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How To Live Life

A STUDY OF ECCLESIASTES

Introduction

1. How many of you as young children engaged in a bit of make believe at one time or another.
2. If you were a young lady, you perhaps had a tea party with your imaginary friends, or you dressed up and pretended to be a princess.
3. If you were a young man, you may have pointed your baseball bat toward the outfield as if you were a major leaguer about to hit a home run.
4. I dare say that all of us at one time or another have given our imaginations free rein.
5. Even today, many of us watch as our young children and grandchildren do the same thing, only with different characters or costumes.
6. At some point, though we wish we could remain in our imaginary world, we are each called back to reality.
7. The world in which we live is often not as exciting as the world of make believe, but it is the world in which we must live our lives.
8. The Book of Ecclesiastes confronts us with the unpleasant realities of this world and forces us to stop and ask ourselves what are we gaining in this life?
9. Though the book may seem pessimistic at times, it challenges us to live our lives as if we were at the end of them looking back.
10. From that vantage point we can see how our lives should be lived.
11. I encourage you to spend time with me in this book as we consider these things.

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I. Who Is “The Preacher?”

A. TITLE

1. The Hebrew title for this book is Qoheleth meaning “preacher” or “speaker in the assembly.”
2. The Septuagint which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament gives it the title Ecclesiastes which means “a member of the church” or “leader of the assembly.”

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B. AUTHOR

1. Several of our English translations (i.e., KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, ESV) all refer to him as “the Preacher.”
2. In the first verse of the book, he describes himself as, “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1).
3. In verse 12 of the first chapter, he tells us that he has been “king over Israel in Jerusalem.”
4. In 1:16, he states “I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me” (Ecclesiastes 1:16, NASB95).
5. In 2:4-8, he presents himself as someone who is very wealthy, and then adds in verse 9, “I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.”
6. Finally, in 12:9, he wrote that “in addition to being a wise man,” he “also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs.”
7. All of these details point to Solomon, who was a son of David and king in

Jerusalem.

8. In 1 Kings 3, in response to Solomon's humble prayer, God not only gave him wisdom (v. 12) but also "riches and honor" (v. 13).
9. Likewise, 1 Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon "also spoke 3,000 proverbs."

C. DATE

1. Solomon reigned for forty years as king in Jerusalem from ca. 971-931 B.C.
2. Ecclesiastes is the type of book that Solomon may have written near the end of his life, after reflecting on his life experiences and the lessons he had learned.

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II. What Did He Mean By "All Is Vanity?"

A. LIFE IS SHORT

1. 'Vanity' is the translation of a Hebrew word (*hebel*) which means vapor or breath.
2. One commentator describes it as, "A wisp of vapor, a puff of wind, a mere breath — nothing you can get your hands on; the nearest thing to zero."¹

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3. In Psalm 39:5, 11, David used this word to describe our life as "a mere breath."

"Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; surely every man at his best is a mere breath." (**Psalm 39:5, NASB95**)

"With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1976, p. 22.

what is precious to him; surely every man is a mere breath.” (**Psalm 39:11, NASB95**)

4. In Psalm 144:3-4, David again compares our lives to “a mere breath” and our “days” to “a passing shadow.”
5. Think about the last time you or someone you know blew out a candle.
6. How long did the puff of smoke last?
7. For the moment, it is very real — you can see it, you can smell it — but suddenly, it’s gone.
8. Notice what Solomon says in verse 4, “A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”
9. Most, if not all of us have heard the statements . . .
 - a. “Here today, gone tomorrow.”
 - b. “The older I get, the faster time flies.”
10. Life is short, a mere breath.

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B. LIFE IS ELUSIVE

“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? ”
(Ecclesiastes 1:3, ESV).

1. The word here in verse 3, translated as ‘gain’ in the ESV, NIV84, is translated as ‘profit’ in the KJV, NKJV, and “advantage” by the NASB.
2. This word is found nowhere else in the Old Testament.
3. It’s basic meaning is “that which is left over, surplus.”
4. Another way we might phrase Solomon’s question is to ask, “What profit, what gain, what lasting significance are we able to point to as a result of our toil down here on earth?”

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5. In Psalm 90:10, Moses wrote of the “days of our life” and the “pride” we

have at the end of them:

“As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away.” (Psalm 90:10, NASB95)

6. Solomon’s point is that we can pour our whole lives into something — that something may succeed or it may fail — we have little control over the outcome.
7. How much control do we really have over our job security, our health, or what will happen five or ten years down the road?
8. In Psalm 103:15-16, David wrote:

“As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
When the wind has passed over it, it is no more,
And its place acknowledges it no longer.”
(Psalm 103:15–16, NASB95)

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C. LIFE IS REPETITIVE

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“Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again.
Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.
All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,

There they flow again.”

(Ecclesiastes 1:5–7, NASB95)

1. In these verses, Solomon focuses on life as it relates to our natural world, by utilizing three aspects of nature: the sun, wind and water.
2. All three are repetitive in their activity.
 - a. The sun rises in the east, sets in the west and races to do the same all over again.
 - 1) Solomon sees this repetitive cycle as vanity.
 - 2) His father, David, however, wrote in Psalm 19, of how God had placed a tent in the heavens for the sun “which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; it rejoices as a strong man to run his course” (Psalm 19:5).
 - b. The wind in its cyclical pattern blows “toward the south,” then turns and “blows toward the north,” only returning to do it again.
 - c. Rivers flow into the sea where through the processes of evaporation and precipitation the cycle is repeated all over again.
3. Solomon would have us understand that this is the way the world works — this is the way it will always work.

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4. In verses 8-11, he points to the weariness which all of this repetitiveness produces in us:

“All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.

That which has been is that which will be,

And that which has been done is that which will be done.

So there is nothing new under the sun.

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Is there anything of which one might say, “See this, it is new”?

Already it has existed for ages which were before us.
There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still.”

(Ecclesiastes 1:8–11, NASB95)

5. This repetitiveness wearies us, because we see it over and over again.
6. There is no point at which we can say we are satisfied with all we have seen and heard.
7. There is “nothing new under the sun” (v. 9).
8. Even in our age of modern technology, those things which are “state of the art” are soon outdated.
 - a. We invent, but how long before we are tired of the old invention and long for something better.
 - b. We discover, but how long before that discovery is old news.
9. How many of us have been around a young person who suddenly discovers something they have never seen before, and believe it to be new.
10. We who are older may say, “That’s been around for ages,” and then we proceed to tell them how it works.
11. For them, “there is no remembrance of earlier things” (v. 11).
12. In the same way, there are some things yet to occur, of which those who are yet to be born will have no remembrance.

Conclusion

1. As we read these words of Solomon, it is very tempting to come away with a discouraged, pessimistic attitude.

2. Please notice that Solomon is speaking to us about life “under the sun.”
3. The sun serves as a marker of time — sunrise, sunset — the here and now.
4. It is his way of saying that “as long as the earth lasts, in this period of time, this is how things are.”²
5. We do the same things over and over again.
6. Millions of people are trying to find satisfaction in the materialistic world.
7. They keep expecting that somewhere behind the obvious benefits of material things they will find some hidden greater joy.
8. The truth is that those who have limited themselves to a life “under the sun” will be caught up in a cycle that never allows them to be content or satisfied.
9. For those of us who are Christians here tonight, the apostle Paul encourages us to be “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

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10. In chapter 8, beginning with verse 34 of his gospel, Mark tells us about a time when Jesus summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said this to them,

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:34–37, NASB95)
11. Are you willing to come to Christ tonight and know a life of eternal purpose and joy?

² David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Life Teaches Us To Live In Light Of The End*, (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 2017), p. 29.