The Book of Ecclesiastes:
The Holy Bible

It is also referred to as God’s Word, or the Holy Scriptures. This book is made up by 66 books penned by various authors over a period of approx. 1600 years, although written by men; God is the ultimate author (2 Tim.3v16-17, 2 Pet.1v20-21).

The Title of the Book of Ecclesiastes

The Hebrew title of the book is Qohelet, a term related to the verb qāhal, ‘to gather, assemble’. Greek translators interpreted the word to mean ekklēsiastēs, ‘member of a citizen’s assembly’.

The date and author of the book

a): The author

The Book of Ecclesiastes does not directly identify its author. The author identifies himself as ‘the son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (1v1) He also refers to himself as ‘the Preacher’ (1v1, 2, 12; 7v27; 12v8, 9, 10). Jewish and early Christian tradition attributes the book to Solomon. There are quite a few verses that imply Solomon wrote this book. There are some clues in the context that may suggest a different person wrote the book after Solomon’s death (i.e. 2v9), possibly several hundred years later. Some consider the book to be a study based on the sayings of Solomon. Still, the conventional belief is that the author is indeed Solomon, certainly no Old Testament king better fits the description given in this book. There are some internal evidences that also point to Solomon as the author.

Note the references to:

- His wisdom – 1v16; compare: 1 Kings 3v12
- His building activities – 2v4-6; compare: 1 Kings 7v1-12
- His activities after writing this book – 12v9-10; compare: 1 Kings 4v30-34

b): Date of Writing:

The lack of specific historical references within the book makes it difficult to date Ecclesiastes. If Solomon is indeed the author, Solomon’s reign as King of Israel lasted from around 970 B.C. to around 930 B.C. The Book of Ecclesiastes was likely written towards the end of his reign, approximately 935-945 B.C. if it was not Solomon it could have been written as late as 200 B.C.

The division of the book

The book can be divided into 5 sections:

- Introduction and Prologue (1v1-3)
- The Preacher’s search for meaning in life (1v4 - 2v26)
- The Preacher’s observations from life (3v1 – 6v12)
- The Preacher’s counsel for life (7v1 – 12v7)
- Epilogue and conclusion (12v8-14)

The Book of Ecclesiastes (Summary)

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a notoriously confusing part of the Old Testament. The author looks at life with its seeming contradictions and mysteries, and so it can be seen as either an essay on the topic ‘Is life worthwhile’? or ‘let’s see what a life without God is all about’.

The Teacher tries many earthly pleasures. He drinks, becomes wealthy, acquires power, buys property, experiences sexual gratification, and views artistic entertainment. However, none of these experiences satisfies him. The Teacher also surveys the general trends of human activity. He notes that just as there is time for each good thing in life, such as birth or love, there is always a time for its opposite, such as death or hate.
It is often hard for mere men to understand the difference between wickedness and justice, but God distinguishes between the two. The Teacher notes that human labour is marked by competition, envy, and oppression.

Next, the Teacher discusses various foolish actions, such as gluttony, the love of money, and excessive talking. The Teacher provides a series of instructions for avoiding such futility. Each saying extols negative experiences over positive ones: mourning, he claims, is better than feasting, and the end of things is better than the beginning. He also encourages people to be neither too righteous nor too wicked but to remain moderate. Still, the Teacher remains bothered by the fact that both evil and good people meet the same end.

Ecclesiastes is a book of perspective. The narrative of ‘the Preacher’ (KJV), or ‘the Teacher’ (NIV) reveals the depression that inevitably results from seeking happiness in worldly things. This book gives Christians the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of a person who, though very wise, is trying to find meaning in temporary, human things. Almost every form of worldly pleasure is explored by the Preacher, and none of it gives him a sense of meaning.

In the end, the Preacher comes to accept that faith in God is the only way to find personal meaning. He decides to accept the fact that life is brief and ultimately worthless without God. The Preacher advises the reader to focus on an eternal God instead of temporary pleasure.

**Some of the themes in Ecclesiastes**

*Two important phrases are repeated in Ecclesiastes:*

The word translated as ‘vanity’ in the KJV, and ‘meaningless’ in the NIV appear 37 times, and is used to emphasise the temporary nature of worldly things. In the end, even the most impressive human achievements will be left behind.

The phrase ‘under the sun’ occurs 30 times, and refers to the mortal world. When the Preacher refers to ‘all things under the sun’, he is talking about earthly, temporary, human things.

*Other recurring words are:*

- Man – 47 times
- Labour – 36 times
- Wisdom or wise – 52 times
- Evil – 22 times
- God – 40 times
**Summary of the Holy Bible**

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Ecclesiastes offers the Christian an opportunity to understand the emptiness and despair that those who do not know God grapple with. Those who do not have a saving faith in Christ are faced with a life that will ultimately end and become irrelevant. If there is no salvation, and no God, then not only is there no point to life, but no purpose or longevity.

**Brief summary of the outline of the book**

**Chapters 1-7** of Ecclesiastes describe all of the worldly things ‘under the sun’ that the Preacher tries to find fulfilment in. He tries scientific discovery (1v10-11), wisdom and philosophy (1v13-18), mirth (2v1), alcohol (2v3), architecture (2v4), property (2v7-8), and luxury (2v8).

The Preacher turned his mind towards different philosophies to find meaning, such as materialism (2v19-20), and even moral codes (including chapters 8-9). He found that everything was meaningless, a temporary diversion that, without God, had no purpose or longevity.

**Chapters 8-12** of Ecclesiastes describe the Preacher’s suggestions and comments on how a life should be lived. He comes to the conclusion that without God, there is no truth or meaning to life. He has seen many evils and realised that even the best of man’s achievements are worth nothing in the long run. So he advises the reader to acknowledge God from youth (12v1) and to follow his will (12v13-14).

The book has special relevance today in our materialistic society, for it helps us to see the vanity of many earthly pursuits. Today many people are attempting to live their lives without God, and finding that the whole of their existence is purposeless. They end up asking ‘who am I’, ‘why am I here’, and ‘where am I going’ etc. Man needs a divine, spiritual dimension, which can only be satisfied by God himself.

The book contains lessons for all, but especially for the young who have so much to lose should they make the wrong choices early in life.

**The key verses of Ecclesiastes are**

- **Ecclesiastes 1v2**: ‘Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity’ (NKJV).

- **Ecclesiastes 1v18**: ‘For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief’.

- **Ecclesiastes 2v11**: ‘Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun’.

- **Ecclesiastes 12v1**: ‘Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them’.

- **Ecclesiastes 12v13**: ‘Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man’.

**Seeing Jesus in Ecclesiastes**

For all of the vanities described in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the answer is Christ. According to Ecclesiastes 3v17, God judges the righteous and the wicked, and the righteous are only those who are in Christ (2 Corinthians 5v21). God has placed the desire for eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3v11) and has provided the Way to eternal life through Christ (John 3v16). We are reminded that striving after the world’s wealth is not only vanity because it does not satisfy (Ecclesiastes 5v10), but even if we could attain it, without Christ we would lose our souls and what profit is there in that? (Mark 8v36). Ultimately, every disappointment and vanity described in Ecclesiastes has its remedy in Christ, the wisdom of God and the only true meaning to be found in life.

**Practical Application:**

Ecclesiastes offers the Christian an opportunity to understand the emptiness and despair that those who do not know God grapple with. Those who do not have a saving faith in Christ are faced with a life that will ultimately end and become irrelevant. If there is no salvation, and no God, then not only is there no point to life, but no purpose or longevity.
The Book of Ecclesiastes is, up to a certain point, the opposite of the Book of Proverbs. It is the experience of a man who - having great wisdom, to judge all things, makes a trial of everything under the sun that could be expected to make men happy, through the enjoyment of everything that the world has to offer. The effect of this trial was the discovery that all is vanity and vexation of spirit; that every effort to be happy in possessing the earth, in whatever way it may be, ends in nothing. There is rottenness at the root. The greater the capacity of enjoyment, the deeper and wider is the experience of disappointment. Pleasure does not satisfy, and even the idea of securing happiness in this world by an unusual degree of righteousness, cannot be realised.

**Wisdom and folly in this world and their end**
The moral of this book goes even farther than that of the Proverbs - on one side at least; for we must remember that it is this world that is in question (*under the sun*). Wisdom avails no more than folly. The difference between them is as great as that between light and darkness.

**Injustice and un-redressed wrongs**
Chapter 4 expresses the deep sorrow caused by the crying injustice of a sinful world, the un-redressed wrongs which compose the history of our race, and which, in fact, make the history of man insupportable to one who has a sense of natural justice, and creates the desire to put an end to it. Labour and laziness alike bring their quota of distress. Nevertheless, in the midst of this quicksand in which there is no standing, we see the thought of God arise, giving a firm foundation to heart and mind.

**God over all in government and judgment**
This is in the beginning of chapter 5. God demands respect from man. The folly of the heart is indeed folly in his presence. From then onwards we find that which takes away the vain hope of earthly happiness gives a more true joy to the heart that becomes wise, and therefore joyful, in separating itself from the world. There is therefore the grace also of patience. The self-sufficient effort to be righteous only ends in shame; to be active in evil ends in death. Finally, to strive after wisdom by the knowledge of things below is also in vain. God must be honoured, and the king also, to whom God has given authority.

We see in chapters 9 and 10, how little everything here meets the apparent capacity of man; and, even when this capacity is real, how little it is valued. Nevertheless the wisdom of the upright, and the folly of the fool, have each its own consequences, and, after all, God judges.

To sum up the whole, God must be remembered, and that before weakness and old age overtake us. For the ultimate conclusion of all that has been said is ‘Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man’.
Submission and obedience to God the principle of all true wisdom

The chief subject, then, of this book is the foolishness of all man’s efforts in seeking happiness here below, and that the wisdom which judges all this, only renders man still more unhappy.

All this experience, on the part of one who possessed the highest ability, is put in contrast with the simple principle of all true wisdom - submission and obedience to God, who knows all things, and who governs all things, because ‘God shall bring every work into judgment’.

The only rule of life

If we remember that this book gives us the experience of man, and the conclusions of man, on all that happens under the sun, there is no difficulty in those passages that have the appearance of contradiction. The experience of man is necessarily limited. He confesses his ignorance; for beyond that which is seen, experience can know nothing. But the solution of all moral problems is above and beyond that which is seen.

The Book of Ecclesiastes makes this obvious. The only rule of life then is to fear the God who orders our life, and who will judge our every action and thought. There is no development, in this book, of grace or of redemption, but only of the experience of this present life, and of that which God has said with respect to it - namely, his law, his commandments, and the consequent judgment.

Conclusion

We must remember that God’s truths are not fully revealed all at once; there is a progressive unfolding of truth in the Bible. We must interpret Ecclesiastes in the light of all the Scriptures, but especially that of the New Testament. If death ends all, then life is not worth living, and human beings are indeed miserable. But when we know Christ as Saviour and Lord, life becomes a thrilling adventure of faith. And our labour is not in vain in the Lord, because one day we shall be rewarded (1 Cor.15v51-58). Salvation and resurrection in Christ make life worth living. The conclusion of the book is that men should live by faith, obey God and he will take care of the rest.