

woodgreenchurch

Introduction to Ecclesiastes: *Finding Joy in a Fallen World*

WHAT IS ECCLESIASTES DOING IN THE BIBLE?

The key to understanding Ecclesiastes is seeing the perspective from which the author sees all of life. While this seems a pessimistic book at first glance, it is actually full of hope.

'The book is like a Rembrandt painting where the dark background and figures draw one's eyes to the figures in the light. The Teacher's dark background of vanity and death seeks to draw the reader to the elements in the light... The light is the focal point of the Teacher's message, but only in contrast to the darkness of life without God.' (Sydney Greidanus)

THE BASICS

- **GENRE:** *Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature*

The wisdom books make general observations and draw general conclusions about how life in a fallen world tends to work and how fallen people tend to behave to help us live wisely and not be fools.

- **AUTHOR:** *Ecclesiastes is written by 'The Teacher'*
(1:1, 12, 12:8)
 - Son of David / King over Israel in Jerusalem (1:1, 12, 2:8)
 - King Solomon?
- **AUDIENCE:** *Ecclesiastes is written for believers*
(e.g. 1:13, 2:24-26, 3:10-11, etc)
- **STRUCTURE:** *The bookends of Ecclesiastes are important*
 - 1:1-11 Introduction and key question (1:3)
 - 2:1-12:7 The Teacher's search for joy:
 - Through personal experience (chs 1-6)
 - Through thoughtful reflection (chs 7-12)
 - 12:8-14 Conclusion and summary answer (12:13-14)

MAIN THEMES

Look up the following verses. Can you identify the three recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes?

1:2-3, 14, 17 / 2:11, 17, 26 / 4:4 / 5:16 / 12:8

1.

2.

3.

'The Hebrew word for vanity (hevel) is the Preacher's multipurpose metaphor to express the futility of life in a fallen world. Taken literally, the word refers to a breath or vapour, like steam rising from a boiling kettle. Such is life. It is impossible to grasp, and before you know it, life is gone; it vanishes into thin air.' (Philip Ryken)

'Smoke, nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything - it's all smoke. What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?' (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 The Message)

- **Life in a fallen world often feels futile because:**

- *Life is often unfair and unjust*
(4:1, 7:15, 8:14, 9:11)
- *Death is inevitable and unavoidable*
(3:19-20, 6:12, 7:2, 8:8a, 12:6-7)

SO HOW CAN WE FIND JOY?

What is the Teachers answer in these verses to finding joy in a fallen world? (Look for the repeated word/idea)

2:24-26 / 3:12-13 / 5:18-20 / 7:14 / 8:15 / 9:7-9

SO HOW CAN WE FIND JOY?

1. **Recognise God's good gifts in everyday life**

(2:24-26 / 3:12-13 / 5:18-20 / 7:14 / 8:15 / 9:7-9)

There are a number of 'enjoyment passages' in Ecclesiastes, where the Teacher looks at everything 'under the sun' from a new perspective, as good gifts from a good God.

'His opening, 'All is vanity,' is repeated some thirty-eight times, but is balanced by his frequent use of the word 'good/goodness' (fifty-one times).' (Sydney Greidanus)

'Life's enjoyments are not guilty pleasures but godly pleasures – or at least they ought to be. A merry heart has God's approval. It is part of his gracious will for our lives.' (Philip Ryken)

2. **Don't look in the wrong places for contentment and joy**

(1:12-6:12 cf: 1 John 2:15-17)

3. **Remember that God is our Creator and he is in ultimate control**

- God gives us life and breath and determines how long we will live (5:18, 8:15, 12:1,7)
- God is in charge of the times and seasons of our lives (3:11)
- God is sovereign over the good and bad times we go through (7:14)
- God gives us our wealth and possessions (5:19, 6:2)
- God gives us wisdom and happiness (2:26)
- God will one day judge everyone (11:9, 12:14)

4. **Remember that God will make things right one day**

(12:8-14)

In the Old Testament God's judgement is welcomed by believers (e.g. Psalm 96:13).

The truth of judgement day means this fallen world will not stay fallen.

One day everything that is wrong will be put right when Jesus returns to judge the world.

Jesus' resurrection means that none of our service for him is meaningless.

'Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.' (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Recommended Commentaries:

Destiny: Learning to live by preparing to die / David Gibson / IVP (best overview with excellent contemporary application)

The Message of Ecclesiastes / Derek Kidner / Bible Speaks Today series / IVP (best short commentary)

Ecclesiastes: why everything matters / Philip Ryken / Preach the Word series / Crossway (best readable longer commentary)

HOW TO READ ECCLESIASTES AS A CHRISTIAN

How should the coming of Jesus and the gospel change the way we read Ecclesiastes?

1. We can identify with the Teacher's frustrations about life in a fallen world

We still live in a fallen world so we mustn't downplay the frustration of the Teacher – it is a real frustration that we all sometimes feel and so reading it will provide moments of identification with what the Teacher is feeling/saying. This should provoke honest reflection: 'Yes, I often feel like this too.'

If we're honest we will also identify with the fruitless search for contentment the Teacher experienced while pursuing the things of this world. His experience is a warning to us not to look for lasting joy or contentment in the world. We need to be reminded of this constantly and to live not just for what is under the sun.

2. We can respond to the Teacher's call to find joy in God's good gifts

Paul says that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do – we should do it all for the glory of God. This is a similar message to the one the Teacher gives in his enjoyment passages. Even when life is hard we can still rejoice in the good gifts of God. But as adopted children of God we don't just rejoice in the ordinary things of life but also the extraordinary grace we have received in the Lord (Phil 4:4). In Christ, we have better reasons to be joyful than the Teacher.

3. We can see with greater clarity the hope that the Teacher alludes to

The Teacher's conclusion is that we need to fear God and trust that he will one day make all things right when he judges the world. As New Covenant believers we know that the judge will be Jesus and he has the power to make all things right because he demonstrated his power on earth. He taught us to pray 'your kingdom come' and this is the hope of the Teacher brought to full fulfilment. One day Jesus will return and usher in his kingdom in all its fullness and make all things right forever.

4. We can look to the Teacher who is greater than Solomon

As Christians we don't put our trust in the Teacher of Ecclesiastes – wise though he might be. Paul claims that in Christ '*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*' (Col 2:3). He also describes Jesus as '*wisdom from God*' (1 Cor 1:24, 30). Jesus himself said that when it came to wisdom he was '*greater than Solomon*' (Luke 11:31 cf 2:52). The crowds flocked to Jesus because they recognised that he taught as one who had greater authority than their own teachers (Mark 1:21-22). We put our trust in the one who is greater than the Teacher and interpret his wisdom in Ecclesiastes through the lens of Jesus's words and work.

5. We can know that because of Jesus nothing we do is meaningless

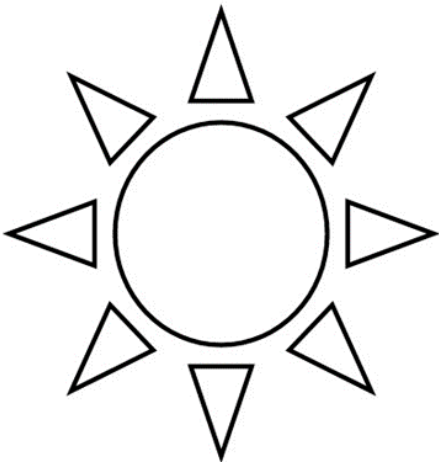
The Teacher's constant refrain in Ecclesiastes is that life is meaningless and that nothing of lasting significance is gained from all our toil under the sun. All our hard work is in vain. But after Paul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus he acquired a very different perspective. He concludes 1 Corinthians 15 – which is all about the resurrection of Jesus – with these words:

'Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.' (1 Cor 15:58)

While much of our toil in life may feel like it is done in vain, we know that because Jesus is risen and alive nothing we do for his glory in this life - whether at work, home or church – is in vain. As we look at Ecclesiastes through the lens of the gospel we see that in reality *everything matters*.

GOD

SOVEREIGN and GOOD



The TEACHER's HOPE

There is more to life than what is 'under the sun'. LIFE IS A GIFT. We find joy as we see God's grace in everyday life. We also trust God will one day make all things right.

The TEACHER's PERSPECTIVE

Life 'under the sun' is a breath, a vapour. LIFE IS ABOUT GAIN. But we never find lasting joy or contentment and death overshadows everything. So everything is vanity.

The CHRISTIAN's PERSPECTIVE

We look to Jesus, who is 'greater than Solomon' (Luke 11:31). In him 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3).

Jesus is the judge who will one day make all things right. If he is our King we have the GIFT of ETERNAL LIFE. He defeated death and so nothing we do for him is in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

ECCLESIASTES

HUMANITY

FALLEN and SINFUL

