**Ecclesiastes**

**Introduction and Chapter 1**

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**Introduction**

Martin Luther wrote this about this book: “This is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered.” Certainly we all need the wisdom of God to begin to open this great book’s meaning. It must be read as “God’s Wisdom Literature”. First we have to understand that this is a book from God and so contains His guidance for living in this world as His people. Second the genre is as wisdom literature. So it is not an epistle like Ephesians, or a law book like Leviticus, or an apocalyptic revelation like Revelation. As a wisdom book it shares characteristics similar to that found in Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Songs. It is made up of a lot of poetry and parallelisms (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and inverted) and many metaphors, similes and other wordplays. We thus need to approach this study knowing that we may never fully understand it or apply it properly. Ecclesiastes is one of the few books of the OT, which is not once referred to in the NT, although there might be many parallel thoughts (e. g. Eccl. 5:1 and Mat. 6:7; Eccl. 12:14 and 2 Cor. 5:10; Eccl. 7:9 and Jas 1:19). The name Jehovah does not appear once in this book whereas the name Elohim (God) appears over 40 times. The name Elohim shows God in His absoluteness and His omnipotence as Creator. On the other hand Jehovah is God's name, which shows His grace and His relationship to men and especially to his covenant-people Israel. The fact that the name Jehovah appears not at all in Ecclesiastes is a sign to show that the subject is not one man or one people in a certain relation of covenant or faith to Him. It rather shows that the subject is man in general who is responsible to His Creator-God (Eccl. 11:9; 12:1).

The first question is “who is the author?” The wisdom books are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. For the first and the last we know the author by the following”

* Prov 1:1 *The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:*
* Song 1:1 *The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.*

Similarly we may also think we know the author of this book:

* Ecc 1:1 *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*
* Ecc 1:12 *I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

We know that Solomon was a son of David and he was a king in Jerusalem. But neither of these verses conclusively identifies the author as Solomon. The Hebrew word translated Preacher is Qoheleth and the word literally means the Assembler. Until about two hundred years ago most scholars thought the author was indeed Solomon. But some people think that the book was written by someone pretending to be Solomon and approaching some difficult questions by answering them as they thought Solomon might. Certainly the book contains wisdom as taught by a pastor to his congregation and so many people refer to the author simply as “the Pastor”. We will assume that the author is indeed Solomon. The second question is “when was it written?” Most scholars think Solomon was born in about 1000 B.C. and ruled from 970 to 931 B.C. Various expressions in Ecclesiastes would indicate that Solomon wrote the book in his old age (Eccl. 1:12 - 2:11; 11:9 - 12:7). This is where the author reviews a long life and all his thoughts and deeds and where he is warning youth and points to old age. Assuming that Solomon is indeed the author the book of Ecclesiastes must therefore date from the end of this period.

So perhaps the third question to be asked is “what is the purpose of the book?” Certainly a major word in the book is the Hebrew word “hebel” which is translated as “vanity” in: Ecc 1:2 *"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."* The word is the same Hebrew spelling as the name of the first man to die, Abel (Gen 4:8) and so may be a clue as to the purpose of the book. It is the name Adam and Eve gave to their second son Abel (Gen. 4:2) after sin had entered the world by their disobedience. These early chapters of Genesis show that man loses access to God and the allusion to the death of Abel indicates that life has thus become meaningless since any purpose of life is ended by death. Genesis tells the story of how humans who were originally in a state of life, purpose, and innocence ended in a state of guilt, toil, and mortality. Ecclesiastes then tells how persons made weak and mortal should then live. It is only since we have the opportunity to study this book from our side of the Cross that we can truly find comfort and purpose in a life that surely ends in death on this side of the river. We will elaborate on this as we study the verses.

**Chapter 1**

**Ecc 1:1-6**

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (2) "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." (3) What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun? (4) A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever. (5) Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there again. (6) Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north, The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns.* (7) *All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again.*

We have already commented on the first verse where the Hebrew word Qoheleth is translated “preacher”. We see that he is not commenting in the capacity of a king but as a teacher to his congregation. The Hebrew word, *hebel*, is here translated as “vanity” but elsewhere is variously translated as “breath” or “vapor” meaning something that quickly passes. But in Hebrew writings these one-word translations are not nearly adequate. It can also mean something that is absurd or meaningless or an offense to reason. The second verse can then be understood to mean that all that occurs in the world is of no lasting meaning. With no one meaning given for the word, verse two can be read as “Hebel hebalim” and “hebel hebel! All is hebel”. Because of man’s sin and God’s curse, life ceases to have the meaning it had before the fall. It is only because of the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that meaning is restored to life. We will be blessed in our study of this great book because we live after the Cross. Jesus freed us from the curse:

Gal 3:13 *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE".* As we study this book we will see that only Jesus Christ can bring meaning to life.

Verses 3 through 6 all build on the meaningless of life by man acting alone in the world where nothing is changed by his actions. This does not relate to global warming due to man! Verse three echoes the curse of the ground:

Gen 3:17-19 *Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. (18) "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; (19) By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."*

The phrase “under the sun” draws a parallel between the place of God and the place of man. God is in heaven and man is on earth. The work of man “under the sun” cannot accomplish anything of lasting value when judged by the righteousness of God. Verse four speaks of the ever-changing generations that continue with no lasting effect on the physical universe. He then speaks of the endless behaviors of the sun, wind, and waters. The sun seems to move a lot around the earth, the wind blows one way and then another and the waters flow but without seeming to influence anything. The rivers flow into the sea but the sea is never overflowing from all that water going into it. He may be thinking of the Dead Sea as the Jordan River incessantly empties into it but does not seem to be changed by all this flow. The universe itself is in constant motion as the galaxies continue to move away from each other at increasing velocities but nothing changes from our perspective. If there will be generations of people a thousand years from now the universe will still seem to look the same as it does today. All is hebel! Paul also described this situation:

Rom 8:19-21 *For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly 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 also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

**Ecc 1:8-11**

*All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing. (9) That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. (10) Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already it has existed for ages Which were before us. (11) There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later still.*

Verse eight further portrays everything as not fulfilling any of our senses. Wearisome means to become bored or annoyed or impatient. We cannot explain anything fully so we get tired of trying to understand it. The visual aspects of everything cannot reveal any deep meaning to them and neither can any sound coming from the object under consideration. Technology has greatly improved since this was written but the conclusions remain the same. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle even tells us that we cannot know simultaneously the position and energy of something so even in the era of quantum mechanics there is still much that remains unknown and unexplainable.

Verses 9-11 expand upon this topic in that history is cyclic. All that has been will continue to be and that which has been done will be done again. Therefore there is nothing new in the world (under the sun). Individually one might point to something and say that it seems new but who knows how many people have already seen and experienced its existence.

Only Jesus has brought newness to the world as He brings a new way to understand:

* John 8:23 *And He was saying to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.*
* John 8:31-32 *So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; (32) and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."*

Jesus did a new thing by bringing in a new covenant, a new birth, a new life, and a new commandment:

* Jer 31:31-34 *"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, (32) not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. (33) "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (34) "They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."*
* John 13:34 "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*

He also brings a new name that will last forever. All else is old and passing away.

Rev 2:17 *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a* ***new name*** *written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'*

Jesus also brings a new perspective to life for with Solomon the universe is cyclic with everything just repeating although in some different forms. Jesus tells us that life is linear as it leads to Him in a new universe and along the way Christians do meaningful things through Him. The work of Jesus in redemption certainly had a great impact upon life. We know many events done by people in the world serving Jesus that have changed reality. Other events also certainly are still remembered today. For example, two thousand years after the widow put in her offering we still remember and teach about what she did:

Mar 12:42-44 *A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. (43) Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; (44) for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."*

Life under the sun is then meaningless but life done under the Son brings new meanings to all of life.

**Ecc 1:12-13**

*I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. (13) And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.*

The author again states his background that qualifies him to be writing about this topic. But he is writing to them as a teacher and not as a king. His qualifications are further stated:

1Kings 4:29-*34 Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. (30) Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. (31) For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was known in all the surrounding nations. (32) He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. (33) He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. (34) Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.*

To be a teacher he had to learn and he states that he has set his mind to use wisdom to understand all that has been done in the world. However he states that this task is grievous even though it has been given to mankind by God. He refutes the concept that the pursuit of knowledge fulfills life and gives the person some sort of permanent significance in the world. He also states that it is a hopeless task since he will not be able to find the answers. Stating that the task has been given by God is a way of saying that all is under the rule of sovereign God. The work by intellectuals is as much under the rule of God as any other person. Paul makes a similar observation:

1Cor 3:19-20 *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; (20) and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS."*

The futility of man’s work is because of the sin of Adam and one day the world will be free from this corruption:

Rom 8:20-22 *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope (21) that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (22) For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.*

But until that time, Christians can make significant changes as they work for Christ.

**Ecc 1:14-16**

*I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. (15) What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. (16) I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge."*

He then states that he has seen all the works done in the world and his conclusion is that understanding such is futile. He states that all the results of all tasks disappear with time and death so none has any eternal value. The context requires that he is writing about intellectual tasks. Striving after wind has the meaning that even if one does catch the wind he has nothing. Something that is crooked refers to a problem that cannot be solved. That which is lacking would refer to data or information that one does not yet have and even if all such information were obtained they would not contribute to meaning to the task. Having tried to study the function and structure of molecules during my academic career I can contribute to this statement for solving one problem just brought forward another problem. God’s ways are inscrutable and all intellectualists need to understand this fundamental concept or the life of a person doing basic research will be indeed very frustrating. He then states that if anyone could understand the foolishness of understanding life it would be him due, to his background of increasing wisdom more than anyone else in Jerusalem. His mind has observed much wealth of wisdom and knowledge over the years of his studies and the only conclusions he can reach is that nobody can solve the problems facing those living on earth.

**Ecc 1:17-18**

*And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. (18) Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.*

Madness and folly represent the study of the pursuit of pleasures, mainly immoral ones. So he then set his mind to also know the pursuit of pleasure from a philosophical standpoint but he realized that such a venture was also one that could not be successful. So he found that tasting from the tree of good and evil (Gen 2:17) only increased sorrow. He will elaborate on this venture in the next chapter. He has found that in knowing much wisdom one must also know that grief is attached to that venture. The conclusion is that as one increases in the attainment of knowledge he will also acquire increasing pain. There is a real wisdom that has now been available to people for two thousand years:

1Cor 1:18-24 *For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (19) For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." (20) Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (21) For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (22) For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; (23) but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, (24) but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

So as we look at this book in the time after the resurrection we know that we can receive wisdom that can change reality and increase our joy!