

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 1

Ecclesiastes is a very relevant book for today. This past quarter, we examined it in our teen class. “Why Are We Here?” “What’s Life All About?” Ecclesiastes is a challenging and important book that deserves close examination.

Its relevance in the face of current events can actually serve as “common ground” and a starting point when sharing the gospel with someone you know.

Our present times and the seeming uncertainties they contain are addressed in this book.

The message of Ecclesiastes is that the course of life to be pursued is a God-centered life. People trying to be happy without God – this book shows the absurdity of that.

The pleasures of life are not intrinsically fulfilling and cannot offer lasting satisfaction, but they can be enjoyed as gifts from God.

Life offers good times and bad and follows no pattern, but all comes from the hand of God.

Some sayings – can you identify their source?

Have you heard? ***Many of the sayings from Ecclesiastes are familiar to us.***

1. “To everything there is a season.” (Ecc 3:1)
2. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Lk 6:31)
3. “Two are better than one.” (Ecc 4:9)
4. “A time to kill and a time to heal.” (Ecc 3:3)
5. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” (Heb/Bab proverb)
6. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” (Ecc 9:10)
7. “To thine own self be true.” (Hamlet)
8. “There is nothing new under the sun. (Ecc 1:9)
9. “The Lord is My Shepherd.” (Ps 23:1)
10. “All men are created equal.” (Dec of Ind.)
11. Extra credit: “A little birdie told me” (var Ecc 10:20)

Some Background

Author: doesn't give name, calls himself Qoheleth [ko-hell-it] –

- Hebrew word means preacher, teacher, gatherer.
- Ecclesiastes – think “ecclesia”: is Greek for “the assembly” We gather together.
- Ecclesiastes is Greek form of the Hebrew word Qoheleth.

It is preceded with a **definite article**, the...so probably not a name but rather a title.

But what is Qoheleth gathering?

Could be gathering people (preacher). But Ecclesiastes doesn't contain sermons.

Could be gathering observations and proverbs to share. (as a teacher)

Tradition holds this teacher is King Solomon, written in old age:

- “The Son of David, King in Jerusalem.” (Ecc 1:1,12)
- Unsurpassed wisdom (Ecc 1:16)
- Unparalleled works (2.5-7)
- Unequaled wealth (2.7-8)
- Unimaginable harem of women (2.8)

Arguments against:

- Speaks of reign in past tense (1:12), but was king until he died. (one could read the verse in a ‘present tense’)
- Mentions “all who were over Jerusalem” before him (1:16) but only 2 kings preceded him. (Saul, David) HOWEVER: may not only refer to Israelite rulers but to the non-Israelite rulers before David: Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18), Adonizedic (Josh. 10:1), Araunah (2 Sam. 24:23)
- Teacher quits using the image of kingship in Ch 2 and is elsewhere critical of the king. (in his wisdom, he can see the faults of an earthly king)
- Hebrew used is generally considered to be from a later time period.

Since scripture is silent on the matter, we cannot be confident in identifying Qoheleth.

Nonetheless: 2 Timothy 3 ¹⁶ All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:¹⁷ That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

In that light, the human authorship is not the point... Author here refers to himself as Preacher or teacher, so that's how we'll refer to him.

Also, seems to be an editor involved in compiling the final text – Teacher is referred to in the third person. We'll discuss it later.

Because we don't know the author, we really don't know when Ecc was written. If by Solomon, maybe 930s BC. If someone else, maybe even after exile (based on development of Wisdom literature and style of Hebrew language it uses) so maybe as late as 540-300 BC)

I'm reading from the ESV; Pew bibles page 553. Whatever translation you're using is fine.

Ecc 1:1-3

The words of the Preacher,^[a] the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

² Vanity^[b] of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

ESV, KJV: Preacher (Vanity of Vanities)

NIV, ICB: Teacher (Meaningless! Meaningless!) (Useless! Useless!)

NAB: Qoheleth (Vanity of Vanities)

GNT: Philosopher (Life is useless, all useless)

MSG: Quester (Smoke, nothing but smoke) *Relate Col 3 from MSG at baptism: Redlands*

Purpose: It's all about the search for the meaning and significance of life.

³ What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

This question is posed in realization of 1:2 –

² Vanity^[b] of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Everything is meaningless??? At first glance, there seems to be a depressing tone...

Before we dive in, let's consider an English word...

“case”

- An argument: “Make a case” for something.
- An Example: “This is a case of _____”
- A Container: pencil case, briefcase.
- A lawsuit/trial: “the OJ Simpson case.”
- An Instance of disease: a case of pneumonia
- A crazy person: “That guy is a nutcase!”
- Expression of Frustration: “Get off my case!”
- A form of letters: “Upper case and lower case letters”

There are a lot of ways that the word **case** can be used.

Case in point (lol):

לְבָהּ hebel [he-vel] (Strong's 1892)

- Is the word translated as ‘meaningless’ or ‘vanity’.
- Important theme in Ecclesiastes
- Used 38 times in Ecc, more than rest of OT combined.
- Literal meaning is “breath”
- When used as a metaphor, there are diff possibilities of how it should be translated.

Discuss: What word does your translation use for vanity? When you hear the word vanity, what are some different ideas you associate with that word?

לְבָהּ hebel [he-vel]

- Has a range of possible meanings
- Any of these can be legitimate depending on context

Vanity: Traditional understanding. Conveys sense of meaninglessness or emptiness. If everything is meaningless, then what are we doing here?

An illustration of that is found with Anna Spafford:

Ref: Horatio Spafford 1873 / Ville Du Havre / It is Well

This hymn was written after traumatic events in Spafford's life:

The first two were the death of his four-year-old son and the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which ruined him financially (he had been a successful lawyer and had invested significantly in property in the area of Chicago that was extensively damaged by the great fire).[1]

His business interests were further hit by the economic downturn of 1873, at which time he had planned to travel to England with his family on the SS Ville du Havre, to help with D. L. Moody's upcoming evangelistic campaigns.

In a late change of plan, he sent the family ahead while he was delayed on business concerning zoning problems following the Great Chicago Fire.

While crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship sank rapidly after a collision with a sea vessel, the Loch Earn, and all four of Spafford's daughters died.[2]

His wife Anna survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "Saved alone ...".

Shortly afterwards, as Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write these words as his ship passed near where his daughters had died.[3]

Bliss called his tune Ville du Havre, from the name of the stricken vessel.[4]

Anna Spafford said, "God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why."

Naturally, Anna was utterly devastated, but she testified that in her grief and despair, she had been conscious of a soft voice speaking to her, "You were saved for a purpose!"

So all that speaks to the concept of “vanity”.

Absurdity: Ecclesiastes argues that there should be some meaning to life, but unfortunately there isn't. Life is absurd, and this is the problem the author is writing about. Life is unreasonable or irrational and undermines morality – no point in being good people.

Mystery: “breath” in the sense of hard to grasp. Inconsistent, unpredictable and mysterious it simply can't be understood. This is better than meaningless or absurd, but leaves us in a frustrating place. Life may have meaning, but we struggle to know what it is.

Temporary: fleeting, not lasting, quickly fades away. Not that life is empty or meaningless, (There are moments of great joy!) but just doesn't last.

So... first two are problematic since we'll see he recommends living in certain ways, which would make no sense if everything was meaningless.

But...some textual support for mysterious. Ecc 8:14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

Ecc 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

And...we'll see textual evidence which supports interpretation as temporary:

Ecc 6:12 For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain[a] life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

Ecc 3:19 For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. “brief” could replace “vain” here.

Ecc 7:15 In my vain[a] life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. “brief” could replace “vain” here too.

Handout: Hebel as temporary. (basis p26-27)

Superlative:

- In English, add –est (biggest, friendliest, etc.)
- In Hebrew it’s idiomatic. Vanity of Vanities, Song of Songs, Holy of Holies. Of all the Holies, this is the holiest. Of the songs, this one is THE song.

This impacts how we interpret Ecclesiastes. It’s not that everything in life is sad, empty, meaningless.

There are places in this book that emphasize the joy that comes from appreciating God’s gifts and the good things in life.

But this life does not last and will pass away. And some things in life are beyond our understanding.

Is 55:8-9 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Read in context, **James 4:13-14**:

13 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a **mist** that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Abel

This name comes from hebel. In the OT, names often reveal some part of a person’s character. Abraham – father of a multitude. Isaac – he laughs. In the

same way, “breath” or “brief” was a fitting name for Abel. He embodied the fact that life is temporary and in many ways, hard to understand – despite righteous living, he was killed by his brother in a fit of jealous rage.

Understanding *hebel*, then Chapter 1 is pretty straightforward.

There is a literary device to note:

Inclusio (in English, “Framing”)

The Frame helps us interpret everything inside the frame.

- **Read Ecc 1:2**
- ² Vanity^[b] of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- **Read Ecc 12:8**
- ⁸ Vanity^[a] of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

Think of it as ‘bookends’: everything in between belongs together.

Ecc 1:3 – What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? What’s the point? What is the gain or benefit of the work we do? (**Here the teacher begins to answer his own question – a process which he will do for the rest of the book.**)

Jesus expands on that question in Mark 8:36-38, where he says,

36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Ecc. 1:4-11 ⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It has been already
in the ages before us.

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

The cycle of life.

Generations come and go, sun rises and sets, impermanence of life. Fleeting aspect of hebel.

Perhaps this silently demonstrates our need for an eternal life. A life beyond fleeting.

Refocus on 1:9-10 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.

Nothing new under the sun. May seem to be new because the past is easily forgotten. Also, “under the sun” is earthly; apart from God.

“Under the sun” – appears 29 times.

The 10 Commandments haven’t needed to change. Sin is still the same.

But God’s love is also still the same.

This passage does not mean our lives are unimportant – but it should cause us to question our motives.

“Making a name for myself” – will it last?

Ref. notes from teen class:

**Life can be hard for teenagers to understand; there is a common assumption that once they grow up they will be able to figure things out. As older adults, it is amazing how quickly time passes, and we never understand all the things we wish we did.

Read Ecc 1:12-15 [Slide 4] [Slide 5]

¹² I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Ecc: 1:12 Recall Solomon, as “King over Israel”. Here, the teacher begins to speak in the first person.

[Slide 6] **1:13** “heart” The Hebrew term denotes the center of one's inner life, including mind, will, and emotions. (**Lēb** heart; by extension: the inner person, self, the seat of thought and emotion: conscience, courage, mind, understanding) **Cognitive and also emotive.**

Also notable: author uses “Elohim” for God rather than “Yahweh”. Elohim focuses on sovereignty. God’s power and might.

1:14 “Vanity” as “mere breath” (hebel).

1:15 [Slide 7] Contrast with Isaiah 40:3-4 KJV: ³ The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:

[Slide 8][Slide 9] What is crooked cannot be made straight...by man. If you want to see that again tonight, peek ahead to Ecc 7:13. If not, we'll see it when we get there.

Human effort in and of itself is meaningless and hopeless – but when we are content with God's provision and direction, we have a different outlook.

Read Ecc 1:16-18: [Slide 10]

¹⁶ I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. ¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Remember he is talking “under the sun”, so earthly – apart from God. Humanistic wisdom leads to grief and sorrow.

Human wisdom is good, but has its limitations (1:18)

So we see how he considers that human wisdom is meaningless.

New Testament Bridge: [Slide 11][Slide 12]

Romans 8:18-23 ¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to **futility**, 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.

[Slide 13] When the apostle Paul lamented the frustrations of life in a fallen world, he noted that the creation has been “subjected to frustration”(NIV), “subject to vanity” (KJV) (Romans 8:20).

Notably, the Greek word translated as “frustration” (mataiotes) is used 38 times in the Greek version of Ecclesiastes to render the word “meaningless,” leading some to speculate that Paul had Ecclesiastes in mind.

Either way, however, he identified the same problem highlighted by Solomon centuries earlier.

Thankfully, Paul revealed the solution: at Christ’s second coming, the world “will be liberated from its bondage to decay” and all believers in Jesus will receive perfect, eternal resurrection bodies (Romans 8:21–23).

On that day, the “meaningless” aspects of the present life will not be worth comparing to the glory of eternal life in heaven (Romans 8:18). **Source: Storyline Bible**

In Ch. 2, the teacher will show that pleasure cannot give meaning or satisfaction.