

**A LOOK AT THE BOOK  
ECCLESIASTES  
THE FUTILITY OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN**

Ralph Porter

For how many of us would this be our favorite book?

A "synthesizer" takes the bits and pieces and unites them in such a way that they produce (beautiful?) music.

Ecclesiastes is God's answer for the "yuppies"—for boomers!  
Solomon was a first-class yuppie—perhaps the original yuppie!

### **AUTHOR AND DATE**

The author's style, and the details concerning his life, fit Solomon.

The book claims to have been written by the son of David who was king over Jerusalem.

Recent criticism denies Solomonic authorship and places the book in a later period.

The evidence is more presuppositional than factual.

References to his wisdom, wealth, pleasure, and building exploits also fit Solomon best.

Solomon was consistently accepted as author by Jewish Talmudic and Christian tradition, until the time of Luther.

Assuming the validity of the conclusion that Solomon wrote it, the book would have been written between 971 and 931 B.C., probably late in that period.

### **BACKGROUND**

Solomon's success

As heir to David's kingdom, he lived at the high point of Israel's history.

Israel's expansion

The kingdom had extended its borders.

Its wealth continued to increase.

Solomon's wisdom--people came from everywhere to hear him

Kings from all over the contemporary world came to see his kingdom and to hear his proverbial wisdom.

He was prime example # 1 of the successful man!

Against this background of expansion, prosperity and success, Solomon wrote concerning the futility he felt with life.

## **PURPOSE AND THEME**

Key expressions: "vanity" ("emptiness" or "meaningless") and "under the sun."

These expressions reveal the basic thrust of the book.

Solomon speaks as a person who has tried everything and found that life and all it has to offer is futile.

Satisfaction will *never* be found in wealth, pleasure, knowledge, work, social relationships, nor anything else this world offers us.

"Life is just a series of meaningless cycles, filled with inequities and injustice, which lead to death."

Solomon doesn't leave us on the meaningless "merry-go-round" of life, however. The futility exists while man sees life from the perspective "under the sun."

The main thing Solomon wants us to learn is that the basis for true satisfaction, and for a meaningful life, isn't found under the sun!

It's found in the true God of the universe, Who controls and surpasses the sun. True satisfaction is found in seeking after and obeying God.

When life is seen as a gift from God, to be lived in submission to His revealed will, then life takes on meaning and can be fully enjoyed. 12:1, 13

Based on this premise, the purpose of the book seems to be to warn young people (Yuppies?) to realize this early in life and to seek Him first.

If we want to enjoy life fully, we can lay aside normal human goals and seek God. Then we will learn what it's like to *really live!*

## **ORGANIZATION**

This major thesis is revealed in the prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:9-14)

The premise is developed through its two major sections:

First, the author gives proof of life's futility (1:12-6:12).  
based on his own experience (1:12-2:26)  
and his observation of life in general (3-6)

Second, he presents important principles for living in a futile world, on the basis of his previous conclusions (7-12:8)

## **PROLOGUE 1:1-11**

The basic problem the author is dealing with is defined in the prologue.

**Author 1**

**Theme 2**

After a thorough examination of life and nature, he has found that life on earth is futile and frustrating.

**Illustration 3-7**

**Conclusion 8-11**

It's all a *meaningless* series of cycles that ends in death.

That's all the human perspective gets us!

## **PROOF OF THE FUTILITY OF LIFE 1:12-6:12**

### **FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE 1:12-2:26**

Based on his own experience

He tried everything in an attempt to find something that satisfies.  
It was all futile--empty!

**Futility of striving after wisdom 1:12-18**

He tried *human wisdom* and found that all the understanding gained couldn't satisfy him.

Satisfaction, contentment, fulfillment, don't come from human wisdom!

**Futility of striving after pleasure 2:1-3**

He tried *pleasure*, but all of its enjoyment was meaningless and couldn't satisfy.

### **Futility of striving after treasure 2:4-11**

He stored up great *wealth*, and great accomplishments, but all that money could buy couldn't satisfy him.

### **Futility of wisdom and folly 2:12-23**

As he compared the foolish way of life to the wise way of life, he found *wisdom* to be much better, but it really didn't change life much.

That, too, was rather useless.

### **Conclusion 2:24-26**

*Having tried everything this world offers, the author arrives at the conclusion that he might as well enjoy what God has given to him and seek to please Him.*

*Godliness with contentment is great gain!*

## **FROM PERSONAL OBSERVATION 3-6**

Next the author demonstrates the futility of life in this world on the basis of his observations.

Each of these observations leads to a logical conclusion.

### **He has observed the futility of life 3**

Life goes through its cycles (3:1-15)

Wickedness continues to increase (3:16-17)

Finally, people die just like the animals do (3:18-21)

*So what's the use of struggling for anything more?  
You might as well enjoy life as best you can and die (3:22)*

### **He observed the inequalities of life 4**

Everywhere you look there's oppression (4:1-3)

Envy (4:4-6)

Loneliness (4:7-12)

Old age makes people cranky and lays us on the sidelines as someone younger takes our place (4:13-16)

**He observed that religion abounds everywhere, but it's marked by insincerity 5:1-7**

Sacrifices are offered thoughtlessly (5:1)

Many words are repeated often, but without meaning (5:2-3)

Vows are made but not kept (5:4-6)

This kind of religion is worthless.

*People need to take God seriously and reverence Him (5:7)*

**He observed that wealth is increasing but it's not solving anyone's problems 5:8-10**

The desire for more wealth causes oppression (5:8-9)

Those who have it always want more (5:10-12)

What we have never lasts (5:13-17)

*What people really need is to accept what God has given us, be content with it, and enjoy it (5:18-20).*

**The issues already mentioned lead to general frustration with life 6**

People don't enjoy their prosperity.

Our wealth and our children escape us, because we are always seeking more possessions (6:1-6).

We work hard but our desires are never fulfilled.  
We always want more (6:7-9)

We don't understand what's good for us.  
We don't understand the right priorities for our life.

*Therefore we're never satisfied (6:10-12)*

**PRINCIPLES BASED ON THE FUTILITY OF LIFE 7:1-12:8**

On the basis of his previous conclusions, he teaches us important principles for living in a futile world.

**PROPER PRIORITIES FOR LIFE 7:1-14**

In order to enjoy life, we have to understand what the right priorities are.

He describes *seven priorities for people who want to be satisfied with life*:

**1. What you ARE is more important than what you OWN 7:1a**

It's more important to have a good reputation than to have expensive possessions, such as fine perfume.

**2. Funerals are better than birthday parties 7:1b-2**

We tend to remember birthdays and look forward to parties because they represent the happy times in our lives.

It would be better to pay attention to death, because it will help us consider what is really important in life.

**3. We learn more from moments of sadness than from the temporary pleasure of laughter 7:3-4**

**4. It's better to be corrected by a wise man than praised by a fool 7:5-7**

We normally like to be praised.

It doesn't really matter who praises us, as long as we receive praise!

It's better to be corrected by a wise man, than to be praised by a fool.

**5. "He who laughs last, laughs best!" 7:8a**

Rather than be concerned about a good start on a project, or making a good showing, we ought to be more concerned about what the end product will look like.

It's better to be seen as a fool at first and achieve greatness later than to start and end mediocre.

It always costs something to achieve greatness.

**6. It's better to listen carefully to our critics than to try to save face or get revenge 7:8b-9**

Patience is better than pride.

There is greater benefit in being corrected, than in saving face.

**7. Contentment with the present is better than concern about the past (or even the future) 7:10-14**

"Don't cry over spilt milk!"

Don't worry about tomorrow.

This is true whether the past, or future, be good or bad!

What really matters is how we use the present moment God has given to us.

Are we taking advantage of today's opportunities?

### **AVOIDANCE OF EXTREMES 7:15-22**

Neither over-righteous nor over-wicked

Not "holier than thou"

Neither over-wise nor foolish 15-18

We need a balanced view of our own righteousness (and of that of others) 19-20

We need a balanced view of criticism 21-22

### **AVOIDANCE OF WOMEN 7:23-29**

Women caused Solomon trouble--even spiritually!

His problem was caused by the ones he chose to identify with--they led him into trouble.

The man who seeks God first will avoid that kind of women (7:26)

In fact, (especially given his luck!) better to stay away from them completely than to run the risk!

True enjoyment of life comes from avoidance of those women who by their schemes lead men astray (7:27-29).

### **RELATIONSHIP TO GOVERNMENT 8:1-15**

The person who wishes to enjoy life must also be in proper relationship to the government.

In the midst of a "real" world we will only do this when we see life from God's perspective.

#### **Submission to authority 8:1-8**

He should submit to the authority of those who govern.

"When our leaders abuse us"

"There's a time and a place for everything"

In this context of governmental authority, the implication seems to be that God is in control.

You do what's right and submit to the authority God has established--in HIS time, He will do justly.

The government's wrongdoing doesn't justify our doing wrong through rebellion 1 Pet. 3:17:9-17

## **Punishment of the wicked 8:9-14**

The government ought to judge justly and apply fair, but effective, punishment, if their subjects are to enjoy life.

"When life is (seems) unfair" 10-15  
"It's just a matter of time"

## **Conclusion 8:15**

The person who is in a proper relationship with his government ought to enjoy life in the condition where God has placed him and leave the consequences to Him.

What lessons should we learn from these principles that Solomon is teaching us?

What suggestion does he give in each verse?  
Why is this good advice?  
Paraphrase it for us today? What should we do?

2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13

How do we "flesh it out"?

Should Christians "take the law into their own hands" when the administration of justice seems painfully slow? Why? Why not?

## **ENJOYMENT OF LIFE DUE TO MAN'S FATE 8:16-9:12**

"How DO we find joy in a world filled with death?  
With cruelty and suffering on every side?  
How can we talk about joy in that kind of world?"  
*It's a matter of perspective*  
"As long as we focus on the whys, we will be disturbed".  
We have to focus on who.

His observation of the common fate of all people has troubled him.

He has come to the conclusion, however, that since man has no control over it, he might as well enjoy life.

## **Divine control 8:16-9:1**

God controls the fate of all people.

Only when we realize Who is in control can we have real joy.

We don't know what tomorrow holds but He does. We can trust Him!

## **Equal opportunity 9:2-6**

All share the same fate

If your whole perspective is centered in this world, you've got a problem We're all going to die!

No one wants to die. We all want to live on forever.

Even the one who thinks there is no difference between man and a dog (unclean animal),  
wants to live on.

Everyone thinks that life is valuable.

BUT, the reality is WE ALL DIE.

### **Resultant enjoyment of life 9:7-10**

Therefore, we might as well live the life God has given to us and enjoy it.

"There always will be enigmas, and in many cases we never will know the answers."

*So, what do we do?*

Concentrate on the good things God has given us!

Enjoy life

Get together with your wife

Enjoy her

Enjoy life with her 9:9

Even when life doesn't make sense!

Whatever you do--do it whole-heartedly! 9:10; Col. 3:23

Toscanini--what was the most important thing in his life?

Whatever he was doing at the moment!

Jim Elliot--"Wherever you are, be all there!"

"Thoreau--`none are so old as those who have outlived enthusiasm.'"

How have you put these two principles to work in your life this week?

What can you do next week to make it different?

### **Unrevealed schedule 9:11-12**

The importance of enjoying the life God has given to you is especially significant since no one knows when God will change their circumstances.

*"Cheer up, things could be worse, . . . "*

The human perspective will never solve man's problem because no one knows when his hour will come--not even the rich!

*"I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul!"*

HA! One breath from death.

We are not in control. On our death bed that perspective rapidly vanishes!

We can't even predict the future; much less control it! (Weatherman!)

The only perspective that can really satisfy is God's perspective!

He is in control and we should leave those decisions in His hands.

What lessons should we learn from these principles that Solomon is teaching us?

What suggestion does he give in each verse?

Why is this good advice?

Paraphrase it for us today? What should we do?

How do we "flesh it out"?

Principles for enjoying life in a world filled with enigmas

1. Recognize Who is in control. 8:16-9:1
2. Trust Him even when you don't know what tomorrow will bring. 9:1
3. Enjoy to the utmost all that God has given you. 9:7-9
4. Whatever you do, give it all you got! 9:10

## **PURSUIT OF WISDOM 9:13-12:8**

### **Value of wisdom 9:13-18**

The final principle given for the enjoyment of life is the pursuit of wisdom.

### **Warning against folly 10**

Foolishness is dangerous.

*"What you sow, you reap!"*

### **Exhortation to pursue wisdom 11-12:8**

People who wish to enjoy life should seek wisdom.

Seek to please God and others, without being concerned about the results 11:1-6

Work actively even if conditions are uncertain 11:1-2

Use what God has given you for the good of others also.

Redeem the time 11:3-4

We ought to use what God has given us

We ought not sit around watching for a more ideal time.

Confidence is a product of faith 11:5-6

Since we don't know what God will do . . .

Take advantage of each opportunity God has given to you.

Don't wait around until you're sure of the results to work--just use the opportunities

He has given you for His glory.

How can I get the most out of my life? 11:7-12:7

Enjoy life and avoid evil while you're still young 11:7-10

Enjoy life now because it is temporary

BUT--Live in the consciousness of coming judgment. 9-10

After death comes judgment (Heb. 9:27)

Don't be afraid to grow old--enjoy the days God has given to you! 10

In the light of death's rapid advance, waste no time.

God and his wisdom should be pursued early in life, so that life will not become meaningless 12:1-8

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth

What does it mean to "remember" him?

Live for your Creator during your strongest days.

Don't worry now if you didn't then

You can only control today!

Give God what you have today!

--Don't worry about yesterday or tomorrow!

## **EPILOGUE 12:9-14**

### **Teacher's activity 12:9-11**

In conclusion, Solomon's activity as a teacher is directed toward one purpose. He wants the reader to learn the lesson which his search taught him.

### **Teacher's advice 12:12**

### **Teacher's admonition 12:13-14**

One basic key to make life enjoyable and meaningful:  
Fear God and obey His Word.

People who learn this lesson while young will experience a meaningful life and come to the end of life *satisfied*, rather than *frustrated*.