

Sept 27 Ecclesiastes 1-4

Ecclesiastes Intro

Ecclesiastes is the traditional book read during the Jewish festival of Sukkot (the festival of Booths), which commemorates the time that the Jewish people spent living in the wilderness, and God's faithfulness to them even during the difficult experience of living as a displaced people. While traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, Ecclesiastes is likely dated later as it incorporates a number of Aramaic words throughout, which were not in use in Israel until the 7th century BC- the time of Jesus. Its true authorship is unknown. The title "Ecclesiastes" comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Qohelet", which simply means "Teacher" or "Preacher" (the one who speaks to the assembly). Ecclesiastes is a work of moral wisdom, the Teacher deconstructs the conventional logic of life by exposing its absurdities, then affirms life's value by recovering meaning and morals from the wreckage his words have left behind. For this reason, do not lose heart while reading the Teacher. Ecclesiastes' primary pursuit is in constructing an understanding of the meaning of life, while taking seriously the absurdity and seeming meaninglessness of life. The Teacher will come to assert that even when the meaning of life seems to collapse, a kind of meaningfulness can and does remain in the midst of that which seems to make no sense. Meaningfulness can be reconstructed, even in the face of oppression and the absurdity of trying times.

Chapter 1

The Teacher is definitely not King Solomon because the timing of this work doesn't match up, but this is a good example of pseudopigraphy (writing in the name of a famous person to give your words of wisdom more authority). The Teacher of Ecclesiastes uses a number of contradictions in his pursuit of meaning to illustrate the absurdity of life. The absurd (or vanity as he calls it) arises from the contradiction that exists between two undeniable realities. While a number of words can be used to translate the word used for "vanity" in the NRSV. The best translation for this word is "absurdity." Absurdity does not imply silliness, but rather the tragic, irrational, meaningless nature of human life. Absurdity is that which seems contrary to human reason, and the Teacher's response to the oppressive elements of human existence. **The absurd is an affront to reason.**

What are some "affronts to reason" that you can think of in our world today?

Vs 3 introduces the Teacher's other key theme: toil. Throughout this work, he will seek to understand the nature and purpose of toil. Verse 3 can be read as a voice of cynical despair, "What's the point of it all?" This first chapter expresses the modern proverb "history repeats itself." The Teacher is commenting on all that he has observed, and from the vast spectrum of human life that he has witnessed, he concludes that there is "nothing new under the sun." Human and nature repeats the same actions over and over and over again, *What are some that you can think of?*

Because of this lack of novelty in our world, the Teacher questions the point of human toil. If nothing new can ever be achieved, then what is the point of it all. *Is there even such a thing as progress? Or just an endless back and forth of history repeating itself for better and for worse?*

The Teacher introduces the idea of "Chasing after the wind," (or vapor) that is "futility." This key phrase will be repeated 8 more times through this book.

Vs. 15, The Teacher does not have a high view of humanity. There's so much stupidity and brutishness in the world, he laments. "What is lacking cannot be counted." However, his own pursuit of wisdom is also his life's bane. The pursuit of wisdom is "the unfortunate business that God has given people to busy themselves with." God doesn't want us to be stupid or brutish, BUT...

Vs 18, "In much wisdom is much vexation, those who increase knowledge increase their sorrow." Despite his negative opinion of wisdom (for it is pointless and only seems to make one's lot worse because one has full understanding of all the absurdity in the world), Ecclesiastes is firmly planted in the wisdom literature of the Bible.

Chapter 2

The Teacher embarks upon a series of theological/philosophical experiments (pleasure, being wise, toil) to find something meaningful for mortals to do. He pursues things that are pleasurable, that contribute to society, that build up his own wealth, that contribute to the wealth of the nation, and that build his own personal "greatness." This sounds like a life of hedonism. And yet, the Teacher concludes that even a life of hedonism is pointless/absurd/vain. The work involved with seeking pleasure is not worth the result. The same fate befalls the wise and the fool. What's the point of being wise? "There's no enduring remembrance of the wise and the fools." How many generations do we have until we are forgotten in history?

The Teacher says it is a great evil for one to toil and for the one who did not toil to receive the reward, and yet this is how the world works.

The ability to enjoy the work itself (the toil) is a gift from God, and the only thing meaningful in life. He says there is nothing better than to “eat, drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.” This is God’s sweet gift to humanity in the midst of a brutish and seemingly pointless life, the point is to find meaning and joy in the toil. Toil for the sake of amassing wealth and stuff is foolish, since you can’t take it with you. But toil for the sake of enjoying your life while you toil is true wisdom.

Chapter 3

Every event has its right time and right set of circumstances in which it should happen, and God determines this in God’s wisdom. Humans should wait until the time is appropriate rather than straining and forcing something to happen at the wrong time. The difficulty with this is that God has not shared with humans the specific schedule of when events should happen. It is left to humans to discern the will and ways and timing of God. God does not predetermine exactly what will happen when, but rather certain times are more ripe for events to take place than others. For instance, there are conditions morally right for war, but with the absurdity of the world as it is, these conditions are not always the time in which war is initiated. The other layer to the catalogue of times is that there are some times that are right and others that are wrong, which human beings have no control over (for instance, the moment one is born and the moment one dies). Humans do have control over some of the items on this list (for instance, when to plant and when to harvest, when to engage in sexual intimacy and when to abstain –gather stones/not gather stones). The wise thing to do, according to the Teacher, is to adapt oneself to the constraints of reality and not to strive for something to happen when the time is not right.

Vs. 12, that there is nothing better than to “eat, drink, and find enjoyment in toil” is set within the context of doing things when the time is right, within the right order and balance of God’s timing.

Vs 16-22, The Teacher wrestles with the absurd reality that both humans and animals return to the dust after death. He ponders the big question of what happens to one after death? He asserts that IF there is an eternal soul, that human life would not be pointless. But at this point in Israel’s history this was not a commonly held belief, and he says that since we cannot know

for sure that we cannot use this possibility to remedy the real injustice of humans and animals seeming to meet the same fate.

Chapter 4

Vs 1-3, Social injustice/oppression is one of the evils that exist in our world as a manifestation of the absurdity which the Teacher began speaking about. He asserts that worse than the misery caused by the oppression itself (the tears) is the fact that those who are downtrodden seem to have no one to comfort them and take their side. For this reason, the dead have a better lot than those living with oppression.

Vs 4-6, Envy and ambition in toil are self-destructive and self-defeating. The image of a person eating their own flesh is an illustration of this, practically speaking it's also an image of anxiety, one biting their cuticles or knuckles. It's better to achieve less in a state of peace, than to feverishly amass wealth for the sake of hoarding.

Vs. 7-8, Describes a person who has no familial connections, no one to leave his wealth to, and yet who works feverishly to amass for the sake of amassing, rather than enjoying the life that he has.

Vs. 9-12, It is good and holy to have companions to share life with. Humans were not meant to live in isolation as loners. The Teacher speaks of friendship in very practical terms, not emotional terms. A friend or partner gives one a purpose in their toil, and a safety net when the absurdities of life afflict. "A three-fold cord is not easily broken" is an ancient adage that speaks to the protection a traveling companion affords to one on a journey. Christians have come to understand this image also in marriage as the couple being married, being bound up together with God as the third companion on their journey. *How has friendship or companionship blessed you in your journey?*

Oct 4 Ecclesiastes 5-8