

Ecclesiastes

The title, “Ecclesiastes,” comes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures). It is the word sometimes translated as “preacher” or “teacher,” and indicates one who convenes an assembly (compare the word for congregation or church in the New Testament: *Ecclesia*). The Hebrew term is *Qoheleth*. While there is debate over the exact authorship of the book, Qoheleth directs our minds toward Solomon, who was “the son of David” (vs. 1) and “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (vs. 12). The book doesn’t tell us much else about that, aside from what we may gather from the contents of the work.

Ecclesiastes begins by reminding the readers of the vanity of life. The opening words are somewhat chilling: “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2). The idea is that all is fleeting and transitory. This expression is found throughout the book, serving somewhat as bookends to the entire work (12:8). As an illustration, Qoheleth appeals to the way that generations come and go and how nature takes its circular courses. Things pass on, seem to move in circles, and “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). Where can life really find meaning and purpose? It’s all so fleeting.

Qoheleth first appears to present a fairly dim view of life “under the sun” (a recurring



phrase). There is a futility to the ways of the world, and he tried it all. He gave himself to wisdom and knowledge and found it to be “striving after wind” (1:12-18). He gave himself to pleasure, and “behold, it too was futility” (2:1-11). Even

though he withheld nothing that he wanted, he still saw there was no profit under the sun. It seemed that everywhere he turned, no matter what he did, he hit that same dead end and came to the same conclusion. All is vanity. Nothing worked.

But for God. Qoheleth, then, presents a masterful case for the unprofitable vanity of life without God. Nothing “under the sun,” all by itself, can provide purpose and meaning. With this view, he tackles the problem of suffering and evil. He shows that life is time (ch. 3) and that time presents many challenges, both good and bad. Yet the only thing that can give life any real semblance of meaning and coherence is a life that is focused and centered on pursuing God. Nothing in life is fulfilling in and of itself, but once God becomes the focal point, everything in life takes on a new meaning. This life is fleeting, but eternity is not: “everything God does will remain forever” (3:14).

Considered from the perspective of serving God, Ecclesiastes is not *ultimately* the negative book it often made out to be. While the work destroys one’s sense of

finding hope or answers in the things of this world, it is done with a view toward building one back up with a new perspective that changes everything. Materialism cannot work, and the book can move one from the despair of worldly futility to the recognition that life finds ultimate fulfillment in fearing the Lord. We move from the fleeting to the eternal.

Qoheleth directs us to the difficult questions. If God is in control, why is there wickedness and injustice (3:16-17)? Why do men seem to die just like animals (3:18-21)? Why is there oppression and great suffering (4:1-3)? Why are people so greedy, so inhumane, so selfish (4:4-6)? Why is there loneliness and poverty? Why do people seek popularity and high position only to have it taken from them? How does life make sense?

We begin to see clues to the answer early on in the book. While focused on the things of life, Qoheleth learned to hate it (2:17-18). However, he also began to show that the enjoyment of the fruit of his labor was “from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?” (2:24-25) The idea that life and its enjoyment is the gift of God is then seen throughout (2:24; 3:12-13, 22; 5:19-20; 8:15; 9:7-9).

“Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart” (5:19-20).

God must be the focus of our lives. Wealth, power, and pleasure without God is empty. With God, one can enjoy life and the fruit of our labor. All need not ultimately be vanity

if eternity is in view.

Qoheleth finally reaches the great conclusion: “fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole of man. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.” (12:13-14) If we keep this in mind, we can enjoy our lives “under the sun” and find the greatest meaning and happiness through serving God. This is divine wisdom.

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