



Overview for Ecclesiastes

Purpose: To record the Wisdom Preacher’s own experiences and reflections on the meaning of life, and to lead the younger generation into the path of true wisdom.

Author: “The Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). Although generally accepted to be Solomon, the writer never discloses his own name.

Date Written: Most likely during Solomon’s aging years (about 955 to 931 B.C.), since it is clearly the work of a mature individual.

To Whom Written: Though not specifically stated, internal evidence indicates it was directed toward the young men of Israel.

Unique Features: The title *Ecclesiastes* does not appear in the original manuscripts. It comes from the word translated *preacher* in the first verse. In Hebrew, that word is *goheleth*, meaning “a presiding officer or one who speaks to an assembly, school, or religious body such as a synagogue.” In the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek), the Greek term *Ecclesiastes* was used, from the root word *ekklēsia*, meaning “assembly.” That term was carried over into the English translation as the name of the book.

Literary Style: Ecclesiastes is one of five wisdom books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) in the Old Testament. These books represent a major shift in style from the historical books which precede them.

The content of Ecclesiastes is not logically or tightly organized. Rather, the book is a series of impressions, observations, positions, and emotional responses which fluctuate between faith and pessimism. The book is particularly notable for its iconic

phrases: “vanity of vanities; all is vanity,” “there is no new thing under the sun,” and “he who increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow.” Solomon’s stylistic methods are similar to methods used by teachers of his day. He employed literary forms that were also utilized in Proverbs and Job, such as proverbial sayings, admonitions, parables, allegories, and rhetorical questions.

Setting: Solomon ruled Israel for forty years, and during his reign the nation enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity. During this time frame, the nation of Israel was respected throughout the known world more than at any other point in its history. However, foreign influences, religions, and cultures began to filter into the nation which had been commanded to remain separate from the world and dedicated to the Lord.

God gave Solomon the opportunity to observe and explore every avenue of earthly life. Since royal power, prestige, wealth, and every conceivable pleasure were at his disposal, Solomon could and did gratify every desire. In Ecclesiastes 2:10 he stated, “And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy.” However, in spite of all his exploits and achievements, the predominant tone of this book is one of futility. Other than following God and His plan for mankind, Solomon concluded that all is vanity and vexation—no created good can satisfy the soul, and happiness is to be found in God alone.

Jewish tradition states that Solomon would gather together the young and old before the Temple and instruct them regarding the vanities and errors which would lead them away from God. Even to this current day, the Book of Ecclesiastes is read in Jewish synagogues during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Outline

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- I. The theme stated (1:1-11)
 - A. The theme introduced (1:1-2)
 - B. The theme illustrated (1:3-11)
- II. The theme defended (1:12—6:12)
 - A. The emptiness of seeking for knowledge (1:12-18)
 - B. The emptiness of seeking for pleasure (2:1-11)
 - C. The meaninglessness of lifestyle (2:12-17)
 - D. The emptiness of human toil (2:18-23)
 - E. The basis of happiness is in God (2:24-26)
 - F. The realization that death stalks everyone (3:1-22)
 - G. The inequalities of life (4:1-16)
 - H. The emptiness of religious formalism (5:1-7)
 - I. The emptiness of the life of man (5:8—6:12)
- III. The theme applied (7:1—12:7)
 - A. Advice concerning one's life (7:1—9:12)
 - B. Advice concerning wisdom (9:13—12:7)
- IV. The theme concluded (12:8-14)
 - A. The theme rehearsed (12:8)
 - B. The preacher's activity (12:9-11)
 - C. The preacher's advice (12:12)
 - D. The preacher's conclusion (12:13-14)