

Wisdom Literature: **ECCLESIASTES**

INTRODUCTION

The book of *Ecclesiastes* is written by a man who calls himself “Qoheleth,” which means “Teacher” or “Preacher.” Most scholars believe this was King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live. He had more money, more power, and more experiences than anyone else (1 Kings 3).

In *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon looks everywhere for purpose: in success, relationships, work, wealth, pleasure, and even wisdom itself. But over and over again, he comes up empty. His repeated conclusion is sobering: *everything under the sun is meaningless* without God. The phrase “under the sun” shows up many times in the book—it means life lived from a purely earthly perspective, without considering eternity or God’s role in our lives.

Solomon isn’t trying to depress us. He’s trying to wake us up. He wants readers to realize that when we chase after temporary things—like popularity, possessions, or achievements—we’ll always end up disappointed. Those things might bring a little fun, but they can’t bring lasting joy.

But there’s good news. At the end of the book, Solomon doesn’t leave us hanging. He gives us a clear answer: the only way to live a meaningful life is to *fear God and keep His commands* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). When we live for God instead of ourselves, life has real purpose and joy that lasts beyond this world. *Ecclesiastes* is honest, raw, and real. It reminds us that chasing the world will leave us empty—but centering our lives on God will lead to deep satisfaction that nothing else can give.

MAJOR THEMES:

1. *The Retribution Principle: God sees, and He will make things right.*

Many books in the Bible’s wisdom section—like *Job*, *Psalms*, and *Proverbs*—teach the idea that the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will face judgment. *Ecclesiastes* wrestles with this truth. The Teacher looks around and sees that sometimes evil people seem to get ahead, while the godly suffer (Ecclesiastes 3:16–22; 8:10–14). But he doesn’t give up hope. In the end, he says clearly: “*It will be well with those who fear God*” (Ecclesiastes 8:12). God’s justice may not be instant, but it is certain.

2. *Wisdom is gained through real-life experience.*

The Teacher didn’t write from a classroom. He wrote from the school of life. He tested wealth, pleasure, hard work, and even wisdom itself. He ran after everything people think will bring happiness—and found that none of it could satisfy (Ecclesiastes 1:12–18; 2:13; 5:18). His words remind us: wise living often comes from learning the hard way.

3. *God wants us to enjoy life—but with Him at the center.*

Ecclesiastes isn’t anti-pleasure. In fact, it tells us to enjoy life! The Teacher says to eat, drink, and find joy in your work—but always with the fear of the Lord (Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12–13). He knows that pleasure becomes a problem when it becomes your purpose. But when God is at the center, enjoyment becomes worship. Life is a gift, and God wants us to delight in His gifts—with gratitude, not greed.

4. Everything on earth is fleeting.

The Hebrew word *hebel* shows up 38 times in the book. It means vapor, smoke, or breath. That's how the Teacher describes everything "under the sun." It's not all bad—but it's all temporary (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 1:14; 2:1, 2:17, 2:19). Success, stuff, status—it all fades. So don't build your life on what's passing away. Build it on the One who lasts forever.

BOOK ORGANIZATION:

ECCLESIASTES: Vanity

1. The Introduction (1:1-11)
2. The Search for Meaning in this World (1:12-6:12)
 - A. Man's futile search for meaning "under the sun" (1:12-3:22)
 - B. The futility of selfish ambition (4:1-6:12)
3. Living Wisely in this World (7-11)
 - A. Despair as a turning point toward wisdom (7:1-14)
 - B. The true path to wisdom: the fear of God (7:15-9:10)
4. Shepherding wisdom for the work of God (9-12)
5. The Conclusion (12)

Outline adapted from: https://www.amazon.com/Talk-Thru-Bible-Quick-Guide/dp/0840752865/ref=sr_1_1?crid=22K8HY5W5P3Gd8eyJ2jpaMSf9.vY2b23de-OCR_9f0N1cyat8Tc0b8pW6G3AaIGWxtFQe3_jwW6mmsVNETH5DazUYEPfcQK5-4cGjwRV4wFhZ5RT0x0aW-Gd6dH5eK17L3Hqgqz8LaDDA8_7LYu4.OrFde56e0n5w2mTnm5b6E-q0LU6GW0a0Kc-y3Q6d8_b9=rel=keywords=talk+thru+the+bible+williamson+and+boslaipd+17519199336+prefix=boo+and+with%2Cqps%2C1656r+0-1

JESUS IN ECCLESIASTES:

Jesus is the only true answer to the empty life Solomon describes in *Ecclesiastes*. At the end of the book, Solomon gives his final advice: "*Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man*" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). But here's the problem—none of us can do that perfectly. Only one person ever has: Jesus, the Son of Man. He not only kept God's commandments without fail—He also invited us to follow Him. Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" (John 14:15). He is both our example and our strength.

Solomon also warns that one day "*God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil*" (Ecclesiastes 12:14). That might sound scary, but it's also part of the hope we have in Jesus. He is the *light of the world* (John 8:12), and nothing is hidden from Him. As Jesus said, "*There is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed*" (Luke 8:17). He will bring every secret into the light—not to shame those who trust Him, but to make all things right.

In a world full of questions and confusion, Jesus brings clarity. In a life filled with disappointments, He gives lasting purpose. He is the answer Solomon was searching for all along.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFIC – HOW TO STUDY ECCLESIASTES:

Observation: What do I see in the passage?

Look for repeated words and phrases.

Words like "*meaningless*" (*hebel*), "*under the sun*," and "*chasing the wind*" are used over and over. Repetition highlights what the author wants you to feel and remember. Ask: What idea keeps showing up? Why might that matter?

Watch for patterns and structure.

Ecclesiastes often uses formulas like lists or pairs (e.g., "a time to be born, a time to die" in chapter 3). These help you see the rhythm of life. When you notice a pattern, write it out or paraphrase it to better understand the flow.

Notice extended images from creation.

Solomon uses nature—like the sun, wind, and rivers (1:3–7)—to paint a picture of life’s repetition. These aren’t random. They’re meant to stir something in you. Ask: Have I seen this picture somewhere else in the Bible? What do these images reveal about life or God?

Mark shifts in tone and perspective.

Sometimes Solomon sounds hopeful, and other times cynical or even hopeless. These shifts help highlight the author’s struggle and journey through different stages of reflection. Ask: Is the author describing how life feels—or what is ultimately true?

Interpretation: What does it mean?

Discern between description and prescription.

Solomon isn’t always telling you what to do. Sometimes he’s just being honest about how he feels. Not everything in Ecclesiastes is advice—it might be a reflection. Ask: Is this a truth I should live by, or a description of someone wrestling with life?

Trace the theme of time.

Time plays a major role in Ecclesiastes. The author reflects on how short and uncertain life is, and how God’s timing is often hidden from us. Consider how this connects to God’s sovereignty and our limitations as humans.

Examine how Ecclesiastes interacts with the Retribution Principle.

The idea that good people prosper and wicked people suffer is challenged in this book. Solomon admits that reality doesn’t always work that way—but he still affirms that *it will be well with those who fear God* (8:12). This tension prepares us to understand the justice and grace we find fully in Jesus.

Ask what the image meant then, and what it could mean now.

Think about how the original audience would have understood these metaphors or ideas. Then, ask how those same images might speak to modern readers. A vapor (*hebel*), for instance, might remind us today of fog or breath on a cold window—here for a second, then gone.

Application: What’s my response?

Let the tension sit—don’t rush to fix it.

Ecclesiastes doesn’t answer every question. That’s on purpose. When life feels confusing or unfair, we’re invited to trust God even when we don’t understand. Ask: How is God shaping me in the unknown?

Ask what the passage teaches about God, sin, and yourself.

What does it show about God’s character? What does it reveal about the world’s brokenness—and your own heart? How does it point you to something deeper than success or comfort?

Reflect on contentment and time.

Ecclesiastes challenges our desire for control, certainty, and “more.” Ask: Where am I chasing something that won’t last? What would it look like to receive time and joy as gifts from God instead of trying to earn or control them?

Look for the gospel thread.

Solomon ends with a call to *fear God and keep His commands*—but we know from the whole Bible that only Jesus did this perfectly. Ask: Where do I see my need for Christ in this chapter? How does this passage prepare me to understand grace?

Prayer: How do I respond to God based on what I've seen, understood, and applied?

Use prayer as a way to invite God into the process of studying Ecclesiastes. This book wrestles honestly with life's hardest questions, and God welcomes your honest prayers in return. You can use the following prayer prompts to guide your time with Him:

Ask God to reveal the places where you're chasing the world instead of Him.

"Lord, show me the areas of my life where I'm looking for meaning apart from You. Help me see the things that feel important but won't last."

Confess your discontent—and ask for deeper joy in Him.

"God, I confess that I often want more than I have. I run after things that won't satisfy. Please teach me to be content in You. Help me enjoy Your gifts without forgetting the Giver."

Thank God for the wisdom in this book—even when it's hard to understand.

"Father, thank You for not avoiding the tough questions. Thank You for giving me a Bible that is honest, real, and deep. Give me a heart that seeks Your wisdom and trusts You even when life feels confusing."

Pray for humility and a teachable spirit.

"Jesus, make me someone who listens well to You. Soften my heart to be corrected. Help me receive Your truth with humility, not pride or resistance."

Ask the Spirit to help you see Jesus more clearly.

"Holy Spirit, open my eyes to see how Ecclesiastes points to Jesus. Help me remember that He is the only one who lived with perfect wisdom, and that because of Him, I can live with purpose and peace."

Read the passage aloud—and pause to pray wherever your heart is stirred.

After reading, stop and pray over any words that hit you. Ask God to shape your heart around those truths and to help you live them out today.

WHAT CHURCH HISTORY HAS SAID ABOUT ECCLESIASTES:

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

"For when he says in another book which is called Ecclesiastes, 'There is no good for a man, except that he should eat and drink,' what can he be more credibly understood to say, than what belongs to the participation of this table which the Mediator of the New Testament Himself, the Priest after the order of Melchizedek, furnishes with His own body and blood?"

John Wesley (1703-1791)

"The sun is in perpetual motion, rising, setting, and rising again, and so constantly repeating its course in all succeeding days, and years, and ages; and the like he observes concerning the winds and rivers, Ecclesiastes 1:6-7, and the design of these similitudes seem to be; to shew the vanity of all worldly things, and that man's mind can never be satisfied with them, because there is nothing in the world but a constant repetition of the same things, which is so irksome, that the consideration thereof hath made some persons weary of their lives; and there is no new thing under the sun."

