

Ecclesiastes 1- Introduction

Before people take an expensive trip to another country, they will often buy a book: a travel guide. These books are written by people who have visited the country in question and can tell you what is of interest, what is a must-see, what is unpleasant and avoidable, what things cost. They tell you what to expect, how to do things, so as to make the most of your time in that country. After all, you're spending a lot of money to go to this foreign country, so it only makes sense to prepare yourself. That way, you don't arrive in that country and waste hours, if not days, trying to figure out what's going on.

I would say that most people live their lives like people who arrive in a foreign country without a clue of what's going on. Only, it is not a foreign country they have come to, it is life itself. They spend most of their lives trying to figure out what is actually going on in life. They spend not just hours or days, but years trying to make sense of it all, trying to make life work. Some get by better than others. Almost everyone experiences the kind of confusion that a tourist experiences when trying to get around in a country where no one speaks your language. Things don't make sense. Things don't add up. Life seems unfair. Life seems pointless. Life does not seem to satisfy. And yet, our hearts want satisfaction, they want there to be a point, they want justice. Some come undone and just lose it, as they contemplate life. Others try not to think about it all and busy themselves with their particular pursuit. Some just accept a permanent sense of confusion or despair as normal.

Wouldn't it be great if there were a travel guide for life itself? To have a guide to tell you what it's about, where to go, what to see, what to do, what to avoid, so that you are not bumping your head all the time in perpetual frustration and confusion. Now that's no easy task. We'd need a number of things to be in place for that guide to be worth anyone's time. The author would need to have sampled something of everything life has to offer. He would have to have tried pleasure – be it parties, shopping, sexual exploits, food and every imaginable luxury that money can buy. A very small percentage of the earth's population could write that book.

He'd need to have sampled power, been in a position to command and judge, to see justice and injustice, oppression and freedom, and understand all the pains and trials of human society, politics and economics. Even less people could do that.

He'd need to have experienced singleness, marriage, companionship, death, war and peace, and lived long enough to see the mysteries of life.

He'd need to have sampled fame and fortune, listened to philosophers for the meaning of life, spent hours and hours and hours thinking about it and writing about it. He'd need to have a very high intelligence and wisdom, to bring all this knowledge together into a cohesive guide, with a powerful logical mind that could reason without error.

Finally, he'd need something that has only ever been given to around 40 people. He'd need to have God Himself, the author of life speak through him, and move him to write what God wanted. The three sources of knowledge are divine revelation, human reason and experience. This travel guide would need God's inspiration, a powerful human reasoning mind and a personal experience so rare that almost no one could have experienced it.

You don't have to imagine such a book. It has been written. It is the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes is all the things I have just mentioned. It is inspired. It is powerfully reasonable. And it records the experience and conclusions of a man who had it all, tried it all, lost it all and came to

the right conclusions at the end of his life.

To neglect the book of Ecclesiastes is somewhat like spending all that money to get to another country, and fail to pick up on small book to help you figure it all out when you get there. The difference is that what you will waste by not reading Ecclesiastes is not just money, but your whole life. You will keep trying to figure it all out on your own, while making more and more errors, all the while a little book that takes up maybe 13 pages (of you have a large-print Bible) of your Bible. As we study this book together, I want to encourage you to be reading through it. Set yourself the goal of reading through the whole book five times, by the time we have finished it. As you read it, mark what you don't understand. That's the only way you understand a difficult book, is by taking note of what you trip over, and coming back to it until it makes sense. If you really want to know this book, I recommend writing out your own copy of it.

I want us to look at the Author and His Approach.

I. The Author

Now, I said that the author of this book was a unique man who was inspired, had all that reasoning wisdom and had these remarkable experiences. Who was he?

Ecclesiastes 1:1 *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

Ecclesiastes 1:12 ¹² ¶ I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Who was he? He was the son of David, and he was the king. Now certainly, sometimes that phrase can be used to describe a descendant of David. When we examine the experiences of this man, especially in chapter 2, the description best fits Solomon. He never refers to himself by that name, he calls himself Qoheleth. Qoheleth is the word translated 'the Preacher' in our English Bibles, and it means the one who gathers people together; the one who calls an assembly to speak, which is what a Preacher does. The Greek term for Qoheleth is Εκκλησιαστής, from where we get the title of the book.

I am sure that you accept that Ecclesiastes is valuable. But I want to spend some time making the case that Solomon was uniquely placed to write the ultimate travel guide on life.

Firstly, how do we know that this book is inspired? How do we know that God spoke through Solomon to write it?

Ecclesiastes 12:11 *The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.*

The word 'shepherd' is capitalised because the writer does not call himself the shepherd, he calls himself the preacher. This is a reference to God. He believes his words have been inspired by God. The fact that this book was accepted by the Jewish people as Scripture confirms the fact.

Secondly, how do we know that he had the wisdom, the logic, the skill and the reasoning power to provide a book that uses knowledge properly?

Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 *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. ¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright -- words of truth.*

Ecclesiastes 1:16 *I communed with 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."*

Solomon had more wisdom than any who had gone before him.

1 Kings 3:5-14 *At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask! What shall I give you?"* ⁶ *And Solomon said: "You have shown great mercy to Your servant David my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day."* ⁷ *"Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in."* ⁸ *"And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted."* ⁹ *"Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"* ¹⁰ ¶ *The speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing.* ¹¹ *Then God said to him: "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice,"* ¹² *"behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you."* ¹³ *"And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days."* ¹⁴ *"So if you walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as your father*

Immediately after this, we have an example of this wisdom, when two women came before him arguing over a child, each claiming that she was the rightful mother. We all remember Solomon's wise decision, and Israel, we are told, feared God and the king when they heard of it.

1 Kings 4:29-34 *And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore.* ³⁰ *Thus Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt.* ³¹ *For he was wiser than all men -- than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.* ³² *He spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs were one thousand and five.* ³³ *Also he spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall; he spoke also of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish.* ³⁴ *And men of all nations, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom, came to hear the wisdom of Solomon.*

1 Kings 10:1-9 *Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions.* ² *She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels that bore spices, very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart.* ³ *So Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing so difficult for the king that he could not explain it to her.* ⁴ *And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built,* ⁵ *the food on his table, the seating of his servants, the service of his waiters and their apparel, his cupbearers, and his entryway by which he went up to the house of the LORD, there was no more spirit in her.* ⁶ ¶ *Then she said to the king: "It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom."* ⁷ *"However I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes; and indeed the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard."* ⁸ *"Happy are your men and happy are these your servants, who stand continually before you and hear your wisdom!"* ⁹ *"Blessed be the LORD your God, who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD has loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness."*

This was a man with wisdom. When he put pen to paper, the whole world sat up and took notice.

So that's two out of three. Solomon had the Holy Spirit inspiring him; Solomon had unparalleled wisdom. What about experience? What was Solomon's life experience like so that he could have sampled all the things that people look for to make life meaningful?

Think about this man's opportunity. He comes to the throne at the age of 17. He rules Israel not when it is crumbling, but at its zenith, when the borders of Israel stretch as far as they ever had. He has rest no wars around him.

Let's start with money.
I Kings 10:14-29

Did Solomon experience wealth? Definitely.
What about pleasure?

Ecclesiastes 2:1-9 *Ecclesiastes 2:1 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter -- "Madness!" and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" ³ I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.*

He partied!

*⁴ I made my works great; I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. ⁵ I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. *

He built!

⁷ I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces.

He shopped!

I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds.

He was entertained!

Was Solomon qualified to tell you about pleasure?

What about power? What about the fame and the lifestyle that comes with climbing the ladder?

1 Kings 4:20-25 *Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and rejoicing. ²¹ So Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. ²² ¶ Now Solomon's provision for one day was thirty kors of fine flour, sixty kors of meal, ²³ ten fatted oxen, twenty oxen from the pastures, and one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. ²⁴ For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the River from Tiphseh even to Gaza, namely over all the kings on this side of the River; and he had peace on every side all around him. ²⁵ And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, each man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan as far as Beersheba, all the days of*

Solomon.

Ecclesiastes 2:9 *So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem.*

To this we can add - Solomon was a brilliant ruler, a skilled administrator, an inventor and a genius architect.

Solomon was wealthy, powerful, famous, successful, admired, extremely knowledgeable and intelligent, very wise, a go-getter who oversaw Israel at its height.

There's one other thing we can say about Solomon: In the earlier part of his life, he was a man who sincerely loved God. We've read of his request for wisdom. If you read I Kings 8 through to chapter 9, you read Solomon's prayer, leading Israel to a fervent relationship with God. He not only knew what it was to have all the gifts of this world, he knew what it was to know and love the Giver.

Does Solomon sound like someone who has enough on his CV to get the job of writer of Life's Travel Guide?

Now, perhaps there is something outstanding. What about the evil side of life? What about experiencing the sinful, the forbidden, and the wicked? I don't think Solomon can help us there, can he?

Every now and then, you come across a person who will not believe a preacher unless that preacher has been down the path which he tells others to avoid. In other words, unless the preacher has been a drunkard, he doesn't have the right to tell me that being a drunkard is a bad way to live. Unless the preacher has lived in moral debauchery, he doesn't have any authority to tell me whether or not immorality is satisfying or not. Unless the preacher has taken drugs, had a divorce, been abused, gambled his money away, battered his wife, watched pornography, and gone deep in the ways of sin, he is too much of a goody-two-shoes to help me.

Now that's very naïve for a number of reasons. Reason number 1, it sounds just like Satan talking to Eve. Unless you try it, you won't know the kind of knowledge it will bring you. Innocence is ignorance.

Second, it means that the most important source of knowledge is experience. It's not. Of the three – revelation, reason and experience, experience is last. Revelation is first, reason second and experience third.

Thirdly, it means that Jesus' life and ministry is irrelevant to all of us, because He never sinned. You see, it is very wrong to think that the only people who can warn us about fires are those who have been burnt.

Now sometimes, God will allow a man to hurt himself in sin, and that will become something which God uses to warn others. But it is not necessary for a man to have tried it all in order to tell us about the evil side of life. But having said all that, Solomon did, in fact, experience the sinful side of life.

Deuteronomy 17:14-17 *When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,' ¹⁵ 'you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. ¹⁶ 'But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the LORD has said to you, 'You shall not return that way again.' ¹⁷ 'Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away;*

nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.

1 Kings 10:26-27 *And Solomon gathered chariots and horsemen; he had one thousand four hundred chariots and twelve thousand horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. ²⁷ The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedar trees as abundant as the sycamores which are in the lowland.*

1 Kings 11:1-3 *But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites -- ² from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, "You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. ³ And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart.*

Solomon disobeyed God on each of the three points.

Look at the effect:

1 Kings 11:4-6 *art of his father David. ⁵ For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. ⁶ Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David.*

We don't know how long Solomon lived like this. It was during this time, that Solomon sought out the pleasure he describes in Ecclesiastes 2. It was during this time, that he tried to find meaning in life apart from God. It was during this time, that he thought about the puzzles of life, the injustice of it, the circular nature of it, the frustration of it. During this time, Solomon felt the utter despair of living life as a practical atheist – living life, under the sun.

So if you are looking for someone who has known not only power, pleasure, fame and fortune, but also debauchery, drunkenness, idolatry, false religion, atheism, hedonism, materialism – then Solomon is your man.

But why should we listen to a man who turned away from God? Well, the Bible says, whom the Lord loves, he chastens. I Kings chapter 11 is a record of the people God stirred up to discipline Solomon – Hadad the Edomite, Rezon, and Jereboam.

Now I believe that the book of Ecclesiastes is the testimony of Solomon's repentance. This is a man who has been around the block. He started well. He had it all. He tried it all. Then he turned away from God. He tried it all as someone turned away from God. He lost a lot. In the end, he comes to see everything from God's perspective again.

Chapter 12:1-7 is probably a personal testimony – he had wasted his own youth, was now an old man, regretting how he had lived and advising others not to take his path.

Solomon is the most qualified man who has ever lived to write the book on what life is all about. He is inspired by God. He is the wisest man who has ever lived. He has had experience like very few have ever had or will ever have.

Now, let me say a word or two about his approach.

II. The Approach.

Ecclesiastes is not written in a three point sermon format. It is a book which does not have the kind

of structure we find in the book of Romans. That can make it hard to understand. Many people have tripped over Solomon's approach. It seems to them that he chops and changes, says one thing and then says another. So much so, that some people are sure that more than one person wrote the book. After all, at one point Solomon is telling us that life is meaningless, the next moment he is telling us to eat and drink and be happy.

Some people have thought that Solomon is advocating pessimism – just be disillusioned with life and get on with it. That's not what he is doing.

Some have thought that Solomon is advocating hedonism. Because life is such a puzzle, just eat, drink and be merry. That's not what he is saying.

Verse 11 of chapter 12 explains his approach:

Ecclesiastes 12:11 *The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.*

Notice two things are present there – goads and nails. What is a goad? A goad is a sharp object used to poke or prod an animal, so as to get them to move. Some of what Solomon is doing is a goad. It is going to prod you, poke you, and move you to action. The nails are the tent-pegs used to hammer down a tent. These are the truths given by the Shepherd that we build our life on.

This is the key to understanding the book. Solomon speaks in two voices. He speaks in the voice of his life lived under the sun; the life of living away from God. He records his experience and his reflections of life lived as a secularist – someone who lives as if God does not exist. And each time, he comes up and his conclusion goads you. He pokes you in the ribs. So, you think money will satisfy, do you? Well, it's useless to bring joy, you've got to give it to someone who didn't work for it in the end, and you can't take it with you.

So, you think, social justice is the key? Well, he says, poking you, why do evil men die peacefully, while poor oppressed people die painfully? So, you think knowledge and education is the solution? Why do fools die just like wise men, he goads? So you think pleasure is the answer? And when you've done pleasuring yourself, then what, he goads.

Solomon is going to keep doing that, right through the book. He is going to step into the shoes of the one living as if God isn't there, and he is going to ruthlessly, relentlessly push you to the conclusion of living life that way – it is empty, frustrating, nonsensical and meaningless. His aim is to upset you, disturb you, and hurt you, if you insist upon living life apart from God. “Solomon wants to deliver us from a rosy-coloured, self-confident godless life, with its inevitable cynicism and bitterness, and from trusting in wisdom, pleasure, wealth and human justice or integrity.” - Michael Eaton.

His goads are sharp pointed conclusions and reflections that make you ask what the point of it all is. But then, at various points in the book, he is going to step back into what he truly believes. He is going to nail into the ground some tent-pegs of truth about life lived to and for God. He is going to bring God back into the picture. One thing you will notice is almost every time he brings God back into the picture, joy reappears. In fact, joy is mentioned 17 times in the book. At the Jewish feast of Tabernacles, the most joyous of all the feasts, guess what book was read? Ecclesiastes! So don't expect an argument like Paul. This is partly a poetic book. It is written in a way which reflects some of its content, that life is a cycle. Life has built in tensions, and so the book seems to be in tension with itself.

Now you already know the conclusion. We are not going to study this book because we don't know the conclusion. We are going to study this book because we too often don't believe the conclusion – that life is pointless without a reverent and fervent relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

We're studying this book because we are prone every day of our lives to try to make life work our own way. We do not naturally gravitate towards a life of faith. We do not naturally try to live life from God's perspective but that is what this book will do for you if you will be a receptive and a responsive hearer. It will drill you. It will dunk you under the water of life and hold you there until you are gasping for the air of God's truth. It will cleanse you of worldly ambitions. More than anything it will grow your fear of the Lord. It will show you God who is the Creator. It will show you God who is the Sovereign. It will show you God who is the Giver of Joy. It will show you God who has unsearchable wisdom. It will show you God as the Judge. It will show you the God or order who is the only one that can make a confusing life seem coherent and fulfilling.