

Message #1**Various Texts**

When it comes to living life in this world, there are two seemingly paradoxical concepts found in the Bible. On the one hand, we are admonished not to love the world, neither the things in the world (I John 2:15). We are taught that we should be heavenly-minded, laying up treasures there, rather than earthly-minded, laying up treasures here (Matt. 6:19-21). On the other hand, we are taught in the same Bible that God richly supplies us with all things to enjoy in this life (I Tim. 6:17) and that every good thing here is a gift from Him (James 1:17). How do we resolve this biblical paradox? How is it that we live life in a way that makes sense in light of these two very unique and yet two very different themes?

It seems to me that when it comes to living life as a believer in this world, there have been two notable extremes. One extreme we could call isolationism. In this view of life, the believer withdraws from society and isolates himself as much as possible from enjoying anything in life. This kind of person lives life as a joyless, hermit monk almost afraid of the fact that he might have fun. The other extreme we could call conformism. In this view of life, the believer totally conforms and indulges himself in everything in the world. He gives himself to the world's goals, objectives and philosophies and lives life as a total libertine. This person goes along with everything, and never takes a stand for anything. As near as I can determine, both systems are wrong and both are unbiblical and unbalanced.

Somewhere in the middle of this perplexing maze is a third alternative that appears to be very wise, very right and very biblical. We could call this transformationism. In this view of life, the believer himself is transformed and allows everything he is and does to be transformed through the pages of the Word of God. What he believes, how he behaves, his goals, objectives and ambitions begin to coincide with the "whole counsel of God." Life is lived in light of all of God's Word.

The believer who pursues a life of isolationism will soon discover he is joyless, angry and lonely. Life will be miserable and depressing. The believer who pursues a life of conformism will soon discover life will be empty and meaningless. No matter what one has or who one is won't matter, such a believer cannot ever be content. But the believer who pursues transformationism will discover life will be both joyful and fulfilling, meaningful and exciting. For this one, life is alive, it makes sense and it soars.

If ever there is one book in all of the Bible that really zeroes in on putting all of life into this perspective, it is the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is, most assuredly, a very unique book of God that explores life from all angles. It seems to me that its primary goal is to teach a believer how to find real meaning and real fulfillment in life in view of the many facets that make up life.

Ecclesiastes takes us on a remarkable journey through all of life. It oft times presents a worldview of life without God at the center, so it can instruct us to have a worldview of life with God at the center. This book paints a lofty portrait of God and teaches us to do the same.

According to Ecclesiastes, if God is at the center of our lives, our lives make total sense. There is real meaning, there is real purpose and there is total fulfillment and full joy. If God isn't at the center of our lives, no matter what we are achieving, no matter what we are doing or experiencing, there will be no joy and no fulfillment.

QUESTION #1 – Why study the book of Ecclesiastes?

Reason #1 - Because Ecclesiastes is one of only 66 books found in God's Word.

Beginning with Genesis, in our English Bibles, Ecclesiastes is the 21st book of our 39 Old Testament books. In the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes falls under the Jewish categorization known as "the writings," and sits as the 33rd book just after Lamentations and just before Esther. Ecclesiastes is one book that has always been accepted as belonging in the Bible by Christians and the Christian church. Ever since the first century A.D., believers have never even questioned the fact that Ecclesiastes belonged in the Bible.

The canonicity controversy surrounding Ecclesiastes is Jewish. Even though Ecclesiastes is listed in all the Jewish listings of sacred books, there was a problem concerning this book. Near the end of the first century A.D., a major debate arose between two rabbinical schools as to whether or not Ecclesiastes really belonged in the Bible. The rabbinic school of Shammai rejected the book as being biblical and the rabbinic school of Hillel accepted the book as being biblical.

The school of Shammai thought the book was too skeptical and was filled with statements that were inconsistent with other statements in the book and inconsistent with other portions of God's Word (i.e. compare 2:2/7:3/8:15; also 11:9/Num. 15:39). However, it was argued that in each instance there was a simple contextual answer to the seeming inconsistency. The school of Hillel, on the other hand, defended the book as belonging in the Bible based on the fact that it stressed a "fear God" and "keep His commandments" theology (i.e. 12:13). The school of Hillel also argued that this book belonged in the Bible because it had come from Solomon. In the end, the school of Hillel won and the book was officially deemed as belonging in the canon of Scripture at the council of Jamnia in A.D. 90.

We could actually conclude that Ecclesiastes was considered part of the Word of God long before A.D. 90. Ecclesiastes was part of the famed Dead Sea Scroll discovery. It is believed that these manuscripts were copied somewhere near or before 200 B.C. In the famous Qumran cave #4 (the Partridge Cave), the text of Ecclesiastes was found with all the other O.T. books, with the exception of Esther. This clearly teaches us that the Jews accepted Ecclesiastes as belonging in the Old Testament some 300 years before the controversy even began.

Reason #2 - Because Ecclesiastes is a book that unlocks the key to a meaningful existence.

When it comes to a meaningful or purposeful existence, all people are after it. It does not matter whether one is a believer or unbeliever.

It does not matter what a person's age or gender. Every human being longs for a life that makes sense. Dr. Walter Kaiser said it well: "To the twentieth century 'man on the street,' life is a puzzle. He feels that he, like his culture, has become plastic....Life has lost its zip. There is no joy in Mudville—or anywhere else. Man is made to feel cheap, commercial, dead and machinelike" (p. 7). This is not only true for unbelievers; this is true for many believers. We must remember the writer of Ecclesiastes was a believer and he certainly knew what it was like to endure life as a meaningless and empty existence. Ecclesiastes is a book we desperately need today, for it unravels the key to a meaningful life.

Reason #3 - Because Ecclesiastes is a book that reveals a believer can enjoy life.

There are many hurting, depressed, and even miserable believers in the world who rarely, if ever, reflect a joyful existence. Someone has said that a believer, who is a legalist, is a person who is afraid that somewhere, in some place, some believer is having fun and enjoying life. Is it wrong to enjoy life? Is it wrong to laugh and have fun? Is it wrong to want to experience pleasurable things and to succeed in life? Should we always make apologies for good things God gives us to enjoy? Ecclesiastes is a book that answers all of these questions. It puts all of life into a God-honoring perspective and it leads one to the conclusion that we can enjoy life.

Reason #4 - Because Ecclesiastes is a book that emphasizes the sovereignty of God.

Fearing God is the wise way to live life and we may be certain that a key to fearing God is recognizing the sovereignty of God. When one truly fears God, there will be a high and holy recognition of God's sovereignty (i.e. 3:14). Ecclesiastes is a book that magnifies the sovereignty of God. In this book:

- 1) God is sovereign over all of wisdom . 1:13
- 2) God is sovereign over all good things in life. 2:24
- 3) God is sovereign over everything in time . 3:11
- 4) God is sovereign over everything that is eternal . 3:14-15
- 5) God is sovereign over a person's words and thoughts . 5:2
- 6) God is sovereign over enjoyable things. 5:18-19
- 7) God is sovereign over distribution of wealth . 6:2
- 8) God is sovereign over blessed days and adverse days. 7:13-14
- 9) God is sovereign over those who do fear Him and those who don't . 8:12-13
- 10) God is sovereign over undiscoverable things. 8:17
- 11) God is sovereign over the perspective and treatment of one righteous . 9:1
- 12) God is sovereign over all things. 11:5
- 13) God is sovereign over every human's death . 12:7
- 14) God is sovereign over every person's judgment . 12:14

Ecclesiastes is one book of the Bible that clearly reveals that God is supreme ruler over everything and everyone.

Reason #5 - Because Ecclesiastes is a unique O.T. book in that it is very applicable to all people.

There is no question that we can closely connect this book to the Jewish people and Jerusalem (i.e. 1:1, 12, 16; 2:7; 5:1; 10:16-17). We may also surmise from the end of the book that its primary targets were those younger as opposed to those older (12:1). However, if we consider the fact that in this book the name for God is Elohim, not Jehovah, plus if we consider the worldwide outreach and influence of Solomon, we would be very naïve to isolate or limit this book to only Israel, for it clearly has instruction for all people whether Jew or Gentile.

Ecclesiastes is a book for all peoples of all times. Young and old, Jew and Gentile, male and female, and believer and unbeliever. All need to hear the same clear message from Ecclesiastes. It is possible for any person of any ethnic or even religious background and culture to live life as an empty, meaningless existence. It is also possible for that same person to live life to its full meaning and purpose. Ecclesiastes shows all people how. It is a book for all ages and for all people.

QUESTION #2 – Who wrote Ecclesiastes?

Until the past couple of hundred years, it was universally agreed, believed and stated that the writer of Ecclesiastes was Solomon. Dr. Gleason Archer writes: “Until the rise of nineteenth-century criticism, it was generally accepted by both the synagogue and the church that this book was a genuine work of Solomon’s” (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pg. 486).

Actually, it was during the 17th century, called the “Age of Enlightenment,” when certain scholars started making technical literary observations about the book that doubts surfaced. Based on certain linguistic differences in Hebrew style and some statements in the book itself, some scholars concluded that Ecclesiastes was not written by Solomon, but was written about Solomon by some other wise scholar around 200 B.C. (12:9).

Primarily, there were three main proofs offered to deny Solomonic authorship:

Proof #1 - The proof of the different style of Hebrew—a unique vocabulary and syntactical structure proves Solomon wasn’t the author.

Proof #2 - The proof of the fact that the writer had been king, but wasn’t when the text was written (1:12)—Solomon was king until the day he died—(II Chron. 9:30-31).

Proof #3 - The proof of the fact that the writer was greater than “all” before him in Jerusalem (1:16)—David was the only one prior to Solomon who reigned in Jerusalem.

However, upon careful consideration, each is easily turned to support Solomonic authorship:

- 1) Solomon was the wisest man in all the world and he built political and commercial ties with more people of the world than at “any other period in Israel’s history” (Archer, p. 489). It stands to reason that a book that is solely his would feature many unique Hebrew words and a variety of syntactical distinctions.
- 2) The verb of 1:12 “have been king” is perfect tense indicating the writer had been king from some point in the past and continued to be king in the present.
- 3) The statement of 1:16 “more than all who were over Jerusalem before me” is not an isolated statement about Jewish kings. Many important and powerful people reigned in Jerusalem before David claimed it—i.e. Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18); Adonizedek (Josh. 10:1); and Araunah the Jebusite (II Sam. 24:16, 18, 23).

Evidence #1 - The external evidence.

The external evidence that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes is overwhelming. All of Jewish tradition attributes Ecclesiastes to Solomon (i.e. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7a, Shabbath 30; Aramaic Targum; Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah). All early Christian writers attribute Ecclesiastes to Solomon (i.e. Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Origen, Didymus).

It is often said that the famed Reformer, Martin Luther, in his “Table Talk,” is one who didn’t support Solomonic authorship. But for Luther, this apparently was not always the case. Luther, in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, did assume that Solomon was the author. Luther writes: “The summary and aim of this book, then, is as follows: Solomon wants to put us...” (Cited from Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 111).

There is little doubt that the vast majority of biblical scholars in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world conclude that Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon.

Evidence #2 - The grammatical evidence.

In this teacher’s opinion, there are two major grammatical evidences that prove Solomon was the author:

(Proof #1) - The appositional relationships of the first verse.

The words “son” and “king” sit grammatically appositionally to “preacher.” What this means is whoever this preacher is, he was also David’s son and he was also king in Jerusalem. This grammar stresses this is the person, not this is about the person.

(Proof #2) - The first person pronoun that shows up throughout the book.

In both the Hebrew text and the Greek text (Septuagint) the emphatic personal pronoun “I” repeatedly is used (i.e. 1:12; 2:1, 13, 18; 3:12, 16; 4:1, 4, 7; 5:18; 6:1; 7:15, 25, 26; 8:10, 16; 9:1, 11, 13; 10:5).

What this tells us is the writer was personally involved in what he was writing about. He experienced these things firsthand.

Both of these grammatical points give solid weight to the fact that Solomon had to be the writer.

Evidence #3 - The contextual evidence.

(Fact #1) - The writer was called the “preacher.” 1:1a

We will examine this later, but whoever the writer was, he was known for gathering the people of Israel together to give them instruction in things pertaining to God. This certainly fits the historical evidence of Solomon (i.e. I Kings 8:1-5).

(Fact #2) - The writer was the son of David. 1:1b

Solomon was the son of David through Bathsheba, again fitting the contextual information II Sam. 12:24).

(Fact #3) - The writer was king in Jerusalem. 1:1c, 12

It has been accurately observed by many that the only actual son of David who was king in Jerusalem was Solomon (I Chron. 29:22-25; II Chron. 3:1).

(Fact #4) - The writer was wiser than any other ruler. 1:16

God, Himself, specifically said that He gave Solomon a wisdom level far beyond any before him or after him (I Kings 3:11-12). In fact, the whole world knew of this (I Kings 10:24).

(Fact #5) - The writer oversaw massive and impressive building projects. 2:4-6

Solomon was known worldwide for his architectural genius (I Kings 9:15, 17-19).

(Fact #6) - The writer gained the greatest level of wealth ever seen. 2:7-9

It is pure biblical fact that Solomon, by direct blessing of God, was the richest man in all the world (I Kings 3:13; 10:23-24).

(Fact #7) - The writer was known for searching out and teaching proverbs. 12:9

The one man in the Bible whose name is synonymous with “proverbs” is Solomon. Solomon is specifically said to have spoken 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs (I Kings 4:29-32).

(Fact #8) - The writer stressed the importance of going to the house of God to listen to the Word of God. 5:1

The man actually responsible for building the house of God in Jerusalem was Solomon (I Kings 6:1; II Chron. 6:1-3). These are powerful evidences and that is why it is obvious to most that Ecclesiastes was most assuredly written by Solomon.

QUESTION #3 – When did Solomon write Ecclesiastes?

Solomon's life story occupies about 20 chapters of the Old Testament in I Kings and II Chronicles. We get a clear statement concerning Solomon's reign in I Kings 11:42—"Thus the time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years."

Most scholars suggest that Solomon's forty-year reign was from approximately 970 B.C. - 930 B.C. We may safely and generally assume, then, that Ecclesiastes was written sometime within this forty-year span of time.

Time Frame #1 - His early years as king.

During Solomon's early years as king, he replaced his father, David, as king and worked to establish the Davidic Kingdom (I Kings 2:12; II Chron. 1:1). It was during this early era that Solomon constructed a magnificent temple for the LORD. During these first 7-10 years, God was well pleased with Solomon and blessed him in every way. Generally, we could date this time from 970 B.C. to 960 B.C.

Time Frame #2 - His middle years as king.

During Solomon's middle years as king, he rebelled against his God. He went through his famed "mid-life crisis" in which he devoted himself to himself. It was during this middle era that God was very displeased and angry with Solomon and He raised up many adversaries against him (I Kings 11:9-11, 14, 23). Generally, we could date this time from 960 B.C. - 940 B.C.

Time Frame #3 - His final years as king.

During Solomon's final years as king, he was right with God. He had come through his time of rebellion and once again he was devoted to doing the will of God. It was this rededication that enabled him to die as an honored king who was walking in the ways of God (I Kings 11:41-43; II Chron. 9:29-31; 11:17). Generally, we could date this time from 940 B.C. - 930 B.C.

Since much of the information in Ecclesiastes describes his "mid-life crisis," and since there is evidence in the book that Solomon was thinking much about his death in his older age (i.e. 11:8; 12:1, 7), we may conclude that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes in his final years of life.

This book was written somewhere between 940 – 930 B.C.

QUESTION #4 – For whom did Solomon write Ecclesiastes?

As near as I can determine, the specific target of the book was a son of Solomon who was young. There can be little doubt that this book is primarily aimed at a young man who had all of life in front of him. Several passages lead us to this conclusion (11:9, 10; 10:1, 12).

This book was taught to all people (12:9) in Jerusalem and it contains instruction for people of all ages, but its primary target is the young person who has all of life before him or her. Young people, this is a book aimed straight at you!

QUESTION #5 – Why did Solomon write Ecclesiastes?

Solomon wanted his son to have the most fulfilled and meaningful life possible. Solomon wanted his son to avoid the pain, the emptiness and the loneliness of a life that leaves one meaningless and unfulfilled.

QUESTION #6 – What is the theme of Ecclesiastes?

Here is one of the most debated and controversial questions pertaining to this book. Both Jewish and Christian interpreters have argued and struggled to discover the primary message Solomon wanted to communicate.

Some have suggested that the primary theme is that all of life on earth is empty and meaningless, so completely devote yourself to heavenly things. Some have suggested that the primary theme is that there is nothing enjoyable on earth, so devote yourself to an ascetic life of complete devotion to God. Some have suggested that the primary theme is that all worldly pursuits and carnal gratifications will leave you empty, so give yourself to fearing God and obeying His commandments.

We will be the first to acknowledge that there is much that is pessimistic about life in the book, but there is also much that is positive (i.e. 2:24; 3:12-13).

I am convinced that we are very close to Solomon's true main point with this idea or theme:

When God is at the center of life and His Word is being followed, life will be completely fulfilling and meaningful and everything that happens, even if we don't understand it, will make sense.

The obvious antithesis to all of this is—if God isn't at the center of one's life and His Word isn't being followed, there will be an emptiness no matter what is happening and one won't sense a real purpose or fulfillment.

Any believer who tries to figure out life by going after this or that will soon discover he is chasing the wind. But any believer who puts God and His Word at the center of life will discover there will be meaning, fulfillment, joy and blessing. Life will make sense and it will be and can be enjoyed.

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