



Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes (sometimes also called Qoheleth) poses the question of how to live with meaning. The author expresses the frustration that work, searching for answers and even seeking after pleasure bring little satisfaction and feel empty. Life has problems that are impossible to surmount or comprehend but can be worthwhile if you concentrate on everyday joys: time spent with friends and family and in worship of God.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 30 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.26; 4.1-16;
 9.1-18



Genre

Wisdom literature



Anything tricky?

Much of the book of Ecclesiastes can feel depressing and hopeless, the author applies a harsh reality to the world. It is important to read chapters 9-12 in order to realise that the book is not wholly bleak.



Inspiring quotes

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 1.9)

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.

(Ecclesiastes 3.1-2)

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

(Ecclesiastes 4.9-10)



About the Author

The author is identified in the book as the 'teacher', and while a few passages hint that the teacher might be a king (particularly Solomon) most scholars opt for the author being an unknown wise teacher from Judah.

What do we know about him?

Nothing beyond what is in the book



What kind of Book is it?

Wisdom literature. The book contains the distilled wisdom of what feels like an elderly and somewhat bad tempered teacher who has seen and experienced what he thinks is the pointlessness of life.



About the times

There are a variety of views about when the book was written. Some think it come from the early post-exilic period (i.e. the fifth or fourth century bc) while others think it is much later, around 250 bc.

What were people feeling?

There is little in the text to suggest what the people might have been feeling.

Other books set around this time

Hard to say as the date is so uncertain.



How is it structured?

1.1-2	Introduction
1.3-2.26	The search for meaning
3.1-22	Human futility
4.1-16	Human oppressions
5.1-20	Remember God is heaven
6.1-7.29	Death comes to us all
8.1-17	The limits of human knowledge
9.1-12.14	Finding hope in the reality of life



Look out for...

The book sets out to provide the unvarnished warts and all realities of life. Look out for this theme as you read and see whether you agree with the author's take on life.

Jews read Ecclesiastes during the joyful feast of the booths (also called Sukkoth) and stress the theme of joy in the book. If you look carefully below the surface of the text, you might be able to notice this theme running throughout Ecclesiastes.

'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.' (1.2) Different translations use different words for vanity. It translates a Hebrew word which means vapour or breath and hence something that is pointless and empty. The word recurs throughout the book, look out for it as you read and see why the author uses it so much.



What could this mean for me?

The author of Ecclesiastes is content to say human beings do not and cannot understand the world so we might as well get on with living. Reflect on this theme as you read, do you find it convincing?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Do you think Ecclesiastes tells it like it really is or that it is overly pessimistic and hopeless? Did you find it a breath of fresh air or depressing?
- Many people today would relate to the apparent meaninglessness of life described by the 'teacher'. Did you find anything in Ecclesiastes that might help people who feel like this?
- The teacher is clearly not happy but has learnt to live with this. How important is happiness to you? If you had the chance what might you want to say to the teacher?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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