

BIBLE SURVEY ECCLESIASTES AND THE SONG OF SOLOMON

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Preface

Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are the last of what are known as the wisdom books of the Old Testament. It is fair to say that some have given rather fanciful interpretations of these books without Scriptural warrant, but that should not deter us from seeking to proclaim the messages both books contain. It is also fair to say that they are often much neglected by preachers, partly because of the difficulty of understanding them correctly. They are full of excellent wise advice, given

under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which is why of course they are included in Scripture. Therefore those responsible for preaching and teaching the people of God ought to consider preaching from these books, and those who do will profit considerably from their studies.

These books are based on the talks Philip Parsons gave in the *Serving Today* radio programmes and I am indebted to him again for his help. Philip is giving us a survey of each book of the Old Testament and this book forms part of that series. He has also given us a number of useful suggested sermon outlines. The preacher will need to remember that these are only outlines as he will need to work on the Biblical text in more detail to complete a full sermon, but Philip's guidance is an excellent first step.

May the Lord who caused these books to be written be our helper as we seek to teach them to others.

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Chapter 1: Ecclesiastes

General introduction

Ecclesiastes is the third of the wisdom books of the OT. Have you ever wondered why this book is in the Bible? In some ways it does not seem to fit, because its style is so different from almost everything else in the Scriptures. But it is there and we must address it, for we are to live by every word of God.

1. Author, Date of Writing and Name

Although some have doubted that Solomon was the author, the evidence for him being so is very strong (1:1-12; 2:4-9; 12:9). He was clearly advanced in years, and this seems to present a problem because we are told of his terrible backsliding as he got older. If he was in such a backslidden state, how could he write this part of Scripture? The only satisfactory answer seems to be that he repented towards the end of his life and that his 'wilderness' years actually enabled him to write such a book as this. The way the book is written indicates that he had experienced first-hand much of what he speaks about. It is as though he had truly found out from bitter experience

the vanity of life not lived wholeheartedly for God. If this view is correct, then the book was written around 935 BC.

The name of the book is also unusual. It should really be entitled 'The Preacher'. The original Hebrew name for the book means just that, and the word Ecclesiastes is the Greek translation of it. Why we have retained the Greek version as the title for the book in our English Bibles is probably because that title was used when the King James version of the Bible was translated and it has remained in common usage.

2. Method & Structure

As we have already observed, the style of this book is very unusual, and if we are to gain benefit from it, then we need to understand the underlying method that is employed. Throughout the book, Solomon is really looking at life from two points of view, and he keeps switching from one to the other in the course of the book. Where he uses the words 'vanity' or 'meaningless' or 'futile' when referring to life 'under the sun', he is looking at life from the purely natural and godless point of view.

Without God there can be no real meaning to life. Other parts of the book are clearly looking at life and death from the perspective of one who fears God and lives for him. It is only then that life can have any real meaning and hope.

It is also important to realise that after a brief introduction, the book consists of a sermon or series of sermons, looking at the two themes of futility and hope, but examining them from different points of view.

Survey of the Contents

1. The Preacher's Introduction (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

Here, Solomon portrays life from a merely earthbound point of view and he comes to the same conclusion that many are coming to today. There is a mood of pessimism and hopelessness which pervades modern philosophy, but Solomon said it all 3000 years ago. Thus this wise preacher sets the stage for his discourses.

2. The Sermon - Futility or Hope?

The preacher examines four aspects of life in this world, to see if any of them hold the key to life:

- (a) Intellectual pursuits (1:12-18). Note his conclusion (v18)!
- (b) Pleasure (2:1-11) - no indulgence was spared.
- (c) Human wisdom (2:12-16) - human wisdom on its own is of no lasting value.
- (d) Hard Work (2:17-23) - there is no enduring benefit in mere hard work.

From 2:24 the preacher now brings God into the picture. Only a life lived for God can bring any meaning into these things he has been considering. But when God is the centre of our lives then we see that everything is in fact part of his overall plan (3:1-8) and everything is full of meaning and purpose (3:9-15), even such things as eating and drinking ("drudgery divine!" - G Herbert).

3. Trying to find meaning in life

From 3:16 to 4:16, the preacher examines further aspects of life in this world. He first looks at the courts to see if he can find justice, but concludes that even here there is often wickedness. Such evil, though unpunished in this life, will be brought to final judgement.

Secondly he observes the great evil of ruthless oppression by those in power. Work and achievement is again reviewed. Its motive is exposed as, more often than not, 'one-upmanship'. Also, some who worked hard were not able to enjoy the fruit of their labours. There is some relief to be found in this miserable existence of men, and that is in the enjoyment of one's work (3:22) and to be in real partnership with another, or even three (4:9-12). Finally in this section the preacher exposes the fleeting nature of fame and power, a drama which is often re-enacted in the rise to favour and fall from favour of modern governments.

In chapter 5 the preacher considers the religious life. Can this be the answer? Not in and of itself, but only when a true fear of God

is present. Beware, he says, of too much talk in religion. This view finds an echo in the Apostle Paul - "the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power" (1 Corinthians 4:20).

The next section (5:8 - 6:12) deals with the many evils of riches. They never satisfy, others prey upon them, they can be lost at a stroke and we cannot take them with us. Only when we acknowledge all we have as a gift from God, can wealth or possessions have any benefit.

In Chapter 7 the preacher makes a number of comparisons about life in this world: honour is better than luxury, seriousness better than frivolity, restraint better than rashness, wisdom better than wealth, submission better than rebellion, but godliness is better than everything (7:18b). Revelation is also better than reason. Search, as you will, it is almost impossible to find a really wise man, let alone a woman (7:28), but this state of affairs is all man's fault (7:29). Godly wisdom will show in a man's face (8:1). In the first part of chapter 8, the preacher makes two further comparisons: discretion is better than

stubbornness, especially in public life, and despite all the injustices of life, the fear of God is better than evil.

From 8:14, Solomon begins to bring the book to a close with a long section where he draws the unenlightened conclusions of the wisdom of the world; you might as well enjoy life while you can because of its inequalities, because of its uncertainty and because death is the end of it. There are, however, lessons which can be drawn from life by even the ungodly (9:13-10:20). Human wisdom, though tainted, can be helpful, but it has value for this life only.

From 11:1 to 12:7, the preacher considers the godly life and why it is to be preferred. He draws out two main lessons: To do good while there is opportunity and to begin to serve God while you are young. He drives home this last lesson with a graphic description of the increasing decrepitude of old age and of death itself.

The last few verses give the preacher's final conclusions: (i) the futility of the earth-bound man's life (12:8); (ii) the God-given answer (12:13-14).

Sermon suggestions from Ecclesiastes

1. Can life in this world be of truly satisfying and lasting value?

- (a) In intellectual pursuits? (1:12-18)
- (b) In pleasure? (2:1-11)
- (c) In human wisdom? (2:12-16)
- (d) In hard work? (2:17-23)
- (e) Only a life lived for God has true meaning and purpose (2:24-26)

2. Every aspect of life is part of God's plan

- (a) There is a time for everything in life – from birth to death (3:1-15)
- (b) We should not expect only good times or be surprised at evil times – they all fit into God's perfect plan.
- (c) God will judge all things (3:15)

3. What is the meaning of life? (3:16-4:16)

- (a) The rarity of true justice (3:16)
- (b) Only God's final judgement will be perfect (3:17)
- (c) The godless life little better than animal existence (3:18-21)

- (d) The limited value of selfish toil (3:22-4:18)
- (e) Some value in human friendship and partnership (4:9-12)
- (f) Fame and popularity are fleeting (4:13-16)
- (g) Only the godly life is of truly lasting value.

4. Can the religious life be the answer? (5:1-7)

- (a) Religion without God of no real value.
- (b) The fear of God is vital to our religion.
- (c) Too much talk in religion is a bad thing (1 Corinthians 4:20)

5. The many evils of riches (5:8-6:12)

- (a) They never satisfy.
- (b) Others prey on them.
- (c) They can be lost at a stroke.
- (d) We cannot take them with us.
- (e) Wealth and possessions are a gift from God and will only be of true benefit when we recognize this.

6. Practical Wisdom and the Fear of God (7:1-20)

- (a) Honour is better than luxury.
- (b) Seriousness is better than frivolity.
- (c) Restraint is better than rashness.
- (d) Wisdom is better than wealth.
- (e) Submission is better than rebellion.
- (f) God's overruling providence can be mysterious and includes adversity as well as prosperity (7:13-15)
- (g) Godliness is better than everything (7:18)
- (h) Sin has affected all (7:20).

7. The Rarity of true Wisdom (7:23 – 8:1)

- (a) A truly wise man, one in a thousand.
- (b) A truly wise woman even rarer.
- (c) Godly wisdom softens a man's face.
- (d) Sinful foolishness is man's fault (7:29)

8. Natural Wisdom, the Inequalities of life and the fear of God

- (a) Life is full of inequalities (8:9,14; 9:2-3a; 9:11-12)

- (b) Because of life's inequalities, enjoy life while you can (8:15; 9:7-10)
- (c) The fear of God alone has lasting value (8:12)
- (d) Natural wisdom alone cannot discern this (8:16-17)

9. Wisdom Contrasted with Foolishness (9:13-10:20)

- (a) The example of the city and the wise man (9:13-18)
- (b) A little bit of foolishness can spoil your wisdom (10:1-4)
- (c) Times when those in authority are not the right people (10:5-7)
- (d) General wise advice showing the laziness of the fool (10:8-18)
- (e) Inequality of those who have money and those in high position (10:19-20)

10. The value of Diligence (11:1-8)

- (a) Service for God and others will ultimately bear fruit (11:1-2)
- (b) Do not be deterred by adverse circumstances (11:3-4)

- (c) Serve God despite the apparent disappointing immediate results - He is in control of the final result of all things (11:5-6)
- (d) Life lived for itself alone will end in despair and darkness (11:7-8)

11. The vanity of youth and the decrepitude of old age (11:9-12:7)

- (a) Childhood and youth are vanity (11:10)
- (b) God will judge us for the vanities of youth (11:9)
- (c) Turning to God in our youth is of great benefit (12:1)
- (d) Frailty of old age and death come eventually to all (12:3-7)
- (e) Better to learn to fear God while we are young – we may have no desire to do so when old.

12. The value of preaching and the whole duty of man (12:9-14)

- (a) Preachers should work at their sermons (12:9-10)

- (b) Preaching the truth will have lasting effect on the hearers (12:11).
 - (c) Study without wisdom is of little value (12:12)
 - (d) The whole duty of man – fearing God and keeping his commandments (12:13)
 - (e) The judgement will reveal all (12:14)
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Chapter 2: The Song of Solomon

Introduction

The Song of Solomon is the last book in the section of the Bible referred to as 'the wisdom literature'. Like Ecclesiastes, this book also appears a strange one to have in the Scriptures. To understand it we need a key, which will unlock its secrets. But first a word about its author. Like most books of the Bible, its traditional author has been challenged. There is, however, no compelling reason for rejecting the historic view of Solomon as the writer. Obviously written before his apostasy yet with considerable foreign influence in his use of words, we can date it at about 965 BC.

1. Interpretation

Some have considered this love poem to be purely naturalistic, describing only human love, courtship, marriage and the married state. Others have regarded the whole book as purely allegorical, depicting the relationship between Jehovah and his people, Christ and his Church, and Christ and the individual Christian. Either view alone would seem to be extreme. The fact that there are fifteen geographical references means that the events being described actually happened and therefore this beautiful description of human love is meant to guide all those who embark upon courtship and marriage. But to allow no further meaning to the text is surely against the Biblical concept of 'Christ in all the Scriptures' – (see Luke 24:27). The best way to read this book then, is to follow the development and fruition of the love of this pair. But as we enter into this delightful saga, also to let our thoughts rise higher to that love which Christ has for his bride, the Church, and the corresponding love which each believer therefore has for him. It is a poem describing natural human love at its best and highest, but with spiritual overtones.

2. Analysis

This love poem, a chain of 13 links, describes the courtship, marriage and married state of Solomon and a beautiful Shulammitite girl (see 6:13ff for use of Shulammitite). She is sometimes referred to as the 'Cinderella' of a family. (Cinderella is a fictitious character in a children's story who was forced to work hard and despised by others but who eventually married the prince.) The Shulammitite is similar for she kept Solomon's vineyard in the hill country of Ephraim about 50 miles north of Jerusalem. She had been forced to work so hard by her half-brothers that she had become almost black with sunburn and had neglected her own appearance. Disguised as a shepherd, Solomon visited the vineyard and there begins a courtship between them which issues in a declaration of their love for each other and an invitation by Solomon for her to be his bride (2:10,13).

While he is away making the necessary arrangements, she dreams about him, and in her dream she has lost him, but then after diligent searching she finds him (3:1-4). Her intense sorrow is turned into ecstatic joy. The

scene now changes to describe the bridal procession of the Shulammitite girl being brought up to Jerusalem for her marriage to Solomon.

Chapter 4 is the bridegroom's wedding song extolling the virtues of his beloved. It is more explicit than what we are accustomed to in many cultures, but something similar is still practised at weddings in Syria. The second song (4:8-15) is really expressing the bridegroom's own feelings for and delight in his bride, and ends with all the guests being invited to share the joy of bride and groom.

Chapter 5:2- 6:3 describes another dream in which the bride is separated from her beloved because of selfish negligence on her part. When, in her dream, she is able to extol his virtues, she is then able to answer her own question as to where he is - he is really with her.

The remainder of the book consists of further expressions of love between Solomon and the Shulammitite, where there is also a maturing and deepening of their love.

3. Spiritual Teaching

The following are a sample of the spiritual lessons which we may legitimately draw from the song: -

- (i) Chapter 1:8 - We shall only discover true fellowship with Christ when we follow closely the path of duty.
- (ii) Chapter 3:1-4 - What Christian has not known the pain of the withdrawal of the felt presence of Christ? The way back to that blessedness is only through diligent searching for him with repentance if needed.
- (iii) Chapter 8:6-7 - Is not this the very height of the relationship of a believer with his Lord? May we too love not our lives unto death for his sake!

Sermon suggestions from the Song of Solomon

1. The physical expression of human love at its best and highest
 - (a) Exclusively between one man and one woman in the marriage relationship.
 - (b) A lifelong partnership.
 - (c) The marriage relationship is not to be despised because of sexual abuses (e.g. adultery, promiscuity etc.).
 - (d) Physical relationships within marriage are a gift from God.
 - (e) Physical relationships within marriage to be enjoyed by believers.
 - (f) Married love can have its painful times (e.g. separation) as well as happy times.
 - (g) Mature married love a great blessing.

2. The marriage relationship is a picture of Christ and the Church (see Ephesians 5)

- (a) Christ delights in his people and rejoices over them.
- (b) Believers should delight in the Lord and desire to do so increasingly.
- (c) Christ's love for his people is flawless and eternal.
- (d) Believers should desire to experience the felt presence of God in Christ in their lives.
- (e) When in times of spiritual estrangement, believers should seek the presence of Christ through the means of grace.
- (f) The pinnacle of love to Christ is a willingness to lay down our lives for him.

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