



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

Ecclesiastes

Chapters 1-12

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities!

All is vanity.

--Ecclesiastes 1:2

All is a Vapor!

The title Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning "assembly" a translation of the original Hebrew for the one who calls the assembly, the *qohelet*, or Preacher.

While the book does not name the "Preacher". Several verses within the text point to King Solomon (1:1, 12-2:26; 2:4-9; 12:9). This has been the traditional understanding of most Christians and Jews, though not all modern interpreters hold to this view. The author himself has chosen to go unnamed and points away from himself to the real author behind collected sayings of wisdom, the "one Shepherd" (12:11).

The major theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes centers around the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is translated vanity or vapor. The Preacher is reflecting on the meaning of life seeking to understand its significance. The heart of his message is that apart from God, the search for significance in life is ultimately grasping at a vapor--a chasing after the wind.

Structure³³

The Book of Ecclesiastes	1-12
Prologue: What Profit Has a Man?	(1:1-11)
Man's Futile Search for Meaning "under the Sun"	(1:12-3:22)
The Futility of Selfish Ambition	(4:1-6:12)
Despair as a Turning Point to Wisdom	(7:1-14)
The True Path to Wisdom: The Fear of God	(7:15-9:10)
Shepherding Wisdom: The Work of God	(9:11-12:7)
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The book of Ecclesiastes has a two part literary structure. The Preacher first reflects on the futility of pursuing wisdom apart from God. The central poem of the book provides a turning point reflection on godly despair in human uncertainty and folly. The Preacher then reflects on the "work of God" and concludes that wisdom is ultimately found not in man but in the fear of God.

³³ James S. Reitman, The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes, BIBLIOTHECA SACRA v. 154 (July-September 1997): 297-319



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Prologue: What Profit Has a Man? (1:1-11)

The key question of the book is introduced in the prologue (1:3):

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:13-14

The prologue names several vanity cycles: the human life cycle of generations, the daily cycle of the sun, the wind, the water. Is there any purpose to any of this? Or is all of it *hebel*, vanity, a vapor?

Thus the Preacher sets out to answer this question.

Man's Futile search for Meaning "Under the Sun" (1:12-3:22)

The Preacher observes that there is a marked futility in the human condition. It seemed to him that the more he considered the purpose for human labor and existence the more vexing the question becomes. (1:17)

He uses his own life experience as the test case and example. The Preacher himself vainly pursues self indulgence in pleasures and the finer things of life. "Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them." But ultimately he concludes that this was a vain exercise from which he gained nothing. (2:11)

So he turned to wisdom and seeking after knowledge and insight. (2:12-17) He looks to find meaning in his toil. (2:18-26) Again he concludes that a selfish quest for wisdom or labor turns out to be for nothing--no ultimate profit.

God has given an order and a "time for every matter under heaven". Yet these ultimate purposes are recognizable, yet remain elusive:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. --Eccl. 3:11

God's purposes for man's labor and his destiny for man is inscrutable.



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The Futility of Selfish Ambition (4:1-6:12)

The Preacher turns to a reflection on the futility of human beings pursuit of selfish ambition. This pursuit has led to bitter tyranny and oppression. (4:1-6) Man's envy is self consuming: "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh" (4:5) Selfish ambition leads to a lonely alienation and foolish self-centered existence:

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business. --Eccl. 4:7,8

For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

--Ecclesiastes 5:7

The sin of selfish ambition is the sin of presumption upon the grace of God. The words of our mouth are arrogant in what we purpose and vow to do. Our dreams and plans for ourselves are often not God's ways and plans.

Ultimately, the selfish pursuit of more and more wealth will prove to be unsatisfying and stressful. The more you have, the more worries, because there is more to lose. And at the end of the day, it will all be lost. "As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand." (5:15) So hold wealth loosely, enjoy it while you have it-- and count your blessings as a gift from God! (5:18-20)

The end of selfish ambition for earthly and temporal gain is ultimately despair because the future is unpredictable:

For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

-Eccl. 6:12



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Despair as a Turning Point to Wisdom (7:1-14)

The Preacher places a poetic hinge at the center of the book. The poem calls the reader to despair of life. The first half of the book has lead the reader to this point--ie. what is the point. If life here is so uncertain and all of our work ultimately leads to no earthly gain.

What is the point? Only when we become so thoroughly disillusioned with ourselves and our selfish ambition do we turn outward toward God. The answer is not found in self and the works of our hands, but in the work of God and his wisdom.

*For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.
Consider the work of God:
who can make straight what he has made crooked? --Eccl. 7:12-13*

The True Path to Wisdom: The Fear of God (7:15-9:10)

The key to wisdom is found in trust and fear in the Sovereign God. We may not understand his ways or purposes in our prosperities and adversities--the key is in the trust and fear of the Lord.

Man needs to be humble in our own self estimation. Man is hopelessly inadequate in our own depravity. (7:20) We are our own worst barrier to discerning wisdom. "God makes man upright, yet men have sought out many schemes." (7:29) So fear of God is mans only hope.

*Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.
--Eccl. 8:12-13*

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. --Eccl. 7:20



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Shepherding Wisdom: The Work of God (9:11-12:7)

So the Preacher cautions his reader to live the wisdom of the fear of the Lord holding loosely much of the life in a fallen world. There is much that will happen in this life that does not seem right or will make too much sense. But by shepherding wisdom in your heart and life you will be blessed.

Wisdom's advantage is dismissed by fools. (9:13-18) It will also be forfeited by those who give their life to folly (10:1-20). Life is filled with adversity, but our call is to steward the wisdom of God, found in the work of God. (11:1-12:9)

Epilogue: The Preacher's Moral Authority (12:9-14)

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.

¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

¹¹ The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. ¹² My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. --12:9-14
