

Old Testament Survey
Lesson 21 – Ecclesiastes
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School
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Introduction

The Hebrew word used to name this book was taken from the title given to an important person who called a group together to speak on an vital topic. It could be translated preacher and Solomon is presenting a monologue, a lecture, a sermon. In Greek, preacher is derived from the word for assemble [ecclesios], therefore the Septuagint translators chose the term Ecclesiastes. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is placed, along with Ruth, Song of Solomon, Esther, and Lamentations, in a series of five scrolls which are read publicly on special occasions. Like Ruth on Purim, Ecclesiastes is read on Pentecost.

It is not unusual for a person reading Ecclesiastes to be troubled or puzzled by it. It is clearly negative, with everything declared as meaningless and virtually nothing that seems positive. Some even wonder why this book is in the canon. But, carefully studied, it brings us face to face with the "real world" and drives us to God like few other books do. The abiding value of the Ecclesiastes is that it proves that only God can satisfy the longing of the human heart. Only a personal relationship with Him can "fill that God-shaped vacuum" which He created in every person.

John MacArthur sums Ecclesiastes up like this: "This book shows that if one perceives each day of existence, labor, and basic provision as a gift from God, and accepts whatever God gives, then that person lives an "abundant life" (John 10:10). However, one who looks to be satisfied apart from God will live with futility regardless of their accumulations."

Ecclesiastes itself tells us it was written by a "*son of David, king in Jerusalem,*" (v1) and "*king over Israel*" (v12). This would naturally point us to Solomon and arguments against this assumption are weak. Ecclesiastes was most probably written in the late 930 BCs, during the late years of Solomon's reign and demonstrated his experience and disillusion. Solomon as the author makes sense because:

1. Only David and Solomon ruled over both Judah (Jerusalem) in the south and Israel in the north.
2. Solomon's life paralleled the life described in the examples of this book. Few others had all the resources and circumstances to be able to live that life.
3. Solomon was a "*wise man, ... who taught the people knowledge; and pondered, searching out and arranging many proverbs.*" (12:9)
4. Solomon had the education and knowledge displayed by the writer. Certain passages, especially chapters 3 and 9, closely resemble other ancient literature of the Near East. The style and content of Ecclesiastes are paralleled in the Egyptian *Song of The Harper* and Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh Epic*. Solomon was a scholar of these periods (1 Kings 4:34) and could easily have borrowed these styles.

Solomon was rich. Perhaps the richest man who ever lived. He had unlimited power, unlimited resources, and unlimited appetites. He was also the wisest man who ever lived. He had unlimited learning, unlimited creativity, and unlimited skills. Add to all this he had a long and proud family heritage, a famous and godly father, and a personal knowledge of God and His word. This should have made him highly qualified to experience and observe the world and develop a proper view of personal self-fulfillment in relation to God. How did he do? Solomon tried everything "*under the sun*" everything the natural world system has to offer, and came up dry and depressed. This book shows the insufficiency of all earthly encounters to bring happiness and shows us the need for something outside ourselves for true fulfillment – God!

Most scholars believe that the first readers of Ecclesiastes were not the common, ordinary people of Solomon's kingdom, but the wealthy and powerful with access to the royal court. It was like a teaching text and deals with the study of wisdom (education), the value of wealth, and problems of a privileged lifestyle. Since we are all rich, these things apply to all of us. It spoke to the people who tended to build their lives on success, education, power, achievement, and pursuit of pleasure. This can lead to boredom, disappointment, and depression. They need a reason for living. They need an answer. **They need God!**

The idea of vanity is a prominent theme in Ecclesiastes. The word "vanity" or "vanities" occurs some 37 times in Ecclesiastes. It means fleeting, transitory, empty, worthless, futile, meaningless, confusing, or incomprehensible with the exact meaning dependant on the context. There are ten "vanities" in Ecclesiastes. We see these "vanities" all around us or even "in" us today.

1. Human Wisdom (2:14-16) – The wise and the ignorant (foolish) have the same end-death. There is no lasting fulfillment in great learning.
2. Human Labor (2:18-23) – The laborer is no better than the shirker. In the end we all die. There is no lasting fulfillment in work.
3. Human Achievement (2:26) – Achievement come and go. There is no lasting fulfillment in achievement.
4. Human Rivalry (4:4) – Success brings more envy than joy. There is no lasting fulfillment in success.
5. Human Selfishness (4:7-8) – Get more and remain empty. "Much" feeds lust for the elusive "more." There is a cult of people following a philosophy of working just to amass for themselves. There is no lasting fulfillment in selfishness ambition.
6. Human Fame (4:16) – Fame is brief, uncertain, and soon forgotten. There is no lasting fulfillment in fame.
7. Human Greed (5:10) – Money does not satisfy nor the things that money buys. There is no lasting fulfillment in money.
8. Human Coveting (6:9) – Wanting begets more wanting. Gain cannot be enjoyed despite desire. There is no lasting fulfillment in gaining what we want.
9. Human Frivolity (7:6) – Time wasted brings a sad end.
10. Human Recognition (8:10-14) – Good and bad often get wrong desserts. There is no lasting fulfillment in recognition.

Problems

1. Ecclesiastes seems to be a book of doom.

It is true that Solomon's entire argument is based on the thesis stated in verse 2, "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" This turns this poem into a dirge of hopelessness. "*What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?*" (v3) We just have to be really patient. We spend an entire book in the "pit of despondence" to get to two verses:

¹³The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. ¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. Eccl 12:13-14

"Power, popularity, prosperity, prestige, and pleasure all in abundant measure and all combined cannot quench the burning thirst in man's soul which can only be satisfied by God alone." John Phillips in "Exploring the Scriptures"

There is *"nothing good under the sun,"* but there is something very good **beyond** the sun. There is a living God who will fill the hearts of those who turn to Him through repentance and faith, and bring meaning to day to day living.

2. Ecclesiastes seems to teach that there is nothing after death so we need to *"enjoy life"* and *"fear God and keep His commandments."*

Another problem is Solomon's reaction to his disappointment. He seems to say, since all of this stuff and striving is worthless, we have nothing left to live for except to "enjoy life" as best we can. For much of his life Solomon suffered from an imbalance of trying to enjoy life without regard for YHWH and His commandments. In fact, he only refers to God as Elohim, which is the name which serves to emphasize the creator-creature relationship rather than YHWH, which points to a redeemer-redeemed relationship. He had a shallow relationship to God. He squandered much of his life and God's blessings on his own personal pleasure rather than spending it for God's glory. The book is written to warn young adults not to make the same mistakes he made.

Solomon has thoroughly researched life and come to several definite conclusions which he will now present to his spoiled, self indulgent, materialistic audience: 1) Man is incapable of finding satisfaction by his own devices and 2) Fear of God and obedience to His commands is the only alternative. There are three ways to research and investigate a subject: experimentation (do it), observation (watch it), and education (learn it). Solomon did all three and now he reports his findings to us.

I. Presenting His Thesis (Chapter 1:1-11)

Every good treatise has a thesis statement. By now you should know Solomon's.

A. Thesis Stated (1:1-2)

¹The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ²"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Eccl 1:1-2

The Hebrew word (HEBEL) translated vanity means something insubstantial or fleeting. To Solomon everything of the world with no eternal value is pointless. As James says it, "it is like a vapor." There is no lasting fulfillment, no peace or purpose, in anything the world has to offer.

B. Thesis Supported (3-11)

In primary support of his thesis Solomon writes a poem of life. It presents life as a rat race of activity that never gets anywhere and accomplishes nothing permanent. Nothing ever breaks into the cycle to give meaning. There is "nothing new under the sun" (v10). Much as in Romans 8, "all creation groans as it awaits something new, something supernatural."

II. Proving His Thesis (Chapters 1:12-10:20)

Solomon begins his scientific research:

A. Experimentation (1:12-2:26)

I set my mind to seek and explore (experience) ... all that has been done ... I have seen all the works which have been done (experienced) under the sun. Eccl 1:12-13

1. His Search Something of Lasting Purpose (1:12-2:10)

He started in the world of the mind, with observation and intellectual pursuits, but the more he knew the more he knew he didn't know. *"...in wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain."* (1:18)

He moved on to the world of pleasure, (2:1) with luxury and carefully planned stimulation including wine, art, architecture, horticulture, collecting, music, concubines ... *"And all my eyes desired I did not refuse them, I did not withhold from my heart any pleasure."* (2:10)

2. His Summary – Nothing Lasts (2:11-26)

The quest for wisdom is hopeless. Wisdom is of little value because it does not alter destiny. The wise may know what is happening, but so what, they are still doomed just as the fool.

The spending of money and energy on pleasure is pointless. You cannot take it with you. Your children may just blow it all. You are working to impress others you do not even know. This is nuts! *"This too is vanity and striving after the wind (a vapor)."*(v26)

B. Observation (3-6)

Looking at life Solomon saw an existence in flux. Man is not really in control, God is. *"I have seen (observed) the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves."* (3:10)

1. **Time is in God's hand.** *"He has made everything appropriate in its time,"* The timing of events and situations are all "appointed" (v3:1) and we as creatures of time must conform to those limitations. This is especially frustrating because, *"He has also set eternity in our hearts."* (v11) so we can't be content with what we are or understand what God is doing.

Tied to this lack of control is our lack of power over death (Chapter 3) or wealth (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

2. **Politics is in God's hand.** Remember, Scripture teaches that governments, good and evil, are under the control of God. He holds them accountable for how they treat people (Chapter 3), judges them for corruption and abuse of power, and controls how long they reign (Chapter 4). He ordained them to bring order to a chaotic world (Chapter 5).

C. Education (7-10)

This portion moves into things Solomon has learned by study. It starts with a series of proverbs, the major teaching tool of his day.

1. Frustration (7)

This chapter discusses the problem of finding our way with the limited wisdom we have because of our humanness. This makes it hard to make decisions in the areas of: finances (1-14), justice (15-24), and relationships (25-29).

2. Fallacy (8)

Chapter 8 looks at some common fallacies accepted by the world:

- We can be powerful or have self destiny (1-9)

⁸No man has authority to restrain the wind... or authority over the day of death... 8:8a

- We can be wicked (10-13)

¹³But it will not be well for the evil man ... because he does not fear God. 8:13

- We are rewarded fairly (14)
¹⁴There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. 8:14
- We can party (15)
¹⁵... there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry 8:15
- We have a clue (16-17)
¹⁷... I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. 8:17

3. Failure (9)

This chapter presents three areas of failure that all men experience:

We all die (1-10) – It is the same for all, There is one fate for the righteous and the wicked (v2) ...they all go to the dead (v3). Not only do we all die, but...

We all do not know when (11-12) – ...man does not know his time... (v12)

We all tend not to listen (13-18) – ...Wisdom is better than strength! But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. (v16)

4. Facts (10)

Here, provided in proverb form, is the bottom line:

1. Folly will often win over reason and right. (1-7) – ...folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places,(v6)
2. God will often undo man's work, wisdom, leisure, or recreation. (8-20) – "...No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?" (v14) So why fight for a legacy?

III. Presenting His Findings (Chapters 11-12)

Solomon presents his findings based on his research. He has experienced, observed, and studied, and now he will summarize his material and present his conclusions.

A. **Summary (11)** – Solomon's summary is divided into three categories:

1. Future (11:1-6)

Prepare as best you can, but realize that God is in control. Plan, invest, diversify, be cautious, speculate, but realize that you are not the one in control.

...you do not know the activity of God who makes all things (happen). 9:5

2. Present (11:7-8)

Live as best you can, but realize that there will be the good and the bad. Youth is made for joy not anxiety, and adulthood can be productive, but always live righteously.

Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all. 11:8a

3. Past (11:9-10)

Forget as best you can, but learn from God's judgments. As we age, we tend to look back at the glory of victory and the agony of defeat. As Paul taught us, we need to "*forget those things that lie behind* (victories that could make us proud or defeats that could make us depressed) *and press toward those that lie before.*"

...childhood and the prime of life are fleeting. 11:10

B. Conclusions (12)

We are often willing to follow an expert's advice based on several years of research. Now, based on a lifetime of experience, observation and study, Solomon advises us:

1. Remember who God is! (1-8)

¹Remember also your creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come... 12:1

Remember Him as death approaches (v5) and as the earth winds down (v7).

2. Remember that which only He can fill! (9-14)

People can try all sorts of things to fill the emptiness when they do not have a personal relationship with their Creator, but nothing will work. Only God brings lasting purpose and peace.

¹³The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. 12:13

In the end...

¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. 12:14

God's Glory and Glorifying God

Many people are looking for peace and purpose. As we saw in Ecclesiastes this is not new. In 1647, a document was written in England by the the (English Reformed) Presbyterian denomination called the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This was a question and answer format teaching tool typically used by churches and parents to train their children in basic Christian beliefs. The first question is: What is the chief end of man? ... The answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

⁷Everyone who is called by My name, And **whom I have created for My glory**, Whom I have formed, even whom I have made." Isa 43:7

⁸There is no one like You among the gods, O Lord, Nor are there any works like Yours. ⁹All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, And **they shall glorify Your name**. ¹⁰For You are great and do wondrous deeds; You alone are God. ... ¹²I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, And **will glorify Your name forever**. Psa 86:8-10; 12

¹¹"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to **receive glory and honor and power**; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created." Rev 4:11

³¹Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, **do all to the glory of God**. 1 Cor 10:31

I. What is God's glory and how do we glorify God?

A. God is the God of **glory**

²And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! **The God of glory** appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, Acts 7:2 (Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin)

¹In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ²Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called out to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, **The whole earth is full of His glory**." Isa 6:1-3 (Isaiah's vision and commission)

¹The **heavens are telling of the glory of God**; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Psa 19:1 (General Revelation)

B. God's glory is His **alone** – what He has is His alone and not ours.

⁸"I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images. Isa 42:8

C. God's glory is **intrinsic**

¹⁸Then Moses said, "I pray You, show me Your glory!" ¹⁹And He said, "I Myself will make **all My goodness** pass before you, and will **proclaim the name of the LORD** before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." Ex 33:18-19

God's name in Scripture points to all that He is, the sum of His attributes. God's glory is essential to His being. God's glory is the composite of His attributes and essence; the sum total of what He is. God's glory is the beauty, power, wisdom and splendor of His character. God is infinitely glorious in nature, so we cannot add anything to Him. His glory is never diminished, so it does not have to be replenished or more magnificent.

D. What is glorifying God?

Based on Ex 33 we can see that to "glorify" God is to **show** His character in **words** and **deeds**. We glorify God when we live in a way that those around you can look at you and see what God's character is like. "...we glorify God by placing His attributes on display in our lives." (MacArthur)

E. Why glorify God?

- Jesus' purpose was to glorify God.

⁵⁰"But **I do not seek My glory**; there is One who seeks and judges. John 8:50

- Because God is worthy to be glorified. He created us, He saved us, He is worthy!!

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Rom 11:36

II. Practical ways to glorify God (6 WAYS out of MANY)

A. Receive Jesus as Lord and Savior

First, we must have the ability to have a relationship with the God of glory. The only way to do that is through Jesus. God's attributes (His infinite mercy and grace) are on display when we bow before Him and ask for forgiveness for our sins and submit our lives to Jesus.

⁹For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue will confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.** Phil 2:9-11

⁸For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, ⁹and for **the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy**; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME." Rom 15:8-9

Second, not only when we personally turn from our sin and trust in Jesus Christ is God glorified, but when we tell others about Jesus is God glorified.

¹⁵For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may **cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.** 2 Cor 4:15

B. Believe what God says

What God says is true and we can believe it completely.

¹⁹Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; ²⁰yet, **with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,** ²¹and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Rom 4:19-21

When we do not trust God's word (promises) we are calling Him a liar.

¹⁰The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; **the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar**, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. 1 John 5:10

C. Confess our sin

Our RELATIONSHIP with God is broken when we sin. Remember Achan? He gathered up part of the spoils after the fall of Jericho.

¹⁹Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, I implore you, **give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done.** Do not hide it from me." ²⁰So Achan answered Joshua and said, "Truly, **I have sinned against the LORD**, the God of Israel, and this is what I did: Josh 7:19-20

We must get our relationship with God right by confessing our sins. Confession means to agree with God that what we have done is sin. It is to place the blame for our sin on ourselves and not on God.

When we know we have sinned and do not confess the sin we are calling God a liar.

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. 1 John 1:8-10

D. Bear much **fruit**.

We glorify God by doing good works.

⁸"My **Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit**, and so prove to be My disciples. John 15:8

¹⁰so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; Col 1:10

¹⁶"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may **see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven**. Matt 5:16

What are some examples of doing good works? – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... Gal 5:22-23

Remember, we strive to bear fruit out of gratitude and to glorify God – NOT to get something.

²⁸**Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;** ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire. Heb 12:28-29

E. Serve Christ's **church**

We glorify God by serving Jesus' body – the church (in our case at VBC)

²¹to **Him be the glory in the church** and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. Eph 3:21

¹⁰As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ¹¹Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things **God may be glorified** through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 1 Pet 4:10-11

We each have special gifts that we should be using to serve... We each have something to offer, but we have to be there to offer it.

F. **Humbly** attribute success to God

We glorify God by making sure He gets the credit for the good things that happen in our lives.

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, **yet not I, but the grace of God with me**. 1 Cor 15:10

²³"**He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me**; And to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God." Psalm 50:23

King Herod didn't do that...

²¹On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. ²²The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" ²³And **immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory**, and he was eaten by worms and died. Acts 12:21-23

Have you ever done something well and someone else gets takes the credit for it? How do you feel? Think about how God feels when we are taking the credit for what He has done.