

SESSION THIRTEEN

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON:

Ecclesiastes

I. INTRODUCTION

Why is Ecclesiastes a relevant book for people today? Man wants to pursue a life of self-seeking pleasure without any moral accountability to a holy, Creator God. Man's heart will never be satisfied with this, because in his heart there is an anxious longing to make sense out of life . . . to find *the meaning* of life. Yet man is plagued by questions he cannot answer. He cannot explain why one man is born rich and with every advantage in life, while another man is born poor and disadvantaged. He cannot explain why one baby is born healthy while another is not. Are we, then, to just throw our hands up and conclude that life is futile? Does it matter how I live life?

II. KEY WORD: VANITY

One of the key terms of the book is "vanity." After the introduction, the opening verse in 1:2 declares, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The *NIV* has used the term "meaningless." Unfortunately, neither of these English terms is adequate to understand Solomon's point.

Vanity (*hebel*, הֶבֶל) is a translation of the Hebrew word meaning "vapor" or "breath." Just as a vapor quickly vanishes in the air, so something can be described as "vanity" that is fleeting or short-lived. The point of this word (as used in Ecclesiastes) is not that something is worthless or meaningless, but that one cannot seem to grasp it. It eludes us before we've had a chance to examine it sufficiently. Hence, this refers to a whole category of life that doesn't make sense. Furthermore, in life, man often struggles to understand his fate, but it is futile because he cannot always make sense out of it or see it in the "big picture."

This meaning of *hebel* is aptly illustrated in Eccl 8:14, where it is translated "futile" by the *NASB* (though still translated "meaningless" by the *NIV*). "There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility." Thus, life often doesn't make sense—it is often *paradoxical*.

Not only is it difficult to translate the Hebrew word *hebel* into English, but we also need to be alert to the fact that this word may have multiple nuances of meaning. As an example, consider Eccl 11:10 where *hebel* seems to have the meaning of *fleeting*. In the latter part of this verse, Solomon asserts that "childhood and the prime of life are fleeting (*hebel*)." So, depending on the context, it may mean "elusive, perplexing" or in other instances "fleeting."

Although the book begins by raising this sort of question, are we to conclude that this is nothing more than the sentiment of the sceptic who has foolishly left God out of his life and therefore can only draw faulty conclusions? No, not at all. Almost everyone admits that when we finally come to the end of the book, the author has something *spiritually wise* to say. Yet even there, Solomon says, "Vanity of vanities" (12:8). So, this is not the expression of the unbelieving sceptic nor of the man who began skeptically but managed to make sense out of things by the end of the book. When he speaks about life's *futility* (*hebel*), he is speaking truthfully from beginning to end. Life indeed is puzzling and often paradoxical.

The issue is "what are we going to do about it"? Do we just throw up our hands and give up? Do we eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die? What do we do?

III. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK¹

Prologue	The Futility of Life Proven Examines: work, wisdom, luxury, pleasures, etc.		The Futility of Life: Deductions to be Made	Epilogue
Introduces the primary theme of "futility"	The futile search for the significance of man's striving in life 1:12-3:22	The vexing outcomes that result from selfish ambition 4:1-6:12	How to cope with life despite the limitations of human wisdom	Fear God; Keep the Commandments <i>Reason:</i> Our accountability to God
	1:12—6:12		7:1—12:8	
1:1-11	1:12—12:8			12:9-14

IV. IMPORTANT OBSERVATIONS

- A. The categories he examines include "work" and "wisdom" which are considered *good* in other parts of Scripture. Therefore, their appraisal as "vanity" probably doesn't mean that they are worthless but unintelligible.

Elaboration: Solomon was counting on these to unlock the door that makes life worthwhile. None of these in itself unlock the meaning of life. Thus, they may be good, but by themselves they are insufficient to make sense out of life. Any one of these pursued to the

¹ For a helpful attempt to understand the literary structure of the book, see James S. Reitman, "The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes," *BSac* 154:615 (Jul-Sep 1997): 297-319.

exclusion of everything else is indeed vanity. None of the "keys" open the door to make all of life meaningful.

B. Note the repeated refrains encouraging man to enjoy life:

1. 2:23-24; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 6:12; 8:14-15; 9:9
2. Life is not meaningless in the sense that it cannot be enjoyed. There is good and enjoyment in life. It is perplexing/futile in the sense that the details don't explain the whole.

C. The inability to Discover in Life and the Unpredictability of Life

1. Life is often very unpredictable. When you think you know what to expect next, often the opposite happens (6:12; 7:13-14; 8:7; 10:14).

"Consider the work of God,

For who is able to straighten what He has bent?

In the day of prosperity be happy,

But in the day of adversity consider—

God has made the one as well as the other

So that man may not discover anything that will be after him."

[the last line implies that man cannot know what will happen next]

2. Man has an instinctive feel that there is some ultimate cause and something beyond this life. Yet man often cannot discover what God is really doing or why He does what He does (3:11).
3. Man cannot get the whole picture. There is a desire to make sense out of life, but man cannot do so in and of the normal pursuits of life such as work, pleasure, etc.
4. Despite the fact that life is often unpredictable and man cannot discover God's ways of working, we must learn to accept that the details are "in the hands of God."

"When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover.

For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love [i.e., prosperity] or hatred [i.e., adversity]; anything awaits him" (8:16–9:1).

5. Out of this dilemma of life, man is driven to look to his Creator. One writer comments,

So it appears that the basic theme for the book is to realize that God has a total plan for all events that occur, that we can understand that such a plan does exist, and we have to

look to God for answers. Yet we also know that we can find only partial answers in this world.²

- D. There is a continued refrain that man should "fear God."³
1. See 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13 and 12:13.
 2. Justice may be perverted in the present life here on earth, though in the end God will give righteous judgment (3:16-17).
 3. Because righteous judgment doesn't always come immediately in this life, people mistakenly conclude that living righteously is not important. In the end, however, the one who "fears God" will come out best (8:11-13).
 4. Closely connected with the idea of man having "the fear of the LORD" is the notion of *accountability*. See 12:1-2,13-14; cf. 3:17; 9:1; 11:9. Life should be lived responsibly!

V. PURPOSE OF ECCLESIASTES⁴

Despite the fact that life seems to be an apparent futility—man cannot predict what will happen nor can he discover how to put it all together (i.e., know God's "master plan")—it is not a puzzle to be solved, but a gift to be responsibly enjoyed before God.

Don Glenn similarly concludes,

*"... life should be lived in complete trust in God, be received and enjoyed as a gift from His good hand, and be lived in the light of His future judgment."*⁵

Reitman presents a similar but more elaborate statement of purpose:

By reflecting on his futile search for any advantage to human labor "under the sun," the author exposes man's existential inability—tracing it to his inherent uncertainty, depravity, and mortality—and consequently locates the only hope for meaning in patient submission to God's sovereign (though inscrutable) purposes, so that the reader might despair of self-determination, mourn his own inability, and accept his "portion" from God, thereby enabling him to enjoy the advantage of wisdom as an accountable steward of the "work of God."

In light of the above conclusion, this should result in a life of faith. Within Ecclesiastes, three dimensions of Solomon's faith can be detected:⁶

²Louis Goldberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 16.

³The expression "the fear of the LORD" is characteristic of wisdom literature (cf. Job 28:28; Prov 1:7). Basically, this is a reverential awe which leads to submission to God's authority and majesty.

⁴ For further help in understanding the viewpoint and purpose of Ecclesiastes, see Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage," *Grace Theological Journal* 7:1 (Spr 1986): 21-56.

⁵Donald Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, 978.

⁶For these suggestions about Solomon's faith, I am indebted to Bruce K. Waltke, "The Bible's Black Sheep,"

- 1) God is wise, and He has a plan.

Though God's plan in its entirety may be hidden from the eyes of man, we can take comfort in knowing He has one.

- 2) God is not only wise, but He is also good.

Whatever God brings to us, it is His gift for us . . . and thus it is good. This applies not only to the pleasurable things in life (our food and drink), but also—by faith—to the things we would not naturally wish for ourselves.

- 3) God is not only wise and good, but He is also just (a day of judgment is coming)

In the final analysis, all will give an account to God and wrong will be righted.

WHAT WE SHOULD LEARN FROM ECCLESIASTES

Don't wait until you have life all figured out before you conclude it is worth living. Have faith in God and accept the life He gives you. View it as a gift from Him, and live it responsibly, whether prosperity or adversity comes your way. In the end, He will judge everything righteously, and those who have "feared God" will be the winners.