

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

October 19, 2008 - Skip MacMillan

Introduction

1. Tone

Sober look at life, depressing, pessimistic, sad, heavy, negative, lonely
Unique book in Scripture
12 chapters of Wisdom Literature (Job, Proverbs and some Psalms)
12 chapters of trying to understand the inconsistencies in life and trying desperately to find any meaning in this life

What does our time in this life accomplish?

2. The Preacher

Ecclesiastes (Greek) – Qohelet (Hebrew) – Preacher / Teacher (English)

Qohelet = "one who gathers an assembly to teach".

Observing Life

"I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives" (2:3).

He wants to understand, he wants meaning, to learn; willing to go, do and commit.

He wants something timeless, unchanging, eternal; wants life to count for something.

He is observing, looking all around for answers, seeking anything meaningful.

He observes work, success, relationships, money, wisdom, human justice, and pleasures.

What if I experience and accomplish some or all of these, will I find meaning?

So the preacher commits his life to work, people, projects, wisdom, folly, and money.

In the end he observes that these do not and are not able to give meaning.

He is left feeling very alone.

3. Conclusion: "Utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless"

Hevel = senseless, absurd, meaningless, vapor of vapors.

James 4:14 - "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."
38 times, the central theme.

The Preacher concludes, what man and all his accomplishments give us is not meaning, but busy and meaningless activity.

4. Disturbing

He is unafraid to speak what may appear cold and disconnected from Scripture.

He observes "the distortions and inequities that pervade the world; the ineffectuality of human deeds; the frailty and limitations of human wisdom and righteousness" -Fox.

The Preacher is disturbingly honest, willing to allow his experiences and Scripture to collide.

Willing to ask very difficult questions.

And yet in all his struggling he never walks away from God but continually comes back to him.

God is not unaware of the difficulties and truths of life, he included this book in the Bible.

Limited view of God (transcendent, just, judge and sovereign).

Almost an absence of personal devotion and faith in God.

Scripture? Questioned its part in the canon; it's words were self-contradictory and difficult.

Difficult: Eccl. 10:19 - "A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything."

Reconciling: sarcasm, stating what some think, half truth – money does help.

Qualifications to be included into Scripture:

1. Its place in the history of redemption; it surfaces during the wisdom tradition of Solomon.
2. Its authorship or authorship associations.
3. Its content: true and consistent with other Scripture.
4. Its preservation over the centuries: it has been continually held as Scripture.
5. The testimony of the church: What has the church said about it?
6. The witness of the Spirit: What does God say about it?

Some will see and hear while others will walk away in doubt. Acts 2 and John 7.

Disturbing but Purposeful

Designed to sympathize, challenge and evangelize the skeptic.

1. The book gets into the skin of the skeptic, willing to stand beside her and look at life from a purely humanistic perspective.
2. The observations made, anyone can make, believer or unbeliever.
3. It is asking, can we find meaning in all our pursuits?
4. The Preacher says it is all utterly meaningless and empty.

Can you live with this meaninglessness?

The skeptic tries to (i.e. Christopher Hitchens, Purple State of Mind).

But the Preacher keeps pressing meaninglessness down hard on our necks, knowing no one can ultimately accept it.

He "wishes to deliver us from a rosy-color self-confident godless life, with its inevitable cynicism and bitterness, and from trusting in wisdom, pleasure, wealth, and human justice or integrity"
-Fox.

In a not so obvious but very powerful way he is driving us to God.

Step One: See and experience the meaninglessness of life.

If meaning cannot be found in the things of man then where else might we look?

Step Two: Where else can we look for meaning?

This book is an "opening paragraph of an evangelistic message" -Eaton.

Paul's similar sermon in Acts 17 to Athens.

The Preacher may have even borrowed from Egyptian pessimistic writing from 2300 to 2100 BC which offered suicide as the solution. He redirects the reader from suicide to the sovereign God.

Ecclesiastes sympathizes, challenges, and evangelizes the skeptic.

Designed to "wake up the Church"

Some are asleep in life, not thinking but running, not wondering but busy, not asking questions but chaotically fumbling along.

Ecclesiastes disturbs and awakens you from your slumber, forcing upon you the meaninglessness of life, forcing you to think again, to wonder and ask the questions you haven't: "what is this all about?"

Moving us from "Leave it to Beaver" to "South Park".

Hear the observations Qohelet makes and consider again your answers.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

Defines as Meaningless:

Work

"What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3).

Working all those hours for what? What have we gained from all our work?

Recognition, value, big retirement, good wine, wider screen TV, extravagant vacation, etc.

What really has come of it?

Did you receive anything from your grandparents, parents; all they worked for and nothing.

Nature

"Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever" (1:4-7).

Sun, wind, water cycle around and around

Linville Gorge and Caverns will continue without me.

While far outliving you and me, creation will also come to an end.

Repetitiveness

"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. . . " (1:9-10).

Trends and fads come and go.

Movies remake old comics.

Books restate what has been said before.

People

"Generations come and generations go" (1:4).

Spruce Pine, NC in late 1800's, hundreds of people in the photo.

Personalities, worries, successes, ambitions, hopes.

What was accomplished from all their labor? A town now dying, trying to revive itself.

"There is no remembrance of men of old" (1:11).

Forgotten, how long until you're forgotten, completely?

What is your great grandmother's name? What do you know of her personality, work, possessions, struggles, issues and character?

Wisdom and Knowledge

"With much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (1:18).

Sought it and found it; and I was left wanting, even more I was filled with sorrow and grief.

Qohelet experienced the limitation of wisdom and knowledge.

Science explains but falls short of answering WHY; it can't give meaning or the intent behind it all.

Life can be very empty and lonely if all there exists are 6.5 billion people running around on a ball of mass spinning around a sphere of fire.

Qohelet asks, what is your answer to our meaninglessness?