

BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

1. One of the strangest books in the Bible is the book of Ecclesiastes. This book follows right after the book of Proverbs. It has a lot of common sense, just like the book of Proverbs.
2. What is this book about? It sounds fatalistic as if life is meaningless, unlike the books of Psalms and Proverbs which are easy to appreciate. This book tends to be read by middle-aged people who wonder what life is all about. Younger people tend to ignore it.
3. The word “Ecclesiastes” is a direct translation of the Hebrew title for this book. It means a man who attracts people to come to listen to him, like a preacher or teacher. (“Ecclesiastical matters” refer to matters of the Church such as teaching about God and life.)

Who is the author of the book of Ecclesiastes?

1. It was likely authored by King Solomon. Ecclesiastes 1:1 says the preacher is the son of David, king of Jerusalem.
2. Proverbs Chapter 1 describes this son as having everything and this fits the description of Solomon who also had everything such as wisdom, wealth, knowledge of science, agriculture, etc. As Solomon had tasted everything, he was well-positioned to write such a book.
3. Ecclesiastes 1:2 seems to suggest that the author was not the preacher himself as it was written in the third person! But it is most likely that Solomon did write this himself but he wrote it in the third person.

What is the theme of this book of Ecclesiastes?

1. The word “vanity” appears 30 times and is translated as “meaningless” in some Bible versions. “Vanity” is a Hebrew word which means “smoke” or “vapour”.
 - a) It means “temporary” (i.e. comes and goes).
 - b) It also means “enigma” which is used to describe a very thick smoke that cannot be taken hold of, although it may appear to be substantial or solid because in reality, it is empty with nothing inside.
 - c) It is a description of life in this world, including health, wealth and reputation, etc. that can collapse at any time. Everything that we build can disappear at any time. Such things look so important and significant but are actually “nothing”.
2. Another phrase “under the Sun” appears 28 times in this book but it is not used in any other part of the Bible.
 - a) Your life is meaningless if all you live for is “life under the Sun” and not the next life, which is life in the New Heaven and the New Earth where there is no Sun. Nothing that you build on this Earth can give you lasting joy.
 - b) For example, you set your first target at \$1 million but when you hit it, it is not satisfying because you will want the next \$1 million! It is just smoke. It is the same with fame and that is why some famous people commit suicide.
3. Unlike us, when Solomon wrote this, he did not know for sure that there is an eternity.

- a) We believe in the New Heaven and the New Earth and everlasting life. We know and we are sure about eternity.
 - b) Solomon was just living life “under the Sun” and like the Israelites, in those days, he had no clear confidence that they will go to be with God forever. They believed in “Sheol” which is a holding place for the departed. To them, Sheol or Hades was an unknown waiting dark room but they were not sure what was going to happen next.
 - c) So, this book was written by a man who was just looking at life on Earth or just life “under the Sun”.
4. The author, Solomon summarized the entire book in Ecclesiastes 1:2 (at the start) and in Ecclesiastes 12:8 (at the end) with a statement, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”.

Actual content of the book of Ecclesiastes

1. Ecclesiastes 1:1-3:11. The book starts with “time”. It is also about “time”.
 - a) Ecclesiastes 1:4 says, “A generation comes and goes, but the Earth abides forever.”
 - b) Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. This is a short poem of 8 verses and the keyword “time” appears multiple times.
 - c) We work so hard to build empires, reputations and possessions but the next generation will forget about us totally. Similarly, great men in the world may be known by their names but people do not really care much about them. Empires and companies are soon gone and inventions become obsolete. Whatever is done “under the Sun” will be vanity – gone!
2. Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:7. This is the last poem and it is about “death”.
 - a) Everyone goes to the dust no matter how much he or she has built on this Earth and will become irrelevant. Generations will pass but mountains and seas abide forever. How transient life is!
 - b) Someone else will use all the things that we have built but they might not even care about who we are. For example, your grandson uses something which you left behind but he might not even know your name. He will drag his feet to your tomb to mourn for you but he may use the things that you passed down for a totally different purpose from your original intent or may even misuse them. Perhaps you pass down the money to be used for good but instead it is used for evil.
3. Therefore, the preacher thinks that since life is so meaningless, he might as well just enjoy the pleasures of life on Earth. So, Solomon did! BUT to his dismay, he found the pleasures empty as well! To Solomon, “doing good is excelling folly” just like “light excelling darkness” which is good but it is still vanity; doing evil is an even bigger folly (i.e. vanity for doing good things and double vanity for doing evil things). So one can conclude that all things done are pointless if it is done just for life under the Sun.
4. It is depressing but it causes us to rethink. As young adults, we have ambitions to achieve great plans, change the world, etc. But in the end, whatever we do is insignificant. For example, tourists will only remember the mountains in the country they visited but they will not care about the people who lived there.

What is the conclusion of the preacher?

1. Just enjoy the simple things in life, your family, good meals, etc.
2. Do not dream too much and just appreciate and be thankful for daily blessings.
3. Ecclesiastes 12:9 gives the reason why the preacher said all these things; it is to warn us.
4. Ecclesiastes 12:12 says, "My son, listen". Solomon was trying to teach his son. Solomon spent his life building the biggest buildings, etc. and it was all vanity. He also concluded that if you hang around and do nothing, it is also folly. Nothing we do on Earth can satisfy us. Possessions, power, wisdom, etc. cannot satisfy our heart.
5. Ecclesiastes 12:11-12 tell us that there is a missing ingredient that satisfies the human soul. Let us consider this: If Solomon who had everything and yet could not be satisfied by things on Earth, how can we be satisfied?
6. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 gives the final conclusion.
 - a) Fear God because He is the only one who can fill your heart.
 - b) It is the spirit that matters; not your ears (yearning for good music), not your eyes (lusting for beautiful things), not your bellies (craving for good food), etc.
 - c) Verse 14 says God will judge every secret thing, whether it be good or evil - our words, our thoughts and motives, etc. because He is a holy God. It is a conclusion that hangs in the air at this point because Solomon was not sure about the reality of eternity.

What have you learned from the Book of Ecclesiastes?

1. Nothing can satisfy our heart except God alone. All other things can only "tickle" us for a while.
2. God is holy and will judge us no matter how great we are! Solomon did not die a happy man because he did not know that Jesus died on the Cross and God has already judged our sins at the Cross. Believers, unlike Solomon, can conclude for sure that we have Jesus who satisfies our soul.
3. God gives us peace in suffering! The "vacuum in the heart" is filled even while we are on Earth.
4. The book causes us to rethink life on Earth. Anything done on Earth apart from God is vanity. But anything we do for God is labour that God remembers and will not be in vain. Jesus can satisfy us NOW as well as for all eternity.