

Preview of Ecclesiastes

Although Solomon is not named in the Book of Ecclesiastes, evidence points to him as the author. The writer was a son of David (Eccl. 1:1), a "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Eccl. 1:12), a man of unexcelled wisdom (Eccl. 1:16; 2:9), and a collector of proverbs (Eccl. 12:9).

A number of key words and expressions occur throughout the book. The word *vanity* occurs thirty-three times and *vanities* four times. The phrase *vexation of spirit* occurs nine times. The phrase *under the sun* occurs twenty-nine times. These words and phrases indicate a lack of fulfillment with the things of life. Five times the writer encourages his readers to fear God (Eccl. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12, 13; 12:13). The concept of God bringing every work into judgment is found at least six times (Eccl. 3:17; 5:8; 9:1; 11:9; 12:7, 14). This dual emphasis on godly fear and a divine judgment is foundational to the message of this book.

To understand Ecclesiastes, we must view its message as a whole. The writer introduces his theme in Eccl. 1:2-3. Throughout the following chapters, he develops this theme by clearly showing that, although man has the capacity to learn and do many things, he can never discover the key to life's purpose and destiny. Apart from God, "all is vanity." These chapters largely portray life from the viewpoint of the natural man, who bases his goals, actions, and conclusions on things "under the sun." Consistent with this viewpoint is the writer's use of the term *God* (Elohim, the Creator) rather than *LORD* (Jehovah, the covenant God). The natural man attempts to find his way by means of created things—outward appearances and humanistic reasoning. On the one hand, the book shows the futility of seeking fulfillment in things exclusively earthly; on the other hand, it shows the nobility of enjoying the good "gift of God." Finally, the writer pens the masterfully crafted climax (Eccl. 11:9-12:12) and the confident conclusion (Eccl. 12:13-14). And that conclusion is not "All is vanity" but "Fear God, and keep his commandments," and live in light of the Judgment.

Lesson 8 21 December, 2014

Man's Search for Meaning in Life

Lesson Scope: Ecclesiastes 1 & 2

Lesson Focus

Everyone desires fulfillment in life. Solomon was no different, but he did have a rare opportunity to explore the blessings of divine favor and the vanity of earthly activities. And because he was granted wisdom above all men, he was able to evaluate each of those. Likewise, his great wealth allowed a level of material indulgence so that he could discover the limits and merits of materialism. He truly "gave [his] heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven" (Eccl. 1:13).

Solomon's exploration took him through the spectrum of human experience on earth. He considered "all the works that are done under the sun" (Eccl. 1:14). This included mirth (Eccl. 2:1), wine (Eccl. 2:3), architecture and horticulture (Eccl. 2:4), a large business (Eccl. 2:7), wealth and entertainment (Eccl. 2:8), political stature (Eccl. 2:9), and an indulgent lifestyle (Eccl. 2:10). His conclusion was that "all was vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccl. 2:11).

Remember that Solomon's vexation related strictly to earthly pursuits. His conclusion at the end of the book (Eccl. 12:13) put much in perspective. Solomon had explored these vain pursuits to the full, and he came away vexed. For our benefit he was divinely inspired to commit his experiences and his findings to writing. We need not—dare not—repeat those vain pursuits.

Most people have struggled with questions of what life means and why they exist. This lesson does not seek to answer these questions directly. It does point out follies in natural man's approach and maps out a clear path for men to take to come to a satisfying answer. Much of the frustration expressed in the lesson text is a result of an earth-bound view. Very little eternal perspective is found in these verses.

Contrast the life of a child of God with the life of someone outside the circle of God's family. Bring in practical examples of distractions and stewardship issues facing the church. This lesson does not have a final

resolution; that is given at the end of Ecclesiastes. We find encouragement in knowing that God created us and has a purpose for us. Apart from God, life is empty and frustrating. Any effort to fill this void through tangible things proves futile.

Lesson Aim: To show how man vainly seeks to find meaning in life apart from faith in God.

Memory Verse: [Isaiah 55:2](#). Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

Lesson Text

The Perplexing Issues

[Ecclesiastes 1:1-9](#) ¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity. ³ What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? ⁴ *One* generation passeth away, and *another* generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. ⁵ The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. ⁶ The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. ⁷ All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea *is* not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. ⁸ All things *are* full of labour; man cannot utter *it*: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. ⁹ The thing that hath been, *it is that* which shall be; and that which is done *is* that which shall be done: and *there is* no new *thing* under the sun.

[Ecclesiastes 1:13-14](#) ¹³ And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all *things* that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. ¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

The Pursuit of Things

[Ecclesiastes 2:1](#) I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also *is* vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:3-4 ³ I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what *was* that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. ⁴ I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:

Ecclesiastes 2:7-8 ⁷ I got *me* servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: ⁸ I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, *as* musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

Ecclesiastes 2:11-17 ¹¹ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all *was* vanity and vexation of spirit, and *there was* no profit under the sun. ¹² And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what *can* the man *do* that cometh after the king? *even* that which hath been already done. ¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. ¹⁴ The wise man's eyes *are* in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all. ¹⁵ Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also *is* vanity. ¹⁶ For *there is* no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now *is* in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise *man*? as the fool. ¹⁷ Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun *is* grievous unto me: for all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

Questions for Study

The Perplexing Issues

1. Why does all seem to be "vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccl. 1:14)?
2. Discuss possible answers to the question in Eccl. 1:3.
3. What are some worthwhile pursuits of men?
4. We live in a time of discovery and technological change.

Discuss Eccl. 1:9 in light of the unprecedented strides of technology today.

The Pursuit of Things

5. How do the principles of stewardship apply to the pursuits described

in this passage?

6. List some blessings we have received by diligently undertaking the Lord's work.

7. How can we keep meaning in each of our lives?

8. What are the advantages of wisdom as opposed to folly?

Analyzing the Passage

Chapter 1 portrays monotony in the patterns of life. The wise man notes the rising and setting of the sun as well as the changes of the seasons. Each man gains knowledge only to die and leave it to the next generation, who will try the same things again. Nothing is new; today is the same as yesterday, and tomorrow will be the same as today.

Interestingly, Solomon notes that "the earth abideth for ever" (Eccl. 1:4). The earth, a link to point men to God, is solid. He mentions it in passing, near the beginning of his list of monotones, and then remains silent. The focus is on the vain pursuits of men, and like so many men, his consideration left out the One who can provide fulfillment. Work is not inherently negative, but it seems so when the important things of life are neglected for the sake of work (see chapter 8).

The second chapter focuses on the vain pursuits Solomon considered. He considered many things, all designed to dull men's minds to reality. His conclusion was that no activity can produce lasting satisfaction. We all have the same end; there is nothing new. It is vain to pursue earthly ambitions without God.

Principles and Applications

The Perplexing Issues

1. The natural man has a God-given sense of emptiness and need (Eccl. 1:2).

We all wonder at some point about the meaning of life. We want to know our purpose. The emptiness within can be truly filled only with God and what He provides for us. Unfortunately, many pursue the vanities and worldly ways described by Solomon and miss the signs and ways to fill their need.

2. Man tends to look to himself in his search for meaning in life (Eccl. 1:3). Meditation techniques, yoga, so-called self-help methodologies, and so forth, all draw on the "inner strength" of men. Men are finite,

and efforts to find meaning from within quickly come to an end or become futile repetitions. Some people conclude that life has no meaning and that there is no hereafter. Modern science appears to support this conclusion, ensnaring more people in this hopeless conclusion and desperate lifestyle. Looking to an imperfect, finite being for meaning can result only in despair.

3. To those who will heed it, creation sounds forth a testimony of a Creator (Eccl. 1:4). At times the earth does shift deep within itself, sending tremors to the surface. Storms uproot trees and floods alter the earth's surface. Yet man knows of nothing tangible that is more enduring than earth with all its regular cycles. The unfathomable, unchanging, and minutely predictable heavenly bodies also confirm the existence of a Creator. All this should lead us away from the seeming monotony of the cycles of life to see the care of a loving Creator.

4. The search for meaning in life through natural things becomes an intense but unsatisfying cycle (1:8, 9). Pursuing meaning apart from God will blind us to realities that should be readily apparent. Do not the evolutionists prove this? They have a theory that can be proven only through natural things, and they must constantly revise their observations and time lines to accommodate their "science," because the natural things they observe do not fully support the theory. Questions about life should be posed and answered in light of the One who created it.

5. In his search for meaning in life, man often ignores the ways of God (Eccl. 1:13-14). Men often immerse themselves in their chosen occupations or hobbies to provide purpose in life. In so doing, they often work too much to the neglect of church and family, forgetting the direction God has given for labor. Or they forego labor in favor of ease and pleasure, only to find themselves without the means to meet the needs of life.

The Pursuit of Things

6. Carnal man seeks meaning in life through mirth and amusement (Eccl. 2:1, 8). This represents poor stewardship of time, talents, and money. There is better use for time than the several hours needed for the sports contest or latest movie. The family day at the amusement park would be better spent working on a project around the house. What profit is the sporting event or the park? When the day is done, nothing of value lingers. The immediate gratification results in long-term loss.

What we seek is to lay up treasure in heaven; what we do should have a lasting value to that end.

7. Men seek escape from reality through substance abuse (Eccl. 2:3). Men who do not know God frequently turn to substance abuse to escape depression, stress, or the reality of failure. Sadly, others take this route as a result of peer pressure, seeking to "fit in" with a particular group of friends or business associates. Addictions frequently result in broken relationships, destroyed families, and a complete loss of status in society. Moreover, they destroy body, mind, and soul.

8. The ungodly may seek fulfillment through grandiose business pursuits (Eccl. 2:4). Business interests have a way of taking more and more of our time and energy. Often, this results in diminished family time and reduced participation in church activity. If we are complaining that church activity takes too much family time, might the true reason be that we are spending too much time with business interests? Business pursuits are merely temporal; what we do for our families and for the Lord is eternal.

9. Carnal man seeks meaning through the false security of abundant wealth (Eccl. 2:7-8). We all are tempted to wish for just a bit more income so things will be easier, but the point of satisfaction never seems to come. Only treasure for God can stand the tests of time and eternity. We have the responsibility to provide for ourselves and our families and to give to the Lord's work. Beyond this, wealth can become a snare that keeps us from God. More wealth does not bring happiness; neither does it indicate God's favor on our lives.

10. Apart from God, man's noblest observations remain fruitless (Eccl. 2:13-14). We do our part here on earth, as called by God, but we must remember that it is God who gives the increase. This is true with material things as well as with intellectual gifts. It is God's increase, and we do well to use His increase for His work.

11. Man's greatest obstacle in his search for meaning is himself (Eccl. 2:14-17). We must remember that we are limited in our ability to assess ourselves and our situation objectively. We view ourselves better than we are, and we rationalize our situation more favorably than we should. We are our own worst enemy. If we think our situation is better than it is, we will be lax in doing what we are called to do. Let us measure ourselves by God's standard.

Answers to Questions

1. Why does all seem to be "vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccl. 1:14)? The activities of people in and of themselves are temporary at best. They quickly fade away or are removed and replaced by something else. Even large works such as skyscrapers and entire cities will eventually be destroyed. From the earth-bound perspective, this makes all our doings vain.

2. Discuss possible answers to the question in Eccl. 1:3.

Work for God is profitable. We can use the rewards of labor to lay up treasure in heaven.

3. What are some worthwhile pursuits of men?

Some work is worthwhile for us. We must provide for ourselves and our families. This includes securing shelter, food, and clothing to meet our physical needs. It also includes maintaining Scriptural church relationships, worship, and a firm relationship with God. We raise our children for the Lord. We witness to others. This can be done through direct means such as street meetings, tract distribution, and answering questions. It can also be more indirect through a faithful walk.

4. We live in a time of discovery and technological change. Discuss Eccl. 1:9

in light of the unprecedented strides of technology today.

These discoveries are not new to God, who is all-knowing. Also, much of the technological change is simply a repackaging of old ways of doing things, but with new facets and combinations of concepts to make them attractive to us. Much is made, for example, of the communication technologies, but the basic concepts of communication and relationships with fellow men are still present.

5. How do the principles of stewardship apply to the pursuits described in this passage?

We are stewards of what God has given us. The activities included here are not good examples of stewardship of time, of possessions, or of life itself (abuse of time and possessions often results in an abuse of the body). We must apply the principles of stewardship to these pursuits that are needful and legitimate.

6. List some blessings we have received by diligently undertaking the Lord's work.

Diligent work frequently results in an increase. This can be in the form

of health and possessions. More importantly, we receive a church family, eternal life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual hedge around us, the leading of the Lord, and joy, peace, and contentment.

7. How can we keep meaning in each of our lives?

A life of sacrifice for God's kingdom is a meaningful life. If we die to ourselves and live for Christ and others, we will find true meaning in our lives. A self-serving life is usually shallow and devoid of meaning.

8. What are the advantages of wisdom as opposed to folly?

Those who are wise are attuned to God and receive His blessing and leading. The wise are able to apply their knowledge and understanding to the issues of life. Wise decisions are grounded in fact and faith, and prevent wasteful, harmful outcomes.

Important Teachings

1. The natural man has a God-given sense of emptiness and need (Eccl. 1:2).

2. Man tends to look to himself in his search for meaning in life (Eccl. 1:3).

3. To those who will heed it, creation sounds forth a testimony of a Creator (Eccl. 1:4).

4. The search for meaning in life through natural things becomes an intense but unsatisfying cycle (Eccl. 1:8,-9).

5. In his search for meaning in life, man often ignores the ways of God (Eccl. 1:13-14).

6. Carnal man seeks meaning in life through mirth and amusement (Eccl. 2:1, 8).

7. Men seek escape from reality through substance abuse (Eccl. 2:3).

8. The ungodly may seek fulfillment through grandiose business pursuits (Eccl. 2:4).

9. Carnal man seeks meaning through the false security of abundant wealth (Eccl. 2:7-8).

10. Apart from God, man's noblest observations remain fruitless (2:13-14).

11. Man's greatest obstacle in his search for meaning is himself (Eccl. 2:14-17).

Summarizing the Lesson

Men have struggled with the question of the meaning of life for millennia. Some turn to science, some to philosophy, and some to religion, yet none of these offer a sufficient answer. God created all that was, is, and will be. He created each of us and loves each of us enough that He gave His best to reconcile us to Him. The standard of living He has given us in His Word is for our benefit. He desires that we be with Him. Let us walk with Him and discover what He has for us in the life He has given us.

Research Guide

1. Read the entire lesson scope for fuller understanding of the lesson text.
2. Read Psalm 104 for inspiration regarding what God has done for us.
3. Read Luke 18:18-30 for God's direction concerning earthly pursuits.