



Series: Bible Survey

Lesson: 26. Ecclesiastes

- **Introduction**

- Author: Solomon
- Date: Sometime late in Solomon's reign (before 931 BC)
- The title is a translated term that refers to 'someone who speaks to an assembly' (i.e., a 'preacher').
- There is not much actual poetry in this book, but it is definitely wisdom literature from beginning to end.
- Context:
 - Solomon had lived a full and blessed life as the wisest men who ever lived, as well as one of the wealthiest and most influential, who had the chance to observe and experience nearly everything earthly life had to offer.
 - Ecclesiastes records his musings somewhere toward the end of his life when he was reflecting on all he had learned in his quest to find satisfaction in life.

- It is one of the most controversial books in the Bible because of its many difficult statements, leading to a variety of proposed approaches by theologians over the years, such as:

- It shouldn't be Scripture.
- It should be read and accepted at face value (like Proverbs).
- It should be read as a negative example of human wisdom that is meant to be countered instead of accepted (until the very end).

- **Main themes**

- The 'vanity' of life from a _____ perspective
 - The word for 'vanity' [*hevel*] literally means 'vapor'; it can be taken in the senses of 'ephemeral,' 'futile,' and/or 'hard to grasp.'
 - Everything is seen as 'vanity' based on a variety of ways life doesn't always go according to principle; the great nullifier and equalizer in every example is death.
 - This book taps into the struggle we all face when we don't understand why life works out the way it does sometimes and question whether anything we do really matters.
 - This is related to the 'groanings' of life in a sin-cursed world awaiting redemption.

Rom. 8:19–23 – For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to **futility**, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. ²³And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

- The _____ earthly value of wisdom
 - The great question of the book is how much value there is in wisdom when every truth deduced from it is only a proverbial truth.

Eccl. 1:18 – Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

Eccl. 2:13–14 – And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. ¹⁴The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both.

Eccl. 7:12 – For wisdom is protection just as money is protection, But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.

Eccl. 7:19 – Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.

- Wisdom is the best approach to life on this earth, but even that isn't enough to guarantee any kind of outcome, let alone one of blessing and security.
- The necessity of _____ God
 - The only answer the book gives to the (seeming) randomness of life is to fear God Who is above it all and will judge everyone in the end, even if not necessarily here on earth.
 - We may not understand all of His ways on earth, but the certainty of facing Him is the one immutable truth through all we wrestle with here on earth.
 - Solomon begins and ends his wisdom literature with the fear of YHWH.

*Prov. 1:7 – The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

*Eccl. 12:13–14 – The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: **fear God** and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.
¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.*

- **How to Read Ecclesiastes**

- It is unwise to read short selections from Ecclesiastes apart from their larger _____.
 - It is meant to be read as a whole work that is then reflected upon.
 - There are still plenty of theologically true statements that are worthy of our study and application throughout, but there are also lots of statements mixed in that seem contradictory or even unbiblical apart from how they fit into the main themes of the whole book and/or are balanced with other statements and perspectives elsewhere in the book.
- We're supposed to read Ecclesiastes more as a _____ than as direct instruction.
 - Solomon is recording his honest thoughts from his past; his more mature viewpoint only leaks in occasionally (even though it's a constant subtext) to remind the reader that there's a deeper, spiritual perspective beyond what his human experience revealed.
 - We're supposed to feel the weight of his frustration over all the 'vanity' he experiences and sees all around him to better understand why the spiritual perspective is so necessary.
- Ecclesiastes is making a _____ point more than anything.

- Solomon originally tried to prove truths about human existence based solely on what he could observe and experience for himself.
 - By going to the effort to show the 'vanity' of everything he recorded, he is proving that a worldview that lacks God is meaningless.
 - Unlike nihilism, he points people back to God and shows how fearing Him is the answer to all seemingly arbitrary circumstances of life.
 - He's showing how the only way to avoid pessimism is to find meaning in God.

- Ecclesiastes is teaching us how to enjoy the life God has given us instead of worrying about our own _____.
- It's the most central question every human faces and why most are consumed with legacy.
 - Ecclesiastes recognizes that this pursuit is futile, so the 'eat, drink, and be merry' passages are really there to remind us to make the most of the moment we're in instead of investing so heavily in things we can't secure for ourselves.
 - It's reminding us to ultimately find security in God and not forget to make the most of the time He's giving us right now since no earthly future is promised to us.

Discussion:

1. Why is it so valuable to recognize the 'vanity' of human existence instead of ignoring it just because we pursue something greater (spiritual)?
2. Why do you think wisdom literature in the Bible focuses so much on proverbial truth instead of absolute truth?

FOR REFLECTION: How can you use Ecclesiastes in witnessing to unbelievers around you?

Blanks: human, limited, fearing, context, chronicle, philosophical, mortality