts the reader to remember the Creator before the days of age and death set in.
  - The exhortation to remember the Creator is not a contradiction to the exhortations to rejoice. Instead, we have a warning against mindless self-indulgence and profligacy during the days of one’s vigor.
  - To forget the Creator of youth is to invite bitter regrets and an empty existence in old age. To remember the Creator is to follow the path of wisdom and extend the joy of life.
- **Ecclesiastes 12:13**, “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.”
  - The summary and conclusion of the whole work is now offered: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of humanity.”
  - To obey God is to be truly human. Throughout his book the Teacher has investigated the situation of mankind.
  - Now, surprisingly, he affirms that the whole of humanity consists not in its mortality or ignorance but in its dependence on God.