

Under the Sun

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Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon

This inductive Bible study is designed for individual, small group, or classroom use. A leader's guide with full lesson plans and the answers to the Bible study questions is available from Regular Baptist Press. Order RBP1719 online at www.regularbaptistpress.org, e-mail orders@rbpstore.org, call toll-free 1-800-727-4440, or contact your distributor.

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

UNDER THE SUN: ECCLESIASTES AND SONG OF SOLOMON

Adult Bible Study Book

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Preface

Throughout all of human history men and women have asked several key questions. Among these questions are “What is life, and how can life be fulfilling?” and “What is the key to real love?” People of every age ask these questions, and countless authors and speakers have suggested many answers.

The Bible contains God’s wisdom for life. It does not avoid the tough questions, but it answers them clearly. In this study, you will examine two Old Testament books that focus on the critical questions of life and love.

Ecclesiastes may sound out of step with the rest of the Bible. But when we read it carefully, its message powerfully reinforces what God’s Word teaches elsewhere. As Solomon searched for satisfying life under the sun, he came at last to the conclusion that life is found only in a vibrant relationship with God. When we respect God and obey His Word, we are free to enjoy life to the fullest as His good gift.

Song of Solomon uses intimate language to speak of human love as God designed it to be. Instead of glorifying physical intimacy apart from marriage, as our world most often does, it insists that the physical expression of love is proper only within marriage. On the other hand, it does not shrink away from the sexual aspect of love, but it shows that within marriage intimacy is blessed and encouraged by the Lord.

Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon speak with stunning relevance to life today. You will learn that life *Under the Sun* can find meaning as it is lived *for the Son*.

Lesson 1

The Puzzle of Life

Only God can make sense of life.

Ecclesiastes Overview

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:1–3).

Life can seem like a vicious circle. We work to earn money to buy the food that will give us the strength to work for more money to buy the food that will give us even more strength to do even more work. Taking this view of life can be maddening and disheartening. But many people struggle to find another plausible view of the average person’s life.

Getting Started

1. Is this a realistic view of the average person’s life?

2. Would you say this depicts a significant life?

3. What would need to be added to this life to make it significant?

Searching the Scriptures

During the next few weeks you will examine Ecclesiastes, a book that tackles the question, What makes life significant? Written by Solomon, his purpose was to tear down all human misconceptions about the significant life. In their place he concluded that only a life of obedience to God brings lasting joy and fulfillment.

In order to understand the message of Ecclesiastes, we first need to see the book as a whole.

Authorship and Date

Unlike many books of the Bible, the authorship of Ecclesiastes is difficult to determine. In fact, although the book has been traditionally attributed to Solomon, many scholars today reject Solomon as the writer. For them, the language of the book points in other directions. Nevertheless, a number of pieces of evidence support Solomon as author. The writer, like Solomon, had unparalleled wisdom (1:16), unequalled wealth (2:8), ample opportunities for pleasure (2:3, 10), and extensive building activities (2:4–6).

The identification of the writer as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” does not demand Solomon as the author, but it strongly suggests it. The verse could refer to another son of David, with “king” then referring to David. However, in the light of the other evidence, it most likely refers to Solomon.

Determining the kind of man who wrote the book is easy. He possessed keen observation and penetrating understanding. He looked at life carefully and analyzed it critically. He had a restless spirit, for he wanted to find true, lasting satisfaction in life. He wanted to discover eternal significance that transcended material possessions and human achievements. He was not content with superficial pleasures in life; he insisted on finding true fulfillment and meaning.

If this book came from Solomon, as it likely did, then it was written during the time of Israel's greatest power and prosperity. Though on the surface everything seemed fine in Israel, underneath there were deep problems that caused the kingdom to split apart after Solomon's death (1 Kings 12). In addition, Solomon himself experienced spiritual struggles in his latter years (1 Kings 11:1–13). Ecclesiastes may well be the written record of his internal turmoil. It reveals the inner struggle of a man who seemed to have it all but who felt empty inside.

4. What do people usually conclude about the inner satisfaction and well-being of those who are “doing well” in life?

5. Does the smile on a face always mean that there is a smile in a heart? Explain.

6. Why can times of prosperity also be times of soul hunger?

Structure

When we read a book, we expect the author to take us directly from one point to the next. For example, a novel does not skip around from one date to another in a haphazard way. A logical discussion moves from a cause to the effects produced by the cause.

Most of the books of the Bible follow this kind of linear progression. However, Ecclesiastes takes a different approach. Instead of moving in a straight line, Ecclesiastes is more like a set of circles that keep returning to the same point. Eventually, the book gets to its main point, but on the way Solomon takes the reader along the journey that he took in trying to find meaning in life.

7. Skim through Ecclesiastes. Why didn't Solomon just give his conclusion in a logical, straightforward way?

What Solomon did is both creative and powerful. His approach reproduces in the reader the feelings of futility that Solomon had. By the end of the book, the reader not only knows the answer but feels the pain of the problem and appreciates the significance of the solution.

The book begins with a prologue (1:1–11), in which Solomon gave his initial assessment of life, “All is vanity under the sun.” This raises the question that drives the entire search, “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (1:3). When pain is subtracted from pleasure, asked Solomon, what profit is left?

After the prologue, Solomon moved through his first observation of life. In 1:12–2:23, he carefully analyzed his experiences. Then he evaluated them in terms of God's oversight of life (2:24–26). He tentatively concluded that although life seems enigmatic, God gives the believer the capacity to enjoy life.

Solomon followed the same pattern three more times. He concluded each observation of life (3:1–5:20; 6:1–8:15; and 8:16–12:8) by evaluating it from a theological point of view. Each section demonstrated that there can be fulfillment in life, even though many of the details of life remain puzzling.

The key to the book is found in the epilogue in 12:9–14, where Solomon stated the conclusion that his painful search produced. Without this final truth, the book would leave us going in circles, but this verse brings us to a fixed point on which to stand. God's wisdom surpasses the partial understanding of humans.

Humans can see only part of what is happening in life, and that part leaves them restless and frustrated. However, the eternal God knows what He is doing, and He will evaluate what every person does in life. This conclusion forms the framework in which the rest of the book must be interpreted.

8. What has happened in your life that leaves you frustrated?

9. How does the fact that God knows what He is doing affect your life?

Purposes

Because the content of Ecclesiastes differs from the rest of the Bible, many people have wondered why it is included in God's Word. In fact, some scholars believe it is a piece of cynical philosophy that argues against the rest of Scripture. But when the book is seen as a whole, several important purposes emerge. The purposes include the following.

- Attempts to satisfy the human hunger to understand how all of life fits into a meaningful pattern.
- Addresses the boredom of the joyless routine of the average life.
- Calls the world to develop a God-centered view of life.
- Convinces the reader that life that does not rise above human efforts is useless.
- Endeavors to untangle a major enigma of life: Why can a person have everything this world offers yet feel so empty?
- Challenges the young to reflect on the issues of life and to choose to obey God.

Ecclesiastes challenges the unbeliever's belief system, but it also convicts the believer of any worldly philosophies or viewpoints he or she may have adopted. For instance, a believer without a lot of money might adopt the belief that having a rich person's money would indeed make them happy.

10. Evaluate this statement: That person's money may not have made him happy, but I am convinced it would make me happy.

Themes

The major themes of Ecclesiastes flow out of its purposes. The first theme states that life is enigmatic, for it leaves many questions unanswered. The second theme directs the reader to enjoy life, but be accountable to God.

11. What would Solomon have concluded about the idea that to be spiritual you have to be somber and serious most of the time?

Furthermore, Solomon's emphasizes that true meaning in life cannot be found in the temporal, earthly sphere. He builds on this theme by demonstrating that God has created humans with an eternal hunger and that the prospect of death urges a wise investment of life.

12. Evaluate this statement: Facing our mortality rather than denying it would most likely help us to live more productive lives.

Finally, Solomon taught that only God gives joy in the treadmill of human existence. Life is bleak without God in the picture.

When we read Ecclesiastes carefully, we find a message of optimism and hope. Life "under the sun" is disillusioning, but life does not have to be confined in that way. When we take God into account, our eternal hunger is satisfied, we have joy in the face of life's puzzles, and we have hope for the future.

Significance

13. If you were inviting an unsaved person to the class sessions on Ecclesiastes, how would you describe this book's relevance to him?

Ecclesiastes is significant for the questions it raises. Solomon dared to ask the hard questions that challenge our thinking. Instead of using his possessions, power, and pleasures to drown out his feelings of frustration, he faced the issue of significance.

In doing this, Solomon followed the same course many others have traveled. In modern times many leading thinkers have given up on life. Some people give themselves over to mindless pleasures in a sad attempt to deny the gnawing pain they have in their hearts. Others conclude that life has no meaning at all—that it is absurd and that the only way out is death.

Ecclesiastes is such a powerful book for modern people because it gives solid answers to these troubling issues. Solomon did not leave us in the despair of disillusionment or take us on a flight of fear. Instead, he turned to the one source of significant life, God. He challenged his readers to reverence God and to keep His commandments, for only He can give life.

Making It Personal

14. If only God can make sense of life, then what is true of people who don't see any purpose in living?

15. What will happen to them in their attempts to make sense of life without God?

16. Identify an unbeliever you know who is struggling to make sense of life. From what you have learned about Ecclesiastes so far, what can you do to help him or her?

17. From what you have learned from this overview of Ecclesiastes, how relevant is the book to your life?

18. Complete the following self-evaluation test to help you determine whether or not you are living with God at the center of your life. On the scale the one means the statement is not at all descriptive of you. The three means it is somewhat descriptive of you, and the five means it is very descriptive of you. If the statements are all highly descriptive of you, then you most likely are not living with God at the center of your life.

1 2 3 4 5 I respond to difficult circumstances by becoming depressed.

1 2 3 4 5 I find it difficult to motivate myself to do mundane tasks.

1 2 3 4 5 I only think of God's presence with me when I am at church or with other believers.

1 2 3 4 5 I seem to be living from thrill to thrill.

1 2 3 4 5 I delay dealing with problems by immersing myself in hobbies or interests.

1 2 3 4 5 I lay awake at night while anxious thoughts flood my mind.

1 2 3 4 5 I don't spend much time in prayer.

19. How do you expect to be changed from this study of Ecclesiastes?

20. Memorize Ecclesiastes 1:1–3.