

## ECCLESIASTES SERIES Introduction part 2

NEW MEMBER CLASS – Feb 25, March 4,11,18 during SS.

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

A book that focuses on our shared human experience. It is not "preachy" with lots of biblical words or language.

There will be times when I go into and through a passage, and other times where I make take a look at themes in the book.

Why? Because like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, as wisdom literature is more like poetry than prose. It is often filled with riddles rather than didactic teaching themes. Various topics are scattered in various places in the book, they're not all set out in an orderly fashion.

There are different ways to group themes, but as you read the book, look for these Five ideas as they unfold.

1. Human Yearning- nothing better than to enjoy 2:24ff; 3:22
2. Moral Values
3. Our Fallen Nature
4. Ultimate Accountability.
5. Time marches on – (Tracy Lawrence song)

It doesn't really matter whether you grip the arms of the dentist's chair or let your hands lie in your lap," Lewis wrote. "The drill drills on."

To understand wisdom, we need to know what it is NOT:

Proverbs view vs Ecclesiastes view – both are wisdom literature, but they give different perspectives

Proverbs is more cut and dry- Probabilities, while Ecclesiastes is the exceptions

EX: learning a language. They all have exceptions

Brian Regan on the i before e rule [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Brian\\_Regan](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Brian_Regan)

I remember my teacher asked me, "Brian, what's the 'I before E' rule?"

Um... I before E... ALWAYS.

" Are you, being silly, Brian?"

Apparently!

So, she says, "No, Brian, it's I before E, EXCEPT after C, AND when sounding like "A", as in neighbor, and weigh, and on weekends, and holidays, and all throughout May, and you'll always be wrong NO MATTER WHAT YOU SAY!"

That's a hard rule. That's a— rough rule.

Eswine: **The Wisdom Literature needs Ecclesiastes then, in order to keep us from entrusting ourselves to trite formulas under the sun. It is not that Proverbs ignores exceptions. It too makes plain that rules aren't enough and that context matters for how we apply wisdom**

Job, also wisdom literature, gives an example with his "friends". They knew the "(i) before e" rules – "obey and God will bless you. Job is suffering, so he has not obeyed the rules." WRONG- Job was a righteous man. His friends didn't know the "except after 'c' rule".

Ecclesiastes is all about the exceptions, and we tend to not like the exceptions:

EX: learning French. The rules were great, and then, here come the IRREGULAR VERBS and the exceptions.

Eswine:

“The inspired words of Ecclesiastes which may disturb us reveal aspects of God too often neglected by us.”

i.e. The exceptions- we want a tame domesticated God who follows our rules, but the God of the Bible is beyond our control. “His ways are not our ways”. Just read Job to get a fuller picture of this reality.

A big part of wisdom is learning to embrace the exceptions in life as coming through the hands of a sovereign God. Remember that those are the same hands that held the rod that fell on Christ in order to draw us to Himself. -VoV p.91 Christian Calling

What wisdom is NOT:

§ JI Packer: like being in control room of a subway system- you get to see all the lines, all the trains and their location. You see where they are headed and what time they should arrive.

We assume that wisdom from God happens when He takes us behind the scenes of the cosmic control room and gives us deep insight into the events around us. We have a super power to see what God has done and WHY He is doing it. If we just walk close enough with God then we can read the signs and know what to do. If it all flops, then it is because of our lack of spirituality.

The proof of our “wisdom” is that our plans will work out and we’ll avoid all suffering. DID THAT WORK FOR Jesus?

WHAT WISDOM IS...

Packer uses another transportation illustration:

Wisdom is like being taught to drive or teaching someone to drive (been there!!)

What matters in driving is the speed and appropriateness of your reactions to things and the soundness of your judgment as to the circumstances.

You don’t ask, “Why did the lanes converge, or did the road twist and turn like this, or why that driver just did that or parked there, or why the guy is on my bumper, etc”.

The key to driving is doing the right thing in the actual circumstance that arrives.

We don’t have to know, and probably won’t know, the ‘Why’. Wisdom is knowing and doing the Biblically correct thing even when we don’t understand the ‘why’. Wisdom consists in choosing the best means to the best end. It may not always be the comfortable thing, or the thing that leads to our “success” in the eyes of the world. The effect of divine wisdom is to enable you and me to do just that in the actual situations of everyday life.

EX: DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME YOU DROVE A STICK SHIFT? If one has only driven a car with automatic transmission, driving manually will take some getting used to. - Peugeot in France

That’s what Ecclesiastes is like- jerky and bumpy.

One last car illustration: Eswine

Have you been in a country that drove on the “wrong side of the road?” You must change the way to watch and look- it takes some time to get used to and it can be scary.

When it comes to wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes is a bit like driving on the wrong side of the road. You have to pay more attention at what is going on around you.

What do we need to know in order to “get used to” the way this book functions in its attempt to get us from one place to another?

We need to know that the destination makes sense of the journey- Gibson

If we start with the end in mind – Death comes to all of us- then we can begin to make sense of our journey and the odd “wisdom streets” that we go down.

David Gibson – preface Living Life Backward

Ecclesiastes teaches us to live life backward. It encourages us to take the one thing in the future that is certain—our death—and work backward from that point into all the details and decisions and heartaches of our lives, and to think about them from the perspective of the end. It is the destination that makes sense of the journey. If we know for sure where we are heading, then we can know for sure what we need to do before we get there. Ecclesiastes invites us to let the end sculpt our priorities and goals, our greatest ambitions and our strongest desires.

Ecclesiastes is not an easy book. There are various approaches that scholars take to the book as a whole in terms of meaning and perspective. The fact that solid evangelical scholars disagree, is a bit daunting, but it should not keep us from engaging with the book. I can't guarantee that I have the definitive perspective, but I'll give you what seems to make the most biblical sense to me. Today, as part 2 of our overview, I want us to consider some broad strokes of the book.

**OVERVIEW OF ECCLESIASTES** Ecclesiastes comes to us from an editor (12:9–14) who has compiled the teachings and proverbs of an Israelite king who calls himself Qohelet (“assembler”), a title that alludes to his role as a teacher of wisdom in an assembly—presumably of God's people (12:9).

A prologue (1:1–11) sets forth the basic concern that drives Qohelet's whole enterprise, namely, the hebel nature of human life in a world that continues as it was before and after anyone's own life span.

(hebel = “breath,” “vapor”; NIV, “meaningless”)

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.”

Why does the preacher start his sermon like this?

As you read the rest of the chapter, and the book, it's like a stream of consciousness essay. He seems to be talking to himself, but with a wider audience in view. Unlike the Proverbs which are clearly directed to “my son” (1:8), Ecclesiastes doesn't give a direct reference until Chapter 11:9 , when the preacher says, “Rejoice young man in your childhood”, then again in 12:1.

The author speaks as a mature teacher giving a young disciple the fruits of his own long experience and reflection (11:9; 12:1,12). He wants to lead this young believer into true wisdom and to keep him from falling into the “subway control room” mistake. The preacher wants to give him a realistic view of life and a true view of wisdom. Young men and women are inclined to equate wisdom with book learning – NOTHING AGAINST BOOK LEARNING- BUT wisdom is more than that. Nor does wisdom give us insights into the divine motivations for how He governs the universe.

The Preacher wants him to see that the real basis of wisdom is a frank acknowledgment that this world's course is perplexing, that much of what happens is quite inexplicable to us, and that most occurrences “under the sun bear no outward sign of a rational, moral God ordering them at all.

PACKER

EX: How often have you wondered aloud or in silence, “What (the ‘hebel’) is going on? Just a cursory reading of the news headlines would lead one to question whether or not there is a rational order in the cosmos.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is “Life seems useless at times, but don't despair. Don't let that throw you off. There really is a God who is in charge. It may not all make sense until our ultimate end – DEATH- , but it does.

We may SUMMARIZE the message of the sermon as follows: PACKER

§ Look (says the preacher) at the sort of world we live in. Take off your rose-colored glasses, rub your eyes and look at it long and hard. What do you see?

§ You see life's background set by aimlessly recurring cycles in nature (1:4-7). "THE drill drills on."

§ You see its shape fixed by times and circumstances over which we have no control (3:1-8; 9:11-12).

§ You see death coming to everyone sooner or later but coming haphazard; its coming bears no relation to whether it is deserved (7:15; 8:8).

§ Humans die like beasts (3:19-20), good ones like bad, wise ones like fools (2:14, 16; 9:2-3).

§ You see evil running rampant (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 8:11; 9:3); the wicked prosper, the good don't (8:14).

§ Seeing all this, you realize that God's ordering of events is inscrutable; much as you want to make it out, you cannot do so (3:11; 7:13-14, 8:17 RV; 11:5).

§ The harder you try to understand the divine purpose in the ordinary event of life, the more obsessed and oppressed you grow with the apparent aimlessness of everything, and the more tempted to conclude that life really is as pointless as it looks.

Once you buy into the "hebel" of life, then the question of 1:3 comes into play – What profit is there for a man in all his endeavors?" If all is senseless, then is there any value to doing anything? You work and labor for what? You leave it behind and don't know who will get it.

The Preacher is like the personal trainer who seeks to break you down in order to build you back up. He pushes us to avoid the optimism of finding "God's purpose in everything". There is actually a slice of wisdom in recognizing that we don't always find that purpose in this life. The world doesn't work that way.

In my own life, and in ministry with others, I've seen how we get caught up in the notion that we need to be in the subway control room where we can know exactly what is going on. Or to put it another way, we want to "Be in the room where it happens." We want the sense of security that God approves of us enough to give us the scoop. We want to feel like we're getting the insider information at the celestial water cooler, where the real news is shared. It is comforting to us to think that we'll get the real scoop on anything that happens to us in the future.

And then "hebel" happens and our bubble bursts. We feel abandoned by God and we don't know how to pray and repent because we thought we were good with God. We're perplexed – Ps 73- we're disoriented and lose our grip.

Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart!

2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped.

3 For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

4 For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat.

This is what happens when we do not heed the message of Ecclesiastes. For the truth is that God in his wisdom, to make and keep us humble and to teach us to walk by faith, has hidden from us almost everything that we should like to know about the providential purposes which he is working out in the churches and in our own lives. PACKER

This is what happens until we get a Psalm 73 perspective of a sovereign God who is actually in control, and not us.

16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight

17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; *Then* I perceived their end.

But what, in that case, is wisdom? The preacher has helped us to see what it is not; does he give us any guidance as to what it is? Indeed, he does, in outline at any rate.

- ❖ -“Fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13);
- ❖ -trust and obey him, reverence him, worship him, be humble before him,
- ❖ -and never say more than you mean and will stand to when you pray to him (5:1-7); do good (3:12);
- ❖ -remember that God will someday take account of you (11:9; 12:14), so run from things of which you will be ashamed when they come to light in God’s time...”
- ❖ -It’s ok to enjoy life
- ❖ -Seek grace to work hard at whatever you do and enjoy your work.
- ❖ -Leave the ultimate judgement of your life up to God; your part is to be a good steward of what He has given you.

THAT IS THE WAY OF WISDOM, which is one aspect of a life of faith.

Undergirding this is the faithful character of God and His sovereign control over things that will, at times, be perplexing.

It is the way of wisdom and the movement of faith to sink our roots deep into the character and truth of the God who has been on mission to save, redeem, and sanctify a people for His own possession. **God’s way of giving wisdom is part of His plan for restoring the relationship between Himself and his fallen creatures.** Packer

Wisdom is not some secret insight; **WISDOM IS SOMEONE WE MEET BEFORE IT IS SOMETHING WE OBTAIN. 1 Cor 1:24, 30**

Wisdom isn’t about knowing something, but rather it is a heart posture of resting in Someone who we trust in the middle of the “hebel”.

We’ll know we’re growing in wisdom when we see its fruit – humility, joy, an ear and heart open to His voice in His Word, a growing repentant faith and eagerness to submit ourselves to His will.

In NT terms this is growing in Christlikeness, as we walk with Him by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, seeking to understand and live out the wisdom of God as it is revealed in His Word.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes leads us to the ABC’s of faith:

Admit  
Believe  
Confess

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