

Term 3
2021

ECCLESIASTES

The search for meaning



9 Studies for Group or Personal Use

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This study owes several helpful insights to *The Message of Ecclesiastes (The Bible Speaks Today, 2011)* by Derek Kidner, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs: The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2001)* by Iain Provan, and *Ecclesiastes: The Search For Meaning* (study guide: Matthias Media, 2013) by Tim McMahan.

Series Overview

Ecclesiastes gives the appearance of having been written with our time in mind. Its main voice expresses a scepticism that sounds almost 'modern'. Consequently, many people have turned to this book for help when they have experienced disillusionment with their world – and even with God.

Author and Structure

The main speaker of the book is called Qoheleth (pronounced KO-HEH-LET). This is not his given name, but rather a pseudonym, which literally translates as 'assembler'. Combined with the book's instructive nature, common English translations include 'Preacher' or 'Teacher'. Following the Holman translation, from hereon in we will call Qoheleth 'the Teacher'.

Many have assumed the Teacher to be King Solomon. This is implied by the royal title he attaches to himself, his apparent access to resources and experience, and Solomon's renown for possessing wisdom. Unlike Proverbs and Song of Songs, however, this isn't made explicit. The reference in 1:16 to 'all those who were over Jerusalem before me' implies a long succession of rulers, whereas Solomon only had one (in David's line) – David himself. Moreover, all signs of royalty fade after chapter 2, and the author refers to himself only as 'the Teacher', taking the stance merely of an observer, not a ruler. In the words of Derek Kidner:

It seems fairly clear that we're meant to see the non-royal title as the writer's own, and the royal title as simply a means of dramatizing the quest he describes in chapters one and two. He pictures for us a super-Solomon, (as he implies by the word 'surpassing' in 1:16) to demonstrate that the most gifted man conceivable, who could outstrip every king who ever occupied the throne of David, would still return empty-handed from the quest for self-fulfilment.

The view that the Teacher is Solomon also fails satisfactorily to account for the two distinct 'voices' within the book: the Teacher, and a second wise man whose third-person narrative voice in the prologue and epilogue frames the Teacher's first-person reflections. Thus, structurally, the book of Ecclesiastes is divided into three parts: a short prologue (1:1–11), followed by a long monologue by the Teacher (1:12–12:8), concluding with a brief epilogue (12:9–14).

Genre

Ecclesiastes is broadly categorised under the genre of 'wisdom literature', along with other Old Testament book such as Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Job. This is understandable as the book is to a degree one long meditation on wisdom and what it means to 'live well under the sun'.

However, there are no *exact parallels* to Ecclesiastes in the Bible or in the Ancient Near East. It isn't cast in the form of axioms and truisms about life like Proverbs, although they make an appearance. It isn't a poetic meditation on life and love, like Song of Songs. Nor is it a polemic, like the dialogue-driven book of Job. By contrast, amid its philosophical contemplations, it has a distinctly autobiographical tone – while never becoming an actual autobiography. Perhaps a way to understand it is as a 'wisdom memoir'.

Theological Message

Some see Ecclesiastes as a *pessimist's book* – so pessimistic, in fact, that it should be understood as a 'foil', a teaching device used by the second wise man to instruct his son. Thus, the Teacher comes to represent the dangers of speculative, doubting 'wisdom' in Israel. This seems too far – and unfair to the Teacher. A fairer view would be that it's a *realist's book*. Yes, the Teacher has doubts and often sums up life as 'absolute futility', and yes, he even questions God's role in and over all things. But there is an unmistakable note of faith in his observations and reflections; in the Teacher's view, life 'under the sun' is futile when lived apart from God. When lived in the context of one's Creator it can and does prove to have purpose, and so can, in fact, be embraced.

Christian readers of Ecclesiastes, of course, know more than the Teacher did about God and about God's plans for the world and for individual human beings. The New Testament reveals Jesus Christ as the One who redeems us from 'futility', the *hebel* under which the Teacher suffered. Jesus is the Son of God, yet he experienced the godless futility of the world so that he could free us from it.

And so we know, for example, about the resurrection and new life, and about how divine justice is ultimately delivered in the universe; how in the end it does go better for God-fearers than for the wicked (8:12–13). As a result, Christians can experience deep significance precisely in those areas where the Teacher felt most oppressed. Jesus has restored meaning to labour, love, and life. After all, by facing death, Jesus conquered the biggest fear facing the Teacher, and he showed that death is not the end of all meaning, but the entrance into the ultimate experience of it: the presence of God.

STUDY 1 | The Treadmill of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1. Have you ever given much thought to questions like, 'what's the point of it all?' Or have you ever heard others ask that question? What conclusions have you come to, or heard others come to?

READ | Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

2. Who might 'the Teacher' be? Why do you think he adopts this title? How does 'Son of David, king in Jerusalem' help us?

The word translated 'absolute futility' is *hebel*, which refers to 'mist' or 'vapour'; something that has the appearance of substance but which fades away. It appears later in 9:7, and in that context is translated 'fleeting'.

3. What do you think the Teacher means when he declares everything to be 'absolute futility' (consider his follow-up question in v.3)? How does knowing what the word *hebel* means help you?

- As a 'gut response' do you agree or disagree (especially that *everything* is absolute futility)? Why?

4. The Teacher goes on to make two comparisons between human beings and nature. First, what point does he make by his contrast in verse 4?

5. Second, consider the Teacher's observation about nature in vv.5–7, then consider his comparison with people in v.8. What is his point here?

- How do you feel about this view of the world (as a place that doesn't 'satisfy')? In what way does it or does it not ring true to you?

6. The phrase 'under the sun' is a way of referring to life on earth. What do you make of the Teacher's famous declaration in v.9 that 'there is nothing new under the sun'? Is it accurate? Or is it the statement of someone limited by his ancient time and place?

7. What final, downbeat point does the Teacher make in this opening passage (v.11)?

- To what extent is this *not* true in your experience? To what extent *is* it true?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. Have a look back over these first 11 verses. If you haven't noticed it already, what – or rather, *who* – is not mentioned?

9. The Teacher will go on throughout Ecclesiastes to meditate further on these matters – and bring God well and truly into the picture as he does so. At this point, however, how might you characterise the Teacher's observations and assertions? How you respond to them?

10. Recognising that the teacher stands in his own time and place, and that Ecclesiastes is part of the 'whole counsel of God', what difference does the New Testament make to the Teacher's view of the world and life? In particular:

- Lessons from nature
- what wisdom looks like
- 'gain' and 'futility'
- 'newness'

STUDY 2 | Pointless Possessions

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26

1. Have you heard the phrase 'ignorance is bliss'? What do you understand it to mean? Do you agree with it?

READ | Ecclesiastes 1:12–18

2. What is the 'miserable task' (NIV: 'heavy burden') God has given people (v.13)? How should we understand this as something God has 'given' us?

3. In v.14 the Teacher introduces a metaphor for futility: 'a pursuit of the wind'. This then leads to a proverb in vv.15 and 16. What do you think it means to say something is 'twisted' and 'cannot be straightened', or 'lacking' and 'cannot be counted'? What is the result of trying to do this?

- In what ways have you experienced this?

4. The Teacher says that even pursuing wisdom is 'a pursuit of the wind'. Indeed, that is brings 'much sorrow' and 'grief'. Why might this be so?

READ | Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

5. List the various 'pleasures and possessions' the Teacher pursued in his 'wisdom quest'. What was the result?

- Consider the equivalent of these pleasures and possessions today/in your life. To what extent have you experienced 'futility' doing them and gaining them, or witnessed it in others?

READ | Ecclesiastes 2:12–17

6. What is the advantage wisdom seemingly has over folly (cf. vv.12-14a)?
7. However, why does the Teacher not consider this an advantage in the end (vv.14b-17)? Are the wise no better than fools? Why/why not?

READ | Ecclesiastes 2:18–26

8. The Teacher continues in his pessimism: as a result of his knowledge he hates all his work. What specific reason does he give in vv.19–23 for viewing his work as 'futile'?

- Do you ever feel/have you ever felt the same about your work?

9. Consider the Teacher's conclusion in vv.24–25:

(a) How is it different to what's come before, and how does it connect with what's come before?

(b) What do you think is his point (consider the reference to 'God's gift' and compare earlier with 1:13)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION**READ | Matthew 6:19–21**

10. What difference does Jesus' teaching make to the Teacher's view of work and gain?

- What difference does it make to you?

11. How does the gospel fill out the Teacher's understanding of wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–2:16)?

STUDY 3 | The Tyranny of Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1–22

1. People who are 'into nature' sometimes describe the experience of being outdoors in almost transcendent, spiritual terms. Why might this be so? Has this ever been your experience?

READ | Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

2. What do you see is the point of the Teacher's list in vv.1–8? Is it positive or negative (or neutral)? Perhaps think in terms of whether the list is *prescriptive* (saying what *should* be) or *descriptive* (saying what *is*).

READ | Ecclesiastes 3:9–15

3. What do you make of the idea that God has 'put eternity in their [people's] hearts'?

4. What paradox does the Teacher identify about this (cf. v.11)?

5. According to the Teacher, what does 'the good life' look like, and how should we view it?

6. How does the Teacher characterise/summarise God's work (v.15)? What difference does this make to us?

READ | Ecclesiastes 3:16–22

7. The tone once again reverts to a more pessimistic view of things. What is the Teacher's observance in v.16? Give some examples from your own observation/experience.

In the face of injustice, the Teacher appears to find solace in the judgment of God, which he brings to everyone in the end – even the wealthy and powerful who were able to escape human justice (since they often control it). According to the Teacher, eventually God leads people to a realisation of their depravity and essential mortality. As Iain Provan says: *In this condition they are, perhaps painfully, aware of the truth: for all that they like to think of themselves as gods, human beings are mortal, just like the beasts.*

8. What does the Teacher say in vv.19–22 about the fate of people? What does this tell us about his worldview?

- What is the truth in what he says? In what way might you disagree? Why?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. There is a view that the Christian life is defined in terms of activities in which we may *not* engage – partly because that is what is lived out in many Christian circles. How does Ecclesiastes 3 challenge that view?

10. What difference does the New Testament hope of resurrection make to the Teacher's perspective on life in vv.16–22? What difference does it make to yours?

STUDY 4 | The Heartache of the Have-Nots

Ecclesiastes 4:1–16

1. Think of various utopian visions (i.e. ideal worlds) you've encountered, whether in books, movies and television, or even political and social commentary. What are some things they have in common?

READ | Ecclesiastes 4:1–3

2. What does the Teacher observe?

3. Why can nothing be done about 'the tears of the oppressed'?

The world, as a place of striving after 'gain', is a place of tears and disproportionate power, in which many are ground down and have 'no comforter.' (Iain Provan)

4. In light of injustice and oppression, to what confronting conclusion does the Teacher come?

- In one sense it's almost impossible to consider this, but: do you agree? Why/why not?

READ | Ecclesiastes 4:4–12

5. What truth is there in the Teacher's declaration that 'all labour and skilful work is due to a man's jealousy of his friend'? (v.4)

- To what extent have you experienced this in your work and life?

6. Why is lack of companionship futile as well (in the Teacher's eyes)?

7. List some of the benefits of companionship that the Teacher outlines in vv.9–12.

- We live in a vastly more individualistic culture than the Teacher did. If loneliness was prevalent enough for him to observe and lament, then it goes double for us. What are some circumstances of loneliness that people in our society or church community experience today? What are some practical ways we can bring companionship to people – either those we know or those we don't?

READ | Ecclesiastes 4:13–16

8. How would you summarise the teaching in vv.13–16? What's the point of his enigmatic parable?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS

There is a common theme in these four observations: something is *lacking*. There's a lack of justice and comfort in the face of oppression; a lack of satisfaction and joy in work; a lack of companionship to share life's ups and downs; and a lack of wisdom, loyalty and affection in advancement and succession.

9. We touched on this earlier, but what are some ways our modern world exacerbates the ills observed by the Teacher in this passage?

10. What biblical bases do we have for responding to these ills?

READ | Luke 10:25–37

11. How does Jesus' parable (and, ultimately, *example*) help you to respond in a godly way to the Teacher's observations in Ecclesiastes 4?

STUDY 5 | Worship and Wealth

Ecclesiastes 5:1–6:12

1. The late Sydney business tycoon Rene Rivkin famously said, 'He who dies with the most toys wins.' Is there anything in such a sentiment that you find attractive, or compelling? What would you say is the worldview that drives it?

READ | Ecclesiastes 5:1–7

2. What does the Teacher warn against? What – or who – might this look like (for the ancient Israelite and for us)?

3. Why is this foolish?

READ | Ecclesiastes 5:8–20

4. What is the connection made between wealth and injustice (vv.8-9)? How have you seen this in our world today?

5. Why, according to the Teacher, is the sleep of the worker 'sweet', but the sleep of the rich not?

6. What is the 'sickening tragedy' the teacher describes (vv.13–17)? What's tragic about it?

7. Consider the Teacher's observations on what is 'good' in vv.18–20. How do you reconcile this with the observations/teaching of vv.10–17?

8. What do you think verse 20 means?

- What might it look like (or does it look like) for you to be 'occupied by the joy of your heart'?

READ | Ecclesiastes 6:1–12

In chapter 6 the Teacher returns to the 'tragedy' of futile having. In many ways he restates observations and assertions he's made in previous sections: death comes to all, so whether you gather much or gather little, whether you're wise or you're foolish, we all go 'to the same place' (v.6). Indeed, like before (4:2-3) the Teacher reasons in vv.3–6 that, rather than knowing the tragedy of gaining and losing, rather than experiencing the futile striving of life, it's actually better to have been stillborn or not at all. It's a confronting conclusion to arrive at, but there's an unsentimental logic to it.

9. What's the difference between 'a wandering desire' and 'what the eye sees' (v.9)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. The connection between 'fearing God' and living well is a common one in the wisdom literature (e.g. Proverbs 9:10). So too here (5:7). What do you think it means?

11. What light does the New Testament shine on the teaching here regarding worship, wealth and 'having'? (cf. Luke 10:13–21)

STUDY 6 | Beyond Understanding

Ecclesiastes 7:1–29

1. Think of people you would consider to be the *wisest* people you know. What makes them so wise (in your eyes!)?

READ | Ecclesiastes 7:1–6

2. List the 5 *better thans* in vv.1–6. What do you notice about the middle three?
3. Death has previously been used by the Teacher to undermine the value of wisdom. What do you think his point might be here?
- Does the Teacher's view resonate with you at all? Why/why not?

READ | Ecclesiastes 7:7–14

4. In what ways does the Teacher say we should *not* respond to the awfulness of realising our mortality and the world's brokenness (vv.9–10)? Why might these not be wise responses?
5. Consider vv.13–14. To what foundational truth does the Teacher return? How should this guide our response to life's ups and downs?

READ | Ecclesiastes 7:15–22

6. The Teacher states an obvious truth in v.17: if you live an ‘excessively wicked’ life, then you’ll likely die younger than you otherwise would have. Therefore, don’t live that way. What is the less-obvious truth he states in v.16? Why is it also true?
7. What way does v.18 suggest we avoid both excesses?

READ | Ecclesiastes 7:23–29

8. In vv.23–25 the Teacher moves to the climax of his point. What is it? What’s his conclusion after ‘testing all this by wisdom’?
9. Verse 28 appears odd at first. Do you think the Teacher’s speaking generally, or of a particular experience? How might v.29 help us understand the point of the comparison (in v.28)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. What are some of the ways our modern (esp. western) world challenges the Teacher’s thoughts on wisdom?
11. Consider Paul’s teaching on Christ as ‘the wisdom of God’ (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). How does it fill in – or even challenge slightly – the Teacher’s more pessimistic view of wisdom?

STUDY 7 | Death, Life and Control

Ecclesiastes 9:1–12

1. By 2014 the Monty Python song *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* was the most popular song Britons would like played at their funerals. Does its popularity in this way make sense to you? Why/why not?

READ | Ecclesiastes 9:1–6

2. What do you make of the teacher's conclusion/explanation in 9:1? How does 8:14–17 help us make sense of it?

3. What is the 'one fate' for everyone? Why is this 'an evil' (v.3a)?

4. Despite the inevitability of death, and the 'evil and madness' in people's hearts, what 'hope' does the Teacher see (vv.4–5)?

- Those who have felt the sharp sting of death may well disagree that death can help us appreciate life more. Perhaps that's you. To what extent can you agree with the Teacher? What makes it difficult for you to accept his conclusion?

READ | Ecclesiastes 9:7–12

5. How would you summarise the Teacher's subsequent advice in vv.7–10?

- In your opinion is this good advice, or bad? Why?

6. In v.7, what do you think the Teacher means by 'God has already accepted your works'?

7. Consider vv.11–12. What further evidence does the Teacher put forward to show that life is, humanly speaking, fundamentally incomprehensible? What is the chief effect of this?

- To what extent is this/has this been your experience of life?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. How do you understand/reconcile the Teacher's view of life and death – which is very 'secular' and earthbound – with the rest of the Bible's?

9. In what ways are you tempted to gain control that's not ultimately possible?

10. What difference does the teaching of 9:1–12 make to:

- Your pursuit of blessing?
- Your prayer to, and worship of, God?

STUDY 8 | The Way of Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:20

1. Consider the well-known adage of uncertain origin (variously attributed to Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln) that 'It's better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt'. In your experience, what truth is there in it?

READ | Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:1

2. The Teacher concluded the previous section by showing the incomprehensibility of life with its hazards of time and apparent chance. What evidence does he give here that further bolsters this claim?

- The calm words of the wise are carefully heeded – then promptly forgotten (as is the wise man himself). When have you witnessed or experienced this? Does this mean wisdom is futile?

READ | Ecclesiastes 10:2–7

3. To what does the 'left' and 'right' in 10:2 refer? What is the Teacher's point in vv.2–3?

The notion of 'inclination' is key to the Teacher's point here. As verse 3 goes on to add, whether someone has acted wisely or foolishly isn't always immediately obvious; it becomes apparent in the subsequent course of life (indeed, foolishness will *inevitably* become apparent!).

- Can you think of examples of this?

4. A couple of different rulers are described in vv.4–7. How would you describe the ruler of v.4 and the rulers of vv.5–7 respectively?

- What are some of the real-world consequences of foolish rulers (like those depicted here)?

READ | Ecclesiastes 10:8–15

5. Despite the frustrations the Teacher experiences in trying to apply wisdom in an incomprehensible world, he nevertheless maintains that being wise is better than being foolish. Have a look at vv.8–15 and note:

- i. Things about life that the wise understand and act upon.
- ii. How the fool acts and what happens to him.

READ | Ecclesiastes 10:16–20

6. What contrasting visions of kingship/rule are depicted in vv.16 and 17?

7. Is the Teacher revealing an ageist and classist side? Is he saying that youth can never rule well, or that only the noble class can? Why/why not?

8. What do you think the Teacher's implication is in v.20?

- The reach and influence of the rich and powerful remain similar today. How might we experience it (and live with/under it)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Do you think people have too high an expectation of politicians, or not enough? Why/why not?

READ | Ephesians 5:15–17 and Matthew 7:24–25

10. In seeking to live 'wise lives' today, how do Paul's words to the Ephesians and Jesus' words to his listeners speak into the observations of Ecclesiastes 10?

11. For personal reflection: how do you rate according to the characteristics of wisdom and foolishness in this chapter? Are there practical changes you could/should make?

STUDY 9 | Embracing God's Gift of Life

Ecclesiastes 11:1–12:14

1. The idea of 'living life to the fullest' and ticking off 'bucket lists' has gained more and more popularity in recent decades – no more so than in our present 'Instagram age' of social media. Do you see these mindsets as essential to 'embracing life'?

READ | Ecclesiastes 11:1–6

2. What do the actions described in 11:1–2 and v.6 have in common? What attitudes might motivate such action?

3. What point is the Teacher making by his observations in v.3?

4. The illustrations in vv.4–5 contrast this certainty of v.3. What lesson do you think the Teacher want us to draw from this observation?

- The Teacher commends a willingness to get involved in life, despite not fully understanding it or knowing what the future holds. How can such willingness demonstrate a right acknowledgement of God and an appropriately humble view of self?

READ | Ecclesiastes 11:7–10

5. Why is it good for young people to be 'glad of heart' – to enjoy life?

6. What advice and warning does the Teacher give young people as they vigorously pursue life?

- What signs are there in our society that we live in a culture that perhaps unhelpfully celebrates youth and youthfulness – indeed, worships it even? What might the Teacher say to this?

READ | Ecclesiastes 12:1–8

7. The Teacher turns to consider the inevitable process of ageing. How do vv.1–7 convey the realities of old age and death? List some of the images.

- At the risk of generalisation, how much do you think God figures in thinking of people in our society at 'each end' of life?
- How is our situation different from the Teacher's given we live this side of Christ's coming, death, resurrection and ascension (cf. Romans 8:18–25)? How is it the same?

READ | Ecclesiastes 12:9–14

8. What is the nature of 'the sayings of the wise', and what should be their goal (v.11)?

9. The wisdom of the Teacher, and his desire to gain and impart knowledge is rightly celebrated in vv.9–11 (possibly by the ‘editor’ of the final form of the book). How, then, do you understand the apparent contrast in vv.12–14? How does ‘the conclusion of the matter’ in v.13 help us?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. How might the Teacher respond to the following attitudes found in some Christian circles today?

- If you’re good, God will bless you with prosperity and health; poverty and sickness are the result of sin and lack of faith.
- We can determine God’s specific will for our lives by ‘reading’ the events and circumstances that happen to us.
- It’s wrong for Christian to enjoy the pleasurable things of life.

11. Think back over Ecclesiastes as a whole. How has it changed your view of:

- God?
- Yourself?
- The world in which we live?

