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Ecclesiastes – Key to Understanding it

By Rev. Peter Eng

*"Ecclesiastes is the most misunderstood book in the entire Bible. Its apparent contradictions and the questions it raises have delighted skeptics and puzzled the faithful through the ages."
Bruce Waltke*

Books like Revelation and the second half of Daniel may be difficult to understand because of their unusual imageries. Ecclesiastes reads plainly, and the words are easily understood. It is precisely at this point that many read Ecclesiastes with frustration. We may understand the words, but do not seem to understand the meaning. Some would even say it is the most depressing book in the Bible.

One view of Ecclesiastes is that the conclusion controls the book. The rest of the entire book constitutes the confession of one who indulged in sensuality. This view is right to observe that the concluding section summarizes the arguments of the book. At the same time, it is dangerous to say that God's Word merely records the rambling of a frustrated and futile life, only to say at the end of everything that he was wrong all along. Such a view is incongruous with the general picture of how God reveals himself and his will to us.

Bewilderment leads some to suggest that Ecclesiastes is the work of man's reasoning and not revealed truth. This is perilously close to denying that Ecclesiastes should be part of the Bible!

One of the lessons in Ecclesiastes is that there are many enigmas in life. The Teacher "discovers that human wisdom, even that of a godly person, has limits (1:13, 16-18; 7:24; 8:16-17). It cannot find out the larger purposes of God or the ultimate meaning of man's existence." (NIV Study Bible). If we apply that to Ecclesiastes, we may say that where our limited understand cannot comprehend all that is in the book, we can apprehend it by faith, and wait for a day of greater understanding. What is improper, is to throw our hands up in surrender or to toss the book out and deny its place in the Word of God whether by assertion or neglect.

We can understand this book if we have a few key elements in place:

1. Theme
2. Structure
3. Literary Genre
4. Progressive Revelation

Theme

A cursory inspection of this book, tells us it is about man in pursuit of many things. He tries to satisfy his need for significance by leaving behind a good name, posterity

or a large inheritance. He delights himself in intellectual pursuits and tries to lay bare the secrets of the world. He strives for social utopia by challenging existing social and political structures. Perhaps he is a pragmatic person, since he simply labors for food and drink.

The Teacher tells us in no uncertain terms that whatever our pursuits, without God, they are meaningless. We must be emotionally and mentally prepared to face harsh reality when we come to this book. The writer, King Solomon, is brutally honest. He confronts issues that many of us dare not ask. He confronts the self-seeking, self-pleasing, and self-exalting person in us with the futility of our pursuits. No wonder we find Ecclesiastes distasteful. With one stroke, he strips away all pretence of happiness. *He asks both the secularist and the pious whether or not they are really enjoying life.*

The Teacher points out our real earthly needs, and the soul hunger in us. We are also bound by real limitations which make all attempts to enjoy life futile – unless God is there. He points us to the sovereignty of God (3:1-15; 5:19; 6:1-2; 9:1) and tells us that we need to accept *God-given limitations*, and live by *God-given guidelines*. Through this, we learn to enjoy life.

The theme of Ecclesiastes comes as a surprise to many. It is: *How to enjoy life*. We see this as a refrain throughout the book (2:24-25; 3:12-14,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-12:1). The Teacher tells us in this book that God has given us definite perimeters within which to operate. Within the confines of birth and death, within the confines of limited material resources, under the oppression of the wealthy or the powerful, and the limitations of wisdom, our transient existence vanishes like the morning vapor. He tells us that we can stare reality and

harshness in the eye and at the same time enjoy the life God assigns us.

In addition to handling how we can enjoy life within God-given perimeters, he also instructs us on how to enjoy life according to God-given guidelines. There are instructions on how we ought to conduct ourselves and direct our lives that we may enjoy it. The fuller statement of the theme in Ecclesiastes would be: How to enjoy life within God-given perimeters and according to God-given guidelines.

Waltke has an excellent summary of the Teacher's faith. It is also the life of faith that we are called to enjoy. He describes it:

1. God is wise and he has a plan.
2. God is not only wise, but he is also good.
3. God is not only wise and good, but he is also just—a day of judgment is coming.

Structure

If we wish to understand Ecclesiastes properly, we have to spend time over the structure of Ecclesiastes. This is not an idle exercise in intellectual prowess. It is important because we need to discover the thought flow of the Teacher. One cannot understand the details unless he first understands the big picture, and one cannot get the big picture unless he has a good control of the details. It is a cycle of successive approximation.

Many of us will not be able to take the time to discover the structure for ourselves. For us to understand this book, constant reference to the outline is essential. This article provides an outline to help us follow the points the Teacher brings up. On the whole, it may be said that the first six chapters talk of how we can enjoy life within God-given

perimeters, and the last six chapters talk of how we can enjoy life by living according to God-given guidelines.

In ancient writing, structural markers within the text are used to help the reader know when a new thought is being introduced. We need to look at "everything is meaningless" as a paragraph marker. Next, the sectional markers are discerned through the main theme, viz. there is nothing better for us than to enjoy life (2:24-25; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-12:1). Finally, the most important structural determinant is the content.

Through these, and other observations, an outline has been formulated for us. Needless to say, no outline is perfect. You are encouraged to work on the outline for this will give you a hands-on experience as you follow the reasoning of the Teacher.

Literary Genre

Ecclesiastes is a mixture of prose and poetry. Readers who use the KJV do well to refer to either the NIV or the NASB to see which portions are prose and which poetry. Unless we get this right, Ecclesiastes cannot make sense. It would be reading Shakespeare as though it were pulp fiction.

In addition to Ecclesiastes being mostly poetry, it is also under the category of wisdom literature. Wisdom, as a whole refers to "skill in godly living." But in Ecclesiastes, the broader concept is regularly used: "skill in living." In terms of the theme in Ecclesiastes, it is: "*skills in living an enjoyable life.*"

The content of Ecclesiastes is philosophy. This is the only book in the Bible with such content. We can expect to put in more effort when we read this book. In fact,

some scholars assert that in all of ancient literature, there is no other book like Ecclesiastes. The other books of antiquity may have similar portions, but no book was devoted to philosophy.

In this regard, we need to note that the term "wisdom" as used in Proverbs is different from the word "wisdom" here. "Wisdom" in Proverbs is portrayed as always good and wholesome. It is skill in godly living. Ecclesiastes addresses *how the godly life is also the goodly life.*

In common ancient vocabulary, "wisdom" refers to observations of how we ought to live our lives. It is *applied philosophy*. For those who are familiar with eastern applied philosophy, it is akin to the philosophy of Confucius or Lao Tze, as oppose to the deductive philosophy of Anselm, Hume or Russell. The Teacher often uses "wisdom" in the sense of applied philosophy. He is not referring to western style deductive philosophy, or the narrower definition in Proverbs.

At times, we find wisdom denigrated by the Teacher, and at other times, wisdom is commended. The book itself is a wisdom book. We need to know that the Teacher switches freely between the broader definition of wisdom as applied philosophy (largely secular), and the narrower godly philosophy of life as we find in Proverbs. We need to keep this in mind when the subject of wisdom is raised.

Another term we need to understand in Ecclesiastes is the word "vanity" in the KJV and NASB. In the NIV, it is "meaningless." When we think of "vanity" we think of a person who has a high self-esteem of his looks, one who preens and parades before a mirror. But the idea here is that everything is "in vain" rather than that everything is overweening. In

present day vocabulary, the NIV is easier to understand.

The word "meaningless" means that which is empty, hollow, which is found wanting, and has no value. A secondary meaning of this word is that which is "transient." This is the thought behind Ecclesiastes 9:9; 11:10; and in a few other places.

Progressive Revelation

One other consideration in understanding Ecclesiastes is to bear in mind that while we have the complete word of God in the Old and New Testaments, OT saints did not. They have very little revelation compared to us, but they too have enough for holy living.

Solomon lived during a time when he had the Pentateuch, Job, Judges, some parts of Psalms, and perhaps I and II Samuel. While there is no doubt that he believed in life after death (as all ancient people do) he doesn't know much about life after death. Some of the statements made on death being the termination, and the dark veil through which all must go, make Christians uncomfortable.

The believers then knew that there is life after death, and that there will eventually be a bodily resurrection. But we need to accept that they know less than we do. Furthermore, Solomon's concern in this book is not to treat the question of life after death. His statements are designed to bring home the message that we all die. Rather than live as though there is no tomorrow, we need to be fully aware that there is an end, beyond which we know very little. The proper thing for us to do is to enjoy life as God intends.

Conclusion

Once we understand where the Teacher is going, we will better appreciate the content of Ecclesiastes. If there is

anything that should surprise us in Ecclesiastes, it is how the Teacher attacks the values of this world in a comprehensive assault designed to eliminate any other philosophy of life. To do so, he confronts all the real life objections on why a person might not want to live a godly life. Having done so, he tells us there is only one way to enjoy life: God's way.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.