

OVERVIEW OF ECCLESIASTES

Author & Date: The book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon (1:1 – the “preacher,” David’s son and king). Solomon reigned from about 970 to 930 B.C. and seems to have been written near the end of his reign.

Purpose: Ecclesiastes searches for meaning in life. The preacher searches for this meaning apart from an eternal perspective and finds all facets empty or “vain.” The term “vanity” (literally “vapor or beath” – something here today and gone tomorrow) occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes out of its 81 occurrences in the entire Old Testament. “Wisdom” or “wise” occurs 54 times in the book. Hence as Solomon searches for wisdom apart from God, he finds that it is vanity. Ultimately, the preacher must conclude that the only meaning in life is really found only when one lives their life in the fear of God. Hence, the book attempts to answer the question, “what is the meaning of life?” or as the Preacher put it himself, “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun” (1:3).

It is worthy of note that although the name “God” appears 41 times in the book, the special Hebrew name “LORD” (see Exod. 3) does not appear at all.

Key/Noteworthy Passages:

- 1:2-3 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." 3 What profit has a man from all his labor In which he toils under the sun?
- 3:1-8 “There is a time for everything...”
- 12:13-14 13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. 14 For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.

Broad Outline for Ecclesiastes

- I. Prologue (1:1- 3)
- II. Futility of human effort (1:4-11)
- III. Futility of human wisdom, pleasure and work apart from God (1:12-2:26)
- IV. The frustrations of man’s labors (3:1-6:12)
- V. How to cope with life (7:1-12:8)
- IV. Conclusion (12:9-14)
 - A. Qualifications of “the Preacher” (12:9-12)
 - B. Exhortation to fear God and keep His commandments

Food for Thought

1. The phrase, “under the sun” (found 29 times in the book) is a key to understanding the book. What is meant by this phrase and what perspective does this phrase give to how one understands the book?
2. How would you summarize the main argument for “vanity” from 1:3-11”?
3. What things does the Preacher try in order to find meaning in life from chapter 2? Which of those things do people today try to find their meaning and purpose in?
4. In 1965, the American band, The Byrds, used Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 to promote the idea of “world peace.” Is this an appropriate application of these verses?

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