

Ecclesiastes (May 31)

Reading Ecclesiastes

His whole body was filled with delight. The aroma was so good, so tempting, it merited a closer look. At the jar's edge, the scent overwhelmed him. He settled upon it and gorged himself with sticky sweetness. But then he could not pull away. Although he beat his wings until they buzzed, the ointment clung to him and drew him down to silence.

Similarly, Solomon's pursuits and experiences drew him down like a fly stuck in the proverbial ointment. Though he had greater wisdom than all and greater wealth than most, in the end he could not enjoy them. Ecclesiastes records how Solomon viewed life and its pleasures as a trap that brings deadly silence. Yet Solomon breaks this silence by calling out the "end of the matter" (Ecclesiastes 12:13), wisdom's abiding treasure: the fear of the Lord. He even anticipates the hope of the resurrection.

Author and Date

No time period or writer's name is mentioned in the book, but several passages strongly suggest that King Solomon is the author. On the other hand, the writer's title ("Teacher"), his unique style of Hebrew, and his attitude toward rulers may point to another person and a later period.

Purpose and Method

With his life largely behind him, the author takes stock of the world as he has experienced it between the horizons of birth and death – the latter a horizon beyond which man cannot see. The world is seen as being full of enigmas, the greatest of which is man himself.

As the author looks about at the human enterprise, he sees man in mad pursuit of one thing and then another – laboring as if he could master the world, lay bare its secrets, change its fundamental structures, break through the bounds of human limitations, and master his own destiny. He sees man vainly pursuing hopes and expectations that in reality are "meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

But faith teaches him that God has ordered all things according to his own purposes and that man's role is to accept these, including his own limitations, as God's appointments. Man, therefore, should be patient and enjoy life as God gives it. He should know his own limitations and not vex himself with unrealistic expectations. He should be prudent in everything, living carefully before God and the king, and above all, fearing God and keeping his commandments.

Life not centered on God is purposeless and meaningless. Without him, nothing else can satisfy. With him, all of life and his other good gifts are to be gratefully received and used and enjoyed to the full. The book presents the philosophical and theological reflections of a typical person, most of whose life was meaningless because he had not himself relied on God.

Blessings for Readers

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