

#17. THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

1. **Ecclesiastes is a wisdom monologue that is best interpreted as Solomon's summary memoir written during his later life.** It is arguably the most difficult book of the Bible to interpret and the second book of wisdom attributed to Solomon. The key word is *vanity*, also translated as *meaninglessness* or *futility*. Some view this as a belief that life itself is meaningless. Others see the author elaborating on the fleeting nature of temporal things. Three truths seem to stand out in Ecclesiastes: (1) life is temporary, (2) death is certain, and (3) only in God can we discover the answers to life's perplexities (see 12:13, 14). In the Hebrew scriptures, Ecclesiastes is linked with Ruth, Song of Solomon, Esther, and Lamentations, and is known as the *Megilloth* or the *Five Scrolls*.

2. **The author is Solomon.** Both internal evidence (1:1) and strong tradition identifies Solomon as the Qoheleth, the *Assembler* or wise teacher who calls people together. Also, his life experiences corroborate the experiences of Qoheleth. David himself recognized the wisdom of his son (2 Kings 2:6, 9). From the Septuagint and Latin texts, we get the clearer idea of the Assembler as *The Preacher*.

3. **The Date:** Ecclesiastes was written no later than 931BC near the end of Solomon's life. The assumption is that Solomon began well, faltered, then returned to faith after suffering debilitating disillusionment.

4. **Key Chapters**
 - **Chapters 1 and 2** - Solomon's personal experience

 - **Chapters 3, 4, and 5** - Solomon's observations about life's futilities

 - **Chapters 6, 7, and 8** - Solomon's advice on life

 - **Chapters 9 - 12** - Solomon's final conclusions

5. **Key Verses**
 - **Ecclesiastes 1:1, 2 NASB** 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.”

- **Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 NASB** In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. ¹⁰The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. ¹¹The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. ¹²But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. ¹³The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. ¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

6. Key People

- **Solomon** - the monologue is probably based around the event of Solomon’s backsliding.

8. Key Themes

- ***Emptiness and searching*** - Solomon’s search was varied and intense. Once he strayed from God, nothing was found to bring satisfaction and fulfillment.
- ***Death*** - Though it’s a morbid thought, death is the Great Equalizer.
- ***True Spirituality*** - Man is truly created to love God and our fellow humans. There is no spiritual attainment by any other means.

9. The Contents of Ecclesiastes

- Introduction and Theme (1:1-18)
 - “I wore myself out in this pointless search!”
- Solomon’s futile search for the meaning of life (2:1-5:20)
 - I looked for pleasure. (2:1-11)
 - I looked for carnal wisdom. (2:12-17)

- I worked hard, and it all goes away - left behind for someone else! (2:18 5:20)
- Solomon's conclusions (6:10-12:8)
 - Man's knowledge is limited. (7:1-8:17)
 - Death is certain (9:1-11:6)
 - Judgment is certain! (11:7-12:8)
 - Solomon's final advice (12:9-14)

Worth noting

- The lesson of Ecclesiastes is much the same as in Job: trust God alone, for only in Him does life yield fulfillment and meaning.
- Consistent with the rest of Scripture, life is seen as *vanity* not because it has no meaning, but rather because its value is only found in connection with the spiritual realm.

When reading Ecclesiastes:

- Remember this is probably the most difficult book of Scripture to understand. It seems full of rambling contradictions, and even seems to posture itself against other principles clearly laid out in the rest of the Bible. Keep in mind that the passages are the observations and feelings of a teacher who had, by his own admission, strayed at various times in his life. His battle with disillusionment and cynicism is well documented.
- Remember: the bottom-line lesson is the brevity of life and the need to remain focused on God and eternity.