

# What do you expect?

Ecclesiastes for Today

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## Preface

The Book of Ecclesiastes both fascinates and captivates. Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, described Ecclesiastes as ‘the truest of all books’, this ‘fine hammered steel of woe.’ George Bernard Shaw compared it to Shakespeare. Ernest Hemingway was entranced by the book. His novel *The Sun Also Rises* uses as an epigraph the book’s opening poem. A character in John Updike’s *Rabbit* trilogy describes Ecclesiastes as ‘the Lord’s last word.’ Even the band, U2 used it as an inspiration for its song *The Wanderer*.

Also contemporary film reflects some of the musings of Ecclesiastes, how at one moment life feels so worthwhile especially in the face of beauty, but within a heartbeat fades into grey and hollow emptiness. ‘There is perhaps no better example than the 1999 Academy Award-winning movie *American Beauty* which calls into question our contemporary obsession with producing “beauty” while simultaneously suggesting that there is another more fragile beauty that is present for those who have eyes to

see it. Lester's voice-over at the movie's beginning and end serves in a similar way to the opening and closing poems of Ecclesiastes, bookending what happens in between: "It's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world ... I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life."<sup>1</sup>

Not only is this a fascinating book, which has sense of timelessness about it, it is also a controversial book. The controversy lies in how to read it. Is it to be read as a deeply pessimistic take on life or a more positive affirmation of life—especially in eating and drinking? Is it a book for the pessimist or the hedonist?

As we shall see, the writer is far too unique a thinker to be neatly pigeonholed. While we must be careful not to make him into a '21st Century man', much of what he says does seem to be remarkably contemporary—'postmodern' even, as it wrestles with paradox and contradictions, happily holding them together without feeling the need to apologise for the fact. He may make us feel rather disorientated in that he does not adopt a straight, linear style of argumentation, but tends to go back and forth—even sideways at times—in his themes and observations. Ecclesiastes draws us into his own spiritual journey as he explores the meaning of life, not by way of abstract philosophy (although there is much here philosophers would do well to consider), but by personal observation and experiment. Much of what he says will resonate with the modern reader, whether Christian or not. One thing is for sure, a careful reading of this book will result in us never seeing the world in the same way again.

It would be a mistake, however, to view these writings as merely the contemplations of an ancient king with time

on his hands and money to spare. For this is a book which is one with 65 other books which make up the Bible. It is therefore part of a bigger story which culminates in the greatest story ever told centring upon a descendent of Ecclesiastes—Jesus Christ. As we shall see, many of the questions the writer wrestles with find their resolution in the man from Nazareth (who is also the God from heaven) and this makes all the difference in the world. Whether a Christian believer or not, if you have a sneaking suspicion that life is meant to be more than what we wear, eat, drink, work and play, and yet no matter what you do you are still left with a sense of incompleteness, then read on, this is the book for you.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to so many people for making this book possible.

First, a great note of thanks to Mark Lanier for his kind generosity in enabling me to use the excellent facilities of the Lanier Theological Library in Houston, Texas. Mark is one of the most personable, kindest and ablest men I have ever met and his vision in setting up such a wonderful resource is truly inspiring. I would like to thank the library's staff, including Charles Mickey the library's Director, Sharon Cofran, the chief librarian and all the other wonderful ladies of the library, 'Southern belles', every one of them; one could not wish for a more gracious and helpful staff team.

Secondly, I would like to express my gratitude to Shirley Godbold for her labour of love in checking over the manuscript and to my colleague Dr Richard Hawes, for his review of the many references. Appreciation is also expressed to Philip Tinker and the questions he has

produced at the end of each chapter for further thought and discussion.

It continues to be a great source of joy to belong to a church, St John, Newland, which loves the teaching of the Bible, and more importantly, the God of the Bible. Thanks also to my ministerial colleagues whose faithful Biblical teaching continues to inspire and challenge me—Lee McMunn, Scott Mckay and Jake Belder.

Finally, as always, my heartfelt thanks goes to my wife Heather who remains my most loyal supporter, critic and friend.

Soli Deo Gloria,

**Melvin Tinker**

The Lanier Library, Houston, Texas

# 1

## Bubbles and smoke

### Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Here are the anguished words of a fourteen year old schoolgirl:

Why am I here? What have I done? Why was I born? Who cares about me? I am me. I must suffer because I am me. Why do we live? For love, for happiness? Why should I not commit suicide? I hate this world. I hate my parents and my home—though why, I do not know. I searched for truth, but I only found uncertainty. I was thwarted in my search for love. Where can I find happiness? I do not know. Perhaps I shall never know.<sup>2</sup>

You would have to possess a heart of stone not to be moved by those sentiments, but I suspect that such angst-ridden thoughts are only going to become increasingly more



common as society continues to fragment with a descent into the superficial and as parents, politicians and teachers fail to face up to the big questions in life. Although touched by this heartfelt cry of a young girl we are probably not all that surprised, after all, letters in the ‘Agony Aunt’ columns of teenage magazines and TV documentaries express similar cries.

But just in case we might be tempted to dismiss such thoughts as being the misplaced musings of modern youth, here are similar sentiments from someone of quite a different generation belonging to a different age:

My question, the one that brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old, was a most simple one that lies in the soul of every person, from a silly child to a wise old man. It is the question without which life is impossible, as I had learnt from experience. It is this: what will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?

Expressed another way the question can be put like this: why do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?<sup>3</sup>

Those words were written by the author of *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy.

To complete our ‘trilogy of desperation’, let us hear the words of a modern writer—Tom Wolfe:

The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that the sense of loneliness, far from being a rare and curious

phenomenon peculiar to myself and to a few solitary people, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence. All this hideous doubt, despair, and dark confusion of the soul a lonely person must know; for he is united to no image save which he creates himself. He is bolstered by no other knowledge save that which he can gather himself with the vision of his own eyes and brain. He is sustained and cheered and aided by no party. He is given comfort by no creed. He has no faith in him except his own and often that faith deserts him leaving him shaken and filled with impotence. Then it seems to him that his life has come to nothing. That he is ruined, lost, and broken past redemption and that morning, that bright and shining morning with its promise of new beginnings, will never come upon the earth again as it once did.<sup>4</sup>

What may come as a surprise is when we read similar words in the Bible. Indeed, the whole of the book of Ecclesiastes appears at first sight to be one long variation on the same despairing theme of the troubled teenager, Tolstoy and Wolfe (although as we shall discover it is so much more). We only have to consider the opening few verses which afford a taste of what is to come: 'Meaningless, meaningless' says the Teacher, 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' It sounds so 'irreligious', so 'un-Christian', so 'heretical' and yet here it is repeated over and over again like a haunting refrain. Little wonder that Medieval Old Testament scholars called Ecclesiastes one of the Bible's 'two dangerous books.'! (The other one being the Song of Solomon with its overt sexuality).<sup>5</sup>

We have to admit that the thoughts and observations of our writer do appear to have a contemporary ring about

them, chiming in with the views of many modern writers and thinkers. In fact they resonate with the thoughts and feelings of the ordinary man and woman in the street. In other words, the world our writer inhabits with all its disappointments, frustrations and contradictions—where so much is expected and so little delivered, and yet at the same time with the awareness that there is much in life which makes it worth living, is very much *our* world. However, we would be wrong to draw the conclusion that this book has found its way into the Bible by mistake, that somehow an atheist has managed to slip one by the compilers of Scripture! For what soon becomes apparent is that this man is a firm believer in the one true God.<sup>6</sup>

When reading commentaries on Ecclesiastes we often come across statements like these:

This book ... is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to read and to understand. Its interest is no less significant a subject than the meaning of life.<sup>7</sup>

Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most enigmatic book in the Old Testament. Like the desert Sphinx, it teases us with questions, yields its secrets only grudgingly, and will not allow us the luxury of easy answers. In other words, it is thoroughly irritating, but at the same time almost mesmerizing in its appeal.<sup>8</sup>

Ecclesiastes poses one of the more interesting hermeneutical [interpretive] challenges in the Old Testament, for two reasons. First, the message of the book seems to be at odds with theological trajectories evident elsewhere in the Hebrew

Scriptures. Second, at least on the surface, Ecclesiastes is dotted with noticeable internal inconsistencies.<sup>9</sup>

Trying to grasp Ecclesiastes feels like trying to pin down a large resistant octopus; just when you think you have the tentacles under control, there is one sticking out again!<sup>10</sup>

A daunting book indeed! However, because something is difficult to understand doesn't mean it is impossible. We shall see that once we have grasped a few basic principles we will find this to be a book which is pastorally helpful and apologetically useful (even though answers are not yielded all that easily!). It is a book which helps Christians connect with unbelievers who are living in the same good but broken, messed up world we are all in, struggling for answers. We shall discover that, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, 'Not only are we in the same boat, but we are all seasick.'<sup>11</sup> What is more, it enables people to see the world as *God* sees it and so to do something about it. This idea of seeing things properly, taking the time to look at life squarely in the face, is fundamental to the writer's outlook.<sup>12</sup> It is not a matter of approaching life with all its beauty and ugliness with our own preconceived ideas, airbrushing out what we consider awkward or inconvenient, but engaging in a comprehensive survey of life and following through whatever clues there may be to where they might lead.

### **The person**

Who, then, is the writer of this enigmatic yet enticing book and what can we know about him?

The first thing to say is that the one who has put the book