

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 Life under the Sun

Ecclesiastes has been called (by Barry Webb) a “garment of vexation”. It is an honest look at life in this world. Be warned, some find its insights quite depressing. Yet others find a deep connection with our human experience, and value the wisdom of not trying to fully explain or control life, but to enjoy God’s good gifts (2:24-25) and to “fear God and keep his commands” (12:13).

A. Overview (Could be done in your group, or as ‘homework’)

Read right through the book from beginning to end. Consider these questions:

1. What overall responses/reactions do you have to the book? How are you left feeling?
2. What main ideas or themes are repeated?
3. What particularly resonates with you?
4. What questions or objections do you have?
5. What is the writer’s approach to trying to find some “gain” in life? What is his conclusion?
6. If you had to summarize what the book is about – what would you say?

B. Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1. According to verse 1, who is the author (or speaker) in the book? What was he famous for? (See 1 Kings 3:7-14 & 10:1-9.)

In verses 2 & 3 we find a summary statement of the whole book. There are 3 key words/phrases that are hard to translate, and need some clarification as they appear throughout the book:

“Futility” (HCSB), “Meaningless” (NIV), “Vanity” (ESV) – are various English translations of the Hebrew word ‘Hebel’, which refers to a breath, mist or vapour. The idea is something transient, that can’t be held onto because it has no substance and doesn’t last. (See the same word used in Psalm 39:5 & 144:4)

“Gain” – this is a commercial word, what we might call a “profit” or “surplus” or “reward” or “pay-off”.

“Under the Sun” – Refers to life in this present world of time and space. It is equivalent to the phrase “under heaven (1:13) & “on earth” (8:14). It’s not life without God, since the “teacher” is very conscious of God.

2. Consider the observations made in verses 4-11.
 - a. What is the main point of these observations? How does this support the assertion of verse 2, and address the question of verse 3?
 - b. Try to think of real life examples that match the observations made.
 - c. How accurate do you think the teachers observations are? Can you think of anything ‘new under the sun’?
 - d. What difference does it make to see the world this way?
3. Read James 4:13-17. Notice the similar idea of our life being like a mist (or smoke). What implication does James draw from seeing this?
4. Now read Romans 8:18-25. Although we live in a world subjected to futility, there is something that changes. What is it and what difference should this make for us?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26 A King's Quest

1. In what ways do you see people in our culture 'striving' to achieve satisfaction or control of their lives?

The big issue in Ecclesiastes is revealed in 1:2-3. Everything is futile (ie. everything is transitory, passing, of no lasting significance). What therefore does a person gain from all their labour "under the sun"? Just as the whole creation is continually 'busy' but never gets anywhere, there is no lasting gain from human labours under the sun (1:4-11). In the next section of the book, the teacher describes a royal quest. Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26.

2. From 1:12-15. What was the teacher's quest? What is his conclusion (announced 'up front')?

3. In 1:16-2:23 the teacher pursues two potential sources of 'gain' – wisdom and pleasure.

- a. What do you think a quest for wisdom might look like? Why does he conclude that striving for wisdom is ultimately 'futile'?
- b. Why does he conclude that striving for pleasure (in whatever way) is also futile?
- c. Is the teacher 'against' wisdom and pleasure in themselves? If not, what is it that he particularly critiques?
- d. To what extent does the teacher's 'discoveries' match with what we see and experience in our lives today?

4. From verses 24-26.

- a. Rather than striving to achieve lasting gain, what approach does the teacher commend, and for what reasons? (Do you think verse 26 is talking about what God does in this life, or only at the end?)
- b. How do you react to this? What attitudes and approaches to life (in the world and among Christians) does this 'wisdom' challenge?
- c. In practice, what might it look like for us to 'eat, drink and enjoy our work'? How can we learn/change to live this way?

5. (If time permits) Read Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19-34. In what ways do you see the words of 'the teacher' in Ecclesiastes reflected here?

6. Pray together about what you've seen from God's word. For what gifts of God (simple pleasures) can you thank God? Ask for wisdom to avoid to futility, and to enjoy God's good gifts – even while life seems hard.

Ecclesiastes 3 Eternity in our Hearts

1. To what extent do you feel that you are in control of your life, and to what extent is your life controlled by things that happen around you?

2. Read Ecclesiastes 3. The 'time' poem is famous.
 - a. How well does it match up with your observations of life in this world?

 - b. What mood does its structure and rhythm evoke?

 - c. How do you react to the poem? (eg. Comforting? Frustrating? Helpful? Confusing?)

 - d. What implications do you see for wise living?

3. From verses 9-11, what has God got to do with this pattern of times? What conclusions does the writer draw about our experience of life in this world?

4. What approach to life is therefore commended in verses 12-15? What alternative approaches to life might this correct/critique?

5. In verse 16 (and also in 4:1-4) the writer observes the problem of injustice. How does knowing that God is in control and has set a time for everything help him to deal with what he sees (v 17)?

6. In light of the further revelation we have about resurrection and our eternal states, what should we do with verses 18-22? Are we really like the animals? If so, what good does it do for us to see this?

7. At the end of the book, the teacher gives us his overall conclusion. Read Ecclesiastes 12:9-14. In what ways do we see his conclusion already 'peeping through' in chapter 3?

8. How does Ecclesiastes 3 help us to understand or appreciate Jesus? What do we know now that the writer of Ecclesiastes didn't fully see? (As time permits, reflect on Acts 17:26-3,1Galatians 4:4-5, Revelation 22:13)

9. What will you pray in response to reading and reflecting on Ecclesiastes 3?

Ecclesiastes 4-6 An Honest look at Wealth

1. We're sometimes told that "money can't buy happiness". Do you think people really believe this? Why or why not?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 4-6. (It will help concentration to have a new reader for each paragraph). What repeated ideas and/or patterns can you see? What seems to be particularly important?
3. Although not the only theme, the pursuit and accumulation of wealth is prominent in these chapters. From the verses below, what aspects/consequences of this does the teacher point out? (For each reference think about how you would explain this in your own words and how we might see it in our society today).

4:4

4:5-6

4:7-8

5:10

5:11

5:12

5:13-17

6:1-6

6:7-9

4. In the middle of these observations we find a strikingly different section. What is the thrust of the teacher's instruction in 5:1-7? How might this be related to the main themes of chapters 4-6?
5. Which aspect of the teacher's instruction do you find most challenging – personally and for the general culture of our church? How might it look for us to live in light of the teacher's observations and instruction?
6. In practice, how can we change and/or guard ourselves from the 'love of money' and trusting in our wealth?
7. As time permits read these New Testament passages and consider how they confirm or add to the teacher's instruction in Ecclesiastes, or to your discussions – 1 Timothy 6:6-10 & 17-19 & Luke 12:13-21 & 27-34.
8. Pray together about what you have seen. You may want to confess your sin, thank God for what you have, and ask for his help to not be 'consumed' by the pursuit of wealth.

Ecclesiastes 7-10 An Honest look at Wisdom

What do you see as the benefits of being wise? Can you think of any drawbacks or limitations of being wise?

This study covers 4 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes. It includes many wise sayings, but also an honest look at the value and limitations of wisdom, and the implications for how we should then live. There are 2 ways to hear the message of this material. Your group will need to choose between the two (or do both!).

- a) Read through Ecclesiastes 7-10. After each chapter, stop and consider...
 - a. What particularly strikes you as important for living wisely in our world today?
 - b. What benefits flow from being wise (as opposed to being foolish)?
 - c. What limitations does the teacher see for us using wisdom to live successfully?
 - d. Recognizing b and c above, what general principles of life does the teacher commend to us?
 - e. Where does God fit into life "under the sun"?
- b) Follow some themes using the questions and references below. (Don't get bogged down in Q1 – make sure you get to question 3!)

1. From these verses, why is wisdom (and righteousness) better than foolishness (and wickedness)?

7:4-6 & 7-12

8:1

7:19 & 9:13-18

10:10-20

2. What limitations and frustrations do we face in our pursuit of wisdom to control our lives and live successfully?

7:13-14

7:15, 8:14, 10:6-7

7:20

7:23-29, 8:16-17

9:11-12, 10:8-10

9:1-6

3. In light of the value of wisdom, and particularly its limitations, how then should we live? What is challenging for us about these instructions?

7:2-4

7:16-18

8:2-9

8:15, 9:7-10

4. How should being conscious of God make a difference?

7:18, 8:12-13

5. Read 1 Peter 5:6-7. To what extent does this align with what you have seen in Ecclesiastes? What is the massive encouragement here?

6. How do these chapters help us to understand and appreciate Jesus? In what ways is our situation the same or different now that Jesus has come? See Ephesians 5:15-17, Colossians 2: 1-3 & 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

7. What would be good to pray for each other as result of reading from Ecclesiastes 7-10? Pray together.

Ecclesiastes 11-12 An Honest look at Aging

1. When are you most conscious that the days of your life are limited? When this awareness comes to your mind, what is your normal reaction/response?

2. For each section below, read the passage and consider what approach to life is commended and why? Also consider what this might look like for our daily life, and for our overall priorities in life?
 - a. 11:1-6

 - b. 11:7-10

 - c. 12:1-7

3. Now read the writer's conclusion to the book in 12:8-14.
 - a. To what extent do you think that these verses sum up Ecclesiastes? Is there anything new here?

 - b. What do you think it looks like for people today to live according to the conclusion of verses 13?

 - c. How might our lives be different if we were always conscious that God will bring "every act to judgment"?

 - d. Since the sayings of the wise are like "goads" (used to prod oxen when pulling a load), and even "firmly embedded nails", what impact has reading Ecclesiastes had on you. How have you been 'goaded'?

4. How does reading Ecclesiastes help us to understand and/or appreciate Jesus? Given that Jesus has come, to what extent do you think the observations and conclusions of the teacher are still valid?

5. If you were asked to summarize what Ecclesiastes is about, and why it is worth reading, what would you say?

6. (Stretch question – as time permits.) Why do you think the writer gives us all the observations and instructions in chapters 1-12, saving the conclusion till the very end? (ie. How does the literature 'work' on us?)

7. What would be good to pray as a result of reading Ecclesiastes, and particularly chapters 11 & 12? Pray together.

