



# **Finding Life's Meaning "Under The Sun"**

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**Biblical Studies From  
The Book Of Ecclesiastes**

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# Finding Life's Meaning

## "Under The Sun"

### Biblical Studies In Ecclesiastes

## Lesson 1 – General Introduction

### Overview

All of us have seen the cartoon depicting a man scaling a high mountain in search of a guru who can explain to him the meaning of life. The climb is not too high...the perils are not too daunting. His life is empty; therefore, he must find the wise sage who can impart to him the secrets to unlock life's true happiness.

Whether jokingly or seriously, man has always wrestled with this age-old question: *"What is the meaning of life?"* This question even has its own "sub-set" of questions:

- ◆ *"Who am I?"*
- ◆ *"How did I get here?"*
- ◆ *"Where am I going?"*

Questions like these haunted men of Bible times. They torment modern man no less today.

There is nothing wrong with asking these questions. Biblical faith does not run away or avoid tough questions. Problems arise when we go to the wrong places for the answers. Trying to answer such questions may drive many to despair. An honest person will be driven to seek out the answers from a reliable and trustworthy source. To aid the "honest seeker" in the quest to finding life's true meaning, God inspired what may be one of the most neglected books in the O.T. → **Ecclesiastes**.

Commentaries and uninspired opinions about this book have been diverse through the years. Some (*maybe most*) see **Ecclesiastes** as nothing but a collection of contradictions that make its readers cynical and pessimistic. To come to such a conclusion is to study the book carelessly. Those who invest their time in "rightly dividing" the message of this book will understand its simple message...a positive affirmation of what really matters in life, especially in view of eternity.

If one will remember the book's proper perspective, the journey through **Ecclesiastes** will be rewarding. This fact alone makes it a very "up-to-date" book...as fresh as the newspaper you received this morning. The author looks at life from "under the sun." Ever since that dreadful day when one man introduced sin into the world through his disobedience, the world has "groaned under the weight" of the curse placed upon it by God (**Rom. 8:20; Gen. 3:9-19**). Notice that God's actions in this were "...in hope" (*they had a purpose*). Despite God's hope, man more often than not views life as a giant jigsaw puzzle...sometimes with missing pieces. Anyone who has lived long enough will testify to feeling at times like life is full of unanswerable riddles. We see painful contradictions and injustices all around us, and perhaps have been "victims" of such inequities. Early on, **Ecclesiastes** poses the apropos question that can be seen as the

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book's theme... *"What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?"* (1:3). It is in such pursuits that man convinces himself he can find "meaning" (*purpose for living*). He tries to fill his life with things and pursuits that will only leave him more empty (5:10-11). Why will such efforts fail? Because they are not as eternal as he is (3:11; Col. 2:22a; 1 Jn. 2:15-17).

While teaching the ultimate meaning of life, this book also does something else that is equally important. It vindicates God in His dealings with man. How easy it would be to accuse God of unfairness or sinister motives for perplexing man with unsolvable problems. Remember...Job made this mistake. In the midst of all the unrighteousness and unfairness that plagues life, God is still righteous and good toward us. All that happens "under the sun" that is not good is brought upon man by his own sinful attitudes & actions.

**Ecclesiastes** does not deny nor hesitate to describe what is wrong with life on earth. The book confirms man's inability to solve this "giant jigsaw puzzle" all by himself (1:15). Though life may at times make God's plan unclear, in the final analysis all will be made well for those who trust and serve Him (8:12).

After considering possible answers for life's ultimate meaning, **Ecclesiastes** presents in grand climax life's one true meaning... *"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil"* (12:13-14). The Scripture exhorts us in no greater way than in the will of our Creator who longs for every soul (Acts 17:26-27; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).

### The Author

Who wrote **Ecclesiastes**? Does it even matter if we know? After all, we do have Biblical books from anonymous writers from both the O.T. (**Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles**) as well as the N.T. (**Hebrews**). Even though we do not know what men the Holy Spirit used to pen these books, we are still able to understand and apply the lessons they teach.

We submit **Ecclesiastes** is different than the books mentioned above because it chronicles one man's experiences in his pursuit of finding life's meaning. Who this man was becomes important. His identity validates his attempts to answer this question.

In the Hebrew language, the writer simply identifies himself as "*Koheleth*" [*Ko-HAY-leth*]. This is usually translated "Preacher" (1:1-2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10). It means "one who calls together or is over an assembly." **Ecclesiastes** is the Greek equivalent to "*Koheleth*," and in this we can easily see "*ekklesia*," the Greek word for "assembly" or "church."

Notice these descriptions the author writes about himself:

- ◆ "Son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1)
- ◆ "King over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12)
- ◆ "...I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me" (1:16)
- ◆ "Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem." (2:9a)

What man best fits these statements? We can think of no one better than Solomon...only he could be described in such a way (1 Kings 4:29-31; 1 Chron. 29:25; 2 Chron. 1:11-12).

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Yet, Solomon fell. His fall was not "intellectual" but "affectional." That is, he did not go after what he *knew*, but rather what he *felt* (1 Kings 11:1-8). Isn't this the nature of sin that plagues us all? Even though we're separated by thousands of years from Solomon, his fall is still very instructional. It also helps put what we read in *Ecclesiastes* into proper perspective. Consider the following:

- ◆ What he had been                      Wise & humble in youth (1 Kings 3:3-15)  
                                                            His dedicatory prayer at the Temple (1 Kings 8:12-61)
- ◆ What he had seen                      God appeared to him twice (1 Kings 3:5; 9:1-2)  
                                                            He saw God's glorious manifestation (1 Kings 8:10)
- ◆ What he had written                      *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."* (Prov. 3:5-6)  
                                                            *"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life."*  
                                                            (Prov. 4:23)  
                                                            *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."*  
                                                            (Prov. 16:18)

Although God did not cause Solomon's fall, He uses it to teach all generations that came after the great king. Solomon reached a plateau "under the sun" no other man will ever reach. Just think of all the ways in which he was blessed by God!! Surely he could find happiness with all that was at his disposal!! But, he did not. It is this point that makes his "testimony" so meaningful.

Therefore, the book seems best understood as reflections of an older (*wiser, more experienced*) man late in his life. A penitent Solomon writes from scarred memories, offering "inspired advice" to others and warning them not to repeat his mistakes. He is saying, *"Don't do what I did...I tried it, but I failed."* In the end, all the fun, glory, and triumph he enjoyed was nothing but a big puff of wind (1:14). If he couldn't find happiness in such things, neither will we (Lk. 12:15).

### The Message

First, let's determine what *Ecclesiastes* is not. Solomon does not write as a Greek philosopher.

- ◆ He is not a "stoic" → one who was indifferent to and even minimized pleasure
  - Solomon teaches God's gifts (*"pleasures"*) are to be enjoyed (2:24)
- ◆ He is not an "Epicurean" → one who thought the highest good was found in pleasure
  - Solomon teaches pleasures will have to be answered for at judgment (12:9, 14)
- ◆ He is not a "cynic" → one who thought life had no meaning; rejected all conventional values
  - Solomon teaches life has a purpose as defined by God Who is in control (8:12)
- ◆ He is not a "pagan" → one who invented or worshiped false gods
  - Solomon teaches there is but one true God & Creator (5:1-7; 12:13)

What, then, is *Ecclesiastes*? Technically, it is a "theodicy" (*a justification of a righteous God and His dealings with humanity, especially in the face of inequities and unfairness*). Solomon does not "candy coat" his description of all that is wrong with life "under the sun" (1:15; 3:16). He does not spare us some of the

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painful and "ugly" truths of living in the world. Yet, his defense of God is extremely strong. Even though God's purpose may not be visibly clear, He always remains constant in His graciousness toward man (Deut. 6:24; 1 Jn. 5:3). This book is a "practical guide" about how to live joyfully, even in a uncertain world.

Solomon teaches some very important truths...

- ◆ ...about God → He is wise and sovereign
  - humans are limited in wisdom...God is not (Isa. 55:8-9; 1 Cor. 1:18-21; 2:4-5)
- ◆ ...about death → life is short and death is certain (3:19; Jas 4:14; Heb. 9:27)
  - the uncertainty of when and how we will depart this life can prepare us (9:10-12)
- ◆ ...about life → sometimes, it is "hard" and even "unfair"...we "toil" and "labor" (2:10, 21)
  - yet, it is not without its pleasant joys from God (2:24-26)

Noticing key phrases from **Ecclesiastes** will help us remember the book's main message.

- ◆ **"Under the sun"**  
It occurs 29 times. It speaks of the visible or created world. The reality of living in this realm without a relationship with God & His wisdom to guide us reveals a life without any real value, and certainly without any future hope.
- ◆ **"Vanity"**  
It occurs 37 times. It refers to the empty & unsatisfying activities that God didn't design to have lasting value. To make them more important than God intended is to "grasp for the wind." Man will be left holding an "empty bag" if he emphasizes temporal activities too much (Mt. 16:26).

## An Outline

**Ecclesiastes** can be divided into 3 main sections. [Some of the sub points below are borrowed from material by Paul Earnhart.]

- ◆ **The Prologue (1:1-11)**
  - Solomon introduces the "themes" he will address throughout the book
- ◆ **The Monologue (1:12 – 12:8)**
  - the vast majority of the book
  - Solomon's "autobiography" of reflections from his search for life's true meaning
  - this discussion can be sub-divided
    - *The Search: Trying To Find The Meaningful Life (1:12 – 2:26)*
    - *The Problem: Understanding God's Providential Rule Over Life (3:1 – 5:20)*
    - *The Application: Explaining & Applying God's Plan (6:1 – 8:15)*
    - *Trusting God & Living Joyfully In An Uncertain World (8:16 – 12:8)*
- ◆ **The Epilogue (12:9-14)**
  - Solomon's firm conclusion and "rational" exhortation