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Article 21: Ecclesiastes at a Glance

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ECCLESIASTES AT A GLANCE

This book reflects the world view of history's wisest man as he describes in graphic but grievous fashion his experiences and evaluations regarding human existence on a purely natural level. Its author, Solomon, could truly sigh and say "been there, done that," following his futile search for peace and meaning. However, his ultimate conclusion and final counsel is simple, sufficient, and satisfying—"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

BOTTOM LINE INTRODUCTION

THE BACKGROUND STORY BEHIND THE WORLD'S GREATEST PROBE FOR THE WORLD'S GREATEST PRIZE, THAT OF PEACE AND PURPOSE IN THIS LIFE.

In a certain sense Ecclesiastes may be thought of as scripture's divine soap opera book. Here the question is asked: "Can a fabulously wealthy and wise king ruling over a splendid empire ten centuries B.C. find true peace and purpose in life?" But there is one restriction imposed, can he find these two priceless treasures apart from God?

This then is Solomon's great search. In the main, chapters 1-10 record the attempts involved, while the final two chapters provide the answer. Some readers, not understanding the chronology and purpose of the book, have mistakenly concluded that Ecclesiastes teaches the following false doctrines:

- A. Fatalism – *"Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?" (7:13)*
- B. Pessimism – *"Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive"(4:2)*
- C. Materialism – *"For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?"(3:19-21)*
- D. Atheism – *"There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (1:11)*

However, the key words in Ecclesiastes are man (used 47 times), labor (36), under the sun (30), and vanity (37 times). These phrases are the secret. The book of Ecclesiastes (ch. 1-10) may be summarized by two apt statements, one made by a former well-known agnostic trial lawyer, and the other by a sewer worker in Chicago. Both statements were given in response to a question concerning their personal philosophy of life. "There is a statement in the Bible which pretty well summarizes my life. It says, *'We have toiled all night, and have taken nothing'*(Lk. 5:5)" – Clarence Darrow.

"I dig da ditch to gette da money to buy da food to get da strength to dig da ditch." – Cook County sewer employee.

FACTS REGARDING THE AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK

1. Who? **Solomon.** He was the son of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:24), Israel's third king (1 Kings 1:39), and the world's wisest man (1 Kings 3:5-12).
2. What? The books of Proverbs 1-29; Psalms 72, 127, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes.
3. When and where? 935 B.C., from Jerusalem.
4. Why?
 - a. Prov. 1-29. To contrast man's foolishness with God's wisdom and to instruct believers concerning this wisdom.
 - b. Psalms 72, 127. The glories of Messiah's kingdom (72) and the importance of proper foundations (127).
 - c. Song of Solomon
 - (1) Historical: Solomon's love for his bride.
 - (2) Typical: God's love for Israel, Christ's love for the church, and the love that should exist between a man and his wife.
 - d. **Ecclesiastes.** The futility of human existence apart from God.
5. To whom? To "my son" (Prov. 1:8, 10, 15, etc.). This was Rehoboam who apparently refused most of the wisdom offered by his famous father – see 1 Kings 12:1-16.

KEY EVENTS

1. The beginning of Solomon's search
2. The endless and pointless cycles of life
3. The frailty of life and the end of Solomon's search (see also ch. 12)

KEY INDIVIDUALS

1. **Solomon:** David's son and successor, Israel's wisest king who wrote the entire book of Ecclesiastes

UNIQUE FEATURES

1. Apart from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes is probably the most important Old Testament book for young people to read. It answers their many questions. Can I find happiness in sex, or sports, or silver? In popularity, in prestige, or power? In educational degrees or drugs? The answer to all these is "No." Thus, numerous heartaches and ruined lives can be avoided by simply heeding the advice of the man who has already traveled down those roads. Sometimes experience is not the best teacher, for the tuition is too expensive.
2. The tremendous contrasts between the two opposing philosophies, life *with* God, and life *without* God, are readily seen, as suggested by author Ken Boa (*Talk Through the Bible*, Thomas Nelson, 1983):

Life Under the Sun

- 1:3 What advantage is work under the sun?
- 1:9 Nothing new under the sun.
- 1:14 All deeds are vanity under the sun.
- 2:18 The fruit of labor is hated under the sun.
- 6:12 Man is mortal under the sun.
- 7:15 Pleasure is temporary under the sun.
- 8:17 Man cannot discover God's work under the sun.
- 9:3 All men die under the sun.
- 12:2 Life under the sun will cease.

Life Under the Son

- *"He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 1:6)
 - *"If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation ... new things have come"* (2 Cor. 5:17)
 - *"Be steadfast, immovable ... knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord"* (1 Cor. 15:58)
 - *"Bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God"* (Col. 1:10)
 - *"Whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life"* (Jn. 3:16)
 - *"For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"* (Phil. 2:13)
 - *"Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully"* (1 Cor. 13:12)
 - *"God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son"* (1 Jn. 5:11)
 - *"In order that you may know that you have eternal life"* (1 Jn. 5:13)
3. Many believe the secret code unlocking this mysterious book can be found in 2:11—
"The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails ... given from one shepherd."
The three key words here are:
- Goads: A sharp stick, used to prod oxen stimulating their movement and controlling their direction (see Acts 9:5 and 26:1a)
 - Nails: Long spikes or stakes used to secure a tent in place (see Jer. 10:4)
 - Shepherd: Solomon's probable reference to the coming Messiah

With this in mind, consider the words of Richard DeHaan:

"In summary, the goads Solomon includes in Ecclesiastes are the recollections, the concerns, the serious thoughts, and the guilt feelings which arise in the consciousness of one who is willing to face things as they are. Their stings are painful, and do not in themselves provide the answer to man's need. But they bring to light a person's sinfulness and helplessness, and thereby may get him started in the right direction. When he is finally driven to faith in Christ, they have served their purpose.

"The nails, which we have said refer to long spikes or tent stakes, are the truths that come from God through special revelation. For us today they are

found in the Bible, God's Word for all men. When Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, he had only the five books of Moses, plus Joshua, Judges, probably the books of Samuel, and many of the Psalms, for at that time God was in the process of making Himself and His will known to men." (*The Art of Staying off Dead-End Streets*. Victor Books. Wheaton, Ill. pp. 12, 13)

4. Two of Scripture's most graphic descriptions in regards to the cycles of life and death are found in Ecclesiastes:

- Regarding life:

"There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven: A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to rebuild. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to lose. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak up. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace" (3:1-8).

- Regarding death:

"Don't let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honor him in your youth before you grow old and no longer enjoy living. It will be too late then to remember him, when the light of the sun and moon and stars is dim to your old eyes, and there is no silver lining left among the clouds. Your limbs will tremble with age, and your strong legs will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to do their work, and you will be blind, too. And when your teeth are gone, keep your lips tightly closed when you eat! Even the chirping of birds will wake you up. But you yourself will be deaf and tuneless, with a quavering voice. You will be afraid of heights and of falling, white haired and withered, dragging along without any sexual desire. You will be standing at death's door. And as you near your everlasting home, the mourners will walk along the streets. Yes, remember your Creator now while you are young, before the silver cord of life snaps and the golden bowl is broken. Don't wait until the water jar is smashed at the spring and the pulley is broken at the well. For then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (12:1-7).

TITLES FOR AND TYPES OF JESUS

1. The God of all Seasons (3:1-8)
2. The Eternal Creator who has placed eternity in the hearts of His Creatures (3:9-14)
3. The Future Judge of all People (11:9; 12:14)
4. The All Wise Shepherd (12:11)