

# Through the Bible Book by Book

Old Testament

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## Ecclesiastes

**Title:** The word "**Ecclesiastes**" means "*the preacher*." It may have been so called from the fact that Solomon, after his sad experience of backsliding taught publicly his experiences and the lessons learned therefrom.

**Theme:** In the book of Proverbs we learned about that wisdom which has its source in GOD. Now, in Ecclesiastes we shall read about that merely natural wisdom, which, apart from GOD, attempts to seek truth and happiness. Both books were written by Solomon; the first, during the early part of his reign, when he walked with GOD; the second, during the latter part of his reign when sin had separated him and his Maker.

In Proverbs there is heard from his lips a note of joy and contentment as he meditates upon the blessings of divine wisdom; in Ecclesiastes we hear a note of sadness, despair and perplexity as he sees the failure of natural wisdom to solve human problems and secure perfect happiness.

After his departure from GOD (I Kings 11:1-8), Solomon still retained riches and wisdom. Possessed of these he began his quest for truth and happiness apart from GOD. The result of this quest is expressed in the ever-recurring phrase "**all is vanity**" (vanity here means "*emptiness, worthlessness*").

Solomon learned the following truth which sums up the theme of the book: Without GOD's blessing, wisdom, position, and riches do not satisfy, but rather bring weariness and disappointment.

**Author:** Solomon (See 1:1, 16; 12:9).

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In reading Ecclesiastes, the student will find together with much sound teaching, much that is at variance with other teaching of the Bible (Read 1:15; 2:24; 3:3, 4, 8, 11, 19, 20; 7:16, 17; 8:15).

He should remember that the book is the inspired record of the uninspired utterances of a natural man, reasoning about human experience and divine providence. In the same way the Bible contains many utterances of wicked men; the utterances are uninspired, but the record is inspired.

## **I. The Vanity of Human Pleasure and Wisdom (Chaps. 1,2)**

In 1:1-3, Solomon states the theme of his discourse: the vanity of all human effort and endeavor. All effort is vain, for the mind that would try to search out the secrets of life is not satisfied.

Men come and go without discovering the solution of life's problems, but the world still continues to exist with its unsolved mysteries (1:4-18). Thus man's theoretical wisdom fails. Solomon now applies his practical wisdom to the problem of finding happiness (Chap. 2). He tries mirth (vv. 1,2), wine (v. 3), building (v. 4), wealth and music (vv. 5-8). The result of his quest is stated in verse 11 - disappointment. He is filled with despair and weariness as he sees that with all his wisdom, he is not more advanced than a fool in his attempt to solve the problems of life (vv. 12-19).

As he considers that the riches which he has labored so hard to accumulate and which have not satisfied him he will have to leave to one who has not worked for them, he is overwhelmed with the sense of the emptiness and worthlessness of effort (vv. 20-23).

He comes to the conclusion that the best thing possible for the natural man. is to get the greatest pleasure out of this life, at the same time doing his best to live a moral life (vv. 24. 25).

## **II. Earthly Happiness, Its Hindrances and Means of Advancement (Chaps. 3-5)**

Solomon reasons that in order to attain to happiness, one must rejoice in its blessings and make a righteous use of them (Chap. 3). At the best human happiness is limited, for all human action and effort is restricted by and depends on an unchangeable higher law. In other words, whatever comes, whether good or evil, must come, for everything has its time.

Man cannot change this order so he must submit to it and derive all the happiness he can from life (vv. 1-15). Human happiness is restricted because of the natural man's ignorance of the things of the future life. So uncertain to him is the hope of a future life that he wonders whether he is any better than the animals in this respect (vv. 16-21). Because of this uncertainty of a life beyond, there is nothing better for him to do than enjoy the life that now is (v. 22).

He then names the hindrances to happiness (4:1-16), mentioning:

- the personal misfortune of many men (vv. 1-6),
- the evils of social life (vv. 7-12), and
- the evils of civil life (vv. 13-16).

He suggests that happiness is to be attained by devotion to the worship of GOD (5:1-7), by refraining from injustice. avarice and violence (vv. 8-17), and by a temperate enjoyment of the

pleasures and treasures of life granted by GOD (vv. 18-20).

### **III. True Practical Wisdom (Chaps. 6:1 to 8:15)**

True wisdom does not consist in striving after earthly sources of happiness (6:1-12), for even those who possess wealth do not attain to a true lasting enjoyment of them (vv. 1-6), and never escape from the feeling of their emptiness and of the uncertainty of the future (vv. 7-12).

True wisdom consists:

- in a contempt of the world and foolish lusts (7:1-7),
- in a patient calm and resigned spirit (vv. 8-14), and
- in an earnest fear of GOD and a sincere acknowledgment of sin (vv. 15-22).

This wisdom must be preserved in spite of the lusts of the world (7:23-29), in spite of the temptations to disloyalty and rebellion (8:1-8), and in spite of oppressions and injustice (vv. 9-15).

### **IV. The Relation of True Wisdom to the Life of Man (Chaps. 8:16 to 10:20)**

GOD's dealings with man are sometimes mysterious (8:16 to 9:6), but that should not discourage the wise man from taking an active part in life; rather he should enjoy this life and use it profitably (9:7-10). Though the result of human labor is sometimes uncertain, man should not be discouraged in his search for wisdom (vv. 11-16).

In the presence of the insolence, pride and violence of fortunate fools, the wise man should keep his peace of mind by silence and modesty (9:17 to 10:20).

### **V. The Conclusion (Chaps. 11:1 to 12:7)**

After his reasonings, some of them true, some partially true, and some false, Solomon comes to his conclusions.

These represent the very best that the natural man can do, apart from revelation, to attain to happiness and favor with GOD. They are as follows:

1. Faithfulness in benevolence and in one's calling (11:1-6).
2. A calm and contented enjoyment of this life (11:7-10).
3. The fear of GOD for young and old in view of a coming judgment (12:1-7).
4. The fear of GOD and the keeping of His commandments (12:13, 14).

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