

## Lesson 22 - Ecclesiastes

**Key Verse:** *"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."* (12:13-14 Eccl.)

**ECCLESIASTES** is one of the Old Testament books of Poetry. Whereas Job deals with the subject of human **suffering**, Ecclesiastes addresses the subject of the general problems of **life** and is the only book in the Bible that gives it such a treatment. Ecclesiastes deals with earth life, "Life Under the Sun" -- the meaning of life; the best way to live in order to make the most of life and to obtain the most satisfaction from it.

Ecclesiastes reports the author's investigation and observations *"concerning all that is done under heaven"* (1:13). The object of his quest was to *"see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life"* (2:3) and many conclusions are reached, the most important of which is the final conclusion reached in the last two verses of the 12 chapters and which is our key verse for the book. This final conclusion applies to all men everywhere for all time and is the complete summary the entire purpose for one's existence when all vanity has been stripped away.

### I. TITLE

Ecclesiastes is presented as biography of "Kohelet" (or "Qoheleth", meaning "Assembler" or "speaks in an assembly", but traditionally translated by Christians as "Teacher" or "Preacher"). "The preacher," translated from the Hebrew word "Kohelet", which literally means *"speaks in an assembly"*. In the Septuagint Version, the word "preacher" in 1:1 is the genitive singular for Ecclesiastes. (The English title, Ecclesiastes, is taken from the greek-version.)

### II. OUTLINE

- A. Title (1:1)
- B. Initial poem (1:2–11)
- C. I: Kohelet's investigation of life (1:12–6:9)
- D. II: Kohelet's conclusions (6:10–11:6)
  - 1. Introduction (6:10–12)
  - 2. A: Man cannot discover what is good for him to do (7:1–8:17)
  - 3. B: Man does not know what will come after him (9:1–11:6)
- E. Concluding poem (11:7–12:8)
- F. Epilogue (12:9–14)

### III. AUTHORSHIP

There is much diversity of opinion as to the book's authorship. Modern critics place the composition at a later period than that of Solomon, more in the category of the later books of the Old Testament. However, evidence favors Solomon as the author. Assuming Solomonic authorship, the date of the book would be approximately 935 B.C. (toward the close of his life). The author does not use his own "voice" throughout the book again until the final verses (12:9–14), where he gives his own thoughts and summarises what "the Kohelet" has spoken.

### IV. THEME OF THE BOOK

- A. All that is in the world is vanity! “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” is a prominent expression (1:2 etc.) Some 33 references are made to “vanity” in the book. It is from the Hebrew word Hebel and it means “emptiness or vanity” fig. “something transitory and unsatisfactory”. A world “under the sun” of unending “striving after wind” - of daily living without getting ahead or having much to show for all your labor and then...leaving it all behind when you die. The phrase “under the sun” occurs 29 times in the book with the synonyms “upon earth” (2 times), “upon the earth” (5 times), and “under heaven” (3 times). Solomon was given wisdom and explored every avenue of earthly life - pursuits and pleasures of mankind seemed to him as “vanity and a striving after the wind” (2:17) His solution? Fear God and keep His commandments.

## V. PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

To show that earthly pursuits as the chief aim in life will not bring happiness! Kohelet's story is framed by the voice of the narrator, who refers to Kohelet in the third person, praises his wisdom, but reminds the reader that wisdom has its limitations and is not man's main concern. Kohelet reports what he planned, did, experienced and thought. His journey to knowledge is, in the end, incomplete. The reader is not only to hear Kohelet's wisdom, but to observe his journey towards understanding and acceptance of life's frustrations and uncertainties: the journey itself is important.

Ecclesiastes has had a deep influence on Western literature. It contains several phrases that have resonated in British and American culture, and was quoted by Abraham Lincoln addressing Congress in 1862. American novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote:

"[O]f all I have ever seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth—and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one I could say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound."

Abraham Lincoln quoted Ecclesiastes 1:4 in his address to the reconvening Congress on December 1, 1862, during the darkest hours of the American Civil War: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.' ... Our strife pertains to ourselves—to the passing generations of men; and it can without convulsion be hushed forever with the passing of one generation."

Popular culture:

The opening of William Shakespeare's Sonnet 59 references Ecclesiastes 1:9–10.

Leo Tolstoy's Confession describes how the reading of Ecclesiastes affected his life.

The title of Ernest Hemingway's first novel The Sun Also Rises was taken from Ecclesiastes 1:5.

The title of Edith Wharton's novel House of Mirth was taken from Ecclesiastes 7:4 ("The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.").

In the dystopian novel Fahrenheit 451 Ray Bradbury's main character, Montag, memorizes much of Ecclesiastes and Revelation in a world where books are forbidden and burned.

Pete Seeger's song "Turn! Turn! Turn!" takes all but one of its lines from the Book of Ecclesiastes chapter 3.