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Some things to say first

Importance

The poetical book we are about to read was written almost 3,000 years ago. That in itself should fill us with interest. But we cannot study it like other books from the ancient world. It is part of the sacred Scriptures, of which the inspired apostle declared, 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope' (Romans 15:4).

Ecclesiastes was written for *us*, and we cannot ignore it without impoverishing ourselves. Its style is not quite what we are used to, but its message is plain. It tells us what kind of living is worthwhile. This it does by a process of reasonings, reflections, observations and conclusions, all encapsuled in pithy and brief lines of poetry. There is a wonderful freshness about it all. What it says is so startlingly relevant that we find it hard to believe that it was not written *today*.

Key

In this book Solomon looks at life from two viewpoints. First of all he stands in one position, and then in the other, and does this

alternately throughout the book. He sees the same issues from two perspectives. It is virtually impossible to make any sense of Ecclesiastes unless this simple fact has been grasped first.

Solomon's first viewpoint is that of a natural man. He sees life through the eyes of a person who is still unconverted. Such a person tackles life's problems without the light of God's revelation. He leaves God out of the picture, and never ponders his Word. The only conclusion he can come to is that 'All is vanity' (1:2). Everything in this mortal life is ultimately futile. It is a waste of time.

Solomon's other viewpoint is radically different. He now looks at life through the eyes of a man to whom God has revealed himself. Such a person sees everything in a new light. Life has meaning after all, but only if we worship and serve God. When he stands in this position, Solomon's words ring with assurance and hope. The dark beginning of the book sees Solomon occupying the first perspective; the bright conclusion sees him enjoying the other.

But *how* can we know God? Ecclesiastes stirs up this question in our minds, but does not give us the answer. It leaves us hungry to know God, but does not show us the way to him. That is something which is revealed only in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and part of the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to prepare us to receive it. It shows to us that man's search for truth gets him nowhere. The path of the philosophers is a no through road. The meaning of life is not found by observing and recording our experiences. Nor is it discovered by following through our thoughts. God, who alone gives human life its purpose, cannot be known unless he reveals himself. The book makes us long for him to do so, and all who understand its message greet the gospel with relief and excitement.

Structure

The book opens with a short introduction (1:1–11). Its main point is to state that, from the human point of view, ‘all is vanity’. This note will be struck again and again, throughout the book, even when we are on the very threshold of its ultimate conclusion (12:8).

There then follows the main body of the book (1:12–12:7). This consists of four sermons, or discourses. Each one expounds on the two themes of futility and hope. By constant underlining, the overall message of the book becomes too clear to miss. When our outlook is earth-bound (‘under the sun’), life is meaningless and hopeless. It has no point. But when we live for the eternal God, it is filled with purpose. There is constant alternation between these two viewpoints, and Solomon faithfully tells us what he observed when he occupied each. However, each section written from the second point of view also contains a good deal of instruction and teaching about the ways of God.

The book then comes to its conclusion (12:8–14), which is little more than a summary of everything that has gone before. If God is not the centre of our existence, life is vanity (12:8). The thing to do, then, is to live for him, never forgetting that it is to him that we will finally be answerable (12:9–14).

Key words

Within this clear structure, certain key words crop up repeatedly. Their value is that they help us to recognize which viewpoint Solomon is expressing at any particular point.

The most obvious of these words is ‘vanity’ or ‘futility’, which occurs thirty-nine times. This translates a Hebrew word meaning ‘something without substance, which quickly passes away’. ‘Vanity’ is as solid and as enduring as the morning

mist. We must constantly call to mind that the modern use of the word, in the sense of empty pride or conceit, was not in Solomon's mind at all. For this reason we shall only use the word 'futility' from this point.

Closely connected with 'futility' is the phrase 'under the sun', which is found twenty-nine times. It describes the earth-bound and temporal perspective, which sees all of life's activities as pointless. Why not now go quickly through Ecclesiastes, and underline every occurrence of 'futility' and 'under the sun' in black? This simple procedure will go a long way towards helping you identify those passages where Solomon is occupying his first point of view.

Now scan the book again, underlining the word 'God' in red. You will find that it occurs forty times, in small clusters, separated by long passages where he is not mentioned. You have now begun to identify those sections where Solomon occupies his second point of view, brings God into the picture and sees life through the eyes of a converted man.

A fourth key word, which also occurs forty times, is the word 'heart'. This is not closely associated with either one viewpoint or the other, but is worth underlining in a third colour. This will make another point. Unconverted man is in turmoil because of the apparent futility of life. The frustration of it strikes him to the very heart—precisely the place where the converted person senses peace, purpose and fulfilment.

Finally, we should mention the important word 'wisdom' which, with its related words 'wise' and 'wisely', occurs over fifty times. This, too, is not strictly associated with either of Solomon's viewpoints, although two-thirds of its occurrences are in those passages where he is looking at life through the eyes of the unconverted. The exceptions are at 2:26, 12:9 and

11, and in the section 7:1–8:13. If these occurrences of the word are underlined in red, and all the others in black, you will have a further indication of which viewpoint Solomon is occupying in any particular passage.

This last key word reminds us that in Ecclesiastes we are reading a very early example of what has been called ‘wisdom literature’—a whole species of literature which arose in the ancient Near East from the tenth century B.C. onwards. The pattern which Solomon commenced was followed by many uninspired authors, who set out to give instructions for successful living and to ponder the problems of human existence. They used every possible literary device to make their teaching easy to remember, such as repetition, poetry, comparisons and contrasts, alliteration, riddles, fables and allegories. None of these books would have been penned if Solomon had not led the way by writing Ecclesiastes.

Title

We are now ready to embark on our study of it, but it is possible that there is still one point which is distracting our minds. It concerns the title of the book. ‘Ecclesiastes’ is a pretty strange name, so how did it originate?

It comes from the opening phrase of the book, ‘the words of the Preacher’ (1:1). The Hebrew word *qoheleth* designates a person who is the official speaker to an assembly of people. It is not found in any other Old Testament book, but seven times altogether in Ecclesiastes—three times in the first chapter, three times in the last, and once in the middle at 7:27. When the Old Testament was eventually translated into Greek, this word was rendered *ecclesiastes*, and the book became generally known by this name. In English, both the Hebrew and Greek words are translated as ‘the Preacher’. Shall we now put ourselves in his congregation, and listen to what he has to say?