

Life Within Limits

Ecclesiastes

Life Group Studies

Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes is a collection of teachings from an ancient Israelite wise man. While he speaks occasionally as though he were one of the kings of Israel (probably Solomon the wise) (1:12), that may be just a teaching technique, so his title of the Teacher is the best way to name him.

The Teacher gives us a contrast with some of the other wisdom books of the Bible (such as Proverbs) which present an orderly world where righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. By comparison, Ecclesiastes is a profoundly pessimistic book, where the Teacher questions the meaning and purpose of all human activity 'under the sun'. The book famously opens with his declaration that 'Everything is meaningless!'. That sounds like despair to us, but the word translated 'meaningless' is probably better understood as referring to 'anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent or contradictory'¹. In short, the world is a perplexing place and contains much that exceeds the grasp of us short-lived humans. All of our plans and endeavours come to nothing in the end and cannot be relied upon as enduring sources of meaning.

The theme of these studies is the way in which the Teacher outlines our limitations as creatures of this world, and how our mortality and the mysterious nature of our life should drive us to enjoy what we have while honouring God who is above all things. This teaching comes from a pre-Christian context and does not engage with the more positive Old Testament material about the covenant of God with his people and their hope in his action in history. So we have included questions to help us look forward from

¹ From the Anchor Bible Commentary by Choon-Leong Seow.

the Teacher, to Jesus and how his teaching might complement or challenge the perspective on life that we find in Ecclesiastes.

The studies cover some topics that people may find a bit solemn or depressing to consider, so we need to be sure that it is appropriate for our group at this time.

Summaries of the studies

- 1. Under the Sun:** the world is a perplexing place, and to live well we need to face the limitations that come with being created people, as well as our longings for 'more than this'.
- 2. Living the Dream:** The pursuit of wealth, pleasure and success takes up so much of our lives. What is ultimately worth pursuing, given that we know that these things do not last?
- 3. A Season for Everything:** Our lives bring a constant rhythm of positive and negative experiences. How do we reconcile ourselves to our lack of control over what happens to us?
- 4. The Problem with Money:** Along with its advantages, money brings us frustration and difficulty, as well as being the source of much injustice. We need to find a way of relating to money in the midst of a 'meaningless' life.
- 5. Let it Go:** Life is full of sadness and disappointment, and our attachment to the things we possess and desire makes it even more tragic. We need to confront the reality that even if we don't let go of things, we will lose them in the end.

- 6. The Limits of Wisdom:** Wisdom is good and helpful, but we can't know everything. It is not possible to live without sin or without making mistakes, and we need more than wisdom in order to be reconciled to the way the world is.
- 7. A Common Destiny:** Whether or not we acknowledge it, we live under the shadow of death, which brings all our hopes to an end. 'Under the sun' there is no way of evading this reality, which means that Christians need to look elsewhere for an abiding hope, while still enjoying the good gifts of God.
- 8. The Time of our Life.** We face various opportunities and challenges in the different stages of our lives. But the greatest challenge of life is to find hope as we face the end, giving our lives over to the God who made us and has our future in his hands.

Under the Sun – Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

1. Would you describe yourself as an optimist or a pessimist? Why?
2. What aspects of life or the world do you find most perplexing?
3. How does it make you feel to read the opening lines of this passage, 'Everything is meaningless'? Do you agree? If not, what do you think is meaningful?
4. The concept of 'toil' (see v3) is important in Ecclesiastes. Read Genesis 3:17-19. What is this saying about our experience of work?
5. In verses 3-11 the Teacher emphasises the circularity of life and the unchanging rhythms of the world. He argues that there is 'nothing new under the sun'. Can you think of anything in the world today that you would describe as genuinely 'new'?
6. Read Psalm 8. How is this vision of the creation similar and different to the one in this chapter of Ecclesiastes?
7. How many generations back does your family memory go? (v11) Have you ever thought about how long you will be remembered by your descendants?

8. What is the 'heavy burden God has laid on mankind'? (v13)
9. Do Christians have reason to question the extreme pessimism of the Teacher in this passage?
10. Read Mark 1:1-3. What is the significance of the Kingdom of God as announced by Jesus, in terms of whether we should be optimists or pessimists about the world?

Living the Dream? – Ecclesiastes 2:1-23

1. Do you like receiving catalogues in your mailbox? Which are your favourites?
2. What would you do if you won the lottery?
3. What is the 'great Australian dream'?
4. What did the Teacher do in order to 'test pleasure' as the source of meaning? (vv1-11). Why did it fail for him? Does this match your own experience of life?
5. What are his complaints about the outcome of his life of hard work? (vv17-23)
6. Why is the Teacher so pessimistic about the thought of leaving an inheritance?
7. Does your work feel like this to you at all? What makes work meaningful?
8. Read Mark 10:17-31. What approach does Jesus recommend to his disciples about the pursuit of wealth and pleasure? Is it different to that of the Teacher? If so, what makes the difference?

9. Do you need to re-evaluate your own goals and actions around the pursuit of wealth and success?

A Season for Everything – Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

1. How much do you feel that you are in control of what happens in your life?
2. Look at the pairs of 'times' in verses 2-8. Find ones that are striking to you or which you find difficult to understand, and discuss what they mean.
3. Can you identify with any of these 'times' in your own season of life at the moment?
4. What is the 'burden' that God has laid on the human race (v10)?
5. What does it mean that God has 'set eternity in the human heart' (v11)?
6. Why does the Teacher say that there is 'nothing better' than to be happy and do good while we live, eating, drinking, and finding satisfaction in our toil (v12-13)? Do you agree?
7. Do you feel that you are able to be content with a simple life?
8. Do you believe that God is in control of the events of your life, and the course of history? If yes, how does that affect how you live?
9. Read John 14:1-7. What is Jesus's message to his disciples as they are troubled about the future?

10. What can Christians do to face the various seasons of life with hope and peace?

The Problem with Money – Ecclesiastes 4:1-8 & 5:10-15

1. What types or examples of injustice in the world trouble you the most?
2. Why would the Teacher say that it is better to be dead or never even be born than to be alive (v1-3).?
3. In verse 4 he gives his analysis of the root cause of our discontent with life. Do you think this is true?
4. What tragedies or ironies of wealth does he describe in 4:5-8 and 5:1-10? Have you encountered any difficulties of this kind with money in your own experience?
5. What attitudes toward money or ways of using money can help us to overcome the problems that money can bring?
6. Read Luke 12:13-21 (The Parable of the Rich Fool). What does it mean to be 'rich towards God' (v21)?
7. Are there any practical steps that you can take to make your use of money less 'meaningless'?

Let it Go – Ecclesiastes 6:1-7:4

1. Would you say that our world is overall a happy or a sad place?
2. What events or situations in the world or in your life experience strike you as 'absurd'?
3. What is the problem described in 6:1-6? Have you ever known someone whose life ambitions were thwarted by an untimely death?
4. Do you think anyone really knows what is 'good in life' (v12)? What would your answer to that question be?
5. In 7:1-4 the Teacher makes a series of claims that reverse our usual view of things. Discuss why these claims might be true. For instance, why would he say that it is better to go to a 'house of mourning' (a funeral) than to a 'house of feasting' (a wedding)?
6. Why is wisdom associated with mourning, and fools with pleasure (5:4)?
7. Are there any particular life goals or possessions that you would struggle to let go of if your circumstances changed?
8. Read Matthew 16:24-27. What motivation does Jesus give for 'losing our life'? What does it mean to 'find our life' in following Jesus? Is there

anything that needs to change in your life to make this more of a reality for you?

The Limits of Wisdom – Ecclesiastes 7:11-25

1. Do you believe that 'everything happens for a reason'? Why/why not?
2. What is the benefit of wisdom according to the Teacher (v11-12)?
3. Does he mean in verses 13-14 that God actually makes bad things happen?
4. Have you ever seen the situation he describes in v15?
5. Why does he give the advice to 'avoid all extremes' in verses 16-18?
What would cause someone to have such a cautious approach to life?
6. Is it possible to avoid making any mistakes (v20)? What are the limits on our ability to know and do what is right?
7. Why should we not 'pay attention to every word people say' (v21)?
8. Is there a limit to what we can know about the world (v23-25)? If so, what does that mean for our ability to know 'why bad things happen to good people'?
9. Read Romans 3:19-26. How can Christians deal with our lack of righteousness and wisdom?

A Common Destiny – Ecclesiastes 9:1-11

1. Have you been to many funerals? What do people talk about in the eulogies?
2. Do we acknowledge the reality of death enough in our culture? What are some of the ways that death is portrayed or discussed in our media?
3. How often do you reflect on your own death?
4. Why does he emphasise that death is the 'common destiny' of all people regardless of their righteousness, wisdom, etc. (vv1-3)?
5. According to the Teacher, what advantage do the living have over the dead (v4-5)?
6. What is his advice about what we should do in the light of this truth (vv7-10)? Is this good advice?
7. Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. How does this cast the reality of death in a different light for Christians than the advice of Ecclesiastes does? What does it have to say about the benefit of righteousness, wisdom, toil, etc. in this life?

8. What can you do to have a more fruitful relationship to your own mortality? Are there some of the good things of life that you should be enjoying more fully while you have the chance?
9. How can you live out the hope of the resurrection in practical ways?

The Time of Your Life – Ecclesiastes 11:5-12:8

1. How would you describe the 'stage of life' that you are at? What are the significant features of this stage, and particular challenges?
2. What do you think is (or was, or will be) the 'best' period of your life?
3. What is the Teacher's advice about life in verses 6-8 of chapter 11?
4. Verses 9-10 seems to be almost an invitation to commit 'youthful indiscretions'. What is his attitude to enjoying our younger days?
5. 12:1-7 has often been seen as a series of metaphors about the process of aging and its effect on our bodies. Do you agree with that reading, and can you find any obvious examples of this?
6. Why are we urged to 'remember your Creator in the days of your youth' (12:1)?
7. We know that (one way or another) the whole human race will face the end of its life at some point. What are some of the attitudes that you have seen to the 'end of the world' and what we should do about it?
8. Read the epilogue of Ecclesiastes, 12:9-14. What is the Teacher's final word on life? How does this compare with the rest of his teaching? Is he ultimately an optimist or a pessimist?

9. Christians ultimately look forward to a restoration of the world and an eternity with God (Revelation 22:1-5). How should this affect the way that we live 'under the sun'?