

Hebrew Literature/Ecclesiastes

"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." These are among the opening words of Ecclesiastes, the fourth of five books of poetry in the Old Testament. The author of the book, believed to be King Solomon, exhausted every human resource to find truth and meaning to life. The book of Ecclesiastes is an account of his philosophical and experimental exploits. According to *Willmington's Guide to the Bible* these can be categorized into three groups: man's problems stated, man's problems studied, and man's problems solved (pgs. 136, 137). It is concerning these groups that discussion will be offered.

In the first couple of chapters, the author addresses a wide array of topics, and the futility of them all! Pondering such issues as ambitions, endeavors, pleasures, possessions, work, and even wisdom itself—all is condemned as vanity. It is a pessimistic beginning for a book nestled between the pure wisdom of Proverbs and the romantic pages of Song of Songs. And yet, when contemplating its ideas, one cannot help but concede to the bitter truth it conveys. Observations like, "For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous..." (Eccl. 2: 22, 23a) and "It is a grievous task God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with" (Eccl. 1: 13b). How many people could empathize with such statements when they wake up at five in the morning each day to go to a job they hate. Day in and day out they are tormented with the seemingly useless routine of life. It grates upon their spirit until smiles and lighthearted cheer become rare. Ecclesiastes speaks to the humdrums of life, even thousands of years later.

In the next eight chapters, it is the analysis of man's problems with which the Preacher is concerned. It is in these chapters that practical advice abounds. For example, in regards to work the following instructions are offered, "Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going" (Eccl. 9: 10). Another example involves political leaders: "Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength, and not for drunkenness" (Eccl. 10: 16, 17). It should be noted that this category comprises the majority of the book. This indicates that the author is not simply melancholy and slothful, but as later chapters record, "In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs" (Eccl. 12: 9). So, while it can be said that Solomon disobeyed God and lived a life out of step with the Holy Spirit, it cannot be said that he didn't use his wisdom for teaching others. Indeed, we are still learning through him each day we devote our studies to his works.

The last two chapters of Ecclesiastes are the grand climax and conclusion to Solomon's philosophies and proverbs. In chapter eleven he urges his hearers to invest in life wisely and diversely, knowing that "God will bring you into judgment for all these things" (Eccl. 11: 9b). In chapter twelve emphasis is placed upon finding God and serving him faithfully in one's youth. The Preacher concludes the entire book and perhaps even his teaching career with the words: "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act into judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl. 12: 13, 14). The importance of these last two verses cannot be overstated. It is as if Solomon were saying, "If I'm right about anything, I'm right about this! So be sure, if you don't catch anything else I've taught, that you at least catch this." How our world desperately needs this simple eternal perspective! If people were to only digest the fact that every deed done in the body will be judged by an all-knowing God; that no one truly gets away with anything; that

there's no such thing as secret sins or little white lies. Perhaps, people just might start living a little differently.

Ecclesiastes is a book people can relate to. They can find their doubts, crankiness, and frustrations all represented by a person that delved into these feelings and searched out reasonable responses. With each passing vanity recorded one could easily find themselves offering a chorus of "Amens," agreeing with the author. Yet, the book is not a mere list of grievances against God and man. It is careful to point out that man is "under the sun" while God is "in heaven," completely sovereign. As a whole, it shows mankind what not to chase after—"the wind" and what life is really all about—to "fear God and keep His commandments."