

The Bible's Big Story



Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a neglected book of Scripture, often set aside for easier texts, yet richly rewarding for those who study it carefully. It tackles the question of the meaning of life, but unlike Proverbs' short, direct sayings, Ecclesiastes wrestles with it through a long, nuanced argument that only yields its full answer when read as a whole.

Introductory Information

Title: The Hebrew title, comes from a verb meaning to assemble or gather, likely referring to one who gathers wisdom and addresses an assembly. The Greek Septuagint translated this as *εκκλησιαστής*, and the English title "Ecclesiastes" derives from that Greek term.

Authorship: The book is formally anonymous, referring to its author only as "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). Most Jewish and Christian tradition has identified this figure as Solomon. However, several textual and stylistic difficulties make this attribution uncertain. Whatever the human author's identity, the book's authority rests on its divine inspiration. Ecclesiastes itself credits its wisdom to "one Shepherd" (12:10–11).

Date: Dating depends on the authorship question. If Solomon wrote the book alone, it dates to the tenth century BC, during his reign (970–930 BC). If it was written or later expanded by another hand, a date as late as the fifth century BC is possible.

Theme & Purpose: The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to answer the question, "What is the meaning of life?" In order to answer this, the book presents two contrasting viewpoints: a humanistic or naturalistic view that exposes the emptiness of a life lived apart from God, and a God-centered view that locates meaning in an eternal relationship with God. Life is brief for everyone, but it is only truly meaningless when lived apart from a relationship with the eternal God.

Theme Summary: Reflecting on the meaning of life "under the sun" exposes the futility of all human pursuits and achievements when viewed apart from God. True fulfillment is ultimately found only in a covenant relationship with him; therefore, fear God, appreciate his simple daily gifts, and keep his commandments—all else is vanity.

Redemption Revealed In Ecclesiastes

Human wisdom and natural revelation alone are insufficient to reveal the meaning of life.

The Preacher's exhaustive investigation demonstrates that human intelligence and effort

alone cannot unravel the meaning of life under the sun (Eccl. 3:11). This failure is not the final word, however; it points forward to the need for special revelation, a hope ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who alone makes the Father known (John 1:18).

True satisfaction and meaning in life cannot be found apart from God.

Because God has placed eternity in the human heart, temporal things cannot satisfy eternal beings. True satisfaction is found only in the infinite God, not in the brief pleasures of this life. This life is not merely a waiting room for eternity but a schoolroom, in which God sovereignly uses both prosperity and adversity to draw people toward himself, echoing Augustine's observation that the human heart is restless until it rests in God.

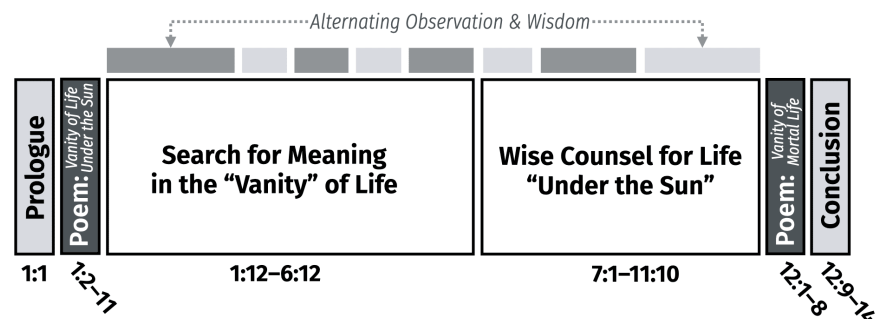
Ecclesiastes' conclusion anticipates a need which only the gospel can satisfy.

The book's closing demand to "fear God and keep his commandments" echoes the summary of the Mosaic covenant, yet Ecclesiastes never resolves how fallen humanity can meet that demand. This is not an oversight but an intentional signpost pointing toward the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33), in which perfect righteousness, God's law written on the heart, and true obedience from a regenerated will are found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Ecclesiastes answers the timeless human question of life's meaning by pointing beyond itself to the covenant relationship with God made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As divine image-bearers created for relationship with God, we find true fulfillment only when Christ is at the center of our lives; he alone answers the question Ecclesiastes raises.

Structure of Ecclesiastes



Notes:

1. Ecclesiastes wrestles with the meaning of life across an entire book rather than offering quick answers like Proverbs. How does reading the book as a whole, rather than pulling out isolated verses, change the way you understand its message?
2. The Preacher describes pursuing knowledge, pleasure, wisdom, and gain, only to find each "vanity." Which of these pursuits do you find yourself most tempted to treat as a source of ultimate meaning, and how does Ecclesiastes challenge that tendency?
3. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God has "put eternity into man's heart." How does this truth help explain why temporary things under the sun can never fully satisfy you?
4. The lesson argues that Ecclesiastes ends with a demand ("fear God and keep his commandments") that it cannot itself resolve, and that this gap points forward to the gospel. How does seeing this unresolved tension change the way you read the book's final chapter?