



# Ecclesiastes 1-2: The Words of the Teacher

Sermon - 26 July 2020

## Introduction

G'day – My name is Greg Holmes and back in the dim dark past my wife, Helen, and I attended the 6pm service here at Kiama Anglican Churches and will do so again when we get back to normal – or should that be the NEW normal.

Today my task is to introduce to you the book of Ecclesiastes and to lead us through a brief look at Chapters 1 and 2.

One of the themes of the book is that death is inevitable for us all.

I noted that last Friday, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the prolific Christian author, thinker and writer J.I. Packer died. He was responsible for the classic, 'Knowing God', along with over 50 other books.

In 2015 he wrote an article about his favorite book of the Bible (the full text of this article is appended below). It was Ecclesiastes.

*He wrote: This is how the writer, who called himself Qohelet—Hebrew for 'Gatherer', strikes me. I see him as a reflective senior citizen, a public teacher of wisdom, something of a stylist and wordsmith.*

He continues:

*Ecclesiastes is one of the Old Testament's five wisdom books. It has been said that the Psalms teach us how to worship; Proverbs, how to behave; Job, how to suffer; Song of Solomon, how to love; and Ecclesiastes, how to live. How? With realism and reverence, with humility and restraint, coolly and contentedly, in wisdom and in joy.*

The wisdom literature in the Bible sort of sits outside the ongoing story of scriptures, outside the flow of salvation history as you move through

the law, the histories and the prophets; they invite us to look, as Packer implies above, more reflectively at life in God's creation rather than simply under the covenant promises and the fulfilment of those.

That said we need to turn now to the opening of the book itself. We will look in some detail at the argument in 1:1-11 and make reference to the material in Chapter 2, then seek to draw some conclusions from that. So let's dig into Ecclesiastes...

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

This verse introduces the book and its author. There are actually two 'voices' in this book. The first voice is heard here in 1:1 and then not again till 12:8 where he sums up. He is often called the 'frame narrator' or if you like the 'anchor man'.

The principal writer is called teacher which is the NIV's translation of Qohelet. This is a difficult Hebrew word to translate but it basically means someone who gathers people to listen. So, Teacher or Preacher will suffice. He is described as the Son of David, King in Jerusalem, which makes us immediately think of Solomon, though he never actually claims to be. Suffice it to say here it is possibly more accurate to see him as someone in the line of Solomon.

In verse two we turn to his actual words and to his motto throughout the book:

**Ecclesiastes 1:2 *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher.***

***"Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."***

His claim, to open his discussion, is that everything is 'hebel' which the NIV translates as 'meaningless'; it can be translated as 'vanity' (ESV), 'absolute futility' (CSB), 'smoke' (The Message), or 'useless' (TEV).

You begin to get the picture. It literally means 'vapour' or 'breath'.

You get the idea when you breathe out on a winter's morning and you

see the vapour coming out of your mouth – it is there one moment and gone the next. Or in the simple task of blowing bubbles - they form, they expand they drift, they burst – nothing of substance is left.

Qohelet, the teacher, sees the world like this.

The next verse gives us an important clue as to the nature and limitations of his enquiry.

**3     *What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?***

This verse introduces us to another important concept in the book and that is the idea of ‘Under the Sun’. This defines for Qohelet, the teacher, the scope of his considerations. He is looking at what is earthly, the things, people and activities around him, worldly things. He only occasionally lifts his eyes above to recognise that there is more.

His focus is on the Here and Now, and only very, very occasionally on the There and Then.

And the final section of this verse then further explains what he means by ‘meaningless’:

***What do people gain from all their labors?***

Is there any lasting worth in all that people do?

The chapter then goes on to consider a variety of things all of which continue on and on just the same as before:

**4     *Generations come and generations go,***

**5     *The sun rises and the sun sets,***

**6     *The wind blows to the south and turns to the north;***

**7     *All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full.***

In nature there is this constant, regular cycle. It continues on and people can do nothing about it. And try as we might we cannot control it.

***<sup>8</sup> All things are wearisome, more than one can say.***

***The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.***

***<sup>9</sup> What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.***

There is nothing new under this sun.

All happened before – even viruses – 1919 Spanish Flu – now...

We can apply our skill and wisdom and our hard work, but these things keep repeating.

***<sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? ... ..***

***<sup>11</sup> No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.***

Even individuals are forgotten. We live – die – and are forgotten. In the main. People say at funerals, “He/she lives on in our memories” but even that is fleeting – one generation – perhaps two...in this earthly ‘under the sun’.

In v12-18 the author discusses wisdom and ends up with another evocative image.

***<sup>17</sup> Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.***

Even the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom in the end, ‘under the sun’ comes to nothing...like chasing the very wind itself.

In chapter two Qohelet, our Teacher examines...

### Pleasure

**2:1 I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. ... ..**

### Projects

**2:4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks ....**

### Stuff

**8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. ... ..**

**11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;<sup>a</sup> nothing was gained under the sun.<sup>b</sup>**

And Wisdom again

**12 Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly.**

**16 For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; like the fool, the wise too must die!**

And back to Hard Work...

**2:17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ... ..**

The conclusion - **This too is meaningless.**

No lasting satisfaction, no lasting security, no lasting significance.

Nothing new, nothing but *hebel*. Vanity, vanity!

SO .....

Pleasure, Projects, Stuff, Wisdom, Toil will not give a truly fulfilling life 'under the sun'.

However,

V24 fff God arrives on the scene.

**2:24 A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? <sup>26</sup> To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.**

A new player ... God gives all these things; enjoying them in the acknowledgement that they come from him gives some meaning to life – lived with a view that transcends what is under the sun.

A new point ... Enjoyment of all God provides. A new meaning in life. Life lived in acknowledgement of God.

### Conclusion

Are we simply chasing after wind?

I believe, and some disagree, that Qohelet, the teacher, is a man of faith who genuinely seeks meaning and significance in the earthly realm, under the sun'; he recognises it is meaningless but acknowledges God has a role in this.

His problem is he has no idea what God can do about it.

But we live this side of the Cross of Jesus ...

Here is the vaccine for the virus of meaninglessness 2020! A fully developed, fully tested, fully validated by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, vaccine for meaninglessness.

**Romans 8:18** I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration (same word as for meaningless, vanity), not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

The Teacher's message, then, is that since all our worldly endeavors are futile, since all our striving apart from God is futile, we ought to find enjoyment in the gifts God gives us every day. We ought to savor the moment and find enjoyment in our present eating, drinking, and work because these are God's gifts to us.

Jesus also teaches us to savor God's gifts in the here and now. He teaches us to be content with our lives and to receive our food and drink as God's gifts to us: ***"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink," he says. "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?... Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*** (Matt 6:25–33)

The world misses the mark of life. Jesus' followers know the mark: *Seek first the kingdom of God, and God will give you food, drink, and clothing.*

I will let J. I. Packer have the last word:

*Being too proud to enjoy the enjoyable is a very ugly shortcoming, and one that calls for immediate correction. Let it be acknowledged that, as I had to learn long ago, discovering how under God ordinary things can bring joy is the cure for cynicism.*

*Greg Holmes, July 2020*

*This is the Article referred to in the Sermon:*

### **J. I. Packer: How I Learned to Live Joyfully**

A wizened sage named Ecclesiastes tamed my youthful cynicism.

**J. I. PACKER**

**SEPTEMBER 9, 2015**

Christians like to quiz each other about their favourite book in the Bible. Finding out how people experience Scripture—especially those who write books about the Bible—is a natural interest to us. When asked which Bible book is my favourite, I say Ecclesiastes. Should people raise their eyebrows and ask why, I give them two reasons. First, it is a special pleasure to read an author with whom one resonates. That is how the writer, who called himself Qohelet—Hebrew for “Gatherer,” a title that in Greek became Ecclesiastes, the “Assembly-man”—strikes me. I see him as a reflective senior citizen, a public teacher of wisdom, something of a stylist and wordsmith. As his official testimonial or third-person testimony (it might be either) in 12:10 shows, this man took his instructional task very seriously and labored to communicate memorably. Whether he was the Solomon of history or someone impersonating him—not to deceive but to make points in the most effective way—we do not know. All I am sure of is that each point has maximum strength if it comes from the real Solomon at the end of his life.

Whoever he was, Qohelet was a realist about the many ways in which this world gives us a rough ride. But while temperamentally inclined to pessimism and cynicism, I think, he was kept from falling into either of those craters of despair by a strong theology of joy.



How far this matches the way people see me, I do not know, but this is how I want to see myself—and why I warm to Ecclesiastes as a kindred spirit. (One main difference, of course, is that his thinking is all done within the framework of Old Testament revelation.)

Second, looking back to my late-teens conversion, I see myself as having received from Ecclesiastes wisdom that I needed badly. When Jesus Christ laid hold of me, I was already well on my way to becoming a cynic. But by God's grace, I was tamed thoroughly, and I see Ecclesiastes—the man and his book—as having done much of that taming.

Cynics are people who have grown sceptical about the goodness of life, and who look down on claims to sincerity, morality, and value. They dismiss such claims as hollow and criticize programs for making improvements. Feeling disillusioned, discouraged, and hurt by their experience of life, their pained pride forbids them to think that others might be wiser and doing better than they themselves have done. On the contrary, they see themselves as brave realists and everyone else as self-deceived. Mixed-up teens slip easily into cynicism, and that is what I was doing.

I was reared in a stable home and did well at school, but, being an introvert, I was always shy and awkward in company. Also, I was barred from sports and team games by reason of a hole in my head—literally, just over the brain—that I had acquired in a road accident at age 7. For years I had to cover the hole, where there was no bone, by wearing an aluminium plate, secured to my head by elastic. I could never get my body to learn to swim or dance.

Being an isolated oddity in these ways was painful to me, as it would be to any teen. So I developed a self-protective sarcasm, settled for low expectations from life, and grew bitter. Pride led me to stand up

for Christian truth in school debates, but with no interest in God or a willingness to submit to him. However, becoming a real as distinct from a nominal Christian brought change, and Ecclesiastes in particular showed me things about life that I had not seen before.

## **Learning to Live**

Waiting for me in the pages of Ecclesiastes was a view of reality very different from my junior-level cynicism.

Ecclesiastes is one of the Old Testament's five wisdom books. It has been said that the Psalms teach us how to worship; Proverbs, how to behave; Job, how to suffer; Song of Solomon, how to love; and Ecclesiastes, how to live. How? With realism and reverence, with humility and restraint, coolly and contentedly, in wisdom and in joy.

People who may not have read beyond chapter 3 might think of Ecclesiastes as voicing nothing more than bafflement and gloom at the way everything is. But 2:26 already goes beyond this: "to the one who pleases him God has given . . . joy" (ESV, used throughout). In Ecclesiastes, joy is as central a theme, and as big and graciously bestowed a blessing, as it is in, say, Philippians.

Ecclesiastes is a flowing meditation on the business of living. It has two halves. Each is a string of separate units juxtaposed without connectives in a loose-looking way, which yet links them logically and theologically by subject matter. And binding everything together are three recurring imperatives:

Revere God: *fear* in Ecclesiastes, as in Proverbs, means 'trust, obey, and honour', not 'be terrified' (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13).

Recognize good things in life as gifts from God and receive them accordingly, with enjoyment (2:24–26; 5:18–19; 8:15; 9:7–9).

Remember that God judges our deeds (3:17; 5:6; 7:29; 8:13; 11:9; 12:14).

There are two further unifying features. The first is the bookend sentence, “Vanity of vanities”, says the Preacher. ... “All is vanity”—the opening words in 1:2 and the closing words in 12:8. *Vanity* literally means ‘vapour’ and ‘fog’, and appears more than two dozen times to convey emptiness, pointlessness, worthlessness, and loss of one’s way. ‘Striving after wind’—that is, trying to catch hold of it—is an image of parallel meaning (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4; 6:9). Both metaphors point to fruitless effort, of which the world is full, says the writer. The second unifying feature is the phrase ‘under the sun’. It specifies the standpoint and pinpoints the perspective of no less than 29 verdicts on how things appear when assessed in this-worldly terms, without reference to God.

The first half of Ecclesiastes, chapters 1–6, is in effect a downhill slide ‘under the sun’ into what we may call the darkness of vanity. The natural order, wisdom in itself, uninhibited self-indulgence, sheer hard work, money-making, public service, the judicial system, and pretentious religiosity—are all canvassed to find what meaning, purpose, and personal fulfillment they yield. The reason for enquiring is given: Deep down in every human heart, God has put ‘eternity’ (3:11)—a desire to know, as God knows, how everything fits in with everything else to produce lasting value, glory, and satisfaction. But the inquiry fails: It leaves behind only the frustration of having gotten nowhere. The implication? This is not the way to proceed.

The second half, chapters 7–12, is somewhat discursive—we might even say meandering. It labours to show that despite everything, the pursuit and practice of modest, quiet, industrious wisdom is abundantly worthwhile and cannot be embarked on too early in life. After comparing old age to a house falling to pieces (12:1–7), the writer works up to a solemn conclusion:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

That last phrase is elusive; duty may be its focus, or the phrase could be carrying the thought “the completeness of the human person,” which the Good News Bible has neatly rendered:

Fear God and keep his commands, because this is all that man was created for. God is going to judge everything we do. (12:13–14).  
How then should we finally formulate the theology of joy that runs through and undergirds the entire book? Christian rejoicing in Christ and in salvation, as the New Testament depicts, goes further. But in celebrating joy as God’s kindly gift, and in recognising the potential for joy of everyday activities and relationships, Ecclesiastes lays the right foundation.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. (2:24)

I commend joy. (8:15)

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun. (9:9)

Being too proud to enjoy the enjoyable is a very ugly shortcoming, and one that calls for immediate correction. Let it be acknowledged that, as I had to learn long ago, discovering how under God ordinary things can bring joy is the cure for cynicism.

*J. I. Packer was Board of Governor’s Professor of Theology at Regent College and author of more than 40 books, including his bestseller, ‘Knowing God’. This article was written in 2015. He died on July 17<sup>th</sup> 2020 aged 93.*