Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes espouses the simple life of childlike faith while honestly facing the quandaries of existence in this fallen world. The child of God can enjoy (not overanalyze or shun) life’s little pleasures as gifts of a gracious God. At the same time he can roll with the punches, looking realistically at the problems and hardships of earthly life and laughing in their faces. Unlike fair-weather religion, which rejoices in good times and crumbles in the bad, the faith inspired by Ecclesiastes is resilient. Even death itself cannot shake a faith that is founded, not upon human musings and intuition, but solely upon the grace, power, and wisdom of God Almighty. He will bring everything into judgment, so fear him and trust in him (12:13–14).

*James Bollhagen, Ecclesiastes (ed. Dean O. Wenthe; Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), xv.*

What kind of book is Ecclesiastes?

Solomon is known to have delivered a theological address with a lengthy prayer at the consecration of the temple (1 Kings 8 || 2 Chr 5:2–7:10). It is possible that Ecclesiastes could have been prepared for another such public worship occasion. However, within the book the only unmistakable reference to a worship setting is the instruction regarding the house of God in Eccl 4:17–5:1 (ET 5:1–2). Since there is little overt churchly or liturgical material in the book, another royal podium of some sort may be in view. Luther envisions that

 these words were spoken by Solomon in some assembly of his retinue, perhaps after dinner … to some great and prominent men who were present. He spoke this way after he had thought long and hard to himself about the condition and the vanity of human affairs.… This is, then, a public sermon which they heard from Solomon.

In ancient Israel, any royal address by a faithful king could be expected to be theological in nature. There was no separation between “church” and “state” in the modern sense, nor was the government to be secular. The king bore the responsibility to govern according to the Word of God and to ensure that the divine worship services that God had provided for the salvation of his people were conducted by the priests and the assembly of Israel.

*James Bollhagen, Ecclesiastes (ed. Dean O. Wenthe; Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 1–2.*

Blessings for Readers

Whereas much of Scripture describes life from the viewpoint of heaven, Solomon provides a very earthy, human perspective in Ecclesiastes (“under the sun”). The Book connects powerfully with our frustrations and disappointments as well as our fears about life now and eternally. Despite all the sad points of wisdom and experiences, Solomon ends on a clear word of hope. In this way, the Book illustrates the unconquerable good news of God’s care and mercy. It affirms the meaningfulness of life’s basics: the pleasure of youth and good health, honest work, the love of a faithful spouse, and the hope of eternal life with God.

*Edward A. Engelbrecht, The Lutheran Study Bible (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 1049.*

Teaching

Life not centered on God is purposeless and meaningless. Without him, nothing else can satisfy (2:25). With him, all of life and his other good gifts are to be gratefully received (see Jas 1:17) and used and enjoyed to the full (2:26; 11:8). The book presents the philosophical and theological reflections of a typical person (12:1–7), most of whose life was meaningless because he had not himself relied on God.

*Robert G. Hoeber, Concordia Self-Study Bible (electronic ed.; St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1997), Ec.*

 Ecclesiastes Is the Gospel’s Call to Saving Faith

Since Christ, the Son of God, is wisdom, Ecclesiastes is shown to be, above anything else, a call to faith. When all is said and done, when everything has been heard and all the scrolls have been written, the fear of God is the beginning and end of all wisdom (Eccl 12:12–13; also Ps 111:10; Job 28:28; Prov 1:7; 9:10). The child of God is called not to evaluate things by what his eyes see nor judge by what he hears under the sun. Ecclesiastes shows clearly enough where that approach leads. Instead, the child of God believes. He trusts. He falls flat on his face and prostrates himself before his only hope: the grace and mercy of his God. Only there is the peace that passes all understanding.

Unbelievers in search of wisdom pose the question What is it? Believers, on the other hand, pursue wisdom knowing that Jesus is the answer to the question Who is he? Wisdom is no longer a talent; it is a Person. Wisdom is no longer a human program or agenda; it is God’s Good News in the long-promised Savior, to be received with a grateful heart. Wisdom is no longer intellectual insight or the rational power of deduction; it is holding every human thought captive in the presence of Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

 The Gospel of Christ Is Our Only Hope

Only Christ could enter this fallen world, partake of its suffering, and redeem us from it all, both now and forever. The realization that Qoheleth’s words are actually God’s own words is staggering. This means that God himself is describing the human plight so vividly and accurately. He speaks from the perspective of one who has been here and personally lived through it all. As in Psalm 22 (and other psalms of lament), the Savior can present an inside look at the world and its troubles because he has suffered them all—for us. Thus, without allegorizing individual verses, Ecclesiastes turns out to be one gigantic messianic prophecy of Christ’s suffering and dying in our stead and rising as victorious Lord over all.

 Life in a Fallen World

No other biblical book presents the universal human predicament as graphically as Ecclesiastes. Life just is not fair (2:12–17; 3:16–22; 8:14–15). However, in the context of all Scripture, the negative views in the book should not be construed as mere pessimism, but as a confession of the Gospel as the only source of optimism (rightly understood).

 A Proper View of Material Things

Ecclesiastes does not encourage asceticism or a monastic shunning of the world, but neither does it condone materialism, which is a form of idolatry (Col 3:5; cf. 1 Tim 6:10). Earthly goods are temporary and passing, yet they are blessings from the eternally loving God. They should not be assigned either more or less attention than they deserve (1 Tim 6:6–8). Material blessings are indeed gifts of God and are his appointed means of sustaining earthly life. The child of God gives thanks for every one of those blessings, knowing that they are entirely undeserved. And as the child of God gives thanks, he endeavors to be a good steward of the resources entrusted to him for the benefit of others. They are tools to be used in the service of God, the family, the church, and the neighbor. God also grants his children the privilege of enjoying whatever he has given them. The believer recognizes the source and purpose of goods by simply enjoying them as a totally dependent child (5:17–19 [ET 5:18–20]; 9:7).

Enjoyment is one concrete way of remembering one’s place before God Almighty. But at the same time, material gifts are clearly penultimate to the Giver of life himself, and they are secondary to the eternal life won through the cross of his Son. God’s everlasting blessings are stored up in heaven with Christ and will be showered abundantly upon all believers when they inherit eternal life in the new heavens and new earth (Mt 6:19–21; 19:21; Lk 12:33–34; 1 Pet 1:4).

*James Bollhagen, Ecclesiastes (ed. Dean O. Wenthe; Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 22–27.*