ECCLESIASTES

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BACKGROUND

The wise King Solomon (see <u>Author</u>), who shared his God-given wisdom in Proverbs, focused in Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life in an imperfect, fallen world. Though Solomon's faith in God shows through at key places (see <u>Eccles. 3:14</u>; <u>Eccles. 5:7</u>; <u>Eccles. 8:12</u>; <u>Eccles. 12:8</u>, <u>13</u>), he seems for the most part to leave God out of the equation, declaring again and again that life is meaningless. A thorough reading of the book suggests, however, that Solomon's purpose was to show how utterly meaningless life is *apart from God*.

The word *vanity*, translated "meaningless" by the NLT and NIV, appears 29 times and sets the tone of despair that pervades Ecclesiastes. The phrase "under the sun" appears 27 times and suggests that Solomon was making his case for despair based only on evidence from the natural world.

As the outline suggests, Solomon dealt with the problem of life's apparent meaninglessness in four stages:

- He stated his "belief" that life is meaningless (Eccles. 1:1-11).
- He offered evidence for that belief, showing how his and other people's efforts to find meaning in life yielded only despair (Eccles. 1:12-6:12).
- He offered advice about how to cope with a meaningless world (Eccles. 7:1-12:8).
- Having hinted at his own belief in God, he concluded by stating that meaning *can* be found through faith in and obedience to God (Eccles. 12:9-14).

Ecclesiastes appears to be the work of a Solomon made older and wiser by the unforeseeable misfortunes of life and by his own serious mistakes in spite of his great wisdom (see exposition on <u>*Eccles. 5:8-12</u>; <u>1 Kings 11:1-13</u>). Ecclesiastes, which means "teacher" or "preacher," was Solomon's pen name for this book as well as the book's title (Eccles. 1:1).

AUTHOR

Solomon:

- He is "King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem" (Eccles. 1:1).
- The description of the author's wealth and variety of experiences fits what we know of Solomon
- The book's great wisdom fits Solomon, who received wisdom as a gift from God (see <u>1 Kings 3:1-13</u>) and authored numerous proverbs (see <u>1 Kings 4:29-34</u>).

DATE AND LOCATION

Ecclesiastes was likely written in the latter years of Solomon's life, c. 935 B.C. (see <u>Background</u>), in Jerusalem (<u>Eccles. 1:1</u>).

PURPOSE

See <u>Background.</u>

UNIQUE FEATURES

- Because of its focus on the meaning of life, Ecclesiastes has a unique appeal to people of all religions.
- The repetitions of *vanity* and *under the sun* (see <u>Background</u>) constitute the most prominent emphasis of a single word or phrase in any biblical book.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

See <u>Job: Comparison with Other Bible Books</u>; <u>Proverbs: Comparison with Other Bible Books</u>

OUTLINE

- 1. LIFE IS MEANINGLESS: THE PROBLEM (Eccles. 1:1-11)
- 2. LIFE IS MEANINGLESS: THE PROOF (Eccles. 1:12-6:12)

III.LIFE IN A MEANINGLESS WORLD (Eccles. 7:1-12:8)

IV.THE BIRTH OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE (Eccles. 12:9-14)

TIMELINE

c. 971 B.C.: Solomon granted wisdom 960 B.C.: Solomon completes Temple

c. 935? B.C.: Solomon writes Ecclesiastes (after apostasy?)

931 B.C.: Death of Solomon

Eccles. 1:1-11 "Nothing matters! All is meaningless!" Solomon began his discourse on life by declaring, "Everything is meaningless" (Eccles. 1:2; see Eccles. 12:8; Psalm 39:5-6). He illustrated this meaninglessness from the realms of nature (Eccles. 1:1-7) and human experience (Eccles. 1:8-11). Sunrises and sunsets come and go. The winds blow and the rivers flow, but for no apparent purpose. The human experience could be summarized as, "Been there, done that!"

Eccles. 1:12-18 He decides to find out for himself. With his privileged position as a wise and wealthy king, Solomon felt able—and compelled—to discover whether life was indeed as meaningless as his own experience suggested.

Eccles. 2:1-3 "It's party time!" Solomon had sought meaning through the pursuit of pleasure but quickly concluded that such a pursuit was worthless. Pleasure would never satisfy people's greatest need—the need for peace and purpose.

- Eccles. 2:4-11 Creature comforts by the cartload. Solomon had then tried to plug the hole in his soul by inaugurating great public works projects, by amassing a great fortune, and by further seeking to satisfy his every desire. He concluded, "But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless. It was like chasing the wind" (Eccles. 2:11).
- Eccles. 2:12-17 Wisdom is better, but not for long. Solomon meditated on the relative merits of wisdom and folly. Though the wise person was obviously better than the fool, as light is superior to darkness, there was a fatal flaw: Both the wise and the foolish alike would soon die and be forgotten.
- Eccles. 2:18-23 "The worthless will inherit your wealth." Though wise people and fools are equal in death, in a way the wise person's lot is worse because the wealth he or she has accumulated through wisdom might end up, after his or her death, in the hands of a fool!
- Eccles. 2:24-26 "So enjoy it now!" Since you can't take it with you and a fool may inherit your wealth, Solomon concluded, you might as well enjoy it to the fullest while you can.
- Eccles. 3:1-8 You name it, there's a time for it! Solomon listed some 28 "times" in the calendars of humanity. With the exception of the first two—the time of their birth and death—people for the most part control the timing of these events.
- Eccles. 3:9-15 Eternity in our hearts, but creatures of time. God has given humans some concept of eternity, but they are still creatures of time. God alone is eternal, controlling both past and future. The bottom line for humans, said Solomon, is to fear God (Eccles. 3:14; see Eccles. 5:7; Eccles. 8:12; Eccles. 12:13), to be happy (Eccles. 3:12), and to enjoy God's gifts (Eccles. 3:12-13; see Eccles. 5:18-19; Eccles. 8:15).
- Eccles. 3:16-22 *No better than animals?* Solomon noted the evil and injustice in the world and expressed confidence that God would, in his own time, judge all things. Till then, however, humans sometimes seem no better than animals, with both breathing the same air, eating the same food, and dying similar deaths.
- Eccles. 4:1-3 The best fate? To have never existed! Considering all the suffering in the world, Solomon concluded, the dead are more fortunate than the living, and those never born are most fortunate of all!
- Eccles. 4:4-8 Envy and the economy. Envy drives people to work needlessly hard to accumulate the things they covet. (Someone has described this process as buying things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like!)
- Eccles. 4:9-12 Two are better, and three is best! God created humans to function as social, not solitary, creatures (see Genesis 2:18).
- Eccles. 4:13-16 Success quickly turns sour. Success is never permanent, as exemplified by the poor youth who wins the people's hearts away from the old monarch, only to fall into disfavor himself.

Eccles. 5:1-7 "Watch your words, but keep your vows!" Solomon cautioned against making rash vows but also asserted that once a vow is made it must be fulfilled (see <u>Deut. 23:21-23</u>; <u>Judges 11:29-40</u>).

Eccles. 5:8-12 *Trickle-down dishonesty*. Bribery and corruption, Solomon sadly observed, often begin at the very top with the king, and then affect all the officials who surround him. In sharp contrast to this elite but corrupt world is the common working man, who is poor but at peace with himself.

There is some indication that Solomon himself may have been guilty of corruption later in his reign (see <u>1 Kings 12:1-4</u>).

Eccles. 5:13-17 Gone with the wind. Solomon had seen people hurt by risky investments gone sour, which naturally confirmed his conviction of life's meaninglessness. Jesus spoke of a better kind of investment that yields a guaranteed 100 percent return! (See Matthew 6:19-21; Matthew 19:29.)

Eccles. 5:18-20 "Do your best, enjoy the rest!" In light of life's brevity, said Solomon, the best philosophy is to work hard, enjoy the fruits of that work, and not think too much about life's brevity but leave such matters to God (see exposition on §Eccles. 9:9-12).

Eccles. 6:1-6 Wealth without health. Another of life's unfortunate ironies is that people often become wealthy only when they no longer have the physical capacity to enjoy their wealth (Eccles. 6:1-2). Likewise, the person who is rich in children but does not enjoy them would be better off not to have been born (Eccles. 6:3-6).

Eccles. 6:7-9 A bird in the hand . . . Humans labor to satisfy their desires, yet those desires are never satisfied (Eccles. 6:7). Those are happiest who are content with what they have (Eccles. 6:9).

Eccles. 6:10-12 Has the past determined the present? In light of God's overwhelming sovereignty (Eccles. 6:10; see Job 9:32), Solomon seemed somewhat fatalistic about the ability of mere humans to affect their own lives. His apparent fatalism should, however, be interpreted in light of his later encouragement of his readers to exercise their free will (Eccles. 12:9-14).

Eccles. 7:1-4 Better a funeral than a festival! The death of a friend causes us to take inventory of our own life and to confront our mortality. As someone has said, "Only one life; 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

Eccles. 7:5-26 The fruits of the fool and the way of the wise. Much of Solomon's advice in Eccles. 7-11 is in the form of proverbs:

- "It is better to be criticized by a wise person than to be praised by a fool" (Eccles. 7:5).
- Wisdom is better than wealth (Eccles. 7:11-12).
- The wise person avoids extremes (Eccles. 7:16-17).
- Wisdom is better than military power (Eccles. 7:19).
- The wise person avoids sexual immorality (Eccles. 7:26).

- Eccles. 7:27-8:1 *One in a thousand?* Solomon had found few who exhibited true wisdom (see Proverbs 20:9). His apparent prejudice against women (Eccles. 7:28) should be judged in light of Proverbs 31:10-31 and the Song of Songs. The few who are wise can be identified by their shining faces (Eccles. 8:1; see Proverbs 3:13-18; Proverbs 4:18).
- **Eccles. 8:2-9** *Obey the king!* The wise person in this imperfect world will be obedient to established civil authority, trusting God to bring about final justice (Eccles. 8:6; see exposition on §Proverbs 24:21-22 and on §Romans 13:1-7). Such submission makes sense in light of our inability to foresee the future (Eccles. 8:7-8; see James 4:13-15).
- Eccles. 8:10-17 What if he commits a hundred crimes? Though the wicked often seem to go unpunished in this life, their day of judgment will surely come (see <u>Acts 17:31</u>; <u>Rev. 20:11-15</u>). Rather than try to figure out such mysteries (<u>Eccles. 8:16-17</u>), one should simply enjoy life and trust God's providence (<u>Eccles. 8:15</u>; see <u>Eccles. 2:24</u>; <u>Eccles. 3:12-13</u>; <u>Eccles. 5:18</u>; <u>Eccles. 9:7</u>).
- Eccles. 9:1-8 "Better a live dog than a dead lion!" Even though life seems unfair, and the righteous die just as quickly as the wicked (Eccles. 9:1-3), in the final analysis life has tremendous advantages over death. Only the living can hope, aspire, plan, and enjoy life's many rewards.

Solomon's statement that "the dead know nothing" (Eccles. 9:5) should be interpreted in light of his later statement that "the spirit will return to God" (Eccles. 12:7). To Christians who understand eternal life in light of Christ's resurrection, OT statements about the afterlife often seem inadequate. However, the OT saints were not without hope of life beyond the grave (see exposition on §Isaiah 26:1-19).

- Eccles. 9:9-12 "Enjoy! It's later than you think!" Because life can end so unexpectedly (Eccles. 9:11-12), one should enjoy the pleasure (Eccles. 9:9) and fulfillment (Eccles. 9:10) it affords (see exposition on Eccles. 5:18-20; Job 7:6-7; Psalm 102:3; Psalm 103:14-16; James 4:13-15).
- Eccles. 9:13-18 Wisdom, though good, is often forgotten. Though wisdom is superior to folly, few appreciate it, as exemplified by a wise man who saved his city and was then forgotten.
- Eccles. 10:1-20 Sometimes it seems that nothing goes right! This imperfect world is full of perils: Dig a well and you may fall into it. Demolish a wall and you may be bitten by a snake. Work in a quarry and you risk being crushed by stones. And as always, the fool talks nonsense (Eccles. 10:11-15), and even those in authority may not be trustworthy (Eccles. 10:16-20). In such a world, it is wise to be cautious and even a little pessimistic.
- **Eccles. 11:1-6** *Risks and returns.* Life in an imperfect world involves taking risks and investing generously (see <u>Luke 6:38</u>). The person who waits for perfect conditions never accomplishes anything (<u>Eccles. 11:4</u>), but the person who steps out in faith (<u>Eccles. 11:5</u>) and works hard (<u>Eccles. 11:6</u>) will find great reward.
- Eccles. 11:7-10 Enjoyment now, but judgment later. As a person enjoys the fruit of hard work, he or she should remember that death and judgment will surely come (see Hebrews 9:27).

Eccles. 12:1-8 "Young person, prepare for old age!" Solomon warned the young among his readers to be prepared for old age, when all the joys of youth (see <u>Eccles. 11:9</u>) would be just a memory. The best way to prepare for that difficult time is to love God and live for him today (<u>Eccles. 12:1</u>). Without such a commitment of faith, life would end as it began, without meaning or purpose (<u>Eccles. 12:8</u>; see <u>Eccles. 1:2</u>).

Eccles. 12:9-14 *In a nutshell: Fear and obey him.* After confidently affirming the inspiration of his message and urging his readers to take it very seriously (Eccles. 12:9-12), Solomon summed up what he had learned from his quest for life's meaning: The only way one can make sense of life is to "fear God and obey his commands" (Eccles. 12:13; see Eccles. 3:14; Eccles. 5:7; Eccles. 8:12; Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10).