

Ecclesiastes Teaching Overview

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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 mesmeric in its appeal. It draws us towards it by mirroring the perplexity we all feel as we grapple with life.

Barry Webb, Five Festal Garments

The book of Ecclesiastes offers profound wisdom for life in our culture, but the much needed wisdom lies within a book that has puzzled and frustrated Bible readers for centuries. If we want to glean the wisdom that is offered, we need the help of the Holy Spirit as we work to understand and apply its message to our lives today. This overview is intended to help bring some foundational clarity to our interpretive approach as we make our way through this book together.

KEY THEME

Ecclesiastes confronts us with some uncomfortable realities: life can be unpredictable, our future is outside our control, and the pleasures that the world offers are fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying. In confronting us with these sobering truths, the book helps deconstruct the common ways that humans pursue pleasure and purpose, it teaches us to surrender to God in the midst of the complex realities of life, and it lays a foundation for a more mature and more reliable path to lasting joy.

OVERVIEW

In Ecclesiastes, the anonymous author encourages us to listen to the honest, dark, and sometimes cynical musings of a royal teacher who has lived out his life “under the Sun” searching in every conceivable way for a life of meaning and significance. In striking contrast to the book of Proverbs, this teacher has come to a sobering conclusion: **life under the sun is like a vapor** (Hebrew: *hebel*). The phrase “under the sun” is used to signify life in the observable fallen world. - it’s fleeting, unpredictable, and impossible to grasp - offering no reliable path to joy, no clear meaning, and no lasting satisfaction. The teacher substantiates his claim by investigating several of the traditional ways that people tend to search for joy: career, wealth, sexuality, relationships, health, ethical living, and even religion. He walks through a methodical process of existential deconstruction, thoughtfully exposing the cracks that run through the foundation of each pursuit, proving them all to be a mirage, an illusion,

a fleeting vapor in the human quest for meaning and joy. It's not that he thinks there isn't goodness or meaning in life. It's that even the most good and meaningful pursuits are unstable and fleeting, inevitably falling to the relentless cycles of time, the unpredictability of chance, and the inevitability of death.

Why would the biblical author want us to hear these words? I can see at least three reasons, two found within the book, and the last comes when we consider the place of Ecclesiastes in the broader biblical narrative.

- 1) **It's real.** As cynical as the teacher's ideas may seem, he is pointing out legitimate cracks that run through the foundation of human pursuit of joy. Ultimately, he is exposing uncomfortable truths about the nature of life that most thoughtful people will periodically wrestle with, and that all human beings will inevitably face. The brutal honesty serves as a wake-up call to those who tend to avoid these sobering realities, inviting them to stop living for things that cannot ultimately satisfy. At the same time, the book serves to validate some of the darker thoughts that rumble around in the minds of so many who already feel the unstable and fleeting nature of life.
- 2) **It's helpful.** Instead of asking people to suppress or ignore those cynical thoughts, the author meets us in the disorienting valley of deconstruction and gives us a path forward. The path forward doesn't lead down into an inescapable hole of nihilistic hopelessness. Far from it. After the words of the teacher have concluded, the author re-enters the conversation to lead us forward to a more mature and foundational understanding of the good life: fear God and keep His commandments. Honor God by surrendering to Him and trusting Him as the Creator King, and follow His way of life. This gives a clear path forward, even when life is confusing and disorienting and we can't see the full picture.
- 3) **It points us to Jesus.** The book as whole exists in the broader context of God's story to pose a question: is there more to life than what we can experience "under the Sun"? Jesus enters human history as the answer to that question. True joy and abundant life are found in Him, as we trust Him and follow His way of life, even as it leads through beauty and pain, through death itself, and into the life of the resurrection. For those who follow Jesus, every glimpse of beauty in this life is a foretaste of the beauty of the future resurrection life, and every experience of pain, loss, and death will be redeemed and transformed into glory that is beyond compare. This resurrection life that Jesus has opened to those who trust in Him gives meaning and significance to everything we experience as we live out our lives under the Sun.

INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

Make no mistake, Ecclesiastes is one of the most challenging books of the Bible to interpret. Attempts to understand the atypical and enigmatic subject matter of Ecclesiastes are further complicated by the unusual literary framework of the book as a whole. Generations of Bible readers have been confused by the origin and the structure of the book, and even among faithful scholars there is still no wide consensus about the identity of the “author”. Still, any attempt to work through the book in a coherent way requires the reader to make some fundamental interpretive decisions, even if they require some degree of speculation. Much could be said on this issue (and much has been said), but for our purposes, I’ll simply summarize my basic approach to the distinct voices that frame and drive the content of the book.

Most modern commentators agree that the book of Ecclesiastes is presented with two distinct voices. The body of Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 1:2 - 12:8) comes from the voice of “the teacher” (Hebrew: *qoheleth*). It is this teacher that walks the reader into the honest and sometimes cynical ideas that characterize the book as a whole. Then there is the voice of the anonymous author - “the frame narrator” - who introduces the teacher in the opening verse (Eccl. 1:1) and then returns to conclude the book with some final thoughts of his own (Eccl. 12:9-14).

It might be helpful to imagine the frame narrator as a faithful spiritual leader who encourages you to listen to a profound sermon from a provocative teacher and then circles back at the end to offer some grounding thoughts to help center you as you chew on the potentially disorienting ideas presented in the sermon.

With this basic framework in mind, we have to address at least two foundational issues to help us know how to interpret the content of the book. First, we need to consider the identity of “the teacher”. Second, we need to consider to what degree the frame narrator endorses the message of the teacher.

Who is *Qoheleth*?

The Hebrew word *qoheleth*, often translated as “the preacher” (ESV) or “the teacher” (NIV), refers to one who has called for an assembly. It comes from the Hebrew root *qahal* which means “to gather” or “to assemble”. When the Hebrew Bible was translated to Greek (sometime between 300-100 BCE), the translators chose to translate this Hebrew word *qoheleth* with the Greek word *ekklesiastes*. This Greek word comes from the root *ekklesia*, which the New Testament authors use to refer to the gathered people of God, the church. When used in the Old Testament, the word *qoheleth* always refers to a royal figure who has called for an assembly of God’s people for some matter of national significance. In the

case of Ecclesiastes, the message of the royal assembler is to offer the people a seasoned and sober reflection on Israel's history and his own experience of life under the Sun.

The fact that *qoheleth* is described as a "son of David" and a "king in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:1) indicates that this is a kingly descendent of David, not that it is necessarily one of David's biological sons. Some of the statements made by the teacher – particularly about his unsurpassed wisdom – have led many to assume that this is referring to Solomon, and this is certainly a traditional position. However, the book itself never makes that claim, and the content and language of the book has led most modern commentators to agree that Solomonic authorship is unlikely and that this was written much later in Israel's history after their exile in Babylon, centuries after Solomon's reign. What seems far more likely is that *qoheleth* is a later royal figure in Israel who is reflecting on his own life and on the history of Israel's kingdom mission with Solomon-like wisdom.

Upon reflecting on his own life and Israel's painful history, this royal teacher has come to a sobering conclusion: that this whole attempt to build an enduring kingdom and live a fulfilling life is essentially like chasing after the wind. No matter what the kings of Israel have achieved or experienced, they can't seem to build anything of lasting value. Even if they defeat their enemies, more will come. Even if they are righteous, they might still get decimated. Even if they build a flourishing kingdom, the next generation will likely ruin it. Even if they chase after possessions, wealth or worldly pleasures, it will all eventually fade away and won't accomplish anything of enduring worth.

In all of these ways [building projects, riches, royal treasuries, pools, singers] the royal boast in Eccles. 2:4-10 displays a king's achievements in terms that show an author of the Second Temple period reading and interpreting the earlier stories of Israel's kings... the writer has pulled together texts and motifs from Israel's histories... to show that the paradigm king, Solomon, set the mould that was continually replicated through the rest of Israel's monarchy down to the exile.

Jennie Barbour, The Story of Israel in the Book of Qoheleth

Time has demonstrated an endless cycle of success and failure, chaos has continued to bring frustration and disorder, and generation after generation has succumbed to the inevitable fate of death, leaving the next generation to repeat the cycle. The vital wisdom that this royal assembler is offering is that the task of Israel's kingdom builders – apart from some cosmic shift in the natural order of things – is fundamentally insufficient. It's like a vapor.

Does the "frame narrator" fully endorse the message of Qoheleth?

What are we supposed to think of this sober and seemingly hopeless message? Should we receive it or should we reject it as faithless and overly cynical? Should we pick and choose what to receive, what to modify, and what to reject? To answer this question, we have to consider how the "frame narrator"

views the message of *qoheleth*. Faithful scholars disagree about this issue. Some well-respected Hebrew Scholars claim that the message of “the teacher” is at times inconsistent with well-established orthodox teachings found elsewhere in Scripture, and they believe that frame narrator uses his voice to temper the words of the teacher. They essentially treat *qoheleth* as a character in the author’s story, and claim that this character doesn’t always speak reliable wisdom. In support of this view they cite other examples in Scripture where unhelpful advice is given by unreliable characters. The primary example given is that of Job’s “friends” who offer their own wisdom that may at first glance feel partially true, but the fuller narrative of Job shows the “wisdom” to be fundamentally flawed and unhelpful.

As much as this makes sense in the case of Job, I find applying this framework to Ecclesiastes an unsatisfying attempt to resolve theological tensions. In Job, the advice of the friends plays a smaller part of a large narrative that clearly shows the advice of the friends to be flawed. Whereas, in Ecclesiastes, the words of the teacher make up almost the entirety of the book, and the frame narrator never questions their trustworthiness. In fact, the closing thoughts from the narrator explicitly endorse the words of the teacher as upright and true, even when they are uncomfortable and challenging:

Besides being wise, the teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The teacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

Ecclesiastes 12:9–11

The frame narrator is claiming that these uncomfortable insights are used in the hands of the one Shepherd to poke and prod us down the right path. We may not be able to make sense of the path that we are on, but stay the course, follow God’s revealed wisdom for life, and in the end, God will sort everything out.

A Messianic Reading of Ecclesiastes

How are we supposed to read this book as Christians? Do we simply let New Testament theology override the challenging and enigmatic teachings of Ecclesiastes? Or does the book of Ecclesiastes in some way anticipate the coming of the Christ? It’s the final line of the frame narrator that gives us a key.

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

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14

The closing line of the book anticipates a future where God will bring final judgment, a future time when He will put the world to rights. This eschatological note reminds us of a crucial truth: that

Ecclesiastes is written in the middle of an unfolding drama and it needs to be interpreted in light of that progressive revelation. Like all of the Hebrew Scriptures, the key to interpreting the message of Ecclesiastes is to read this canonically (as part of an unfolding biblical narrative) and messianically (as part of a narrative that is preparing for the coming of the Christ).

We must understand that the wisdom of the teacher is given at a moment in redemptive history when the failure of Israel's kings and their kingdom project was on full display. Generation after generation had failed. The kingdom had been destroyed, the nation was no longer on an upward trajectory. Instead, they had been repeatedly defeated by a series of foreign powers and were floundering with no realistic path toward the Kingdom that they had experienced under David and Solomon, much less toward the glory that had been promised to the people of Israel.

The teacher sees the endless cycles of time, chaos, and death. He feels the ultimate insignificance of their accomplishments and the limits of their efforts. From his vantage point in history, their mission to build a lasting and meaningful Kingdom was like "chasing after the wind". It all feels shadowy, like a vapor, and the only way to make sense out of this senseless cycle would be for God to intervene in some dramatic way. In order for the history of the world to be anything other than vanity, God would have to fix some foundational flaw in the universe. That's what the book of Ecclesiastes is highlighting, and that's what Jesus came to accomplish.

Through His righteous life and sacrificial death, Jesus atoned for the fundamental flaw of human sin that introduced the curse of chaos, corruption, and death into the world. Through His resurrection, Jesus has opened the door to a new epoch in the history of the world - one where all of our life "in the Lord" is not vanity (1 Corinthians 15:58).

How Do We Apply the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes to Our Lives?

Ecclesiastes was not written and handed down for generations to be analyzed as a mere philosophical treatise on the meaning of life (or lack thereof). For millennia, both the people of Israel and followers of Jesus have treated Ecclesiastes as Holy Scripture, inspired by the Spirit of God and having authority and value for our lives as the people of God. So how should we apply the message of this book to our lives here and now? A few basic principles can help guide us:

1) We must understand the meaning of Ecclesiastes in its original context for the people of Israel.

The interpretive approach summarized above can help us to read the book according to the human author's intended meaning as it would have been understood by the original audience. Specifically,

we must remember that this book was composed for the people of Israel after their exile in Babylon, and aspects of the message will only be rightfully understood within that historical context.

2) **We must read the story of Israel as a microcosm of the human experience.**

The story of Israel is essentially a retelling of the story of humanity only at a national level. Like Israel, humans were commissioned to participate in the building of God's Kingdom on earth. Like Israel, humanity turned from God and consequently experienced exile from His presence. Like Israel, humans - both individually and corporately - have been attempting to build lasting meaning and satisfaction in life "under the Sun." Like Israel, humanity has persistently failed in this quest to establish enduring meaning and ultimate joy apart from God. All humans can sense that life is a vapor, enigmatic, elusive, and fleeting. And like Israel, humans are searching for something of more substance. In the words of the teacher, God has "put eternity in man's heart." Because of this parallel relationship between the story of Israel and the human experience, Ecclesiastes has immediate - if at times nuanced - relevance for the lives of all humans in any culture.

3) **We must interpret Ecclesiastes in the light of the redemptive story that Jesus came to fulfill.**

We have access to more special Revelation than the author and audience of Ecclesiastes. God eventually did interrupt the seemingly endless cycle of Israel's history by taking on flesh to dwell as a human in the person of Jesus. Jesus brought the story of Israel and the story of humanity into a new chapter, offering rich purpose, deep joy, and the hope of eternal life to all who follow Him. If we're honest though, even as followers of Jesus our motives and our pursuits in life are a mixed bag. This is where Ecclesiastes has immense value for the Christian in our age. When we seek to live life in step with the Spirit, living for Christ and His unshakable Kingdom, we are able to find enduring meaning and lasting joy as we participate in God's plan to renew and restore the world. At the same time, as much as we continue to live our lives on our own terms according to the value systems of the world, we will find ultimately that our energy will have been wasted and our work will have been meaningless (1 Corinthians 3:9-15). Even with the sure hope of God's eternal Kingdom, the foundational truths of the teacher remain. Time will march on, chaos will continue to undermine our efforts and achievements, and death will have its word... but it won't get the last word. In Jesus, the age of the New Creation has already broken into our world giving us immense hope, even while we continue to face the challenges, troubles, and futility of the old age (Romans 8:12-17). So in the tension between that which is already secured in Christ and that which is not yet fully revealed, we wait with patience. Equipped with the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and the hope of the resurrection, we wait with anticipation for Christ to come again and make all things new.

RESOURCES

As with all resources that provide commentary on a book of the Bible, each has its contributions, limits, and weaknesses. For Ecclesiastes, I don't have a single "go to" resource. Below is a summary of resources that I've found helpful for various reasons along with some of my thoughts on their limits and/or weaknesses.

- ***The Message of Ecclesiastes* by Derek Kidner** - I appreciate Kidner's interpretive approach to the book as a whole. His commentary provides helpful insights, but it is relatively brief.
- ***Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs (NIVAC)*, by Iain Provan** - This is overall probably the most helpful commentary on Ecclesiastes. The introduction is helpful, giving a thoughtful and clear explanation of the foundational questions about the identity of the author and *qoheleth* and the relationship between the two. The outline of the book is not overly complicated, and he provides helpful insights on the meaning, interpretation, and application of each passage.
- ***The Book of Ecclesiastes (NICOT) and Ecclesiastes (Cornerstone)* by Tremper Longman** - I have deep respect for Longman, and these commentaries are excellent on exegetical details. However, I disagree with his broad approach to Ecclesiastes. He resolves the tensions and apparent contradictions present in the words of *qoheleth* by claiming that he is not always speaking of ideas that the author necessarily agrees with. I don't find this approach consistent with the internal structure of the book, and I think it at times undermines the value of the complex and honest wisdom presented in the book. I think the commentaries can still be helpful in dealing with exegetical details, but I'd recommend caution when Longman questions the veracity of a particular section.
- ***Five Festal Garments: Christian reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther (NSBT)* by Barry Webb** - Webb's treatment of Ecclesiastes is refreshing. It isn't intended to be a verse by verse commentary. However, this is an excellent resource on the structure and themes of the book and especially on its relationship to the broader redemptive story. I found his comments on the relationship between the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and the message of the New Testament particularly helpful.
- **"The Gift of Wisdom: Ecclesiastes" in *Old Testament Theology* by Bruce Waltke** - Waltke's chapter on Ecclesiastes gives an excellent overview of the book. His approach to the relationship between the author and the teacher is very helpful, and his treatment of the primary themes of the book are clear and grounding.
- ***Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* by David Gibson** - This is more of a christian living book that reads like it is an adaptation from a sermon series. Each chapter is insightful and engaging and is aimed at applying the wisdom of Ecclesiastes to real life in our age. Though it's not a commentary, this might be the most helpful resource for the majority of our congregation.

SERIES SCHEDULE

WEEK	DATE	TEXT	SERMON THEME
1	9/10/2023	Ecclesiastes 1:1-11	History on Repeat
2	9/17/2023	Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26	The Pursuit of Happiness
3	9/24/2023	Ecclesiastes 3:1-22	There Is a Season
4	10/1/2023	Ecclesiastes 4:1-16	Downward Mobility
5	10/8/2023	Ecclesiastes 5:1-7	Watch Your Mouth
6	10/15/2023	Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12	What's the Meaning of This?
7	10/22/2023	Ecclesiastes 7:1-29	The Search for Wisdom
8	10/29/2023	Ecclesiastes 8:1-17	The Limits of Wisdom
9	11/5/2023	Ecclesiastes 9:1-18	Enjoy What You Get... While it Lasts
10	11/12/2023	Ecclesiastes 10:1-11:6	Living Is a Risky Business
11	11/19/2023	Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8	You Are Going to Die
12	11/26/2023	Ecclesiastes 12:9-14	How Should We Then Live?