

Ecclesiastes

Author: Solomon. Why? 1:1 says he is the son of David, and was king in Jerusalem. While Hebrew “son” does not always mean strictly a son, but sometimes grandson, or descendant, 1:12 also says that he was the king over Israel in Jerusalem. Solomon was the only descendant of David to be king over both Judah and Israel in Jerusalem. Solomon’s son Rehoboam caused a split in the kingdom, so the 10 northern tribes seceded and set up a separate kingdom called Israel under Jeroboam, centered in Samaria. Judah was what was left, centered in Jerusalem. Besides all this, the descriptions of his wisdom and riches and activities certainly would be true of Solomon.

Purpose: Ecclesiastes shows man's struggles to discover meaning and significance in life through various earthly pursuits, and concludes that life is meaningless without being in right relation with God.

Context: Much of what we now understand about the afterlife comes from later writings and the new testament, so I think a lot of the questions, frustration, and “vexation” apparent in this book are what occurs when we see life as limited to the few short years in this life. We now understand more about eternal life and that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and this relieves a lot of the vexing questions raised in Ecclesiastes. The book should be read as showing the emptiness of purely earthly pursuits, and should inspire us to eternal rewards.

Contents:

A. Introduction; the Cycle of Life 1:1-12

1:3 presents the main question of the book – “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” After a whole life of toil, what do we have to show for it? What is the significance of our lives? Have we really made a difference, or did we just exist? This can be true of the wife and mother facing a seemingly endless routine of diapers and meals and cleaning, or of the man working decades at a job that puts food on the table.

His opening statement is that all is vanity, based on his many observations. That is, that despite all men do to try to find meaning in life and to make or do truly significant things, in the end, it all crumbles.

Generations come and go, the sun continues its cycle. The wind continually cycles around (a remarkably accurate description of weather as we now understand it). He even accurately portrays the water cycle of rivers flowing into the sea and then somehow returning to start the journey again.

B. Trying to find fulfillment in this life (shows the vanity of godless pursuits) 1:13 - 2

a. 1:13-18 The vanity of wisdom

It is good to be serious, and seek out wisdom and knowledge, but “in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” Why?

- Partly because of the frustration of seeing the folly around you and being unable to do anything about it.
- Also because “the more you know, the more you know you don’t know.”
- Just knowing the truth doesn’t mean you are living it. Wisdom would say that you should be content with one wife, but Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines. Evidently wisdom can be counteracted by lust and pride.
- It is obvious that there are many today who are highly educated and “knowledgeable” but are personally miserable. Knowledge can be good, but is not inherently satisfying.

b. 2:1-11 The vanity of various activities

- i. Mirth and pleasure
- ii. Laughter
- iii. Wine
- iv. Great works (building, vineyards, gardens and orchards, pools or fountains)
- v. Servants and maidens
- vi. Flocks and herds
- vii. Silver and gold, and treasures that only a king could obtain
- viii. Entertainment and music
- ix. And “whatsoever my heart desired”

These are listed, roughly, in the order in which many people seek them. They go to college away from parents, and think life can be experienced as “Let’s party!”. After graduation they may proceed to building home and family, and accumulating stuff. When their immediate needs have been satisfied, they save up extra (silver, gold, and “peculiar treasure of kings”), and move on to cruises, theater, concerts, philanthropy, etc,

So Solomon was able to, and did, enjoy every conceivable human pursuit, but in the end (2:11) recognized that it was all empty and a vexation (annoyance, or irritation) of spirit.

c. 2:12-17 The vanity of wisdom.

Solomon thought, “I have done and experienced it all, and what can anyone after me do that I haven’t? But I am still unsatisfied.” He recognized that wisdom excels folly as far as light excels darkness (1:13), and yet in the end we all die, so what becomes of our “wisdom”? In not too many years, no one will even remember us as being wise, more than those who live in foolishness.

d. 2:18-23 The vanity of inheritance

There is a grief in knowing that everything you worked for in business, or thrift, or personal labor, is going to be left to those who did nothing for it, who will just spend it up, and not even appreciate it. Often a man becomes extremely wealthy by his work, innovation, or invention. The next generation or two may maintain the wealth at some level, but probably just wastes it. Whereas the first generation lived in frugality, the next ones live in frivolity. So in the end, all the wealth of the man who worked so hard comes to nothing, spent up by fools.

e. 2:24-26 The conclusion

Often people who have the most possessions never seem to get around to enjoying them, because they are too busy getting more, or trying to keep from losing what they have. The good thing that God has given us is to eat and drink, and enjoy the fruits of our labor. It is good to save, and even to leave an inheritance to children and grandchildren, but the ability to enjoy life and the things of this world is the gift of God. We should enjoy things without seeing them as ends in themselves. God enables his children to live in contentment, and to truly enjoy his bounty, and to be thankful.