

An Overview of Ecclesiastes

by William MacDonald

The Book of Ecclesiastes describes Solomon's search for the meaning of life, concluding that life is vanity and futile, but ultimately pointing to the way of fulfillment in Christ.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:2, Ecclesiastes 3:18

Topics: "The Meaning of Life", "Human Wisdom vs. Divine Wisdom"

Description

William MacDonald explores the Book of Ecclesiastes, detailing Solomon's quest for life's meaning through human wisdom, ultimately concluding that life is vanity and futile without divine revelation. He emphasizes the recurring phrase 'under the sun,' which signifies the limitations of human understanding and the futility of seeking fulfillment in worldly pursuits. MacDonald highlights that while some of Solomon's observations contain truth, many are misleading, and the book serves as a cautionary tale against a life devoid of spiritual insight. He notes that true fulfillment can only be found in a relationship with God, contrasting the wisdom of man with divine wisdom. The sermon concludes with a call to remember the Creator, especially in the face of life's inevitable challenges.

Transcript

The Book of Ecclesiastes describes Solomon's search for the meaning of life, by his own unaided intellect and apart from divine revelation. His conclusion was that life is vanity and as futile as chasing the wind.

We know the book was written by Solomon because he was the only son of David who was king in Jerusalem, 1. 1. We do not know what period of his life he is describing.

The key to the book is the expression 'under the sun.' It occurs 29 times. Solomon tries to solve the riddle of life by his own wisdom and by his own observations. His conclusions are the same as you and I might draw if we did not have a Bible.

Two expressions confirm that the book represents man's wisdom under the sun. In 3. 18, Solomon said in his heart that men are like beasts. He said this in his heart. He is speaking from personal observation and not from divine wisdom. Then in 3. 21, he said, 'Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the beast, who goes down to the earth?' This is not divine revelation but human ignorance. He says that nobody knows. However, we know what happens at the time of death, because we have the Bible.

If this book contains nothing more than human wisdom, why did God allow it to be included in the Scriptures? Its purpose is to save us from walking the same dreary path of frustration, pessimism, and meaninglessness. If the wisest and richest man could not find fulfilment 'under the sun,' what chance do we have?

Because the findings are 'under the sun', some of them are true, some are half-true, and some are not true at all. Some are true, e.g. 'A good name is better than ointment', 7. 1a; 'For there is not a just man who does good and does not sin', 7. 20. Some are only half-true, e.g. 'And the day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth', 7. 1b. This is true only if the person is a believer. Some are not true at all, e.g., the earth does not abide forever, 1. 4; man does have an advantage over beasts, 3. 19; the dead do have knowledge, 9. 5; 'do not be overly righteous', 7. 16, is not good advice, God would never say that. On the contrary, He does say, 'My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin', 1 John 2. 1. In other words, don't sin at all.

The fact that there are untruths in the book does not affect its inspiration. The inspiration of the sacred word does not guarantee the truthfulness of what the devil says, Gen. 3. 4-5, or of what man says by his own wisdom. God said to Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has', Job 42. 8. Yet, Eliphaz's words are in the Bible. The Lord gives a faithful record of what is said and done, and that record is inspired even if it records some of man's mistakes. He wanted those things to be in the word for our instruction and correction.

Solomon uses Elohim for the name of God in these twelve chapters, never the name Jehovah. Anyone can know that there is an Elohim, that is, a Mighty One. But the name Jehovah speaks of God in covenant relation with man. A fool can know that there is an Elohim, but only a believer can know Him as Jehovah.

The king tried to find fulfilment in education, pleasure, materialism, wealth, music, philosophy, status, and sex, 1. 17 - 2. 11, but concluded that life is meaningless and futile. The argument is that if the richest and wisest could not find fulfilment in these things, what chance do we have? 'For what can the man do who succeeds the king?' 2. 12.

In chapter 3. 1-8 he listed 28 activities of life, half of which seem to be active and the others counteractive. Usually the second member of each pair cancels the first. Fourteen minus fourteen equals zero.

This would seem to imply that life is a big zero. The king concluded that when it comes to dying, man has no advantage over a beast. They all go to the grave, 3. 18- 22. Accumulating riches is folly; when a man dies, he leaves it all, perhaps to a son who is a fool. The son did not work hard for it, so he goes out and wastes it.

Mingled with some words of wisdom are many other expressions of pessimism. The struggle of life simply is not worth it.

The king covers most of the spectrum of human life. He tackles the main questions that plague mankind, and comes up with his own answers. Because God's ways and works are inscrutable, the best philosophy of life is to have a good time while you can. Solomon grieves over injustice, wickedness, and inequalities. The competitive spirit is vanity. Religion that is insincere is vanity. The insatiable desire for more is vanity. All is vanity.

Did Solomon ever get above the sun in this book? The jury is still out on that question. There is no agreement among students of the word. I don't think he did.

His closing advice for young people to remember their Creator is reinforced by a classic description of old age with its multiple infirmities, 12. 1-7. It is a masterpiece of symbolic literature. Jesus summarized the message of Ecclesiastes when He said, 'Whoever drinks of this water [the world] will thirst again', John 4. 13. Only God can fill the vacuum of the human heart. The way of fulfillment is to get above the sun where Christ sits at the right hand of God.

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