

I. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective

From Vanity to Vitality

“An Introduction and Overview”

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2

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I'm really looking forward to this study in Ecclesiastes and that you will really enjoy the deep dive into this book. I think this is a powerful book and it is known as the wisdom book. There are a couple of perspectives that will hopefully be helpful for us and that is when you look at this book you look at in context of the wisdom literature, particularly with the books of Proverbs and Song of Solomon. Secondly, it helps if you look at this book in terms of its author and I do think Solomon is the author of this book. I will try to affirm that in this study, but even more I think this book really addresses a world and life view and the conundrums we face living for Christ in a broken world especially now knowing the victory of Christ but not yet having the fullness of that victory. Now in Christ we are more than conquerors yet seemingly we get conquered in this life and things are overwhelming to us from time to time.

This is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is facing in a very powerful way. One preacher said about Ecclesiastes, ‘This writer is ransacking all of life through all of his experiences and opportunities and tries to address if it makes sense.’ A phrase that we will hear time and time again in this book is ‘I found out...’ Repeatedly we will also hear the phrase ‘All is vanity’ and in fact it is said 38 times. Is this a pessimistic view of life? Is he simply a skeptic or is there something else hidden throughout this message that this writer is attempting to communicate to us?

I almost titled the series ‘The Gospel according to Ecclesiastes’ to give a way to you and I don't think this book is a book of pessimistic defeatism, fatalism, skepticism or cynicism. I think it's much more than that and you have to work your way through it to see it. This is a book that goes back and forth between adversity and prosperity, vanity and adversity, vanity and prosperity, the solutions the world offers and the solutions of the vanities. This book has clarity, simplicity and profundity to it but it is not laid out in a linear fashion. So we'll have to pick our way through it as we keep going back to the connecting tissues. If you are looking to do additional study on Ecclesiastes I think the best commentary to use is one written by Philip Ryken. So let's get started.

As we start I want to look at three things – the author, audience and address itself. This will give us the writer's purpose and theme that has been given to us. This will help us understand it, embrace it and profit from it knowing that all Scripture is profitable. In this introduction and overview we'll look at a number of passages in this book but we'll start by reading the first 11 verses, although our focus will be on the first two verses. As we read the opening verses it basically reveals the transcripts of a sermon for these are a preacher's words.

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 says, [1] *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.* [2] *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.* What a rousing introduction to a sermon but this is an honest preacher who is honestly dealing with the issue of life and he has made a pronouncement. What is his pronouncement, why is he making it and where is he leading us in it?

Ecclesiastes 1:3–11 says [3] *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

[4] *A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

[5] *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

[6] *The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.*

[7] *All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.*

[8] *All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.*

[9] *What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.*

[10] *Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?*

*It has been already
in the ages before us.*

[11] *There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.*

Now let's look at Ecclesiastes 12:7–8 which says [7] *and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.* [8] *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.* Wesley, an Armenian Methodist, loved to preach from Ecclesiastes. Whitfield, a Calvinistic Methodist, loved to preach from Ecclesiastes. Those of you around my age may remember a singing group called Peter, Paul and Mary, who has a song from Ecclesiastes. Simon and Garfunkel also have a song from this book. The phrases in Ecclesiastes show up in the vernacular of our conversations continually. As we go through the 12 chapters of this book there will be a number of things you recognize that have become commonplace in our communication.

Why do we have the title Ecclesiastes? In Bethlehem right next to what is traditionally recognized as the birth stable for Christ, a saint of old finished his life and he made the first translation of the Bible from Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic into another language. His name was Saint Jerome. When he got to the book of Ecclesiastes and saw the word Koheleth (word for Preacher) in the first verse he took it into the Latin language. He worked it from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament and that is *ekkllesiastes*. We have Anglo sized it into Ecclesiastes.

It is the word that comes to the New Testament to speak of the church. There are three words in the Bible that speak of the church. One is *ekkllesia* which speaks of the foundation of the church and it means the gathered ones, the main one used to define the church. Another

word for church is *synagoge* which is the word we get synagogue from. The third is the word *kirk* which we have Anglo sized from the Scottish language for the word church, which mainly refers to a building where the church meets.

The Koheleth was the one who led the gathered assembly. He was the cleric and thus it could be translated teacher, professor but the word that has been settled on which I agree with for this, is the word preacher. Those who put together the Westminster Confession would call them a proclator. This is the preacher preaching a sermon.

Who is this preacher, who stands over the gathering of God's people, the ekklesia, in order to lead them? Strictly speaking, we don't know. Nowhere in the text does he ever give his name. I do think it's important to try and discern his name but also whenever something is anonymous I don't think we need to overstate with our dogma who we think it is because there are some various possibilities. Historically for years and years it was thought to be Solomon.

Why do people think it's Solomon who wrote Ecclesiastes? In Ecclesiastes 1:1 it states the son of David, King in Jerusalem and Solomon was both of these. The book goes onto to say that the writer sought out wisdom and assembled together many proverbs. We also know this king is very rich. Solomon was all of that. This king has enough riches to try every solution to vanity in life. This king has unlimited resources and has dipped and dived into sensuality and his appetites whether food, drink or sex. In the text it says this king has unchallenged power. All of this so matches up with Solomon. We know that Solomon was so rich it absolutely amazed all of his visitors. Under his reign Israel stretched to its farthest borders. The Bible says Solomon had over a thousand lovers. He was a man who was given to the fulfillment of his appetites. So seemingly all the things that are said match up so why is there any question about who wrote it.

The question comes because one people say that if it was Solomon that he would have identified himself. It is pretty clear about Solomon's engagement in the book of Proverbs and the Song of Solomon. Would he not lend his name to this book? Because whoever wrote this did not put their name to it, there is a challenge to it. Another reason is that in the book of Ecclesiastes we will read a phrase that says 'the many kings before me.' There were only two kings before Solomon in Jerusalem – Saul and David. So how can this be Solomon who wrote this?

From the more academically gifted than me, they are able to spot multiple words that have been borrowed from the Persian language into the Hebrew language and that did not happen until the Babylonian captivity and the return under the Medo-Persian Empire. They are what they call 'loan words' where you have taken a word from one language and imported into your language. If this book was written in Solomon's time that would not have been there, yet the language is more of the sixth century Hebrew than of the tenth century which is when 'loan words' began.

Then there are those who have made the point that there seems to be clear communication of almost defined Greek philosophies such as Stoicism and Hedonism. After the Babylonian Empire came the Persian Empire and after that came the Greek Empire. So would this not been written in the fifth or sixth century to accommodate these things that we find in this book? These are pretty powerful arguments.

Some have said it wasn't Solomon who wrote this book but that it was Ezra or someone during the time of Ezra, after the restoration from the Babylonian captivity and it's a pseudo-Solomon reference to try and give it weight. They didn't outright say they were Solomon but they have made it to be like Solomon that it would have carried the weight that they wanted to carry when it was read in the second Temple after it was being built.

Then there are those who would say this is not some devious, deceitful thing that someone writing this would make believe that they are Solomon, as a false writing using someone else's name because they didn't use his name. No. Sometimes things are given in a first person situation like I have done on Reformation Sunday when I have posed as John Calvin but some say this is a similar literary communication device of a first person – a dramatic presentation of a sermon using Solomonic wisdom and identifying with Solomon but it is actually a fifth or sixth century prophet that is doing it. So this would actually be a literary device to get Solomon's wisdom on the issue of how you look on a world that seems to have nothing but emptiness and absurdity to it. So that is what some would say.

I have to confess I have been exposed to all those possibilities but I finally came to the conclusion that I think it's Solomon who wrote this. It's not because I tend to be conservative in staying with the tradition but I really weighed this out back and forth. Here are my reasons why I think this. I would explain the loan words used through the fact that every book in the Bible keeps getting copied and when its being copied it is constantly being copied in the language of the day sometimes. So I think subsequent copyist at times put words in that have to do with the language and time in which it is being copied. It happens in books like Genesis and others, where scribes would have used a certain word that would help communicate to these certain people because it is the way we say it at that time. I think in the Providence of God and the preservation of the text the copyists in the fifth or sixth century might have, in the context, used a more "up to date" language, a Hebrew word, that had been affected Persian vocabulary out of the Babylonian captivity.

Along the lines of Solomon not using his name, I think he is purposefully not using his name because he doesn't want the focus on him. Concerning the Greek philosophy, during that time it just changed the names of the philosophical issues but it didn't raise new philosophies. Stoicism, fatalism, skepticism, etc. have been around long before the Greeks popularized them. Proverbs was written long before Greek philosophy was expanded under the Greek empire and Alexander's conquest and yet Proverbs contains things that would have been catalogued on Hedonism, skepticism, stoicism, cynicism, epicureanism, etc. The fact that is shows up in the book of Ecclesiastes is not unusual for they have really been around long before the Greeks gave them names, systematize and define them.

One more reason I would go with Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes is that whoever this is he is a preacher over an assembly and to me, that's Solomon. In I Kings 6 we find that Solomon builds the temple. He dedicates it along with his palace in I Kings 7. Then I Kings 8:1 says *[1] Then Solomon **assembled** the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion.* Now I Kings 8:12–14 says *[12] Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. [13] I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." [14] Then the king turned around and blessed **all the assembly** of Israel, while **all the assembly** of Israel stood.* So we have a gathered assembly of worship for instruction by the preacher.

Who is the preacher? It is Solomon. Where? In Jerusalem. What is his title? He is king. How is functioning? He is functioning as a Koleheth as he stands before them and preaches to them. Notice that all the people are standing while he delivers his message *[15] And he said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to David my father, saying"...* (I Kings 8:15) as he goes on to develop his sermon. What we see in the book of Ecclesiastes matches up with the way that Solomon

would have lived. The problems are easily answered and therefore I don't think we have to navigate 400 to 500 years into the future. I think we can stay in the tenth century and this is Solomon himself giving us this message. So that's the author.

Now who is the audience? The audience is the assembly of God's people. Can the book of Ecclesiastes be used evangelistically? Absolutely and I will try to give you multiple illustrations of how it is used this way, which is the reason God led me to the book under our ministry theme emphasis of having a lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship. This book is useful to communicate in the lives of unbelievers because it is what they are experiencing but I believe the book is also a discipleship instrument to give God's people a Biblical world and life view to make sense of the now but to help you realize what Christ has purchased for you is not found in its fulfillment of life before death but life after death, yet there is a way we are supposed to live in life before death. He will tell us how to live life before death but will remind us that the fulfillment is life after death.

There is a way we live without pessimism, cynicism, and skepticism in this life, yet have a real understanding of it in this life. There will be adversity in this life and as a believer when adversity comes you are going to be blessed. Guess what is happening in prosperity? You are going to meet adversity. Here is the conundrum. We sense that this is not the life that God has intended for me. Sin has done something in me, to me and in this world. I am redeemed by Christ yet I'm still here. This book speaks to where everyone you know is living for all of life is really empty and it speaks to where you're living. Heaven comes down from time to time but I'm not there yet and I will always have to deal with brokenness, sin, the old man within and the consequences of sin all around me until I am there. The Satan who has been defeated has not been destroyed. While he has been restricted he is still active yet great is He that is in me than he that is in the world (I John 4:4). So this book is laid out to equip us as to how we are to live.

I want to take a moment to delve into my own frustration. I'm so thankful for how I am supported to get into the Word to preach and teach it and to be available to be a shepherd along with others in this church. Yet there is so much I get that if in fact we were in the Word and hearing the Word preached then we already have the answers. I so long for you to have a Biblical world and life view that is sustained with a lifestyle that is fed with a life love from your heart and this book, I believe, is crucial in equipping you.

In this study of this book we will be dealing with where you are living right now for it deals with what we are right in the middle of now. In the next study we'll look at five man-made solutions to vanity and all they do is multiply the emptiness. All five of these solutions are constantly calling you to come to them instead of Christ, but all the way back to the tenth century B.C. Solomon has already warned of us of this. This is a book of great value not only to reach unbelievers because it is where they are living but we can give them a realistic view of the Gospel of what it does now because of what it has done then. This book shows us how to deal with life in a broken world.

So what is it that we will be focused on in this study? This is where I'll conclude in this study. The first word we need to look at is the word vanity for it appears in the book of Ecclesiastes 38 times. Vanity can be translated breath, vapor, empty, meaningless and various ways but I want to understand the vanity that Solomon is pointing us to and how we can move from vanity to vitality, yet realizing you will be surrounded by vanity all the way to glory. Vanity will disappear in the new heavens and the new earth but it will always be in the midst of this world.

This vanity is very pointed and defined. It means nothingness, confusion and emptiness. We living in conundrums, like where we finally get that job and we were convinced in that there was life. Then sin shows up in the business too and the raise didn't do it and neither did the new house. We're always looking for it and there is that momentary exhilaration of what we reached out for to remove vanity in this world and then we're back to vanity.

You want to set this in the book of wisdom literature. The book of Proverbs tells you the pathway to success as defined Biblically. The book of Ecclesiastes is telling you what exists with success defined by the world. Here is another reason I argue for Solomon being the writer of this book. The book of Proverbs is Solomon on the ascendancy when he called upon God for the gift of wisdom. Then you have a man with feet made of clay and we see him descending and succumbing to idolatry, power, sensuality, possessions and he even allowed the encroachment of Molech and child sacrifice back into Israel. I think Ecclesiastes was Solomon's repentance.

I believe Ecclesiastes is an autobiography of Solomon to tell you where he has been, his repentance and his renewal at the end of his life which shows us what we need to expect in the adversity and prosperity of this world. Then he tells you how to live in vitality while you are surrounded by vanity but what you don't want is that vanity in your soul. So I encourage you to look at this way as we go through this book study of Ecclesiastes.

I have this illustration that goes back into my childhood. When I was growing up I used to attend this State Fair each year. We started out going as a family and as I got older my mom would let me go with a couple of friends. We didn't have a lot of money so I was grateful to have a couple of quarters when I go there. I really only needed two quarters to have a good time at this fair. One quarter would get me into this event that would happen in this gigantic barrel. Out would come about eight gigantic Harley Davidsons. The noise of these motorbikes was exhilarating. They would actually start riding around the wall inside this huge barrel and it was the most amazing thing I had ever seen in my life. These weren't stunt drivers for they were just guys that did this for a living. You always thought they were going to run into each other but they never did. As a 14 year old boy it was incredible.

What about the other quarter? On the way to the motorcycle exhibit I would stop at this trailer where there would be a lady inside wearing a net over her hair and there would be this big stainless steel drum in front of her. She would pour something in it and take this white paper funnel and swirl it around and around inside this big stainless steel drum. I would say 'keep going, keep going...' She would smile and give me a few more rounds in the drum and then hand it to me. I would give her my quarter and then I would open my mouth as wide as I could and bite into it. I had just bought .25 cents worth of sugar coated air. I would bite in to chew but there was nothing to chew, only a momentary sweetness. That is what Solomon is telling us about vanity.

All the solutions that the world offers to the vanity it can't hide, at best is sugar coated emptiness. It's nothing. All is vanity but we don't stop there for all is vanity...under the sun. This is a very important phrase and it's going to show up over 30 times in this book. Here is what the phrase 'under the sun' means; temporary. You're life with the sun in this world that is shining on you is temporary. You were born with a finite number of sunrises and sunsets. Life is temporary under the sun but it also looks at the brevity of life. Psalm 144:4 says *[4] Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.*

Under the sun also looks at life as being empty. It's confusing for it never gives what it promises. It never fulfills what you think and sense. I was made to experience more than this. This isn't what it ought to be. Something is not right. Life under the sun is one that is faltering

and a life that is lived without reference to the transcendent. I have one prayer that dominates every week. That is, that I would preach so that you would know the eminence, presence and nearness of God and that in worship you will be overwhelmed at the transcendence of God. You will never live life with vitality if your life perspective is under the sun. It is to live in light of the One who made the sun, over the sun and who is transcendent and majestic. That's the God who lives in you and is near to you. Life under the sun is only lived in the immediate and not the transcendent.

Life that is under the sun is lived according to the wisdom of the world instead of the Word of God that came from the One who is over the sun. Life under the sun always relies on man's wisdom and worldly wisdom instead of the wisdom from above that comes by the Spirit of God through the Word of God. Therefore when it says 'all is vanity' it is specifically speaking about everything under the sun. If your hope, perspective and focus is there then it will always be ultimately empty, even your victories, and your moments of success for they are permeated, polluted and adulterated with adversity, unmet expectations where there has to be something more.

I believe the book of Ecclesiastes fueled the writing of Paul in two passages. Many times we go to II Corinthians 5 because it shows the ministry of reconciliation but look at what sets up the glorious text on the Gospel from verse 6 to the end of the chapter. II Corinthians 5:6–10 which says [6] *So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight. [8] Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* So how is it that we stand at that judgment? Paul then goes to the Gospel.

Let's look at how Paul set verses 6–10 up. II Corinthians 5:1–5 says [1] *For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. [2] For in this tent we groan (vanity), longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, [3] if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. [4] For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. [5] He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.*

What is under the sun will be swallowed up by the One who is over the sun. He points out that in this life, even the believer, is groaning. There is a sense that you don't have everything and even what you have that is the earnest payment of God, the Holy Spirit, has not brought you into the fullness of what He has purchased for you. This is even further expounded in Romans 8.

Romans 8:18– says [18] *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time (life under the sun) are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (in the new heavens and the new earth). [19] For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. [20] For the creation was subjected to futility (vanity), not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. [22] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. [23] And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. [24] For in this hope we were saved.*

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? [25] But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

In other words, under the sun, I'm living with a perspective beyond the sun, but here there will be groaning and futility. So is it grin and bear it? Is it stoicism? Is it denial? How is it that this vanity is addressed with a present day vitality that leads to an eternal consummation? That is where the writer of Ecclesiastes is going to take us. Read Ecclesiastes 12:12 and to the end and he gives you the answer. The preacher waits until the life takeaway to give you the answer at the end.

Here is a sense of that answer – vanity does not have the last word because there is another Son of David who has won the victory over that which brings vanity and that is Christ the Lord. When you live under the eye of the Lord, now you do not live under the sun but under the Son. This Son of David is the One who brings growth by grace now, leading you to the victory of vitality then and bringing you into its presence. So how do you deal with it? Go read the last part of Ecclesiastes and then go back and read chapters 1 and 2 to see if you can find the five solutions to the emptiness of a sin-cursed world that are offered by worldly wisdom and what does Solomon have to say about them for he tried them all.

Today, if you have never come to the Son of glory I invite you to Him. I invite you to live in light of the majesty of the God of glory as you live in the midst of a groaning world under sin. You can walk with the vitality of Christ yet always know the best is yet to come. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to give praise to our God. Thank You God for the opportunity to walk into the text of this Scripture and to day by day walk our way through the honesty of Your Word. God, it is so amazing that those of us who are called to preach the Gospel will so often misuse the Word to make promises You don't make for here and take people's eyes off the fulfillment of those promises there, yet at the same time don't communicate the real promises for here and how we grow even in the midst of the emptiness and futility of a groaning world and groaning body, but God, vanity doesn't have the last word, Jesus does. Therefore bring His Word to our hearts that in the midst of vanity we would walk with the vitality of our soul, filled with Him, living life in light of the One who made the sun, not under the sun, but we would live over the sun as we love the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind, in Jesus' Name, praise God, Amen.

Power Point

THE AUTHOR

THE AUDIENCE

THE ADDRESS