

ECCLESIASTES SERIES Introduction part 1

We're starting a series in Ecclesiastes, and we'll be here for a number of weeks.

Today, I want to give some overall perspective of the book this morning, TONIGHT, and next, after that we'll jump into chapter One in more detail.

DISCLAIMER – Each week I can start with some “air quotes” because I'm definitely drawing on the insights of scholars who have gone before me – Michael Eaton, John Kendall, Richard Belcher, J.I.Packer, Jay Adams, The Bible Project team, Zack Eswine, Derek Kidner, Robert Rayburn, David Gibson, J.D. Greear Gordon Fee, and others.

The first crucial question is ...

Why study this weird book from 3,000 YEARS AGO?

One reason is that this book has given us some very familiar sayings:

- Eat, drink and be merry...(8:15)
- A fly in the ointment ... (10:1)
- There is a time for everything... (3:1)
- Cast your bread upon the waters... (11:1)
- There is nothing new under the sun ... (1:9)
- Vanity of vanities, all is vanity 1:2
- “Your so vain, you probably think this song is about you” – sorry, that was Carly Simon, not King Solomon.

If you're not a “religious” or churchy person, then this book is for you because it doesn't assume that you know anything about the typical Bible stories or plotline that folks learn in Sunday school or VBS. In fact, Ecclesiastes is so void of the typical religious terms and references that some wonder how it even got put in the Bible. There is no mention of OT heroes, the Covenant, the Exodus, prophets, kings (except a quick mention of “king David's son”), sacrifices, atonement, etc.

§ Themes from Ecclesiastes are not just in sayings, but also in many movies.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/13-films-that-capture-the-themes-of-ecclesiastes/>

The Gospel coalition posted on January 19th, **13 films intended to illustrate some important themes in Ecclesiastes: *Forrest Gump; Searching for Bobby Fischer; Roman Israel, Esq.; The Greatest Showman; La La Land; Before Sunset; No Country for Old Men; In Cold Blood; A Man For All Seasons; Selma; Silence; A Man Escaped; The Man Who Planted Trees.***

I've only seen a few of those, but the article describes how the movie connects with themes from the book- intentionally or unintentionally.

§ It goes along with the previous sermons of sowing and reaping, or at least the idea of **“Begin with the end in mind.”**

In Ecclesiastes we are challenged to **“LIVE WITH THE END IN MIND”, and the end is death.**

David Gibson- “Living Life Backward” : Chris Hitchens use of poet Wm Dunbar – “the fear of death distresses me”. Hitchens adds- “I would not trust anyone who had not felt something like that.”
“Hitch 22 memoir”

Christian Machu (French friend) – “Death itself doesn't scare me, but the idea of no longer existing or not having meaning bothers me.”

Ecclesiastes 7:2-3

It is better to go to a house of mourning Than to go to a house of feasting,

Because that is the end of every man, And the living takes it to heart.
Aren't you glad you came today??

Gordon Fee points out Four realities dominate the overall perspective of Ecclesiastes:

(1) God is the single indisputable reality, the Creator of all and the one from whom all life comes as gift (e.g., 3:12–14), including its usually burdensome nature.

(2) God's ways are not always, if ever, understandable (3:11; 8:17).

(3) On the human side, what is "done under the sun" (2:17) simply is not tidy; indeed, much of it doesn't add up right at all. The way things should be (the righteous get the good, the wicked get the bad) is not in fact the way things are—at least not consistently in this present life.

(4) The great equalizer is death, which happens to rich and poor, young and old, wise and foolish alike.

These are themes we'll revisit in the weeks to come.

§ WHY STUDY THIS BOOK???

I think Ecclesiastes resonates with a lot of us here at Highlands. It has themes that wrestle with the complexities and perplexities of life.

Have you ever had a time or season when life went "off script?" It can happen for any number of reasons. Anyone know that feeling?? Raise your hands

** I'VE never preached or taught through Ecclesiastes and that's a good thing because I would not have been ready for it. I believe it takes some experience of life being off script to fully appreciate this book.

What does that mean, "off script"? If you have to ask, then it probably means that you've not been there.

Here's what it sounds like:

"God, I WANT MY LIFE BACK";

"God, this doesn't make sense. Things weren't supposed to happen this way."

"God, MAKE IT STOP";

"God, I CAN'T HANDLE ANYMORE OF THIS";

"PLEASE God, LET ME WAKE UP AND LEARN THIS WAS A DREAM." ;

"How can people just go about their trivial little lives. Don't they know that I'm dying inside, and it could happen to them at any time?"

Here's what it feels like:

§-You just got your guts kicked in

§-Nothing seems to matter

§-You feel like you're walking in a daze, or you feel like the Walking Dead – you feel like a zombie. You're numb.

Many of you have been there, or are there now.

For you, this book will make a lot of sense. It is messy, and dark, and it feels like it is filled with contradictions – just like real life.

For some of you, this book will be frustrating because it isn't neat and orderly, and you have a bent toward "everything being done in orderly fashion." That's good, but it makes it harder for you to sink your cognitive and emotional teeth into a book like this.

Ecclesiastes describes the world that is off script. It uses the Hebrew word “hebel” that refers to emptiness, absurdity and meaninglessness.

You may be rattled by the study, but that’s good because one day the hebel is going to hit you upside the head. When it does you may be mad at God, but hopefully this series will help prepare you for it.

Some find this disquieting..

The personal covenant name of God, Yahweh, LORD, is not used a single time in Ecclesiastes (or Esther). The word “God” Elohim is used 40 times, but the word “vanity” hebel is used 38 times – 73 total in the OT – most in Ecclesiastes.

“Hebel” is a key word in the book, and we’ll discuss it more, but it literally means, “mist/smoke/vapor/mere breath”

Figuratively it refers to emptiness or vanity, or something transitory and unsatisfactory; absurd

It is also the same root from where the name of Abel is derived, suggesting that the story of Adam and Eve’s son—whose life is tragically and senselessly cut short—epitomizes all that Ecclesiastes understands as evil, unfair, or unjust under the sun.

Life is like that. One minute you feel like you’ve got life figured out, and then poof, it is vanity, smoke, unsatisfactory. WHAT HAPPENED? “HEBEL” HAPPENED.

Michael Eaton – commentary – dating of Eccles? “It doesn’t give a lot of clues about the date and it doesn’t fit with a particular style. It is a genre of pessimism literature.”

Ecclesiastes is the dystopian book of the OT- it can be dark and at times depressing because it is so real.

Dystopia –(opposite of UTOPIA) an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.

Think: 1984, Animal Farm, A Clockwork Orange; Slaughtershouse Five, Lord of the Flies, Fiddler on the Roof, Rebel without a Cause; The Wild One, Walking Dead; Planet of the Apes, Mad Max movies, ...Genesis 4 – post-fall human condition. Things went from Paradise to homicide / fratricide in one chapter (from ch 3 to 4), to Gen 6 – every intention of man was evil continually.

We all look for solutions for life, or something we want to call wisdom. We want to find something to make sense out of it all. We want some guru to explain it. We tend to have trouble with ambiguity. As a former cross-cultural missionary, and one who works regularly with those preparing to go to the field, I’ve long since thought we should give them T-shirts that say two things:

FRONT: “I LOVE AMBIGUITY” (not all missionaries love it – nor do we)

BACK: “I DID NOT SIGN UP FOR THIS”

We might all like to have that T-shirt.

Things we didn’t sign up for come our way and we start looking for answers or a way to ease the pain.

The problem is that we may look in all the wrong places:

Ex: Man looking for his wedding ring outside in his lawn. Friend comes to offer to help. “Where did you lose it?” – *In the house. “Why are you looking out here?” ** The light is better outside.

It is foolish to look for something where it can’t be found, and the book of Ecclesiastes helps us understand that. Where do folks look for wisdom for living??...

§ The magazine rack at the checkout counter

- You see articles and books about “How to Avoid Aging” – Thank you Peter Pan
- - Seriously, does that mean being stuck in Jr High all your life???
- The only real way to avoid aging is to die young.
- Not great wisdom there.

§ -The self-help section of the bookstore

§ Dr. Phil or Dr Oz or Dr. Laura or Judge Judy or Oprah??

§ We seek knowledge and information – 24 hr news cycle/ podcasts/ blogs / Twitter feed/ online info site/ “google it”/ “Ask Siri”, etc WE LIVE IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY and THE INFORMATION AGE.

The problem is that the information doesn’t give us the peace and sense of well-being we hope for. **Ecclesiastes 12:12 But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. Ecc 1 – “increasing knowledge leads to increased pain.”**

This weariness can push us to look in the right place—God’s Word.

Zack Eswine:

In Ecclesiastes God intends you to know him by requiring you to look plainly and without polish at yourself, your neighbors, and the world in which you and I live. God puts himself in the background, as it were, in order to place self-concern front and center. “We are prompted by our own ills, to contemplate the good things of God.” (Jean Calvin) In the Spirit’s hands, Ecclesiastes confronts us with our own ills in order that by knowing ourselves as we are we might come to know God as he is.

The problem is not that there is evil in the world. The problem is that there is good. Because otherwise, who would care? A rather odd backward sounding statement, but it fits the mood of Ecclesiastes.(a character in a TV show)

What people are really looking for is a formula for “success”. We call it wisdom, but we really just want the key the good life- defined by financial success and good health. Years ago, Francis Shaeffer called it the search for personal peace and affluence.

Ecclesiastes speaks into this ambiguity and our desire for understanding. But it does it in an unusual way, which is why the book is disturbing to some.

Ecclesiastes understands that life is messy and complex, sometimes tragically so, but it gives us a way to look at the mess. **Part of wisdom is in knowing that we don’t know what we don’t know, but God does, and He does have it all in His hands. In the end He will put it all right, so live with the end in mind.**

As Sam Gamgee says, “Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?” (Jason Gray lyrics??)

The Biblical promise is that one day we’ll have that same reflection, in a positive way, if we know Christ.

“[Some mortals] say of some temporal suffering, “No future bliss can make up for it,” not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”

—C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, chapter 9.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” — Revelation 22:20

Depending on where you are on your journey, that may sound weird. No matter where you are, we’re glad you came today. I think this book will meet you as you take a journey of faith.

If you are skeptical, then you’ll hear your own voice at times in Ecclesiastes. I encourage you to read it during the week. If you need a bible, speak with me or someone you’ve seen up front.

If you’re a believer – struggling or convinced – the voice of wisdom will resonate with you in this book. I encourage you to read it during the week as well.

Ecclesiastes speaks to the general condition of women and men in this world “under the sun.” The voice of wisdom introduces topics that will stimulate, challenge, and provoke us in our thinking, and hopefully make us want to talk further about what we hear.

Life under the sun may seem absurd at times. Without a God centered perspective is certainly vain and meaningless, but God came into our world so that we could know what we don’t know. God didn’t send an airtight argument by a preacher- he sent an airtight Son.

Life “under the sun” only makes sense when it is lived in relationship with THE SON.

When our lives go “off script”, we can remember that Jesus went off script voluntarily for us. He left heaven and stepped into our mess, so that we can get back on script with God. Those who stood at the cross and watch Jesus die thought things were off script. They didn’t know that it was His plan all along – He came to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died.

He is coming again to ensure that everything sad will become untrue for those who belong to Him.

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