

# God's Message to Us in Ecclesiastes

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## **Introduction**

In the afternoons, we have been going through the books of the Bible, looking at God's message to us in each one.

- Today, we have come to Ecclesiastes.
- The name Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth in Hebrew) means "speaker before an assembly."

It is thought that Solomon is addressing the church, the congregation of God's people, to tell them what he has learned through his quest for wisdom.

- God gave him special wisdom above all others, but he did many foolish things in his life—such as marrying a thousand wives.
- But here he is telling us what he has learned about life at the end of it all.

Since he was guided by God's Spirit in what he wrote, we have something much more than the musings of a wise man at the end of his life.

- We have here truth about life that is from God—breathed out by Him for us to receive as the precious word of God.
  - Here is wisdom not of the earth, but wisdom from above.
  - Here is wisdom you can wholeheartedly trust.

I remember the first time I read it after my conversion, when I was twenty years old, and how delighted I was with it!

- As a new Christian, I had come to understand that there was nothing worth living for but God.
  - The very thing that had brought me to seek the LORD was the realisation that there was more to life than this world—life "under the sun" as Solomon says.
- While there were bits and pieces and even major themes in this book that I did not understand, the overall message that life is completely empty without God came through loud and clear!

It was rather striking to me some years after so enjoying Ecclesiastes when I ran across the evaluation of this book by unbelieving Bible scholars.

- You know that most of the Bible scholars in the divinity schools across the continent are unbelievers, don't you?
  - They study the Bible in an academic way, but they don't believe it to be the word of God—they are rationalistic men who do not believe that anyone was ever born of a virgin or raised from the dead.
  - They value these myths, as they call them, for their ability to inspire people, but they do not actually believe them to be factual...
- Anyway, it was striking to me that this book, that to me as a new Christian was so full of light and hope, was to them a book of darkness and despair.
  - Some of them believe that Solomon was deeply depressed when he wrote it—perhaps even suicidal.

- But really, it makes sense that those who do not truly believe in Christ would find this book to be discouraging...
  - because Solomon is telling us how utterly empty life is without God—and they don't have God.
  - For those who don't have God, it speaks of the very realities they are desperately trying to deny.

Remembering, again, that these are not only the words of Solomon, but also of God the Holy Spirit, let's begin by looking at:

## **I. God's message to us in Ecclesiastes about the utter vanity of life without Him.**

A. This theme of vanity is found both in the beginning and at the end of the book.

1. Look at the introduction in the first three verses:

- **Ecc 1:1-3: The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." <sup>3</sup> What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?**

- That is indeed a dark assessment!

a. *Vanity* speaks of a vapour that vanishes in the air—like your breath that you can see on a cold day, or like steam that comes out of a kettle.

- The Lord is showing us through Solomon that our life in this world is truly nothing more than that if He is not in the picture.
- He could hardly emphasise it more.
  - The word *vanity* is used five times—it is not just vanity, but it is vanity *of* vanity—in other words, it is vanity begetting more vanity.
  - He repeats it to be sure you get it, and then adds,
    - **all is vanity,**
    - just to make certain that you realise that nothing is excluded.

b. Then he puts the question out—**What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun?**

- The phrase, “under the sun” is used throughout the book to refer to life in the world without reference to the true God.
  - Life as if there is nothing above the sun.
  - It would be something like a marriage where a bride marries a really great guy, but then completely ignores him... avoids him completely... refusing to look at him, listen to him, or talk to him (with the exception of an occasional curse or cry for help).
- So you have a person toiling and toiling away—and then he dies.
  - What did he accomplish?
  - You say, well maybe he left the world a better place for the next generation.
    - Well, that is a nice idea, but what was the value of that since the next generation is also just going to die too?
    - They will be toiling away with life and then they will die too.

- You never get anywhere in the end.
    - You can build a great civilization or a great estate, but in a matter of time, it will all be gone like a vapour.
    - That is the raw truth that nobody wants to face because it is too discouraging.
      - But the LORD drives it home to us through Solomon's words.
2. At the end of the book, he says the same thing about life under the sun—again, talking of life in a closed universe without reference to God.
- In Ecclesiastes 12:7-8, he says:
    - **7 Then the dust** [speaking of our bodies] **will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.** **8 “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “All is vanity.”**
    - He simply won't let us escape from the reality that our life under the sun is but a vapour, here today and gone tomorrow.

TRANS> Now of course I am highly motivated to get to the solution that is found in this book to all this gloom and despair...

- but first I want to explore a little more of what lies between the introduction and the conclusion in Ecclesiastes about life under the sun being vanity of vanity, all vanity.

B. What does Solomon, or rather the LORD, say to back up this claim that all is vanity?

1. In chapter 1:4-11, he shows that everything under the sun is just an endless repetition.
  - Verse 4 says, **“One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.”**
    - Then he illustrates with wind first blowing south, and then north; with the rivers running into the ocean, but the ocean never getting full.
      - No one really ever does anything that is new...
      - No one really ever gets anywhere.
      - We are only dust in the wind.
2. Then in 1:12-18, he speaks of the folly of pursuing wisdom...
  - The more you learn, the more you discover how deep the problems of the world are and the more you despair.
    - **1:15: What is crooked cannot be made straight, And what is lacking cannot be numbered.**
  - He concludes that in much wisdom is much grief and that **he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**
    - You start out thinking you will find solutions, but you only get deeper problems.
3. So in chapter 2, he speaks of how he went after the pleasures of life: **Come now** [he says] **I will test you with mirth; therefore, enjoy pleasures...**
  - Perhaps in pleasure is to be found the key to life...
    - He was an extremely wealthy and powerful man!
    - He married 1000 virgins.

- He had a beautiful and well-ordered estate with food and treasures from all over the world.
  - He had music and wine and houses and vineyards and flocks...
    - He sums it up to say in 2:10: **Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor.**
  - He says that there was joy in his labour...
    - But the raw truth comes home again in verse 11.
      - **Ecc 2:11: Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.**
    - Talk to those who have made it big in the world, and sure there is pleasure, but what do they really have after a while?
      - Look the misery of the people in Hollywood.
      - You think that you would be so happy if you have a little more than you have now, and especially if you had a lot more, but many of you have twice as much as you did when you first started out in your little apartment and it is not all that different, is it?
4. In chapter 3-11, Solomon talks about how life happens apart from our control.
- a. He starts out chapter 3 with showing how seasons of life come and go:
    - **Ecc 3:1: To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: <sup>2</sup> a time to be born, And a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; <sup>3</sup> a time to kill, And a time to heal; etc...**
    - The point is, life happens as it happens—
      - he is not speaking of what we ought to do—a time we ought to do this and ought to do that; but of the situations in which we find ourselves—one day it is this, one day it is that.
  - b. He then speaks in the rest of chapter 3 and in chapter 4 about how justice often does *not* happen in this world.
    - In 3:16 he says: **Moreover I saw under the sun: in the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there.**
    - Corruption is all around—injustice is everywhere... chapter 4:
      - **4:1-3: Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: and look! The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter—on the side of their oppressors there is power, but they have no comforter. <sup>2</sup> Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, more than the living who are still alive. <sup>3</sup> Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.**
    - He speaks also of how a fellow can work really hard, and another fellow is a bum, but they both end up in the grave.
      - The diligent guy wore himself to the bone, but it makes no difference under the sun in where he ends up.

- You can be the fastest and still lose the race, you can be wise and never be recognised, you can be a king and end up sidelined by everyone.
  - You are famous one day and forgotten the next.
  - It is all vanity—there is no rhyme or reason under the sun.
- c. In chapter 5, he shows how you don't even have control of your own intentions.
  - Too often we are dreamers when we make vows to God.
    - You say something like, "Lord, if you will prosper my business trip, I will give half to the church..." and you think it will be easy.
    - But then when the profit comes, it is not so easy to follow through.
- d. In the rest of chapter 5 and chapter 6, he shows how worldly prosperity rarely brings the satisfaction it promises.
  - Many have all the good things of life, but do not have the ability to enjoy them all.
- e. He goes on showing how things turn out quite differently than what you either expect or plan.
  - Adversity proves to be better for you than mirth (7:1-14).
  - People who plan and do right often end up crashing (7:15)
  - Righteous people can hardly ever be found (7:20 – 8:9).
  - The only certain thing is that all die (8:10 - 9:12).

TRANS> You get the general idea.

- There are no guarantees in the world except that in the end, we all end up in the same place—we all return to dust.
  - You can achieve great things, or you can be foiled all along the way, but you end up in the grave no matter what you do... good, bad, wise, foolish...
    - Vanity of vanity, all is vanity, says the preacher!
    - Vanity of vanity, all is vanity, says the LORD!
- So what are we to do in this vain world?

## **II. Solomon has two pieces of advice that flow through the whole narrative.**

- One about how to get along in this world—and the other about what matters above all else.
  - Let's look at the first and then the second.
- A. First, how can we get along well in this world according to Solomon?
- We might summarise what he says like this: Don't expect too much in this world, but enjoy whatever the LORD gives you along the way.
    1. As far as not expecting too much.
      - Don't expect the world to be a fair place.
        - There is a lot of wickedness here, and very often it is wickedness that the wicked get away with.
        - Sometimes the honest guy who works hard ends up at the bottom of the barrel—and there is really nothing you can do about that.

- Nevertheless, as a general rule, the person who exercises wisdom and lives a decent life will get along better than the fool.
  - In chapter 10, he talks about how the fool makes life hard for himself...
    - He wears himself out cutting all day with a dull axe because he was too lazy to sharpen it.
    - He is a king and he gets drunk when he should be making policies.
    - He speaks evil of dignitaries who have power to hurt him.
    - He leaves his roof leaking till his whole house is destroyed.
  - Yes, the wise person who lives an upright life will ordinarily have things go better for him than the fool.
- But it is a great danger to suppose that if you do everything just right, you will have no troubles!
  - You know the miserable soul—who is overly righteous—meaning that he tries to find security in this world by being good...
    - In Ecc 7:15-18, Solomon says, **I have seen everything in my days of vanity: there is a just *man* who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked *man* who prolongs *life* in his wickedness. 16 Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: why should you destroy yourself? 17 Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: why should you die before your time?**
  - He is talking about a kind of perfectionism and effort to control everything that ends up making you frustrated instead of getting what you want.
    - “I did everything right, I planned, I was upright, and still there were things that went wrong!”
      - Of course there were things that went wrong!
  - And because there is pleasure to be found in nice things, there is the danger of supposing that if you can get enough, you will be happy and fulfilled.
    - If you think like that, you will always be frustrated
      - either because you feel that you don’t quite have enough yet,
      - or because you made it big and find that all you acquired is not all that it was cracked up to be.
    - In Ecc 4:4-6, he encourages us to neither fold our hands or to try to fill both hands—rather to fill one hand...
      - He says: **“Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind. 5 The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. [looking with envy at the rich guy]. 6 Better a handful *with* quietness than both hands full, *together with* toil and grasping for the wind.”**
    - Do you see the picture?
      - The fool is envious and folds his hands because he can’t get all that the rich man has—his hands are empty because he folds them.
      - And then there is the guy who grasps and toils to fill both hands, but ends up wearing himself out so that he can’t enjoy his stuff.

- It's like the people with the big houses that are gone all the time and never get to enjoy their house or their spouse because both of them are toiling—to own the big house.
2. The overall advice is, don't be overly concerned about what you have in this world—don't overrate it—just enjoy it.
- Enjoy what God gives you as His gracious gift—as long as you have it.
    - Instead of trying to get too much out of it, just enjoy it before Him.
  - a. Look at chapter 2, verse 24-26: **Nothing is better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. <sup>25</sup> For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? <sup>26</sup> For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who *is* good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is* good before God. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind."**
    - When you know the LORD, you can enjoy the things you have—
      - You know you might lose them, but that's okay... you enjoy them while you have them.
        - And if you do lose them, you give thanks for the memory and for having had them... it was all from God.
    - To those God loves, He gives the ability to enjoy His gifts.
      - You see one fellow enslaved by wine while another receives it as God's gift and truly enjoys it.
      - One is frustrated with his marriage or frustrated that he doesn't have enough money, while the believer is able to simply enjoy his spouse and enjoy the money that he does have!
        - Isn't it true? Most people can't enjoy what they have because they are always thinking they want more.
    - You can even see this with children.
      - A godly three-year-old can have a blast in his back yard all afternoon with a stick, while an ungodly three-year-old sits in a pile of expensive toys whining all day.
      - Of course it can be reversed too—put the whiny kid in the back yard and he will whine because he only has a stick...
        - put the godly kid in a room full of expensive toys, and he will have a blast there just like he did with the stick.
  - b. In Ecc 5:18-19, Solomon echoes this truth again:
    - **Here is what I have seen: *It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage.* <sup>19</sup> As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—*this is the gift of God.*"**
      - Just enjoy what you have—your wealth, whatever it be.
- So what are the implications when it comes to working to obtain wealth in this world?

- c. Go ahead and do your work heartily, trusting God.
  - Basically, go ahead sow your seed.
    - Make the investment, do the project, get the training, go for the job...
  - Of **course** things might go wrong, but don't let that stop you...
    - **Ecc 11:4: He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.**
  - Don't let fear stop you—go for it and leave it with the LORD...
    - **Ecc 11:6: In the morning sow your seed, And in the evening do not withhold your hand; For you do not know which will prosper, Either this or that, Or whether both alike will be good.**
  - God has given it to us ordinarily to enjoy our labour and its fruits.
    - Don't fret even if things do go wrong—just take whatever God gives you with thankfulness... enjoy it while you can.
    - As 11:9 says, **“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.**

TRANS> As you can see, Ecclesiastes is full of advice about how to get on well in this world... again, not expecting too much—you are going to die anyway—but just working and enjoying what God gives you.

- But now we are ready to look at the thing that matters most of all!
  - Solomon, or rather the LORD, tells us in Ecclesiastes what the most important thing of all in life is—and of course it is just what the Lord Jesus tells us.

B. Above all else, fear God and keep His commandments.

1. This is the conclusion Solomon reached on his quest for wisdom!

- In the last two verses, he nails it:
  - **Ecc 12:13-14: Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.**
- a. To fear God, as we learned last week in Proverbs, is the beginning of wisdom.
  - It means that you recognise that God matters most of all!
    - That is what keeps you from getting all worked up about what you have in this world—all frustrated with what you don't have, or all anxious about what you do have, or all consumed with trying to get more from this world...
  - When you see that it is not what you have or don't have, but God that matters, you are on the right track!
    - If you have His favour, you are blessed forever—not just till the grave!
    - But if you have His disfavour, you are cursed forever—even if you gain all the riches in the world before you return to the dust.
- b. Don't you see? The very reason we all return to dust is because of our rebellion against God.
  - All of us as a human family rejected our Maker.
    - We said that God did not matter.
    - We rejected God as our God to go our own way.
    - And most people are still going through life as if He doesn't matter... think of it!



- The only ones who truly fear God—who truly know that God does matter are those who have been called into His kingdom... the kingdom of His Son.
    - They have come to see that God is the only one that matters.
    - They have come to see that rejecting Him was our great sin,
      - And they have come to see that there is nothing they can do to fix that or make amends for it.
    - They have come to see that God graciously sent Jesus, His only Son, to restore us to Him...
      - That Jesus made Himself one of us, and came and lived among us, but as one who truly feared God...
      - And that to secure our pardon, He took the punishment for our rejecting of God, and promises that if we trust in Him as crucified for our sins, we will be completely pardoned.
  - We can come back to God through Him who was crucified.
    - We can start living again in the reality of the fact that God does matter—we can start living for Him!
      - We can live in hope that there is life after this world, and that for us in Christ, there an inheritance in His house forever!
        - There is a resurrection and there is eternal blessing.
    - This world is as it is because we and the whole human family have rejected God as our God...
      - That is why we die.
      - But through faith in Jesus, we can live again!
- c. So now we know what living is for—just what Solomon says...
- This is man's all: to fear God and to keep His commandments.
    - We are here for Him.
    - We lose our lives for Him and when we do, we find them!
2. Solomon has pointed to this conclusion throughout the whole book of Ecclesiastes.
- a. If this world is all you are living for, you will be sorely disappointed.
- You have maybe 50 more years—maybe 20—maybe 80—
    - who knows—but what's the difference were it a thousand?
  - And even if you get all that this world has, it is just vapour—you are just a vapour that vanishes away.
    - Surely you must be able to see that—can't you?
- b. What freedom it gives, once you do!
- This book of Ecclesiastes becomes so precious when you see that life does not consist in what you have in this world. All is vanity!
    - It is found in the living God who made all of these things.
    - Blessing and life are found in Him alone.
      - Don't waste your life living for what is going to vanish... what doesn't matter... fear God!

- c. God is going to bring every work to judgment, including the very thoughts of your heart.
  - If you want that judgment to go well, come to Jesus.
    - Without Him, it won't go well because you have no way to deal with your sins—and you will have to stand before God as one who rejected Him as your God.
    - That is why there is death—God is showing us that there is something terribly wrong.
      - That is why we can't really get anywhere in this world—why all is vanity.
  - It is so obvious, but so hard to accept.
    - But again, what freedom there is once you do!
    - Now you can start, as Jesus says, laying up treasure in heaven where moth and rust will not corrupt.
    - Now you can start investing for eternity.
      - Now you can know the glorious God whom to know is the greatest reward of all!

**Conclusion:** For this is man's all—to fear God and to live for Him!

- What else is there but that?
- That is the message of Ecclesiastes.