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Ecclesiastes Overview



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In his overview of the book of Ecclesiastes, Steve Gregg explains that the authorship of the book is attributed to King Solomon, though some scholars doubt this. The book's overarching theme is the pursuit of fulfillment and meaning in life, which can only be found through devotion to God rather than material possessions or worldly pleasures. The book contains a confession of failure and pessimism, highlighting the importance of keeping God at the center of one's life, and pointing out the inevitability of death and the equal end of all people, wise and foolish alike.

Transcript

The book of Ecclesiastes is yet another book written by Solomon, at least so it claims to be, and there's not much, there's no really good reason to doubt that. There are, of course, modern scholars who doubt everything, and including whether Solomon wrote this book, but to tell you the truth, no one has very many serious doubts that Solomon wrote many of the Proverbs in the book of Proverbs, and this book is very similar in style. The content and mood of the book is different than Proverbs, but it is nonetheless very consistent with Solomon's style as near as I can tell, and it is of course the Jewish tradition that Solomon wrote it.

It is also the Christian tradition that Solomon wrote it, and it's only in so far, I think, as scholars like to pick apart of traditions that they have raised questions about Solomon's authorship. As far as the internal evidence that Solomon is the author, we can piece that together rather quickly. You look at the first chapter, Ecclesiastes 1 and verse 1, you'll find the words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Okay, now this man is a son of David who is king in Jerusalem. Now there were actually 21 sons of David who were kings in Jerusalem successively, because anyone descended from David would be called a son of David. Therefore, not only Solomon but Rehoboam and all the rest of the kings of Judah could be called the sons of David, but this was actually, the king claims to be a son of a king of a king of Jerusalem, son of David.

Now there's also another reference to himself in chapter 1 verse 12, where he says, I the

preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. Now Israel, after the time of Rehoboam, which was Solomon's son, was the name of a separate country that was not ruled by Jerusalem. Jerusalem was, throughout the history of Israel, the capital city of the southern kingdom of Judah.

But after Solomon's death, practically at the very beginning, in the first few days of his son's reign, the nation split into two. The northern kingdom was called Israel, the southern kingdom was called Judah, and Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, not Israel. So when he says, I reigned over Israel in Jerusalem, this means he reigned at the time when Jerusalem was still counted to be the capital of Israel, and that was before the kingdom divided.

The only kings who ever ruled over Israel in Jerusalem were Saul, excuse me, not Saul, Saul reigned over Israel but not in Jerusalem, before Jerusalem was counted, but David and Solomon. And since he says he's a son of David, it's not David. This, if we take this man's self-identification seriously, then he was certainly Solomon.

Of course, scholars who doubt the traditional authorship, they often will say, well, there are literary reasons for an author to claim to be somebody that he is not, but as, again, I would say there's no reason to doubt it. Nothing compelling anyway. I'm not saying that scholars don't bring up arguments against the traditional authorship, but they don't have any compelling arguments.

It is still entirely reasonable to accept the traditional view that Solomon is the author. Solomon, by the way, according to 1 Kings chapter 4, wrote a lot. He wrote, for example, over 3,000 Proverbs.

We only have less than a thousand of them in what we call the Book of Proverbs, but there were more than 2,000 additional Proverbs to those that he wrote or spoke. He didn't write them all, but he spoke them. And likewise, he wrote a thousand and five psalms.

It is generally believed that the book The Song of Solomon was his favorite of a thousand and five songs that he wrote. But among the things he wrote were the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes and apparently the Book of Song of Solomon. These three books are attributed to the same author and they're different from each other.

Proverbs, as we know, is on a wide variety of subjects giving counsel to his own son about how to live wisely instead of foolishly. Ecclesiastes is much more gloomy. It's much more pessimistic.

It's written by Solomon in his older age. It's clear when you get to the twelfth chapter. He clearly is an old man at the time that he writes this.

And he writes it in a very pessimistic mood, which isn't necessarily the case in the Book

of Proverbs. In fact, he repeatedly says things like, all is vanity. Now the word vanity, which is the King James rendering of that Hebrew word, means emptiness.

In a modern translation, it should say everything is empty. Emptiness of emptiness. All is emptiness.

And by that he means empty of meaning. He was somewhat nihilistic. He felt like there is no meaning.

Or at least this was what the evidence seemed to declare to him. He believed that everything that promises to give fulfillment and meaning to life, he tried it and found out it was empty. Each thing he tried, and he goes through them serially.

I tried this. I tried that. I tried that.

And every time he says, and you know what I found out? It's empty. It too is an empty promise. If it promises to bring pleasure and joy and meaning, it's a lie.

It's an empty promise. It's vanity. Another, and by the way, that term, all is vanity, or the word vanity is found 31 times in the 12 chapters of this book.

And so you can see it's quite thick in his thinking and in his appraisal of the things in his life in this world. He also describes nine times as this pursuit after meaning was like, he said, like grasping after the wind. When I was a teenager, Donovan had a hit song called I Might As Well Try and Catch the Wind, which expressed, of course, an idea of something very futile and frustrating to try to do.

How do you catch the wind? I always thought even at the time that he had gotten that concept from Ecclesiastes because nine times, Solomon says, it's emptiness. It's like trying to catch the wind. It's like striving after the wind.

Now in the King James version, it says it's vexation of spirit because the word spirit and wind are the same in the Hebrew, and it could be like trying to strive after the spirit, but almost all new translations believe he's saying it's like trying to catch the wind, which is saying if you're striving after meaning, purpose, fulfillment in life, if you try any of the traditional routes that people take, you'll find that you're not catching it. You're not reaching it. It's staying ahead of you.

It slips through your fingers. It's like trying to grasp the wind. It's emptiness.

This is his pessimism in Ecclesiastes. 28 times, however, he qualifies this sphere of which he is speaking. 28 times he uses the expression under the Sun.

All is emptiness under the Sun. There's nothing new under the Sun. There is this great evil I beheld under the Sun, under the Sun, under the Sun, meaning the S-U-N, meaning under the sky.

Here on the earthly level, he is deliberately, therefore, excluding from consideration heavenly things. He's talking about earthly things. A man whose thoughts and awareness are confined to the earthly level, observing only those things that happen under the Sun, reaches the conclusions that Solomon reached and suggests very strongly that if there is such a thing as fulfillment and satisfaction we had, it's not to be found under the Sun.

It's going to be found above the Sun. It's going to have to be found in another realm than that which he had access to as a rich, privileged, white male. I just use that because the popular terminology today, he probably wasn't very white, probably very swarthy, but the point is that he was rich and privileged to be sure, and he was a male, and he relished that fact because he liked women, a large number of women as a matter of fact.

He was a man who as the king of Israel at its wealthiest time, by the way, Israel was at the end of David's reign when Solomon took over the kingdom. Israel was at its wealthiest point at any time in its history. It's never been like it since and never before.

David made Israel an empire, a smallish one compared to things like the Greek and the Roman Empire, but still an empire. David conquered the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Philistines, and the Edomites, and the surrounding, the Phoenicians, and all the people around him, and they paid tribute to him. So it's sort of like, they saw Jerusalem was like Rome in the Roman Empire, only a smaller empire.

David had so much wealth and so much power and so much prestige that when Solomon took over his father's throne, he was arguably one of the most powerful men in the world, if not the most. God had actually told Solomon as a youth, when he came to Solomon at the beginning of his reign, he said, what would you like? Just ask me, and Solomon said, give me wisdom. God said, well I'm pleased that you didn't ask for wealth or for fame or for the neck of your enemies.

And you asked something wise and more or less selfless that you'd have the wisdom to reign well. So I'm going to make you the wisest man and also the wealthiest man, and the most secure, and the most famous. And he certainly was famous.

And so he had fame, he had fortune, he had the ladies, he had 700 wives, and if that wasn't enough, he had 300 concubines to round out the number to a cool 1,000. So you know the kinds of things that men think will give them pleasure, being powerful, being recognized, being wealthy, having the women, those kinds of things. Solomon had the opportunity to pursue those things as no other man perhaps in history.

Well, modern, there's modern wealthy people who have access to as much. Jeff Epstein, for example, who you know, I think he found it all to be vanity, emptiness, and he's of course no longer with us under the sun. But there are people like him, very wealthy, very hedonistic, very indulgent, and Solomon was all of those things, probably as much as

any man in the ancient world ever was.

So he provides a very rare, if not a unique case, of a man who's gone places that many men, certainly the secular man, the worldly man, would love to go. Most men who are not happy with their lives think if they only had more money, if they only had more respect, if they only had more power, if they only had more sex, well I mean more of this kind of stuff. That's the kind of thing that would make life better.

Well Solomon had all those things. He had those things more than any man you'll ever meet had them. And he said, hey listen, I've been there, done that, it's empty.

If you're thinking about looking for happiness and fulfillment in any of those areas, let me save you the trouble. I've gone further in that direction and in that direction, that direction, any direction you may want to go. I've been further down that road than you ever will.

And it's empty. It's frustrating. It's like striving after the wind.

And so Solomon provides for us then a tremendous warning about wasting life. Solomon presents himself as a man of a wasted life. Now you might say, wasted life? I thought he was a godly man.

He wrote scripture, he was the son of David, he ruled over God's people. What do you mean a wasted life? Well Solomon of course did start out well, but he violated the rules that God had made for kings. In the book of Deuteronomy God had said to Israel, when you have a king he shall not multiply horses.

That means weaponry, that means an army. He shall not multiply wives. He should not multiply gold.

All those things were forbidden to the kings of Israel. Solomon violated all of them. He multiplied wives.

Now you might say, well David multiplied wives, he had eight wives. That's addition, not multiplication. A thousand is multiplication.

Eight is too many. And I think David found it to be so too. And his children certainly found it very unideal for their father to have multiple children by multiple wives.

In fact every family in the Bible that ever was polygamous, it was an unhappy one. But David added wives here and there. Solomon had to multiply them.

He hardly had enough time to add a thousand. You know, this man multiplied wives, he multiplied horses, he multiplied gold, he did all the things kings shouldn't do. And worse, if that wasn't bad enough, he did the very worst thing as far as God was concerned.

And that is he multiplied gods in Israel. And the one thing that was to set Israel apart from all other nations was no other god. Only one god.

It's not okay to break other laws, but other laws were broken a lot and God would not like it, but he wouldn't always lash out. But when it came to making idols, when it came to worshipping other gods, this was something God lashed out against. Because in God's mind when Israel, Israel was married to him, the covenant he made with them in Sinai was a marriage covenant.

Israel was God's wife. Many of the prophets spoke of this. Isaiah did, Jeremiah did, Hosea did certainly, Ezekiel did very graphically.

And all of them point out that Israel was God's wife, but she was a harlot. She did not remain faithful to God. And because when Israel worshipped other gods, this was like a woman having sex with another man than her husband.

Because God wanted unique devotion from his wife as any man would, and as any woman would from her husband. And so it was the idolatry that really destroyed Solomon. And he did go bad.

If you want to see the description of that, that is in 1st Kings chapter 11 verse 1. But 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, 300 concubines, and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so when Solomon was old that his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon went after Ashtaroath, the goddess of the Sidonians, after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites.

Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord and did not fully follow the Lord as did his father David. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the abominable, the idol of Moab, on the hill that was east of Jerusalem. And for Molech, the abomination of the people of Ammon.

And he did likewise for all of his foreign wives who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. Now we don't know to what degree Solomon participated in the worship of other gods, but he tolerated it because of his wives. His wives came from other countries, from other religions.

Once they became his wives, they wanted to worship their ancestral gods of their nations. And so he said, okay, okay. And so he built shrines for them and his wives

worshiped other gods in Israel, which is not permitted.

Solomon may have done this somewhat himself to keep his wives happy, who knows? And by the way, it says his 700 wives were princesses, which suggests that a lot of these marriages were not done out of love per se, but out of political alliances. This is not uncommon in the ancient Near East for kings to make mutual non-aggression pacts with each other of other countries, and they do so by family intermarriage. You know, one king's daughter would marry the other king or his son or something like that.

And the intermarriage between these two nations would serve as a pact between them. But there were not 700 nations around. He must have taken several princesses from each nation around him.

In any case, this is where he went wrong. Now we do not read in the historical narrative ever of Solomon returning to the Lord. If we're to go by only what we read in First Kings and the rest of the historical narrative of scripture, Solomon ended his life away from God, backslid.

However, we have Ecclesiastes, which I take to be a genuine writing from Solomon. Again, some scholars want to make it written by somebody else, but I see no reason to disparage the Jewish or the Christian tradition about it or the author's own claims. If the author was the son of David reigning in Jerusalem and ruled over Israel, he had to be Solomon unless he was Rehoboam, who reigned over Israel for about three days before the nation split.

And yet Rehoboam could not say about himself what Solomon said about himself. This man said he was wiser than most. Well, certainly that was true of Solomon.

It would not be true of Rehoboam. So what do we find? We find that the man left the Lord. And when you leave the Lord, you're stuck with the world.

God lives in heaven. And when you have a relation with God, you have a connection with things that are transcendent, otherworldly, heavenly, spiritual, things that meet a need that is built into the human being, made in God's image. We're made in God's image, unlike the animals.

Now, we are a lot like animals because we have bodies not very different from theirs. I mean, we have very much the same kind of cellular structure and things like that. Some animals are very similar to us, you know, more or less in their DNA and so forth.

We have a lot in common with animals, but God made us in his image, unlike the animals. And that was when he breathed into our nostrils the spirit of life and we became spiritual beings in his likeness and intended to be connected with him in a way that animals were not. Then our spirit is to be in union with God's spirit.

And when it is not, we are not as we were made to be. There's a hole there. There's an emptiness there.

There's a God shaped hole, which some preachers have talked about. You can't fill it with anything except God himself. And if you depart from God, you lose that connection.

And then you have to look for something else to fill that hole. So he had a lot of opportunities, more than most of us will ever have, more than any of us will ever have. He had sensuous pleasure he could pursue.

He partied. He hired musicians. He did horticulture.

He did all the normal carnal stuff that men do if they are carnal and choose to do it and have the opportunity. And he found that everything that man can try, and he ought to know because he tried it all, is unfulfilled. It's emptiness.

Now, it is my opinion that when Solomon wrote this, he had returned to his earlier faith. That doesn't mean he was extremely godly at the end of his life. But it does mean that he realized, after all, that the only thing that matters is to be on good terms with God.

And we can see that from chapter 12, the very last chapter of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon urges young men, in verse one, not to forget God while they're young. He says, 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.

Now, I didn't bring with me a paraphrastic version of the Bible, such as the New Living Translation, or some of these others that more or less paraphrase, but it's kind of interesting how he goes on and describes old age. Here's how he describes it in literal language. I mean, this is the literal translation.

While the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are not darkened, and the clouds do not return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow down, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows grow dim. When the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low, when one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of music are brought low. Also, when they are afraid of heights, and of terrors in the way, when the almond tree blossoms, and the grasshopper is a burden, and desire fails, for man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.

Now, most of that probably didn't make any sense at all to you, because of the imagery he uses. But he's describing old age. He's telling young men, serve God while you're young before this happens.

Before what happens? All this he's just described. Now, if you would read the New Living Translation or some other version that tends to paraphrase rather than give literal

translation, it goes something like this. When the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are dark, it means your vision is going.

When you're old, and the clouds don't return after the rain. That is to say, not every cloud has a silver lining anymore, when you're old. In the day when keepers of the house tremble, the keepers of you are your arms, and the strong men bow down.

Talk about being bow-legged, the strong men are your legs. When the grinders, that's your teeth, cease, because they are few. You can't chew anymore, because you don't have any more teeth in your head.

That's what he's describing there. And those who look through the windows grow dim, that is your eyesight is poor. Looking out through your eyes, it's getting hazy.

It's not like it used to be, it's not clear anymore. When the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low, usually that's thought to mean you need to make sure you keep your mouth shut while you chew. And it says, one rises up, one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of music are brought low.

Ironically, something like a bird keeps you from sleeping, wakes you up, and yet your hearing isn't so good as to appreciate music anymore. When they are afraid of height, when you get old and you're afraid of heights, because you're a little wobbly, and terror is in the way. When the almond tree blossoms, it is thought this means when your hair is all white, the almond tree has white blossoms.

And a grasshopper is a bird, meaning you're kind of weak. Even a grasshopper is a burden for you, which is not a very heavy burden, by the way. And desire fails, usually thought to refer to the ending of sexual interest.

And man goes to his eternal home. So this is a very graphic, poetic description of old age, and it's not intended to be an attractive one. Now in Proverbs, which Solomon wrote when he was younger, he spoke well of old age.

He said, you know, the white hair is a crown of glory if it's found in the way of righteousness. And that the young man who doesn't rise up in honor of an entering old man, the birds will pluck his eyes out. You know, I mean, Solomon speaks well of old age when he's not old.

But when he's old, speaking as an insider, he describes it as a very unattractive thing. He says, now young men, you're not there yet. Serve God while you've got the strength.

Serve God while you've got your natural powers. Don't give God the ragged end and the leftovers of your life once you've got nothing else you can do with it. Give him the best years.

And at the end of the book, verses 13 and 14, says, let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.

So this is how he concludes. The book's full of all kinds of advice and observations which will say something about. But at the end he says, well, here's my conclusion.

Really the best thing you can do is fear God and keep his commandments. That's really what you're expected to do. That's the whole duty of man.

And he's going to judge you for whether you do that or not. So obviously this is what I recommend. Now Solomon, of course, could be recommending this as one who feels he's too old to do this anymore.

It may not be telling us that he's returned to the Lord, but that he realizes that that would have been better for him if he had stayed with the Lord. And men will be, young men will do well to take his advice. But obviously it means that he is putting God and one's man's duty to God as the highest priority.

Which to my mind suggests he has come back to his faith. He certainly can't be worshipping idols if he's recognizing the need to fear God and that all his works will be brought into judgment. And so I believe that Ecclesiastes provides for us the last chapter of Solomon's life which is left out of the historical narrative.

In the historical narrative in 1st Kings, the last we hear of Solomon, he's not a good guy. And if that's all we had, we would have to despair for his salvation, I think. This book, however, written later when he's older, no doubt is to help us understand that he did see the error of his ways and come back and he wrote a book to try to advise others not to make the mistakes he did.

And that's what the book serves as. It's a great sermon. That's why he calls himself the preacher.

Actually the name of the book in Hebrew is Kohelet, which is the word preacher. The word preacher is the Hebrew kohelet. It means one who gathers and addresses an assembly.

That's what kohelet is. A person who gathers an assembly and addresses them like a preacher. And so he calls himself the preacher, Kohelet, because he has a sermon to give.

He wants to gather an assembly of especially young men and warn them not to make the mistakes he made. And this, he gives a really great warning because again he addresses all the things that a carnal and worldly young man dreams of. The things that

are on the bucket list of a young man who doesn't care about the things of God, that wants to just grab all the gusto he can.

Then reading Ecclesiastes that allows a young man to say, well maybe I'll make a different pursuit than that. Here's a man who was first of all brilliant. I mean I mentioned that he was rich, had all the women a man could ever want and far more than a man should.

He was famous, he was powerful, but he's also really smart for the most part. Now he was very foolish in his moral decisions, but intellectually many, many foolish people are intellectually smart. They're just morally stupid.

And he, and basically he said in Proverbs, when he wrote Proverbs, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But he must have forgotten that part. He was a man of great secular understanding and wisdom.

And at one time even spiritual wisdom, but when he departed from God it didn't take away his IQ, it just took away his good sense. And a man can have a high IQ and not very much good sense. And so here's a man who really was actually interested in finding fulfillment, finding meaning.

I think some people who who give themselves over to drugs and alcohol, they just kind of despair of finding meaning and just try to medicate, self-medicate with these habits. And they're not necessarily thinking it'll ever fulfill them, it'll just, it'll just keep them from ever sobering up enough to know how unhappy they are. But he was not pleased to self-medicate.

He was pursuing fulfillment, pursuing meaning, pursuing what is man's chief end and what's man's chief good. And this was his testimony of his pursuit. The purpose of the book I think is to warn other people about what he learned in his great experiment which led him to waste a great portion of his life and he hoped to perhaps prevent others from doing so.

There's a quote here in your notes from G. Campbell Morgan, a great preacher from England in the former generation. He's talking about this book, he says, 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 of 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's how I see the book of Ecclesiastes. So it's a confession.

You know when I was young in the Jesus moment, a lot of people were getting converted out of hippie-dumb and a lot of them had really, even though they were young, had used

a lot of drugs and a lot of alcohol and had really defiled themselves in a lot of ways. And then they found Jesus. And we used to hear their testimonies all the time.

At church and in coffee houses or just talking, everyone loved to tell their testimony. So many of them were full of former drug use that we used to call them drug-a-monies. Because unfortunately some people, some of these people, almost seemed to compete with each other to post about how much drugs they had taken before they were Christians.

Well I took this many hits and that. Oh yeah, well I took this many. But that's why some people cynically refer to them as drug-a-monies.

But they were real testimonies. These people who really had sinned, really had lost their way and wasted some of their life, a short portion, because they found Christ usually when they're young. But still they've lost a couple of good years or more.

And this is like that. You know, the testimonies were always, you know, I did this, I did that, I did that, all bad things. And then at the end I met Jesus and now my life has changed.

Usually the testimony ended there. We always thought it'd be nice to hear more about the change. But the really, I guess, sexy part, the really intriguing part, the entertaining part, was hearing about how bad they had been before.

And this is like one of those testimonies. At the end he says, essentially, and then I came back to God. And that's what you should do.

But throughout the book you're going to find him talking about his time away from God. His time making a futile search in the spirit excluded to that realm under the sun and trying to find meaning and fulfillment. Now I'm not going to go through the book, but I'm going to draw from it certain elements that will, I think, help you when you do read the book to make proper sense of it.

From time to time you find things in the book of Ecclesiastes that are simply not true. And there are people who try to make doctrines out of things that Solomon says in Ecclesiastes and end up with bad doctrine. For example, there's a, well, when I say bad doctrine, I don't believe in soul sleep.

Maybe you do. A lot of Christians I know do believe in soul sleep. Jehovah's Witnesses believe in it too.

So some cults believe in it. But the thing is soul sleep is the idea that when you die you're unconscious, completely unconscious, until the end of the world when Jesus raises from the dead. I don't think it's an abominable doctrine, but I don't think it's a correct one.

And one of the main verses they like to use is in Ecclesiastes 9, where Solomon says, the dead know nothing at all. That statement, the dead know nothing at all, sounds like it's saying, well, when you're dead you're unconscious. And that sounds like a support for that doctrine.

But if you're going to come up with proof texts for doctrines out of Ecclesiastes, you can find much more evidence in Ecclesiastes that there's nothing better for man than to eat and drink and be married. Because he says that about four or five times in the book. It clearly is not true.

It is not true that there's nothing better for man than that he eat and drink and be married. There are better things than that. But this is what he concluded.

This is what his temporary conclusion was at different points in his exploration. He's telling about his exploration. It'd be like if somebody had come out of a new age background and became a Christian, they're giving their testimony.

And they say, and here's what I believed at the time. I believed that, you know, when you die, you're reincarnated. And you come out better in the next incarnation if you had more good karma.

And worse if you had more bad karma. And I believe there was no personal God. And I believe there was no heaven or hell.

I believe there was just Nirvana and that after many incarnations we end up there. Now a person who's telling his testimony how he used to be in the New Age movement or Hindu, but now as a Christian, might tell those things as part of his story. He's not saying that he believes those things now.

He's saying that's what he was thinking at the time that he's describing. So for example, in chapter 9 where we do find the statement, the dead know nothing at all. And that is by the way verse 5. Ecclesiastes 9.5, for the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.

Well look four verses earlier. The chapter begins with, I considered all this in my heart. Considered it in the past tense.

I thought like this. Let me tell you what I was thinking at the time. I was thinking like this, including the idea that the dead don't know anything.

I thought people when they die were no different than animals when they die. That's what I was thinking. He's not saying that's true.

And so most of what's in Ecclesiastes has got to be understood in that realm. In fact, he gives many disclaimers. Like there are at least eight times when he prefaces something

by saying, I said in my heart, or I perceived, or I considered in my heart, or I communed with my heart, or I saw, or I've seen, or I said.

These are all past tense. He's talking about a time earlier in his life when he said these kinds of things, and saw these kinds of things, and perceived them a certain way, and considered in his heart that this was such and such. He's not telling us what is necessarily true about reality.

He's telling us something that was true about himself at an earlier time. This is what I was thinking. Now some of what he was thinking was not wrong, because let's face it, you don't have to be a Christian to know some things correctly.

You can be a great scientist, or mathematician, or historian without knowing a thing about God, if you're an expert in your field. Even some philosophers say a lot of things that are really true insofar as they agree with Christianity, but they do so without consulting Christianity, because they thought it through. And Solomon was a philosopher.

He was nothing if he was not a philosopher. And most of this book is philosophy. And I mean he did try hedonistic pleasures, sex, alcohol, parties, you name it, money, acquisition of everything he wanted.

But he also had a lot of thoughts about what is life about? What happens when you die? What is, what's the point of everything? What's the meaning of life? These are the things that are speculated about as much, if not more, in the book of Ecclesiastes. And some of the things that he speculated about come from real observations that are true. Let me show you some things he saw.

Not everything that he said was true at this time, but some things were. So don't be surprised if you find things in there that are wisdom, like the Proverbs themselves. But some of the things you just got to discern.

You've got to judge the truth value of everything in Ecclesiastes by how it squares with what the Bible teaches elsewhere, because it is not a book of doctrine. It's not a book that Solomon wrote in order to say everything I'm saying here is trustworthy. Now he's saying everything I'm saying here is something I once thought was trustworthy, but I wasn't very close to God in those days.

I wasn't thinking about anything except life under the sun. So don't trust everything I say, especially in terms of things I say about ultimate meanings and morals and things like that. You've got to get information about that from God, not just from watching things in the world, which Solomon spent a lot of time doing.

But he found many reasons to be cynical and pessimistic, and some of those things he saw, and they're in your notes here, the bottom of the first side of the page, Solomon's

case for cynicism and pessimism. He saw that everything is repetition and directionless. He talks about this in chapter 1 verses 4 through 10, and basically he says everything happens only that's happened before.

Whatever's happening now is going to happen again. Whatever happens now, it's not new. There's nothing new under the sun.

Everything's just a repeat. There's no progress. History is not going in a line.

It's going in a circle, which by the way is not true. Eastern religion teaches that history is circular. It's cyclic, but the Bible teaches that God has a plan.

There's a narrative that begins with creation, ends with redemption, and there's God's work. He's made a plan. He's working his plan, and history is linear.

But if you don't see that plan, because you're only looking at things under the sun, you just see a repetition of the same thing. Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it, and most people don't know it, so it gets repeated a lot. And so you see this, for example, in chapter 1, or verse 4, it says, one generation passes away, another generation comes, but the earth abides forever.

Nothing changes. The sun also rises, the sun goes down, and it hastens to the place where it arose. Just repeats.

Sunrise, sundown, repeat. The wind goes toward the south, it turns toward the north, the wind whirls around continually, and comes again to its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full, and the place from which the rivers come, there they return again.

Now he didn't know about our water cycle, and about precipitation, and evaporation, things like that. He wouldn't know that, but he did know enough to know that in the water that goes into the sea, it must find its way back to its source, because it keeps coming. You know, there must be a water cycle here.

He's a smart man. He didn't have the advantage of modern science, but he could tell that the water flows in the sea, it ends up going back to where it started, and running down in the river again, which is of course quite true. All things are full of labor.

That means they're burdensome, laborious. Man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing.

That which has been is what will be. That which is done is what will be done. There's nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which it may be said, see this is new? It's already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any

remembrance of things that are to come by those who come after. Now a lot of these verses are quotable in a sense that can be true.

When you say, well, you think there's some new vice? It's old. You know, this new problem in society? They had it back in the Greek Empire, the Roman Empire. Babylon had a problem.

These are old problems. There's no new problems. There's no new sins.

You know, there's nothing new under the sun. People say that, and in that sense it's true. But that's not just what he's saying.

He's saying there's nothing new at all. And yet God says in Revelation, behold I make all things new. Paul said, if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation.

Old things are passed away. All things become new. There is progress.

There is direction in God's plan and purpose in the world. Solomon just wasn't able to grasp it. All he could see is, hey, everything's happening now.

I heard that happened back when my dad was raining. And it happened in that other kingdom over there in Egypt when Pharaoh was raining. Over here in Moab, these things happen all the time.

Everything that happens is the same old thing. There's no progress. It's just circular.

And that was one reason he was pessimistic. He also said in chapter 1 verses 17 and 18 that the more you know, the more grief it brings to you. He said, I set my heart to know wisdom.

It's no madness and folly. I perceive that this also is grasping at the wind. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Well, this is really true in a way, because the more you know about the world, the more you know about what's wrong in the world. I mean, former generations before television didn't have any clear picture of what was going on, you know, where a tsunami hit another part of the world, or where people are starving, or where there's, you know, ethnic cleansing going on in Africa. People in Europe didn't know about these things.

People in England or in America didn't know these things. The more you get more knowledge, the more you realize the world's a pretty ugly place. It used to be that you only had to carry the burdens of the evils in your life and the life of people you were acquainted with and knew about, the sorrows they had.

Just last night I received a text from someone I don't know. I get a lot of texts from people in Africa and India and so forth because of my website. And I woke up this

morning on my phone, there was a text from someone saying, please pray for the situation my friend, pastor so-and-so, this is someone in Africa I believe, was killed in an accident last night.

His wife is in intensive care. His eight and ten-year-old children are, you know, left behind and so forth. And yeah, that was a burden when I read about it.

I don't even know this person. I don't even know where he lives. Never heard of the guy.

If a friend of mine died in a car accident, his wife was in intensive care and his kids, that would be a grief to me too. But now I get to share griefs from people all over the world I've never even meet. I would have never known that.

I don't need to know that necessarily. The more you know, the more is your capacity to be grieved by all the tragedy and all the disaster. Solomon didn't have an iPhone but apparently because he was gathering information from all over the world, he realized, hey, this is, there's a lot to be grieved about here.

That's the reason for pessimism and cynicism. In fact, he says in chapter 2 verses 3 through 11, which we won't read, that he tried mirth, meaning partying. He tried partying with musicians and wine and women.

I just concluded it's madness. It's just, it's just, it's insanity. I've never done much of that myself because I was raised a Christian.

But I've certainly known people and I've seen lives depicted in movies and things like that. People who, you know, they live for the weekend so they can go out to the club and dance and have music loud and drink with their buddies and just tell body jokes and things. And I think this is what they look forward to? If I was in that situation, how much do I have to pay to get out of here now? You know, this is so unpleasant.

It's madness for someone to think that that's what you live for, is for these weekends, for that kind of thing. That's what Solomon was doing. He said, I was partying hard.

I had the women, I had the wine, I had the music, you know, I had everything that everyone's having fun, but I'm a little too intelligent to think that's sensible. That's madness, he said. It's an insane way to spend your life, he said.

And that's speaking as one who wasn't really a Christian. He was seeing it because he was just wise enough to notice it. Another thing he brings up several times, chapter 2 verses 14 through 23, also chapter 3 verse 19 and chapter 7 verse 2, he brings up repeatedly that men and animals kind of all have the same end.

They all die. Man seems superior to the animals when he's alive, but at the end, same thing happens to a man that happens to an animal. They die.

What's that about? You know, in the end man is no better than the animals. Solomon didn't know anything about the afterlife, but then he can't be blamed for that because actually in the Old Testament God didn't really reveal things about the afterlife. That was revealed in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament there was hardly a mention of an afterlife at all, and certainly no revelation of what happens to people after they die.

And so Solomon, like anyone else, had to speculate. He said, as near as I can tell, a man dies, he's gone. Animal dies, it's gone.

It's just the same, man and animal. All those virtues, all those superiorities, those excellencies that make man so proud that he's above the animals, it all kind of comes down to the same thing at the end. It's very humbling.

C.S. Lewis likes to quote somebody, I forget who he quoted, but who said, you know, I'm not so much afraid of death as ashamed of it. You know, it's like very humbling. Think, well, I lived in all my glory, tried to get all this respect, all this attention, and finally if my friends outlive me, they'll get to look at me, you know, in a coffin, totally impotent as much as a dead animal.

Solomon was thinking like that, and he was thinking, you know, and this is true of all men, whether they're wise or fools. That didn't seem fair. Seemed like a wise man uses his life better and finds more meaning in life, should seemingly, than more than a fool, and yet they both end up the same.

And then another thing he thought was pretty bad was that a wise man may build a great estate, but when he dies, he leaves it to his son, who's a fool. Solomon actually had that experience. He didn't live to see it.

He built up this kingdom, and then he left it to Rehoboam, who destroyed it in three days. But he worried about that. I think he could foresee that.

He was a smart man. He thought, hey, I've got this great kingdom, and this idiot son of mine is going to have it all at his disposal when I'm gone? Sheesh. He said, this is vanity.

This is strident. A man leaves his accomplishments to one who may be a fool and may waste them all, and certainly that did happen. He mentions that in chapter 2, verses 18 and 19.

He also mentions in several places that he has observed corruption in high places in government. Now, he apparently did not regard himself as a corrupt king, and we do see only a few samples of this administration in the early days, like when he judged between the two women who were fighting over the one baby. He certainly made a brilliant decision in that case, and I think we're supposed to understand this was, in general, how he was.

He made wise decisions to vindicate the right person and so forth, give the baby exerts right mom, expose the wrong mom, and so forth. But, of course, we do also read in his history that he was kind of an oppressor himself. He built the temple.

He built his own palace, which took twice as long as building the temple, and he did a whole bunch of other civic works on the backs of slaves. Lots of slaves. Israeli slaves.

His own subjects. He was quite an oppressor. This is why the kingdom broke up after he died, because his son was approached by the Israelis, his subjects, and said, listen, your father oppressed us.

If you will lighten the load of oppression, we'll serve you. If you don't, we're going to break off in a rebel against you. And Rehoboam foolishly said, well, I'm going to be harder than my dad was on you, and they caused the kingdom to break up.

But he was not all that wise. He was an oppressor. He mentions in this, he says, I see this injustice, that the poor are oppressed, and there's corruption in high places.

Now, he may have been saying this by means of repentance. He might have been saying, you know, now that I've reached the end of my life, I see that I've been a jerk. I've been oppressive.

I've been not a good king at all. That might be what he's saying. But if he is, he's saying, and yet even if I stop doing it, this goes on universally.

People in power oppress people who are under their heel. If they can, they will. And this is depressing, he says.

He also said in chapter 5, verses 10 through 17, that he has seen that wealth, which most people think will make them secure, he says, actually wealth deprives a man of his peace of mind. A man with very little has very little to worry about, very little to lose. But a man who's wealthy, it takes away his sleep, takes away, he's got something to lose.

He's got something to worry about. I remember telling a Christian friend of mine about someone I knew who had, he'd had a thousand dollars in his wallet, which was a lot of money in those days, and someone had sold his wallet. And so this guy was really upset.

I took a thousand dollars. I was telling a Christian friend of mine, he says, well he had it to lose. You know? No one has ever sold a thousand dollars for me.

I don't have it, you know? And you know, he had it to lose. If you've got it, you've got it to lose. And it can bum you out to lose it.

You never have it in the first place. You're not bummed out. Having the money can make you insecure.

He said, when goods increased, they increased to eat them, to consume them. Just ask anyone who's ever won the lottery. Suddenly they have more relatives than they ever knew they had, you know? Where there's a will, there's a way.

And when there's wealth, there is a lot of competition for that wealth. And the man who's got it has got headaches. I won't go into that anymore, because I have to say there's been a few brief seasons where I've had some wealth that I inherited or whatever, I got a settlement.

And I remember it was a headache. I was so glad when that was gone. And then I could just live normally again.

Because it does deprive you of peace. If you have a lot of money in the stock market, and you watch the stock market daily, you're gonna be grieved more often than someone who doesn't have anything in the stock market. You're gonna be happy when it goes up, maybe not too happy, because you're always worried it's gonna go back down.

And when it does go down, you don't necessarily feel like, well, it's gonna go back up. You just hear, oh no, it's down. Money, wealth, it deprives you of peace in many cases.

That's what Solomon observed. He also said women couldn't be trusted. He didn't have a high view of some women.

Now he had a high view of some women, but not all. But he said in chapter 7 verse 26, 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.

Then he says this, this is a little hard to understand. The sentence seems to be missing a few words, but you can kind of get the general sense of what he says. Here's what I have found, says the preacher, adding one thing to the other to find out the reason, which my soul still seeks but I cannot find.

One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found. Truly this only have I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. That's not clear if he means by they, the women.

God made man upright, but the women got us into trouble. They always get us in trouble, they seek out many schemes. And he says, you know, I haven't found one man in a, well I find one man in a thousand, but not even one man, not even one woman in a thousand.

Now what's he talking about? One, find what? What's he looking for in these thousands? He doesn't say, but apparently he's saying he doesn't find virtue. Not one man in a thousand impresses him for their virtue, and not even one woman in a thousand. He had a thousand women, he had 700 wives, 300 concubines.

He's actually perhaps alluding to that fact. Among all these, I'm not finding anyone that impresses me. He is cynical.

Now by the way, he probably didn't impress the women that much either. I mean, he was impressive to women who like rich guys and powerful guys, but as far as getting the respect of a woman or the love of a woman, I think a man who's got a thousand women probably isn't very highly loved or respected by any of them. Why should they? They've got a lot of competition for that.

He also says, and this is another reason for his cynicism in the book, that rewards in life come by chance and by fate, but not by merit. And you see this in chapter 9 verse 11. He says, I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill, but time and chance happen to them all.

Elsewhere he talks about he's seen men who are wise who were rewarded as if they were fools. He's seen men who are fools who were rewarded as if they were wise. He's basically saying this is not a merit-based world.

It should be, but it just isn't. You can be very righteous and still have things go very badly for you. But again, he's thinking about under the sun at this point.

He's not thinking about the next life. He's not thinking about how a righteous man is rewarded in another life and a foolish man also punished in another life. He's only seeing at eye level.

He's only seeing at ground level how things are from the an observer under the sun. One more thing here about his cynicism and that is that men are more esteemed for their social position than for their virtue and wisdom. This is seen in chapter 9 also verses 13 and following.

He says, this wisdom I have also seen under the sun and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with a few men in it and a great king came against it and besieged it and built a great snares around it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city yet no one remembered the same poor man.

Then I said wisdom is better than strength. Nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words were not heard. So he's basically saying he's a wise, this poor man was wise and he saved the city but he's not remembered.

He's not honored because he was poor, because he wasn't a rich man. People are revered for their riches not because they're wise or because they're good or because they're people are indebted to them but just because. Why would people show more favor to rich people? Well obviously because they can get something out of them.

Everybody's a friend to the rich man. It says that's all in problems but the poor man even his brothers despise him. If you don't have anything that people can gain from you you're gonna have a lot fewer friends.

Of course if you do have something people can gain from you and you have a lot of friends you always have to worry about the kind of friends they are and that's what Solomon's saying here. Now on the back of the sheet I'm not gonna take the time for it but there's a couple other categories. There are statements in Ecclesiastes as I mentioned that aren't exactly true and sometimes he says in different parts of different things that are contradictory to each other.

Now this is simply what comes of a man trying to figure out what life is about without divine revelation without thinking without knowing about the things of God. He was worldly wise but he was not wise in the things of God and because of that he saw some things clearly at times and other things he they seemed the opposite to him. Let me just I'm not going to look these up the references are all there in the notes but for example we mentioned in 1.9 there's nothing new but there are some things new.

It's true a lot of things are not new. Some things repeat a lot. Some things go in circles.

Some mistakes are made again and again but but some things are new. There are some things new. It's not not completely true when he says there's nothing new.

He says in verse chapter 1 verse 15 that which is crooked cannot be made straight and yet the Bible does talk about God making crooked ways straight. He says the wise man dies just like a fool does and is remembered no more than a fool is in chapter 2 verse 16. Well that's true for an earthly perspective not from a heavenly perspective.

It's not the same for a virtuous wise man as it is for a wicked fool. Another thing that's not quite true is there's nothing better to do than to eat and drink and enjoy your life. Well there are better things to do than that but maybe not if you don't know of anything after this life then I guess grab all the gusto you can is what he's saying.

It's not quite true. It might seem true from the perspective of one who doesn't know about the next life but it's not true to one who's informed from the New Testament. He says in chapter 7 verse 16 don't be too righteous or overly wise.

Why did he say that? Because he's just said I saw I knew I've seen righteous men who it happens to them according to what should happen to an unrighteous man and I've seen unrighteous men but what happens to them is according what should happen to a righteous man. That's what he says just before this. Like Job for example.

You may have Job in mind or people like Job. They're good people but bad things happen to them. Shouldn't be.

And then there's these bad people seemingly good things happen to them. One of the psalmist in Psalm 73 observed that. That he said he almost stumbled he almost lost his faith when he saw how the wicked prospered and seemed to be without pain and sorrow in their life and the righteous were poor and oppressed.

That's in Psalm 73. He says I almost lost my faith over that one. It's an observation Solomon made too and that's but is it really true? Does that mean okay so don't be too wise don't be too righteous.

Don't go overboard. Don't be a fanatic. Well no it's still good to be as righteous as you can.

Even if it will happen to you in this world according to what shouldn't happen to righteous people but God's keeping track. God's keeping score. Jesus said when you when you throw a feast invite all the poor and the maimed and the blind who can't repay you in this life because you'll be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous.

You're being generous to people who aren't going to repay you in this life. You could die without any people helping you out. So what? God will help you out.

Jesus said you'll be repaid in the resurrection but Solomon didn't know about that and of course his statement in chapter 5 9 verse 5 the dead know nothing at all. Well a man without divine revelation might know might think that but I think the Bible indicates that we do. That's perhaps from the body for Christians to be present with the Lord.

And the last last section I'm not going to go over but there are times when Solomon seems to say one thing in one part of the book and says the opposite thing in another part and I've listed about what six examples of that in your notes which you can look at which is just a I'm just saying that to prep you because the assumption of these lectures is I'm giving you an introduction so you can read the book. Not now when you go home read the book and when you do I want you to bear in mind that these things because otherwise you'll be kind of confused. He said that didn't he just say something different there what's going on does the Bible contradict itself? No but Solomon does or at least did when he was away from God and that's what we have in the book of Ecclesiastes his testimony of the mistakes he made when he was away from God and a very valuable one for anybody who's contemplating living their life away from God because he's saying I don't know where you're gonna go I don't know what you're gonna pursue but wherever whatever you pursue I've already done that and I'll tell you what you'll find I can save you a lot of time when you get to the end of that road you'll find it's a dead end it's empty you're as empty at the end as you were at the beginning it's just like you were striving after the wind because you were reaching for something that wasn't there where you were looking for what is the conclusion fear God keep his commandments this is the whole duty of man God's gonna judge everything you do and therefore seek the Lord serve the Lord in the days of your youth before it's too late and you end up just giving

him the ragged ends like Solomon apparently did.