

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

Ecclesiastes

What and where? Twenty-first book of the Old Testament, after Proverbs.

Who and when? Written by King Solomon, probably late in life (950 B. C.)

Ecclesiastes reminds us of Sinatra's song "I Did It My Way" and the Burger King motto "Have it your way." This Solomon did, with small satisfaction. His life's primary proverb is pessimistic: "All is vanity" — i. e., grasping for the wind (1:2; 12:8; and about 35 other uses). But the *v* word is not the final word. After his windy chases come up empty, Solomon adds what neither Frank nor fast food ever said: Remember God, fear God, obey God (12:1, 12).

The phrase ***under the sun*** (29 times) sets the tone of the book, much of which tells the futility and meaninglessness of living apart from God and His holy will. Pursuing several self-centered goals in a brilliant career, Solomon reports disappointing results and offers counsel regarding each attempt:

labor, accomplishment (1:3, 14; 2:17-24; 3:9, 13; 4:8, 9; 5:12, 18; 9:10)

wisdom (1:13-18; 2:12-16; 7:11—8:1; 9:13-18; 10:3-15)

pleasure, mirth (2:1-11; 7:2, 3; 8:15; 9:7-9)

riches (5:8-20; 6:1, 2; 7:14)

In this autobiographical hymn to existential pain, Solomon reflects on his efforts and experiences and on the lessons he's learned. The result, sometimes cynical, has instruction for daily life and work, reminds us of eternity and judgment to come, and ends with a ringing challenge to fear God and keep His commandments (3:11; 11:9; 12:13, 14).

What bothers Solomon? He often expresses disappointment and disillusionment over the disparity between what he expected from life and what he actually experienced and observed. For him, life seemed filled with inequity, injustice,

and indistinction between the results of righteousness and folly (2:14-16; 3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 6:8; 7:15; 8:11-14; 10:5-7).

Searching for justice, lasting joy, and fulfillment, the author labors under the shadow of death. His references are often indirect: the "thing" or "event" or "it" that happens to all. For him, the two sure things were death and judgment (2:14-16, 21; 3:18-21; 4:2; 5:15; 6:3-5, 12; 7:1; 8:8; 9:2-12; 11:8-10; 12:1-7, 14).

Ecclesiastes speaks to modern thinkers through its serious treatment of the themes of brokenness, meaninglessness,

and despair. This pessimism makes the book difficult for some Christians to digest. How can it be explained? Either as the inevitable experience of those who don't know God (in which case *under the sun* means "apart from God") or in terms of the believer's continuous disappointment with earthly things and longing for God's promise (then the phrase will mean "this side of eternity").

Summaries of Solomon's experience and wisdom concerning

- life and labor (2:24; 3:22; 5:18; 9:10)
- man's time and God's (3:1-15)
- value of companionship (4:9-12)
- punishment of evil doers (8:11-13)
- old age — a parable (12:1-7)
- the whole matter (12:13, 14)

Shades of Ben Franklin, Ken Starr, and Murphy's laws:

- Eat, drink, be merry (2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9).
- But perjury is serious (5:1-6).
- Expenses rise to meet income (5:11).
- You can't take it with you (5:15).
- Keep your temper (7:9).
- Remember the good ol' days (7:10).
- Maintain moderation (7:16, 17).
- Don't believe all you hear (7:21).
- What goes around, comes around (7:21, 22).
- Life isn't always fair (8:14; 9:11).
- A bird in the hand . . . (9:4).
- Sharpen your ax (10:10).
- Silence is golden (10:11-15).
- A stitch in time . . . (10:18).
- A little birdie told me (10:20).
- He who hesitates . . . (11:1-6).
- Wherever you go, there you are (11:3).

Ecclesiastes in a sentence: A lifetime of hard work, wisdom, and earthly achievement is vain and does not bring lasting fulfillment, so young and old alike must prepare for death and judgment by remembering God and obeying Him.