**Ecclesiastes**

**Introduction**

**Title**

The Hebrew title is *Qoheleth*, which means “one who convenes and speaks at an assembly,” or “an ecclesiastic” or “preacher.” The Greek equivalent, *ecclesiastes*, also means “preacher” and is derived from the word “assembly.”

**Authorship**

Though not specified as Solomon, the author identifies himself as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). References in the book to the author’s unrivalled wisdom (1:16), unequalled wealth (2:7), opportunities for pleasure (2:3) and extensive building activities (2:4-6) all point to Solomon, since no other descendant of David measured up to such specifications. Jewish tradition explicitly stated that Solomon was the author. On this basis the date of composition is approximately 935BC.

Following the lead of Martin Luther, some have abandoned the traditional view of Solomon’s authorship of this book, feeling that it was written after the Exile by an unknown author who used Solomon as his central character. Linguistic evidence is said to demand a post-exilic date, but such evidence is inconclusive. Fragments of Ecclesiastes found at Qumran rule out any date later than 150 bc.

**Message**

The message of the book may be stated in the form of three propositions:

1. when you look at life with its seemingly aimless cycles (1:4ff.) and inexplicable paradoxes (4:1; 7:15; 8:8), you might conclude that all is futile, since it is impossible to discern any purpose in the ordering of events
2. nevertheless, life is to be enjoyed to the fullest, realizing that it is the gift of God (3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9)

(3) the wise man will live his life in obedience to God, recognizing that God will eventually judge all men (3:16-17; 12:14)

Verses frequently quoted from the book include

1:2

3:1

4:12b

11:1

12:1

12: 13

**Outline of Ecclesiastes**

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**The Thesis Demonstrated**

**1:4-2:26**

1. **The Futility of the Cycles of Life 1:4-11**

The writer presents a depressing picture of life. From nature’s continual activity (rivers, sun, wind) he shows that life is a cycle that seems to revolve around man and over which we have little say. Indeed as the refrain comes “there is nothing new under the sun”. To our current generation that craves the new this is a sobering thought.

1. **The Futility of Human Wisdom 1:12-18**

The writer who is identified as a King in Jerusalem decided to use his wisdom to answer the question of the meaning of the life, what is its purpose. By using intellect he seeks to find answers to the futility he has seen around him. The search for meaning in life he sees as a “burdensome task God has given to men”.

Despite his intellect and great political power his conclusion is that it is all just an exercise in chasing after the wind. Even wisdom and intellect it seems are vanity.

1. **The Futility of Pleasure and Wealth 2:1-11**

Having decided that seeking mean in through use of intellect was futile the writer next turned to find meaning in pleasure. He tried wine to bring him joy. He built great houses, planted vineyards, he created beautiful gardens and water pools, he acquired servants to do his bidding, he amassed great wealth, beautiful objects, he sought pleasure in music.

In short whatever his eyes desired he was able to have.

Yet again his quest for meaning was frustrated. Again his conclusion is that *“all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.”*

1. **The Futility of Materialism 2:12-23**

This section brings the reader into a dark, sobering reflection on the futility of life. The writer has tried all that intellect, power and money can offer in this world and all of it is ultimately unsatisfying. He is brought to a place of despair – *“for all his days are sorrowful and his work burdensome, even in the night his heart takes no rest. This is all vanity.”*

1. **Conclusion: Enjoy and Be Content with the Providences of God 2:24-26**

Having tried all that this world has to offer he concludes his search by asserting that the best a man can do is to *“eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labour.”*

This “good life” is a gift *“from the hand of God”.*

He also makes a statement that God gives the work of “gathering and collecting” to sinners in order that they might give the result to those who are good before God. It is the sinner’s life that is pointless. The ultimate beneficiaries in life are those who please God, those who have given up striving after gain, but gain an inheritance in any case.

**God’s Design for Life**

**3:1-22**

1. **He Gives Life’s Order of Events 3:1-11**

Probably the best known passage in the book. It has inspired poets and musicians over the centuries. Everything that happens in life has a purpose in its proper time.

The literary technique that the writer uses is called *merismus.* This entails stating the extremes as a way of embracing everything that lies between them. The totality of things is perhaps also implied by the fact that there are 14 pairs, a multiple of 7 which is the number that symbolizes completion or perfection in the Bible.

The first pair sets the tone for all the succeeding pairs. Everything that follows will happen between the first pair (birth and death).

The individual elements described may be open to interpretation (are they to be taken literally or metaphorically?) but taken together they give an overall impression of life. Every person will encounter some but probably not all of the events (e.g. not everyone has experienced war). None of the aspects of life are being commended by the writer. It is simply a generalized *descriptive* account of the kinds of things that make up human existence (as opposed to being *prescriptive*).

In verses 10 & 11 the writer reminds us that God created everything beautifully (see Gen 1:31) and that He has placed eternity within the heart of every person. There is a desire within us to have a relationship with God even if we will never fully understand Him.

1. **He Gives the Good Gifts of Life 3:12-13**

Everything has been placed on the Earth for man’s benefit and should be received with thanks. As an example, rather than seeking “profit” from our labour we should rejoice in it for its own sake.

Everything should be seen as a gift from God rather than sought for in our own efforts. The “good life” should involve doing good things (just as God does good in all His creation).

1. **He Gives the Perspective of Future Judgment 3:14 – 21**

Only what God creates has everlasting significance.

Verses 16 & 17 develop the theme that God controls “the times” by addressing the question of injustice in the world. The writer has looked and seen the injustice that prevails in the world but is assured that ultimately God will act justly. God is the ultimate guarantor of justice and brings it to everyone in the end (see Isa 10:1-4 and Amos 5:7-13).

Verses 18 -21 return to the theme of death, the final reality for all created beings. In 2:12-26 the contrast had been made between the wise and foolish, here the emphasis is on the apparent lack of difference between humans and animals in death. Note the repeated use of *“all”.*

The writer does not commit himself to say what happens after death. He is aware of the idea that when the human body and *“breath/spirit”* are separated, the human spirit does not go down to the earth, as is the case of animals, but rises “upwards” (presumably to God?). His view on what happens after death could be described as agnostic *(“Who knows”*? V 21).

1. **Conclusion 3:22**

In the light of what he has discovered the writer reiterates his view that there is nothing better in life than to find joy in whatever you do. We are to live our lives, not in the hope of gaining some advantage over the rest of creation (we are all but dust!), but simply for its own sake, finding and receiving joy in it. All of life is a gift from God, enjoy it while you can (*carpe diem?*).

**The Futility of the Various Circumstances of Life**

**4:1-5:20**

1. **Oppression 4:1-3**

The writer now considers the plight of people who are oppressed. He does not say how they are oppressed but simply that people are oppressed. He shows passionate concern because as he looks around at the world he sees that they are not comforted or championed by anyone.

His observations lead him to make one of the most dismal statements about the human condition – it would be better not to have lived at all rather than see all the evil there is in the world. Thankfully this is not a statement by God! We know that God is on the side of those who suffer injustice and that ultimately the wicked and the exploiters will receive their reward. Later in 9:4 he states *“a living dog is better than a dead lion”.* Clearly the writer has contrasting views as he considers what he has seen in the world.

1. **Work 4:4-12**

The writer states that the foolish person destroys himself through idleness. One of the themes of the book seems to be that work in moderation is beneficial to men but if work dominates life it is futile. From verse 6 we are told that having a little (handful) together with peace or rest is preferable to having an abundance that requires hard toil and a grasping attitude.

He speaks of someone working hard just for their own benefit, having no heirs of companions. The writer concludes that this is a grave misfortune, the man having become consumed with making more but not being satisfied or benefiting anyone else.

The value of friendship and co-operative working is emphasised in verses 9 – 12.

There may be allusions also to marriage in verses 11 & 12. The often quoted verse 12 is usually taken to refer to God as the third person however this is not explicitly stated. If we were to assume that verses 11 and 12 belong together it may refer to the birth of a child to cement the commitment of the father and mother.

1. **Political Success 4:13-16**

Political power is not lasting. Position does not depend on wisdom. Kings are often not wise (we see many examples of this both in the Bible and in history).

This is a difficult section that translations treat quite differently. Identifying who the “youth” and the “king” are is crucial. It seems that what the writer is trying to convey is that a young, poor but wise youth became a king but as he got older his wisdom deserted him and he became someone who would not take advice. In hindsight he will not be well remembered. Political advancement often brings with is a loss of self. People lose sight of where they may have come from. It brings with it even greater work than before but no great thanks.

There may also be a hint that the writer believes that an hereditary monarchy does not have value because it places rank by birth ahead of merit and genuine leadership.

1. **Fear God and keep your vows 5:1-7**

This section teaches that it is better to be quick to listen (especially to God’s word) than to speak rashly. No doubt the writer will have seen many people who have been quick to make promises and vows to God that they have been unable to fulfil.

We may be reminded of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:33-37 and James 1:26). The emphasis is on the need for integrity in our speech. When surrounded by dreams and fantasies it is essential that we hold on to the reality of God and stand in awe of Him.

It is worth noting that this passage regarding integrity and the centrality of truthful speech regarding the things of God is sandwiched between passages that speak of the futility of riches and political power. Putting God in His rightful place will help us to overcome the lure of Mammon (see Matthew 6:24 and Mark 12:38 – 44).

1. **Hoarded Riches 5:8-17**

Verses 8 and 9 refer back in part to the theme of oppression but is also a transitioning passage before a discussion of the value of materialism. Oppression is common despite being an unworthy thing. In society there are levels of power each with their opportunities for graft and exploitation.

Verses 10 to 17 emphasise that wealth and material gain do not and cannot satisfy. All human economic systems (capitalist, Marxist or socialist) are predicated on materialism and so are deemed futile.

The writer emphasises that no one can take any material riches with them when they die (v 15). Those who have lived their lives consumed with the pursuit of riches will find their lives full of darkness, sorrow, sickness and anger (v 17).

1. **Conclusion 5:18-20**

He concludes this section by echoing an earlier theme. Though men cannot discover an absolute, ultimate value by his efforts in this life, they should receive what God has given them with thanks and enjoy it.

**Questions:**

1. How does the writer illustrate the value of friendship?
2. What two principles does the writer speak of concerning vows?
3. How should we approach God in worship?
4. What teaching has impressed you most in chapter 4?
5. Is there anything in chapter 5 that has surprised you?
6. Oppression is common in various areas of life, why does God allow it?

**The Futility of Riches**

**6:1-12**

**1 - 2**

The writer continues with his theme of riches. At the beginning of this chapter he reflectson the observation he has made that in some cases God gives a person wealth, possessions and even honour and yet it seems that He doesn’t allow that person to enjoy them (v 2 means literally “eat them”). Instead a stranger enjoys the riches. It seems it is possible to have all that the heart desires and yet find no joy in it.

**3 - 6**

In verse 3 to 6 the writer observes that it is possible to have many children and descendants (usually a sign in the OT of God’s blessing) and yet find no joy in that fact too. He says that the person would be better off never living (“stillborn”). In the OT the fact and manner of burial is seen as very important, hence the comment that this person “has no burial”. In other words a miserable life ends in a bad death. Even a very long life may not be worth much if it has not experienced joy (even 2,000 years of life v6)

**7 – 9**

In these verses the writer sums up the madness of life. Work is undertaken in pursuit of things to consume that will not satisfy the void of the inner man. It seems that wisdom comes from being content with what we have and resisting the temptation to wander off in search of more, giving in to coveting (v9).

**10 -12**

As he brings this section to a close the writer underlines that the reality of life needs to be accepted rather than debated. Verse 10 reminds us of the true nature of mankind, we are from dust and will return to dust. God is far higher so what point is there in contending with Him (v 10, also see Job chapters 38 – 42). No human being is in a position to challenge God. The final verse of this section is perhaps one of the lowest points of view from a human perspective as it talks of the vanity and futility of life, the purposelessness of contemplating what will happen after we die.

**Counsel in View of Man’s Wickedness**

**7:1-29**

In this section the writer lists a number of sayings and observations, rather like the book of Proverbs. In them he seeks to show ways in which the pursuit and use of wisdom will help bring enjoyment to life.

**1 – 6**

The reality of death lies at the heart of the opening verses of this section. It is part of the wisdom needed for life that we should understand and even embrace the fact of death. As we recognise the shortness of life and how precious and precarious it is, we should live life seriously.

By perhaps over emphasising mourning and gloom he makes the point that pursuing frivolity for its own sake is folly. He has previously stated that eating, drinking and laughter are good things that come from God (2:24-26) so he obviously is not against these things but he brings a sobering perspective by reminding us of the sorrow that is amongst us because of death.

**7**

This verse seems to stand alone in this chapter having little to do with either what precedes or follows it. It is a warning perhaps to the man who pursues riches at all costs. Integrity is more important than riches.

**8 – 9**

These verses advocate a patient attitude towards life. A wise person will not react immediately to a situation but will take a longer term view, waiting to see more of a matter before deciding how to respond. Only a fool will arrogantly and angrily respond immediately (see also Proverbs 12:16, 14:29).

**10**

This verse expresses the idea that it is not wise to look back at the past with rose tinted glasses. The “good old days” resides only in memories which have often blotted out the bad.

**11 – 12**

While both wisdom and money may provide protection, the advantage of having wisdom is that it also gives life. Wisdom is like an inheritance that is passed down the generations so that those who receive it may live well (see also Proverbs 3:13 – 18).

**13 – 15**

The crucial thing to remember about the universe is that God has created it in accordance with His will, not ours. Although certain ways of living and behaving are wiser than others and generally tend towards life rather than death, in the end we must remember that the universe is not a predictable machine but is a personally governed and complex place. There is a warning that one’s lifestyle is no guarantee of one’s life span.

**16 – 18**

The writer clearly advises that people should not pursue wickedness or foolishness but here he also advises against an overzealous pursuit of righteousness and wisdom. Perhaps here he is warning against the attitude of trying to gain an advantage over God and force His hand through our endeavours. A reverence for God should not only mean we avoid foolishness and wickedness but also that our pursuit of wisdom and righteousness is truly out of reverence for Him and not for our own gain.

**19 – 22**

Whilst wisdom is greater than political power nevertheless we need to remember that a wise person is still a flawed person because he is a human being. No one is sinless, no matter how intent a person is in following God (see Romans 3:10 – 20). An example of our flaws is seen in verses 21 and 22. The truly wise person who fears God and remembers who he is will also remember who his neighbour is and will behave accordingly.

**23 – 25**

The writer repeats his intention or resolve to dedicate himself to wisdom. However he finds that true wisdom is beyond his natural abilities. While he may classify himself as being amongst the wise he finds that the true wisdom he has been seeking remains out of his reach and cannot be acquired by his own efforts (see also Job 28:20 – 23).

**26 – 29**

Here the writer echoes some of the Proverbs regarding avoiding the entrapments of a wicked woman (see Proverbs 2:12 – 19). The writer sees wickedness in both men and women. Although God created us all “upright” we have all fallen through sin. This fall into sin is deliberate in that it is “sought out” (v 29)

**Counsel in View of God’s Inscrutable Providences**

**8:1-9:18**

**8:1 – 9**

An advantage to wisdom over other alternatives is the dignity that if gives to a person (see also 7:12).

In this section the writer advises his readers to be careful to obey the king’s commands because they had sworn oaths before God to do so. He advises that they should not stand up for a bad cause before the king.

The king rules through his powerful words or commands. Those words will usually be backed up by the power of the military forces at his command.

A wise man will be able to discern the times and seasons of court life, when to speak and when to remain silent.

In v 8 the writer describes four things that people do not have control over:

1. A man cannot keep his spirit within him when it is time to die
2. He cannot postpone death
3. He cannot avoid being embroiled in war
4. He cannot use wickedness to save himself because it will ensnare him

In v 9 he writes of the despotism he has seen. Without accountability to others, rulers sooner or later will inflict damage on themselves as well as on those he rules

**8:10 – 17**

In this section the writer again talks of the futility of life. The wicked will be forgotten eventually even in the place where they committed evil.

In v 11 he says that when justice is not quickly upheld the deterrent of the sentence is diminished, the wicked become more bold. However in the following verses he upholds the view of retribution - the wicked will eventually be punished. This is even despite the fact that he sees the innocent wrongly punished and the wicked seemingly getting away without punishment.

Faced with this apparent iniquity the writer again encourages his readers to enjoy life while they can (v15).

At the end of this chapter he comes to the conclusion that God’s works, among them the meaning of life, cannot be comprehended by human intellect, even if one were to work at it day and night.

**9:1 – 12**

This section reiterates an argument that the writer has used before. He says that the same fate awaits everyone whether they behave righteously or wickedly. Consequently he encourages his readers to eat and drink and enjoy life and relationships while they can. Since the only thing in life that is certain is death, enjoy life while you have it.

**9:13 – 18**

This short section again repeats lessons the writer has learned and has written of previously. He describes an incident in which a besieged city was saved by the wisdom of a poor man. Yet despite this the man was soon forgotten. The implications of verses 15 – 17 is that wealth and social class are far more impressive to people, generally, than wisdom. People will more readily listen to people of great wealth and high social class than to a poor but wise man.

His conclusion is that men are vain because they forget the good deeds of wise men just as they also forget the evil done by the wicked (see 8:10). Whilst wisdom is obviously a good thing it is also limited. Wisdom is especially necessary when dealing with rulers who are either foolish or wicked (or both!). The writer frequently uses rulers as illustrations of what fools look like.

**Counsel in View of the Uncertainties of Life**

**10:1-20**

The author returns to his discussion of traditional wisdom and its uses. This theme had been broken off in chapter 8 verse 10. It is difficult to divide this section of the book into sections because each verse or two appears to deal with a different subject (in a similar way to much of the book of Proverbs).

10:1

People always seem mo re ready to notice your bad points than your good ones.

10:2

In the ancient world it was deemed that “right” represented good and “left” represented evil.

10:3

Even in the casual affairs of life the fool (the wicked man) cannot disguise his true nature.

10:4

When you encounter a difficult situation in the king’s presence, do not panic. Keep calm and see it through.

10:5 – 7

When fools have power there is corruption and an overturning of the usual order of state.

10:8 – 9

The person who plots evil will eventually feel its effects.

10:10

The wise person gets the job done much more quickly and efficiently than the fool (who is compared to a dull axe).

10:11 – 15

Once again the author shows that the wise man is superior to the fool. The fool simply babbles on unaware that he is damaging himself by his speech. The fool becomes weary (because he hasn’t worked wisely) and is unable to get on in life

10:16- 18

The word translated “child” is the same as that translated as “young man” in 1 Kings 12:8, 10 where it describes the brash counsellors who Rehoboam consulted. It is used as a derogatory term to denote someone who lacks wisdom and good judgement. The idea of feasting in the morning denotes drunkenness which results in mismanagement in the government and economy.

10:19

Whilst feasting and drinking may make for a happy time for a short time, having money can be used in many ways (spent or invested). Having money allows the possessor to have options that are forfeited by the person who has spent all of theirs.

10:20

A warning to be careful what you think or speak out in private – walls have ears!

**Counsel in View of the Aging Processes of Life**

**11:1 – 10**

**Verses 1 – 6** mainly advise on the value of being diligent.

11:1

Invest your money, do not simply hoard it.

11:2

Be generous with your wealth. If it is tied in with verse 1 it may also be advising diversifying investments. Being generous may help because in time of hardship it is good to have friends around you who you have previously blessed.

11:3 – 6

The author advises against delaying because of a greedy desire to invest at the ideal time in order to realise the last bit of profit. Instead he advises that you both sow your seed in the morning, in other words early or when you are young and also in the evening when you are older.

**Verses 7 – 10** see a change in the mood of the book. We find here a first summary of the conclusion of the whole book.

The author has failed to find anything of lasting value “under the sun”. Life is “vanity”, transitory and impermanent. He is therefore driven to two conclusions:

1. The best thing to do is to enjoy the blessings of God
2. Anything of absolute value must transcend this life and must be rooted in God’s justice

Knowing that God will judge all things should motivate us to lead morally good lives whilst enjoying the things with which God has blessed us.

**Conclusions and Summary**

**12:1 – 14**

**Verses 1 – 8**

The author continues to encourage his readers to seek God early in life. In his opinion as we grow older it becomes more difficult to take pleasure in life. Enjoy the light of youth before darkness descends with old age. Establish your relationship with God while you are young before the evils of life harden your heart.

He describes the increasing frailty of people as they grow older. The reference in verse 3 to “grinders” may be a reference to teeth.

The almond tree blossom is white like white hair. The reference in verse 5 to grasshoppers may mean either that even a thing as light as a grasshopper becomes a burden or perhaps that a grasshopper becomes a burden to itself when it is about to die as its movements become more difficult.

In verse 6 death is pictured as the loosing of a silver cord, the breaking of a golden bowl, the shattering of a bucket (pitcher) or a broken wheel. In all of these there is a loosening or breaking representing the end of a life.

Verse 7 pictures death as the separation of spirit (breath) from the body. Similar thoughts are found in 3:21 and 8:8. It reminds us of Genesis 2:7, the creation of human life.

The familiar refrain of “vanity...” concludes this section.

**Verses 9 – 14**

These verses which conclude the book are written in the third person (like the beginning 1:1, 2). They perhaps show that the work was written by a disciple of the author. He wants us to understand the importance of his teacher’s work (9 -11) after which he adds a summary in his own words. In verses 12 -1 4 he is probably quoting his teacher in order to make certain that the reader has understood the point that is being made. Although the increase of books and human knowledge will never cease, human wisdom yields values that are limited and transitory (see also 1:13-18) and results in weariness. We should not attempt to substitute scholarship for obedience to God because this will, with all knowledge pass away (1 Corinthians 13:8). Rather, if we have a reverence of God then our lives and work will remain “standing” at the Judgement. The vain things of this world will pass away but our relationship with God will remain. After all his searching the author’s conclusion shows clearly where our priorities should lie: not in the things of this life, but in God.

**SUMMARY**

Ecclesiastes is one of the strangest books in the Bible. At times it seems to contradict Biblical revelation we find elsewhere. We need to ensure that we come to terms with the fact that it is a book written by a searcher after truth who has become wearied by what he finds in the world. It is not a reflection of God’s ideal for the world or human relationships. It is not meant to be a commentary on life from God’s perspective; rather it is a commentary by one man on what he found in his time.

There are of course lessons and observations that can be applied universally and for all time. The author’s conclusions (fear God, obey God etc) are powerfully relevant today. However, perhaps the greatest reason for having this book in the canon of Scripture is that it forces us to face *life as it is* rather than how *we would like it to be*. It helps us to focus on this life rather than the next. In some ways it helps to correct the imbalance we sometimes find in Christianity whereby we focus so much on waiting for something rather than getting on and living out our faithful lives here and now.