

THEME
THE TRUE VALUE OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN
AN OVERVIEW ON
ECCLESIASTES
ADEOYE, EMMANUEL (EVANG.)

"Ecclesiastes" comes from the Greek Ekklesia, which in the NT is translated "church" or "assembly." It carries the idea of a preacher (or debater) speaking to an assembly of people (1:1-2 and 12:8-10). The Preacher here presents a practical problem and discusses it, seeking to come to a conclusion.

AUTHORSHIP

Solomon is named as the author; see 1:1-2,12. Certainly he was known for his wisdom as well as for his wealth and enjoyment of pleasures. No king in the OT better fits the situation described in this book.

THE PREACHER - and Convener of assemblies for the purpose, *Qohelet* in Hebrew, is the standing form for calling or gatherings together the people of God (Deut 4:10; Ex 35:1; Lev 8:3): a symbolical name for Solomon, and of Heavenly Wisdom speaking through and identified with him. Compare **1 Kings 8:1**, "Solomon assembled the elders of Israel."

Wisdom in the Church, unlike the wisdom of worldly philosophy, addressed itself not merely to the privileged few, but to the whole assembly. It pities and seeks the good of all, instead of the glorification of self. There is thus a coincidence with Solomon's words, Prov 1:20-21; 8:3, "Wisdom crieth without" - "She crieth at the gates;" i.e., the place of public concourse

THEME OF THE BOOK

The theme is given in 1:1-3, and might be expressed, "Is life really worth living?" Solomon looks at life with its seeming contradictions and mysteries, and he wonders if the "endless toil" of existence is worth it. People toil all their lives, then die, and somebody less worthy inherits their wealth and wastes it. Solomon comes to the conclusion that the best thing to do is to enjoy the blessings of God today, fear God, and keep His Word. Of course, with the added light of the NT we know that "our labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58).

Some of the key words and phrases in Ecclesiastes are: *man* (47 times), *labor* (36 times), *under the sun* (30 times), *vanity* (37 times), *wisdom* or *wise* (52 times), and *evil* (22 times). Keep in mind that Solomon is reasoning about what he sees and knows "under the sun." If you stop with Ecclesiastes, you will stay in the shadows; you must move on to the full revelation of the NT to have the whole counsel of God.

Many of the false cults quote isolated verses from this book to prove their strange doctrines.

KEY THEMES

>The tragic reality of the fall. The Preacher is painfully aware that the creation has been damaged by sin (7:29; Rom. 8:20-22) He speaks as one who eagerly awaits the resurrection age.

>The “vanity” of life. The book begins and ends with the exclamation, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccles. 1:2; 12:8) The phrase pictures something fleeting and elusive. All the endeavors and pleasures of earthly life are only temporary. When one sees the consequences of sin in this fallen world, one is left in utter frustration, anger, and sorrow. The more one tries to understand life, the more mysterious it becomes (1:12-18).

>Sin and death. By sinning, human beings forfeited the righteousness they originally had before God (7:29), and thus all people are sinners (7:20). Death was a result of the fall. The Preacher is only too aware of this dreadful reality that affects everyone (e.g., 2:14-17; 3:18-21; 6:6)

>The joy and the frustration of work. God gave Adam work to accomplish prior to the fall, but part of the punishment of his sin was that his work would become difficult (Gen. 2:15; 3:17-19). Both realities are seen in the Preacher’s experience, as he finds his work to be both satisfying (Eccles. 2:10, 24; 3:22; 5:18-20; 9:9-10) and aggravating.

- The grateful enjoyment of God’s good gifts. The Preacher spends a great deal of time commenting on the twisted realities of a fallen world, but this does not blind him to the beauty of God’s world (3:11) Nor does it cause him to despise God’s good gifts of human relationships, food, drink, and satisfying labor (5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7, 9) These are to be received humbly and enjoyed fully as blessings from God.
- The fear of God. The fact that “all is vanity” should drive people to take refuge in God, fearing and revering him (7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13-14)

OUTLINE

- INTRODUCTION AND THEME (1:1-3)
- FIRST CATALOG OF “VANITIES” (1:4-2:26)
- POEM: A TIME FOR EVERYTHING (3:1-8)
- FEAR GOD, THE SOVEREIGN ONE (3:9-15)
- SECOND CATALOG OF “VANITIES” (3:16-4:16)
- FEAR GOD, THE HOLY AND RIGHTEOUS ONE (5:1-7)
- LIFE “UNDER THE SUN” (5:8-7:24)
- THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM: SIN (7:25-29)
- MORE ON LIFE “UNDER THE SUN” (8:1-12:7)

■ FINAL CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE (12:8–14)

PROBLEMS

Does Ecclesiastes teach that men die like animals, that there is no life after death?

No

Read the "death" verses carefully: 2:14-16; 3:16-22; 6:1-6; 7:2-4; 9:1-4. You will note that Solomon *does* believe in life after death. In 3:17 he mentions a future judgment, and also in 11:9 and 12:14. If there is no future life after death, how can there be a future judgment? The "one thing" that happens both to man and beast in 3:19-20 is that both go to the same place—the dust. But note v. 21 where the spirit of man goes back to God; see also 12:7. Solomon did not have the full revelation of the NT concerning life, death, resurrection, and judgment, but he does not contradict NT teachings.

Does Ecclesiastes teach "eat, drink, and be merry"? No. It does, however, teach that we should receive God's blessings and enjoy them while we can. Each of the "enjoyment" passages is balanced by a "death" passage: 2:12-23 with 2:24-26; 3:16-21 with 3:12-15 and 22; 6:1-7 with 5:18-20; and 9:1-4 with 8:15-17. Solomon is saying, "In the light of the brevity of life and the certainty of death, enjoy God's blessings, the fruits of your labor, today. Use these blessings for His glory."

This agrees with Paul in 1 Tim 6:17. Solomon is not advising reckless pleasure or drunkenness. Rather, he is counseling us to appreciate life and its blessings while we can.

God's truths are not fully revealed all at once; there is a progressive unfolding of truth in the Bible. We must interpret Ecclesiastes in the light of the NT. If death ends all, then life is not worth living, and human beings are indeed miserable. But when we know Christ as Savior and Lord, life becomes a thrilling adventure of faith. And our labors are not in vain in the Lord, because one day we shall be rewarded (1 Cor 15:51-58).

Salvation and resurrection in Christ make life worth living. "He who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17, NJKV). "Their works do follow them" (Rev 14:13). Solomon's conclusions in chapters 11-12 bear this out: live by faith, obey God, and He will take care of the rest. Enjoy His blessings now and invest your life in that which really counts.

When I was asked to launch an Old Testament series of (BE books), I could think of no better book to start with than Ecclesiastes. And I could think of no better title than *Be Satisfied*, because that's what Ecclesiastes is about.

"Life is filled with difficulties and perplexities," King Solomon concluded, "and there's much that nobody can understand, let alone control. From the human point

of view, it's all vanity and folly. But life is God's gift to us and He wants us to enjoy it and use it for His glory. So, instead of complaining about what you don't have, start giving thanks for what you do have — and be satisfied! “

Our Jewish friends read Ecclesiastes at the annual Feast of Tabernacles, a joyful autumn festival of harvest. It fits! For Solomon wrote, “

There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God” (Eccl 2:24). Even the apostle Paul (who could hardly be labeled a hedonist) said that God gives to us “richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17).

Life without Jesus Christ is indeed “vanity and vexation of spirit” (Eccl 1:14). But when you know Him personally, and live for Him faithfully, you experience “fullness of joy [and] pleasures forever more” (Ps 16:11).

THE AIM

Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?” (1:2-3). Just in case we missed it, he put the same key at the back door (12:8). In these verses, Solomon introduces some of the key words and phrases that are used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes, so we had better get acquainted with them.

VANITY OF VANITIES.

We have already noted that Solomon used the word “vanity” thirty-eight times in this book. It is the Hebrew word *hevel*, meaning “emptiness, futility, vapor.” The name “Abel” probably comes from this word (Gen 4:2). Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is *hevel*, vanity. One of my language professors at seminary defined *hevel* as “what-ever is left after you break a soap bubble.”

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). However, this is not his final conclusion, nor is it the only message that he has for his readers. We will discover more about that later.

UNDER THE SUN. You will find this important phrase twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and with it the phrase “under heaven” (1:13; 2:3; 3:1). 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. Solomon wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (12:10-11; 2 Tim 3:16), so what he wrote was what God wanted His people to have. But as we study, we must keep Solomon's viewpoint in mind: he is examining life “under the sun.”

This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun...

until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light."

The thought of the book centers in six ideals

Three are these negative and resolve around the problem of life

- 1. All is Vanity
- 2. Man is Limited
- 3. God is Hidden

The Other Three are positive and give solutions to life crises.

- 1. Fear God and keep his commandment
- 2. Enjoy life
- 3. Use wisdom properly

All six ideals are sacred throughout the book but taken together they demonstrate that the purpose of the book is to show men that they should lead godly and joyous lives, though they live in a world of divinely condoned mysteries.

CONCLUSION

Solomon wanted his readers to face the fact that life has its puzzles