



IS LIFE REALLY WORTH LIVING?

Source: Church Missler, Koinonia House
(<https://www.khouse.org/articles/2003/447/>)



We have in our possession a considered response to this basic question from one of the wisest, richest, most powerful men to have walked the earth. And yet even today his counsel is widely ignored or misunderstood!

"Vanity of vanities," lamented Solomon, "all is vanity!" Solomon used the word "vanity" 38 times in Ecclesiastes as he wrote about life "under the sun." The word means "emptiness," "futility," "vapor"; "that which vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind." From the human point of view, life ("under the sun") does often appear futile; and it is easy for us to get pessimistic. But we should not mistake brutal honesty with pessimism.

Ecclesiastes is the kind of book a person would write near the end of life, reflecting on life's experiences and the painful lessons learned. Solomon wrote Proverbs from the viewpoint of a wise teacher, and Song of Songs from the viewpoint of a royal lover, but when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he called himself "the Preacher."

The Hebrew title is *Koheleth*, and it is the title given to an official speaker who calls an assembly. The Greek word for "assembly" is *ekklhsia*, *ekklesia*, and thus the Septuagint version gives us the English title of the book, Ecclesiastes.

But the Preacher did more than call an assembly and give an oration. The word *Koheleth* carries with it the idea of debating, not so much with the listeners as with himself. He would present a topic, discuss it from many viewpoints, and then come to a practical conclusion.

Ecclesiastes is unlike any other Old Testament book and has no parallel in other literature of the Biblical world. It is a philosophical discourse, and yet it is more. Ecclesiastes makes no claim to bring man a word from God. Instead the writer specifically states that he includes only what he can determine by his own reason and limits himself to data that is available "under the sun."

(The doctrine of inspiration, however, assures us that this book conveys the message that God intended that we should receive, but it does not guarantee that all of Solomon's statements are accurate!)



Ecclesiastes is different from any other book of the Bible. It does not dwell on the covenant, the election of Israel, redemption, prophecy, sacred history, or the temple. Its focus is on man the creature, his life on earth, and the inscrutability of God and His ways. Ecclesiastes goes beyond the other wisdom literature to emphasize the fact that human life and human goals, as ends in themselves and apart from God, are futile and meaningless.

Relevance for Today

Among other things, Solomon saw injustice to the poor, crooked politics, incompetent leaders, guilty people allowed to commit more crimes, materialism, and a desire for "the good old days." It sounds relevant for us, too, doesn't it? Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door:

"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?" - Ecclesiastes 1:2-3

(Just in case we missed it, he also put the same key at the back door.) But don't assume he is cynical or pessimistic: that would miss his real point! Whether he considers his wealth, his works, his wisdom, or his world, Solomon comes to a sad appraisal: all is "vanity and vexation of spirit." However, this is not his final conclusion, nor is it the only message that he has for his readers. We will discover much more as we delve into the depth of the book.

In spite of his painful encounters with the world and its problems, Solomon does not recommend either pessimism or cynicism. Rather, he admonishes us to be realistic about life, accept God's gifts and enjoy them. After all, God gives to us "richly all things to enjoy." [Words related to joy (enjoy, rejoice, etc.) are used at least 17 times in Ecclesiastes.]

Solomon does not say, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!" Instead, he advises us to trust God and enjoy what we do have rather than complain about what we don't have. Life is short and life is difficult, so make the most of it while you can.

Solomon initially opens with three bleak observations: nothing is really changed, nothing is really new, and nothing is understood. After experimenting and investigating "life under the sun," he initially concluded, "No, life is not worth living!" And he gave four arguments to support his conclusion: the monotony of life, the vanity of wisdom, the futility of wealth, and the certainty of death.

But being a wise man, Solomon, in Chapters 3 to 10, reviewed his arguments and this time brought God into the picture. What a difference it made! By reexamining each of these impressions more carefully he realized that life was not monotonous but filled with challenging situations from God, each in its own time and each for its own purpose.

He also learned that wealth could be enjoyed and employed to the glory of God. Though man's wisdom couldn't explain everything, Solomon concluded that it was better to follow God's wisdom than to practice man's folly.

And as for the certainty of death, there is no way to escape it; it ought to motivate us to enjoy life now and make the most of the opportunities God gives us.

So he asks his listeners to look up, look within, look ahead, and look around, and to take into consideration time, eternity, death, and suffering: these four factors God uses to keep our lives from becoming monotonous and meaningless.

In his final conclusion and personal application, Solomon then presents four pictures of life and attaches to each picture a practical admonition for his readers to heed:



- Life is an **ADVENTURE** - live by faith
- Life is a **GIFT** - enjoy it
- Life is a **SCHOOL** - learn your lessons
- Life is a **STEWARDSHIP** - fear God

These four pictures parallel the four arguments that Solomon had wrestled with throughout the book: Life is not monotonous; rather, it is an adventure of faith that is anything but predictable or tedious. Yes, death is certain, but life is a gift from God and He wants us to enjoy it. Are there questions we can't answer and problems we can't solve? Don't despair. God teaches us His truth as we advance in "the school of life," and He will give us wisdom enough to make sensible decisions. Finally, as far as wealth is concerned, all of life is a stewardship from God; and one day He will call us to give an account. Therefore, "fear God, and keep His commandments."

Here we have practical advice about life from one of the wisest, richest, most powerful men to have ever lived. His insights about life, money, values, and ordering one's personal priorities are priceless: this is a rewarding guidebook to the reader who looks behind the initial impressions to find the wisdom this remarkable man gleaned from his unique career.