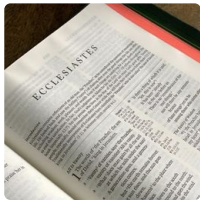


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Ecclesiastes Introduction



Ecclesiastes - Steve Gregg

In this introduction to Ecclesiastes, Steve Gregg explores the origins and meaning of the book. While some believe that King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, there are differing opinions on the book's authorship. Nevertheless, the book is generally considered a deeply contemplative work that explores the emptiness and futility of worldly pursuits. Despite its pessimistic tone, Ecclesiastes is a meaningful and thought-provoking book that continues to inspire readers today.

Transcript

The book of Ecclesiastes is a very strange book. It's strange in that not everything about it is trustworthy, and yet it's in our Bible. Its inclusion in the Bible perhaps has been questioned because of some of the peculiar aspects of it.

It's very clear, as you read it, that there are things that are said that do not appear to be true, and yet it's not as if somebody made a mistake in putting it in the Bible, because anyone could see that it says things that do not appear to be true, and so we have to ask ourselves, why did God give us a book, if that is what he has done here, through Solomon, like the book of Ecclesiastes? Let's start with just the meaning of the title. It's a strange word. It sounds like it's very closely related to the word ecclesia, which is the Greek word for church, or more properly, for assembly or gathering, and it is, actually.

The word ecclesiastes is a Greek word that means one who gathers people, one who gathers people to address them, like a preacher. It is Greek, and it is from the Septuagint, but the Hebrew title of the book was Kohilith, and so you'll sometimes find the word the preacher, as in verse 1 of chapter 1, the words of the preacher. In the Hebrew, that's the words of Kohilith, and again, Kohilith comes from the Hebrew word for gathering, and it means a person who gathers people together in order to address them, so it would be like a preacher, or somebody who's at least a public speaker.

And who this speaker is, who this preacher is, it seems obvious, as you read it, that it's supposed to be Solomon, but is it Solomon? That's the question. Now, I personally believe that it is. I believe that Solomon wrote this, but there have been many scholars

who have questioned this.

Part of their questioning has been based upon the language forms and phraseology and specific vocabulary that they say belongs to a later period in Israel's history. They say there's some phrases that really didn't come into use until after the Babylonian exile. They say that there are some Aramaicisms, which are from the Aramaic language that they believe would not have really entered into the Hebrew language until a later time.

However, conservative scholars have answered all of these objections and shown that nothing really conclusively can be determined from these things about the date. Though some have tried to suggest that Solomon couldn't have written it because it belongs to a later period, there really is nothing in the language that competent scholars have failed to show could, in fact, be written by Solomon in his own time. One of the things that's peculiar about it is the use of the word the preacher.

And whether the preacher is the writer or not. Now, one might just assume that it is, and maybe it would be correct. The preacher obviously is written as if it is Solomon.

But one theory is that Solomon wasn't the writer, but a later writer was writing more of a lesser creative work and attributing it to Solomon or basing a moral lesson on the known history of Solomon and sort of putting words into his mouth as if this was his testimony when it really was not. The case for this is seen in the fact that the preacher is sometimes mentioned in the, well, is mentioned in the third person. Whereas the author often, there's also the I, I, I, the first person throughout the book.

So some say there's two persons in view here. One is the writer and the other is the preacher about whom he is writing. But it's very difficult for scholars to try to sort this out because most of it is written in the first person.

As if the writer is the person that is also the subject. The reason for thinking that the preacher may be somebody else comes from one of the occurrences of that term in chapter 7 in verse 27. Where he says, here is what I have found, says the preacher.

Now, here's what I have found is first person. Says the preacher is third person as if somebody else is quoting him. And, you know, some scholars have said, well, you know, while a person in fact might write about himself in the third person as Moses did in the Pentateuch or as Joshua probably did if he's the author of Joshua.

It's not uncommon, Matthew wrote about himself in the third person in the book of Matthew. It's not that uncommon for persons to write about themselves in the third person and call themselves the preacher. But he said it's a strange thing for him to use the third person in the same sentence where he uses the first person as in chapter 7 verse 27.

As if somebody else is the writer and he's quoting the preacher. This may be not

something we can ultimately solve. But the suggestion is that perhaps Solomon's writings are represented in the first person and some other author has put them together in the present form and quotes Solomon and refers to him as Koheleth or as the one who is preaching.

It's like the book is a sermon. I don't suppose it's too important for us to know whether the preacher is writing about himself or whether somebody else is writing about the preacher and quoting him. The point would be that almost everything in the book would still be a quotation from what Solomon wrote.

The area where it might make a difference would be at the very end of the book. Chapter 12 verse 9 says, And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge. Now if Solomon is writing about himself, he's talking in the past tense.

It says the preacher was wise. Almost like he's no longer around. He was a wise man of the past.

And it would then, of course, raise questions about the conclusion of the matter. Verse 13, let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Is this Solomon's conclusion or is this the author's conclusion if the author is writing about Solomon? In other words, if this is a collection of Solomon's sayings arranged in order to tell a story about Solomon but written by somebody else and put together by somebody else and referring to Solomon as Kohelet or as the preacher.

These last words, are these the conclusion that the author came up with upon reflecting about Solomon's experience? Or is this Solomon's own words? I've always taken it to be Solomon's own words and helpfully so because I would like to believe that Solomon came back to the Lord at the end of his life and I think that it's best to understand that these are Solomon's own words at the very end. In verse 13-14, let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man.

If these are Solomon's own words, then we can say that at the time he wrote this, he had returned to the Lord. Which is what I'd like to believe. If this is some author later on writing these things and saying, okay, now that we've considered all these things Solomon went through and all these things Solomon said and so forth, now let us, the readers of a later date, think of what the conclusion is we can reach from this.

And then we would have the author, a later individual's conclusion at the end of the book, rather than Solomon's himself. And that would leave us still wondering whether Solomon ever came to his senses again. Now when I say came to his senses again, of course I'm referring to the fact that we know from 1 Kings chapter 11 that Solomon departed from the Lord.

And we see that, of course we've been studying 1 Kings, so it's actually timely for us to come to Ecclesiastes at this particular time. But in 1 Kings chapter 11, it says in the beginning, King Solomon loved many foreign women as well as the daughter of Pharaoh. Women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites, from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you, for surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.

Solomon clung to these in love, and he had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines, and his wives turned away his heart. And it goes on to tell how that he accommodated the religions of his wives from foreign countries, and the gods of those countries, and he became something of an idolater himself, and therefore he became bad. And later on in the chapter, it tells how that God therefore sent a prophet to Jeroboam, the foreman on Solomon's work crew, and said that God was going to take the kingdom from Solomon and give it to Jeroboam.

And when Solomon learned of this, Solomon tried to kill Jeroboam. So we find that Solomon was not a good man in the end of his life after he turned from the Lord. And that's really how the history of Solomon ends in the historical narratives of the Old Testament.

In 1 Kings we read nothing about Solomon coming back to the Lord. We read the end of his reign, he seems to have fallen away. And he has not come back.

However, the writer of this book certainly is a believer in the Lord, and in obeying the Lord, and keeping his commandments. And therefore, if Solomon is the one whose words are concluding this book, then we can conclude that Solomon himself learned his lesson. That he had a time of wandering away from God, and then he came back to God in his old age.

We can tell it was written in his old age by the way he speaks about things, especially at the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12. We can see that the writer has reached old age, and is writing with instructions or lessons for younger men, who have not reached his advanced age. In chapter 11, verse 9, it says, Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.

Walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes, but know that for all these God will judge you, or bring you into judgment. And then, of course, in chapter 12, verse 1, Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth. Before the difficult days come and the years draw near, when you say, I have no pleasure in them.

And then he gives this lengthy, very poetic description of old age. And so he's basically an older man writing to younger men. And I am of the opinion that the book is written by Solomon.

Although if a later editor added these third person references to the preacher, that wouldn't hurt. So long as the writer was minimally intrusive into the narrative. That is, that Solomon is the author of all the words in the book.

Essentially, with the exception of the references to him as the preacher, which somebody may have put together later on. It is, of course, possible that Solomon wrote every part of the book, but did not put it together in its present form. And that somebody having access to Solomon's written material would have put it together in its present form and referred to him in the third person as the preacher.

I'm not going to worry too much about that. Scholars have worried a great deal about it and tried to figure out. And frankly, there's so many different opinions and no one can really decide.

I'm going to go with the traditional view. The traditional view of the Jews is that Solomon is the writer of Ecclesiastes. And that this was held by Christians traditionally, too.

It's only been in recent, the last century or two, that Christian scholars, including conservative Christian scholars, have raised questions as to whether Solomon did write the book. I don't think there's sufficient reasons to doubt it. I believe that to attribute it to Solomon still has as much evidence as any other theory.

And we can certainly see the internal evidence is that way. Unless the writer is, you know, taking on a role other than himself and pretending to be Solomon, then the author must be Solomon because everything the author says about himself can only really apply to Solomon. Not as individual statements, but taken collectively.

For example, in chapter 1, verse 1, it says, The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Well, of course, all the kings in Jerusalem were sons of David. So this wouldn't have to be Solomon.

This particular line could be any of the Davidic kings in Jerusalem after David's time. Although he says king of Israel rather than king of Judah, after Solomon's time, in Rehoboam's time, the kingdom divided and the southern kingdom was not called the kingdom of Israel, but it was called the kingdom of Judah. And so if it was the later kings after Solomon, it would be more natural for them to say, not the king of Israel, but the king of Judah in Jerusalem.

But even that is not completely decisive of the point. Because after the northern kingdom, Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 A.D. And the southern kingdom continued for another century and more. After there was no more northern kingdom, Judah sometimes was called Israel and sometimes Judah, since all that was left of Israel was Judah.

And so they were sometimes referred to in scripture as Israel. However, that would be very late kings. There would only be a few, relatively few kings that could have written

this that late.

However, the simplest way to understand it is that it's Solomon. And especially when you read other things he says about himself. As in chapter 1, verse 12, he says, I, the preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

And in verse 16 he says, I communed in my heart, saying, Look, I have attained greatness and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge. Now some say this doesn't seem like it'd be Solomon because he says, All who were before me in Jerusalem.

And only David had been a king before him in Jerusalem. Why would he speak of all those who had been before him? Some say a later king of Judah, a later descendant of David, could speak of all his predecessors who had been before him in Jerusalem. But would Solomon speak about all that were before him in Jerusalem when it was his father, his immediate predecessor, who had conquered Jerusalem and made Jerusalem the capital? Only one king prior to Solomon had ever reigned in Jerusalem.

But notice he doesn't say specifically all the kings that were before him in Jerusalem. He may not be saying that all that were before him are kings, but all wise people. He said he attained greater wisdom than all that were before him in Jerusalem.

Well, whether this is a reference to all the kings or all the wise, we can say this, that no king later than Solomon could make this statement. No king after Solomon could say, I have been wiser than all the kings that were before me in Jerusalem because Solomon was before them. And they would be looking back at all the kings including Solomon and say, None of them have been as wise as me.

That would hardly make sense since Solomon was said to be the wisest man before or after himself. Certainly, although Christ is one greater than Solomon, as he said, none of the kings that followed him were necessarily wiser than him in the sense that wisdom literature uses that term. Now, there were a number of kings probably who were wiser morally than Solomon.

Jehoshaphat, maybe even Eza, certainly Hezekiah and Josiah were morally better men than Solomon. We could say wiser, but here it's using the word wisdom in the sense of wisdom literature of whom we read that Solomon, no one was ever greater than Solomon in that area. The wisdom of Solomon was legendary and considered to be essentially unique.

It would be very strange for any later king to speak of himself as being wiser than Solomon. And therefore, that writer seems to be Solomon. In chapter 2 and verse 9, he says, So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem.

Also, my wisdom remained with me. Now, to say he excelled in greatness, all who were

before him in Jerusalem, would not be true of later kings. There was no king after Solomon who had the wealth and the prestige and the power and all of that that Solomon had.

It was after Solomon's time the kingdom deteriorated and never came back up to the level that it had been in the days of Solomon. Chapter 12 and verse 9 says, And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge. Yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs.

That certainly sounds like Solomon. We're told in 1 Kings chapter 4 that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs. And we really don't know of any other later king of Judah that did.

So although the king, the preacher, Koheleth, does not mention who he is, he does not give his name, the tradition is that it was Solomon. Now, not all evangelicals believe this, not all conservatives believe this. Even Martin Luther, who was a fairly conservative man in terms of his biblical faith, Martin Luther did not believe that Solomon wrote this.

But he was in the minority. Throughout history, the Jewish tradition and Christian tradition has been that Solomon is this man. And I believe that it's a fair inference that if Solomon is not the man, it is someone pretending to be him.

And I think that if it was someone pretending to be him, probably the book would not belong in our Bible. I'm willing to simply take it at face value as if Solomon wrote it and to learn what we can about Solomon. By the way, there are many autobiographical notations about what this man who wrote it did.

And they connect with the known biography of Solomon. So to take Solomon as the author is clearly the path of least resistance. It's the shortest distance between two points, and it makes much sense.

Now, as you've read the book, I'm sure you found that it had much in it that resembled the book of Proverbs. And we know that Proverbs was primarily written by Solomon. There are a few chapters that seem to be written by other people.

But the book of Proverbs is primarily a collection of Solomon's writings. And some of the lines and verses in Ecclesiastes either are almost a repetition of similar statements in Proverbs, or else at least of the same type of statements. A lot of things in it are like Proverbs.

The tone of the book is more pessimistic than Proverbs is, and cynical. And that, of course, would seem to be part of the purpose of the book, is to be cynical. Because the terms that recur the most often and the most cynical of the terms are terms like vanity of vanities.

Now, if you have a more modern translation than the King James or the New King James,

then it may say something like emptiness or futility or something like that. The Hebrew word vanity means emptiness. And it's only because the New King James follows as closely as it does the precedent of the King James that it has retained the word vanity.

We think of the word vanity very differently in modern English. We think vanity means that you're always looking at yourself in the mirror or something like that. But that something is vain in old biblical language means it's empty.

And this expression vanity in one form or another is used 28 or 29 times in the book of Ecclesiastes. In a book that's as short as this one is, only 12 chapters, that's a frequent recurrence of a particular word more than twice per chapter on average. And basically he's saying that everything is empty.

Everything in life is empty. And nine times he says, and it's like grasping for the wind. Now, the older translation, the King James says vexation of spirit, which is a different thought.

But spirit and wind are the same word in the Hebrew. And so the traditional rendering is everything is vanity and it's a vexation of spirit. That phrase in English, vexation of spirit, seems to speak of inward frustration.

A vexed spirit. But almost all modern translators would agree that that phrase in Hebrew really means something like striving after or seeking to grasp the wind. There was a popular song back in the 60s by Donovan called, I might as well just try and catch the wind.

Which was to speak of that which would be utterly a futile effort. You can't catch the wind. And so Solomon said that all the things he tried were emptiness.

He found everything he tried that he thought was hopeful, that might give him some meaning in life, was really empty. It was like trying to grasp the wind. He's trying to grasp something.

He's trying to get a hold of something. The ultimate good, the ultimate meaning in life. Whatever will fulfill his insatiable philosophical thirst to feel that he's really connected with the core reason of existence.

And what really will bring satisfaction to humanity. And every time he tried something he said it ended up being empty. And I'm trying to grasp at something but it's like, it's elusive.

Like trying to grasp the wind. And so this is the pessimism that we find throughout the book. Again and again almost everything he describes he says, and I found that too was empty.

I found that was emptiness also. And it was like trying to grasp the wind. So we find a frustrated man described in these chapters.

Frustrated because he's looking for something and he can't seem to find it. He's looking for that which is not empty. Something that has meaning and that has fullness.

And something that will be satisfying and he cannot find it. Now the problem here is of course that he's looking in the wrong places. And this is made very clear by the frequent use of the term under the sun.

This is also used 28 times in the book. He kept speaking about things under the sun. As in chapter 1 verse 3. What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun.

And you'll find it again and again this expression. And that's a useful thing to observe. Because it's a key to understanding what we're supposed to get out of this book.

Because he is contemplating things only below the level of heaven. Only here on earth. From an earthly position.

From an earthly standpoint. Solomon at the time that he's describing was a man who had departed from God. His thoughts were not lofty and godly.

He was not contemplating things beyond this life or this world. And so we have him describing the observations of a worldly wise man. Considering things only from an earthly standpoint.

Only as they appear under the sun. And it's for that reason that he makes statements and reaches tentative conclusions. That are not correct.

And he'll say I concluded this or I considered that. Or I sought this and I found this. And what he finds is always depressing.

And always discouraging. But he's always searching under the sun. The whole book is describing what a man whose awareness.

Whose interests are confined to the earthly level. Under the sun. As doomed to come up with.

And that is that nothing really matters. Now of course the message of the book then would be ultimately. That the meaning of life must lie somewhere outside.

Of those things that are found under the sun. And that would be in God. Now he mentions God a lot of times.

There's quite a few references to God in the book of Ecclesiastes. Interestingly though he

never uses the word Yahweh or Jehovah. He never uses the common covenantal name of God.

He always uses the word Elohim which is the most generic term for God. Elohim just means the mighty one in Hebrew. And it's a reference of course to God in many passages.

Certainly Yahweh is Elohim and Elohim is Yahweh. But the terms are used differently. Because Yahweh was the God of Israel specifically.

The name that God revealed himself to them as. When he entered into covenant with them. And so Yahweh always has a connotation of being the covenant God.

The one in covenant with Israel. And that was the special name for God. That Israel knew and called him affectionately by.

And reverently. But Elohim would be a term that anyone might use of any religion. Any God.

Now Solomon was not an atheist. Even at the times when he wandered from God he was not an atheist. Nor was he a polytheist as near as we can tell.

Maybe he was. We don't know because he did have his wives gods. Represented in Jerusalem.

And so maybe he thought there was some validity to them. But he did believe in a God. He did believe in Yahweh.

But he didn't call him Yahweh. He believed there was some higher power. But he did not seemingly have a grasp much on what God was like.

Nor did he find. Since he was alienated from God. He didn't find much satisfaction in his belief in God.

He makes references to God. So he's not writing as an atheist. Or a person of a philosophically naturalistic persuasion.

Who didn't believe in the existence of the supernatural or anything like that. But he apparently did not seek to find his fulfillment in a relationship with God. As his father David had done.

We find David continually talking about how his whole heart's desire is to be in union with God. To meditate in his temple. To see the beauty of the Lord.

And to continually come before God. Solomon did not find his satisfaction in God. And departed from God.

And therefore he found no satisfaction in anything else either. Because there was none to be found. To a contemplative man.

Now see Solomon was too wise to settle for a shallow existence. He would have agreed that an unexamined life is not worth living. He was sensuous.

He was self-indulgent. He was a carnal man. But he was not a shallow man.

He was philosophically astute. Much too wise to just settle for getting drunk on weekends and figuring that's what life's all about. He tried it.

He tried all kinds of things. He tried all the things that shallow people try. But unlike them he decided this is dumb.

This is nothing. This is empty. It must lie somewhere else.

Where there are people who are less wise than Solomon. Who do all of these things and they, you know, I guess, I don't know whether they find satisfaction or not in it. But if they do it's because they're not reflective people.

They're people who are just living for their satisfaction of their animal instincts and not thinking about what really life is about. Because no one can believe that life is about these shallow things. Unless that person is not thinking very clearly.

We have in Ecclesiastes a really wonderful and unique testimony of a man who was wiser than other men. That is wise enough to be reflective and to really discern things. Although he's too foolish to stay with God.

His passions were apparently too great for him to really govern them by religion. So he wasn't wise enough to stick with God. But he was wise enough to recognize that whatever he sought outside of God was not really meaningful.

And yet he was also a man in a position like no other. To indulge every experiment. To experiment and indulge every lust.

Because he had endless wealth. Solomon had so much gold in Jerusalem that he used it to plate almost every important building. Gold plated.

And silver was so common in Jerusalem that it was like stones. I mean Solomon was so wealthy. There's really nothing that he'd ever have to deny himself that money could buy at the time.

He also, if he was a man given to sexual lust, he certainly had plenty of opportunities to use that. Let's put it that way. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

That's more women than most men could service in a lifetime. Let's put it that way. And

so he could really experiment with the things that attract many people but which many people cannot really acquire for themselves.

Many people assume that they would find it much more satisfying in life if they simply had more opportunity to indulge this desire or that desire. Or had more money to buy things that they wanted. And yet people assuming that often don't have the opportunity to experiment with that question.

Because they never get enough money. They never have enough opportunity to try all these things out. Solomon was uniquely positioned to try everything, to explore everything.

He was intelligent enough to seek intellectual pursuits at a high level. He was rich enough to find out what money could do. He was privileged enough that he could experiment with all of his desires with impunity and find out.

So we have in Ecclesiastes the diary of a man who has come back to God in his old age and is writing to younger men to warn them that the things they may think are going to satisfy them do not. So save yourself the trouble. You know it is said that a wise man will learn from other people's mistakes but a fool has to learn from his own mistakes.

What Solomon is doing is hoping that we'll be wise enough to learn from his. He wasted his life. He had endless opportunities, almost unlimited opportunities and yet he squandered much of it.

And had regrets apparently later on. It is my impression that he probably wrote this book partly to atone for the mistakes he had made by warning others to not go that way. It is a report of Solomon's great experiment.

And the great experiment was to find out is there meaning, is there satisfaction in this world that can be gained from that which is available under the sun, on the earth, apart from God. He experimented as very few people can and he found out that there really isn't anything there. And concluded at the end, you know, just follow God.

Just fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of man he says. G. Campbell Morgan who was sometimes referred to as the prince of Bible expositors, the prince of Bible teachers.

He said Ecclesiastes is an inspired confession of failure and pessimism when God is excluded. When man lives under the sun and forgets the larger part which is always over the sun. The eternal and abiding things.

If you want to know what a man of great privilege and great learning and great wisdom can come to, read this record of a man who has put God out of account in his actual life. And that is, he is rightly called a preacher because this is a sermon. And it's a really good

sermon.

You know it's like listening to somebody's testimony about before they came to Christ. About their life of crime or their life of sin or their life of empty religion or whatever it was they did before they were a Christian. When you hear people give their testimony or read their book of their testimony, they tell all the things they did before they were a Christian.

And then they tell, of course at the end, and then I became a Christian. And now I serve God and I found God to be what I was looking for. That's pretty much what Ecclesiastes is.

In the course of writing it though, he shares some of his musings that he had thought about when he was away from God. Because he does so, he ends up sometimes recording statements that we could not really agree with. In fact, probably he didn't agree with them anymore either when he wrote them.

It's like if you're listening to someone's testimony and they say, you know, I was a Hindu before I was a Christian. And I believed this and this and this. Well, in saying what they believed, they're not telling us that those things are true.

They're just saying they really did believe those things. They're telling the story truly. But they're not affirming the veracity of the things that they once believed.

And you find Solomon doing that sometimes too. So that there are a number of times when he actually says things that we would not agree with nor should we agree with. And probably at the end of his life he didn't agree with anymore either.

Now he gives in the book of Ecclesiastes ten reasons at least for being cynical about life. The book has a cynical, pessimistic tone to it. Because of this continual reference to how everything is vanity.

Everything is emptiness. And yet, of course, what he's really saying is everything is emptiness apart from God. It's like what Augustine said when he said, Lord, you have made man for yourself and he is restless until he finds his rest in you.

Or like we used to say back in the 70s that God made man having a God-shaped hole. And until you have God in that hole, you're not filled. And you can try to fill the hole with all kinds of other things.

Drugs, alcohol, sex, literature, education, whatever. And you just won't be filled because the hole is God-shaped. And nothing fits that piece like God himself.

And that's pretty much the sermon that Solomon's giving here. In the midst of it, he does give some advice. Some of which is good advice.

That's the thing. He was a wise man. He was a wise secular man when he was contemplating the things that he records in this book.

And as a wise man, of course, he saw some things truly. Some of the things he says are true. Some of them are partly true.

And some aren't true at all. But the thing is, his whole tone is a cynical tone. And he spends most of the book laying out why life is depressing.

Apart from God, that is, under the sun. And the force of his sermon is to point out that unless you're going to follow God from your youth, you're going to end up going into one of these areas that he explored and finding what he found. And this book can save us a lot of time and trouble.

The person who's young is saying, well, what shall I seek in life? Well, how about seeking wealth? Solomon had that. He said that's vanity. How about seeking just a life of partying? Well, he tried that, too.

That's empty, too, he said. Well, what about getting a good education and being respected in the community? Solomon had that. He tried that.

He said, don't bother looking there. Anywhere you want to look for satisfaction apart from God, Solomon says, I've been there, done that. I got the T-shirt, and I'm telling you, it was not worth going there.

Not worth paying the admission fee. It was a waste of time. And that's what the book of Ecclesiastes is saying.

Now, as you can see in your notes I've given you, I made a list of some of the things that he found to be reasons for pessimism or cynicism about life, apart from God, of course. One is in chapter 1, verses 4 through 10, he points out that everything seems to be repetitious and directionless. Whatever happens is just repeating from an endless, meaningless cycle.

Nothing is really significant. There's no progress. Everything you're going through right now is just something someone else has been through before, and you'll go through it again.

There's no forward progress. Everything just goes in a cycle, and it's all repetition and directionless. Number two, I didn't really finish the sentence there, did I? In chapter 1, verses 17 and 18, that the more knowledge you get, the more grief comes with it.

I don't know why I didn't finish that. It's a typo on the notes. But more knowledge simply brings more grief, he points out in chapter 1, verses 17 and 18.

That is, it's nice to have knowledge, and it's not very satisfying being ignorant. But as

you gain more knowledge of reality, you find out that reality is cruel and ugly. The more you know, for example, we live in an information age where we have a glut of information.

The more you learn, the more stress it brings upon you, because you realize how many people around the world are starving, how many people around the world are being slaughtered. I just read this morning about another mass shooting that took place in a neighborhood in Ohio, and a bunch of innocent people were just chased around by a gunman and shot dead. If we didn't have the internet or we didn't have the news, we wouldn't know all this stuff.

And you might say, well, we'd be like an ostrich with our head in the sand. We wouldn't be informed. Well, that may be true.

Maybe it is better to be aware that this stuff is going on. But it doesn't make you happy. Greater knowledge doesn't make life seem better.

It makes it seem, wow, what you hear about is the sum total of reality you hear about is more depressing. And so even though knowledge is something desirable to have, it only makes you more grieved. That's the reason that he gives for pessimism.

In chapter 2, verses 3 through 11, he points out that mirth, meaning partying, and indulgence are unsatisfying madness, as he concludes. In chapter 2, verses 14 through 23, and in several other places in the book, he reflects on the fact that death is the common destiny of everybody. Man, animal, wise, foolish, doesn't matter what you do, you're going to die.

And as far as he knew, when you die, it's all over, and death makes everything you did meaningless. A fifth thing that makes life depressing and pessimistic is that a wise man leaves his accomplishments to one who may be a fool. Chapter 2, verses 18 and 19 tells us that a man who's wise can really accomplish great things and build up a great estate.

But of course he's going to die, and then his son will take it over, and who knows whether his son will do well or not. His son could be a total fool and waste everything, destroy everything he's built. Which was a great frustration for him to consider.

Of course, that is exactly what did happen to him, and what his son did do. He had a foolish son, Rehoboam. He also observes in chapter 3, verse 16, and a few other places, that there's oppression and corruption in high places.

This is one of the things that's made many people depressed, is when we see how little justice there is in the courts, how crazy the lawmakers seem to be, why they don't have an all-common sense, and why there are people willing to take bribes and satisfy the special interest groups that will grease their palms and corrupt justice. The reason that's depressing, of course, is because most of us are little people who really can't stop that.

We're not in a position to do anything about it, and so we're ruled over by a system that is corrupt and unjust.

That can be a cause for pessimism. A seventh reason is that even wealth deprives its possessor of peace of mind. You'd think that wealth would have the opposite effect, because people think, if I just had more money, I'd be secure.

If I could just buy this, or have this much laid up in the bank, or even secure these security systems that are expensive, but if I had enough money, I could make myself secure. But he says, no, actually, a person with wealth is not necessarily secure. There's often people who have wealth, but it deprives them of peace, because they have a new set of problems that come with wealth.

He says in chapter 5, verses 10 through 17. He also is not very happy with women. I don't know how happy they were with him, either, frankly.

But his experience was not positive with women, for the most part, notwithstanding his writing of the Song of Solomon, which was probably written when he was younger. He, in general, did not find women to be very trustworthy, respectable. In chapter 7, verses 26 through 29, he seems to be pretty pessimistic about his experiences with women.

As, of course, many men are, and many women are pessimistic about romance and love and marriage, too, especially in our day, because most people have been married, at least when they get to my age, most people have been married, and about half of them or more are divorced now, and others have been disillusioned. Some are disillusioned enough to just think, well, the opposite sex, they're no good. Others hope that they'll find something better.

But the point is that a person, when they get old, can have a lot of opportunities to become upset and disillusioned with the opposite sex because of bad relationships, and Solomon probably had his share. A ninth reason for cynicism and pessimism is that man's fate and rewards come by chance, not by merit. Or so he thought.

In chapter 9, verse 11, Solomon believed that what you do, whether you're wise or foolish, won't really have any impact on how well things turn out for you, which certainly sounds like the opposite of what he said in Proverbs, because in Proverbs, he's always saying that the person who's wise is going to be respected, the person who's wise is going to prosper, the person who's wise is going to be successful, and the person who's a fool is going to be poor, he's going to have regrets, he's going to mess up his life because he's a fool. Well, Solomon was wise, and he messed up his life. And his observation in chapter 9, verse 10, or chapter 9, verse 11, is that chance seems to decide how people turn out, not their merits, not their abilities.

And the tenth reason for cynicism and pessimism he gives is that men are more

esteemed for social position than for virtue and wisdom. So, in other words, the value system of the world is askew, that a man can be wise and virtuous and yet not respected, a person can be not wise or virtuous but in a high social position and be highly esteemed. Of course, we see that all the time, particularly with entertainers.

Entertainers, whether they're movie stars or musicians or whatever, they're often worshipped or at least highly esteemed. At least everyone wants to know what they're doing, you know? I mean, maybe no one really respects them as good people, but everyone's interested in them. Everyone wants to know who they're married, who they're having sex with, what they're doing, scandalous and so forth.

So, they seem to be of great interest to people and they're treated as if they're very important, but not because they're wise or virtuous. And Solomon thought that was a vain thing too. Chapter 9, verses 13 through 16.

Now, there's a number of things that Solomon says in the course of writing this book, which we as people, you know, familiar with the rest of Scripture would recognize are not precisely true. There may be a sense in which they are true at the level that he's considering them. That is, since he's restricting his purview to reality under the sun, that is, in the seen, physical, natural world, not taking into consideration God, not taking into consideration eternity, not taking into consideration spiritual things, maybe these things are true.

But even so, they may not be entirely true, even with that limitation placed upon them. In chapter 1, verse 9, he says that there's nothing new under the sun. Well, under the sun, maybe not.

Basically, he's saying everything that you see is a repeat of something that's happened before. There's really nothing original, and nothing changes. Everything that's going on is the same thing that's been going on forever before, and what's going to happen tomorrow is just going to be a repeat of now.

There's nothing new. There's nothing fresh about life. Well, that's not entirely true, of course, especially when you don't limit yourself to considerations under the sun, when you consider yourself, when you consider things in the sun, in Christ, and in God.

Certainly, there are things new. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away, and all things become new.

So, I mean, certainly outside of the range that Solomon is limiting his consideration to, there are things that are new. And his statement is not strictly true, though it may be relatively true within the realm he's thinking about. In chapter 1, verse 15, he said, What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.

Well, what is crooked cannot be made straight? I'm not sure if he's thinking about

morally crooked or what. It's poetic. It's a poetic statement, so it's not clear how literal he means.

But he does seem to be saying that whatever is bent or wrongly shaped cannot really be fixed, can't be rectified. And he may be thinking about people. It's hard to say what he's thinking about.

But even so, it's not entirely true when you take spiritual things into consideration. I mean, John the Baptist's message, according to Isaiah 40, is every crooked way should be made straight. Every valley should be exalted.

Every mountain should be made low. In preparation for the coming of Jesus, he called everyone to straighten their crooked places. Paul said of the Corinthians, of the Christians there, in 1 Corinthians 6, 9 through 11, he said that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.

And he gives a long list of unrighteous behaviors. And he says, you know, those who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Then he says, and such were some of you.

But now that's not true anymore. You've been changed, he said, by Christ, through the Spirit of God. And so, things that are crooked can be made straight, but perhaps not in the natural realm without taking God into account.

Chapter 2, verse 16, he said there's really not much difference between a wise man and a fool after all when it comes to the fact that they all will die. He says in chapter 2, verse 16, there's no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool does.

Well, wise men really, if they're godly wise men, don't die exactly the same as fools do. A person who knows God can die cheerfully, can die victoriously. Solomon may never have observed that.

He probably just observed people who were as ungodly as he was and saw that the ungodly man dies the same way a fool dies and he's not taking into consideration the man who's ready to meet God and is peaceable, or at least, or even happy in the face of death. Now one thing he says that's not true, and he says it repeatedly, is that there's nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and that his soul should enjoy the good of his labor. This is in chapter 2, verse 24, and repeated a number of times throughout the book.

That there's nothing better for a man to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of his labor. Now it's true that there's nothing wrong with eating and drinking and enjoying the fruit of your labor, but that's a different thing than saying there's nothing better for a man than that. Sometimes it's better to fast.

Sometimes it's better to give away the fruit of your labor. Jesus said it's more blessed to give than to receive. Just to, what Solomon is saying is, there's nothing to live for under the sun.

So just enjoy it as much as you can. Enjoy the food and drink that you've got and eat and drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die, essentially is what he's saying there. And that's not really the way that God has revealed it to us.

We're not, there are things better than eating and drinking. Jesus said don't labor for the meat that perishes, but for the meat that endures to eternal life. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

So this statement is not technically true. That there's nothing better for man than that. It's a rather worldly way of looking at it.

In chapter 7, verse 16, he says, Don't be overly righteous or overly wise. Which is a strange statement. Chapter 7, verse 16, he says, Do not be overly righteous nor overly wise, why should you destroy yourself? Now, don't be overly wicked or overly foolish, why should you die before your time? Just be balanced.

Don't be too obsessed with being right and good and wise, or the other way. Just kind of be moderately righteous, moderately wise. Just stay out of trouble.

That's not really an ethic that we would recommend. He says, why knock yourself out trying to be so good? Well, there may be excellent reason to fight the good fight of faith in order to avoid being bad or compromising. There are consequences for compromise.

And so, he's not really thinking like a godly man when he says that. And then there are statements like this in chapter 9, verse 5, which many people, like certain people that teach soul sleep, they use this as a proof text, as if we can take Solomon's word for it, and consider this to be, you know, how we know reality beyond the grave. He says in verse 5 of chapter 9, For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.

And they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Now, when it says the dead know nothing, some say, well see, the Bible teaches that when you die, you're not conscious, you don't go to heaven, you don't go anywhere, you're just unconscious, you don't know anything. Well, that could be true or not, but the point is you couldn't establish it from a statement like this in Ecclesiastes.

After all, that chapter begins with these words, For I considered all this in my heart. That's past tense. He's still talking about his time where he's trying to discover what life is about while he's away from God.

And at that time, I considered in my heart these things, including that the dead don't know anything. Well, I don't think he would be an expert to consult about that at that

time in his life. He was contemplating things only in the natural realm, in the physical realm, in the earthly realm.

It may be true that once people die, then as far as the earth is concerned, they don't know anything about what's going on. They go somewhere else and they're not paying attention to what's going on on the earth. But to say they don't know anything at all is not necessarily something that we could establish from Solomon's authority on it, even if that's what he believed at the time when he wrote that.

After all, not only is he wrong sometimes, but he seems to contradict himself sometimes. And that's one of the things that's peculiar about the book, too, is that if someone says the Bible contradicts itself, well, they're right if they're talking about Ecclesiastes, because Solomon did contradict himself. But he did so because the man he was, searching for things, thought one thing at one point and then discovered that wasn't right and thought something else at another point.

And as he tells us what he thought in different times, we find him saying things that aren't consistent all the time. For example, does wisdom preserve your life or does it not? In chapter 2, verse 16, he said, For there's no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. How then does a wise man die? As a fool.

A wise man dies just like a fool does. Wisdom doesn't really change that. It doesn't necessarily change his life or make him live longer.

And yet chapter 7, verse 12 says, For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it. So, in Proverbs, he certainly said a number of times that if you're wise, wisdom will give you a long life, and length of days, and so forth. But he's not so sure at times when he writes the Ecclesiastes, although sometimes he thinks it's true still.

In chapter 3, verse 21, he says, Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the beast, which goes down to the earth? Now, most modern translations, I think, say something like this. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and whether the animal goes downward? That's the way it reads in the Septuagint and in a number of other versions. The Hebrew text that we're following here is different than many of the others.

And I think probably the others might preserve the original meaning. Who knows whether when man dies his spirit goes up or not? You know, that may be an idea that people have, but how do we know? How can we say? Solomon doesn't know. And maybe raises some doubt about it.

And yet in chapter 12, in verse 7, he said, Then the dust will return to the earth as it was,

and the spirit will return to God who gave it. So he seems to have assurance there that our spirit goes back to God after we die. But earlier in the book he's not so sure, and he raises questions as to whether that's true.

In chapter 4, in verse 2, he says, Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead more than the living who are still alive. In other words, I thought those who died were better off than those who are still alive. But in chapter 9, verses 4 through 6, he says, But for him who is joined to all the living, there is hope.

For a living dog is better than a dead lion. And so forth. He talks about how it's better to be alive.

A living dog is better than being a dead lion. And yet, he praised the dead in earlier places, as if they might be the ones who are more to be envied. In chapter 7, verses 26 through 29, he speaks about his cynicism about women.

In verse 26, he says, I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her. He says, This is what I found, says the preacher, adding one thing to another to find out the reason, which my soul still seeks.

I cannot find one man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. That's not a very clear sentence, but it seems to be saying that in looking for a good man, he's found one in a thousand, but he hasn't found any good women. And due to the fact that he had a thousand women, and said among these all I have not found one, then he'd say among a thousand, I find one good man, but no good women.

That's his own take on it. However, in chapter 9 and verse 9, he says, Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your life, which he has given you under the sun all the days of your vanity, for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun, to live in a happy marriage, which it doesn't sound like he had one, but in one case he's rather cynical about women, other time he recommends that perhaps the best thing is just to have a happy marriage. In chapter 3 and verse 9, he says, What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? And he talks about reasons for being pessimistic about working hard and accomplishing things, because it ends when you die, you lose it all, you might leave it to a fool and so forth.

And yet, in chapter 5 and verse 18, he says, Here is what I've seen, it is good and fitting for one to eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor, in which he toils under the sun. So, he says repeatedly, it's good to enjoy the fruit of your labor, other times he says, What good is labor? What good is the fruit of your labor? Nothing. So, we can see that he's kind of bouncing back and forth between different opinions about some of the same subjects.

In chapter 9, of course, he said there's the dead know nothing at all, chapter 9 verse 5, but he says about them, they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. So, it sounds like he's saying there's nothing after death, there's no more reward for those who die. And yet, in chapter 12, verse 14, he says, God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good and whether it is evil.

So, in one place, he seems to think there's an accounting after death, and in another place, that perhaps there isn't. But these contradictions are not really flaws in the Bible, or even flaws in the book. They're actually quite consistent with what the book has written to tell us, that he was a man searching for something that cannot be found, in a place where it could not be found.

He was searching for man's chief good, for that which brings ultimate and deep satisfaction in life, but looking in places where you cannot really find it, under the sun. What you find there is emptiness, and it's like striving after the wind. And that is his testimony.

But his testimony at the end is, this is the whole duty of man, to fear God and keep his commandments, because God will ultimately bring every work into judgment. And so, it is a sermon, but it's a sermon full of cynicism about life apart from God, and quite a protracted description of how he came to that conclusion from his experiment, looking to find out what might bring satisfaction. Now, he never does say that serving God will bring satisfaction.

Perhaps he never did it enough to discover that. But he did say that serving God is the right thing to do, and it's the only thing that makes sense in view of the vanity of life. There will be a judgment.

It's best to die on good terms with God, as one who has lived according to his laws and his commandments. That is the chief end of man, and that's what man should do. Now, we'll go through the book, of course, and we'll go through it somewhat rapidly.

I mean, we're not going to dwell long on any given parts, for the simple reason that it's not all even reliable philosophy, nor would he wish for us to think it was at the time of writing. But we will go through it and survey, certainly, the things that he said and thought in those days, and how he experimented. But we'll have to wait until another lecture.