

ECCLESIASTES (Teacher's Edition)

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AUTHOR-

Who is “the Teacher”? Believe it or not, many scholars hotly contest this. The name of the book, Ecclesiastes, is derived from the Greek word “**ekklesia**” (“assembly”) and means “One who addresses an assembly.” This is an accurate rendering of the Hebrew word in Ecclesiastes 1:1 rendered either “Teacher” or “Preacher” in English translations.

King Solomon of Israel, a ruler noted for his great wisdom and vast riches, has traditionally been accepted as the author of this great book. Evidence for this is strong, since Solomon fits the author's description of himself given in the book: "I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven" (1:12-13).

There are also references to **his wisdom** (1:16), **wealth** (2:8), **servants** (2:7), **pleasures** (2:3) and building activities (2:4-6).

But some scholars claim that Solomon could not have written the book because they feel he would certainly **name himself** in it. They believe since the book is poetical not historical, “a later writer, in the person of Solomon as an idealized Solomon, writes under inspiration the lessons that such an experience as that of Solomon would properly afford.” They feel this because the book uses certain **words and phrases** that belong to a **much later time** in Israel's history. These objections by themselves are not strong enough to undermine Solomon's authorship.

WHEN THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN-

If Solomon is indeed the writer, then this book is generally considered written in Solomon's **old age**. The general tone of the book, a little **pessimistic and cynical** perhaps to some, would be in keeping with his **spiritual state** at the time (see 1 Kings 11). Although it is not mentioned in the record of 1 Kings, Solomon probably **came to his senses** before his death and **repented**, turning back to God. This would place the writing of the book toward the latter part of his reign, somewhere between 971 B.C. and 931 B.C.

ABOUT THE BOOK-

I love this book because it speaks of a quest: one that we need to take time for ourselves. The book focuses on the **limits of life** to teach wisdom. It is obvious that the Teacher wants to find some **profit, value or gain** in life that is **unchanging** and can serve as a basis for **proper living**. Therefore he explores everything “under the sun”.

The second verse of Ecclesiastes, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (1:2), eloquently summarizes the underlying theme of the book, and his own personal

discovery-that all human achievements are **empty and disappointing** when pursued as **ends in themselves**. They are vanity. The literal Hebrew word for vanity means “**breath**” with the idea being that “vanity” implies that things are **mortal, transitory and of no permanence**.

Many passages in Ecclesiastes appear to be as pessimistic and depressing as this statement because they point out the folly of pursuing **selfish goals**. One after the other, the author shows how wisdom, pleasure, hard work, popularity, wealth, and fame fail to bring lasting satisfaction. But the book ends on a triumphant note as the reader is asked to consider life's highest good: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13).

Indeed, consider this truth from this perspective: the writer is a man who has **sinned** in giving way to selfishness and sensuality, who has paid the penalty of that sin in **satiety** and **weariness of life**, but who has through all this been under the discipline of a divine education, and has **learned from it** the lesson which God meant to teach him. The concluding point? The secret of a true life is that a man should consecrate the vigor of his youth to God and all man's efforts to find happiness apart from God are **without result**.

The book, through the Teacher's constant probing for the meaning of life and existence, has a powerful message for our selfish, materialistic age. It teaches that great accomplishments and earthly possessions alone do not bring **lasting happiness**. True satisfaction comes from **serving God** and following **His will** for our lives.

What is sad is that we often overlook a major conclusion the Teacher comes to: **that life is to be enjoyed!** This truth is repeated several times so it does not escape our attention: "There is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor-it is the gift of God" (3:12-13). God wants us **to enjoy** life's simple pleasures. Our **grateful acceptance** of His daily blessings can bring a sense of joy and fulfillment to our lives while we strive to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of us.

For this reason I make this bold comment, often to weird looks by others: this book **is optimistic!** It basically declares that we should seek value in the things that are to come- **“above the sun”** not **“under the sun”**, so to speak!

A BASIC ASSESSMENT OF ECCLESIASTES (BASIC THEMES)-

I personally like the translation “Preacher” instead of “teacher” because this book preaches great lessons to us. This whole book is like **one big sermon**. I believe Ecclesiastes illustrates three NT principles extremely well. They are:

- 1) **Life is only fulfilling when it is given away.** Doesn't Solomon say that he pursued everything that was gain under the sun and in essence found nothing? These are the very words of Jesus when He says, “If you lose your life for My sake, you will find it.” Compare Eccl. 2:10-11 & Matt. 10:39, John 12:25.

- 2) Life in pursuit of excellence without true sacrifice of oneself to God will ultimately disappoint. We are warned in this book to avoid searching for passing glory! However noble, neither search for knowledge and wisdom, nor the erecting of man-made monuments or works of art can bring contentment. Even these dignified pursuits, higher than questing after pleasure or fame, are still an illusion. As this book and Phil. 2:17 & 4:11,13, teach, only a “poured out” life to God finds contentment.
- 3) Life that is lived solely on the earth-plane breeds cynicism. The recurrent phrase “under the sun” contrasts our NT position of being “seated in the heavens with Christ”. Life seen only from an earthly perspective, a problem rampant among Christians who do not keep a spiritual point of view because of decreasing spiritual passion, leads to a life that turns in on itself. Without a “heavenly” perspective, even life’s finest attainments, spiritual or earthly, become lackluster. Life seen from a spiritual viewpoint gives a proper perspective to all things- and it stays happy and contented.

Another basic theme in this great book is that without God, “all is vanity”. Godlessness is indeed vanity, and Ecclesiastes tells us why by showing us the effect of this godlessness in various areas of our life: Godless learning leads to cynicism; Godless greatness leads to sorrow; Godless pleasure leads to disappointment; Godless labor leads to hatred of life; Godless philosophy leads to emptiness; Godless life leads to depression; Godless religion leads to dread; Godless wealth leads to trouble; Godless existence leads to frustration; Godless wisdom leads to despair. And in contrast with this, we are taught that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God, a deeply serious attitude toward the commands of God. And Godly fear leads to fulfillment.

The powerful ending of the book brings this theme home. The author closes by stating that there is a God who will hold us accountable for the deeds of our lives. Life “under the sun” will be judged from a heavenly perspective. Thus the book ends on a positive and encouraging note, because one’s accountability before God means that the course of our lives is of eternal significance! In spite of life’s apparent futility, we must grasp by faith the sovereignty, goodness, and justice of God and enjoy all the facets of life as His gift.

SPECIAL NOTE: It is of interest that as the writer processes the vanity of life, he gives us a proof of God. While pondering all his issues he does not find himself helped by bringing God into the problem (the idea in Eccl 2:24-26), even if he thinks of it as the gift of God; for how can one be sure that the gift of God is anything but luck? He sees, however, that it is not fair to dismiss lightly the idea of God as a factor in the problem. It is true that there is a time for everything, and that everything is “beautiful in its time.” It is also true that ideas of infinity are in men’s minds, ideas which they can neither get rid of nor fully comprehend (3:1-18). These ideas must be tokens of God, who has established an infinite order. If we understood His ways better, that might unravel our perplexities. And if God is and exists, immortality may be real, and the solution of our problems may lie in that direction. For a moment it looks as if the speaker were coming out into the

light, but doubt resumes its hold upon him. He asks himself, "Who knows?" and he settles back into the darkness. He has previously decided that for a man to "eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good" is not worthwhile; and now he reaches the conclusion that, unsatisfactory as this is, there is nothing better (3:19-22). But he ultimately concludes with the inescapable: **God is** and we must obey Him for therein lay our joy!

A POSSIBLE KEY WORD-

To put this in the most succinct way, the word **VANITY**, my key word, appears **37** times in the twelve chapters of this book. It simply expresses the many things that cannot be understood about life. All earthly goals and ambitions lead to dissatisfaction when they are **pursued as ends to themselves** apart from God.

KEY VERSE (S) AND CHAPTER (S)-

To understand the Book of Ecclesiastes best, it must be read **as a whole** and interpreted that way- **AS A WHOLE**. Because of this, I chose as my key verse: **Ecclesiastes 12:13,14**. This is what it says- the **conclusion of the entire matter**. In keeping with this same idea, I chose **Ecclesiastes 12** as my key chapter. In this chapter there is resolution to the book's extensive inquiry into the meaning of life, culminating in my key verse.

JESUS REVEALED IN THE BOOK-

It is hard to find typology or any direct reference to Jesus in this book as its subject deals with wisdom and a personal search for the meaning of life. However, we do see parallels to many of Jesus' teachings here, as well as a couple of references to Him.

- **Jesus is THE teacher, and is called that in the NT**
- **The role of King speaks to Jesus as King of Kings**
- **Jesus is that third cord mentioned in Ecclesiastes 3:9-12**
- **Many of Jesus' teachings are paralleled in Ecclesiastes. As one example, Jesus' warning on seeking wealth in Matt 6:19-21 is paralleled in Eccl. 2:1-11, 18-26; 4:4-6; 5:8-14**

THE HOLY SPIRIT REVEALED IN THE BOOK-

Again, we are hard pressed in this Wisdom literature to find types and figures of the Spirit because of the nature of the writing itself. But here are a few examples:

- **Recalling our study in Proverbs, Isaiah 11:2 states that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Wisdom**
- **Joel 2 states that when the Spirit is poured out, people will have dreams and visions. But we are asked to judge the spirits and to discern. Ecclesiastes 5:3 is a good thing to remind people that not all dreams come from God**

- Paul the Apostle's concern about the edification of the Body in the use of Spiritual gifts is mirrored in the Teacher's stress on reverence and obedience to God

SOME TRUTHS AND APPLICATIONS-

Let's build a message! Ecclesiastes teaches us that 2 are better than one: *"⁹Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. ¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart."* Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Why are 2 better than one?

Verse 9: Working together with others accomplishes more; there is also great spiritual power in agreement (Matt 18:19). Even Jesus sent out His disciples by twos!

Verse 10: When we stumble and sin, it is important to have people in our lives that will help us get back on track! God mandates us to help those that are struggling: Jude 1:22-24. God blesses those who help pick others up- see James 5:19, 20.

Verse 11: Two believers walking in openness and transparency can keep each other hot for God! We must keep our zeal! Proverbs taught us: Proverbs 27:17. Romans 12:11 teaches us to stay fervent literally 'boiling over' in our serving the Lord.

Verse 12: When God created the unit of agreement, He made it the smallest possible. There is unbelievable power in two people standing in spiritual agreement! ¹⁸"Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

¹⁹"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. ²⁰"For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."- Matt 18:18-20

Don't forget that Luke 10:19 was in the context of His first sending out the 70 two by two!