



OVERVIEW

Author: King Solomon

Date: c. 931 BC (end of Solomon's reign)

Purpose: to reveal the vaporous nature of life without God; to instruct in the use of what we have been given in thanksgiving to God; to encourage enjoyment of and contentment with present blessings.

Outline:

I. 1-2 Solomon's Quest for Wisdom

A. 1:1-11: Preliminary Observation: Worldly Life is Vaporous

B. 1:12-18: The Task at Hand

II. 3:1-12:8 Pearls of Wisdom

III. 12:9-14 Postscript

(Adapted from James Bollhagen. *Ecclesiastes*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: CPH, 2011)

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Around the Word BIBLE STUDY Eastertide, 2015

Contentment Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Opening: Psalm 39

¹I said, "I will guard my ways,
that I may not sin | with my tongue;*"
I will guard my mouth with a muzzle,
so long as the wicked are in my | presence."

²**I was mute and silent;
I held my peace to | no avail,*
and my dis- | tress grew worse.**

³My heart became hot within me.
As I mused, the | fire burned;*"
then I spoke | with my tongue:

⁴**"O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure | of my days;*"
let me know how fleeting | I am!**

⁵Behold, you have made my days a few | hand-
breadths,*
and my lifetime is as nothing be- | fore you.

**Surely all mankind stands as a | mere breath!*"
⁶Surely a man goes about as a | shadow!**

Surely for nothing they are in | turmoil;*"
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will
| gather!

⁷**"And now, O Lord, for what | do I wait?*"
My hope | is in you.**

⁸Deliver me from all my trans- | gressions.*
Do not make me the scorn | of the fool!

⁹**I am mute; I do not open | my mouth,*
for it is you who have | done it.**

¹⁰Remove your | stroke from me;*"
I am spent by the hostility | of your hand.

¹¹**When you discipline a man with rebukes for
sin,
you consume like a moth what is | dear to him;*"
surely all mankind is a | mere breath!**

¹²"Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
hold not your peace | at my tears!*"
For I am a sojourner with you,
a guest, like all my | fathers.

¹³**Look away from me, that I may | smile again,*
before I depart and | am no more!"
Glory be to the Father and | to the Son*
and to the Holy | Spirit;
as it was in the be- | ginning,*
is now, and will be forever. | Amen.**

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Chapter 1 outline:

- Introduction (v. 1)
- Motto (v. 2)
- Question that drives the book (v. 3)
- Poem about the human lot (v. 4-11)

- Statement about the task at hand (v. 12-18)

v. 1: "The Words of the Ecclesiast, the son of David, king in Jerusalem"

Title: The Hebrew title of the book is Qoheleth, (קֹהֵלֶת) which is based on the verb meaning "to gather". The Greek & Latin translate this word as "Ecclesiastes", which is the source of the English title. An "Ecclesiast" is one who gathers.

Authorship: The human "Ecclesiast"/author is Solomon ("son of David, king in Jerusalem"). See also 1 Kings 3:5-14 for support of Solomonic authorship.

Religious wisdom from an earthly king? As a theocracy, Israel didn't have a strict separation of church & state, so a king's address would often be both political and theological in nature. Therefore, the wisdom in this book is both worldly and spiritual.

Setting: Luther suggests Solomon may have given these talks at the dinner table to royal officials with one of the guests writing them down, much like Luther's own table talks.

Jesus, as the one greater than David and Solomon, is the true Ecclesiast. See Matthew 1:6 (Christ is the son of David & Solomon); Matthew 21:9, especially what the crowds shout on Palm Sunday; John 1:49 (Jesus is the True King of Israel, greater than even King David or Solomon); Matthew 12:42 (Christ is greater than Solomon); Acts 20:28 (Christ is our Ecclesiast, who gave life to gather the Church).

v. 2: "Vapor of vapors"

This is picturesque language, not a rational concept, despite the use of the word "meaningless" in many translations. The picture is like that of a puff of breath on a cold day. It is insubstantial and fleeting, not "meaningless."

The idea expressed here is the fleeting/transitory nature of life and of profit from work (v. 3). Like a vapor, it doesn't last. This is not a statement about the meaninglessness of everything, but rather the temporary nature of life "under the sun."

Luther says this vanity is "not about the things themselves but about the human heart, which abuses things to its own disadvantage," (AE 15:13).

The heart is never content with present things and is always longing for more. When we get what we strive

for, dissatisfaction sets in almost immediately. Our pursuit of happiness is like trying to grasp vapor.

For the greatest vanity of all, see Ecclesiastes 12:13–14.

v. 3: On the futility of human toil

Obviously you gain something from work or you wouldn't do it! But what's the profit? The basic question here is "what do I have to show for all my hard work"? The problem with working for profit is it is "vapor"; it doesn't last. You don't get to keep what you've worked for.

See Genesis 4:1–8. The name Abel is the same as the word that is translated in Ecclesiastes as "vapor." Why is this an appropriate name for Abel? What does this teach us about the worldly benefit of righteousness? See Psalm 37:12, 16 and John 15:18.

v. 4: "A generation goes, a generation comes"

Is death good or natural? See Romans 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:26. How, then, can what St. Paul says in Philippians 1:21 be true? See Philippians 1:23.

v. 4–7: Creation & humanity contrasted

How does the behavior of the sun, wind, and water contrast with the behavior of humanity? Contrast Job 38:8–11 with Isaiah 1:3.

What would happen if the sun became bored with remaining in its assigned place and decided to follow its own course? Why is it to our benefit to live within the boundaries God has set for human existence (e.g., the Ten Commandments)? See Deuteronomy 12:28.

Ecclesiastes reminds us of the blessing of remaining within our God-appointed limits. The opposite of this is found in Judges 21:25. Contrast this with Exodus 15:26.

To what does the orderliness of creation bear witness, according to Psalm 19:1? Can we learn everything we need to know about God from nature? See 1 Corinthians 2:7–11.

v. 8: "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing"

Ambrose: "We arise each day to eat and drink; yet no one is filled so that he does not hunger and thirst after a short time. Daily we seek profit, and to greed there is set no limit. He that loves silver will not be satisfied with silver. There is no limit to toil, and there is no profit in abundance," (ACC IX, 198).

Luther: "So great is the variety of human affections and desires that the eyes are never satisfied. They want first one thing, then another, and when they obtain it, the heart still is not satisfied. The heart is a constantly yawning chasm; it wants everything, and even if it obtained everything, it would go on looking for still more. Look at Alexander the Great. He was lord of almost the whole world. Yet when he heard that there were more worlds, he sighed: "And I have not yet conquered even one!" Thus his heart wanted innumerable worlds. How could anyone, even the most eloquent, adequately describe the enormous vanity of

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Contentment Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

this man's heart? The vanity and insatiability of the human heart are unspeakable. What a man has does not please him; what he does not have, he years for," (AE 15:19).

v. 9: "What has been will be"

Luther: "That is, after you have achieved what you wanted, your mind is still not at peace. You feel the same after you have achieved the thing as you did before you achieved the thing. The heart never finds fulfillment," (AE 15:20).

v. 9: "Nothing new under the sun"

See the following passages for new things: John 1:14; Luke 1:34; Matthew 28:5–6; John 3:3; Luke 22:20; Isaiah 65:17. How do you reconcile these statements with what we find in Ecclesiastes 1:9? Keep in mind who the subject of each passage is.



v. 10: "See, this is new?"

Bollhagen: "'New' is the magic word. Sometimes manufacturers will affix the word 'new' to a product that has been around for years, just to get people's attention... The advances of modern technology in recent decades have only the appearance of newness. The computer? Logical thinking has been around as long as the human race. The Internet, cellular phones? People *do* talk to one another as always. Computerized ignition, fuel injection? It's called getting from here to there... Newness is a mirage. A false sense of newness leads to a false sense of progress and further on to a false sense of hope," (59).

What does the entire hope of the Christian rest upon? See 1 Corinthians 15:14–19.

v. 11: "No remembrance"

What have past generations earned for their accomplishments? What will happen to the memory of our achievements after we're gone? Compare Exodus 1:8 and the consequence the Israelites faced (Exodus 1:9–14) as a result.

How does Isaiah portray "life under the sun" in Isaiah 40:7–8, and with what does He contrast it?

While we tend to dwell on our accomplishments and failures, what does Scripture tell us to ponder? See Psalm 77:12

Closing Hymn: Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ (LSB, 565)

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