



## Introduction

Ecclesiastes is part of the Bible's 'wisdom literature' (along with Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and arguably James). In 1v1 it says that it contains "the words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem". This may have been Solomon himself, or it may have been someone writing in character as a solomonic king. The book is written as a frame narrative; there is a second speaker who introduces and closes the book (1v1-11, 12v9-14), and who reports the words of the Teacher (1v12-12v8) to us, perhaps evaluating them.

Ecclesiastes features many different genre and types of writing. The main ones are autobiography, lament, proverbs, poetry, parables and instruction. It is characterised by irony, repetition and juxtaposition. It is poetic (lyrical rather than logical in how it makes its points), local (grounded in the here-and-now world that the Teacher describes), and hospitable (willing to tolerate opposing views and awkward things). It is intimate and personal in its style.

More like a novel than a textbook, Ecclesiastes is inductive. It arrives at its main point only at the end of the book, rather than stating the main point at the beginning. It does not aim simply to teach us 'stuff we need to know', but rather invites us on a long and painful journey, provoking us to wrestle with difficult issues along the way. The book calls us to carefully examine ourselves and our worlds, before then looking to God. Beware the temptation to try to diminish or cover over the gaps caused by the unresolved tensions; we are meant to wrestle with the complexity rather than searching or settling for easy answers.

'Meaningless' – one of the book's key words and themes (1v2) – is probably best understood as meaning 'ungraspable', rather than 'non-existent'. It is not that the world has no meaning but that, like the mist, we human beings cannot grasp it. Despite our best efforts, we cannot fully understand or master life.

## How it fits into the bigger Bible picture

It can be difficult to see how Ecclesiastes fits into the bigger Bible story. There are no mentions of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the exodus, or Israel's journey to or life in the Promised Land. There is little mention of salvation. God is not referred to by his covenant name, Yahweh (translated 'the LORD' in our Bibles).

Although there are reasonably frequent mentions of God in the book, the speaker rarely seems to turn to God or make much of what he knows about God. Death is one of the book's biggest themes, but there is no mention of resurrection. The book is quoted only once in the New Testament (7v20 in Romans 3v12).

The book seems to focus primarily on God as **creator** and as **judge**, rather than as redeemer. There are many echoes of Genesis 1-3 in its words. The book gives us a true, if painful picture of what life is like in a fallen world (see Romans 8v20-21 for a similar picture). The truth that God will judge is a significant one in Ecclesiastes and one that reverberates through the rest of Scripture.

### So what does it mean?

Although not always on the surface, there are many ways in which Ecclesiastes points us to Christ. Jesus used similar language of lament in his time on earth (Matthew 23v37-39). He spoke with intimacy (Luke 10v41-42) and at times cynicism (Mark 8v36). He sifted through what the world has to offer and judged it wanting (Matthew 6v19-21), but also wanted his disciples to live well in the world (John 17v15) and taught them how to (Luke 16v9-12). But more than all of these is the simple fact that Jesus *entered* the world. In the incarnation, the eternal Son of the Father entered the fallen, meaningless world that his creatures live in. He became one of us. And he died a death that looked utterly meaningless. Our lord knows what it is like to live in this meaningless world!

Jesus shows us, too, much more clearly what lies *beyond* judgment for God's people: resurrection and new, eternal life (John 11v25-26). With Jesus, we can look up *above* the sun. There is a good and sovereign Creator who works all things for good for his people (Romans 8v28). Though the believer doesn't escape "life under the sun" when they turn to Christ, they do gain a bigger perspective as they learn to see their brief trials here in the light of eternity (2 Corinthians 4v17). There is meaning, even if we can't grasp it.

But Ecclesiastes does not merely teach us to hope for the future. It teaches us how to live well *in the present*. Christ is the gain that the world cannot provide in the *now*, as well as in eternity (Mark 10v28-31). Christ is our wisdom (1 Corinthians 1v24, 30). Just as the fall claims all areas of the world under its authority, so now Christ declares himself lord over all areas of our lives. Whether we eat or drink, we do it to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10v31). Our labour is not in vain, if for the Lord (1 Corinthians 15v58).

Ecclesiastes is a great comfort to those wrestling with the frustration and disappointment of life. It teaches us that God meets us where we're at in our brokenness, and isn't afraid of our difficult questions. It shows us the futility of trying to take control of our lives without God. It is not ultimately pessimistic. The many encouragements to eat, drink and enjoy life are genuine. The tension between the futility and the joy of life is resolved only through knowing and fearing our maker (12v13-14). It is this right perspective that enables us to live well as wait for Christ's return, and to enjoy life as a gift from our loving Creator.

## Helpful resources

- Nigel Styles on teaching and preaching Ecclesiastes: <https://vimeo.com/66728868> (15 mins)
- Bible Project 'Introduction to the wisdom literature': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeUiuSK81-0> (7 mins)
- Bible Project 'Introduction to Ecclesiastes': <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ecclesiastes/> (8 mins)
- Derek Kidner's Bible Speaks Today commentary: <https://www.eden.co.uk/the-message-of-ecclesiastes/> (110 pages)
- David Gibson's 'Destiny': <https://www.eden.co.uk/christian-books/personal-life/inspiration-and-motivation/destiny/> (180 pages)
- Zack Eswine's 'Recovering Eden: the gospel according to Ecclesiastes': <https://www.10ofthose.com/uk/products/16601/recovering-eden> (260 pages)

## Series overview

Date	Title	Passage	Focus verses	Main point
5 <sup>th</sup> Feb	<b>Life under the sun: there's nothing new</b>	1v1-14	1v2-3	Just as the cycles of the natural world endlessly repeat themselves, so life can feel like an endless, pointless repetition, with no real progression and nothing truly new. Like the morning mist, life is beautiful yet also confusing, disorienting and uncontrollable. Yet we have a saviour who, like us, lived under the sun.
12 <sup>th</sup> Feb	<b>Living for happiness (and the problem of dissatisfaction)</b>	1v15-2v26	2v1-11	We pour ourselves into the things we think will satisfy and fulfil us (money, sex, nature, art...). But they disappear in the blink of an eye, like the wind. They let us down and leave us dissatisfied and wanting more. We long for a pleasure that is deeper and longer-lasting, a happiness that is eternal, one that won't rot, perish, or be lost or stolen.
19 <sup>th</sup> Feb	<b>Living for achievement (and the problem of failure)</b>	4v1-16, 5v8-6v12	5v10-17	We plough ourselves into our work, seeking to be masters of ourselves and our world and to achieve great things. Yet so often we are motivated simply by envy. And so often we fail in our work. Our projects peter out, our achievements go unnoticed, our successes are attributed to and enjoyed by others. Even where we do enjoy success, it's momentary. We long for work that matters, work that makes a difference, work that will last for eternity.
26 <sup>th</sup> Feb	<b>Living for goodness (and the problem of death)</b>	2v12-26, 8v11-9v16	8v16-9v3	More altruistically, we might try to live for good. We might seek to find wisdom and true knowledge. We might strive to live our lives for others, bring justice for the weak and vulnerable, champion noble causes. And yet so often and despite all our efforts, we fail to see the truth. So often the unjust succeed and the good fail. And in the end, good or evil, wise or stupid, death will come knocking. If only there was an everlasting wisdom. If only justice would one day finally be done.
5 <sup>th</sup> Mar	<b>Life beyond the sun: fear God and keep his commands</b>	12v1-14	12v13-14	Our lives can only truly be understood when we look up to God, the one who is our creator and our judge, and when we give up our desires to understand and control our worlds and submit to him. Rather than striving for autonomy, we can look to Christ, the wisdom of God, and know that he is sovereign and good, and we can live out our lives, as we wait for his return, in obedience, freely enjoying the good gifts he gives us.