

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” —Ecclesiastes 1:1

“In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out, and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd.” —Ecclesiastes 12:9–11

Ecclesiastes is a difficult book. When Charles Bridges—the famous 19th-century evangelical expositor began his commentary on the book, he wrote, **“The Book of Ecclesiastes has exercised the Church of God in no common degree. Many learned men have not hesitated to number it among the most difficult Books in the Sacred Canon”** (*Ecclesiastes*, iii). That sentiment reflects the consensus shared by readers of Ecclesiastes throughout history. Old Testament scholar Richard Belcher has recently stated, “Ecclesiastes is one of the most difficult books of the Bible. It has been called ‘a baffling book,’ ‘alien among the other books of the Old Testament,’ ‘the most problematic of the whole Hebrew Bible,’ and ‘an embarrassment to the Old Testament’” (*Ecclesiastes*, 13). On as another scholar stated, Ecclesiastes is a book “universally acclaimed as one of the most enigmatic in the Hebrew Scriptures. Aside from agreement on this point, however, almost every facet of the book has been a matter of contention among scholars and commentators” (Garfinkel, “Qoheleth,” 51).

One of the main sources of such perplexity is **Ecclesiastes’ apparent contradictions**. To the superficial reader, especially to one poorly versed in the opening chapters of Genesis, the book of Ecclesiastes appears to take contradictory positions on reality—to vacillate between the worldviews of *optimism* and *pessimism*. At crucial moments in the book’s plot, the writer takes a *carpe diem* (“Seize the day!”) approach. For example, “There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God” (2:24; see also 5:18; 8:15). On the

other hand, the main section of the book begins and ends with an important refrain: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2; 12:8; and dozens of times in between). The writer at times affirms that creation is good, that fruitfulness in life is good, that enjoyment of earthly pleasures is good, and that life as a whole is good. But intermingled throughout these affirmations are long confessions that creation is cursed, that life is characterized by futility, that pleasures are to be denied, and that death is desirable. The writer shifts between affirming the good things observable in creation as described in Genesis 1–2 and affirming the reality of the curse as described in Genesis 3. These seemingly conflicting viewpoints create perplexity.

But this is exactly what Solomon wants to do. He does not intend Ecclesiastes to be a simple read, because life in a once good but now fallen world *can never be simple*. He does not aim to resolve all these complexities, because life outside the Garden of Eden is to be lived *by faith* (or in his terminology, *by fear*—Eccl 12:13), and not *by sight*. The book is so difficult to read and understand because we must ***slow down, ponder, remember our Creator, and fear Him***. To achieve this purpose, he writes with brutal honesty. It is this honesty about our world and about our living in it which is as needed in our day as it was in his.

“It is not the kind of book that we keep reading until we reach the end and get the answer, like a mystery. Instead, it is a book in which we keep struggling with the problems of life, and as we struggle, we learn to trust God with the questions even when we do *not* have all the answers.” —Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 202

The Title “Ecclesiastes”

Hebrew: קהלת – *Qoheleth*, “Preacher”

Septuagint: Ἐκκλησιαστής – *Ecclēsiastēs*, “member of the assembly”

One of the five books of the *wisdom literature* of the Old Testament: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

To begin our study of Ecclesiastes, we must first look to the identity and life of the one who penned it. This is where the book itself begins: **“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1).**

I. A Skillful Speaker

The writer designates himself as **“the Preacher”** (Eccl 1:1), a kind of nickname he uses to refer to himself throughout the book. The term in the Hebrew is קֹהֵלֶת, *Qoheleth*, which the writer uses a total of seven times—three times in the introduction (1:1, 2, 12), once in the middle (7:27), and three times in the conclusion (12:8, 9, 10)—to indicate that he is responsible for all the book’s contents.

The term is derived from the Hebrew verb קָהַל, *qāhal*, which means “to call together, assemble, or collect.” In other words, the writer is an *assembler*. But what does he assemble? On the one hand, the title could refer to him as an assembler of *things*, as in “one who gathers wisdom.” On the other hand, the title could refer to him as an *assembler of persons*, as in “one who gathers an assembly to address them.” It is probably this latter idea that is in view. The writer is **“someone who convenes and speaks in a meeting”** (Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 15). This certainly fits with what the writer states at the conclusion of his work: “In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly” (12:9–10).

Therefore, the contents of Ecclesiastes are to be understood as *a sermon or an address* delivered to an assembled people. The book is to be read as a formal, sober, sincere, and persuasive collection of arguments and illustrations woven together to persuade a particular audience. As he states at the end of his book, his words are to function as “goads” (12:11)—a long stick with a sharp, pointed end used by farmers to keep the oxen moving forward as they pulled the plow. In other words, **the writer has skillfully composed his writing in order to prick, poke, and provoke. He writes in order to move us along in a certain direction of thinking. The writer is preaching with a purpose.** He deals with issues his readers know exist but refuse to contemplate. These issues are so perplexing that it takes a teacher of extraordinary insight, skill, experience, and credibility to prod us to action. As such, the writer’s purpose can be summarized as follows:

to gather together the desponding people of God from the various expediences to which they have resorted, in consequence of the inexplicable difficulties and perplexities in the moral government of God, into the community of the Lord, by showing them the utter insufficiency of all human efforts to obtain real happiness, which cannot be secured by wisdom, pleasure, industry, wealth, etc., but consists in the calm enjoyment of life, in the resignation to the dealings of Providence, in the service of God, and in the belief in a future retribution, when all the mysteries in the present course of the world shall be solved. (Christian D. Ginsberg, *Coholeth*, 16–17)

As will be seen throughout our study, this preacher is exactly the man for the job.

II. A Royal Descendant

This preacher identifies himself further as **“the son of David”** (Eccl 1:1). He is one of a *prestigious lineage*. In the Old Testament, the term was always used to refer to a direct descendant of King David—most often, of *Solomon*. The designation immediately **recalls the Davidic Covenant as revealed in 2 Samuel 7**. Verses 12–16 capture Yahweh’s promise to David:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took *it* away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.

But the designation **also recalls the transgressions of David as described in 2 Samuel 11–24**. Solomon was the *second* son of David’s sin-stained union with Bathsheba. He was the perpetual reminder to David and all who

would come after that the king who was known as “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14) was also one who sinned grievously. But despite this stain, Solomon—this “son of David” by means of an ill-gotten marriage—would **also be nicknamed “Jedidiah,” which means “loved by Yahweh”**: “Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her; and she gave birth to a son, and he named him Solomon. Now the Lord loved him and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and he named him Jedidiah for the Lord’s sake” (2 Sam 12:24–25).

III. A Checkered Monarch

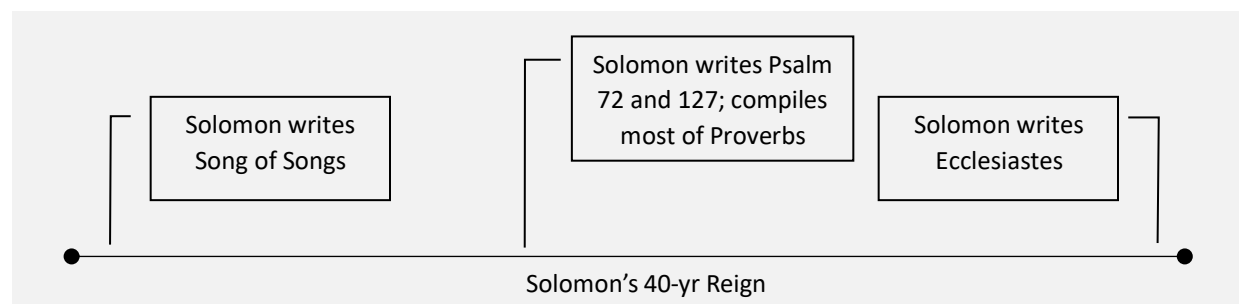
This “Preacher” also identifies himself as **“king in Jerusalem”** (Eccl 1:1). This description is further expanded later in the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes when the writer adds that he was **“king over Israel in Jerusalem”** (1:12). Only one man could fit this description, for only one “son of David” ruled over the united tribes of Israel from Jerusalem: *Solomon*. The descriptions of the rule and experiences of this king as given in Ecclesiastes only further support this identity.

Although even the best of Israel’s and Judah’s kings showed serious flaws, Solomon’s reign is one of the most shocking. It is covered in detail 1 Kings 1–11. Some of the key moments include:

- A chaotic ascent to the throne: 1 Kings 1
- A clear charge from David: 1 Kings 2:1–12
- A compromised beginning: 1 Kings 3:1–4
- A divine visitation: 1 Kings 3:5–15
- An extraordinary discernment: 1 Kings 3:16–28
- A worldwide fame: 1 Kings 4:20–34
- A magnificent temple: 1 Kings 6:1–38
- An exemplary prayer: 1 Kings 8:1–66
- An esteem from afar: 1 Kings 10:1–13
- A turn from God: 1 Kings 11:1–13
- A descent into adversity: 1 Kings 11:14–40
- A humble death: 1 Kings 11:41–43

Solomon’s early compromises (1 Kings 3:1–4) return in force in his mature years (11:1–13). Not even the unsurpassed wisdom he enjoyed prevented him from experiencing life at the bottom. Because of the confidence he placed in himself—in his unsurpassed wisdom, wealth, and fame—Solomon was made to drink the *vanity* of life down to the dregs. For his turn to self-sufficiency, God made him taste the emptiness of all he had achieved, and solidified Solomon’s place in history as that infamous figure who experienced both the greatest heights of blessing and the lowest lows of emptiness.

It is from this vantage point—as one who went from the top of human achievement to the bottom of folly’s ash-heap—that Solomon is able to testify so clearly about the source of meaning in life. No one could describe this search for significance with such skill, experience, or persuasion.



IV. A Beseeching Prophet

Although the main character of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is not the hero of his own story. As Charles Bridges states, “One thing is clear—he has not written a line in this book that tends to give one particle of palliation of his sin. The whole treatise has a sad character about it—a mournful commentary—mainly a book of confession” (*Ecclesiastes*, x).

Solomon consistently and passionately points to One greater than him, to One who alone holds the answers to the dilemmas of life in His hands. This One is the “Creator” who is to be remembered from one’s youth (Eccl 12:1). This One is the “Shepherd” who alone is the source of wisdom (12:11). This One is the “God” who is to be feared and obeyed without reservation (12:13). In fact, the entire book must be read in light of Solomon’s closing words—the words which provide the interpretive key for the entire book: **“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (12:13–14).**

“Fear,” for Solomon, is not to be understood as the adrenal response that spawns fight or flight. As will be seen throughout our study, “fear” for Solomon is to be understood as *reverent faith*—a trust that recognizes God’s transcendence and sovereignty over all, His pure justice and righteousness in the oversight of His creation, and His compassion for the lowly.

What is the purpose of Ecclesiastes? “It may be simply stated—to solve the problem, ‘which from the day when Adam fell has been the great enquiry among men’; and on which philosophy could throw no light—‘Who will show us any good?’ (Psalm 4:6). It is to bring out into clear view the chief good—the true happiness of man, *in what it does not consist*—not in the wisdom, pleasures, honors, and riches of the world—in *what it does consist*—the enjoyment and service of God. Beggars we are, with all the riches of the Indies, without Him. He is the substitute for everything. Nothing can be a substitute for Him.” —Charles Bridges (*Ecclesiastes*, xii)

Ultimately, Solomon points to One to come who would be greater: *Jesus Christ* (Matt 12:42).

For Discussion

1. Based on your past exposure to the book of Ecclesiastes, what is most perplexing to you about the book?
2. Some in church history have questioned whether Ecclesiastes should be included in the Bible. Based on the evidence provided by Ecclesiastes itself, how would you defend its inspiration (hint: compare Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 12:9–11).
3. As a part of the “inspired writings” (2 Tim 3:16), Ecclesiastes is profitable for Christians today, “for reproof, correction, training in righteousness.” As you look ahead, how do you anticipate that this study of Ecclesiastes will edify you most?
4. At what time in his life did Solomon most likely write Ecclesiastes?

For Further Study

1. Read 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Kings 1–11.
2. Read the “Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes” in a MacArthur Study Bible.
3. Read one chapter a day of Ecclesiastes.

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: September 20, 7pm – “Life outside the Garden” (Ecclesiastes 1:2–11)