

ECCLESIASTES – A STUDY ON THE FUTILITY OF LIFE APART FROM GOD

The name *Ecclesiastes* means one who addresses an assembly, hence the author's self-designated title, *The Preacher* (CP Ecc 1:1-2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10). While not every bible scholar agrees, it is plainly evident from scripture that Solomon was the author. In 1:1 he refers to himself as the son of David, king in Jerusalem (CP 1:1). In V12 he declares that he was also king over Israel in Jerusalem. Solomon was the only immediate son of David who was king over Israel in Jerusalem (CP 1:12 with 1Ki 1:38-39, 43-46; 2:10-12; 4:1). In Ecc 1:16 he claimed to have great wisdom. Solomon's wisdom was unrivalled – it was given to him by God (CP Ecc 1:16 with 1Ki 3:11-12; 10:23-24). Solomon's wealth was unsurpassed (CP 2:4-10 with 1Ki 3:13; 10:14-23, 25-27; 2Chr 9:22-24). Solomon had a huge retinue of servants (CP Ecc 2:7-8 with 1Ki 9:17-19, 10:4-8, 26). Solomon declared that there was no man who did not sin (CP Ecc 7:20 with 1Ki 8:46). There was not one God-fearing woman among Solomon's seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines – one thousand women (CP Ecc 7:28 with 1Ki 11:1-8). Solomon was wise and taught the people knowledge – it was he *who sought out and set in order many proverbs* (CP Ecc 12:9 with 1Ki 4:32).

Ecclesiastes is a series of reasonings by Solomon from which a core teaching can be extracted by God's children in every generation, of the utter futility of life apart from God; of basing one's values in life on earthly possessions and self-gratifying pleasures; and of relying solely on human effort and wisdom to achieve lasting happiness and satisfaction from life. The key word in Ecclesiastes is *vanity*, which means something transitory, hollow, vain, empty, meaningless. From a New Testament Christian perspective this expresses the futility of life apart from God. *Vanity* translates from the Hebrew word **hebel**, meaning literally, "breath", which explains Solomon referring to it as "grasping for the wind" (CP Ecc 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 5:16; 6:19). The theme of Ecclesiastes from a New Testament Christian perspective, is the hollowness of natural man's accomplishments, and the complexity of life without God as the central focus. The lives of those in which God is not the central focus, are purposeless and meaningless (CP Ecc 1:2; 12:8).

The expression *vanity of vanities* here means utterly useless, meaningless. It points to the ultimate emptiness of all that the world has to offer (CP Ecc 1:3-11). Solomon observes here that there is no lasting benefit or purpose working to accumulate things to achieve happiness. He compares the enduring activity in creation to the profitless activity of man. The underlying teaching for Christians here is that if God is not central to every human effort or activity in life, it is a profitless life – empty and meaningless. Solomon uses the term *under the sun* in V9 to describe daily life (CP 1:12-18). Solomon observes here that grief and sorrow await those whose hope is solely in the achievements of human wisdom. It goes without saying of course that the "wisdom" Solomon applied in Ecclesiastes is not the same "wisdom" he applied in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs was Godly wisdom whereas Ecclesiastes is mainly human. As an ultimate value, human wisdom

and knowledge only highlight problems – they do not rectify them. A life lived strictly for the sake of wisdom is futile (CP Ecc 2:12-16). Only that which is accomplished by wisdom imparted by God has lasting value (CP 1Cor 1:18-31; 2:4-7, 12-16; Jas 3:13-17).

Solomon next observes the futility of living strictly for pleasure (CP Ecc 2:1-11). Living strictly for pleasure accomplishes nothing. It only satisfies for a time (CP Pr 14:13; Ecc 7:4). The only lasting pleasures are from God (CP Psa 16:11). Solomon's declaration in Ecc 2:11 that all is vanity, highlights his failure to find any real value in his own wealth and possessions, apart from God. Any human pursuit, in which God is not central, is futile. Dedication to work also as its own reward is vain (CP Ecc 2:17-23; 3:22). From a Christian perspective, human labour has no permanent value unless it is dedicated to God. All labour by Christians must be regarded as a service to the Lord, which will one day be rewarded (CP Col 3:23; Eph 6:7-8). Unless all human effort and activity is dedicated to God it has no lasting value (CP Ecc 2:24-26). The truth underlying what Solomon says here is that all activities in life, including eating, drinking and working, can bring satisfaction only if God is central to that life. The principle of life he expounds is that God rewards righteousness and punishes evil (CP Ecc 3:1-10). We learn here that not only does God reward righteousness and punish evil, but He has sovereignly appointed all of life's activities for all men (CP Psa 31:15; Pr 16:1-9). Earthly pursuits are good in their proper place and time, but unprofitable when pursued as life's chief goal (CP Ecc 3:14-17).

Here Solomon declares that God's decrees are immutable (CP Nu 23:19). God works everything perfectly after the counsel of His own will (CP Eph 1:11). Man cannot add to or take away from the order of God's creation and must hold Him in reverential awe, and submit to His authority. The wickedness and injustice in the world that mars God's creation will in due course be requited when God will judge both the righteous and the wicked (CP Ecc 11:9; 12:14 with Ro 2:5-11). Solomon goes on to say in Ecc 3 that men are like beasts; that they have no preeminence over animals in-so-far as they both die and return to dust (CP 3:18-21). Some in the professing church use this passage of scripture to teach the doctrine of soul sleep and the complete annihilation of the wicked dead. Yet there is no mandate whatever for this teaching in anything Solomon says here. In fact in both Ch 3 and Ch 12 Solomon teaches how God has put eternity in men's hearts, and warns of His judgement of both the righteous and the wicked (CP Ecc 3:11, 17; 12:7, 14 (for a more detailed study on the foregoing doctrines refer to this author's study on *Hell* in **Advanced Studies in the Christian Faith**)). Solomon's statement in Ecc 3:21 that the spirit of the beast goes downward into the earth is the sum of what the Bible has to say concerning the destiny of animals. His observation that the spirit of man *goes upward* is qualified in 12:7, where he states that *the spirit shall return unto God who gave it* (CP Psa 16:9-11; 49:15; 73:23-26; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2-3).

Next, Solomon spoke on the cruelty of oppressors and of their victims having no comforter. He concluded

that being dead was better than being alive and not being born at all would be even better (CP Ecc 4:1-3). Here we see the extent of Solomon's backslidden state. God is the comforter of the oppressed, but Solomon did not acknowledge Him as such here (CP Psa 86:17; Isa 51:12-16; 2Cor 1:3). We learn from Solomon's next observation in Ecc 4 that if the basic motive for success in life is the driving force of envy and jealousy, it is utterly futile. Neither working simply to outdo others, nor not working because of the futility of trying to outdo others, have any meaning in life. It is better to take it easy and have little, than to be in fierce competition, grasping after more (CP Ecc 4:4-6 with Pr 15:16-17; 16:8; 30:7-9). Let Paul have the last say for New Testament Christians (CP Php 4:11-13). Solomon was also concerned by the foolishness of a man consumed with the desire for greater wealth, labouring and striving to accumulate it, yet having no heirs to whom he could bequeath it (CP Ecc 4:7-8 with Psa 39:6; 1Jn 2:16).

The aloneness of the man in Ecc 4:7-8 is in sharp contrast to the togetherness of two which Solomon promotes in V9-12 (CP Ecc 4:9-12). Solomon outlines the practical purposes of two people working together here: they have double reward for their efforts; when one falls, the other can lift him up; two can lie together and keep warm; when one is prevailed against, the other can stand with him. From a Christian perceptive the principle of two working together was applied by Christ in sending out the disciples two by two (CP Mk 6:7; Lu 10:1). The core teaching in Ecc 4:9-12 is the futility of someone labouring solely for their own benefit and not sharing with others. This also applies to New Testament Christians. They are not on earth solely for their own benefit, but to serve God and others (CP Mt 28:19-20). Solomon goes on in Ecc 4 to declare that the popularity of kings is precarious and short-lived (CP Ecc 4:13-16). Even the highest honour the world has to offer is a shadow without substance. From a Christian perspective advancement without God being central to it is empty and meaningless (CP Mt 16:26).

In Ecc 5:1-9 Solomon gives advice on what is expected of God's children (CP 5:1-9). *Keep thy foot* (KJV) in V1, means to walk prudently (NKJV). God's children must walk prudently before Him at all times (CP V 1 with Pr 15:8; Isa 1:12); they must be quick to listen and slow to speak. They must cultivate humility and walk softly before the Lord. *The sacrifice of fools* refers to the presumptuous talk of those who speak rashly and make hasty vows they cannot keep (CP Ecc 5:2-7 with Pr 20:25; Mt 5:1-11; Jas 1:19, 26). In V 10-17 in Ecc 5, Solomon teaches keys to handling wealth. He teaches that wealth and material gain do not, and cannot, satisfy. The more a man possesses the more he spends. Pursuit of wealth is an exercise in futility because no one can take anything with them when they die (CP Ecc 5:10-17 with Job 1:20-21; Psa 49:16-19; Lu 12:15-21; 1Ti 6:5-10). It is good for God's children to enjoy the fruit of their labours, but they must always see it as a gift from God (CP Ecc 5:18-20 with Psa 127:1-2; Ecc 2:24; 3:12-13; 9:7). This translates to New Testament Christians sharing that with which God has blessed them, with others needing help, and to advance the cause of Christ in the earth (CP Mt 6:19-20; Lu 16:9; 1Ti 6:17-19; 1Jn 3:16-19).

oppressed, and if life can only offer oppression, then As we learned previously in our study on Ecc 2:24-26, and above in 5:18-20, the ability to enjoy the fruit of one's labour, which are blessings from God, is God's gift to those in a right relationship with Him. In Ecc 6:1-2 Solomon blames God for blessing a man with riches but depriving him of the ability to enjoy them (CP Ecc 6:1-6). What we glean from this in line with what is taught throughout scripture, is that this man never saw his riches and wealth and honour with which God had blessed him, from the vantage point of eternity, but simply to fulfil his own self-gratifying desires (CP Ecc 3:12-13; 6:9 with Job 27:8; Psa 39:6; 52:7; Jer 17:11; Lu 12:15-21; Jas 4:14). From a Christian perspective what we learn from Ecc 6:3-6 is the importance of living our lives for God. Next, in Ecc 6:7-10, Solomon observes that all the labour of a man is to satisfy his appetite and his passions, yet his desire is not satisfied (CP Ecc 6:7-10). We learn from V 7-9 here that it is best to be content with what one has, and not covet something else (CP Php 4:11-13; 1Ti 6:5-10; He 13:5). In Ecc 6:10 we learn that it is foolish for men to contend with God, for He knows and directs every happening in their lives. The simple fact is that no one knows what will happen after they die (CP Ecc 5:15-17; 6:11-12; 8:7 with Psa 39:6-7). It is worth noting here before moving on, that while Solomon does his utmost to prove the meaningless of life in Ecclesiastes, the Holy Spirit uses the observations he makes to show the futility of life apart from God.

Next, in Ecc 7, Solomon gives advice for daily life. In V 1 he declares that a good reputation is more important than great riches (CP 7:1 with Pr 22:1). *Precious ointment* is very expensive and equates to great riches here. When a man of good reputation dies, his death can be a time of honour. For God's children the day of their death is a better day than the day of their birth. Their death is precious in the sight of the Lord (CP Psa 116:15); they are received by God into Glory (CP Psa 73:24), and they go to a far better life with Jesus (CP 2Cor 5:1-9; Php 1:21-23). In V 2-6 in Ecc 7, Solomon contrasts the sobering effect of a rebuke by a wise man with the levity of fools (CP Ecc 7:2-6 with Psa 90:12; 141:5; Pr 13:18; 15:31-33). From a New Testament Christian perspective we should see V 2-6 in Ecc 7 as teaching us to be ever mindful of our own mortality, and of the need for Godly sorrow in our lives for any sins committed (CP 2Cor 7:10). Solomon goes on to observe in Ecc 7:7 that even a wise man who becomes an oppressor acts foolishly, and is turned into a fool by a bribe, because his judgement can no longer be without partiality (CP Ecc 7:7 with Ex 23:8; De 16: 19-20).

For one so backslidden, Solomon underscores some deep Bible truths next, in Ecc 7:8-14 (CP Ecc 7:8-14). Ecc 7:8 teaches that God's children must always avoid acting rashly or hastily (CP V 8 with Pr 14:29; Eph 4:2). Ecc 7:9 teaches that God's children must not permit themselves to be provoked to anger (CP V 9 with Pr 14:17; 16:32; 17:14; 1Cor 13:4-5; Jas 1:19-20). Ecc 7:11-12 reminds us that Christ is the wisdom of God. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (CP V 11-12 with Pr 3:13-18; 8:1-36; 9:1-11; 13:14; Col 2:3). Ecc 7:13-14 teaches that by acknowledging God is at work in them, God's children must accept adversity and prosperity in the

same spirit of grace (CP V 13-14 with Php 4:11-13; 1Ti 6:6-8; He 13:5-6).

What Solomon says next, in Ecc 7:15-18, has provoked much thought among New Testament Christians, yet it is in effect taught throughout scripture (CP Ecc 7:15-18 with Pr 3:7; 25:16; Ro 12:3, 16). God's children are not to become self-righteous or overly wise in their own eyes, nor become puffed up with presumptuous self-sufficiency that will cause them to forfeit their salvation. It is only by fearing God and walking in the way He has prescribed, that one can be saved (CP Ecc 7:18 with 12:13; Ro 11:20-22). In Ecc 7:20 Solomon states the truth of Ro 3:10-18 and 23 (CP Ecc 7:20 with Ro 3:10-18, 23). Ecc 7:21-22 teaches that because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, no one should give heed to what someone else says about them – they too have said things about others that needed forgiveness (CP V 21-22 with Jas 3:2, 6-12). In Ecc 7:23-29 Solomon teaches that sinners cannot find wisdom because they are ensnared by wickedness. Only those who please God by their faith and obedience receive God's wisdom and escape a life of sin (CP V 23-29). The *woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands* in V 26, is the personification of the seduction of immorality and wickedness (CP V 26 with Pr 2:10-22; 5:1-14; 6:24-29; 7:1-27).

In Ecc 8:2-7 Solomon counsels his readers to obey the king (CP V 2-7). For New Testament Christians this translates to obeying all who have the rule over them, whether they be civil, or church leaders (CP Ro 13:1-5; Tit 3:1-2; He 13:7, 17; 1Pe 2:13-17). Next, from what Solomon concludes in V 8-13 in Ecc 8, we learn that no man can prevent his day of death, nor restrain his spirit from departing his body. There is no discharge from the obligation to die, but only the righteous will be redeemed. The wicked will be forever damned (CP V 8 with Job 14:5; Psa 49:6-8). The wicked can be part of the church, and even though their days may seemingly be prolonged, they will be eternally damned. It will only be well with those who reverently fear God (CP Ecc 8:10-13 with 12:14; Psa 37:11, 18-20; 73:1-28; Pr 1:32-33; Isa 3:10-11; Ro 2:5-11).

In Ecc 8:14 – 9:1 Solomon declared that God knows more than man does and that He is sovereign over all things. All things concerning both the righteous and the wicked are in His hands (CP Ecc 8:14 – 9:1 with De 29:29; Ro 11:33-36). To say as Solomon said in Ecc 9:1 that no man knows love or hatred – it is all before them, is incorrect. From a New Testament Christian perspective, God's children know by the scriptures the ways of God, how they are to walk in those ways, and what the outcome of their walk will be (CP Ecc 9:1 with Psa 34:9-10; 37:1-11; 84:11; 91:1-16; Mt 7:7-11; 21:22; Mk 11:22-24; Lu 11:1-13; 18:1-8; Jn 14: 12-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24 (these scriptures are not exhaustive but merely representative of the many scriptures which teach the promise of God's blessings upon His children)).

(CP Ecc 9:2-6). In V 2 here Solomon declares that all things come alike to all. But that is not correct. The only thing that comes alike to all is the *one event* he mentions – death (CP V 2; 2:16; 3:19-21; Psa 49:12;

15; He 9:27). The wicked do not receive of God's blessings in life – only the righteous do, as we saw in the scriptures the subject of our study on V 1. Next, Solomon's declaration in V5 "... *but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward*" is only true as far as the bodies of the dead are concerned. The souls and the spirits of the dead live on. They are immortal and continue in a state of full consciousness throughout eternity – the righteous in heaven (CP Psa 49:12, 15; He 10:39; Rev 6:9); the wicked in hell (CP Psa 9:15; Mt 10:28; Lu 12:4-5). And there are rewards – for both the righteous and the wicked (CP Rev 22:11-12). In V 7-10 in Ecc 9, Solomon advises his readers to enjoy the many blessings God has bestowed upon them (CP V 7-10). From a New Testament Christian perspective of V 8, the white garments Solomon counselled his readers to always wear, and to put ointment on their heads, translates to purity of character and conduct which must always be manifest in New Testament Christians (CP Mt 5:8; 1Ti 4:12; 1Pe 3:13-17).

Solomon's counsel to honour marital fidelity in Ecc 9:9 is also Paul's counsel in the New Testament (CP 1Cor 7:1-5; He 13:4). New Testament Christians construe V 10 in Ecc 9 as encouraging them to labour diligently, whether it be for God or man, and this conforms to scripture (CP V 10 with 1Cor 10:31; Col 3:17, 23). But in the context of V 7-10 in Ecc 9, Solomon, in his backslidden state was encouraging his readers to seize every possible pleasure while they could, because they would not be able to do so once they died. Solomon was not contrasting life with afterlife here, but life with death. As far as he was concerned everything ceased with death (CP Ecc 9:11-18). Here again Solomon observes the iniquities of life from a worldly perspective, and again they underscore the futility of life apart from God. The teaching here for New Testament Christians is not to let any injustices they may suffer in their walk with God deter them from earnest, dedicated work, because they serve God, not men. In life after death God will right all wrongs, and reward their righteous deeds (CP Psa 58: 10-11; Pr 11:8; Ro 2:4-10; Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:23-24).

Solomon's observations in Ecc 10 next, are also from a perspective of life apart from God. In V19 he declares that money is the answer to everything (CP Ecc 10:19). From Solomon's perspective here money is the enabling power for one to live a life of self-indulgent pleasure. From a New Testament Christian perspective however, money cannot be used for self-gratifying pleasures but to extend God's Kingdom and gain eternal benefits (CP Mt 6:19-21; 19:21-24; Lu 16:9-13; 1Ti 6:17-19). Next, in Ecc 11, Solomon gives good advice to all men (CP 11:1-6). What Solomon encourages here underlines God's law of sowing and reaping, which is taught right throughout scripture (CP Psa 126:5-6; Pr 11:18, 24-31; 19:17; 22:8-9; Lu 6:31, 36-38; 1Cor 9:6-10; Ga 6:6-9). It should be noted here that while Christians should never give in order to receive, the law of sowing and reaping is a principle of life already established by God and Christians have no say in the matter – giving and receiving go together (CP Ecc 11:9-10).

Here Solomon warns young men against centring their lives on the cravings of their heart and the desires of their eyes, because God will condemn them for it on the Day of Judgement. Solomon counsels them to put away such lusts from them which end in sorrow, for youth and life itself are transitory, empty and devoid of truth. This translates to New Testament Christians, men and women, young and old alike, cleansing themselves also of the filthiness of the flesh, and having pure hearts before God (CP 2Cor 7:1; 2Ti 2:22). We learn here that as Solomon counselled the young men of his day to remove evil from themselves, so too New Testament Christians must do the same. They must put to death their old sinful nature and walk in the newness of life in Christ under the empowering of the Holy Spirit (CP Ro 6:1-23; 8:1-13; 13:12-14; Ga 5:16-25; 1Pe 4:1-5; 1Jn 3:1-6).

Next, in Ecc 12:1-7, Solomon counsels his readers to remember God while they are still young. There will be no pleasure for them in anything when they become old and infirm. They will die and their bodies will turn to dust and their spirits will return to God (CP V 1-7). The *evil days and years* in V 1, refers to when the young men become old and infirm, with death fast approaching. *While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened* in V 2, refers to old people still being able to see before their vision becomes impaired by their age. *The keepers of the house shall tremble* in V 3, refers to the hands of the human body, which tremble in old age. *The strong man shall bow themselves* refers to people's legs becoming bowed from age. *The grinders cease* refers to old people having very few teeth, which eventually all fall out with age. *Those that look out the windows will be darkened* refers to the eyes – old people's vision is impaired by age. In V 4, *the doors shall be shut*, refers to the mouth and ears – old people being unable to hear and speak. *The grinding is low*, refers to old people using their gums, devoid of teeth, to eat. *He shall rise up at the voice of the bird* refers to old people being awakened from sleep at dawn by cocks crowing and other bird noises. *All the daughters of music shall be brought low* refers to old people's vocal chords failing and no longer having an ear for music.

In V5 Solomon goes on to observe that old people are afraid of heights. They become fearful of dying. Their gray hair flourishes and then falls out. Even the lightest weight is too much for them to carry. Their appetites and passions altogether cease because they go to their eternal home. Those who mourn them will do so. *The silver cord be loosed* in V 6 refers to the thread of life being severed when their spirit departs from them. Solomon depicts their death as the silver cord being loosed, the golden bowl being broken, the pitcher shattering at the fountain and the wheel broken at the cistern – an underground water storage pit. At death their body turns to dust and their spirit returns to God, who gave it. That said, Solomon concludes once

more that life is futile and not worth living (CP V 8). In V 9-12, Solomon then summarises his work (CP V 9-12). Solomon impresses upon his readers here that he was wise and still taught the people knowledge. He sought out and set in order many proverbs. He searched to find the right words and wrote what was true and upright. God – the *one shepherd* in V 11 – inspired the words of truth Solomon spoke. It needs to be restated here though that the “wisdom” of Proverbs is not the “wisdom” of Ecclesiastes. Proverbs was Godly wisdom, whereas Ecclesiastes is mainly human.

In V 12 Solomon observes that the thirst for knowledge will never cease and there are many books still to be written on the subject. But they cannot all be believed, and it will be too wearisome to study them all. Then in V 13, in sharp contrast to trying his utmost throughout Ecclesiastes to prove that life is futile and not worth living, Solomon counsels his readers to bring all the issues he raises, as well as life itself, to a final conclusion by reverencing God and obeying His commandments (CP V 13). Solomon acknowledges here that the only real meaning to life is to be found in a relationship with God. Everything else is “vanity”. The entire book of Ecclesiastes must be understood in light of this verse. Regardless of his cynical observations of life as meaningless and vain elsewhere in the book, what Solomon counsels his readers to do here, and in V 14, gives life the meaning for which Solomon searched so vainly (CP V 14). Every living soul must prepare for eternity on the basis that their every deed, their every thought, their every word, their every secret thing, will be judged by God (CP Ecc 3:17; 11:9; Mt 12:36; Ac 17:30-34; Ro 2:16; He 4:12-13). The righteous will be judged at the Judgement Seat of Christ (CP Ro 14:10-12; 2Cor 5:10). The Judgement Seat of Christ is not to determine punishment, but the Christian's place in heaven (CP 1Cor 3:11-15). The wicked will be judged at the Great White Throne Judgement at the end of Christ's millennial – one thousand years – reign, where they will be cast into the lake of fire (CP Rev 20:11-15).

In summary, Ecclesiastes teaches that the purpose and meaning of life cannot be found in human endeavour. It shows clearly where one's priorities should lie – not in the things of this life, but in God. Christians should acknowledge the evil, foolishness and injustice in life, yet never take their focus off God as the centre of their being, able to sustain and undergird them through every facet of life. Whatever one's portion in life, accountability to God is eternal and irrevocable. The chief end of man is to love God and obey His commandments (CP De 5:32-33; Psa 119:9; Pr 4:4; Mt 7:21-27; Lu 11:27-28; Jn 14:15, 21; 1Cor 7:19; 1Jn 2:3-6; Rev 22:14).