

## The Half Hour That Changes the World

### Ecclesiastes

### Book 21

#### Basic Questions behind the book:

*What is the meaning of life? Does it have purpose? What really matters in this life?*

#### Summary of book:

Occasionally I have referred to the book of Ecclesiastes as Solomon having a bad day. If you read this book right through from beginning to end you will find it all generally sounds quite depressing. Yes, there are some beautiful gems in the middle of it all, but basically, you have the feeling that if Prozac had been around at the time, the author really could have done with some. That said, is it not a good thing that within the canon of scripture we have literature that gives voice to the human condition of despair and hopelessness? We often feel that to please God we have to be happy all the time and rejoicing. However, the Scriptures in some of the Psalms, the book of Job and here, speak to the darker realities of human experience, and promises us that God is even there. Ecclesiastes is one of the books in the Bible in the genre of Wisdom Literature. It isn't wisdom in the sense of the Greek Wisdom tradition or that which is found in Eastern religions. It is unique to Hebrew religion in the Old Testament. Whether the writer is Solomon or not, it is definitely the author's intention to make us think it is him. Whoever the author is, his message is simple: "Everything is meaningless". There is nothing new under the sun and nothing lasts forever. We may as well 'eat, drink and be merry'. It is certainly better to live by wisdom rather than folly. One of the best known and beloved passages of the book is found in chapter 3 where we find that there is a time for everything, and thus we're called to wise and balanced living. The writer cannot let go of belief in God and holds on with his finger nails to the little bit of hope that this gives him. This appears to be a book by someone who has been through a rough period in life. It is depressive but bitingly honest. Life can be hard even when we have great faith (c.f. Elijah after the victory at Mount Carmel). The message of this book is - hold on to God – the storm will pass.

#### Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To spare future generations the bitterness of learning through their own experience that life is meaningless apart from God.

Author: Solomon? The Teacher? Qoheleth? The book is anonymous but as was the custom at the time, the writer would link his writing with someone well known.

Recipients: Unknown but we can say to the people of God in general.

Dating: Not known, but it most likely to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and not as early as Solomon (950 BC).

Setting: Again, not known. Best scholarly guess in recent Old Testament studies suggests that Egypt, among the Jews dispersed there, is the best place for it to have been written.

#### Other Reflections:

It is not without interest that when the Jewish Scholars and the Church were deciding which books should be in the canon of scripture, and thus recognised as inspired and authoritative, this book occasioned considerable debate. The main contention seems to have been around clear evidence as to its origins, and its apparent lack of faith in God. So, they were as unclear in the early centuries of this era as we are now about the origins and value of this book. I believe personally that it was right to retain it as it has some beautiful and memorable verses that would have been lost to the English language otherwise. It also validates the human experience of despair and depression. Christians in earlier centuries talked of the dark night of the soul. If we're honest we all experience such seasons. Ecclesiastes is there for us at such times.

*"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless..."*  
(2:18-19)