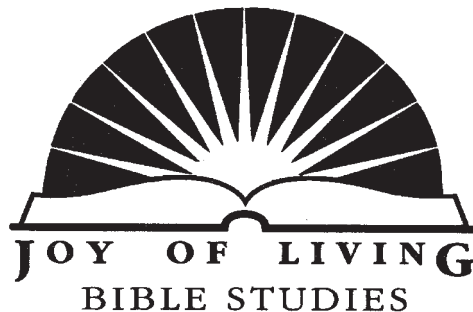


Ecclesiastes

Lesson 1



A Book Whose Time Has Come

I normally look at a map before venturing on a journey.

A number of years ago, my family and I drove from Arizona to our home in Minnesota. Having misplaced my road atlas, I drove the entire way by memory. I probably should have purchased a new atlas, but I had decided to try the trip without one. In spite of a few missed turns, eventually I made it back safely. But my trip would have been easier if I had taken the time and money necessary to buy a map.

I approach the reading of a book with the same road-map philosophy. I first turn to the introduction or first chapter, for usually a good book will give me a reliable “road map” in one of those places. It charts out the terrain over which the author wishes to take me; it expounds the benefits I will enjoy from reading it; it defines the questions it will ask and answer. In short, it tells me what to expect.

So I have prepared this introductory chapter with these questions in mind: What is this study and why should I complete it? How will it help me make sense out of the book of Ecclesiastes? And how will it help me make sense out of life?

Of Life and Wisdom

The book of Ecclesiastes is a book about life. Its writer, King Solomon,¹ was a realist. In fact, I would even call him a realist’s realist! He writes with candor about frustration, fulfillment, work, sex, injustice, friendship, worship, happiness, insecurity, suffering, temptation, folly, confusion, emptiness—our concerns. Even more importantly, he writes about these topics with a kind of brutal honesty and unsentimental clarity that even today few would dare to express in a religious book. His observations are really the conclusions that life itself forces upon us—if we have the stomach for the truth.

Ecclesiastes is also a book about wisdom. Solomon writes that we need two kinds of wisdom. The first is the wisdom that tells us how to get things done in this world—*practical wisdom*. If you want to get ahead in life and want to avoid trouble, Ecclesiastes has some sound

practical advice. How do things work? How can I get the most out of life? Ecclesiastes will tell you.

The second type of wisdom is God’s wisdom. This *spiritual wisdom* tells us what is eternally important. It is wise not to whisper sedition against the king (see 10:20); it is also wise to know that God made us (see 12:1) and that He will eventually pass judgment on our lives (see 12:14). That is, it is one thing to fear the king; it is quite another to fear God. It is this kind of wisdom Solomon had in mind when he wrote, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

Is That All There Is?

Do you ever get blue watching the evening news? I confess I do. In our city, like yours, crime is increasing. The legitimate poor are struggling because of regulations brought on by welfare cheaters. A new abortion clinic is opening. The gays want rights, not repentance. I go to the monthly ministerial meeting looking for an encouraging note. It’s not there. One church is going through a split. Another evangelical pastor has left his wife. Lord, what do you have to tell us?

Solomon constructs an interesting answer in Ecclesiastes. Simply put, he says that all human striving is worthless. In writing these rather strong words, “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (1:2), I believe King Solomon had his eye on two people. First, he was looking back on his own life in remorse over his follies. Second, he was looking at the all-too-common pagan (today we call him a “secularist”) who sees no reason to involve God in his life. “I do quite well without God’s help, thank you.” Quite successful in his own eyes, he looks down at those who believe God is important.

So Solomon decides to meet the secular person on his own ground. It is as though he says, “OK. Let’s assume that God is irrelevant. But if God is out of the picture, who’s in? What does life become without Him?”

The Elements of Life Without God

The first element he finds is *death*. Death is a rather serious problem for the person who has all his or her eggs in an earthly basket. Death is a fact of life that cannot be avoided. “Like the fool, the wise man too must die” (2:16). For all we can see, that might as well be life’s final verdict.

1. The authors realize that some commentators believe Ecclesiastes was written by someone other than Solomon. However, we have accepted the historic understanding of the book’s authorship as Solomon, partly due to its similarity in expression and phraseology with the Song of Solomon, partly due to the weight of scholarly opinion, and partly because it is hard to make sense of the book if Solomon was not its author including 1:1.

The second element Solomon finds is *evil*. He finds evil everywhere. Wickedness where justice should be executed (see 3:16), oppression of the poor in favor of the powerful (see 4:1), envy that accompanies every success (see 4:4), the greed of the wealthy (see 4:8), social systems that exploit (see 5:8), sinful people everywhere (see 7:20), and a mad thirst for evil (see 9:3)—all fill the earth. These evils, too, are easy to observe.

The third fact Solomon finds is *time and chance* (see 9:11-12). He explodes the myth that people can master their own fate. Instead, time and chance end up getting all of us. We are like the unsuspecting fish that is rudely taken from the water when his time “fall[s] unexpectedly” upon him (see 9:12). All of us have seen the brutal work of time and chance; we see their effects every day.

So this is what life without God is like. And having made his point, Solomon again declares, “Meaningless! Meaningless!...Everything is meaningless!” (12:8). Thus Solomon both begins and ends his description of life with these bookends of despair.

No, There's More

But Solomon is a man of faith, and he is not willing to leave the reader in that bone-chilling condition. He cannot resist proclaiming his own faith as he rests his case:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (12:13-14)

Even though Ecclesiastes is filled with statements about the futility of the human experience, Solomon is too much a man of faith to hide his own beliefs. He has much to say about God, even though he uses few words to say it.

In the course of Ecclesiastes he uses five separate attributes of God to express his convictions.

1. As *Creator*, God makes all things. We are told that we “cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things” (11:5). It is He who creates, not us; and we cannot change it. Everything has its season (see 3:1-8), and not one of us can do so much as make a crooked thing straight (see 7:13) or make the wind blow one way or another (see 11:5).
2. As *Sovereign*, God is in charge. It is God who has given a “heavy burden” to humanity (1:13); it is God who “gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness” to the one “who pleases him,” but takes the sinners’ work from them (2:26); and it is God who protects “the righteous and the wise and what they do” (9:1).
3. As *Wisdom*, God is unsearchable. In 3:11 we are told, “He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” In 7:14 we are also told that God has made both good and bad times and “therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.” Furthermore, even a

wise person will be unable to understand the works of God (see 7:23-24; 8:17).

4. As the *Righteous One*, God will surely judge. He will judge the wicked (see 3:17); the works of the righteous are in His hand (see 9:1); we are to live with the judgment in mind, even from the days of our youth (see 11:9); and ultimately everyone will experience God’s judgment (see 12:14).
5. As *Love*, God can be trusted. I believe this is what Solomon implied when he wrote: “So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God’s hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him” (9:1).

I do not believe that Solomon is saying that we cannot know whether God is a God of love. It is important to remember that, by inspiration of God, he is presenting his argument to the secular-minded person. It seems to me that what he says is, “OK, for the sake of argument, this time let’s assume there is a God. But based on what we see around us—evil and suffering and death—we really can’t tell whether He loves or hates us. So what is the point of talking about it?”

Of course Solomon knew that God loves us! He knew the answer to his question. For those who do not know the answer, however, it is a terrifying question. But all who know Solomon’s God also know that it is a wonderful question. “Ah, yes. He loves me. That’s the kind of God He is.”

A Faith-Filled Perspective

It would be easy to assume that a book filled with “Meaningless! Meaningless!” (1:2) would advocate a pinch-faced approach to life. But that is not the case. Repeatedly, Solomon declares that life is a gift from God, and we are to live it with joy (see 2:24-25; 3:13; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9). Certainly, in view of his keen awareness of the dark side of life, his is a remarkable, faith-filled perspective. We who are blessed with so much would do well to learn of joy and gratitude from him.

As I study the book of Ecclesiastes, I find it to be a practical and reliable guide to life in our own century. Time and again I have been amazed at how accurately Solomon described the world. It never fails to overwhelm me that in spite of its surface cynicism, the message of Ecclesiastes is as reliable and hope-filled in our modern, secular age as it was when first penned thousands of years ago. That is why I love this book.

Come, walk through it with me.

Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Introduction to Ecclesiastes.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the Introduction to Ecclesiastes, or from your teacher’s lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, or post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Ecclesiastes 1, concentrating on verses 1-3.

1. In verse 1, who is identified as the author of this book of the Bible and how is he described?

2. What did Solomon say life is like when we consider only the evidence that our senses give us? (verse 2)

3. a. What question does Solomon ask in verse 3?

b. Challenge: Look particularly at the word “gain” in verse 3 which is taken from the ancient Hebrew business word meaning “money gained from work rendered.” What do you think Solomon meant by his question?

c. Read Mark 8:36. What value does Jesus place on the human soul? How does this relate to Solomon’s question in Ecclesiastes 1:3?

4. a. Read Matthew 6:19-21. How does Jesus say the fruits of our labor can be meaningful instead of meaningless?

b. What is the primary work of the Christian? Read John 6:27-29.

5. What objectives for the Christian’s work do you find in the following verses?
1 Corinthians 10:31

2 Thessalonians 3:10

Ephesians 4:28

Matthew 28:19

6. Personal: Do you feel like you are spending your life in meaningless labor and toil? Have you believed in Jesus Christ? He will not only give you eternal life with Him, but will give meaning to your daily labor here on earth. Write a prayer here asking Him to help you do all that you do for His glory.

Third Day: Review Ecclesiastes 1, concentrating on verses 4-8.

1. What did Solomon observe about nature in verses 4-7?

2. What is Solomon's conclusion about these things according to verse 8a?

3. a. Solomon made this statement from the point of view of someone who ignores God. He found the repetition of nature to be pointless and tiring. But as believers we can find great meaning and joy in observing nature. What do the following verses say about this?

Psalm 19:1-3

Isaiah 40:26

Romans 1:20

- b. Personal: Do you ever grumble about the repetitiveness of nature—"Do I have to rake the leaves *again*?" or "How did the car get dirty so quickly?" Ask God to change your mindset, so that you thank Him instead of grumble: "Thank you for the shade from these trees, Lord!" or "Thank you that I have a car to drive." Write down some of your normal repetitive annoyances here, and then write down how you can thank God for them.

4. a. What does Solomon observe in Ecclesiastes 1:8b?

- b. Challenge: How do you see this observation reflected in our culture today?

5. Solomon had learned that true happiness was not in our power to attain because humanly we always long for more. How can we be truly filled and satisfied according to the following verses?

Psalm 37:4

Psalm 63:4-5

Matthew 5:6

6. Personal: Have you received true fulfillment and contentment from God through faith in Jesus Christ and trust in His plan for your life? If not, why not pray about this now?

Fourth and Fifth Days: Review Ecclesiastes 1, concentrating on verses 9-11.

1. What did Solomon observe about life on earth in verses 9-10?
2. Challenge: What do you think Solomon meant by this observation? How do you see this truth expressed in current events and trends?
3. If we look at life and history without reference to God, we see pointlessness and repetition. But in actuality there *are* new things which come to us from the hand of God. What do the following verses say about this?

Isaiah 43:19

Ezekiel 36:26

Luke 22:20

2 Peter 3:13

4. What else does Solomon observe about human history in Ecclesiastes 1:11?
5. Some people pin their hopes for meaning on the dream that they will be remembered after they die. Yet, just as Solomon observed, most people will not be remembered for long, if at all, in earthly history. But the truth is that *every* person's life has significance in the eyes of God. How do the following verses express this?

Matthew 10:29-31

John 15:16

1 Timothy 2:3-4

6. Personal: Have you realized your significance to God? How does this affect the way you view your life and legacy? Write a prayer to God here, thanking Him, and asking for His guidance in setting your priorities.

Sixth Day: Review Ecclesiastes 1, concentrating on verses 12-18.

1. What was Solomon's position in Israel? (verse 12)
2. What did he devote himself to do? (verse 13a)
3. What did Solomon observe about life as he saw it through the eyes of the unbeliever? (verses 13b-15)
4.
 - a. How did Solomon try to understand the situation he saw around him? (verse 17a)
 - b. Why did he think he might be able to do this? (verse 16)
 - c. What was his conclusion? (verses 17b-18)
5.
 - a. Remember that Solomon was looking at the observable world using human wisdom and knowledge. This is different than the wisdom that comes from God. What do the following verses say about wisdom from God?

Proverbs 9:10

1 John 5:20
 - b. Challenge: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 gives much more information about God's wisdom which He reveals to believers. What are the characteristics of God's wisdom, and how do we receive it?
6.
 - a. Personal: Are you viewing life and making decisions based on human wisdom or God's wisdom? If you are a believer, you "have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). How does this change your outlook?
 - b. Did you choose a verse to memorize this week? Share it with your group, if possible.