

Outline of Ecclesiastes

We hope this overview and outline of Ecclesiastes will assist you in your study of God's Word. May you grow ever closer to Him as you read His letter to you.

Background:

One of the most quotable books in the Hebrew Scriptures is also perhaps the most puzzling. From this book come the following:

- There is nothing new under the sun 1:9
- To everything there is a season 3:1
- Two are better than one 4:9
- Eat, drink, and be merry 8:15
- Time and chance happen to them all 9:11
- He who digs a pit will fall into it 10:8
- Money answers everything 10:19

Are we to take these statements as affirmations of truth or findings of folly?

Scholars have debated the meaning and structure of the book. The book cascades between words of vanity and words of wisdom with seemingly wild abandon. For instance, 3:17 states that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, 3:18 tells us that men are animals, and 3:19 states that all is vanity. The first statement is true (Psalm 1; Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29). The second is not (Genesis 1:20-28; Acts 17:28-29). And the third is not (Psalm 73:23-28). Theories abound about misplaced texts, misplaced pages, interpolations, multiple authors, foreign authors, influence from Greek philosophy, Persian ideas, and Aramaic phrases, in attempts to find cohesive meaning.

The author identifies himself as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:1). Many critical scholars doubt Solomon's authorship of this book, based on the language of the book. However, it is a weak argument to state that the language is not that of Solomon when our body of known Solomonic writings is so small (3 Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and prayers in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles). Moreover, Ecclesiastes has many shared characteristics with Song of Solomon in its vivid style, shifting thoughts, repetition of words and phrases, and in some linguistic commonalities. All ancient sources affirm Solomon's authorship. I place this book near the end of Solomon's life, as a retrospective sermon on his life. This would place the writing around 935 B.C.

Structure:

Nearly everyone accepts a three-part structure to the book. There is the introduction (1:1-11). There are the observations and admonitions of the Preacher. There is the conclusion. Some add other divisions within the middle section. Further, the point where the conclusion begins is debated. Here is my outline:

- Introduction 1:1-11
- Body 1:12-12:8
- Conclusion 12:9-14

Purpose:

The book serves as a warning of the futility of living life apart from the fear of God. Over the years I have shifted in my understanding of the book. I now see the book as a single sermon driving home the point that life apart from the fear of God is a wasted life, empty and ultimately meaningless. The Preacher begins with “vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” a premise that is developed and tested throughout his sermon. The premise is accompanied with a related question “What profit has a man from all his labor” (1:3). Finally, the Preacher gives the perspective for his sermon, a focus “under the sun” (1:3). The Preacher does not rely on revelation from God, but rather on what he can see and test. He never uses God’s revealed name “Yahweh” (“LORD”) (Exodus 6:1-8). The generic “God” (“Elohim”) is mentioned 40 times. Only in the final conclusion do we have a direct reference to God’s revelation (“His commandments”). Without God speaking to us through the prophets and through His Son, we would all live a vain life.

Looking under the sun (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5), the idea of vanity permeates the book (1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26, 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:10; 6:2, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8). While there are gems of truth in the book, they are interlaced with the error that always comes from wisdom that is not based on the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

The Preacher approaches his quest with the skills of a scientist. He tests, studies, reasons, and seeks to find out truth by what can be measured and observed (1:13-14, 16-17; 2:1, 2, 3-11, 13-16; 3:10, 16; 17, 18, 22; 4:1, 4, 7; 5:18; 6:1; 7:15, 23; 8:9, 10, 17; 9:1, 11, 13; 10:5, 7). He reaches the conclusion of a scientist, “time and chance happen to them all” (9:11). He fails to see the active, providential God of Scripture who cares even for the sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31). And this perspective cannot discern the works of God or the future (2:19; 3:11, 22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7, 17; 9:10, 12; 11:2, 5).

The error of trying to find meaning apart from divine revelation is driven home throughout this book. The scientific method will never reveal ultimate meaning. This is no knock on science. Rather, it is a truth statement as to the limits of science made clear by this book. Without instruction from God, meaning cannot be known.

The Preacher kept running into the same stark reality: death (3:18-22; 5:15-16; 7:1, 15; 8:7-8; 10; 9:2-6). I can be wise and die. I can be a fool and die. What profit has one over the other? I can be rich and die. I can be poor and die. What benefit is either? The best we can do is to eat and live joyfully with one’s wife all the days of our vain lives, all the days of vanity (9:7-9).

Accordingly, the Preacher concludes his search “under the sun” with the statement “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (12:8). The greatest of vanities is this thing we call life. There is no profit.

Before reaching this conclusion, the Preacher reaches many interim conclusions centered on the best thing in life is to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of one’s labor (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9). He calls this the gift of God (2:24; 3:13; 5:19). But lest we conclude that these interim conclusions are intended by the Preacher to be statements of truth, we must listen to what the Preacher says about them. He states that even this conclusion is vanity (2:26), represents a vain life (9:9) and will lead to the judgment of God (11:9). He concludes that “under the sun” we cannot know what is good for man in life (6:12). Jesus Himself agrees with the Preacher, stating that a life focused on eating and drinking and enjoying this life is the life of a fool (Luke 12:16-21). Life is to be lived for the cause of the Mission of Christ (Luke 9:23-25).

After masterfully leading us through the folly and sadness of life lived with the best wisdom humanity can offer “under the sun,” the Preacher closes his sermon with his His purpose in giving the sermon (12:13-14): “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is all there is for man. For all that is done God will bring into judgment, including everything hidden, whether good or evil.” Notice, the Preacher turns and points us to God’s revelation; namely, His commands. The entire duty of man is to keep God’s commands, because this will be the basis of the ultimate judgment. Focusing on the ultimate judgment provides meaning to life. This is the fear of the LORD.

This ultimate conclusion is itself strewn throughout the sermon. In 3:17, the Preacher states: “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked.” In 5:7, the Preacher states: “Fear God” In 7:18, the Preacher states: “He who fears God will

come forth from all of them.” In 8:12-13, the Preacher states: “yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him, but it will not be well with the wicked...because he does not fear before God.” In 11:9, the Preacher states: “But know that for all these, God will bring you into judgment.” And the Preacher concludes in 12:1 that there should be a remembrance of one’s Creator before one gets to the end of days and discovers the vanity of life without the Creator. It is this theme strewn throughout the book that emerges at the end as the only ultimate truth of the book. Everything else is vanity.

Ecclesiastes thus stands as a stark warning to us. Life lived without a focus on Jesus Christ is wasted, vain, and a chasing after the wind. Whether we pursue pleasure, riches, creative activity, wisdom, or simple bliss, we will come to the end of life and find that our lives were lived in vain. Meaning in life comes only through a life focused on God’s revealed truth, which is personalized in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the counter-weight to this book, the One who brings life more abundantly (John 10:10).

I summarize the book as follows:

I. Introduction 1:1-11

- A. The speaker 1:1
- B. The premise: All is Vanity 1:2
- C. The question: What profit from labor? 1:3a
- D. The perspective: Under the sun. 1:3b
- E. Life is circular, not linear — ultimately there is no progress 1:4-11

II. Under the Sun

- A. Everything one does is vanity 1:12-15
- B. I searched for wisdom and folly and found vanity 1:16-18
- C. I sought pleasure and found vanity 2:1-11
- D. I considered wisdom and found the wise no better than the fool — it’s vanity 2:12-26
- E. Everything has its own time 3:1-8
- F. But what profit is any of it? We all go to the same dust — we cannot know after us 3:9-22
- G. Oppression teaches that it is better not to have lived 4:1-3
- H. Envy and covetousness are vain and evil 4:4-8
- I. Friendship is desirable 4:9-12
- J. But better to be poor and wise than a king and foolish 4:13-16
- K. Keep your words few because words multiply vanity 5:1-7

— Fear God —

- L. Those who seek riches find vanity 5:8-6:12
- M. We can live the best we know but we do not know the hereafter 7:1-14
- N. Watch life and people 7:15-8:1

- O. Watch out for rulers 8:2-9
- P. Death is the leveler of all 8:10-9:6
- Q. The great conclusion under the sun is to live up this vain life all the days of your vanity 9:7-12
- R. Wisdom and folly 9:13-10:20
- S. Do not be lazy, but diligence also is vanity 11:1-8
- T. Remember your Creator while you live so as to avoid a vain life 11:9-12:7
- U. Without Him, all is vanity 12:8

**III. The final conclusion: The duty and profit of man is to fear God and keep His commandments.
12:9-14**

Key Idea: *Under the sun*

The phrase appears 29 times (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15[2], 17; 9:3, 6, 9[2], 11, 13; 10:5). The “truth” statement is true for activities solely “under the sun.”

Key Passage: Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Key Lesson: Life, to have meaning, must be lived in the Fear of God.