

## *Ecclesiastes: the Mid-life Crisis of a King*

*"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."*

*I am* involved in something that will still be worthwhile a million years from now!

The opening lines of the Book of Ecclesiastes says just the opposite. "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). The word translated "vanity" (*hebel*) means vanity, vain, vapor, breath, worthless, futilities of futilities, or useless as a puff of wind. Solomon begins his book in a pessimistic negative tone concerning the futility of all life and continues with this theme throughout the book. He uses the word "vanity" thirty-six times, and at least once in every chapter, except chapter ten. It is a word with a calculated ambiguity, but skillfully used by Solomon to bring out the limitations of human activity and human wisdom. Life is brief, short, empty and meaningless without God.

After a few chapters glimmers of hope begin to appear concerning the goodness of God and how it may be enjoyed. What is the solution to the futility that surrounds mankind in this life? How can a person find purpose in life? Is it possible to have a sense of significance in life?

Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and the heart of man is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." Solomon, after examining all areas of life in pursuit of purpose, concludes that the only way you can find purpose in life is through the God who gives life rather than through life itself. You do not find happiness in life pursuing happiness; you find happiness as a by-product of the right choices you make. Solomon moves from a tone of despair to one of meaning in the midst of the capricious nature of life. In 12:13-14 the author asserts conclusively that the solution to man's futility in life is found in his service to God. He wrote, "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person" (NASB 1995). There is fulfillment in life, but it will come only in a right relationship with God and serving Him.

Ecclesiastes was read on the third day of the Feast of the Tabernacles to emphasize joy over man's place in God's creation.

**NAME:** The Book of Ecclesiastes gets its title from the first words of the book. The words of Qoheleth (ko-**heh**-leth), the Son of David, King in Jerusalem (1:1). It was also known simply as Qoheleth. The word means "speaker in the assembly, or the preacher, the teacher, the leader of the assembly. It is derived from the root meaning to convoke an assembly, hence, to address the assembly. It is the author's title for himself throughout the book (1:1, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10).

The Greek title is derived from the term *ecclesiastes* which is a good translation meaning "preacher," and is derived from *ekklesia*, meaning "assembly." The Greek is Latinized into Ecclesiastes.

**AUTHOR:** is most probably Solomon the son of David, although his name is nowhere mentioned in the book. However, references in Ecclesiastes clearly suggest his authorship. The Jews considered Ecclesiastes to be Solomonic and inspired. The early Christian church also approved it. The author identifies himself as David's son who was a king over Israel in Jerusalem (1:1). The book is consistent with the historic accounts of Solomon (1 Kings 1-11), and he has the qualities that would make him David's son (1:16; 2:4-9). There is no conclusive evidence against king Solomon as the author.

**DATE:** is probably around 940-935 B.C., which would be consistent with Solomon as the author (970-931 B.C.). It is likely that Solomon wrote the book toward the end of his life during the golden era of Israelite wisdom. Kaiser writes, "Given the Solomonic authorship of the book, it will be best placed not before his apostasy, for the questions and sins of Ecclesiastes did not trouble him then, nor during his years of rebellion, for then he had no occasion to use the language of spiritual things. Ecclesiastes is best placed after his apostasy, when both his recent turmoil and repentance were still fresh in his mind. Fragments of Ecclesiastes were found in the Fourth Qumran Cave and thus rule out a date later than 150 B.C. Linguistic data does not permit any certainty in dating the book.

**PURPOSE:** is to show that all is vanity unless he fears God, and keeps His commandments (12:13). The book is Solomon's desperate journey during mid-life crisis. It was a maddening period in his adult life when life lost its luster. He questions everything in life—values, God, ethics, etc. He sought to live without God. The goal of the journey is to show that you cannot live a significant, worthwhile, meaningful life without a personal relationship with God. When you leave God out, life is a repetitious cycle of events, which neither possess nor gives lasting value or satisfaction (1:2-11). Solomon states clearly that significance in life can be found only in a trusting relationship with God. Everything else is vanity. Life is empty when lived apart from God. If it is under the sun it won't work because it is life apart from God. Seeking fulfillment in life from humanism, sex, drugs, amusements, education, pleasure will only result in vanity. The answer to life is found only when we bring eternity into the picture. Jesus asked, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26, NASB 1995). A truly adequate worldview must recognize that God is the highest value of all. Life has a purpose and God will judge every deed.

**THEME:** Vanity of vanities, All is vanity (1:2). Wine, women and song is the experience of living on the ragged edge of reality without God. Understanding of life begins with a healthy fear of God. *Elohim* is used forty times in this book. He is the total sovereign provider over all His creation. The Preacher repeatedly admonishes men to fear God (3:14; 5:6; 8:12; 12:13).

**STYLE:** Ecclesiastes belongs to the Hebrew Wisdom literature. The Hebrew in Ecclesiastes is unique to any other Hebrew from any other period. It has some Aramaic and Persian words. Archer says, "It seems fairly obvious that we are dealing here with a conventional style peculiar to the particular genre to which Ecclesiastes belonged. . . . It so happens that in the case of the precise genre to which Ecclesiastes belongs, we have nothing else which has survived from Hebrew literature. It is unique in that it is written in a particular style conventional for its own genre. There are some remarkable similarities between some passages in Ecclesiastes and the corresponding sections in the Proverbs. He writes as a philosopher, and a keen observer of world history, current events, and personal experiences.

**GREAT EXPERIMENTS OF SOLOMON:** (1) wisdom (1:16-18), (2) wit (2:2), (3) wine (2:3; Pro. 20:1), (4) works (2:4-6), (5) wealth (2:7, 8; 5:10), (6) women (2:8; 1 Kings 11:3, 4), (7) worldly recognition (2:9), (8) worldly pleasure (2:11; Matt. 6:33; Phil. 3:14; John 10:10; 1 Tim. 6:17; John 15:11, 13; Lk. 15:24; Jas. 1:17; Psa. 16:11; Lk. 12:15; Ecc. 12:13).

### **SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Where are you looking for your significance in life? What gives you lasting, abiding meaning in your life? Is life really worth living without God at the center? Solomon was a man of unparalleled greatness, intellectual prowess, financial resources, political power and he came to the conclusion only when you seek first the kingdom of God will you find life. The LORD said to Samuel at the end of Saul's rule, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus said it better than anyone, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33, NASB 1995).

God has placed eternity in man's heart (3:11). Pascal said, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person. And it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ."

Sensual pleasures are temporary because they blind us to reality and disillusion and leave us empty. The LORD alone gives purpose and enjoyment in life. Humanism will never provide it.

Charles Swindoll said, "If a man who had everything investigated everything visible and found nothing of value, then the one thing he needed must have been invisible. Solomon explored every visible realm of stimulation in a carefully controlled environment and was still unsatisfied. The reason is only God satisfies our deepest needs in life.

What a difference the apostle Paul could write at the end of his life. The last recorded words of the great apostle are these: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8, NASB 1995).

[A Look at the Book](#)

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Title: Introduction to Ecclesiastes

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Wil is a graduate of William Carey University, B. A.; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Th. M.; and Azusa Pacific University, M. A. He has pastored in Panama, Ecuador and the U. S, and served for over 20 years as missionary in Ecuador and Honduras. He had a daily expository Bible teaching ministry head in over 100 countries for ten years. He continues to seek opportunities to be personally involved in world missions. Wil and his wife Ann have three grown daughters. He currently serves as a Baptist pastor and teaches seminary extension courses in Honduras.

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