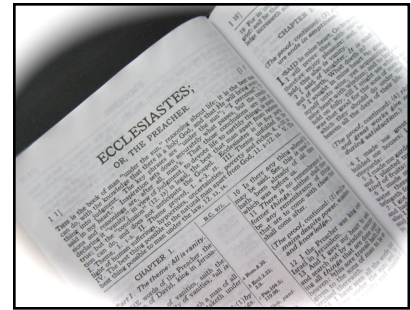


Books of The Bible

A Survey of The Book of Ecclesiastes

Introduction

On May 10th 1965 an English group called the “The Rolling Stones” sang a song which, to a certain extent, embodied the truths of the Preacher/King who wrote Ecclesiastes. The song was called: “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction”. In that song they sang: “I can't get no satisfaction . . . cause I try and I try and I try and I try, I can't get no, I can't get no satisfaction”. In that song various things are tried but it all comes back to the same fact: “I can't get no satisfaction”. The writer of Ecclesiastes tried multiple things, studied many things, but in the end none of them satisfy, and his concluding repeated words are: “All is vanity”. In contrast to the things of this world the Psalmist writes: “At Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore” (Psa. 16:11). The questions then are: “What or who is at God’s right hand?” and “What satisfied the heart of God, things or a person?” The answer is constantly repeated in the New Testament:



- a) God speaking to Christ says: “Sit Thou on my right hand” (Matt. 22:44)
- b) To the chief priests the Lord says: “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power” (Matt. 26:64)
- c) After the Lord’s earthly sojourn was over the Holy Spirit bears witness with this comment: “He was received up into Heaven, and sat on the right hand of God” (Mk. 16:19)
- d) The Lord, the man, not things, is on the right hand of God (Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22).

Many of us were brought up in Christian homes and it was easy to accept the eternity of God, the creation, the act of God laying our sins upon Him, the matter of sin, heaven, and hell. These profound matters, which we take for granted having been taught them from earliest days, we have intellectually believed but perhaps never really questioned. The reality is we ought to know why we believe and not answer “because the Bible says so”! Such an answer carries no weight with an unbeliever, agnostic or atheist. We need to be as the preacher was, thinking individuals, who like the Bereans, search to see if that which has been taught is true. Clearly then, one needs to prove the historical, scientific, medical, and prophetic fact that the scriptures are the inspired word of God. It also helps if one can give the evidences for the fact of God without using the scriptures. This man took a hard look at life and questioned its meaning. He did not give pat answers or blindly repeat that which others had said. When we begin to really ponder any of these truths, then as the largeness of the truths overwhelm the mind, questions will arise. Questions such as: “Are these things really true?”, “Is this whole story a fantastic confidence story, or truths so wonderful the heart will bow in worship?” For many they are afraid to think that deeply, or deny such thoughts. I have no doubt that it is because people cannot accept the depth of such matters that they reject the fact of God, etc., and then live “under the sun” and find it so disheartening and empty. It is to such Ecclesiastes speaks.

When this book is first read it may seem like a series of somewhat unconnected concepts randomly put together. Such cannot be the case for the God who informs us to do “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40), must do the same Himself. The book is a developing systematic sermon, as the structure will show, in which a series of experiments are tried to give meaning to life, a life without God. It could be said it is a moral man seeking purpose in amoral things. One has only to consider those who were the wealthy and influential who committed suicide:

- a) Charles Boyer, film star
- b) George Eastman, inventor
- c) Joseph Goebbels, military figure
- d) Jim Jones, cult leader
- e) Tchaikovsky, composer
- f) Vincent Van Gogh, painter
- g) Roy Combs, TV personality

All of these, with hundreds more, found that nothing in this world could sustain happiness. Tragic!

Books of The Bible A Survey of The Book of Ecclesiastes

C. Rhodes went to South Africa when he was twenty-seven years old, and eight years later controlled all the diamonds and gold mines in the Cape. Being a personal friend of General Booth, Booth asked: "Are you happy?" The answer was a resounding "No". Despite having a God fearing background Rhodes said: "If there be a God, I think that what he would like me to do is paint as much of the map of Africa British Red as possible". "If there be a God", the man, despite amassing millions, was a spiritual pauper and missed the purpose of life.

There are very few Biblical books more difficult to understand than Ecclesiastes. It is a book in which one really needs to discover what the key message of the book is. The message is simply: "Apart from God life is full of weariness and disappointment".

It has always been a favourite book with atheists and it is said that Voltaire appealed to it in support of the sceptical philosophies. No one can deny that it contains statements which, on the outward appearance, seem at variance with the remainder of Bible teaching, and gives approval for things that we, in this age, at first glance would not agree with. For instance: (ch. 1:15; 2:24; 3:3, 4, 8, 11, 19, 20; 7:16, 17; 8:15). Because it has got to do with things under the sun, it has been called the book of the natural man.

In taking a broad look at Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, it is easy to observe a contrast of thought. In Ecclesiastes the preacher clarifies the fact that all the things in the world cannot bring meaning to life or satisfaction. In the Song of Solomon the young lady has very little, but she has a person to love and be loved by, and that gives life its meaning. It is a lesson many saints have never learnt, hence they strive after things, only to need newer or more things and when all is done, they are not satisfied. But the saint who revels in the love of God and Christ and loves divine Persons knows a peace and contentment that the world cannot give.

It appears to me that the introduction was written as a postscript and then put at the front, for how could he have known all was vanity before he had tried the experiments of ch. 1:13 to ch. 9:3?

Author

There are two lines of thought relative to the author.

- a) One is that Solomon wrote the book
- b) The other that it was written many years later by another.

It is my thought that another wrote the book but what he wrote was the personal memoirs of Solomon (see the first person tense). My understanding is that this unknown biographer wrote as Solomon recounted his life and gave his advice. I say this because of what is written in (Eccl. 12:9-14), especially the wording of verse nine.

I am aware that there are those who argue that Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes, attributing it to a later period. The following expressions indicate it was Solomon for none of those who came after Him had the wisdom and wealth to develop such thoughts, or enablement to do such experiments. Note the following:

- a) "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (ch. 1:1)
- b) "I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (ch. 1:12)

The following verses indicate a person pre-eminent in wisdom:

- a) "I have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem" (ch. 1:16)
- b) "So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem" (ch. 2:9)

Because of these verses I have no doubt that Solomon was the author, and this is the autobiography of his life and experience when he got away from God and tried the various methods to produce happiness. It would seem from the last verses of the book that Solomon eventually got back in fellowship with God.

Understanding that Solomon wrote the books of Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, it appears to me that they were meditations at various times of his life. With this in view, I suggest he wrote the Song of Solomon as a younger man, The Proverbs in middle life, and Ecclesiastes in later years. It is evidently written when he was

Books of The Bible A Survey of The Book of Ecclesiastes

politically prosperous, financially secure, intellectually brilliant, but to a degree spiritually broke. Like Scrooge in “The Christmas Carol”, the ghosts of earlier days are back haunting him and sounding in deep hollow echoing tones: “All is vanity and vexation of spirit”.

He is called “the Preacher” (qoheleth), and he is called this in seven verses. (ch. 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10).

Key Verses

In the constant reading of Ecclesiastes, it is my opinion that there is no key verse but rather a number of verses which carry the truths of the book. They are:

- a) “What profit hath a man of all his labour (toil) which he taketh under the sun? The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” (ch. 1:3, 8)
- b) “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” (ch. 1:14)
- c) “It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth from them all” (ch. 7:18)
- d) “Surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him.” (ch. 8:12)
- e) “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole *duty* of man (duty is in italics). For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil” (ch. 12:13-14). The teaching of the last verse is the man who lives “under the sun” lives only for this world’s power, prestige, possessions, wanting its approval and acceptability, living by its standards. He is a fool for there is no fear of God and is not concerned about a coming judgment.

Key Concepts

The preacher reiterates the same expressions / word repeatedly:

- a) “Vanity of vanities” (ch. 1:2; 12:8)
- b) “All is vanity” (ch. 1:2, 14; 2:17; 3:19; 12:8)
- c) “This also is vanity” (ch. 2:1, 15, 21, 26; 4:16; 7:6; 8:14)
- d) “This is vanity” (ch. 6:2)
- e) “Vexation of spirit” (ch.1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9; The only other place where this expression is found is Isa. 65:14)
- f) “What profit” (ch. 1:3; 3:9; 5:16)
- g) “Under the sun” (ch.1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17-20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5)
- h) “Fear God” (or its truth) (ch. 3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13)

What does “vanity” mean? In our world it indicates admiration of ones own person or achievements, a mark of being full of self love. What did Solomon mean when he wrote it? The word “hebel” means emptiness, transitory, unsatisfactory. It is used of idols (Deut. 32:21; 1 Kgs. 16:13; Jer. 8:19), but in Ecclesiastes it expresses the conclusion or summary after evaluation.

The question is from where did he learn the truth that all is vanity? I submit it was from more that personal experiments and observation. I see here a man who had learnt from the dark paths of his father and listened to that which David his father had spoken:

- a) “Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah” (Psa. 39:5)
- b) “Surely every man walketh in a vain shew, surely they are disquieted in vain; he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.” (Psa. 39:6)
- c) “Surely every man is vanity” (Psa. 39:11)

Books of The Bible

A Survey of The Book of Ecclesiastes

God

It will be observed that while God is mentioned as Elohim, his name of Jehovah and Adonai are not mentioned. This is because as lifestyle the preacher was not in fellowship with the moral God but living life with God as nothing other than his creator. Never once do we read: "Thus saith the Lord". Ecclesiastes presents the life of an individual who lives life seeking purpose and satisfaction without the moral God or Master.

Notes

1. The perspective from which Ecclesiastes is written.
 - a) Ecclesiastes rightly follows Proverbs for in it man is seen in his wisdom giving wise advice. In Ecclesiastes man is, now in His wisdom, looking at things from an earthly perspective and giving his evaluation. The preacher is an adjudicator of life, but not as one not involved with life, but as one who had experiences with the opportunity and means to try in its fulness every aspect of life. Having had those experiences the verdict is given. I say verdict for it can be pictured as a court room. In the dock is "Contentment", and the first witness to try to assure contentment is "Wisdom", but it fails; then "folly" comes but it fails, and the first verdict is given: "All is vanity". The same thing is done again with other witnesses and the same verdict is reached several times over. Where then is contentment found?
2. The dangers of misreading that which is being said.
 - a) The doctrine of soul sleep.
 - i) One thing is clear from all false teaching, verses are taken out of context, immediate and book context, and then doctrines such as soul sleep are built on them. When such statements such as: "There is no remembrance of former things" (ch. 1:11) and "The dead know not any thing" (ch. 9:5), it is speaking of them regarding things "under the sun" (ch. 1:3, 9, 14; and the other 24 verses in Ecclesiastes). I expect we all have seen a dead body and as far as this world is concerned they know nothing at all. The thirst of the drunkard is no longer there, the wickedness of the pedophile is no longer there, the body is dead. BUT the soul is not dead, there is no such a thing in the scriptures as "soul sleep".
3. His text
 - a) Main text: "Vanity of vanity all is vanity." Where did he get it from?
 - b) He knew that the kingdom was going to be broken due to his sin.
 - c) Browsing through to Psa. 39.
 - i) "Days as an handbreadth . . . man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah." (v. 5)
 - ii) "Every man is vanity. Selah" (v. 11)
 - iii) The same truth as Job spoke (Job 7:16)
 1. The vanity of living life without God, an idolatrous life.
 2. Is life just a series of rounds, void of end purpose, living for the wrong world?

Purpose of The Book

- 1) The first great purpose in writing this book was to convey to man the impossibility of perpetual satisfaction with that which is on or from this earth.
 - a) "Till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life." (ch. 2:3)
 - i) An age long question: What will give ongoing perfect satisfaction of the things of earth?
 - ii) The answer: Nothing, for the end result is: "All was vanity and vexation of spirit" (ch 2:11)
 - b) "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (ch. 12:13-14)

Books of The Bible

A Survey of The Book of Ecclesiastes

Structure

- 1) The written meditations resulting from personal meditations.
 - a) Introduction which is his observation and leads to rationalization.
 - i) The unceasing turnings of the universe and life which lead to the pondering of:
 - (1) What is the purpose of life?
 - (2) Where is it all leading to?
 - (3) Is this material world all that there is?
 - (4) Is there nothing beyond getting old and dying?
 - b) Experimentation
 - c) Observation
 - d) Declaration
 - e) Conclusion
- 2) The message:
 - a) The Preachers subject (ch. 1:1-11)
 - b) The Preachers sermon (ch. 1:12-11:10)
 - c) The Preachers summary (ch. 12)

The Core Thoughts of Ecclesiastes.

The preacher begins with the acknowledgment that we are locked into a circular world of repetition. These are situations which are beyond our control to change (ch. 1:3-11). Being “under the sun” is not indicating verticalness, but a lifestyle restricted by being in this world and being restricted to the world of the senses and earthly experimentations. Thus, there are decisions to be made:

- a) Shall I live with the pessimistic approach that I am restricted here and can do nothing about it? After all, the sum total of all man’s labours is transient (ch. 1:3); is a weariness (ch. 1:8); is unsatisfactory (ch. 1:8) and leads to the question: “What profit hath a man of all his labour” (ch. 1:3).
- b) Shall I live with the optimistic approach that I am restricted here but I will see how I can make the best of it, and find some sort of rationale in it all?

Then another decision has to be made:

- a) Is there another level I can consider. What if I went outside the box of the senses into the world of the spirit and brought God into the equation?
- b) If I bring God into the equation, even though still in the circular world of repetition, can I begin to understand the purpose of life and then fulfil that purpose?

Ecclesiastes loudly proclaims, where despite all is circular and decaying, I can live with purpose and fulfilment.

The structure of Ecclesiastes, while at first difficult to follow, is seen not to be a non-connected series of thoughts. It is clear the first section deals with his experiments (ch. 1:12-2:26), this is followed by his observation (ch. 3:1-5:12), followed by his observing of practical morality (ch. 5:13-12:12), and then his conclusion (ch. 12:13-14).

The following is a summarized structure of Ecclesiastes and is only meant to present broad outlines.

It is evident that the broad structure of the book is in three parts:

- a) In the 3rd person (ch. 1:1-1:11)
- b) In the 1st person (ch. 1:12-12:8) which is subdivided into four major sections:
 - i) His personal satisfaction in all for or done by himself. In 64 verses the word “I” is used from ch. 1:12 to 12:1.

Books of The Bible
A Survey of The Book of Ecclesiastes

- ii) His personal pursuits for the meaning of life. Note the wording: “I said” (ch. 2:1, 15). The conclusion: “all is vanity”, so his attitude is “I may as well enjoy what I can of life” (ch. 2:24-26). This is a theme he returns to throughout the book (ch. 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10). Note the words “eat and drink in these passages”.
- iii) His observations as others lived life. There is a change in words. “I have seen” (ch. 3:10; 5:13, 18; 6:1); and again “all is vanity” is repeated (ch. 4:4-6, 8, 16; 5:10; 6:2, 9). To this he adds “vexation of spirit”, translated “striving after wind”, “in pursuit of the wind”. In summary, live wisely choosing the better rather than the good (ch. 3:2, 4).
- iv) His advice:
 - 1. Life is not predictable, live it wisely (ch. 7:15-18), followed by words of counsel (ch. 7:19-24), and then a conclusion (ch. 7:25-8:1). Again a collection of proverbs (ch. 8:2-8:8), and then a conclusion (ch. 8:9-13).
 - 2. Despite the fact that life is filled with injustice about which you can do nothing, enjoy the gifts God has given you (ch. 8:14-17).
 - 3. Despite the fact that life is fleeting, live it to its fullest (ch. 9:1-10).
 - 4. Despite the fact that wisdom does not always bring success, live wisely (ch. 9:11-10:4).
 - 5. Despite the fact that fools do succeed, you live wisely (ch. 10:5-20).
 - 6. Despite the fact that all in this life ends in vanity, live life without:
 - (a) hoarding for today for in time all will return (ch. 11:1-3)
 - (b) judging by appearances or what you understand (ch. 11:4-5)
 - (c) slothfulness for better days will come (ch. 11:6-7)
 - (d) thinking all will be ideal forever (ch. 11:8).
 - 7. Therefore, live with the divine evaluation in view, and the temporaries of life (ch. 11:9-12:8)
- (v) In the 3rd person ch. 12:8-14

Review and Consideration

Thank God that the saints having been led to: “The Rock that is higher then I” (Psa. 61:2), live on higher ground, being made to: “Sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). We see things not “under the sun” and earthly, but look on to that which is eternal. (2 Cor. 4:18)

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia