

## *Is Life Worth Living?*

Vanity of vanities," lamented Solomon, "all is vanity!" Solomon liked that word "vanity"; he used it thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about life "under the sun." The word means "emptiness, futility, vapor, that which vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind."

From the human point of view ("under the sun"), life does appear futile; and it is easy for us to get pessimistic. The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as "a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that." You can almost *feel* that definition!

The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life to "an onion—you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep." And British playwright George Bernard Shaw said that life was "a series of inspired follies."

When you were studying English literature in school, you may have read Matthew Arnold's poem "Rugby Chapel" in which he includes this dark description of life:

Most men eddy about  
Here and there—eat and drink,  
Chatter and love and hate,

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Gather and squander, are raised  
Aloft, are hurl'd in the dust,  
Striving blindly, achieving  
Nothing; and then they die—

What a relief to turn from these pessimistic views and hear Jesus Christ say, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Or to read Paul's majestic declaration, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58, NKJV).

Life is "not in vain" if it is lived according to the will of God, and that is what Solomon teaches in this neglected and often misunderstood book.

Before we embark on a study of Ecclesiastes, let's first get acquainted with the author and his aim in writing the book. We also want to get an overview of the book so we can better understand his approach to answering the question, "Is life really worth living?"

### 1. The Author

Nowhere in this book did the author give his name, but the descriptions he gave of himself and his experiences would indicate that the writer was King Solomon. He called himself "son of David" and "king in Jerusalem" (1:1, 12), and he claimed to have great wealth and wisdom (2:1-11, and 1:13; see 1 Kings 4:20-34 and 10:1ff). In response to Solomon's humble prayer, God promised him both wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 3:3-15); and He kept His promise.

Twelve times in Ecclesiastes the author mentioned "the king," and he made frequent references to the problems of "official bureaucracy" (4:1-3; 5:8; 8:11; 10:6-7). Keep in mind that Solomon ruled over a great nation that required a large

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standing army and extensive government agencies. He carried on many costly building projects and lived in luxury at court (1 Kings 9:10-28 and 10:1ff; 2 Chron. 1:13-17). Somebody had to manage all this national splendor, and somebody had to pay for it!

Solomon solved the problem by ignoring the original boundaries of the twelve tribes of Israel and dividing the nation into twelve "tax districts," each one managed by an overseer (1 Kings 4:7-19). In time, the whole system became oppressive and corrupt; and after Solomon died, the people begged for relief (2 Chron. 10). As you study Ecclesiastes, you sense this background of exploitation and oppression.

King Solomon began his reign as a humble servant of the Lord, seeking God's wisdom and help (1 Kings 3:5-15). As he grew older, his heart turned away from Jehovah to the false gods of the many wives he had taken from foreign lands (1 Kings 11:1ff). These marriages were motivated primarily by politics, not love, as Solomon sought alliances with the nations around Israel. In fact, many of the things Solomon did that seemed to bring glory to Israel were actually contrary to the Word of God (Deut. 17:14-20).

No amount of money or authority could stop the silent but sure ripening of divine judgment. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte said that "the secret worm... was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned." The king's latter years were miserable because God removed His hand of blessing (1 Kings 11) and maintained Solomon's throne only because of His promise to David. After Solomon's death, the nation divided; and the house of David was left with but two tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

Ecclesiastes appears to be the kind of book a person would write near the close of life, reflecting on life's experiences and the lessons learned. Solomon probably wrote Proverbs (Prov. 1:1; 1 Kings 4:32) and the Song of Solomon (1:1) during the

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years he faithfully walked with God; and near the end of his life, he wrote Ecclesiastes. There is no record that King Solomon repented and turned to the Lord, but his message in Ecclesiastes suggests that he did.

He wrote Proverbs from the viewpoint of a wise teacher (1:1-6), and Song of Solomon from the viewpoint of a royal lover (3:7-11); but when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he called himself "the Preacher" (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10). The Hebrew word is *Koheleth* (ko-HAY-leth) and is the title given to an official speaker who calls an assembly (see 1 Kings 8:1). The Greek word for "assembly" is *ekklesia*, and this gives us the English title of the book, Ecclesiastes.

But the Preacher did more than call an assembly and give an oration. The word *Koheleth* carries with it the idea of *debating*, not so much with the listeners as with himself. He would present a topic, discuss it from many viewpoints, and then come to a practical conclusion. Ecclesiastes may appear to be a random collection of miscellaneous ideas about a variety of topics, but Solomon assures us that what he wrote was orderly (12:9).

Let's consider now the aim and the development of the book.

### 2. The Aim

Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?" (1:2-3). Just in case we missed it, he put the same key at the back door (12:8). In these verses, Solomon introduces some of the key words and phrases that are used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes; so we had better get acquainted with them.

*Vanity of vanities.* We have already noted that Solomon used the word "vanity" thirty-eight times in this book. It is the

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Hebrew word *hevel*, meaning "emptiness, futility, vapor." The name "Abel" probably comes from this word (Gen. 4:2). Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is *hevel*, vanity. One of my language professors at seminary defined *hevel* as "whatever is left after you break a soap bubble."

Whether he considers his wealth, his works, his wisdom, or his world, Solomon comes to the same sad conclusion: all is "vanity and vexation of spirit" (2:11). However, this is not his final conclusion, nor is it the only message that he has for his readers. We will discover more about that later.

*Under the sun.* You will find this important phrase twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and with it the phrase "under heaven" (1:13; 2:3; 3:1). It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and not necessarily from heaven's point of view. He applies his own wisdom and experience to the complex human situation and tries to make some sense out of life. Solomon wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (12:10-11; 2 Tim. 3:16), so what he wrote was what God wanted His people to have. But as we study, we must keep Solomon's viewpoint in mind: he is examining life "under the sun."

In his *Unfolding Message of the Bible*, G. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarizes Solomon's outlook: "This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun... until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light" (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1961, p. 229).

*Profit.* The Hebrew word *yitron*, usually translated "profit," is used ten times in Ecclesiastes (1:3; 2:11, 13 [excelleth]; 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12 [excellency]; 10:10, 11 [better]). It is used

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nowhere else in the Old Testament, and its basic meaning is "that which is left over." It may be translated "surplus, advantage, gain." The word "profit" is just the opposite of "vanity." Solomon asks, "In the light of all the puzzles and problems of life, what is the advantage of living? Is there any gain?"

*Labor.* At least eleven different Hebrew words are translated "labor" in our Authorized Version, and this one is *amal*, used twenty-three times in Ecclesiastes. It means "to toil to the point of exhaustion and yet experience little or no fulfillment in your work." It carries with it the ideas of grief, misery, frustration, and weariness. Moses expressed the meaning of this word in Deuteronomy 26:7 and Psalm 90:10. Of course, looked at only "under the sun," a person's daily work might seem to be futile and burdensome, but the Christian believer can always claim 1 Corinthians 15:58 and labor gladly in the will of God, knowing his labor is "not in vain in the Lord."

*Man.* This is the familiar Hebrew word *adam* (Genesis 1:26; 2:7, 19) and refers to man as made from the earth (*adama* in the Hebrew: Genesis 2:7; 3:19). Of course, man is made in the image of God; but he came from the earth and returns to the earth after death. Solomon used the word forty-nine times as he examined "man under the sun."

These are the basic words found in the opening verses of Ecclesiastes, but there are a few more key words that we need to consider.

*Evil.* This word is used thirty-one times and in the King James Version (KJV) is also translated "sore" (1:13; 4:8), "hurt" (5:13; 8:9), "mischievous" (10:13), "grievous" (2:17), "adversity" (7:14), "wickedness" (7:15), and "misery" (8:6). It is the opposite of "good" and covers a multitude of things: pain, sorrow, hard circumstances, and distress. It is one of King Solomon's favorite words for describing life as he sees it "under the sun."

*Joy.* In spite of his painful encounters with the world and its

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problems, Solomon does not recommend either pessimism or cynicism. Rather, he admonishes us to be realistic about life, accept God's gifts and enjoy them (2:24; 3:12-15, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10). After all, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). Words related to joy (enjoy, rejoice, etc.) are used at least seventeen times in Ecclesiastes. Solomon does not say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!" Instead, he advises us to trust God and enjoy what we *do* have rather than complain about what we *don't* have. Life is short and life is difficult, so make the most of it while you can.

*Wisdom.* Since it is one of the Old Testament wisdom books, Ecclesiastes would have something to say about both wisdom and folly. There are at least thirty-two references to "fools" and "folly" and at least fifty-four to "wisdom." King Solomon was the wisest of men (1 Kings 4:31) and he applied this wisdom as he sought to understand the purpose of life "under the sun." The Preacher sought to be a philosopher, but in the end, he had to conclude, "Fear God, and keep His commandments" (12:13).

*God.* Solomon mentions God forty times and always uses "Elohim" and never "Jehovah." Elohim ("God" in the English Bible) is the Mighty God, the glorious God of creation who exercises sovereign power. Jehovah ("LORD" in the English Bible) is the God of the covenant, the God of revelation who is eternally self-existent and yet graciously relates Himself to sinful man. Since Solomon is dealing exclusively with what he sees "under the sun," he uses Elohim.

Before we leave this study of the vocabulary of Ecclesiastes, we should note that the book abounds in personal pronouns. Since it is an autobiography this is to be expected. Solomon was the ideal person to write this book, for he possessed the wealth, wisdom, and opportunities necessary to carry out the "experiments" required for this investigation into

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the meaning of life. God did not make King Solomon disobey just so he could write this book, but He did use Solomon's experiences to prepare him for this task.

### 3. The Analysis

Note the places where Solomon admonished us to enjoy life and be satisfied with what God has assigned to us.

Theme: Is life really worth living?

Key verses: 1:1-3; 12:13-14

#### I. THE PROBLEM DECLARED—Ecc. 1-2

Life is not worth living! Consider:

- A. The monotony of life (1:4-11)
- B. The vanity of wisdom (1:12-18)
- C. The futility of wealth (2:1-11)
- D. The certainty of death (2:12-23)

*Enjoy life (2:24)*

#### II. THE PROBLEM DISCUSSED—

Ecc. 3-10

He considers each of the above arguments:

- A. The monotony of life (3:1-5:9)
  - 1. Look up (3:1-8)
  - 2. Look within (3:9-14)
  - 3. Look ahead (3:15-22)
  - 4. Look around (4:1-5:9)

*Enjoy life (3:12-15, 22)*
- B. The futility of wealth (5:10-6:12)
  - 1. Employing wealth (5:10-17)
  - 2. Enjoying wealth (5:18-6:12)

*Enjoy life (5:18-20)*

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- C. The vanity of wisdom (7:1-8:17)
  - 1. We make life better (7:1-10)
  - 2. We see life clearer (7:11-18)
  - 3. We face life stronger (7:19-8:17)  
*Enjoy life* (8:15)
- D. The certainty of death—(9:1-10:20)
  - 1. Death is unavoidable (9:1-10)
  - 2. Life is unpredictable (9:11-18)
  - 3. Beware of folly (10:1-20)  
*Enjoy life* (9:7-10)

### III. THE PROBLEM DECIDED—Ecc. 11-12

- A. Live by faith (11:1-6)
- B. Enjoy life now (11:7-12:8)
- C. Prepare for judgment (12:9-14)  
*Enjoy life* (11:9-10)

In Ecclesiastes 12:8-12, Solomon explained how he wrote this book: he sought out the best words and arranged them in the best order. As he wrote, he included "goads" to prod us in our thinking and "nails" on which to hang some practical conclusions. Keep this in mind as you study. His work was inspired by God because he was guided by the "One Shepherd" (Ps. 80:1).

#### 4. The Application

What is the practical application of this book for us today? Is Ecclesiastes nothing but an interesting exhibit in a religious museum, or does it have a message for people in the Space Age?

Its message is for today. After all, the society which Solomon investigated a millennium before the birth of Christ was not too different from our world today. Solomon saw injustice to the poor (4:1-3), crooked politics (5:8), incompetent leaders

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(10:6-7), guilty people allowed to commit more crime (8:11), materialism (5:10), and a desire for "the good old days" (7:10). It sounds up-to-date, doesn't it?

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then this book urges you to do so without delay. Why? Because no matter how much wealth, education, or social prestige you may have, life without God is futile. You are only "chasing after the wind" if you expect to find satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the things of the world. "For what shall it profit a man, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" asked Jesus (Mark 8:36).

Solomon experimented with life and discovered that there was no lasting satisfaction in possessions, pleasures, power, or prestige. He had everything, yet his life was empty! There is no need for you and me to repeat these experiments. Let's accept Solomon's conclusions and avoid the heartache and pain that must be endured when you experiment in the laboratory of life. These experiments are costly and one of them could prove fatal.

When you belong to the family of God through faith in the Son of God, life is not monotonous: it is a daily adventure that builds character and enables you to serve others to the glory of God. Instead of making decisions on the basis of the vain wisdom of this world, you will have God's wisdom available to you (James 1:5).

As far as wealth and pleasure are concerned, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). "The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Prov. 10:22, NKJV). The wealth and pleasures of the world do not satisfy, and the quest for power and position is futile. In Jesus Christ we have all that we need for life and death, time and eternity.

If there is one truth that Solomon emphasizes in this book, it is the certainty of death. No matter what Solomon enjoyed or

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accomplished, the frightening shadow of death was always hovering over him. But Jesus Christ has defeated death and is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). The victory of His resurrection means that our "labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then all that you work for and live for will ultimately perish; and you will perish too. But faith in Jesus Christ brings you the gift of eternal life and the privilege of serving Him and investing your years in that which is eternal.

So, the first message of Ecclesiastes is: turn from the futility of sin and the world, and put your faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8-10).

But if you are a believer in Jesus Christ and have received the gift of eternal life, then Solomon asks you, "Are you living for the Lord or for the things of the world?" Remember, Solomon knew God and was greatly blessed by Him, yet he turned from the Lord and went his own way. No wonder he became pessimistic and skeptical as he looked at life! He didn't have God's perspective because he wasn't living for God's purposes.

More than one professed Christian has followed Solomon's bad example and started living for the things of this world. Paul wrote about one of his associates in ministry, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). The Apostle John warned, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15); and James admonished us to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (1:27).

When you start living for the world instead of for the will of God, you begin to look at life from the wrong perspective: "under the sun" and not "above the sun." Instead of seeking those things which are above (Col. 3:1ff), you start majoring on the things that are below. This wrong vision soon causes

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you to adopt wrong values and you stop living for the eternal. The result is disappointment and defeat; the only remedy is repentance and confession of sin (1 John 1:9).

Ecclesiastes also contains a message for the faithful believer who wants to serve the Lord and have a fulfilled life in Jesus Christ. Solomon says, "Don't bury your head in the sand and pretend that problems don't exist. They do! Face life honestly, but look at life from God's perspective. Man's philosophies will fail you. Use your God-given wisdom, but don't expect to solve every problem or answer every question. The important thing is to obey God's will and enjoy all that He gives you. Remember, death is coming—so, be prepared!"

Perhaps this message is best summarized in the prayer of Moses: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

I opened this chapter by quoting some metaphors that describe "life," and I want to quote one more. It's from the popular American novelist Peter De Vries: "Life is a crowded superhighway with bewildering cloverleaf exits on which a man is liable to find himself speeding back in the direction he came."

That need not happen to you! King Solomon has already explored the road exhaustively and given us a dependable map to follow. And if we follow God's Word, we will be satisfied.

Are you ready for the journey?

What will life be for you: vanity or victory?