

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes encourages us to consider fundamental questions. Life is like a short breath of air. It quickly disappears, here today and gone tomorrow. However, life can have purpose. Ecclesiastes advises wisdom, righteous living, finding purpose by remembering our creator, and following God's commands. By doing so, we can find joy in the life God has given us.

Setting

During Israel's peaceful and prosperous years after David established his kingdom, Solomon focused on enhancing culture. He developed international trade, diplomatic relations, and agriculture. He built cities, stations for defense (fortresses), and the temple. He made cultural advances for his nation through material prosperity and important literature.

Instead of fighting wars, Solomon engaged with other nations and their literature. He incorporated their cultural expressions into Israel's relationship with the Lord. Solomon's failures are well-known. Yet, he achieved much good with his wisdom and left guidance on managing life in a wise way.

Summary

The book of Ecclesiastes is a series of talks about life's value and what people should do. The editor frames the collection with a short introduction and an addition to the ending ([1:1](#); [12:9-14](#)). Inside this framework are the words of "the Teacher" (Hebrew *Qoheleth*, as most commentators call him).

The Teacher speaks about many topics, such as time, work, wisdom, pleasure, and injustice. Yet he returns again and again to one main idea: life and everything in it is *hebel* (a Hebrew word meaning "vapor" or "breath," often translated as "meaningless"). The Teacher explains how people should live in a world ruled by God. At the end, the editor sums up the book: "When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: Fear God and keep His commandments, because this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, along with every hidden thing, whether good or evil" ([12:13-14](#)).

Author and Recipients

The main speaker is identified as a king, as "the Teacher," and as David's son (see [1:1](#), [12](#), [16](#); [2:7](#), [9](#)). These labels strongly suggest that Solomon is the main speaker. An editor frames his speech with opening and closing comments ([1:1](#); [12:9–14](#)). The editor shows respect for the wise Teacher and adds some of his own helpful advice.

The title "the Teacher" translates the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*. This word means "[the one who] gathers an assembly or congregation." The Greek title of the book, *Ecclesiastes*, comes from *ekklēsia*, which also means "assembly" or "congregation."

At least once, Solomon spoke to an assembly of Israel's leaders and tribal representatives (see [2 Chronicles 5:2–7:7](#)). The Bible also says that kings and ambassadors came to hear Solomon because of his wisdom ([1 Kings 4:34](#); [10:23–24](#)). It is possible that the words in Ecclesiastes were first given in a public setting such as these.

Ecclesiastes as Wisdom Literature

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom book, like Job and Proverbs. Wisdom literature focuses on pleasing God beyond just obeying the requirements of the law. These books show how God's people can succeed as individuals and help society flourish. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes describes wisdom as understanding how God and the world function. This wisdom comes through lifelong investigation. His conclusions form the basis of his lecture.

Meaning and Message

In this discussion, the Teacher talks about life's biggest question: Is anything truly meaningful? If we are like a brief shadow or a short breath, how can our lives have meaning?

The Teacher connects this philosophical question to government in the real world and daily life. Both leaders and citizens must navigate it. His message is certain, and the editor summarizes its implications ([12:13-14](#)). Life and everything in it are temporary and often seem useless. Everything in this world does not last. Life's frustrations might make it seem to have no meaning.

Our actions do not last, and we cannot find purpose in the world alone. We will soon die and people will forget us. So, we should remember how short our lives are and enjoy them while we can.

However, these harsh realities should not make us desperate because we live in a world governed by God. This gives it meaning and purpose. We should focus on following his commands and living to please him because we will soon encounter his judgment.

Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live well, even though life is short and often seems useless. We may not understand all of God's actions or the purpose of our lives, but Ecclesiastes assures us that God controls everything, both good and bad. Those who trust God will see life's challenges as motivation to work hard and achieve what they can in wisdom. They will also enjoy God's gifts along the way.