

An introduction to Ecclesiastes

A first look at Ecclesiastes 3

1 read it

read through the passage (on the next page of this handout) and mark with …

! something unusual, odd or surprising

? something I want to ask questions about (eg ‘what does this mean?’!)

\* something that seems to be particularly important

… etc

use underlinings, arrows, speech bubbles etc to be an ‘active reader’

2 chunk it

divide the passage into sections and give a title to each section

Nigel Styles

Ecclesiastes 3 *English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by* [*Crossway Bibles*](http://www.gnpcb.org/)

**1**For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: **2**a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; **3**a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; **4**a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; **5**a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; **6**a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; **7**a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; **8**a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. **9**What gain has the worker from his toil? **10**I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. **11**He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. **12**I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; **13**also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil - this is God's gift to man. **14**I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. **15**That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away. **16**Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. **17**I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. **18**I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. **19**For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. **20**All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. **21**Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? **22**So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

What is ‘Wisdom’?

*A common call to a wise life*

Proverbs / Job / Ecclesiastes

… and other places (eg Amos 1:3; 1 Sam 24:13; Judges 14:14 etc).

Perhaps ‘a philosophy of life the writers call on the readers to adopt’ = ‘the wise life’.

Not just in Israel, but in every culture (cf 1 Kings 4:29-32, 34; Acts 7:22 etc).

*Bible wisdom begins and ends with the fear of the Lord*

Proverbs 1:7; 2:5-6

The fool is the person who says there is no God (Ps 14:1; 53:1).

The wise person trusts the God of the Bible and lives on the basis of God’s revelation.

*Bible wisdom is ‘how the Bible’s principles work out in experience’*

Wisdom takes the covenant of God and applies it to individual experience

‘Godly wisdom is not so much a word spoken to the human heart from outside, as a character formed in the believer by the Spirit of God working by the Word of God at the deepest level of the human heart’

(Christopher Ash Out of the storm [IVP, 2004] p 88)

An example of ‘Wisdom’ literature: Psalm 73

1 an established truth

2 challenged by experience (‘but as for me …’)

3-12 what the wicked are like: arrogant, and yet prosperous

13-14 compared to what it’s been like for me

15-22 the turning point

15-16 there’s more to say than just my experience in 4-14

17-20 there’s also the fact that God will judge

21-22 so I was daft to say 4-14

23-26 there is another truth to be told

27-28 … and I will tell it

So … how does ‘Wisdom’ work?

Stage 1 this is the world as we know it

Stage 2 add God’s character to that

Result a world with structure, meaning and moral order

God calls us to walk by the truths of Stage 2 not just by our experience at Stage 1

… to walk by faith and not just by sight

(cf 2 Corinthians 5:7 in the face of our groaning as our outer nature is wasting way)

A second look at Ecclesiastes 3

* what is life like in this world, according to Ecclesiastes 3? *(stage one)*
* how is God is referred to in Ecclesiastes 3? *(stage two)*

and how does this character of the unseen God affect our view of the world?

Ecclesiastes 1

* we come and we go (3-7)
* we do nothing new (8-10)
* we’re not remembered (11)

Reading Ecclesiastes with New Testament hindsight

Ecclesiastes will ‘teach us so that encouraged by the Scriptures we might have hope’ (Romans 15:4)

How?

*1 Ecclesiastes longs for Jesus*

* all ‘wisdom’ is found in Jesus

1 Corinthians 1:24

Colossians 2:3

* to be ‘wise’ is to be a Christian

1 Corinthians 1:30

James 3:13-18

*2 Ecclesiastes longs for heaven*

consider the ‘two views’ on p6 of this handout

Two views of Ecclesiastes

In Gospel and Wisdom, Goldsworthy describes two alternative views of the book of Ecclesiastes.

*View One*

appeals more than most to evangelicals. It reads the book ‘as if the author went through a period of searching for the truth by means of various worldly ideas and pursuits, or that he undertook a more objective investigation of these godly approaches in order to test their validity. Either way the result is the same. The secular approaches are shown to be futile and only the fear of God is left as a viable alternative. On this view, the contest in the book is between orthodoxy and worldliness, between faith in God and practical atheism.’ So the book turns out to be an apologetic: it argues for a particular view of reality (ie Jewish monotheism) in order to establish its superiority over all others. Certainly if it actually describes a person’s testimony (hypothetical or real), the lack of form and the disarming honesty of the book would be explained.

A variation on this view reads it as Solomon’s personal story after his apostasy. At this stage in his life he looks back on his life as vanity and without meaning. The author of the book presents Solomon’s view only to reject it in favour of the fear of the Lord and the joy of serving him. So the book’s intention is to oppose Solomon’s potential to mislead others after his apostasy.

What is obviously attractive about this view is that it makes it far easier to cope with the bleakness of the book’s worldview: this is non-Christian, not Christian, thinking. The book now fits neatly within our framework, and our high view of Scripture is not challenged by a rogue book that doesn’t easily fit within the canon.

But Goldsworthy says of this view that it assumes the author ‘is openly critical of some other approach to life. But to what does he really object? Is it to secularism, to Greek philosophical influences, to a scepticism that borders on atheism? If we can answer this we shall be in better position to understand the book as a whole.’

*View Two*

‘From the New Testament perspective it is true to say that we can know with certainty that confusion and futility are banished by Christ. But until he comes again and all things are renewed, faith in the grace of God must sustain us through many incomprehensible tensions in our experience. The peculiar tension for the Christian is that we know our final goal with its resolution of all ills, but we do not know what tomorrow brings.’ Indeed, we know the certainty of the far perspective, but we do not know our short term future.

Perhaps Larry Crabb in the Introduction to his book, Inside Out, best describes this. He’s not writing about Ecclesiastes *per se*, but about the way that modern versions of Christianity promise to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world. ‘We are told, sometimes explicitly but more often by example, that it’s simply not necessary to feel the impact of family tensions, frightening possibilities, or discouraging news. An inexpressible joy is now available which, rather than *supporting* us through hard times, can actually *eliminate* pressure, worry and pain from our experience. Life may have its rough spots, but the reality of Christ’s presence and blessing can so thrill our soul that pain is virtually unfelt. It simply isn’t necessary to wrestle with internal struggle or disorder. Just trust, surrender, persevere, obey.

‘The effect of such teaching is to blunt the painful reality of what it’s like to live as part of an imperfect, and sometimes evil community. We learn to pretend that we feel now what we cannot feel until Heaven.

‘But not all of us are good at playing the game. Those whose integrity makes such pretence difficult sometimes worry over their apparent lack of faith. “Why don’t I feel as happy and together as others? Something must be wrong with my spiritual life.” To make matters worse, these people of integrity often appear less mature and their lives less inviting than folks more skilled at denial. And churches tend to reward their members who more convincingly create the illusion of intactness by parading them as examples of what every Christian should be.

‘Beneath the surface of everyone’s life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabelled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear. And for good reason. We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have … The promise of one day being with Jesus in a perfect world is the Christian’s only hope for complete relief. Until then we either groan, or pretend we don’t.’

That last sentence is a very strong statement, but it fits well with Ecclesiastes viewed in this second way: the book simply takes the effect of the Fall seriously. Every part of human life is affected, whether the individual is a person of great faith or of none. This worldview is a direct assault on that easy, triumphalistic, almost mechanistic view of the world where everything always works out OK: there is nowhere ‘under the sun’ where things are now as they should be, and will be. Goldsworthy concludes: ‘slick views on how to get guidance and to know God’s will in daily things must go under the hammer of the crisis of wisdom in Job and Ecclesiastes. This sceptical sage has an important lesson for us as he bids us take life a day at a time and enjoy it with its toil as a gift from God. He who truly fears God will stand in awe of the mystery of his ways among men.’

Ecclesiastes within the rest of the Bible

*Genesis 1-3*

In his article, The law of sin and death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-3, David Clemens suggests that Ecclesiastes is ‘best understood as an arresting but thoroughly orthodox exposition of Genesis 1-3’. He examines various themes such as ‘death’, ‘toil’, ‘knowledge of good and evil’ and ‘sin’ and points out the extremely close similarity of ideas and vocabulary in the two texts. For example, compare Genesis 3:19 (and also Gen 2:7, 17; 3:3f, 27) with Ecclesiastes 1:4, 6; 3:20 (especially); 12:5b, 7, particularly noting the common word-groups ‘wind-blowing-going-returning’ and ‘dust-earth’ as death is talked about.

The article concludes by noting Ecclesiastes’ conclusion ‘that there is no “advantage, profit” in human activities under the sun: nothing is “left over” by death. There is a small residue of “good” to which the author reverts throughout the course of the book as he surveys the ruins of our fallen condition. It is a deceptively unpretentious residue: to eat and to drink; to find good and joy in life, in activity and labour, and in marriage; to receive these things as a gift and allotment of God.

‘These are precisely the themes that predominate in Genesis 1-2: the goodness of God’s creation (14 times; note 1:31; 2:9, 18); life (14 times, especially 2:7, 9); food (7 times; note 1:29; 2:9, 16) and woman (2:18-25; cf 4:9-12) as God’s gifts; the allocation of work (2:5, 15; 3:23; cf 1:26, 28). Each of these elements of creation has been soured by the Fall, as is reflected in Ecclesiastes. The proliferation of what is good has been checked by the spread of evil; good is expressed in comparative or negative rather than absolute terms. Food is consumed in darkness, and frustration, and folly. Joy and toil is subject to frustration (1:14; 2:1, 2; 7:4). Life is a source of despair (eg 2:17; 4:2). Woman is more bitter than death (7:26). God gives man toil and limitations to humble him (eg 1:13; 2:26b; 3:10, 11; 6:2). Thus, it is not possible to return to Eden (cf 2:4-11).

‘However, it is possible to return to the commands given in Eden, and this is the intent of 2:24-26 and its parallels: God has already approved our eating and work (9:7), because they were prescribed in Eden; our only sure knowledge derives, not from independent evaluation of our good and evil, but from the revealed will of God. More fundamentally, it is possible to return to the God who created Eden – to remember him after forgetfulness (12:1), and to fear him after disobedience (5:6; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13).’

*Romans 8:18-25*

Much of Paul’s vocabulary here could have come straight from Ecclesiastes (eg ‘subjected to frustration’, ‘bondage to decay’, ‘groaning as in the pains of childbirth’, ‘wait for … the redemption of our bodies’). But more significant is his view of ‘present time’.

Paul compares creation’s fall and the Christian’s conversion (- a very daring comparison!): just as the creation was subjected in hope at the fall (Gen 3:17-18, 15b), so we are saved in hope. Hope is important. Hope is the combination of confidence and waiting-for-the-unseen. This combination of confidence and waiting is illustrated by the picture of creation groaning in travail. Just as birth pangs are evidence that a birth is coming but make the waiting painful, so the Spirit which, as ‘first-fruits’, is our guarantee of future glory, causes us to groan now as we wait (22, 23, 25 cf 7:24).

This view of time from fall to liberation as a time of groaning is just the view of ‘life under the sun’ that is described in Ecclesiastes: every part of creation is not now as it should be, and is all awaiting that last time.

*Romans 3:12b*

This is the one NT quotation from (or, at very least, allusion to) the book of Ecclesiastes. Paul quotes Ecclesiastes 7:20 in a long list of OT quotations as he reaches the climax of describing the problem that the gospel must solve. His point is that the OT agrees that everyone-without-exception will have no defence to excuse them from God’s Last Day condemnation. There is not a righteous man on earth.

So the one NT reference to control our reading of Ecclesiastes gives us this key to unlock the book: all of creation is under the wrath of God.

*Isaiah 65: 17ff*

In this passage, the prophet gives us a wonderful glimpse of the ‘new heavens and new earth’ that God will create. Just as Revelation 21:4 tells us what will not be in heaven, so here in Isaiah 65, verses 20-24 in particular list many of the things that feature in the world of Ecclesiastes and tells us that they will be ‘no more’ in this glorious future. For example, compare Isaiah 65:20 with Ecclesiastes 6:1-6, or Isaiah 65:21-22b with Ecclesiastes 2:21 and 6:2.

**Conclusion:** These four links demonstrate that the theme of Ecclesiastes is that everything ‘under the sun’ is outside the Garden. Although ‘fallen’ is not a linguistically-accurate ‘translation’ of ‘meaningless’, theologically it may be that this is the idea. Everything is fallen. Everything is tainted by the fall. Everything is subjected to frustration. Everything is under the wrath of God. But the Bible looks forward to the new heaven and new earth as a place where every trace of that ‘law of sin and death’ is removed.

Is there a structure in *Ecclesiastes?*

*Ecclesiastes* is a difficult book to organise. Although it might be described as a literary essay on a single theme, its structure is not immediately obvious.

In Five Festal Garments (p 87), Barry Webb offers the following table (adapted from an article by S. de Jong published in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 54:107-116) that shows that the bulk of the book alternates between ‘observation’ (‘this is what I have seen or what I know’) and ‘instruction’ (‘this is a possible and sensible course of action in response’).

1:1 introduction

1:2 motto

1:3-4:16 observation

5:1-9 instruction

5:10-6:9 observation

6:10-7:22 instruction

7:23-29 observation

8:1-8 instruction

8:9-9:12 observation

9:13-12:7 instruction

12:8 motto

12:9-14 conclusion

Is there a narrator in *Ecclesiastes?*

Some commentators have put great emphasis on the fact that *Ecclesiastes* begins (1:1-11) and ends (12:8-14) with words written by an unknown Narrator. He introduces us to ‘the Preacher’ (1:1) and we are told what the Preacher says in 1:2-11 before the Preacher himself starts to tell his own story in the first person (‘I, the Preacher, have been king …’) from 1:12 onwards. The book ends in the same way as the unnamed Narrator steps forward again with his/her commentary on all that has been recorded: from 12:9 to the end, the Narrator speaks about the value of the things the Preacher has written and draws a conclusion. There is also one other place in the middle of the book (7:27) where the Preacher is also referred to in the third person, perhaps as a reminder at half-time that the entire book is really in quotations marks.

What this means is that the bulk of the book (certainly from 1:12 to 12:8) is presented as ‘I know this bloke who says …’. Some people put great store on this fact that the writer of *Ecclesiastes* is not the Preacher, and for some (eg Tremper Longman’s commentary§) this is a very significant factor in their understanding of the book.

For example, the fact that the book has a ‘Frame Narrative’ like this could help us to account for its inclusion in the Bible. The Bible writer is simply quoting what someone else thinks. And perhaps that other person is indeed a non-believer, which is why his world-view is so dark.

But does this really help? We are still left with virtually the same question. Instead of asking ‘what does the Preacher think of what he says?’ we are now wondering ‘what does the Narrator think of what the Preacher says?‘ Either way, we must decide whether what is in *Ecclesiastes* is being endorsed or critiqued by the person who wrote it.

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**1**Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; **2**before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, **3**in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, **4**and the doors on the street are shut - when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low - **5**they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets - **6**before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, **7**and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. **8**Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity. **9**Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. **10**The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. **11**The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. **12**My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. **13**The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. **14**For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.