

# **Ecclesiastes: Life Under the Sun**

(by Joe Price)

## **Introduction**

### A. TITLE: Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher.

1. *The Preacher* (Koheleth) - "One who calls an assembly and addresses it," hence, preacher. (7 times – 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10)
2. *Ecclesiastes* – Transliteration into English of the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew title. Cf. EUANGELIZO - "preach" (gospel).

### B. AUTHOR.

1. Solomon - 1:1, 12.
  - a. Consensus of antiquity.
  - b. Jews; Greek and Latin Church Fathers.
2. Some say the author is unknown and the book was written during the late Persian period (about 400 B.C.).
  - a. Hugo Grotius took this view in 1644.
  - b. Liberal scholarship of today takes this position.

### C. BASIC PURPOSE (MESSAGE) OF ECCLESIASTES.

1. The book seeks to teach us our right relation to life experience – 1:2; 2:3.
2. The overruling providence of God -- God is in control. – Cf. 3:11, 14-15
  - a. 3:16-17 – God will judge the inequities of life.
  - b. 3:18 – Man must learn that he is dependent upon God.
3. Demonstrates the futility of living apart from God's grace and revelation – God is the only alternative to this world and its offerings – Cf. 8:12-13; 12:13.
  - a. World is transitory – Not enduring (Matt. 6:19).
  - b. Will be disappointed if we trust in this life – Cf. Lk. 12:15-21.
4. It has been said that Ecclesiastes "asks the questions the rest of the Bible answers."

### D. MAJOR DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK.

1. Chapters 1-6: The Vanity of All Things Earthly.  
-This part of the book teaches us not to view life as a depressing ordeal but rather as transitory, and thus we are taught to not put our hope in earthly things. (cf. Col. 3:1-4)
2. Chapters 7-12: Words of Wisdom (what it is good for man to do on earth).
  - a. Practical advice based upon the truth that earthly things are transitory.
  - b. Only by fearing God (reverencing His superiority) and obeying His commandments will we see life in its proper perspective.

## Major Subjects Addressed in Ecclesiastes

### I. “VANITY OF VANITIES, ALL IS VANITY” – 1:2.

-(Lit. - “breath” or “vapor”)

A. Life Is Transitory, Frail & Unsatisfying – Jas. 4:14.

1. 1:3 – No lasting profit (cf. vapor) in one’s labors.
2. 1:14 – Striving after wind (vexation of spirit) is “empty, futile, fleeting, pointless, unfulfilling.”

B. The Book Seems Depressing until we Understand the Context in which it is Written.

### II. LIFE UNDER THE SUN – 1:3.

-(“Under heaven” - 1:13; “Upon the earth” – 8:14, 16).

A. The Setting for the Book’s Message.

1. Earth life is transitory and ultimately unsatisfying – Jas. 4:14.
2. “What is your life?” – The question Solomon sets out to answer – 1:13; 8:16.
  - a. 1:13 – He will use wisdom to consider earth life & its experiences. Nobody was better equipped to do so (except Jesus) – 1 Kgs. 3:9-13.
  - b. 1:14 – No lasting benefit, no enduring profit in life on this earth.
  - c. cf. 1:4-8 – Illustrates the monotonous routines of life which give no ultimate satisfaction.
3. As we recognize this context of the book, it becomes much easier to understand and it ceases to be gloomy and depressing.
4. Instead, it becomes a book of comfort to those who will order their priorities in life according to the principles “preached” herein – cf. Matt. 6:24-25, 33-34.

B. We must Regard Ourselves as Strangers and Pilgrims in this World – 1 Pet. 2:11; Heb. 11:13.

### III. SOLOMON’S INVESTIGATION INTO LIFE UNDER THE SUN.

A. The Questions Solomon Asks:

1. Why are we here?” “Is this all there is to life?” “What will bring complete satisfaction to life on earth?” – 2:3
2. Some of the things Solomon explored in seeking life’s meaning and satisfaction:
  - a. Pleasure & wealth – 2:1-11 (vanity, 2:1).
    - 1) Pleasure – cf. Prov. 14:13.
    - 2) Wealth – 2:8; Lk. 12:15; Matt. 16:26.
      - a) 4:7-8 – Tend to isolate & make one suspicious of others; No true friends.
      - b) 5:10-12 – No satisfaction to those who love money (1 Tim. 6:10).
  - b. Human wisdom – 2:12-17 (vanity – 2:15).
    - 1) 2:13 – Wisdom is better than foolishness (cf. Matt. 10:16).
    - 2) But, to trust in one’s own wisdom is truly foolish – 1 Cor. 3:18.
    - 3) 2:14 – Death comes to both the wise and the fool.
  - c. Human labors - 2:18-23 (vanity – 2:23).
    - 1) 2:18-19 – cf. Lk. 12:16-20.
    - 2) “Whose will those things be?” – Not ours.
    - 3) Hoarding fruits of labors is vanity – Eccl. 5:13-16.

- d. Oppression of the weak shows the vanity of life - 4:1-3.
  - 1) 4:1 – We aren’t always able to right the wrongs of this life.
  - 2) 4:2-3 – Thus, the dead & unborn, who are not experiencing earthly oppressions, are better off than the living.
- e. Success – 4:4-6 (Vanity – 4:4).
  - 1) Success often causes envy in others – 4:4 (Rom. 12:15; 1 Cor. 13:4).
  - 2) Doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to be successful. But, we must learn to be content with what our labors provide us (and not make “success” the purpose of our life) – 1 Tim. 6:6-8.
- f. High station (power & honor) in life – 4:13-16 (Vanity – 4:16).
  - 1) 4:13 – Power can be (and often is) abused.
  - 2) 4:15 – Popularity is not permanent.
- g. Formalism & ritualism in religion – 5:1-7 (Vanity – 5:7).
  - 1) 5:1 – Formalism void of true devotion is an abomination to God. (“*Keep thy foot*”, KJV – Be careful & reverent.)
    - a) Israel – Isa. 1:10-17: Cease hypocrisy & give God true worship (cf. Hos. 6:6; Micah 6:6).
    - b) Guard against hypocrisy in our worship & service to God – Matt. 15:6-9.
  - 2) 5:2 – Be swift to hear and slow to speak (Jas. 1:19).
  - 3) 5:4 – Pay the vows you make to God (cf. *Becoming a Christian: confession & conversion; Marriage*, Matt. 19:6).
  - 4) 5:7 – Instead formalism, fear God.
- h. Desire – 6:7-9 (Vanity – 6:9).
  - 1) Desires are never satisfied.
  - 2) Phil. 4:11-13 – Contentment is a tremendous lesson that few ever master.
- 3. Seeing the vanity (ultimate futility) of life under the sun, Solomon gives us some wise advice – 6:10-12.
  - a. 6:11 – Earthly things don’t give life true meaning & satisfaction.
  - b. 6:12 – What are we to do? To whom can we turn and get answers to our questions about the purpose and fulfillment of life?
  - c. 6:10 – God: He is in control, and man must recognize His sovereignty and providence.

#### **IV. GOD IS IN CONTROL OF HIS WORLD.**

- A. God Wants Mankind to Enjoy Life – 2:24-26.
  - 1. To do so, we must acknowledge God as the source of our blessings.
    - a. Jas. 1:17 – Every good and perfect gift is from God.
    - b. 1 Tim. 6:17 – God gives us richly all things to enjoy.
    - c. Christians can enjoy life.
    - d. 3:12-13 – To enjoy life is a gift from God (5:18-19; 9:7-9).
  - 2. 2:26 – To ignore God, as the source of our blessings, is to invite disaster (Dan. 4:29-32).
- B. God is the Absolute Ruler over His Creation – 3:11.
  - 1. 3:1-8 – God created everything with a purpose.
    - a. God’s laws are active in this world.
    - b. Man lives under God’s ultimate control.

- c. We are not independent of God. (Acts 17:25-28)
- 2. The book does not teach fatalism (“whatever will be, will be”).
  - a. Rather, it teaches that God set in place the course of life (or “life experience”) – 3:11.
  - b. The things Solomon explored have their place in life, but we must not over-estimate them – 3:10.
- C. Because God is in Control, Man’s Wisdom will not be Able to Discover the Workings of God – 3:11.
  - 1. 7:23-24; 8:16-17 – Man’s wisdom cannot fathom the wisdom & workings of God (1 Cor. 1:21).
  - 2. 3:11 – Yet, God has placed in us the desire to know.
  - 3. Only when we come to God’s revelation do we find the answers to a satisfying life – Deut. 29:29; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; et al.
- D. By Fearing God (acknowledging His rule), Life will be Satisfying.
  - 1. Life without God is “*vanity of vanities.*”
  - 2. Life with God is fulfilling – 8:12; 12:13.
  - 3. 1 Pet. 3:10-12 – Love life and see good days.

**V. THE EQUALITIES & INEQUALITIES EXPERIENCED IN LIFE.**

- A. Equalities in Life: All Must Pass through Life’s Experiences – 3:1-8.
  - 1. Consider death – 9:2-6.
  - 2. Therefore, we must prepare for death.
  - 3. 9:4-6 – Once we die we have no more hope of correcting life’s errors – no more contribution to life on earth.
  - 4. So, we should prepare for all of life’s experiences.
- B. Inequalities in Life: Time & Chance – 9:11-12.
  - 1. Circumstances beyond our control affect our lives.
  - 2. Must acknowledge this and live by faith in God, knowing His Providence will prevail - Jas. 4:13-15 - “If the Lord wills...”

**VI. ADVICE TO YOUTH – 11:9- 12:8.**

- A. Enjoy the Days of Youth, but do so with Piety.
  - 1. 11:9 – Use the strength of youth to enjoy life.  
-But, know you will answer for the things you do when you are young (youth are accountable to God, too).
  - 2. Therefore:
    - a. 11:10 – Put away evil while in youth (cf. 9:8 – Purity).
    - b. 11:10 – Because youth is also transitory.
    - c. 12:1 – Make a place for God in your life now, before hardening occurs.
    - d. 12:2-7 – You, too, will grow old (aging process described).
  - 3. 1 Peter 4:1-5 – Live for the will of God.

**VII. CONCLUSION: TRUE MEANING AND FULFILLMENT OF LIFE – 12:13-14.**

- A. The Investigation is Over (a final word of wisdom from the wise man) – 12:13.
  - 1. Fear God – Reverence His control, providence and authority in my life.
  - 2. Keep His commandments – Natural consequence of “fearing God.”

3. This is the whole (duty) of man.
  - a. Literally: “This is every man.”
  - b. “For this man was made and placed in the world: this is his real object, the chief good which he has to seek, and which alone will secure contentment and happiness.” (W. J. Deane, *Pulpit Commentary*, IX, p. 306)
4. Life’s “Golden Mean” – 7:15-18.
  - Avoid extremes (self-righteousness, conceit, deliberate wickedness & foolishness) and fear God.
- B. Why Should We Fear God and Keep His Commandments? – 12:14
  1. There is a judgment coming – Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5.
  2. Every work and every hidden thing (secret) will be judged – cf. 3:17; 11:9; 1 Cor. 4:5.

### **Summary**

1. While we cannot know all of the whys and wherefores of the workings of God in this world, we can know for certain that He is in charge, and that He cares for His creation.
2. By acknowledging Him with reverence and obedience, we will be prepared to deal with life’s experiences – its joys & sorrows, its inequities & uncertainties – and we will be ready for death and for eternity.