

The Poetry, Book 4

Ecclesiastes

The Book of Ecclesiastes does not usually rank high among favorite books of the Bible. It is usually remembered for the part about everything's having a season, and is otherwise thought by most people to be glum reading--if not depressing. But it is much more than that; in fact, when it is studied from the right vantage point, you might find unexpected riches. I did.

The Title. Our English title, Ecclesiastes, is Greek; the English equivalent is "The Preacher," which is the meaning of the Hebrew title (*Qoheleth*). The Greek title originated, as did so many other things in the Old Testament, with the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek in Alexandria, about 300 BC. In Ecclesiastes Solomon calls himself "the preacher" five times, beginning with the very first verse. The word "preacher" is used in the sense of one who addresses a group, commanding its attention, on a spiritual topic. Here it seems that the King, toward the end of his life, had some important things to say to his people: lessons in life that he had learned by bitter experience. In this way he definitely was, "The Preacher."

Solomon's Dilemma. Solomon was vexed by the conflict between two factors: his carnal nature, and his godly wisdom. He was carnal enough to build great buildings, grow great herds, plant great vineyards and botanical gardens, gain greater knowledge, accumulate more wealth, and more wives/concubines than anyone else ever had; yet he had the godly wisdom to realize that none of it was permanent, that none of it brings happiness, nor has any of it any lasting value or meaning, in itself.

The Positive Prevails. In the midst of all the negative observations on life, there keep appearing very positive and valuable lessons in living. In this gloomy context, the positive continues to surface and, in the end, completely prevails, standing in final triumph in the last two verses.

The Tone. The tone is melancholy, and at times cynical (some would say, bitter); but to dismiss it as a lament, or an end-of-life complaint, is to miss the marvelous riches of this book. These are not just the words of a burned-out old rich man who has had it all, done it all, and found it all "vanity"; no, these are lessons in life, distilled and consolidated, by a king, one who is preaching his farewell message to his people.

Much of what is usually seen as bitter cynicism, I see as hard-eyed, no-nonsense, hard-earned, battle-scarred truth. The Book of Proverbs runs the scale of emotion: high and low, serious and lyrical, often repeating itself; but this is not true of Ecclesiastes. The tone of Ecclesiastes never varies--it is solid, serious, no-nonsense preaching, and it doesn't waste a word. And, I believe, there is a sense of urgency to be found in it. If we could be present as the king preached his farewell message, I think he would neither smile nor frown, but would lock his eyes on ours, and his expression would never change. And, I think, we would be so arrested by his manner, so gripped by the profound importance of what he is saying, that we might forget to breathe.

The Style. The style of Ecclesiastes matches the tone. It is poetic, and contains some beautiful poetry; but it is beautiful, **serious** poetry.

The Message. All the things that the king declares to be vanity (emptiness) are not necessarily vane in themselves; but they are vanity **without the Lord in their center.** We **must** take his meaning in this way.

This message is summarized in the last chapter, and its essence is distilled in the crystalline clarity of the last two verses. Those two key verses with which the preacher ends his final message, must be read with this in mind.

“Under the Sun.” The phrase “under the Sun” occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes (e.g. 1:9: “...there is nothing new under the Sun”). It is an earmark of Ecclesiastes, a phrase which is used in this way in no other book of the Bible. Its meaning is not explained; but, since the Sun is the physical source of all life on the Earth, it seems to be a metaphor for this earthly life, as opposed to eternal life in the Heavenly Realm.

A. Author. The first verse, and others in the text (1:12 and 12:8-10), identify the author as Solomon. Although his name does not appear, the very first verse identifies him as Solomon¹. Critical scholars, of course, claim that it was written much later, by an unknown wealthy Jew (or that it was the work of a number of such writers). The plain sense of the text, and unbroken Jewish tradition from earliest times, identify Solomon as the human author.

B. Place and Date. The original writing was done about 1,000 BC, in the palace at Jerusalem.

¹ Although any descendant of David might, in Hebrew usage, be called “son of David,” only one could rightly be called “the Preacher” (not “a” preacher) i.e. the most knowledgeable and wise man in human history.

NOTE. *Considering all internal evidence (that in the Bible itself), the date of Solomon's writing of Ecclesiastes emerges as "about 1,000 BC." Archeology has confirmed this dating as amazingly accurate. Because of the huge numbers of Egyptian inscriptions and documents, because of their meticulous record keeping, and because archeology has given us the ability to read these records, it is possible to correlate with exactness events in the Bible with known dates in Egyptian ancient history. These correlations reveal the date of Solomon's death as either 925 or 926 BC. Since Solomon was writing Ecclesiastes late in his life, the Bible's date of the writing at "about 1,000 BC," after the passing of 3,000 years, is what I would call "right in the bull's eye"!*

C. Occasion. The content of the book, and its cynical tone, strongly suggest that it was written in Solomon's old age, as he considered the failure, in and of themselves, of wealth, power, intellectual accomplishments, and earthly pleasures, to satisfy, fulfill, and give meaning to life.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Ecclesiastes include the following:

1. Prevailing Winds and the Water Cycle. (1:6-7)

Solomon was, among other things, a great naturalist. He observed and understood prevailing wind currents, and he understood what today we call "the water cycle." He knew that water was neither created nor destroyed, but was continuously recycled, as streams flowed downhill and eventually into the sea, the great reservoir, whence it evaporates, rises and condenses in clouds, and then falls again as rain, filling lakes and ponds and which, collecting in streams, flows again into the sea.

2. You Can't Take It with You (or Guarantee What You Leave Behind). (2:18-26)

It is pretty obvious that earthly possessions are left behind when we die; we all go to meet our Maker naked, the way we began life. We leave this life robed in righteousness, but the robe has no pockets, and we leave with no luggage.

But it is just as true that, no matter how we try to arrange it, once we die we can no longer have any inviolable control over what we leave behind. We can write wills, establish trusts, and extract promises from those who survive us, and this control may last for a while; but, ultimately, once we are dead we can no longer control anything. J.B. Duke, one of the most wealthy and powerful men of recent history, established a fine university in North Carolina and endowed its future with certain restrictions, "in perpetuity." For one thing, he decreed that no building could ever be added

in any style other than that of the original, beautiful, collegiate gothic stone buildings; yet, hardly a generation passed after his death before modern buildings began to be added. Such, Solomon assures us, is the nature of earthly possessions and control of them. Psalm 49 also deals with this fact of life, death and possessions².

3. To Everything There Is a Season. (3:1-8)

Chapter 3 is an essay on the fact that there are seasons in life, i.e. times and periods for certain things to take place. This is a fundamental lesson in life, and it is one that is found nowhere else in the Bible. Adam and Eve lived in unchanging bliss in the Garden of Eden until sin was invited into their lives; since that time, however, life is a constantly changing experience, divided into seasons, and not all of them are pleasant. Although the Heavenly Realm is unchanging, nothing “under the Sun” remains the same; there are even climatic seasons in Antarctica, the part of the Earth least affected by the Sun. Although the counsels of God are unchanging, the counsels of man are constantly changing, and life on Earth consists of seasons.

This fact is most obvious and best known to those who live close to nature, who grow their own food, raise their own livestock, spend most of their time outdoors, and live with the ebb and flow of tides, the rising and falling of creeks and rivers, and the changing of seasons. It is least obvious, and least known, to those who live in an urban environment where water appears at the turn of a tap, food automatically appears on grocery shelves, and most of life is spent indoors, in climate-controlled comfort. But it is nonetheless a reality, as we are reminded when there is a power failure, or an interruption of other basic services. This is true in terms of seasons of the year, and just as true in terms of seasons in life. We are born, we live for a while, and we die; this is inescapable.

4. Is Everything Beautiful in Its Own Way? (3:11)

One of the most outrageously wrong things that people often sing, thinking that it is right, is "Everything is beautiful, in its own way..." It is a nice, feel-good line, but it doesn't bear even the most casual analysis. Is murder beautiful in its own way? Is there anything beautiful about cruelty and torture? Is the rape and brutalizing of helpless children beautiful in its own way? Of course not! This line is absurd, and has irritated me ever since I first thought about it.

² Psalm 49:10-11.

So, what does it have to do with Ecclesiastes? It seems to be a perversion of verse 11 of Chapter 3, which reads, "He [God] hath made every thing beautiful in his time...." Unfortunately, the modern versions of the Bible usually replace "his" with "its," and this completely changes the meaning, from eternal truth to a terrible lie. Even the New King James Version, which supposedly changed nothing except to modernize the archaic language does this.

So what does it really mean? It means that everything God has created was beautiful and perfect, as done by Him, but can be made into something ugly and perverted by sinful man. It can also mean that, although some things in life seem terribly wrong when they occur, it is revealed, in God's time, that they were actually for our benefit³. And it may have both of these meanings.

But what it definitely does **not** mean is that there is something beautiful about all things.

5. Eat, Drink and Be Merry. (3:12-13)

The following two verses seem also to represent scriptural truth that has given rise to a false concept. The popular slogan of the irresponsible pleasure seeker is, "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die"; but that is not what the passage says--let alone what it means. The passage says that in these changing seasons of life the wise thing for a man to do is to "rejoice and do good in his life," and to "eat, drink and enjoy the good of all his labor, for it is the gift of God." This means that there will be good times and bad times, hard times and easy times as we labor through life; and we should make the best of each season, finding what pleasure there is in it to be had.

By implication, here we are also reminded that "you can't take it with you," so enjoy what you have now, take satisfaction from the fruit of your labor, but lay up real treasures in Heaven, for God "giveth us richly all things to enjoy⁴." This concept is expressed in an understated way in 2:24, and is clearly summarized in 5:18-20.

***NOTE:** "Eat, drink and be merry" is again found in 8:15, stated even more clearly; but again the meaning, in context, is that bad things happen to good people, so make the best of it and enjoy the times that are good. This concept is also repeated in 9:7⁵. For the Preacher to express this teaching*

³ Romans 8:28.

⁴ Matthew 6:19-21; I Tim 6:17.

⁵ See also, in this regard Isaiah 22:13; Lk 12:19 and I Cor 15:32, **in their contexts.**

point, and then repeat it in four other places in his final message, must mean that it is extremely important!

6. We Need Each Other. (4:9-12)

God never intended for us to face life alone; even in the beginning of the human experience, in the creation, He observed that "it is not good that the man should be alone⁶." This does not necessarily refer to how many places are set at your table, or whose mail arrives in your mailbox, for many of us live alone and wish that we didn't. But even those who, for various reasons, live alone in their homes, should not live without friends and Christian brothers and sisters, in relationships of mutual support.

My mother used to say that, "two people can make up a bed three times faster than one⁷." It is true that much time is saved when two work together on this job, and she made a valid point; but it can be even more serious if one falls (physically or spiritually) and there is not another to pick him up. A minor problem can turn deadly if something goes wrong and one is alone. And, in terms of strength, it is undeniable that one stick may be easily snapped, but as we add sticks, bound together in bundles, it becomes increasingly difficult to break them,; and "a threefold cord is not quickly broken." This threefold cord can consist of two Christians and the Lord, an unbeatable combination, and the metaphor is often applied to Christian marriage, combining the strength and wisdom of the Christian husband, Christian wife and, God.

7. Let Thy Words Be Few. (5:1-7)

It is the common experience of man that if a person is given to much talking, when it is neither needed nor useful, others are not likely to pay close attention (see 9:17). On the other hand, when one who seldom speaks, does speak, we are likely to listen.

But, we may wonder, why does Solomon equate one who speaks excessively, with foolishness ("the sacrifice of fools")? It seems to be because, beyond a useful degree, excessive talking is unnecessary, and likely to be foolish and vain, often merely seeking attention. We should be particularly wary concerning what we say before others in the house of God. It is also true that we learn a great deal more by listening than by talking. This lesson is found repeatedly in Proverbs, and is finalized in the opening

⁶ Genesis 2:18.

⁷ I'm not sure about the correctness of her ratio, in terms of increasing efficiency--it seems that she was speaking logarithmically; but the principle is absolutely valid: two can make a bed much more quickly and efficiently than one.

passage of Ecclesiastes 5. Jesus later carried the concept a serious step farther, declaring that even an idle word can be a sin⁸.

8. The Right Approach to Prosperity. (5:9-20)

Riches are not necessarily good or evil; what is important is our attitude toward them. They can do a great deal of good, but they can also become a snare if we seek them and make it our goal to be rich, in which case we can never have enough. "Labor not to be rich" is a clear warning in Proverbs 23:4; it doesn't mean that it is wrong to be rich--only that it is wrong to have that as one's goal in life. If one is rich, it is easy for him to trust in his riches rather than trusting in God; even more deadly, it is easy to begin to love one's riches, allowing this to reduce or displace our love for God.

If God gives us prosperity and riches we should enjoy them, and use them wisely and unselfishly, always remembering that they are unsubstantial and have no value in themselves; they can truly "fly away as an eagle toward heaven," and can be a deadly snare⁹. In summary, we are to enjoy riches while we have them, and use them to help others and advance the cause of God; but we must be very careful not to hoard, trust, or love them.

9. The Importance of Speedy Justice. (8:11)

When laws are not enforced, and when punishment for wrong-doing is slow to be applied, the wicked are encouraged to continue in their evil works, and the innocent are tempted to do wrong things. It is important not only that laws be enforced, but that enforcement be done speedily, for this has a healthy impact on all who observe it. Strict law enforcement and speedy punishment are a deterrent to those who might otherwise do wrong; by the same token, lax law enforcement, and prolonged periods before punishment is applied, encourage law-breaking.

10. A Living Dog Is better than a Dead Lion. (9:1-10)

One of the certainties of life is the inevitability of death; and one of the certainties of death is, short of a major miracle, its finality. Once we are dead we can do nothing; yet, while we live, there is hope. In Chapter 9 there is a common-sense essay concerning this, emphasizing the importance of making the best of the lifetime that we have, approaching life positively (not mournfully), enjoying what we have, and doing whatever we do to the best of our ability.

11. Cast Thy Bread Upon the Waters. (11:1-2)

⁸ Matthew 12:36.

⁹ Proverbs 23:5; 27:24 ; 28: 20-22.

The wording of this famous, and often-quoted, verse is strange. It seems to say that if we are generous with our bread (and, by extension, any of our possessions), the things we give away will be restored to us, and sometimes we will receive many times over what we give.

But why cast the bread upon the waters? I doubt that anyone other than God knows the answer to this; but I have a theory. Whatever we throw into the sea (if it floats), will be washed back to us by wave action, onto the beach--even in a falling tide. Perhaps a valid paraphrase of Verse 1 would be "Whatever we give away, in a spirit of sharing with those more needy than we, will be returned to us--and sometimes in greater measure than that which we gave."

12. Only One Life to Live: A Final Summary. (12:1-7)

The final chapter is a summary of the message of the rest of the book. Its first seven verses remind us that in youth we are generally healthy and strong, filled with energy and a bright, optimistic outlook on life; old age, infirmity and death are not only remote in our thinking when we are young, but usually do not even appear. And yet, the preacher reminds us, such is our certain destiny unless premature death cuts our lives short.

He illustrates his point with metaphors undoubtedly familiar 3,000 years ago, but somewhat mysterious to us today. For example, we wonder what he means by "the grinders"; are they the teeth that become few and fail us in old age, or does he refer to the work of millers who are strong and productive? It is very difficult to know, but his thesis is powerful and clear: we should live for our Creator in the days of our youth so that we will not waste the promise of youth on sinful, destructive, or vane things, and so that we will have the comfort of God's presence, and His promises, in the difficult years of old age.

Verse 7 reminds us that we are partly mortal, and partly immortal--part spirit and part clay--and at death these two parts separate permanently and return to their places of origin. As Matthew Henry, the great 17th Century commentator expressed it, "Man is a strange sort of creature, a ray of Heaven united with a clod of earth; at death these are separated, and each goes to the place whence it came."

***NOTE:** As already stated, in the Introductory Material and occasionally in the text of this study guide, whenever possible I avoid discussing doctrinal matters, except for Christian fundamentals. Here, however, I think a pause for it is justified.*

There is a false doctrine, usually called “pre-existence of the soul,” and it is a foundational doctrine of Mormonism. A good Mormon, it is taught, when he dies, eventually becomes a god, ruling his own planet somewhere in space, having perpetual intercourse with his goddess wife, who perpetually gives birth to spirit babies, which are then sent to that planet to be united with mortal babies, making them complete. Verse 7, important to their false doctrine, does not support this false, blasphemous belief. Verse 7 simply means that the “dust” (chemical elements) of which our bodies are made, and the human spirit and soul within us are the creation and gifts of God, Who is the source of all life. The human body, left to natural processes, will decompose and literally become dust; this is even true of bones and teeth, given enough time. The human spirit and soul (which, apparently cannot be separated, return in some manner to the spirit realm and to the God Who created them, to await the final judgment.

13. The Conclusion of the Whole Matter. (12:8-14)

The preacher concludes by saying that he was indeed given, by God, wisdom such as no man before him had possessed; and that he had set this wisdom forth in many proverbs. He recalls that he has explored, researched, and become an authority in many intellectual disciplines, and has written many books. All these things, however, in and of themselves, had not satisfied, nor solved the fundamental questions of life and death; and he declares them vain. Thus he closes his farewell message to posterity with "the conclusion of the whole matter": Fear God, and live in obedience to His Word; it is that simple. And, as a solemn post-script, he reminds us that we shall all someday face God's judgment concerning how we have lived our lives, whether for good or for evil.