

Introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes – *wrestling with life*

Hello there and welcome to Ecclesiastes! My name is Jennie Baddeley and I live in sunny Queensland with my husband and two teenage boys. I'm here to introduce Ecclesiastes and help you get a sense of what spending time in this book might mean for you.

I am excited to be doing this because I think this book is so good for us as followers of Jesus. Ecclesiastes makes us wise by teaching us to slow down and think difficult thoughts about our broken world in the presence of God and with each other. We find that life is complicated and frustrating sometimes, but God is already there before we've even thought of those questions and doubts. He gives us words and ways of thinking to guide us through. They are right there in his Word. Ecclesiastes is the book we need when we realise that this life is not all that we would want it to be. It is God's gift to us. We find that He is not scared of our questions!

I know some of you are old friends with Ecclesiastes. Some of you might never have read it before. Some of you might be a bit apprehensive: you've read it and it seems a bit weird! Let me reassure you, it doesn't matter how new you are to it, or how many times you've read it, or even if you're a bit scared of it: this is a book that will puzzle you, it will frustrate you, but it will make you wise. It will help you grow even more in your faith in the Lord Jesus. It will help you pray and fear God more.

How does this book make you wise? It's part of what is known as the 'Wisdom literature' that is given to us by our Lord in the Old Testament (OT).

In our Bible we find Wisdom literature mostly in the middle section of the OT, between the histories and the prophets. It's made up of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. This is part of God's Word designed to

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make us wise. Wisdom literature takes real life and in different ways, teaches us that the best way to live it, is to fear God. That means we come to understand who we are: creatures in God's world, dependent on him for everything and so, we become humble. We also grow in our understanding that God is good and learn to trust him to provide for us and to teach us the best way to live in this world.

Ecclesiastes fits into this framework. What does the 'preacher' want us to do in this book? Fear God. What attitude does he want us to take towards God? He wants us to understand that God knows us and our situation and that God can tell us how best to live our lives. If we reject God, we are fools and we are wicked.

Reading Wisdom literature makes us wise. Just the act of submitting to God's Word and sitting under his authority in this way grows our fear of God and so, our wisdom grows also. Just by taking Ecclesiastes seriously and reading it you can expect to grow in wisdom. As we fear God more, become wiser and start to realise how deeply we depend on God; you and I will come to love God more and rejoice at his goodness in providing for us more and more. Reading Wisdom literature is good for our souls!

So, what actually happens in Ecclesiastes? Let me take you on a quick bird's eye tour through the book.

It starts with a preacher - either it's king Solomon or someone standing in for him. So, that means this is written at the height of Israel's history: its golden days. All the way back in Exodus, God brought His people out of Egypt and they came through the wilderness to settle in the land God promised them. King David brought an end to the fighting finally at the beginning of 2 Samuel. So here, in around 950BC, under David's son, King Solomon, there is peace

and wealth for God's people. These are the best days of Israel's life in the Old Testament!

And that is why it is a bit of a shock that in these glory days, the preacher begins his book by calling out 'Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!' Surely, he'd have better news than that!

This word 'meaningless' is one of the most important words in Ecclesiastes. What does he mean by this? You'll need to read the book to find out. It's a word that can mean 'meaningless', but can also mean 'breath' or 'vapour'. Like when you breathe on a cold morning, you can see the vapour on your breath. Is he saying that things don't last? Is he finding life frustrating? Is he trying to find meaning? Yes, to all of those things. This word he keeps using can mean all of these things and does throughout the book. It really depends on how he's using it at the time. That's his burden: what is going on with this life? How can you get a hold of it so that your work and effort last and really mean something? So, in chapter 1 he starts to look first at life under the sun, which might look shiny but goes around and around and around. What does it all mean? Why doesn't anything last?

Then he says this – which helps us to understand the whole book. In chapter 1, verses 13-15 he has this little conclusion. He says: *I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.*

If we understand this, we get the problem. Adam and Eve sinned, way back in Genesis 3. They disobeyed God and God judged Adam and Eve and sent them outside their perfect, beautiful home, the Garden of Eden. Eventually, they

died, but their lives in this world were painful and frustrating and this is what we find today. God laid a heavy burden on mankind by judging us for our disobedience. We can't, by ourselves, undo God's judgment.

Then the preacher runs around to try to find meaning in chapter 2. He tries all sorts of things and concludes, no, he was right. It's all meaningless or a vapour. Nothing lasts. He can't pin life down.

Then he looks at time in chapter 3 and sees how that pulls us in two directions. It's wise to see that there's a time for everything, but we have eternity in our hearts. We want to last. We want to hold onto amazing moments. But they fall through our fingers. We are torn by time and yet we have a connection to eternity. It hurts!

Then he looks at the frustration of life in chapters 3 through 5: injustice, relationships, work, the dangers of wealth, poverty, the problems with leaving a legacy – all dominated by this futility in life and ultimately death. It's awful. Even with worshipping God, we find foolishness and brokenness.

The second half of the book (chapters 6-12) are mostly poetry. Much of this poetry jams two contrasting things together, showing how important wisdom is and how it doesn't fix the world. Yet the most important thing is fearing God but it doesn't mean that we are never frustrated or saddened by life. The crookedness of the world means that wisdom does not fix everything.

It might all seem gloomy, but it isn't all terrible. Every now and again, there are a collection of verses that pop up as we go through the book. God gives humanity enjoyment. This is expressed in different ways. Most of the time, it is a picture of people eating together and enjoying one another. Despite the effects of God's judgment, he has mercifully given us genuine good in our lives.

Before we move to thinking about how this leads us to Jesus we do need to stop and think about Hebrew poetry.

Sometimes, Ecclesiastes will not make sense and it will upset your theology. For example, it will seem to say that there is no life after death. It will seem to say that wisdom is a bit hopeless. It will imply that women are worse than men. What do we make of all of this? That's why we need to think about Hebrew poetry.

Sometimes in Hebrew poetry the writer will put two things right next to each other that seem to contradict and just leave them with us. In these cases, what will often be confusing to us is that we'll get just one of those statements without the other one. We might agree with the first statement, so we just gloss over it but then we get to the next one and think, 'You can't say that!' For example, in 10:18 it says, *'Through laziness, the rafters sag; because of idle hands, the house leaks.* We might think, 'Yes, of course! The wise thing to do is to fix the roof if it sags!' Yet, ten verses earlier, there is a puzzling set of observations, including this: *'...whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.'* Why would anyone break through a wall? If you have a look at this section in context, you'll see one reason is to fix it. If you try and fix something it is wise. But sometimes it doesn't work. You might be bitten by a snake. So, should we fix things? Or not? Well, this is the preacher's point: wisdom dictates that we fix it, but we can't assume that being wise will make straight what has been made crooked. Wisdom can't undo the Fall. Sometimes we do the right thing, the wise thing, but it seems to go wrong. That is what it means to live in a broken world.

So, Hebrew poetry is written to help us think these kinds of complex thoughts. If we are to do this well, we'll need to slow down and think carefully about not just what something says, but how it fits with the things around it.

So, if you find yourself thinking ‘This shouldn’t be in the Bible!’ go back and read around the verse and see if this is what the writer is doing. Is there another bit that seems to contradict this part? Then take both things together and think about them that way.

One other thing to do with this is to try to be very careful that you are reading it properly. Is the writer talking about life after death, or is he talking about just ‘dying’? Is he scandalised by the fact that humans die? That might be the point he is making. So, slow down your reading and think hard about what he’s saying. This may be one of those times you might like to look at a couple of different translations as you think about this.

As you slow down and really think about what Ecclesiastes is saying, it’s OK to not know the answers. Like Jesus’ parables, we’re meant to let these words rattle around in our heads and think and pray and talk to each other about them. God has designed his wisdom literature like this so that it makes us humble. We don’t know the answers! So, we need God because we don’t know everything. Ecclesiastes is going to remind us of this and send us running to God who *does* know everything. That is part of what it is designed to do! You and I are supposed to feel our limits as creatures, made by God. Our limits don’t surprise God but lead us to him. So, when you are confused, frustrated, and you just don’t know – remember God is calling you to himself in those moments. You & I don’t have to work it all out and then go to God, you come to God with all your insufficiencies, all we don’t know, all your doubts and you pour them out to him. Ecclesiastes teaches us that we simply can’t do life on our own. We need God.

Also, let this book give you relief. Most of us like to fix things. We like to help people and make things better for them. Ecclesiastes helps us to learn that we can’t fix everything. Sure, keep trying to fix things because that’s how we love

people, that's how we make things right. It's a good and wise thing to do; it's a loving thing to do. But remember, our world is not a straight world; it's been made crooked and you and I are creatures; we simply can't straighten everything out. Ecclesiastes calls us to trust God with that, to realise the enormity of humanity's sin in those moments, see how it's affected everything and ask for his mercy. In the moments where something is fixed, recognise the mercy of God: here is a crooked thing that in his kindness God has straightened. Yes, work hard to fix things, but let Ecclesiastes help you realise that you & I are not God. We are creatures. God does not expect you to fix all the broken things. Let Ecclesiastes help you to trust God to *be* God.

Above all, let this book point you to Jesus. The book begins and ends with a shepherd: David the Shepherd king in Chapter 1:1 and an enigmatic little phrase right at the end in 12:11 that the words of this book have been ...given by one shepherd. In other words, Ecclesiastes is part of how God, the good Shepherd leads us through the dark, shadowy places we find ourselves in as we go through this fallen world. They are meant to give us the light of God's presence with us. And they lead us straight to Jesus. In the New Testament, Jesus will reveal that he is the true Shepherd, come to fix our world for all time. Come to make it straight. He says to us 'my sheep hear my voice'. What does that mean? When we trust in the Lord Jesus to have died for all our sins, we become his sheep. We treasure His words. He has a place for us in his home, in heaven, where it is not broken or crooked or frustrating. Jesus came here, to our dusty, tired, crooked world and lived with very fallen people and died an awful death, carrying the weight of all our sins in his own body for us. Jesus loves us. In this great sacrifice for us, he made a way to a future that is perfect, with no evil and no frustration; where things will last. This Shepherd, who laid down his life for us is the one whose Word we hear in Ecclesiastes, and it reminds us that this world is only 'under the sun', it's only for now.

When we hear his words and trust him with all that we have, we have a tomorrow outside of this world, where the evil and frustration and crookedness cannot enter. So, as you read through Ecclesiastes, keep your thumb in Revelation 21, and keep flicking forward to the vision of the future with a Shepherd who has rescued all his sheep. This Shepherd King, our Lord Jesus has undone all the toil of this world, all the curse, reversed the judgement and made straight what is crooked. No-one else could do this: we can't do this, we are only creatures. But our powerful, merciful eternal Saviour, Jesus, the Son of God. Let Ecclesiastes open your eyes to see him more clearly and trust him with all that you have and all that you are.