

21 – Ecclesiastes: Meaningless! Meaningless! (without God!)

- Hebrew title is Qohleth = Preacher, Teacher, one giving public discourse on something (*not a formal sermon like we know*). Our English title comes from Septuagint Greek translation *Ekklesiastes*, which means “speaker of a called out assembly” – *ekklesia* is the Greek word for church.
- The **wisest man in the world becomes the biggest and most experienced fool in the world**. In Proverbs we saw the *wisdom* of Solomon; here is the *foolishness* of Solomon. Ecclesiastes is the dramatic autobiography of his life when he was away from God. However, this book is full of the “proverbial” wisdom of Solomon, lessons he has learned by being away from God. **The subtitle for this book could easily read “I have been a fool.”**
- This book is widely misunderstood and wrongly quoted. It defines the human condition and provides the cause and cure for pessimism.
- **IN A NUTSHELL:** Life apart from God is completely and totally meaningless. This book is Solomon’s sermon on *natural man’s* quest for fulfillment. This is human philosophy apart from God, which always reaches the conclusions that this book reaches. We need to understand this about Ecclesiastes because there are many statements which contradict certain other statements of Scripture. This book has been the favorite of atheists, and they have quoted from it profusely. The cynic and the critic are apt to quote from this book. Many cults use passages from this book out of context and give them an entirely wrong meaning. Man tries to be happy without God. This book shows the absurdity of the attempt. Solomon was the wisest of men; he had a wisdom that was God-given. He tried every field of endeavor and pleasure that was known to man, and his conclusion was that all is vanity. The word *vanity* means “empty, purposeless.” Satisfaction in life can never be attained in this manner. **In a very precise way, Solomon has described here the condition of the earth after the fall, it’s corrupt state. And without God, there is no hope.**
- The conclusions in each of Solomon’s experiments are human, not God’s truth. This is man *under* the sun. (NOTE: *Inspiration guarantees the accuracy of the words of Scripture, not always the thought that is expressed. The context should be considered, and attention paid to the person who made the statement and under what circumstances the statement was made. The statements that Solomon makes, while he is searching for satisfaction apart from God, are not always in accord with God’s thoughts. Inspiration guarantees that what Solomon said has been accurately recorded in Scripture.*)



Highlights

Key Words/Phrases: 1) **VANITY** – 37 times; 2) **UNDER THE SUN** – 29 times, this is secularism, man living by his own devices and resources; 3) **“I said in my heart...”** this is a disclaimer, Solomon is speaking, not the words of God, but the words of a bitter old man. Solomon’s conclusions are not necessarily inspired.

Some of Solomon’s Observations

- God is in control of everything, by His purpose
- There is no happiness apart from God
- Life on earth is not fair
- Death may be better than life
- Why do we work so hard? For what?
- Friends and family can give strength
- Power and fame don’t bring happiness (useless)
- Don’t make promises lightly – must keep them
- There is evil everywhere
- Wealth and riches don’t bring happiness
- Enjoy what you have – wanting more is useless
- God knows all, we don’t, so trust Him
- Think wisely, don’t be foolish
- People have become experts at being “bad”
- Obey authorities (*the King? Who is King?*)
- Good happens to the bad, bad happens to the good
- We cannot understand God
- There is no real justice on earth
- Enjoy what God has given
- The fastest, wisest, smartest, strongest, most talented don’t always win
- Wisdom is best, but doesn’t always win
- Proverbs about the wise and the foolish
- Work, don’t be lazy
- Act now, don’t wait
- Enjoy every day, enjoy youth
- Old age is the pits!
- Remember your Creator

Solomon knows the truth about God, but he is void of joy because his pursuits of happiness and meaning took him in so many wrong directions. It seems he is lamenting a wasted life away from God.

The Great Quest for Meaning Summarized

Problem summarized	Meaningless, Meaningless, it's all meaningless. (NIV) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. (KJV, NKJV) Everything is meaningless! says the Teacher, utterly meaningless! (NLT) Useless! Useless! Completely useless! Everything is useless. (NCV) Nothing makes sense! Everything is nonsense. I have seen it all—nothing makes sense! (CE) 	1:2
The Quest by Personal Experiment	Search for meaning in wisdom and pleasure. Having fun and filling lusts do not bring happiness He probably tried everything known in the way of pleasure: he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He tried laughter and silliness, drinking and parties, and material wealth. Material things cannot satisfy the soul. He tried building things, and working. Solomon had riches beyond our compare, and accomplishments unparalleled. Even he says, somewhat arrogantly, that no one could best him in the knowledge, wisdom, experience and material wealth departments. But even all these things are “vanity.”	Ch 1-2
The Quest by General Observation	Meaning of evils and mysteries of human society. In science, the natural world, philosophy: Speaks of monotony and repetition of nature, but also of wind patterns, evaporation. All free of scientific error, and make statements that were not proven until thousands of years later. You cannot take natural man—man who is a lost sinner alienated from God—and give him an education, expecting that education to solve the problems of his life. It will not do that. Philosophy and psychology cannot change human nature, nor can they correct the old nature of man. Even the famed chapter 3 is a form of fatalism.	Ch 3-5
The Quest by Practical Morality	Wisdom is good, but even it isn't the answer. Obeying the authorities is also good, and a requirement of God. It helps, but does not provide meaning. There is also no lasting satisfaction from wealth, labor, or pondering the future. <i>(Chapters are full of good practical proverbs for good living. Progressing from depressing analysis to hopeful solutions.)</i>	Ch 6-8
The Quest Reviewed and Concluded	More proverbs, wisdom for good living. But bottom line is still, Meaningless, Meaningless, it's all meaningless. Previous arguments revisited. Conclusion: Remember God, serve Him for meaning in life. God is at the end of the quest for meaning in life, and He is the beginning of meaning.	Ch 9-12

10 Vanities – Useless Human Things

- Wisdom: Wise and foolish have one end: death
- Labor: Worker no better than shirker in end
- Purpose: Man proposes, but God disposes
- Rivalry: Man's success brings more envy than joy
- Avarice: “Much” = lust for elusive “more”
- Fame: Brief, uncertain, and soon forgotten
- Wealth: Money doesn't satisfy; only feeds others
- Coveting: Gain cannot be enjoyed despite desire
- Frivolity: Only camouflages inevitable sad end
- Awards: Good and bad often get wrong desserts

▪ **Truths about God, and meaning and purpose found only in Him, are found liberally throughout** most chapters, with even whole sections on following God for happiness in life. We don't have to wait until the last chapter to hear the “bottom line.” Solomon presents all this throughout, as if he has learned it the hard way, by spending his life away from God.

▪ **This book presents 3 Causes of pessimism and depression:** 1) Viewing life *selfishly* rather than socially (*self-centered rather than others-centered*); 2) Viewing life *apart from God* rather than controlled by Him and with Him; 3) Viewing life as *bounded by the grave* rather than having a glorious destiny beyond.

▪ **Opposite of Pessimism:** *“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”* (Romans 8:20-21) Ecclesiastes is but a prelude, the background to the ultimate hope of Romans 8. Ecclesiastes describes man's futile search for meaning, apart from God, in a corrupt world. Romans 8 describes our hope of deliverance from that corruption.



The Bottom Line

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all.” (12:13) Meaning and value in life are found only in loving God and serving Him faithfully. That is our purpose. That is what Solomon wants us to know, and what he found out very late after wasting much of his life and his gifts.

