

GREAT THEMES OF ECCLESIASTES

A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a collection of observations on life, attributable perhaps to King Solomon, or at least to a tradition of Hebrew wisdom founded upon his insight. Ecclesiastes tells the tale of a man who sought meaning in life in every imaginable place, only to find in the end that without God at its essence, life itself is rather meaningless and futile.

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Lesson 1: Futility of Human Wisdom

Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

1. While verse one introduces us to the author of the book, the second verse indicates his theme. Who is the author? Explain his theme.

2. The connection of the book to Solomon is a matter for scholarly debate, but that man's wisdom is not. How did Solomon obtain his legendary insight (First Kings 3:5-12; cf. James 1:5-8)?

3. How does Solomon immediately display his wisdom (First Kings 3:16-28)?

4. Most people believe that being remembered after they are gone is important. Many of them seek to be remembered for their accomplishments. What flaw in that plan did the writer perceive (Ecclesiastes 1:3-11)?

5. Solomon himself (who is not necessarily the author of this book) was noted as a great builder of monuments to God and his own reign. How long did it take to build the temple and the king's residence (First Kings 6:37-7:1)? What other buildings did he commission (First Kings 7:2-12)?

6. Surely, building is not wrong of itself, but what is the writer trying to teach us in Ecclesiastes 1:3-11?
7. One such structure is noted early in Genesis 11:1-9. Identify the structure and the problem in posed for its builders.
8. What are some examples of “ziggurats” or “towers” that men today build with a similar motivation?
9. So far, we have learned about that. there is in reality nothing new under the sun, but that so much human endeavor is in fact vanity of vanities. Even straightening out the world’s problems will prove to be frustrating, the writer acknowledges. How does world history since 1900 confirm this?
10. Why aren’t many wise according to the flesh called to Christ (First Corinthians 1:18-31; cf. James 4:6)?
11. How does one discern the nature and effectiveness of God’s wisdom from that of the world (James 3:13-18)?

Lesson 2: Futility of Pleasure and Materialism

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:1-17

1. The writer gave up on finding meaning in human wisdom and went to the opposite extreme. What was his next option (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3)?

2. Many people seek something in wine and other mind-altering beverages and substances. What do they certainly find (Proverbs 23:29-35)?

3. If the Preacher is not arguing against all laughter and mirth, what is the warning he would offer (First Peter 1:13, 5:8)?

4. In what did the king seek pleasure next (Ecclesiastes 2:4-9)?

5. For his part, Solomon acquired great riches and possessions from Egypt and beyond (First Kings 10:1-29). What other foreign acquisition did he make? (First Kings 11:1-8) What was the problem? What was the consequence?

6. Consider Ecclesiastes 2:10. Of what does this statement show a lack (First Corinthians 9:24-27, James 4:7)?

7. How did Moses make the opposite choice (Hebrews 11:24-27)? Where do we make application (Second Corinthians 4:16-5:10)?

8. Why did his pursuit of pleasure not bring satisfaction to his spirit (Ecclesiastes 2:11-17; cf. James 1:14-15, 4:1-5)?

9. What are some modern ways that people make fleshly pleasure the focus of their lives (Second Timothy 3:4-5)?

10. What is the end of those who make fleshly pleasure the focus of their lives (Second Thessalonians 2:12, First Timothy 5:6, Second Peter 2:13)?

Lesson 3: Contentment

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

1. With the exception of spoiled heiresses, most people must work very hard in order to be able to afford their pleasures—the focus of the first part of Ecclesiastes chapter two. Why did the Preacher find even this to be depressing and unsatisfying (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23)?

2. Although we are not certain that Solomon is actually the author of this book, the thoughts seem to reflect his life. To whom did Solomon leave the fruits of his labor (First Kings 11:41-12:15)? Was he wise or a fool? What became of the kingdom, the fruits of Solomon's labor (First Kings 12:16-20)?

3. Can life be a success if it is defined by the acquisition of possessions and expenditure upon fleshly pleasure (Proverbs 1:10-19 and First Timothy 6:6-10, 17-20)? Explain.

4. What perspective does this give you regarding any legacy (money, property, heirlooms, etc.) that you might plan to acquire and leave to your children or to others?

5. Where did Christ counsel his followers to seek their achievement and contentment (Mark 8:34-38)?
6. What would modern people call the condition described in Ecclesiastes 2:23?
7. So what was the Preacher's conclusion regarding the place of labor in a man's life (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)? Should a man be defined by what he does for a living or by something else? How important should one's trade, career or profession be in defining him?
8. What three things does God give the one who is good in his sight (cf. James 1:5-8)? Why is the sinner left out of this transaction (Proverbs 2:6-9)?
9. Some consider anxiety and worry to be acceptable, if regrettable, parts of the Christian's life. Why should we instead seek to solve our worry and anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34)?
10. What does the Bible recommend in the battle against anxiety and carnal discontentment (Philippians 4:4-7, 10-12)?

Lesson 4: A Time For Everything

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

1. If Ecclesiastes is a study in pursuing life's meaning, what is the impact of God's sovereignty as described in verse one of the third chapter?

2. Does man have the capability to alter the seasons in nature? What is that supposed to teach him about the seasons in the spirit?

3. The Preacher proves his point with a series of 14 suppositions (Ecclesiastes 3:2-8). On the surface, they are all completely obvious and easily overlooked for that reason. What is the human impulse regarding the seasons of life that makes these obvious observations worthy of deeper consideration (cf. Matthew 6:25-27)?

4. Consider verse 2. What is the folly in the almost universal wish of the young to be older? What two lessons do we learn from planting and plucking (Galatians 6:7-9 and James 5:7)?

5. Consider verse 3. When would there be a time to kill? When and why do men kill out of season (James 4:1-4, Galatians 5:19-21)?

6. Consider verse 4. What is right to do when one is mourning or when others are mourning around him (James 5:13-14, First Corinthians 12:26)?

7. Consider verse 5. When might it be the wrong season to embrace a friend (2 John 7-11) or a spouse (Joel 2:16, First Corinthians 7:5-6)?

8. Consider verse 6. How can we accept the times when we must lose—a game, a job, money in the stock market, etc. (Job 1:13-22, Second Corinthians 4:16-5:7)?

9. Consider verse 7. If the tearing is related to the rending of one's garments in remorse and repentance, what would the sewing be (Ezekiel 37:15, 22; Luke 22:31-32, Second Corinthians 2:6-11, 7:11)?

10. Consider verse 8. Since God in love, how could there ever be a time or anything to hate (Psalm 119:104, Proverbs 8:13)?

11. What is the result when we pursue any of the objectives in this passage, but out of season, that is, at the wrong time (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11)? Which of them is fit to be man's chief objective in life?

12. How will we respond when God's timeline does not match our own? What usually defines our expectations as it regards a timeline?

Lesson 5: Rejoice and Do Good

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:12-22

1. While there is nothing wrong with planning for the future, some people are so anxious or obsessed about it that the present becomes a state of misery. Consider Ecclesiastes 3:12-13. How does one balance the need to plan with the uncertainty of the future (cf. James 4:13-17, Ephesians 5:15-16)?

2. What are the four things the Preacher recommends?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____

3. So many times, we ponder the idea that we will finally be happy once we marry, or graduate, or get promoted or reach retirement. While that might hold true, what is wrong with that mindset, if anything (First Thessalonians 5:16, First Peter 1:8)?

4. What do the following passages tell us about doing good?

- a. Luke 6:27-35:
- b. Galatians 6:10:
- c. Second Thessalonians 3:13:
- d. First Timothy 6:18:
- e. James 4:17:
- f. First Peter 2:20:

5. If the good of one's labor is "the gift of God" as verse 13 suggests, does it follow that one need not labor for it (cf. James 1:17, Second Thessalonians 3:9-12) ?

6. Eternal life is likewise the gift of God. Does man have any responsibility in obtaining that gift (Ephesians 2:8-10, Philippians 2:12, James 2:14-26)?

7. In Ecclesiastes 3:14-15, the Preacher discusses the past, present and future in light of God's sovereignty over all. What human response should be produced by that realization—one which often does not come until late in life (Second Corinthians 5:10, 7:1)?

8. Consider Ecclesiastes 3:16-17. If we acknowledge the future judgment by God of mankind, how should it affect our reasoning about the injustices we witness around us and perhaps against us (Romans 10:17-21)?

9. How are men like animals (Ecclesiastes 3:18-20)?

10. How are men different from animals (Ecclesiastes 3:21-22)?

Lesson 6: Futility of Riches

Text: Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:20

1. What did the Preacher consider next (Ecclesiastes 4:1, 5:8)? What was his conclusion about the problem (2)? Why (3)?

2. Consider Ecclesiastes 4:4-6. We are often tempted to envy the rich and powerful, but where did the Preacher find real contentment?

3. Although the Preacher was disappointed in most of his pursuits, he found one that pleased. What is it (4:7-12)? What are its benefits (Proverbs 18:1, 24; 27:17)?

4. Political power, however, ultimately proves unsatisfying as well (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16). Why?

5. What is prudence (Ecclesiastes 5:1) and what does it have with going to the house of God (Habakkuk 2:20, Leviticus 10:1-3, Ephesians 5:15-17)?

6. Why is loquacity (talkativeness) often dangerous (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3, James 1:19-20, Proverbs 17:28)?

7. Read Ecclesiastes 5:4-7. How might Jesus summarize this passage according to Luke 14:28? How does this compare to the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32?

8. Most think that great wealth would certify their happiness, but what was the Preacher's experience (Ecclesiastes 5:8-11)?

9. Why won't the abundance of the rich man let him sleep (12, Proverbs 23:4-5)?

10. Consider Ecclesiastes 5:13-17. Why is it hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:17-25)?

11. There is the anxious rich man whose abundance will not let him sleep. Why not just build bigger barns (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20, Luke 12:13-22)?

Lesson 7: Life is a Vapor

Text: Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

1. Consider Ecclesiastes 6:1-2. What are the three blessings God has given the man? Why don't they do him much good?

2. Think about what could cause a man to obtain such gifts, but prove unable to enjoy them. What could it be (Lamentations 5:2)?

3. How did Job lose the honor he had accrued (Job 1:1-3, 30:1-16)?

4. What are four keys to riches, wealth and honor (Proverbs 18:12, 21:21, 22:4)?

a.

c.

b.

d.

5. Read Ecclesiastes 6:3-6. What could make the life of a stillborn child better than an old man's?

6. Clearly it becomes important that we learn to be content with goodness. But what is goodness (Psalm 27:13, 31:19, 33:5, 65:4; Romans 11:22)?
7. How is God's honor obtained (John 5:44, Romans 2:7-10, First Peter 1:7, Revelation 19:1)?
8. Ecclesiastes 6:7-9 has a similar message to the old axiom about a bird in the hand being worth two in the bush. What is the Preacher communicating here?
9. Why is it so difficult to restrain that wandering desire (First John 2:15-17)?
10. Read Ecclesiastes 6:10-12. How is man like a shadow or a vapor (James 4:13-17)? What does the godly man learn from this disturbing fact?
11. What should the godly woman take from this (Proverbs 31:30)?

Lesson 8: Precious Ointment

Text: Ecclesiastes 7:1-29

1. Consider Ecclesiastes 7:1-4. What is a good name (Proverbs 22:1, 25:8-10; Acts 2:47, 6:3)?

2. How on earth could the day of one's death be better than that of his birth (First Corinthians 15:54-57, Hebrews 9:27-28)?

3. Does this mean that we are wrong to weep over the death of a righteous person (John 11:11-38, First Thessalonians 4:13-18)? Why do we sorrow over the death of believing loved ones? What should temper our pain?

4. What should the living take to heart in the house of mourning (Second Corinthians 5:10, James 4:13-17, Matthew 25:1-30)?

5. Is mirth always sinful? When is mirth out of place (First Peter 5:8, Proverbs 26:19, 25:11)?

6. Consider Ecclesiastes 7:5-7. Which is better—an exciting Britney Spears or Rolling Stones concert, complete with hit songs, pyrotechnics and popcorn or a 45-minute sermon on sin?

7. How do oppression and bribery destroy or debase a man's heart and reason?

8. Read Ecclesiastes 7:8-10. Why is it better not to hasten toward anger (Matthew 5:22, James 1:19-20, Ephesians 4:26-27)?

9. If it is impossible for us to explain all of life's turnings, how should we handle prosperity and adversity (Ecclesiastes 7:11-14; First Peter 1:6-9)?

10. Ecclesiastes 7:15-20 is not an argument for religious moderation, but a reminder that righteousness does not necessarily bring automatic carnal benefit and might even lead to certain hardships. How does verse 20 apply to our opinion that God should grant our every wish?

11. Who is to blame for human suffering and wickedness—God, man, woman, who (Ecclesiastes 7:21-29, James 1:12-18)?

Lesson 9: Time and Chance

Text: Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:12

1. Begin at Ecclesiastes 8:1. How is wisdom acquired (Proverbs 4:1-9, James 1:5-6)?

2. Subjection and compromise are topics for Ecclesiastes 8:2-9. Although most in the world today do not dwell in monarchies, what is to be our attitude toward civil authority (Romans 13:1-7, First Peter 2:17)?

3. Under what circumstances should Christians be willing to compromise (James 3:17-18, First Corinthians 6:6-7, Romans 12:10)? When is compromise wrong (Ephesians 4:1-3, Jude 3)?

4. How did Jesus handle such a situation in Matthew 17:24-27?

5. The Preacher begins to recognize how God sorts out the earth's injustices (Ecclesiastes 8:10-13). How (Proverbs 1:32-33, Luke 16:19-31)?

6. Frustrated that the meaning of life could not be fully discerned, the Preacher seems to throw up his hands and acquiesce to enjoyment (Ecclesiastes 8:14-17). Why does a philosophy of “Eat, drink and be merry” fail, however (Luke 12:13-21 and First Corinthians 15:32, Romans 14:17)?

7. Carefully consider what the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 9:1-2. He seems to have insight that escaped Job’s friends who figured that the man must be guilty of some heinous sin to account for his great suffering. One might likewise assume that the richest people on earth are also the favored of God. What is wrong with such assessments?

8. The Preacher contemplates death and in this pre-Christian era, his knowledge of eternity is obviously limited and despondent (Ecclesiastes 9:3-8). How does he describe this hopelessness?

a. verse 3:

b. verse 4:

c. verse 5:

9. What importance does the condition of one’s marriage have upon a successful life (Ecclesiastes 9:9)?

10. What is it that often interferes with swiftness, strength, wisdom, understanding and skill (Ecclesiastes 9:10-12)? Explain.

Lesson 10: Life's Uncertainties

Text: Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20

1. Read Ecclesiastes 9:13-15. Why didn't anyone remember the poor wise man? Does anything like that happen today? Explain.
2. Perhaps the Preacher knew something of the event in Second Samuel 20:16-22. Explain the wisdom of the wise woman who approached Joab.
3. Honestly, do you remember ever reading or hearing about this maidservant before? What does that tell you?
4. What is the conflict the Preacher acknowledges in Ecclesiastes 9:16-18? Why is its resolution usually so destructive? Does might make right?
5. Think about those "words of the wise, quietly spoken." They are often the words of the woman, the meek, the aged, the survivor something harrowing which has sapped the body's strength while enhancing the spirit's (Mark 6:2-3). Sometimes they are even the words of the child. Why don't we listen (see also Second Corinthians 10:1-7)?

6. Consider Ecclesiastes 10:1-4. What is the “fly in the ointment”?

7. A person’s reputation can be destroyed by a single misdeed after a lifetime of achievement? Is this fair? Does that make any difference (Proverbs 22:1, Ecclesiastes 7:1, Matthew 5:13-16)?

8. Read Ecclesiastes 10:5-7. Agur also recognized four catastrophes that followed social reversal. List them (Proverbs 30:21-23).

- a. c.
- b. d.

9. What is the theme of Ecclesiastes 10:8-10?

10. Consider Ecclesiastes 10:11-15, 20. When is it advisable to keep one’s mouth closed (see Proverbs 10:14, 15:1-2, 10:32; Matthew 12:36)?

11. The chapter closes in Ecclesiastes 10:16-20. What is the connection between drunkenness, laziness and debauchery?

Lesson 11: The Days of Your Youth

Text: Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8

1. Ecclesiastes 11:1-2 provides the origin for a common expression in the English language. What do men mean when say to “cast your bread upon the waters” (cf. Isaiah 32:20, Luke 16:1-9)?
2. How are sharing and benevolence like investments (Matthew 7:12, Luke 18:22, Isaiah 49:4)?
3. What two acts did Paul equate to fruitfulness (Titus 3:14; cf. Hebrews 13:1-2, 16)?
4. Consider Ecclesiastes 11:3-6. The point is that some foresee hard times coming and respond by being miserly and selfish, but the child of God is not so restrained from righteousness. What excuses do we catch ourselves using so as to remove ourselves from the necessity of sharing or sacrificing?
5. Think about Ecclesiastes 11:6 and consider the Lord’s parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23. What is the problem with extensive testing of the soils?

6. The Preacher predicts that dark days are seldom further away than the next corner in one's life. Although we should enjoy life, it must always be within a context that respects judgment and eternity even more. What does Paul mean when he instructs disciples likewise to walk circumspectly (Ephesians 5:15-17, Romans 13:11-14)?

7. Does the Preacher sanction a profligate lifestyle in Ecclesiastes 11:9-10? Think hard—what is his point (Second Timothy 2:22)?

8. In Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, the Preacher extends that sentiment to invite the younger generation to think about God immediately. Why do you think young adults tend to find it difficult to concentrate upon faith, heaven and eternity?

9. What did Agur recognize as perilous to such a generation as that (Proverbs 30:11-14)?

10. How does one go about remembering his creator in his youth?

6. Consider Ecclesiastes 12:10-11. To what does the writer compare words of truth? Explain.
7. Perhaps the most famous convert in the history of the church spent time kicking against the goads of the Shepherd (Acts 9:9:1-5). What does that indicate?
8. Why do people still kick against the goads today, even as they search for meaning in life elsewhere (see also Matthew 6:19-24)?
9. Most college students would concur with the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 12:12. Why don't self-help books and the philosophy and psychology of men end up helping very much?
10. What is the conclusion to the search and its record in this book? In other words, what is your all (First John 4:17-19, Hebrews 4:11-13, Second Corinthians 5:10)?

Lesson 13: Review

1. While Ecclesiastes 1:1 introduces us to the author of the book, the second verse indicates his theme. Who is the author? Explain his theme.

2. Why aren't many wise according to the flesh called to Christ (First Corinthians 1:18-31; cf. James 4:6)?

3. The writer gave up on finding meaning in human wisdom and went to the opposite extreme. What was his next option (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3)?

4. What would modern people call the condition described in Ecclesiastes 2:23? What does the Bible recommend in the battle against anxiety and carnal discontentment (Philippians 4:4-7, 10-12)?

5. What is the result when we pursue any of the objectives in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, but out of season, that is, at the wrong time (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11)? Which of them is fit to be man's chief objective in life? How will we respond when God's timeline does not match our own?

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7. Consider Ecclesiastes 5:13-17. Why is it hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:17-25)?

8. Read Ecclesiastes 6:10-12. How is man like a shadow or a vapor (James 4:13-17)? What does the godly man learn from this disturbing fact? What should the godly woman take from this (Proverbs 31:30)?

9. What should the living take to heart in the house of mourning (Ecclesiastes 7:1-4, Second Corinthians 5:10, James 4:13-17, Matthew 25:1-30)?

10. What is it that often interferes with swiftness, strength, wisdom, understanding and skill (Ecclesiastes 9:10-12)? Explain.

11. In Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, the Preacher extends that sentiment to invite the younger generation to think about God immediately. Why do you think young adults tend to find it difficult to concentrate upon faith, heaven and eternity?

12. What is the conclusion to the search and its record in this book? In other words, what is your all (First John 4:17-19, Hebrews 4:11-13, Second Corinthians 5:10)?

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