

# Ecclesiastes

## *A Suggested Outline of Ecclesiastes*

Introduction (1:1–3)

- I. His Initial Reasons (1:4–2:26)
  - A. Man is just a “cog in the wheel” (1:4–11)
  - B. Man’s wisdom cannot understand life (1:12–18)
  - C. Wealth and pleasure do not satisfy (2:1–11)
  - D. Death comes and ends it all (2:12–23)
  - E. Conclusion—enjoy God’s blessings (2:24–26)
  
- II. His Deeper Observations (3–10)
  - A. God has a purpose in this “weary cycle of life” (3)
  - B. Wealth and pleasure can glorify God (4–6)
  - C. Wisdom from God is better than a life of folly (7–10)
  
- III. His Final Conclusions (11–12)
  - A. Live by faith (11:1–6)
  - B. Remember that life will end one day soon (11:7–12:7)
  - C. Obey God’s Word and fear Him (12:8–14)

## *Introductory Notes to Ecclesiastes*

### **I. Name**

“Ecclesiastes” comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, which in the NT is translated “church” or “assembly.” It carries the idea of a preacher (or debater) speaking to an assembly of people (see 1:1–2 and 12:8–10). The Preacher here presents a practical problem and discusses it, seeking to come to a conclusion.

## II. Author

Solomon is named as the author; see 1:1–2, 12. Certainly he was known for his wisdom as well as for his wealth and enjoyment of pleasures. No king in the OT better fits the situation described in this book.

## III. Theme

The theme is given in 1:1–3, and might be expressed, “Is life really worth living?” Solomon looks at life with its seeming contradictions and mysteries, and he wonders if the “endless toil” of existence is worth it. People toil all their lives, then die, and somebody less worthy inherits their wealth and wastes it. Solomon comes to the conclusion that the best thing to do is to enjoy the blessings of God today, fear God, and keep His Word. Of course, with the added light of the NT we know that “our labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Some of the key words and phrases in Ecclesiastes are: *man* (47 times), *labor* (36 times), *under the sun* (30 times), *vanity* (37 times), *wisdom* or *wise* (52 times), and *evil* (22 times). Keep in mind that Solomon is reasoning about what he sees and knows “under the sun.” If you stop with Ecclesiastes, you will stay in the shadows; you must move on to the full revelation of the NT to have the whole counsel of God. Many of the false cults quote isolated verses from this book to prove their strange doctrines.

## IV. Problems

Does Ecclesiastes teach that men die like animals, that there is no life after death? No. Read the “death” verses carefully: 2:14–16; 3:16–22; 6:1–6; 7:2–4; 9:1–4. You will note that Solomon *does* believe in life after death. In 3:17 he mentions a future judgment, and also in 11:7 and 12:14. If there is no future life after death, how can there be a future judgment? The “one thing” that happens both to man and beast in 3:19–20 is that both go to the same place—the dust. But note v. 21 where the spirit of man goes back to God; see also 12:7. Solomon did not have the full revelation of the NT concerning life, death, resurrection, and judgment, but he does not contradict NT teachings.

Does Ecclesiastes teach “eat, drink, and be merry”? No. It does, however, teach that we should receive God’s blessings and enjoy them while we can. Each of the “enjoyment” passages is balanced by a “death” passage: 2:12–23 with 2:24–26; 3:16–21 with 3:12–15 and 22; 6:1–7 with 5:18–20; and 9:1–4 with 8:15–17. Solomon is saying, “In the light of the brevity of life and the certainty of death, enjoy God’s blessings, the fruits of your labor, today. Use these blessings for His glory.” This agrees with Paul in 1 Tim. 6:17. Solomon is not advising reckless pleasure or drunkenness. Rather, he is counseling us to appreciate life and its blessings while we can.

God’s truths are not fully revealed all at once; there is a progressive unfolding of truth in the Bible. We must interpret Ecclesiastes in the light of the NT. If death ends all, then life is not worth living, and human beings are indeed miserable. But when we know Christ as Savior and Lord, life becomes a thrilling adventure of faith. And our labors are not in vain in the Lord, because one day we shall be rewarded (1 Cor. 15:51–58). Salvation and resurrection in Christ make life worth living. “He who does the will of God

abides forever" (1 John 2:17, nkjv). "Their works do follow them" (Rev. 14:13). Solomon's conclusions in chapters 11–12 bear this out: live by faith, obey God, and He will take care of the rest. Enjoy His blessings now and invest your life in that which really counts.

## Ecclesiastes

Imagine an assembly of Jewish people as they listen to King Solomon discuss an important problem. Solomon is the "Preacher" or "Debater" in this assembly (1:1–2, 12; 7:27; 12:8–10), and the topic he is discussing is this: "Is life really worth living?" Can you think of a more practical subject? And can you think of a better person to discuss it? For Solomon was the wisest of the kings, a man whose wisdom and wealth enabled him to experience a full life. In this brief section we can only touch the main points of this interesting book.

### I. The Problem Declared (1–2)

"Is life really worth living?" This is the question that Solomon is debating. In 1:1–3 he states his first conclusion: life is *not* worth living because life is full of vanity (emptiness). Then he states his reasons:

#### A. *Man is only a cog in a big wheel (1:4–11).*

What is man compared to the vastness of the world? Everything in nature continues, century after century, but man is here for a brief space of time, then he dies. It all seems so meaningless. It is vanity. (Solomon uses this word "vanity" thirty-seven times in this book.) Since life is so short and man so insignificant, why bother to live at all?

#### B. *Man cannot understand it all (1:12–18).*

Solomon was the wisest of men, yet when he tried to understand the meaning of life, he was baffled. How many wise philosophers have tried to explain life, only to admit their utter ignorance. Is it reasonable to live when you cannot understand what life is all about?

#### C. *Man's pleasures do not satisfy (2:1–11).*

Solomon had plenty of money, pleasure, culture, and fame; yet he admitted that these things did not satisfy. Nor did they last. See what Jesus said about this in Luke 12:13–21.

*D. Death ends all (2:12–23).*

“One event” (death) happens both to the fool and to the wise, to the rich and to the poor. A person labors all his life, then dies and leaves the wealth for another person to enjoy. Is this fair?

These four arguments seem to lead to one grand conclusion: it is not worthwhile for a human being to live. But Solomon does not draw that conclusion. In 2:24–26 he tells us that we should accept the blessings of God now, enjoy them, and benefit from them. This agrees with Paul's counsel in 1 Tim. 6:17. But even this “living for today” does not completely satisfy, because human beings want to go *beyond* today. So, Solomon backtracks in the next eight chapters (he “returns and considers”; see 4:1, 7; 9:11) and studies his arguments in a deeper way.

## **II. The Problem Discussed (3–10)**

*A. God has a purpose in our lives (chap. 3).*

God balances life: birth-death, sorrow-joy, meeting-parting. Why does He do this? For two reasons: (1) so that we will not think we can easily explain God's works (v. 11), and (2) so that we will learn to accept and enjoy what we have (vv. 12–13). God has set “eternity” in our hearts (v. 11, where “the world” should be translated “eternity”). This means that the things of the world can never really satisfy us. Therefore, we must find God's will for our lives and let Him “mix the ingredients” according to His purpose.

*B. God gives riches according to His will (chaps. 4–6).*

These chapters discuss the meaning of riches. Why is one person rich and another poor? Why is there injustice and inequality in the world? Because God has a plan for us, that we should not trust in uncertain riches but in the Lord. Do not live for riches, but use them according to God's will.

*C. God's wisdom can guide us through life (chaps. 7–10).*

The word wisdom (or wise) is used over thirty times in chapters 7–12. It is true that man's wisdom cannot fathom God's plan, but God can give us wisdom to know and do His will. Simply because we cannot understand everything does not mean we should give up in despair. Trust God and do what He tells you to do. Did you notice that in each of these sections, Solomon emphasizes the enjoyment of God's blessings and the reality of death? Read 3:12–21, 5:18–6:7, and 8:15–9:4. Since every person is going to die, we should not bother to work or save money or serve God—is this right? “No!” says Solomon. And in chapters 11–12 he explains what he means.

## **III. The Problem Decided (11–12)**

Solomon has already decided that man is not a “cog in the wheel,” that there is nothing wrong with enjoying riches and pleasures to God's glory, and that our inability to

understand all that God is doing is no hindrance to a happy life. In 11–12, Solomon sums up the whole matter with three practical admonitions:

*A. Live by faith (11:1–6).*

Circumstances are never going to be ideal in this life, but we must go ahead and obey God and trust Him for the results. If you wait for the right wind or the right day, you may miss your opportunity. You may seem to be a fool, like someone who casts bread on moving water, but God will see to it that it will come back to you.

*B. Remember that life will end (11:7–12:7).*

Is this a morbid suggestion? No. It is a Christian realism. One day you will die, so make the most of the life you now have. This is not the worldly attitude, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Rather, it is the attitude of Paul in Phil. 1:20–21—to live is Christ, to die is gain. Note the three key words here directed especially to young people: rejoice (11:9), remove (11:10), and remember (12:1). Rejoice in God’s blessings while you are young; remove from your life the sins that cause sorrow; and remember to serve God and fear Him in the days of your youth. In 12:1–7 we have a poetic description of old age and death. See if you can discover what these poetic terms refer to in the human body.

*C. Fear God and obey Him (12:8–14).*

Live as those who will one day face judgment. When the fire of God tests your works, will they all burn up? (1 Cor. 3:9–17) You will want to interpret Solomon’s conclusions in the light of 1 Cor. 15, the great resurrection chapter of the Bible. If death really ends all, then life is not worth living, and everything truly is “vanity” and emptiness. But 1 Cor. 15 makes it clear that death is not the end. Because Christ arose from the dead, we shall also be raised. And the glory and reward we enjoy in eternity will depend on the lives we lived here on earth. Therefore, our labor is not “in vain in the Lord” (v. 58).

From the human point of view “under the sun,” it seems as if life is futile and empty; all is vanity. But when life is lived in the power of God for the glory of God, then life becomes meaningful. A person may live and labor for fifty years, and then die. Does this mean his life was wasted? Of course not. His labor is not in vain in the Lord. He will receive the rewards of his labors when Christ returns. “He who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). The unsaved person loses all at death; so does the carnal, worldly Christian who will be “saved, yet so as by fire” (1 Cor. 3:15). But the faithful Christian who rejoices in God’s blessings today and uses his life to glorify Christ, will receive abundant rewards in the life to come.

In the light of the NT, Ecclesiastes is not a “pessimistic” book that denies the joys of life. Rather, it proves that though there are many mysteries in life we cannot explain, we can live so as to enjoy God’s blessings and glorify God’s name.