

# Ecclesiastes

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November 26, 2002

Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books in the Bible. But many people hate the book of Ecclesiastes. I hope that I can help you to learn to love this book.

To begin, we must first ask who the author of Ecclesiastes is. The book does not give the author by name, but the traditional assumption is that it was written by King Solomon, the son of David. I agree with the traditional view. The book says that it is written by “the Preacher,” the son of David, king in Jerusalem. He became wiser and richer than anyone in Jerusalem before him, and amassed gold and silver and slaves. This is a description of the life of Solomon.

One objection to the view that Solomon wrote this book is the language style. The original language contains many non-Hebrew words, which would not have been part of the Hebrew language at the time of Solomon. But it seems natural to me that Solomon, who was highly educated, would have used foreign words, as a sort of language of intellectuals, just as today an educated person today might drop a French phrase, “C’est la vie.” This objection, which rings a bit of higher criticism, I think is not enough to overturn the traditional view that Solomon was the author. Not only that, but the Proverbial style of the middle chapters is the same as the book of Proverbs.

The next question is how to take the book of Ecclesiastes. This is where evangelical commentators disagree dramatically. Is this book truth? Is it for us today? Chuck Swindoll has called the book of Ecclesiastes “an inspired record of uninspired thinking.” I have a lot of problems with that. First of all, if we can take that attitude toward this part of Scripture, then what is to prevent us from taking that attitude toward any part of Scripture? Any time we read something that we don’t like, we can call that part an “inspired

record of uninspired thinking.”

Not only that, but the book does not present itself as “an inspired record of uninspired thinking.” Instead, the book commends itself to us as wisdom and truth. At the end of the book, in Eccl. 12:9, it says, “Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.”

If we accept Solomon as the author, then the Bible says that he was the wisest man who ever lived. In 1 Kings 3:12, God says “I will give you a wise a discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.” Even though he fell into sin, sins which are recorded in this book, (and we get some insight in Ecclesiastes into why he did these sins) the Bible never says that he lost his wisdom. David, who wrote the Psalms, also fell into sin, but we do not discount the Scripture written by him.

Last, there are several parallel passages in several other places in Bible which give the same teaching in almost the same words. These include Psalm 49, Psalm 90, and Isaiah 40. The vanity theme is throughout the Bible; we have to cut out more than just Ecclesiastes if we don’t like it.

Given all this, why do people dislike the book of Ecclesiastes? Why do they want to call it “uninspired thinking”? The main reason of the objection to taking the book of Ecclesiastes seriously is its content. Some people simply cannot accept some of the teachings.

I once heard R.C. Sproul give some very good advice. He said that if you want to grow in your spiritual life the fastest, start reading through the Bible, and underline every passage that you really dislike. Then study only those passages. If you dislike a passage, then one of two things must be true. Either (1) you are wrong, or (2) God is wrong. If you rule out the second possibility, then studying the passage will lead to growth, because either you will gain new understanding of the context and language or you will be overturning wrong presuppositions that you have. I heard R.C. say this when I was in college and I have tended to take this approach my whole adult life. One of the first books that I studied following his advice was the book of Ecclesiastes, and it had great effect on me.

Let’s look at some of these difficult passages now and see if we can learn from them. One thing about a wise man is that he doesn’t always say what you want to hear. Instead, he tells you about what really is; he tells you the truth, which may be painful but which cuts to the chase.

The first key to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes is to understand

the word which is translated “vanity” in the King James, which is “habel” in Hebrew. This word repeated all through the book, as a sort of refrain—“Vanity of vanity, all is vanity!” This word is translated “meaningless” in the NIV, but I think this is unfortunate. We may not be able to see the meaning of some things, but nothing which happens is meaningless to God. The word “vanity” captures the idea better, as in, things are done “in vain.” Other ways of saying this are “futility,” “empty,” “unsatisfying,” “transitory,” “changeable,” “frustrating,” “insubstantial” and “temporary.” Life is like “the grass of the field,” and “dust in the wind.” Another picture is sand grasped in your hand. You cannot hold it—it slips through your fingers. Nothing in this world satisfies. The more you try to hold onto it, the less substantial it is. It doesn’t fill you up.

Some of us are familiar with the story of Ernest Hemingway, who traveled all over the world writing stories about foreign places. His philosophy of life was entirely worldly. He earned his fame by being someone who disdained the ordinary, somebody who was cosmopolitan and was bored with the commonplace. Yet in the end, he ran out of new places. Eventually, every place bored him, nothing was new. In one of his last stories, he wrote, “Eventually everything tastes like licorice.” This is the message of Ecclesiastes—nothing in this world satisfies. Solomon runs through all the things which people feel will satisfy them—wealth, sex, fame, knowledge, power, and children and grandchildren. He had them all, and they didn’t satisfy. I believe that God even allowed him to fall into sin for this reason, that he might be able to say “I did it all, it it didn’t satisfy.” How many men have cast everything away for a woman that they felt would be really satisfying? Perhaps some of you here even today have felt this—“Oh, that person would really make my life whole. If only...” But Solomon had it all, any woman he chose, and he tells us that, like wealth, it doesn’t satisfy. Nothing in this world can fill you up.

By contrast, the book of Ecclesiastes says that God is *not* vanity. The things of this world are changeable; God never changes. The world is temporary, God is permanent. Things are insubstantial; God is substantial. The things of the world are unsatisfying; God is satisfying. Sand slips through your fingers, but God can be grasped and held.

It has often been said that all people have a “God-shaped vacuum.” There is a hole in our heart that can only be filled by God. If we try to fill that void with anything else, we are frustrated. We want there to be something permanent in our life. If we put something impermanent at the center of our lives, we are either depressed when it changes and is lost, or we are constantly

in fear that it will change and be lost. Only God is permanent; only God never changes; only God can satisfy that need.

We may not like to face it, but this is true of Christian work, of “good” work, also. In our society we have an ideal that our work should “fulfill” us. We want our work to be something that makes a difference, something that has a lasting effect. Therefore we become depressed when something undoes our work or if we don’t see much effect of our work, or if we do see good effects, we become tense and fearful that something will undo our work. Solomon said “The king must leave his kingdom to another, and who knows if he will be a wise man or a fool?” As it turned out, Solomon’s son *was* a fool— Rehoboam, who split the kingdom and started a civil war. One could paraphrase that for pastors— who knows whether the next pastor in this church will be a wise man or a fool?

If we look at church history, we see great works of God which were led by great people, which eventually passed away. Most of the monastic movements were set up by godly men like Augustine and Francis of Assisi, but by the time of the Reformation they had become corrupt. The Reformation led to the founding of the mainline Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, which have fallen into decay, especially in Europe where they were founded. Revival movements led by people like Wesley led to the Methodist church which has also fallen into decay. Even the Pharisees, who persecuted Jesus, began as a godly reform movement.

What we are told in the book of Ecclesiastes is that the work of God endures forever, and no one can add to it or subtract from it. His kingdom is forever. The kingdom of God is advancing, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. But God may use one tool or another at different times. No one can completely understand what His plan is. This is where frustration comes in. Ecclesiastes 3:10 says, “I have seen what a burden God has laid on men. ... He has ... set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to the end.” This is the tension of being human in a fallen world— we know in our hearts that God is, that there is something more, but we cannot see the big picture. We cannot see the end from the beginning. This is true of Christian people too. Solomon says in Chapter 1, “With increasing wisdom comes increasing pain.” The wiser we are, the more we see that some things we cannot change, and things that will go downhill no matter what we do. He also says, in Ecclesiastes 8:17, “No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun.... Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.” From our perspective, it

seems often that God undoes works which He has previously done. This is frustrating, seemingly “futility,” because we cannot see the big picture. You do something, it gets undone. You build something, somebody or something tears it down. Evil people undo what is good, and they don’t get punished. Good Christian people get cancer and die.

Yet this should not cause us to be depressed. We should be encouraged to know that God stands above it all and that His plans cannot be thwarted. We should be encouraged to know that we are part of a grand plan that must win. The Church universal is advancing, even if our local part is not. We can see this in history. There are more believers alive today, and more believers as a percentage of the total world population, than at any other time in history. We may look back fondly at the church of the book of Acts, but remember that at that time they were a handful of believers in a world of pagans. Outside the Roman Empire there were no believers. Northern Europe was filled with bloodthirsty cannibals. Africa, Asia, and the Americas were completely pagan.

Ecclesiastes is only depressing if we have our hope in this world. If we like to think that *our* work is not subject to decay, then being told that all things in this world are subject to decay is depressing. But if our hope is not in this world, but in the eternal unchanging world to come, then it is not depressing to acknowledge the truth. It is merely a statement of fact—this world is passing away. Again, we like to think of our Christian work as somehow exempted. We like to think that what we are doing is really lasting and permanent, really significant. Often we tell our Christian teenagers that they should set out to “change the world.” And then when they grow up, and see that they cannot change the world, they get depressed. Shouldn’t we rather tell them that *God* is the world-changer?

I can think of two applications to this. First, many years ago, when my wife and I had our first child, this teaching greatly helped my wife Sandy. She had just quit her job and was staying at home with our baby girl. Her hours were filled with seemingly “meaningless” and “unfulfilling” tasks of changing diapers, cleaning up messes, and sitting mindlessly, feeding the baby. She began to get depressed. She began to think, “What am I doing this for? So that this baby girl can grow up and do the same thing? And what will she do it for? So that her daughter can grow up and do the same thing? It is an endless, futile cycle!” What brought her out of it was reading Ecclesiastes. Yes— it is an endless cycle. Yes, changing diapers is unfulfilling. But who says that office work is more significant, more fulfilling? An office worker will

generate paper, so that other people can read that paper and generate more paper, so that other people can generate more paper, and so on. The modern feminist movement says that being a mother is empty, and doing office jobs is fulfilling, but the reality is much different for most women. Almost all types of work seem to get undone and need to be redone over and over.

What Ecclesiastes says is “Enjoy life, enjoy what the Lord has given you to do, and do what is good.” Sandy got her focus off the idea of getting “fulfillment” from her work, and put her focus on God Himself as the One Who is fulfilling. And she found that she could simply enjoy being with her baby, enjoy the little laughs and soft hands. She, like all of us, simply had to ask, “Am I doing what is good? Am I obeying the Lord?” If she could answer that question “Yes,” then she did not have to look to see some deep, permanent impact to her work. Ecclesiastes says that all we have to do is to set our eyes on God, do what is good, and enjoy what He gives us, and we can fall into bed content at night.

Another application is to pastors in dying churches. Suppose a pastor has a congregation of mostly older and poorer people. Like my wife Sandy, this pastor may ask, “What is the impact of what I am doing? I am putting my life’s work into people who are too weak to build the kingdom themselves? These people will simply die off; none of them have the gifts for evangelism or teaching that will cause my church to grow. Is all my work just vanity?”

The answer is yes, our work in this life is vanity. We must simply ask, “Has God called me to this work? Am I doing what is good?” and fix our eyes on Jesus, not the permanence of our work, or the value that society puts on it. When we stop trying to see deep, lasting permanence in our work, we can simply start to enjoy it as something we can do well. It is God who will build His kingdom.

This is one thing that bothers me about the “church-growth” movement. On one hand, I agree that it is good to think “strategically” about where we put our efforts, to look ahead to societal trends, etc. On the other hand, it disturbs me that in practice, this often translates to planting churches exclusively among young, wealthy people, so-called “yuppies.” When we look at how Jesus worked, we might well say that His work was not very strategic, and that it was all “vanity.” He spent most of His time with poor, uneducated people. When He left the earth, most of these people had fallen away. Even then, they still had very little understanding of His message. We know the end of the story, that this little band went on to do great things. Yet continue with the story a little further. We all wish we had

been there on the day of Pentecost. *That* is surely a great, permanent work, when thousands of people come to the Lord. But in a short time, that group was dispersed by persecution, and within a generation, Jerusalem itself was destroyed, and within two generations, the whole Jewish church had become nearly nonexistent. The point is that no one knows what God is going to do next. We may be called to be like Jesus, to work with people who seem to give nothing back, or we may be like Peter and Paul, and start churches, only to seem them attacked and dispersed. God builds His kingdom, and we are called to do what He has given us to do with all our might, even if we cannot see the end from the beginning.

All of this is very uncomfortable for people who see themselves as the leaders of great, earthshaking Christian “movements.” Many evangelical leaders talk in triumphalist terms of grand, sweeping movements that will in a short time change the world. Then we get depressed when the world doesn’t change, at least, not as fast as we hoped. One of the great things about the church in the Roman Empire, and the church in the Reformation, was that for the large part, they did not see themselves as setting about to change the world. They simply saw themselves as obeying God, locally. They set about to “live a quiet life, to work with their hands, and to do good.” And God used this to change the world in His time.

Before I finish, I want to address a few statements in Ecclesiastes that people find particularly objectionable. As I said before, the reason why some people want to take Ecclesiastes as an “inspired record of uninspired thinking” is because they don’t like what it says.

First, Solomon says, “Eat, drink, and be merry.” Is he presenting a nihilist, hedonist world view, like the beer commercial, “You only go around once in life, so go for all the gusto you can get”?

No, if you read Ecclesiastes, you will see that he spends all of Chapter 2 on the stupidity of pleasure-seeking. He got all the gusto he could get, and was empty. What he says in Ecclesiastes is to *work* and to *do good*, and to enjoy the fruits of our labor. This is a consistent theme in the Bible, that we are to work, and we are to rest and to enjoy the fruits of our labor. This is what the Sabbath is all about. God rested and enjoyed the fruit of His labor, and we are to also. Solomon says, in Ecc 6:3, that there is no tragedy greater than a person who works his whole life and never enjoys the fruit of his labor. The person who heaps things up in this life, beyond what he can really use or enjoy in this life, is a fool. Solomon is perfectly consistent with Paul, who said, “I have found the secret of contentment in every situation,” (Phil 4:12),

“Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it,” and also “Make it your aim to work with your hands,” (1 Thess 4:11) and “Whatever you do, do it with all your might, as unto the Lord.” (Col 3:23) Compare this with Solomon, who said, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might,” (Ecc 9:10), “When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work— this is a gift of God,” (Ecc 5:19) and “I know there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.” (Ecc 3:12) Solomon is not encouraging great self-indulgence, but rather, enjoying the simple things of life, neither being lazy and wallowing in pleasure, nor working endlessly without ever enjoying ourselves. This is quite different from the type of “eating and drinking” which Paul condemns in 1 Corinthians 15:32, when he quotes Isaiah 22:13. Isaiah 22:13 speaks of the “revelry” of the people at a time when they should have turned to the Lord in repentance.

Solomon says that there is a time to be merry, and a time to mourn. We will be happier if we accept both, and are neither ascetics nor try to avoid all sorrow, running from one pleasure to the next— “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.” (Ecc 7:4) A person who runs from one kind of entertainment to the next is usually a person who doesn’t want to stop and think, because those thoughts will turn to how empty and vain his life is. We see this all the time in our society— people fill their lives with noise because they are truly afraid to sit and think, because they know they will get depressed. As I said earlier, a person who knows the eternal and unchanging God does not get depressed about the vanity of our lives, because his life does not revolve around trying to make his own permanent mark, but rather in adoring God who ordains all things for His purposes. A person who has his mind set on this world will either get depressed, if he sees how little he has accomplished, or anxious, if he has accomplished something and fears it will be undone.

Another “objectionable” statement in Ecclesiastes is, “Who knows whether spirit of man goes up, spirit of animal down.” (Ecc 3:21) Is Solomon saying that people do not have eternal spirits? No, you only have to read on to see that Solomon believes in eternal life. In Ecc 8:12 he says, “although the wicked commit a hundred crimes and live a long life, I know it will go better with God-fearing men... because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.” In Ecc 11:9 he says, “know that for all these things God will bring you into

judgment.” In Ecc 12:7 he says, “the spirit will return to God Who gave it,” and in 12:14, “God will judge bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

What Solomon is saying in Ecc 3:21, when he asks, rhetorically, who knows whether the spirit of man ascends upward and the spirit of an animal goes downward, is that physically, we are like the animals. He says this explicitly in 3:18: “As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals.” Specifically, we are like the animals in that we die and are forgotten. That is part of the whole “vanity” of this world— this world is passing away; we are subject to decay, just like the animals.

The belief that we have eternal spirits is based on faith; we do not see it. This faith is what gives us hope. If there is no Final Judgment, then there is no justice, because there is no justice in this world. As Solomon says, “In this vain life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.” (Ecc 7:15) This is a consistent theme in the Bible. Only if spirits are judged in an afterlife does universal justice have any meaning, because we know that there is no justice here. Job says the same thing. In Job 17:13, he says, “If the only home I hope for is the grave, ... where then is my hope? Who can see any hope for me?” Two chapters later, Job concludes, on faith, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” (Job 19:25-26) The Bible does not teach glib optimism about this world; it is very realistic about the world. We have hope because we look to an eternal kingdom, because we look to the things above and a kingdom that can never be shaken and an eternal city, not because we think justice will prevail here. I believe that the kingdom of God will grow to have tremendous impact on this world, to be the leaven that fills the whole dough. God is building a great kingdom in this world. But it still will pale in comparison to that eternal kingdom of heaven, the New Jerusalem which awaits us, in which no injustice will ever occur, and no tear will ever be shed. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 4:18, “We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary (vanity), but what is unseen is eternal.” This is the message of Ecclesiastes. Do not fix your eyes on this world, even the good parts, for what is seen is temporary, is vanity. Fix your eyes on God alone. Let us not forget this. The Church is doing wonderful things in the world. But the Church will never fix this world. Our hope is in the unseen world to come.

Last, in another “objectionable” statement, Solomon says, in Ecc 7:16,

“Do not be overrighteous, nor overwicked.” Is he saying that we should not strive to obey God’s law perfectly, in contradiction to Jesus, Who said, “Be ye perfect”? Is he saying it is possible to be more than perfectly righteous?

No, Solomon does not think that anyone can be perfectly righteous. In the same chapter, he says, “There is not a righteous man on earth who does only what is right and never sins.” (Ecc 7:20) This is one of the great proof texts for the doctrine of Total Depravity. What Solomon means by not being “overrighteous” is not to think better of ourselves than we are. An “overrighteous” person has a smug belief in his own righteousness. Solomon says, in contrast, in the same chapter, “there is no one who never sins.” An “overrighteous” person is a perfectionist. Just as we should not be anxious about our failure to accomplish worldly goals, so we should not be anxious about our sinfulness, which we cannot escape.

I think one of the main reasons evangelicals have problems with Ecclesiastes is that we tend toward hero worship. We have all read stories of great men like Martin Luther or Hudson Taylor who “changed the world.” We all dream of being such a person, and we see the work of such people as lasting and important, making a permanent mark on society. Surely their work is not vanity! Surely if I try hard enough, I might be such a person, and my work will not be vanity! But let us not forget that for every Martin Luther, there were 100 men who were just as righteous but whom we have never heard of. God establishes as leaders those whom He chooses. Luther and Calvin were used mightily by God, but let us not forget to give the glory to God, who uses unlikely vessels at times and casts aside other vessels that we might think were more worthy. It is God who is building His kingdom, and we cannot figure out how He is going to do it. The message of Ecclesiastes can be summed up in verse 5:7– “Stand in awe of God!” He is planning things that we cannot even imagine.