

# MANual Lessons from Ecclesiastes

This week's lessons from The MANual, my NIV Bible for Men, continue with another of the books of Poetry: Ecclesiastes. My prior posts on the book of Job, the 150 Psalms (an Introduction, Books 1 & 2, and Books 3, 4 & 5), and last week's on The Proverbs, now lead us to lessons from King Solomon.

## About Ecclesiastes

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes comes from someone identified as "Qoheleth." It's not certain whether this is sort of a pseudonym or the title of an office but the related verb seems to suggest "convener" or "assembler." Some English translations use "Teacher" or "Preacher." Chapter 1 in the NIV begins with "The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (verse 1) which implied Solomon as the author. In fact, Ecclesiastes 12:9 specifically says that the Teacher was "wise" and "set in order many proverbs."

Ecclesiastes was probably written about 930 B.C. near the end of Solomon's life. His reign was beginning to fade and the division of Israel into two kingdoms would take place soon. Ecclesiastes is a reflection of his experiences that expresses his regret for his folly and wasted time due to carnality and idolatry (1 Kings 11). The word "vanity" is stated 38 times and "under the sun" is used 29 times. The word "wisdom" or "wise" appears 52 times, "labor" 36 times, and "evil" 22 times. Jewish tradition asserts Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes in his last years; Proverbs in his middle years; and the Song of Songs during his youthful years (you will find out why in the next post).

The central theme of the 12 chapters of Ecclesiastes is that life is meaningless apart from a relationship with the Lord.

Solomon realized that power, prestige, and pleasure really don't mean much. He discovered that only God can bring us eternal joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment in our lives.

Although some view Ecclesiastes as too negative and pessimistic in tone. However, there's more than the last chapter with Solomon's final conclusion: Fear God and obey His commands, for this is everyone's duty. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." (12:13-14)



## **Men of God: Solomon**

As we learned in the MANUAL Lessons from the Books of Kings, Solomon was the son of King David and Bathsheba. His known siblings include brothers, Absalom and Adonijah, and sister Tamar (we presume there were among many other siblings since Solomon had hundreds of wives and concubines). David granted Solomon the throne after he died to become the third king of Israel. Once he became king, Solomon asked God for great wisdom (2 Chronicles 1:7-12) and became the wisest man in all the world (1 Kings 4:29-34).

However, Solomon's personal life nullified all of his great wealth and accomplishments. He sealed many foreign agreements by marrying pagan women and allowed his wives and conquests to affect his loyalty to God. The king struggled with idolatry and materialism. He excessively taxed his people and drafted others as labor to build the Temple in Jerusalem and to fill his military forces to protect his kingdom.

Solomon eventually learns that wisdom is the application of

knowledge that is only effective when put into action. As an older man, Solomon looked back at the mistakes he had made in his life. The king drew practical wisdom and an eternal perspective from all his mistakes. He realized his vain pursuits were meaningless in life apart from God.

- What vain pursuits are you seeking today? Wealth, sexual pleasure, power, career status?
  - Which do you realize are meaningless in the grand scheme of life?
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## **A Season for Everything**

Chapters 1 & 2 deal with Solomon's personal experiences throughout his life. After stating in 1:2, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!", the Teacher says that he has seen everything under the sun and all is like "chasing the wind." (1:14). He writes in chapter 2 that pleasures are meaningless; wisdom and folly are meaningless, and toil is meaningless. Some translations use the word "Hevel" which is the Hebrew word meaning "vapor" or "smoke." Like trying to grasp for smoke, Solomon feels the chase leads to nothing but emptiness and futility.

But the Teacher makes a point in chapter 3 that there is a season for everything according to God's plan. He says there is a life cycle for everything and timing is important. The key is to discover, accept, and appreciate God's perfect timing. Your ability to find satisfaction largely depends on your attitude and sense of God's purpose in each season of life.

During the first few chapters, Solomon gives common explanations and observations stating that everyone who dies takes nothing with him. Possessions, in the end, are ultimately useless. Solomon reminds us that we are never

completely satisfied with earthly pleasures and pursuits. He writes that God does want us to enjoy life (3:11-14) but have a proper view of Who provides those blessings.



## Bound Together

Buried in Solomon's laments is a little nugget about friendship that also applies to marriage. Chapter 4, verses 9-12 state: "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lay down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves, a cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

The analogy of a strand of three cords can imply that three buddies can make the friendship stronger. But it also implies that we should include Christ in our relationships, especially our relationship with our spouse.

- Do you have one or two friends who will pick you up when you fall?
- What are you doing to include Christ in your marriage?

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Chapters 5-8 are Solomon's practical counsel for having a meaningful life. In chapter 5, he gives advice on approaching God. We must have the attitude of being open and ready to listen to God. Seeking wealth is futile since viewing what we have –whether it's much or little, must come with the right attitude. This message pairs well with chapter 6 as Solomon

tells us that satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God's blessings (6:1-6) while accepting the limitations of this life (6:7-12). Solomon pens a very important principle: every good gift that God gives is only truly enjoyed if He empowers it. Riches, wealth, and honor do not automatically bring happiness, contentment, satisfaction, or a lasting benefit. Rather, they can bring unhappiness, ingratitude, restlessness, and grief.

His wisdom for life in chapter 7 states that he has always tried his best but he realizes that there are limits to our human wisdom. Chapter 8 reminds us of our obedience to the King but that those who fear Him will be better off than the wicked.

In Chapters 9-12, Solomon writes his final conclusion that clears up the entire book: everyone will eventually die and all the deeds of man are useless without God. Verse 9:12 reminds us that no man knows the hour of his death so fear God and keep His commands.



## **God Buddy Focus**

Some believe there are two basic views for Ecclesiastes. On one hand, its author was a pessimistic, cynical, skeptical, hedonistic, or agnostic man of doubt who had wandered far from God. His problems revolve around that all of life is vanity, man is limited, and God was hidden.

On the other hand, many interpret Ecclesiastes positively. The writer is a man of faith, who realized that man simply cannot put the whole of life together without God. His solution: Fear God and keep His commandments, enjoy life, and use wisdom properly.

Of course, there's the need for a proper balance of "enjoying life" with living with "divine judgment." It helps us understand why Solomon suffered from the imbalance of trying to stay on the path of obedience.

In the end, Solomon came to grasp the importance of obedience. His personal experience, coupled with the insight from extraordinary wisdom, shows that even the wisest of men will live with futility regardless of their accumulations apart from God.

This week:

- Take stock of the blessings you have and how those came into your life?
- Also, assess your friendships and determine who is a "2:00 am friend" when you fall down and need help up.

The next post is lessons from the "spicy" book of the Bible: the Song of Songs.