

LESSON 1

The Puzzle of Life

Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes Overview

Key Verse

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:1–3).

Overview

Ecclesiastes is one of the most puzzling and difficult books of the Bible. Many of its statements sound odd in the Bible, for they suggest that life is meaningless. However, when we read the book as a whole, we discover it has a powerful message that life is significant when God is at its center. This is a highly relevant book for modern men and women who share the frustrations with life discussed in Ecclesiastes.

Topic

Life

Theme

Only God can make sense of life.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will complete a self-evaluation to determine the role they are relegating God to in their lives.

Outline

- I. Authorship and Date
- II. Structure
- III. Purpose
- IV. Theme
- V. Significance

Getting Started

The Puzzle of Life

Make several sets of nine index cards containing the following nine words (one word per card): work to eat, eat to live, live to work. Have students form several teams, and give each team a set of word cards. Explain that these cards hold the secret of life if properly arranged in three three-word phrases.

Materials

- Transparencies 1–4
- Several sets of nine index cards containing the phrase: work to eat, eat to live, live to work (one word per card)
- Whiteboard and markers
- Lesson 1 case study from resource CD
- Ecclesiastes 1:1–3 verse card from resource CD

Regather the 3" x 5" cards after this activity. You will use one set again for the concluding lesson in this series on Ecclesiastes. See page 65.

Challenge the learners to solve their puzzles and discover the hidden secret of life.

When teams have completed their phrases, ask a volunteer to read his team's solution to the puzzle of life. Several combinations are possible, but the one you're looking for is "work to eat, eat to live, live to work."

Discuss: Is this a realistic view of the average person's life? Would you say this depicts a significant life? What would need to be added to this life to make it significant? (Questions 1–3)

That's Significant!

Ask: What makes a life significant? Without Christ, would you say your life had any real significance? Explain.

During the next few weeks we will examine a book that tackles the question, What makes life significant? It was inspired by the Holy Spirit and was written by Solomon. His purpose was to tear down all human misconceptions about the significant life. In their place he concluded that only a life of obedience to God brings lasting joy and fulfillment. The book is Ecclesiastes.

In order to understand the message of Ecclesiastes, we first need to see the book as a whole.

Searching the Scriptures

I. Authorship and Date

Unlike many books of the Bible, the authorship of Ecclesiastes is difficult to determine. In fact, although the book has been traditionally attributed to Solomon, many scholars today reject Solomon as the writer. For them, the language of the book points in other directions.

The first verse of Ecclesiastes is the title for the entire book: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). The word translated "preacher" means "one who assembles." The term could refer to either a person who convenes people or one who collects proverbs.

The fact that Solomon is never referred to directly in the book is perplexing. In addition, there are a number of complaints about corrupt political officials, which is surprising if the book were written by the king who appointed the officials. Furthermore, Solomon's reign was a golden age in Israel's history. Ecclesiastes presents a time when life was out of joint. Finally, the epilogue in 12:9–14 seems to be written *about* the Preacher rather than *by* him. For these and other reasons, many modern scholars say that the author could not have been Solomon.

Nevertheless, a number of pieces of evidence support Solomon as author. The writer, like Solomon, had unparalleled wisdom (1:16), unequaled wealth (2:8), ample opportunities for pleasure (2:3, 10), and extensive building activities (2:4–6).

Moreover, Ecclesiastes has striking similarities to Proverbs. Both books have

Notice particularly Ecclesiastes 10:8–18.

memorable maxims that summarize a large volume of experience in concise statements. Ecclesiastes and Proverbs also both emphasize wisdom and the fear of the Lord.

The identification of the writer as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” does not demand Solomon as the author, but it strongly suggests it. The verse could refer to another son of David, with “king” then referring to David. However, in the light of the other evidence, it most likely refers to Solomon.

Determining the *kind* of man who wrote the book is easy. He possessed keen observation and penetrating understanding. He looked at life carefully and analyzed it critically. He had a restless spirit, for he wanted to find true, lasting satisfaction in life. He wanted to discover eternal significance that transcended material possessions and human achievements. He was not content with superficial pleasures in life; he insisted on finding true fulfillment and meaning.

If this book came from Solomon, as it likely did, then it was written during the time of Israel’s greatest power and prosperity. Though on the surface everything seemed fine in Israel, underneath there were deep problems that caused the kingdom to split apart after Solomon’s death (1 Kings 12). In addition, Solomon himself experienced spiritual struggles in his latter years (1 Kings 11:1–13). Ecclesiastes may well be the written record of his internal turmoil. It reveals the inner struggle of a man who seemed to have it all but who felt empty inside.

DISCUSS: What do people usually conclude about the inner satisfaction and well-being of those who are “doing well” in life? Does the smile on a face always means that there is a smile in a heart? Explain. Why can times of prosperity also be times of soul hunger? (Questions 4–6)

It is ironic but true to life that prosperity prompted this painful examination of life. Those who have enjoyed wealth and pleasure quickly learn that those things cannot satisfy the deep hunger of the human heart.

II. Structure

OBJECT LESSON: Mark a series of points horizontally on the whiteboard. Then ask a volunteer to connect the points by drawing a straight horizontal line.

When we read a book, we expect the author to take us directly from one point to the next. For example, a novel does not skip around from one date to another in a haphazard way. A logical discussion moves from a cause to the effects produced by the cause.

Most of the books of the Bible follow this kind of linear progression. However, Ecclesiastes takes a different approach.

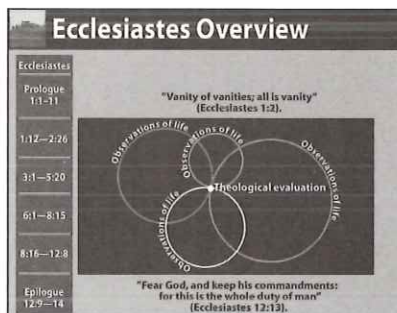
OBJECT LESSON: Mark a point on the whiteboard. Then ask several volunteers to draw circles, all connected to the point at some place in each circle.

Instead of moving in a straight line, Ecclesiastes is more like a set of circles that keep returning to the same point. Eventually, the book gets to its main point, but on the way Solomon takes the reader along the journey that he took in trying to find meaning in life.

DISCUSS: Why didn't Solomon just give his conclusion in a logical, straightforward way? (Question 7)

What Solomon did is both creative and powerful. His approach reproduces in the reader the feelings of futility that Solomon had. By the end of the book, the reader not only knows the answer but feels the pain of the problem and appreciates the significance of the solution.

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 2 as you explain the following information.



The book begins with a prologue (1:1-11), in which Solomon gave his initial assessment of life, "All is vanity under the sun." This raises the question that drives the entire search, "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" (1:3), which reappears in 2:22; 3:9; 5:16; and 6:11. When pain is subtracted from pleasure, asked Solomon, what profit is left?

After the prologue, Solomon moved through his first observation of life. In 1:12-2:23, he carefully analyzed his experiences. Then he evaluated them in terms of God's oversight of life (2:24-26). He tentatively concluded that although life seems enigmatic, God gives the believer the capacity to enjoy life.

Solomon followed the same pattern three more times. He concluded each observation of life (3:1-5:20; 6:1-8:15; and 8:16-12:8) by evaluating it from a theological point of view. Each section demonstrated that there can be fulfillment in life, even though many of the details of life remain puzzling.

The key to the book is found in the epilogue in 12:9-14, where Solomon stated the conclusion that his painful search produced. Without this final truth, the book would leave us going in circles, but this verse brings us to a fixed point on which to stand. God's wisdom surpasses the partial understanding of humans.

Humans can see only part of what is happening in life, and that part leaves them restless and frustrated. However, the eternal God knows what He is doing, and He will evaluate what every person does in life. This conclusion forms the framework in which the rest of the book must be interpreted.

ASK: What has happened in your life that leaves you frustrated? How does the fact that God knows what He is doing affect your life? (Questions 8, 9)

III. Purpose

Because the content of Ecclesiastes differs from the rest of the Bible, many people have wondered why it is included in God's Word. In fact, some scholars

believe it is a piece of cynical philosophy that argues against the rest of Scripture. But when the book is seen as a whole, several important purposes emerge.

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 3. Reveal the purposes of Ecclesiastes as you cover them.

First, Ecclesiastes was written to satisfy the human hunger to understand how all of life fits into a meaningful pattern. Each person's life is brief. He is one of about 6.7 billion people on this planet, and he lives for only a few years. That raises a troubling question: What is a person's life worth in the larger picture? Ecclesiastes affirms that the life lived in the fear of God is indeed part of God's eternal plan.

Second, Ecclesiastes addresses the boredom of the joyless routine of the average life. Solomon speaks of the disillusion of the person who works to eat, eats to live, and lives to work. He destroys the notion that a person's work determines a person's worth, for work without God is worthless. By tearing down this misconception, Solomon clears the way for his positive message.

Third, Ecclesiastes calls the world to develop a God-centered view of life. In each of the four observations of life, Solomon refers to God's design for life. All of this builds toward his conclusion, in which he states emphatically that meaning in life comes only when humans fear God and keep His commandments.

Fourth, Ecclesiastes is powerful in convincing the reader that life that does not rise above human efforts is useless. A favorite expression in the book is "under the sun." What Solomon does is to say, "For sake of the argument, let's leave God out of the picture. Can we then find satisfaction under the sun, that is, only in the human realm?" Of course, the answer is no, so Solomon repeatedly took the reader back to the need for obedience to God.

Fifth, Ecclesiastes endeavors to untangle a major enigma of life: Why can a person have everything this world offers yet feel so empty? This book serves as an outstanding example of speculative wisdom literature that examines the situations in life that do not seem to follow the standard rules. For example, Proverbs 10:22 teaches that God's blessing makes a person rich and God does not add sorrow to this blessing. Ecclesiastes looks at the unusual cases where money and happiness do not go together.

EVALUATE: That person's money may not have made him happy, but I am convinced it would make me happy. (Question 10)

Sixth, Ecclesiastes challenges the young to reflect on the issues of life and to choose to obey God (11:9–12:7). Solomon does not want others to waste their lives going around in meaningless circles. He desires that his testimony may spare other people the pain he had experienced. Their lives can be more fulfilling if they learn early on to reverence God and strive to obey Him in every area of their lives.

Purposes of Ecclesiastes

1. To satisfy the human hunger to understand how all of life fits into a meaningful pattern.
2. To address the boredom of joyless routines of the average life.
3. To call the world to develop a God-centered view of life.
4. To convince the reader that life that does not rise above human efforts is useless.
5. To untangle the enigma of why a person can have everything this world offers and yet feel so empty.
6. To challenge the young to reflect on the issues of life and choose to obey God.

Modern nihilists, such as Nietzsche, and existentialists, such as Sartre, say that life is meaningless and absurd. Ecclesiastes answers the questions of these thinkers.

Themes of Ecclesiastes

1. Life is enigmatic, for it leaves many questions unanswered.
2. Enjoy life, but be accountable to God.
3. True meaning in life cannot be found in the temporal, earthly sphere.
4. God created humans with an eternal hunger.
5. The prospect of death urges a wise investment of life.
6. Only God gives joy in the treadmill of human existence.

IV. Theme

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 4 as you present the major themes of Ecclesiastes. Reveal them as you cover them.

The major themes of Ecclesiastes flow out of its purposes. First, Solomon taught that life is enigmatic, for it leaves many questions unanswered. A key word in the book is the Hebrew term *hebel*, which is most often translated “vanity.” This term has been rendered in several different ways, but it is best to translate it as “puzzling.” Ecclesiastes says that life is fundamentally frustrating because it contains puzzles that the human mind cannot solve. Things do not always follow the general rules. Good people do not always prosper. Rich people are not always happy.

Second, Ecclesiastes encourages us to enjoy life but at the same time to be accountable to God (11:9, 10). The fact that life is puzzling is no reason to give up on it. We must keep our lives anchored to God but also be sure to live life to its fullest. What we do not understand should not sour us from enjoying our opportunities. This book encourages people to jump wholeheartedly into life rather than holding back in fear and worry.

DISCUSS: What would Solomon have concluded about the idea that to be spiritual you have to be somber and serious most of the time? (Question 11)

Third, Ecclesiastes demonstrates that true meaning in life cannot be found in the temporal, earthly sphere. Solomon searched for fulfillment “under the sun,” leaving God out of the picture. However, he kept coming to the conclusion that human effort apart from God leads only to frustration and meaninglessness. No amount of material possessions, personal achievements, or temporal pleasures can bring lasting joy and meaning to life.

Fourth, God has created humans with an eternal hunger. We are unique, because God created us in His image. Therefore, we are dissatisfied with merely temporal achievements and pleasures. We crave a secure, eternal place and an unchanging relationship. The ever-changing kaleidoscope of life may bring temporary pleasure, but it cannot satisfy the deep, gnawing hunger of the human heart. Therefore, we must seek outside of ourselves and of the temporal, human realm to find something to fill hearts which God created to function for eternity (3:11).

Fifth, throughout Ecclesiastes the prospect of death is always in the background. This emphasis teaches two important truths: (1) all human activities lack permanence, for death will bring them to an end; and (2) our present earthly life is our only opportunity to live and work in significant ways before we enter eternity. Therefore, it is crucial that we invest life in what will stand the test of time. We must not squander it on things destined to perish.

EVALUATE: Facing our mortality rather than denying it would most likely help us to live more productive lives. (Question 12)

Sixth, Ecclesiastes assures us that only God gives joy. Life is bleak without Him in the picture. The unending cycle of life and death has no reason. However, in each section of the book, Solomon states that despite all the puzzles and disappointments of life, we can have joy, because joy in life is a gift from God.

When we read Ecclesiastes carefully, we find a message of optimism and hope. Life “under the sun” is disillusioning, but life does not have to be confined in that way. When we take God into account, our eternal hunger is satisfied, we have joy in the face of life’s puzzles, and we have hope for the future.

V. Significance

DISCUSS: If you were inviting an unsaved person to the class sessions on Ecclesiastes, how would you describe this book’s relevance to him? (Question 13)

Ecclesiastes is significant for the questions it raises. Solomon dared to ask the hard questions that challenge our thinking. Instead of using his possessions, power, and pleasures to drown out his feelings of frustration, he faced the issue of significance.

In doing this, Solomon followed the same course many others have traveled. In modern times many leading thinkers have given up on life. Some people give themselves over to mindless pleasures in a sad attempt to deny the gnawing pain they have in their hearts. Others conclude that life has no meaning at all—that it is absurd and that the only way out is death.

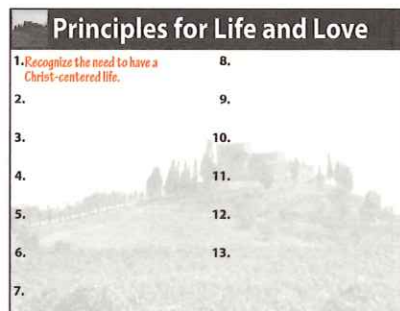
Ecclesiastes is such a powerful book for modern people because it gives solid answers to these troubling issues. Solomon did not leave us in the despair of disillusionment or take us on a flight of fear. Instead, he turned to the one source of significant life, God. He challenged his readers to reverence God and to keep His commandments, for only He can give life.

Ecclesiastes is a book of hope addressed to people who have given up on life. It speaks to people in our culture right where they are, but it takes them directly to the Lord. What a significant book for our time!

Making It Personal

If, Then

Discuss: If only God can make sense of life, then what is true of people who don’t see any purpose in living? What will happen to them in their attempts to make sense of life without God? (Questions 14, 15)



Identify an unbeliever you know who is struggling to make sense of life.
Ask: From what you have learned about Ecclesiastes so far, what can you do to help him or her? (Question 16)

Relevance Rating

Ask: From what you have learned from this overview of Ecclesiastes, how relevant is the book to your life? Have the learners rate the relevance of the book on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being extremely relevant. (Question 17)

Direct learners to the self-evaluation test in their study books (Question 18). The evaluation will help them to determine whether or not they are living with God at the center of their lives.

Ask: How do you expect to be changed from this study of Ecclesiastes? (Question 19)

Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: Recognize the need to have a Christ-centered life.

Memory Verses

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 1:1–3 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verses.