



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

There is no other book like Ecclesiastes in all of the Bible. At first glance, the book may seem overly pessimistic and offer little positive instruction; however we will see in our study that there is much to glean from a study on this book which will point us to faith in the eternal and sovereign Creator God while finding joy in the present life.



The name of this book (Ecclesiastes) comes from its title in the Septuagint. The term refers to one who speaks to an assembly. In Hebrew the author never uses his name, but always refers to himself with the pseudonym *Qoheleth*. This word appears seven times in the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes. For this reason the main character is sometimes called “The Preacher,” but no where in the book does the author “preach.”

Jewish and early Christian tradition have accepted Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes, but today many scholars; even conservative ones doubt Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. The author certainly sounds like Solomon because he refers to himself as “*the son of David, a king in Jerusalem*” (1:1). Other clues that Solomon may be the author are found in 1:16 where the writer refers to his great wisdom; in 2:4-11 where *Qoheleth* describes his works, wealth, and endeavours; and in 12:9-10 where *Qoheleth* is said to have written many proverbs.

Those who doubt that Solomon is the author, point to conditions described in the book which did not seem to exist in the days of Solomon as well as the style of writing which some scholars say points to a time after Solomon. Still, in this study we will assume that Solomon is the author as there seems to be no compelling reason to overturn the consensus of Jewish and early Christian tradition.

Ecclesiastes is categorised along with Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs as the “Wisdom Literature” of the Old Testament. Jewish tradition has contended that Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs as a mature man, and Ecclesiastes toward the end of his forty year reign.¹



Key Question

“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Ecc. 1:3)

The key question in Ecclesiastes seems to be found in 1:3, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”² We might ask the question this way, “Does life have meaning?” If ever there was a timely question for our world today it is this one. Does life have meaning? What is life all about? Solomon guides us through a series of discussions of many kinds of earthly endeavours, none of which completely satisfies.

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 696.

² Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

The key word that is used repeatedly throughout Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word *hebel* which literally means “breath” or “vapour,” but which is usually translated as vanity, meaningless, useless, or absurd. It has also been translated as smoke which illustrates something that cannot be grasped and which quickly disappears. Thirty-eight times the author of Ecclesiastes refers to life or the endeavours of this life as *hebel*.



Key Word

Hebrew word “*hebel*”



The word *hebel* serves as bookends in Ecclesiastes. It is used first in 1:2 where we read “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” *Hebel* is used at the conclusion of the book in 12:8, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.”

Though life is described often as *hebel*, the author concludes in 12:13, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” Life on earth can be difficult, but there is pleasure to be enjoyed.

1. **What are some reasons why life may seem *hebel* (meaningless or filled with vanity)?**
2. **What do we learn about the length of life in 12:1, 7-8; 11:10?**
3. **What do the following verses say about enjoying life? (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-9?)**



Key Phrase

“*under the sun*” (used 29 times)

Ecclesiastes presents two ways of living. The first is the pursuit of pleasure in its various forms which eventually proves to be as fleeting as a vapour. The second is to enjoy the simple pleasures of this life while pursuing obedience to God. Throughout the book these two ways of living are presented and contrasted. More is written about the futility of aiming at worldly pleasure and accomplishments, but there are thirteen times when positive lessons are provided about life. In the end it is faith in God which provides meaning for life.

4. **What does the key phrase “under the sun” tell us about the type of pursuits Qoheleth was chasing?**
5. **How does 12:1, 13-14 contrast with putting hope in things done “under the sun” (1:14)?**



Key Conclusion

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” (Ecc. 12:13)