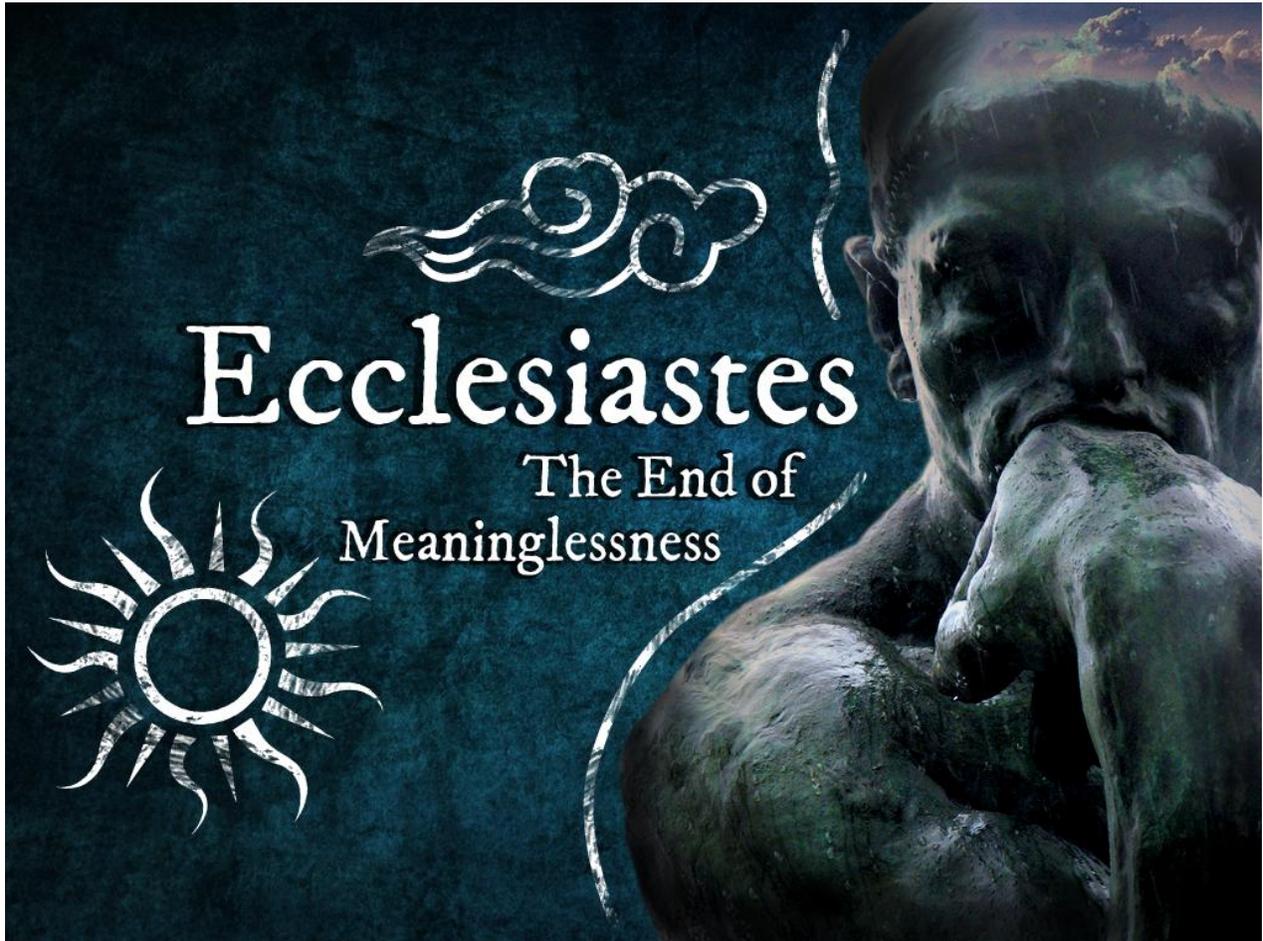


## Ecclesiastes



*A study guide for individuals, families, and community groups at Tyneside Church Central.*

## Introduction and background

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### Why do we have mixed feelings about Ecclesiastes?

Ecclesiastes, which comes after the book of Proverbs in English Bibles, is a book which has been studied and loved by Christians for centuries<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, it is also a book which continues to baffle and trouble Christians; a book which seems to be full of verses and ideas that don't 'fit' with the rest of the Bible (and which even appear to contradict other verses a few chapters apart in the book<sup>2</sup>). Ecclesiastes challenges our desire for tidy theological categories and nice easy boxes to fit our Bibles into. Pastor and author Zach Eswine makes this illustration, likening the different parts of the Bible to different parts of town:

*Ecclesiastes sounds like a crazed man downtown. He smells like he hasn't bathed—looks like it too—and as we pass by he won't stop glaring at us and beckoning to us that our lives are built on illusions, and that we are all going to die. So, most of us choose to get our lunch at a different shop on a less dreary corner of town. Meanwhile, we usually like our visits to the Psalms, except for the ones that we feel we need to rewrite or edit because of how uncomfortably raw the emotions they express are. Their moodiness can ruin a good time. In short, most who have grown up in the Christian community have very little acquaintance with the neighbourhoods of wisdom. The wisdom books are like those neighbours at which we smile but with whom we rarely converse because they live on the "other side of the tracks." No wonder Ecclesiastes sounds foreign to us.*<sup>3</sup>

In Ecclesiastes we are given an unflinching, 'brutally honest' view of the complexities of life. For this reason it is uncomfortable to read. For the very same reason, and by the very fact that it is part of the Bible, God's breathed-out Word (2 Timothy 3.15-17), it is a book which is able to reassure us as we ourselves grapple with similar questions in our lives at times. The God who breathed out the Bible is not afraid to let us see and struggle with the seeming complexities, injustices, and contradictions on planet Earth. Particularly from the 'frame' of the book (see below), we are shown how we are to live rightly amidst these complexities and unanswered questions. For this reason, Ecclesiastes is rightly considered one of the 'wisdom' books of the Bible.

### What are some of the main themes and ideas?

In twelve fairly short chapters, Ecclesiastes touches on a huge range of aspects and angles of life; the famous passage in chapter 3.1-8 alone makes this clear. Nevertheless, there are some particular themes which crop up repeatedly.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, it is among the eminent Christian scholar J.I. Packer's favourite Bible books.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, compare 2.16 and 7.12, or 4.2 and 9.4-6.

<sup>3</sup> Zach Eswine, *Recovering Eden: the Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*.



**The futility and apparent meaninglessness of life.** ‘Vanity’ (literally ‘vapour-like’) is a word occurring 38 times, including as a ‘headline’ in 1.2 and a recap in 12.8. ‘Under the sun’ and ‘a striving after the wind’ are also phrases which are frequently repeated. The theme which is being reflected on is the seeming ‘pointlessness’ (i.e., vanity), futility, and meaninglessness of life ‘under the sun’, given that you can’t predict or control what will happen in the future, and given that eventually we all die and are forgotten. What is more, within the book’s frame (see below) we are to watch and learn that a worldview which sees life as merely ‘under the sun’ will inevitably end with this meaninglessness and despair. A worldview of ‘under the sun’ is wrong! Instead, we are under God; hence the book’s wonderful conclusion to fear God and keep His commandments, since He will bring every deed into judgement (see 12.9-14). Life lived under God is full of meaning; but life under the sun is inevitably vanity, a striving after the wind.

**Sin and death.** In one sense, Ecclesiastes is a sustained ‘unpacking’ of what exactly the ‘fall’ (humankind’s rebellion against and rejection of God – see Genesis 3) looks like. In Ecclesiastes we are to see the curse in action, as we observe futility, injustice, suffering, and brokenness all around. Death, the result of the fall, colours the whole of Ecclesiastes (see 2.14-17; 3.18-21; 6.6)

**Enjoying work and enjoying God’s gifts amidst the cursed world.** Work is a good gift (see Genesis 2.15) which has been cursed by the fall (see Genesis 3.17-19). Both aspects of work are deeply reflected in Ecclesiastes<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the gifts of relationships, families, food and drink are affirmed in Ecclesiastes<sup>5</sup>. Zach Eswine sums up this theme like this:

*For the Preacher, the best good in life is that we have work, family, and food in a place to enjoy. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (Eccl. 2:24–25) There is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man. (Eccl. 3:12–13) There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. (Eccl. 3:22) In other words, the best good in the madness under the sun is found when we recover some small resemblance to what we were made for in Eden...We hear him tell us that “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (Eccl. 7:29). But though our many schemes sabotaged life under the sun, the gift of having a place to dwell, a thing to do, sustenance to cultivate, and a people to enjoy it with has not left us. God, and this witness to him, remains<sup>6</sup>.*

## Who wrote it, and why? How to read Ecclesiastes

Scholars disagree about who wrote Ecclesiastes, and when, and why. Nevertheless, there are some features in the book as we read it carefully that enable us to reach a confident conclusion about who wrote it and why. It appears to be a book which has been ‘framed’; that is to say, there is an

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, see 2.10,18,23,24; 3.22; 4.4-6; 5.18-20; 9.9-10.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, see 3.12-13; 5.18-20; 7.14; 8.15; 9.7; 9.9.

<sup>6</sup> Zach Eswine, *Recovering Eden*.



introduction at the beginning (1.1-11) and a conclusion at the end (12.8-14) which provide a context (or frame) for everything in the middle. In the beginning and end, we are told *about* the Preacher (in some translations, 'Teacher', or 'Leader of the Assembly') in the third person; 'the Preacher says...' or 'the Preacher did...' In contrast, in the middle of the book (1.12-12.7), we are told *by* the Preacher himself; he speaks in the first person, 'I did...'; 'I said...'

It appears in Ecclesiastes that we have a central section (1.12-12.7) which was written by Solomon as a kind of autobiography. We are told he was 'son of David' (1.1), and he tells us that he was 'king over all Israel in Jerusalem' (1.12). The only son of David who was king over all Israel in Jerusalem was Solomon (after him, the kingdom of Israel divided, and Judah was ruled from Jerusalem). As for the frame (1.1-11 and 12.8-14), we don't know who wrote this, or when. But we have a good idea why he wrote it; to warn others of making the same mistake that Solomon made in his later life, of viewing life as merely 'under the sun' rather than a fully God-centred view of life and death, justice and injustice, the past and the future, and so on. In 12.12 he says, 'my son, beware...'; like other wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes was compiled and framed so that the people of God (and especially young people) might avoid the wrong path and follow the right path.

In the book of Job we have a similar sense of an outer frame helping us to understand the perplexing middle. Not every speech made by every person in the book of Job is correct, or orthodox, or to be followed or believed. In the same way, an outer frame helps us to make sense of the perplexing words of an elderly Solomon in the middle.

This fits with what we know about Solomon. King Solomon, who predominantly wrote the book of Proverbs, reigned over Israel from c.971-931 BC. The Bible tells us that Solomon was profoundly wise. For example, in 1 Kings 4.29-34 we read:

*'Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt...'*

He was also famously visited by the Queen of Sheba, who returned overwhelmed at his wisdom and wealth (see 1 Kings 10). Tragically however, in later life Solomon turned away from the Lord and ignored many of the very things he had written in Proverbs (see 1 Kings 11). Most probably he wrote what became Ecclesiastes 1.12-12.7 after this point in his life. With this in mind, note this profound irony: as a younger man compiling the book of Proverbs, Solomon wrote,

*'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.'*

This 'fear of the LORD', the centre of the book of Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 1.7, 9.10) and other wisdom passages (e.g., Job 28.28 or Psalm 111.10), is totally missing from Ecclesiastes. This backdrop to the book gives us a solemn warning as we read it, to guard our hearts from complacency and hardness, and to continue to pursue the 'fear of the Lord' in humility and wholeheartedness throughout all our lives. The point of the 'frame' of Ecclesiastes is this: take care to continue fearing God and keeping His commandments; even the wisest, wealthiest King Solomon



– the man who once taught others the fear of the LORD – went astray once he took his eyes and heart off God.

## How does Ecclesiastes relate to the gospel?

Ecclesiastes is an honest presentation of life and worldview ‘under the sun’, rather than ‘under God’. The human condition – even in one granted the best of wealth, wisdom, hard work and motivation – is meaningless, cursed, and frustrated. Ecclesiastes is brutally honest about life after the fall. Jesus may well have been alluding to Solomon in Ecclesiastes when He calls, ‘what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?’<sup>7</sup> The reality of fallen, frustrated, broken life should cause us to long for, and delight in, the life given by Jesus in the gospel.

Furthermore, the apostle Paul alludes to Ecclesiastes when he says that all creation has been subjected to ‘futility’ (some translations, ‘frustration’) in Romans 8.20; the Greek word he uses is the one used to translate ‘meaningless’, or ‘vanity’ in its 38 occurrences in Ecclesiastes. This fits with our understanding that Ecclesiastes is, in part, a long hard look at the realities of living in a cursed world. But in the gospel, the cursed world will not remain forever; Paul goes on to say, ‘that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God...’ Ecclesiastes should drive us to a deeper, more joyful hope in the gospel. It is not all vanity – in Christ, the future is bright!

In the life of Jesus we are reminded that God Almighty took on flesh and lived life ‘under the sun’, suffering its curse to the utmost, in order to bring an end to the meaninglessness. Death, the great enemy which caused Solomon to despair at there being any ultimate purpose or meaning, has been destroyed in the work of Jesus on the Cross. Jesus died in order to put death to death.

In Jesus’ resurrection we have the underlined confidence that God will indeed bring every deed into judgement (12.14); that the ‘eternity in our hearts’ (Ecclesiastes 3.11) is a real longing for the true life found only in Jesus. And since there is a judgement, when everything will be uncovered and put right before God, everything now is imbued with meaning. All injustice will be corrected in due time. In Christ, we get to live the lives we are given right here and now, for the glory of God. And so, already now in Christ, Eden is truly (although not yet fully) restored.

## For further reading:

Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*

Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*

Zach Eswine, *Recovering Eden: the Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 9.25



## Family worship

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The family is a God-given 'mini community' for worshipping Him. God commands parents throughout the Bible (including Deuteronomy 11:18-21 and Ephesians 6:4) to teach their children His Word. That should be done informally ("when you are walking by the way"<sup>8</sup>) as opportunity arises but can also be practised more formally as part of a daily routine. Essentially, family worship should include reading the Bible together but is also a wonderful opportunity to pray, sing and encourage one another.

What family worship looks like will necessarily vary from situation to situation not least in making it appropriate for the children's ages. However, it is best begun as a daily habit among married couples before they even have children – so little ones grow up never knowing any different. We would also encourage believing dads to be the ones lovingly leading family worship whenever that is possible, as the Bible exhorts.

In all of this remember the patient grace of God. Family worship will always be imperfect. There are bound to be distractions, interruptions and ongoing challenges all of which can serve as temptations to give up. Be encouraged that God loves to meet with us in the mess of everyday life and over time family worship can bear eternal fruit.

If you're totally new to the idea of family worship then why not ask a TCC family who regularly practises it if you can sit in with them one time? You can also have a look at some of the resources in the 'Family Worship' section of <http://tynesidechurch.org/more/grow/>.

## Breakdown of Ecclesiastes at TCC

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- 1.1-11 Prologue/Introduction *21<sup>st</sup> February 2016*
- 1.12-18 Solomon's quest and initial reflections *28<sup>th</sup> February 2016*
- 2.1-11 Meaningless pleasure *6<sup>th</sup> March 2016*
- 2.12-26 Wisdom, folly, and toil all meaningless because of death. *13<sup>th</sup> March 2016*
- 3.1-15 The burden of the 'proper time' *20<sup>th</sup> March 2016*
- Easter Sunday--- *27<sup>th</sup> March 2016*
- 3.16-4.3 The harshness of life *3<sup>rd</sup> April 2016*
- 4.4-4.16 More meaninglessness *10<sup>th</sup> April 2016*
- 5.1-7 God is in heaven / How to go to church *17<sup>th</sup> April 2016*
- 5.8-6.9 Oppression and the meaninglessness of wealth *24<sup>th</sup> April 2016*
- 6.10-7.29 Wisdom and its limits *1<sup>st</sup> May 2016*
- 8.1-17 Not even the wise know *8<sup>th</sup> May 2016*
- 9.1-18 Time and chance *15<sup>th</sup> May 2016*
- 10.1-20 Wisdom and folly *22<sup>nd</sup> May 2016*
- 11.1-12.7 Risk, uncertainty, life, and death *29<sup>th</sup> May 2016*
- 12.8-14 Conclusion: Fear God and keep His commandments *5<sup>th</sup> June 2016*

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<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 11:19b

