

The school of hard knocks. That school has a pretty efficient learning rate. What is the school of hard knocks? It's the school that the writer of Ecclesiastes attended.

Discuss: What do you know about the book of Ecclesiastes?

From an initial reading, the following stands out:

--The author does not give his name, but uses the title, "The Teacher."

--The book is poetic literature. In it we find proverbs, rhetorical questions, allegory, reflections, and other literary devices.

--The key word of the book is "vanity" ('meaninglessness' in the NIV); "Vanity" (Heb. *hebel*) may mean "breath" or "vapor" (Isa 57:13), thus something without substance, nothingness, emptiness, futility.

--The book says things that sound "unbiblical." Such as:

1:2 "Meaninglessness! Meaninglessness! Everything is meaninglessness!"

2:14 "The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both."

3:1, 3, 8 "There is a time for everything...a time to kill and a time to heal...a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace."

3:12 "I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live."

3:19 "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both."

7:3 "Sorrow is better than laughter..."

7:16 "Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise--why destroy yourself?"

So what's going on in this book? Why is it in the Bible? What message does God have for us in it? We'll see.

Name: "Ecclesiastes" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew "qohelet" which means, "one who convenes a congregation," presumably to preach to it. "Preacher" would not be an inaccurate title for the book in English if we understand preaching in this sense--what the writer has to say comes more from his own observations of life rather than from the Law or the Prophets (L.H.B. 586).

Who wrote the book?

--Solomon (Archer)

--However, Solomon is not mentioned by name.

Factors in the book which suggest Solomonic authorship:

--The author was a man of wisdom (1:16), wealth (2:8), had slaves and servants (2:7), and did building projects (2:4-6), all of which fits Solomon.

Factors in the book which suggest it may not have been Solomon:

The name of Solomon is not used as it was in Proverbs and the Song of Song's (1:1). He says, "I was the king (1:12)." His statements imply a line of kings (2:7, 9). One suggestion is to say that the author was someone using Solomon's reputation to capture his readers' attention (L.H.B. 589). Another is to say that Ecclesiastes is a satire of Solomon written by somebody else, to show the folly of trying to live life apart from God.

L.H.B. (588), "It is far easier to say that King Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes than to say who did." The rabbis struggled with the books seeming contradictions and humanistic, skeptical perspective. It was due to Rabbi Hillel's positive view of the book (15 B.C.) over against Rabbi Shammai's negative view that the book was preserved in the canon (Ibid., 587).

When was the book written?

--10th century B.C. (if Solomon)

--Or by Malachi's time in the 5th century B.C. (Harrison)

Let's read from the book to hear it's message...

1:12-18 [note that wisdom is meaningless]

2:17-18 [note that toil is meaningless]

3:1-8 [note that life is full of things over which we have little or no control]

4:4 [note that envy motivates achievement]

9:1-2 [note the common destiny of all]

12:11-14 [note the conclusion of the matter]

Why was the book written?

There are several suggested interpretations of Ecclesiastes: (Prof. David Kennedy)

1. Pure Skepticism (the critical view) -- It's the opposite of Proverbs, and says, "Nothing can be known." Agnosticism.

2. Pure Orthodoxy/Spiritualizing (the view of the early church) -- The author doesn't mean what he says.
3. Dialogue -- This view tries to explain good and bad saying the book is a dialogue between two people: the Teacher and another person. The Teacher holds up false views and examines them.
4. Skepticism for Evangelism --The author writes the book tongue in cheek. The book teaches us what the "natural" man thinks. We don't agree with the views taught in the book, but we do learn about how unsaved people think.
5. Apologetic -- The author has agonized over the questions of life (unlike view 2) and shares his agonizing in the book, along with his ultimate conclusions. It's the look at life from the perspective of *hindsight*. (conservative view)

Discuss: What difference does hindsight make in your life?

So this is a book that grapples with the essential issues in life. It raises the hard questions, like "Why?" and "So what?" It's about the man who scrapped and scraped all his life to climb the ladder of success, and when he finally got to the top, he was aghast to discover the ladder was leaning against the *wrong* wall!

Ecclesiastes is the search for the key to life.

What is the outline of the book?

L.H.B. make an interesting observation (590), "Qoheleth's unique method of argumentation makes a coherent outline of this work almost impossible. It seems to be more a collection of separate thoughts than a unified argument which can be systematically followed from beginning to end. Part of the problem may be in imposing a modern definition of a 'book' as a 'unified, logically argued and constructed whole.'"

Note: Inclusio--there is one statement that frames the book; it's like two bookends that hold the whole thing together (1:2//12:8 "Vanity! Vanity! says the Teacher. Everything is vanity!")

Outline (suggested by David Kennedy, class notes):

- I. Prologue (1:1-11)
- II. Reflections by the Teacher (1:12-6:12)

"Here's what I did."
- III. Advice from the Teacher (7:1-12:7)

"Don't you do what I did. Do this."
- IV. Epilogue (12:8-14)

Key Reoccurring Phrases in Ecclesiastes:

1. "All is vanity" -- 30 times

What does this mean? The point is not that there is no order in life, but that we can't figure it out.

2. "Under the sun" -- 28 times

What does this mean? This doesn't mean there is no new revelation in Ecclesiastes, but is the author's view of figuring out life.

3. "Striving after the wind" -- 7 times

The meaning? It presents the futility of life without God.

4. "I perceived" -- 3 times; "I said in my heart" -- 5 times; "I gave my heart to consider" -- seven times

What does this indicate about this book? It's the record of the Teacher's observations.

5. "There is nothing better...than to eat, drink, and be glad in his labor" -- 9 times

That is, if we are to live, we ought to find enjoyment. Such enjoyment is found in living *rightly*, not in living in excess.

Discuss: "Life should be enjoyed, not apart from God but in God."

6. "Fear God" -- 6 times

What is the message of the book in one sentence?

Ecclesiastes teaches us what doesn't satisfy and what does satisfy in life.

What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?

1. *Proverbs gives us the picture of the path of wisdom. Ecclesiastes is the picture of what happens when we leave the path.*

What other passages pick up this theme? See 2 Timothy 3:16-17

2. *Ecclesiastes prepares us for the gospel. It does "pre-evangelism." It brings us to the point of despair so we'll admit to God our desperate need for help.*

We learn some important lessons in Ecclesiastes that lead us to the gospel message:

a. Life without God is not really life.

Why not?

b. The things of life do not satisfy. Only God does.

All that Solomon stood for--wealth, women, work--all ended up in fruitlessness. He learned the hard way that the essence of life is to fear and obey God.

e.g.--A man (who is now in our church) came to my house several years ago. He was struggling but didn't really know why. I took him to Ecclesiastes. Work doesn't satisfy, nor does pleasure, nor does money, etc. Ecclesiastes prepared that man to hear the gospel.

Discuss: How so? How can we use Ecclesiastes as we work with the unsaved?