



KIAMA ANGLICAN
CHURCHES

Introduction to ECCLESIASTES

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*Text of the Video Introduction which can be
found on the KAC Website:
kiamaanglican.org.au*

G'day. I am Greg Holmes and I have written the studies for our next lot of Bible teaching here at Kiama Anglican Churches.

Have you, like me, grown a little sick of people on the news, during sport programs, in written stuff, in daily conversations down the street at the dinner table, saying that we live in unusual, unique, challenging, different or even fearful, unprecedented and indeed difficult times. True though such descriptions may be...

We only have to look at our South Coast New South Wales region in this Calendar Year; 2020 has so far been a year of Drought, Fire, Flood, and Pestilence not to mention the effects of Climate Change. We have feared for our environment, for our property, for the lives of loved ones, for our economic stability, for our health and well-being.

And so we turn our attention, for the next school term, to the book of the Bible entitled "Ecclesiastes".

You find it in your Bibles just past the middle – it goes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and then Song of Songs.

This book fits well between the Proverbs and Songs as all three are what we call 'Wisdom' Literature.

One commentator on the book wrote, "Anyone to whom the book of Ecclesiastes is not a puzzle has not yet read it." So, we are in for an interesting ride.

The name of the book comes from the Greek version of the Old Testament which called it 'ekklesiastes'. The Greek word used in the New Testament for a church, 'ekklesia', comes from the same word group. It basically means gathering people together.

This word is translated in the NIV as 'Teacher' or, in other translations, 'Preacher'.

Older versions of the World Book Encyclopedia defined Philosophy as something like 'an unusually determined attempt to think clearly'; this seems to be what Qohelet (the Teacher) wants to do as he views the world around him.

This teacher appears to be from the Davidic royal line; he may or may not be Solomon; he does not explicitly claim to be.

We should note that the book has two voices - a 'frame narrator' who, in 1v1, introduces the book and the author who, in 12:9-14, draws it all together.

It is also worth noting that there are two types of writing here. Some of the book is 'observational' in that it sets down what Qohelet observes. Other parts are 'instructional' in that they give guidance for dealing with life.

It is helpful to understand a few key words and ideas used in the book.

We have spoken about the Teacher/Preacher, Qohelet.

This title seems to denote one who assembles people together to listen. The Hebrew word has been called 'untranslatable' but Teacher or Preacher will do.

The second word is 'Meaningless' – 'Hebel'

As the mist clears from the lens of my camera you get a bit of an idea of what it means – it is a vapor, a mist, something that comes and goes quickly and is insubstantial. The most common illustration of this is that it is like your breath on a cold winter's morning – you can see the vapor but it quickly disappears.

The word occurs 35 times in the book, including 5 times in 1v2

However, in the context of the book of Ecclesiastes, it is much more subtle and nuanced; it might be good to take one commentator's advice and allow the text of the book itself to fill out the meaning as we go through. And then consider its meaning again at 12:8.

The third idea is 'Under the Sun.'

And it is most important. This phrase to some extent guides us to the limits of Qohelet's thinking. It basically means here on earth, our physical existence, the material world we see around us.

The book occasionally hints at things beyond that view but basically it wants us to consider carefully the world around us, the activities of men and the meaninglessness of them.

So how do we approach this book. I have a couple of suggestions.

First, remember it is Wisdom literature...

Part of that reflective section of the Old Testament.

That means that in large part it sits beside the salvation history story of the Pentateuch, the history books and the prophets. It reflects on this story but is more related to Creation than to the Covenant relationship of Israel.

If you look carefully you will see a good many allusions to the first chapters of Genesis as we go through Ecclesiastes.

Avoid negativity, note the 'little' positives.

With a 'motto' like 'meaningless, meaningless all is meaningless' it would be easy to be depressed by this writing.

But there are positives and there are pointers to the solution.

Look always to Jesus...

The Sunday school maxim is right – Jesus is the answer.

As one writer said - If the Preacher was not right in asserting that all is vanity ..., that man cannot obtain or achieve justice, that death is ultimately the only certainty ... why then did Christ come from God's eternal throne above the sun and die outside Jerusalem for the redemption of the whole world?

Be aware that there have, throughout the centuries, been a great variety of views on this piece of literature.

Almost every commentary or article you read has some comment on this fact.

This means that stuff you read or listen to may also have a variety of differing views behind them.

Finally, be aware that our Lord God has preserved this piece of literature for our use.

Right down the centuries both BC and AD the 'right' of this book to be in the Scriptures has been debated. AND, despite its unusualness, it has always been concluded that it should remain.

God has preserved it, not as a literary peculiarity, but as Scripture that "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness". (2 Tim. 3:16)

We need to look to it to do those things for us.

We need to apply it to our times and to our lives and our church.

It seems to me that behind the book of Ecclesiastes is a man of faith who is looking for answers. I think (and there are those who would disagree) that he rightly observes the wrong in the world and that he has some understanding that God can do something about it but he has absolutely no idea what.

We, who are fortunate enough to live this side of the cross, do KNOW. God has acted in Jesus, in his incarnation, perfect life, sacrificial death, victorious resurrection and sovereign reign in heaven, to deal with sin and provide the perfect true hope for a meaningless, but not so meaningless world.

Before we conclude there are just a few things of an 'administrative' type to say...

There does seem to be some puzzlement about the 'Turn, Turn Turn' subtitle in the booklet. It really reflects my age. It is the refrain from a Byrds song, written by Pete Seeger; other than those words, it is composed of the words of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 with a very 60's postscript.

There are any number of good commentaries about Ecclesiastes but I would recommend one in particular - in the Bible Speaks Today series Derek Kidner has written one on this book; it is subtitled "A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance". It is easy to read and very insightful.

There lots of other books which are listed at the end of this introduction.

One set of 'talks' that is worth watching and listening to is by Dave McDonald. Again, the link is listed at the end of this document.

Steve Holmes and a few others are in the process of putting together a 'play list' of musical material to help us think around the issues of Ecclesiastes. This comprises some original stuff and a range of contemporary and not so contemporary songs and music. Look for it on the KAC website.

And, as always I am always ready to assist anyone who has questions.

Robert Gordis has written, 'Whoever has dreamed great dreams in his youth and seen the vision flee, or has loved and lost, or has beaten barehanded at the fortress of injustice and come back bleeding and broke, has passed [the Teacher's] door and tarried a while beneath the shadow of his roof.'

Other Resources:

*Kidner, D. "Ecclesiastes – A time to Mourn and s Time to Dance" (The Bible Speaks Today) (Nottingham, IVP, 1976) – *This is the most helpful of the general commentaries.*

*Eaton, M.A. "Ecclesiastes" (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries) (IVP, Leicester, 1983). *Again, a helpful general commentary.*

*Provan, I. The NIV Application Commentary : Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2001).

Ryken, P.G. "Ecclesiastes (Preaching the Word Commentary) (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2010)

The sections on Ecclesiastes in these are also helpful.

*Webb, B.G. Five Festal Garments (New Studies in Biblical Theology 10) (Nottinham, Apollos, 2000). *A great little book, scholarly but pastoral.*

Dever, M. Promises Made : The Message of the Old Testament (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2006) – *The Ecclesiastes section in here is most helpful in getting the whole flow of the book. You can find the sermon on which the chapter is based at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/wisdom-for-the-successful-the-message-of-ecclesiastes/>*

*Kidner, D: The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes (An Introduction to Wisdom Literature) (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 1985).

*Waltke, B.K.; Yu, C., An Old Testament Theology (An exegetical, canonical and thematic approach) (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2007)

The Bible Project overview is also helpful see <https://bibleproject.com/>

Also very helpful are:

A series of 38 short (6-12 minutes) talks by Dave McDonald to be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERmdhVDyVrk&list=PLIA20JKZo9qaQNebzhIJe-WGDYESSKp0T&index=1> *Thoroughly recommended.*

Also a series of Alistair Begg Sermons at <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/series/chasing-the-wind/>



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