

# ECCLESIASTES

## ECCLESIASTES — INTRODUCTION

The ground for ascribing Ecclesiastes to Solomon is fourfold:

1. The indirect claim of the book as gathered from ~~2000~~ Ecclesiastes 1:1, 12;
2. the general opinion of Jews and Christians from the earliest times;
3. the fitness of Solomon to write it;
4. the lack of agreement among critics as to any other author or period.

There are different plans or theories of the book, but to the compiler of this commentary it is a kind of biography of Solomon's life, and yet one in which he not only records, but re-acts his search for happiness, making of it a kind of dramatic biography.

In other words, Solomon rehearses the various phases of his former self, having fits of study, luxury, misanthropy, etc., all ending in disappointment. It is important to note that "wisdom" in Ecclesiastes means "science," while in Proverbs it means "piety." In the same connection, "vanity" here means not merely foolish pride, but "the emptiness of the final result of life apart from God" (~~4810~~ Romans 8:20-22).

They who hold this conception of the book are well represented by W. J. Erdman, in his concise work, entitled "Ecclesiastes," on which we have permission to draw for what follows. He calls it The Book of the Natural Man, by which he means man as he is "under the sun," compared with the man of Paul, whose "citizenship is in heaven."

The first proof is that the only divine name in the book is the "natural" name, God (*Elohim*), the significance of which all will recognize from our reference to it in Genesis. Jehovah, the name associated with the covenant of redemption, is not once employed; hence man is seeking what is best "under the sun" but not seeking Him who is above the sun.

A second proof is the frequent use of "under the sun." Man is looking up, not knowing what is beyond, except judgment.

A third proof is that all the experiences and observations of the book are bound together by the one question: "What is the chief good? .... Is life worth living?" The answer is sought amidst general failure, contradictions, and half-truths, because man is out of Christ, and yet face to face with the mysteries of God and nature.

A fourth proof is what the book styles "the conclusion of the whole matter" (12:13-14), which is that of the natural man only. "To fear God and keep His commandments," is right, but the author of Ecclesiastes confessedly has not done so, and yet he sees judgment in the distance and has no preparation to meet it.

"Where man ends therefore, God begins." The book of the natural man concludes where that of the spiritual man begins. The all-in-all of man under the sun convicts him of failure and guilt in order to lead him to the all-in-all of the man above the sun, the second Adam, who bare our guilt in His own body on the tree.

### **IS THE BOOK INSPIRED?**

This conception of the book explains why some of its conclusions are only partially true and others altogether false, such as 2:16; 3:19; 9:2; etc.

And if it be asked, How then can the book be inspired? the answer is that in the inspiration of the Bible we do not claim the inspiration of the men, but the writings; while in the latter case it is not meant that every word thus written is true, and in that sense God's Word, but that the record of it is true. That is, God caused it to be written that this or that man felt this or that way, and said thus and so, and hence the record of how he felt and what he said is God's record, and in that sense true and in that sense inspired.

## **ECCLESIASTES 1-2**

### **THE PROLOGUE (1:1-11)**

These verses show the general result of the whole search for good on earth, the record of which is to follow (vv. 1-3); a symbolic illustration from nature of the monotony of human existence (vv. 4-7); and a plain statement of the facts in the case (vv. 8-11).

## **THE INTRODUCTION (1:12-18)**

These verses describe the seeker (v. 12); his method of search (v. 13), and the result in general (vv. 14-15) and in particular (vv. 16-18).

## **VARIOUS VANITIES (2:2-26)**

Chapter 2 lists vanities as: the lust of the flesh (vv. 1-3); the lust of the eyes (vv. 4-6); pride of life (vv. 7-8); conclusion (vv. 9-11). The vanity of wisdom (vv. 12-17); the vanity of work (vv. 18-23); conclusion (vv. 24-26).

## **ECCLESIASTES 3-4**

### **MAN'S TIMES (3:1-11)**

These are orderly and seasonable, but bring no permanent profit, because man is still ignorant of God's purpose in them all. He does not know how to fit his work into God's work. The conclusion is in verses 12-15.

### **GOD'S TIME (3:16-22)**

There is a suggestion in verse 17 that this is long. It will be a time, too, of judgment and manifestation (vv. 17-18). Yet, and perhaps because of this, man's death is not different from the beast (vv. 19-21); conclusion (v. 22).

### **SUNDRY WRONGS AND VANITIES (4:1-16)**

Oppression (vv. 1-3); envy (4:4-6); the lonely miser (vv. 7-12); political disappointment (vv. 13-16).

## **ECCLESIASTES 5-6**

### **VARIETIES IN WORSHIP (5:1-7)**

On these verses the writer seems to muse on the relation of the unseen Being to the act of man in worship. Mindful of man's jaunty liberalism and superstition, rash vows and wordy prayers, dreamy and unreal, because full of intruding vanities and worldly businesses, the preacher earnestly exhorts

to few words and solemn steps. But even then it is the natural man only who is speaking in the exhortation, not the regenerate man, because he speaks only of a God who is far away and looks upon sinful man on earth with cold, judicial eye, ready to destroy the work of man in wrath.

### **VANITIES OF WEALTH (5:8-20)**

Oppression of the poor by the rich (vv. 8-9); dissatisfaction with mere abundance (vv. 10-12); hoarded riches are an evil (vv. 13-17); conclusion (vv. 18-20).

### **CONTRADICTIONS (CHAP. 6)**

This chapter is a contradiction of the conclusion reached at the close of the preceding one. He thought it was "good and comely for one to eat, and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor," but now he is startled by discovering as a "common" experience that there are men of wealth and honor from whom God withheld this enjoyment (vv. 1-2). Having begun his descent from the sunny slopes of a natural piety he sinks at last into the deepest melancholy. To be blessed with wealth, offspring, long life, and yet not have the "good" he once thought he had, were worse than never to have been. Before the mystery of it all he is dumb (vv. 11-12).

### **ECCLESIASTES 7-9:12**

The interval between this chapter and the preceding represents a pause in the writer's thought, and now he seems to set out on a new quest for the chief good in life. He will seek it in wise conduct. He will renounce feasting and trying the opposite (7:1-6); he will avoid extremes (7:15-18); no one is perfectly righteous (7:19-22); the worst thing he has found is woman (7:23-26); and the conclusion is that man is indeed a fallen creature (7:27-29). "Inventions" in this last verse is to be taken in the sense of "tricks, evil artifices, and conceits."

The wise conduct which the preacher now proposes is to be exercised against temptations to disloyalty and rebellion in national and civic relations (8:1-8); and against the oppressions of tyrants and other injustices (8:9-13); and yet after considering it all, in his accustomed despair he

reports to his favorite conclusion that there is "nothing in it," and he had better enjoy himself anyway (8:14-17).

This idea is carried over into chapter nine. The providence of God in human affairs is inscrutable (vv. 1-3), therefore the only thing to do is to enjoy this life cheerfully, and use it as profitably as possible (vv. 7-12).

## ECCLESIASTES 9:13-12:14

Some commentators make a new division here, and while others do not agree, yet there is that which suggests it, surely. The preacher here seems to have returned to the placid, philosophic mood again, in the cautious praise of wisdom (9:13-18). This praise is followed by a number of proverbs of natural wisdom and prudence (see chap. 10, especially vv. 16-20).

In chapters 11 and 12 we have "the final sum and forecast," which is, that however pleasant at times life under the sun may be, everything that is to come, like everything that has been, will contain times of darkness. The whole period of life from childhood to old age is vanity (17:7-8).

Therefore special exhortations to childhood and youth follow (11:9-10). Rejoice if you will, but judgment follows.

These exhortations are accompanied by warnings against the evils and miseries of old age — the old age of a vainly spent life (12:1-8). And these lead to the epilogue of the book the mournful repetition of the monotonous refrain, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (12:8), and the great conclusion of man under the sun, "Fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13-14). And why? Because judgment is coming, and yet no salvation is seen!

### SUMMARY

Thus in abrupt endings and sudden returns to the one great question of the book, the preacher keeps showing man to himself. Debating between the vanities of life and the gloom of the grave; the contentment of ignorance and the worth of wisdom; the vexations of riches and the miseries of poverty; the orderly "times" of man and the "eternity" of God; the wrongs which are not righted and the dead that can no longer be oppressed; a distant God and a becoming worship; the wonder that women worth the

name are so scarce, and the reason that things are as they are; the pride and fragrant joys of family life and the event of death that comes to all; the lifelong possession of all manner of earthly good and the final lack of imposing obsequies and an honorable grave; the problem of the proper conduct of life and the mystery of the divine purpose and plan; between such, and manifold more earthly things like these, and others too high for mortal men, the preacher keeps moving on to the discouraging conclusion.  
— W. 5. Erdman, "Ecclesiastes"

That conclusion is the truth underlying all natural religions, the utterance of the universal conscience, namely, "Fear God; do right; thy judgment day is coming." It is some relief, amidst the wrongs and perplexities of the world, to look for a day of judgment to righten and clear up all, but, as has been said, there is no personal salvation in it.

Where man ends, however, God begins. The book of the natural man closes that the gospel of the Son of God may open.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE OUTLINE**

As some may find the preceding outline difficult to grasp, the following is added as suggested in part by the headings of the chapters in the Scofield Reference Bible:

- 1.** The Theme (1:1-3)
- 2.** The Theme Proved (1:4-3:22)
  - a. The transitoriness of all things (1:4-11)
  - b. The fruitlessness of power, wisdom or knowledge, to counteract evil (1:12-18)
  - c. The emptiness of pleasure (2:1-3)
  - d. The emptiness of wealth and great works (2:4-11)
  - e. The limitations of wisdom (2:12-26)
  - f. The weariness of life (3:1-22)
- 3.** The Theme Developed (4:1-10: 20).
  - a. In the light of the oppressions and iniquities of life (4:1-16)

- b. In the light of riches and poverty (5:1-26)
  - c. In the light of man's inevitable end (6:1-12)
  - d. In the light of incurable evil (7:1-29)
  - e. In the light of the mysteries of providence (8:1-17)
  - f. In the light of the world's wrong standards of values (9:1-18)
  - g. In the light of the anarchy of the world (10:1-20)
- 4.** The Best Thing Possible to Man Apart from God (11:1-12:12)
  - 5.** The Best Thing Possible to Man under the Law (12:13-14)