

Ecclesiastes – The Emptiness Of Life Without God

The curious English title of this short book is taken from the name given to it in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the **Septuagint**). “Ecclesiastes” comes from the same root as the New Testament word for “church” – a collection of people whose names are called out. The Hebrew title literally means a “gathering”. Perhaps the idea is we should come together to listen to the words of **the Preacher**, who introduces himself in the first verse. He says he is the son of David and King of Jerusalem, which unerringly links him with Solomon.

Ecclesiastes is the distilled experience of a man who had access to all that this world can offer. Solomon was incredibly rich, and able to indulge himself with lavish entertainments, great building projects, a huge harem, and sweet music. He tried them all, he says in chapter two. And yet he found no lasting satisfaction in his achievements

*“... whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no **pleasure**, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”* Ecclesiastes 2:10, 11

The book pinpoints a fundamental truth about human endeavour. Whatever we have, we want more. We work overtime for months to save up for a new car or a great holiday, and when we have bought it, we find there is a more powerful model available or a more fashionable resort to fly to, and we are off again, striving for the latest or the biggest or the one that we see our neighbours are able to afford.

Happiness is elusive. It does not come from possessions or climbing up the social

ladder. In fact, the poor man may be happier than the rich.

“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” Ecclesiastes 5:10, 12

And Solomon comments wryly that life is unpredictable. “*Time and chance happen to them all*”, he perceives. Often the millionaire dies young, and has to leave his wealth to others, who quickly squander it. Before we realize it, we are old, and life has slipped through our fingers. His last chapter concludes with a graphic portrayal of the weakness of old age, and the inevitability of death. “*Man is going to his eternal home*”, he observes, “*and the mourners go about the streets*” Ecclesiastes 12:5.

It all sounds very gloomy. And truly, life is empty, apart from God. Solomon emphasises the word “*vanity*” (emptiness) as the sum of human activity. Whatever we do “*under the sun*” ends in the grave. We need to lift up our eyes above the sun to the throne of God, and see that this life is intended as a testing ground, a preparation for a life to come where we can live in His presence. Here is Solomon’s last word on the subject -

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14

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