

INTRODUCTION

Lesson 1

KEY VERSE(S)—

OUTLINE—

- I. PROLOGUE: All is Vanity (1:1-11)
- II. THE VANITY OF ALL THINGS (1:12-6:12)
- III. WORDS OF WISDOM (7:1-12:7)
- IV. CONCLUSION: Fear God and Keep His Commandments (12:8-14)

KEY WORDS (Themes)—

BACKGROUND INFORMATION—

Author. Solomon (1:1) Despite some alleged inconsistencies, the internal evidence of the book points to Solomon. The life of the author coincides with the life of Solomon—great wisdom (1:16), extensive building projects (2:4-6), incomparable wealth (2:7-9), and his many proverbs (12:9).

Date. 940 BC. These are the words of a tired man looking back over his lifelong search for meaning and purpose. He made many mistakes and pours out his heart to guide the young who stand at the same crossroad (11:9-12:7).

Name Of The Book. “*Ecclesiastes*” derives its name from the Preacher named in the book (1:1,2,12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10). The Hebrew title is “*Qoheleth*” (a ‘*qoheleth*’ was an official speaker to an assembly of people). When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, this book was given the name “*Ekklesiastes*.” In our English Bibles, the title was transliterated and called “*Ecclesiastes*.” The name of the book translated literally into English would be “*The Preacher*.”

- *What does the title tell you about the book?*

- *What familiar Greek word do you see in that title?*

MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES—

Life apart from God is meaningless. All of man’s pursuits and efforts are futile when God is excluded from them. And since the works of God cannot be thwarted, then it is only a life of service to Him that can impart value and purpose to our lives.

“The purpose of the book seems to be to show that self-gratification and successful worldliness do not bring satisfaction to the human heart. Life without a knowledge of and fellowship with God is empty and meaningless. Man has a destiny which calls for cooperation with God in some worthy enterprise, and in this he finds abiding peace of soul...” (H.I. Hester, *The Heart Of Hebrew History*, p.311).

“The basic theme of Qoheleth is the ultimate futility of a life based upon earthly ambitions and desires. Any world view which does not rise above the horizon of man himself is doomed to meaninglessness and frustration. To view personal happiness or enjoyment as life’s greatest good is sheer folly in view of the transcendent value

of God Himself as over against His created universe. Happiness can never be achieved by pursuing after it, since such a pursuit involves the absurdity of self-deification... Transient mortals must realize that they are mere creatures, and that they derive importance only from their relationship to the almighty Creator... In other words Ecclesiastes is really intended to be a tract for the conversion of the self-sufficient individual; it compels him to discard his comfortable, self-flattering illusions and face honestly the instability of all those materialistic props on which he attempts to base his security... Only as one finds a new meaning for life in surrendering to the sovereignty of God and faithful obedience to His will in moral conduct can one find a valid principle and goal for responsible human living.” (Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia Of The Bible, Vol. 2, pp. 187-188).

Solomon Asks Three Probing Questions.

Question—What profit does a man have under the sun (1:3; 3:9)?

Answer—None. He labors for the wind (2:11; 5:16)

Question—What is it good for man to do in life (2:3)?

Answer—Eat, drink, and enjoy the fruit of his labor (2:10,24; 3:22; 5:18)

Question—What is my purpose for existing?

Answer—To serve God (12:13-14)

STYLE OF ECCLESIASTES—

The negative view that Ecclesiastes is a pessimistic, skeptical book is mistaken. It is neither the style of a complainer nor one who has withdrawn himself from the world. It is the contemplation of a man who has experienced everything that man could want (2:10-11) to find meaning and satisfaction.

He does not resign himself to atheism, agnosticism, skepticism, or putting “blind faith” in the place of God. Rather, he firmly holds to the notion that the fear of God is man’s strongest duty (12:13) and the assurance of man’s truest prosperity (2:24-26; 3:13-14; 5:18-20). The writer does not despise the world itself and all of God’s gifts in it. Rather, he insists that the greatest enjoyment of life comes within the limits of the fear of God!!

“Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes the author shows two opposite life views. First, he views things around him as the natural man would do, without the light of divine revelation. His conclusion is ‘All is vanity’... But then the author writes as one to whom God has revealed Himself, and now his observations and conclusions have the ring of surety and hope. For example: ‘Everything God does will remain forever’ (3:14). This pattern of alternating perspectives continues throughout the book.” (Irving Jensen, Jensen’s Survey Of The Old Testament, p.301).

QUESTIONS—

1) Summarize the book of Ecclesiastes in one or two sentences.

OBSERVATIONS

- Premise (1:1-11)
- Observation (1:12-2:23)
- Instruction (2:24-26)
- Observation (3:1-11)
- Instruction (3:12-15)
- Observation (3:16-4:8)
- Instruction (4:9-5:12)
- Observation (5:13-17)
- Instruction (5:18-20)
- Observation (6:1-12)
- Instruction (7:1-14)
- Observation (7:15)
- Instruction (7:16-8:9)
- Observation (8:10-9:6)
- Instruction (9:7-10)
- Observation (9:11-18)
- Instruction (10:1-4)
- Observation (10:5-19)
- Instruction (10:20-12:8)
- Conclusion (12:9-14)

INSTRUCTIONS

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- 2) *Why do many people consider the book of Ecclesiastes to be a negative, pessimistic book?*
 - 3) *What events in Solomon's life brought him to the perspective of the author of this book (1 Kings 3:3-15; 4:20-34; 5:1-7:12; 10:23; 11:1-13)?*
 - 4) *Why will man never find happiness or meaning apart from God?*
 - 5) *What is the relevance of the book of Ecclesiastes to our generation?*