

# “QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS”

## Session 1 – Is There More To Life Than This?

### An Introduction to Ecclesiastes

#### **Ecclesiastes – What is it?**

Is it possible to find meaning in life? And if so, how? These questions are at the heart of the human condition, and thinkers and philosophers – and just plain people – have been asking these questions for millennia. Ecclesiastes, one of the most surprising books of the Bible, seeks to answer this question from the perspective of one who has had it all – in this case, King Solomon.

The title, “Ecclesiastes,” is the Greek form of the Hebrew title, Qoheleth, which means “Preacher.” The book is to be read, then, as an extended – and unusual – sermon! It can be found in a section of the Old Testament part of the Bible known as “Ketuvim,” or “Writings.” Often called “Wisdom Literature,” to distinguish it from historical or prophetic books, “Ketuvim” includes books such as Job, the Psalms, and the Proverbs. It is often wrongly confused with the similarly titled “Ecclesiasticus,” or “The Wisdom of Sirach,” which is in the “Apocryphal” or “Deuterocanonical” list of books not included in Protestant Bibles.

#### **Who wrote it?**

It seems as though Ecclesiastes is of two completely different minds regarding the search for meaning – one, that life is inherently meaningless and you should just give into pleasure and enjoy yourself; and two, that true meaning can only be found in obedience to God.

Does this mean there are two (or more!) authors? An original writer, Qoheleth, who had a cynical, pessimistic view of life; a Hasid (“pious one”), a later more “religious” reviser of the work who injected positive statements regarding obedience to God as an antidote to the cynical fatalism; and a Hakam (“wise man”) who incorporated traditional proverbs into the work?

Either way, whether it is a book that exists in its original form or one that was revised and added to over time, Ecclesiastes was traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, as the opening verses seem to attest (without actually naming him directly). Solomon was the son of King David, and ruled Israel at the height of its ancient power, from about 970-930 BC. Although the language is from a later date – more “modern” than the ancient Hebrew of Solomon’s day – it is possible that this “updating” was simply a way to make the text more clearly understood (such as a

modern preacher might do, reading from the King James, but changing “thee” and “thy” to “you” and “yours”). The subject matter and introductions certainly fit Solomon very well (1:1; 1:12 - *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem; I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem*).

It seems likely that at the very least, the writer of Ecclesiastes, at a later date, takes up where Solomon left off, uses the familiar words of Solomon as a text, and puts himself in Solomon's place so as to discover how he came to reach his conclusion about life, while reminding us that true meaning is found only in God.

### **The Theme of the Book**

The theme appears in the prologue: "*Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*" And the conclusion comes in the epilogue, which speaks of fearing God and keeping his commandments because we must one day give account to him. Life in the world is subject to frustration; but we can still accept our circumstances, even enjoy them, and find strength to live life as it comes.

Where does one start to build a way of life that transcends the meaninglessness of the world? Can purpose for life be found in nature, money, self-indulgence, property, position, intelligence, philosophy, and religious observances? Obviously, some of these pursuits are better than others, but all encounter some defeating frustration that invalidates them as solutions to the problem of living. The world does not contain the key to itself. It can be found only in God. Roughly speaking, this is the theme of chapters 1-6.

But God has implanted in humanity the sense of an eternal existence, and in this, humanity rises above the rest of the animal world. Since there is a total plan, there must be some way that we can fit into it; but how can we do so if we do not know what the plan is?

The book tells us to begin where we are, with the assumption that God has a purpose for our lives. To fulfill this purpose we must use our God-given sense as well as our own experience of ourselves and that of others. God has a proper time for each thing to be done (3:1-8), and recognizing this allows us to accept life as it comes (3:11a), even though we know we are no more than one piece in the great puzzle.

And so we are moved from speculation (e.g., 8:16-17) to observation. It is right to meditate on the total work of God, but we are to glorify God in the common things of life; i.e., we are to make the fullest use of the present moment. There may be times of stress and strain and special calling; but the norm is to eat, drink, and live our daily life as those who gladly rejoice in God's good gifts and intend to use them to his glory. This is the theme of the refrains:

2:24-26 - A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

3:12-13 - I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

5:18-19 - This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.

8:15 - So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.

9:7-9 - Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.

### **Ecclesiastes and the New Testament**

While all this seems quite “worldly,” it doesn’t contradict the teaching of the New Testament, which does teach that we are to eat and drink and do all our actions to the glory of God (*1 Corinthians 10:31 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Colossians 3:17 - And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*), since God has generously given us everything for our enjoyment (*1 Timothy 6:17 - Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment*).

But what about passages such as 1 John 2:15: *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them”*? The next two verses in 1 John show that even this is consistent with the teaching of Ecclesiastes: *“For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”* Life in the world has significance only when man remembers his Creator (Ecc 12:1).

Jesus reflects this throughout his teaching, such as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25): *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”* Jesus also famously said, (Mark 8:36-37), *“And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?”* One can well imagine the writer of Ecclesiastes giving a hearty, “Amen.”

## **Ecclesiastes in Brief**

### **The Frustrations of a Meaningless Life** (Ecclesiastes 1:1-1:11)

Maybe you're old enough to remember the song, “Is that all there is?” Peggy Lee sang it, but Qoheleth (who we'll refer to as Solomon) wrote it, as many as 3000 years ago. Everything comes and goes, yet, “No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them (1:11).”

### **The Search for Meaning** (Ecclesiastes 1:12-6:12)

Where did Solomon look for meaning? The first half of Ecclesiastes, Chapters 1 through 6, contains a report of where Solomon searched for the elusive answer.

- Can knowledge provide meaning? 1:12-18
- Can pleasure provide meaning? 2:1-11
- Can accomplishments provide meaning? 2:17-26
- Can human beings make any real changes in the way things are? 3:16-22
- Man's fate suggests that life is meaningless. 4:1-16
- Man's inability to affect God's works suggests that life is meaningless. 5:1-7
- Can possessions give meaning to life? 5:8-6:2
- Man's inability to control his future suggests that life is meaningless. 6:3-12

**How can we make the best of meaningless lives? (Ecclesiastes 7:1-12:8).**

Solomon found that human life—if this life is all there is—can have no meaning. But he couldn't resist pointing out that even under the circumstances, some courses of action are better than others.

- Make the best choices you can 7:1-12
- Adopt a fatalistic attitude 7:13, 14
- Avoid extremes 7:15-22
- Be wise, avoid folly 7:23-8:1
- Submit to authorities 8:2-10
- Be God-fearing 8:11-13
- Enjoy the good things life offers 8:14, 15
- Enjoy life while you can: death awaits 9:1-12
- Follow wisdom 9:13-10:20
- Prepare for the future 11:1-6
- Enjoy your youth—old age is creeping up 11:7-12:8

**So... What? Solomon's Epilogue (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14).**

As the book concludes, we can sense Solomon looking back over the years to the bright promise of his youth. Here is his recommendation:

*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (12:13, 14)*

While his very name became a catchphrase for wisdom, Solomon himself did not rule wisely, living (and building) with such extravagance that he bankrupt the Kingdom, levying crippling taxes upon the people. Upon his death, this excessive taxation resulted in civil war, cause a split between the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah, or Judea). The country never recovered – weakened by the split, Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah to the Babylonians in 582 BC. Perhaps this accounts for the book's inherent cynicism.

## **Bonus Page: Ecclesiastes on Old Age**

Ecclesiastes has much to say about Youth and Old Age (such as the possibly autobiographical 4:13, “*Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning*”). But Chapter 12 is a wonderful summary of why to “not put off until tomorrow what should be done today”:

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them”—*

- *before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;* (a reference to failing knowledge)
- *when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop,* (shaky limbs, bad back)
- *when the grinders cease because they are few* (losing teeth)
- *and those looking through the windows grow dim* (cataracts)
- *when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades;* (hearing loss)
- *when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint;* (insomnia, lack of clarity and pleasure when awake)
- *when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets;* (unsteadiness and paranoia)
- *when the almond tree blossoms* (white hair)
- *and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred* (both sexual ability and desire fade)
- *Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets* (a vision of death)

**The conclusion to Ecclesiastes** (12:9-14) is added as a postscript, written in the third person. It affirms the wisdom and truth of the book, while also admitting that the text is hard going. It also seems to say that this is but one of an endless number of books, and reading them all will wear you out! In that way, I believe the cynical, pessimistic spirit of the book is faithfully carried out. Nevertheless, the book concludes on a faithful note (12:13 NLT – “That’s the whole story. Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone’s duty.”)

***Where wisdom fails, faith and duty will bring us through.***