

MINING THE BIBLE



Ecclesiastes

“The Bible is not a child’s storybook; rather it is great literature that requires thoughtful response. All its diamonds do not lie exposed on the surface. Its richness is mined only through hard intellectual and spiritual spadework.”

Haddon Robinson, Expository Preaching

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ABOUT 'MINING THE BIBLE'

Aim

The aim of these studies is twofold. Firstly, they're designed to help you get to grips with the main message and applications of Ecclesiastes as a book. There's a second aim though, which is to help equip you to learn to study the Bible for yourself.

How it works

Each study has two sections: Questions and Summary. The questions for each study are intended to get you thinking about the most important things that the author wants us to understand from each passage. After each of the studies there's a short summary which explains the main point of the passage; but try not to skip straight to this if you're finding one of the questions difficult. Studying the Bible takes thought and isn't always easy, but it's important that you have patience and work hard at understanding it for yourself. If you get really stuck and confused and feel you need the help of the explanation, then do make sure you refer back to the passage again as you read it so that you can see where the points come from in the text.

Some of the longer studies are split into two sets of questions and application. This gives you the option of breaking them into two separate studies if you prefer.

As you go through the studies, you'll occasionally come across these symbols:



#PRINCIPLE

This symbol accompanies a key principle to learn for studying the Bible.



#METHOD

This symbol accompanies a method which you might find helpful for studying the Bible.

You'll also occasionally come across blank pages with this faded symbol in the middle:



This is to keep the summaries at the end of each study separate from the questions, to help you avoid the temptation of looking across the page for the answers without first working hard at the passage yourself! You could use this space to make notes.

Note on translations

These studies were prepared from the ESV, and it's recommended that you use either that or a translation with a similar level of accuracy to the original wording of the Biblical languages. Without going into all the reasons for this, an important one is that such translations often help make connections between ideas in different passages easier to pick up on because a common word is translated consistently.

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

The wisdom literature is sadly a much neglected and often misunderstood part of Scripture, and we miss out on a great many treasures by not burrowing ourselves deeply into it. It's understandable why that's the case; if you've read through Ecclesiastes before, you'll know that it can be uniquely frustrating and confusing at times! There's a lot in it that's hard to understand, and a coherent structure isn't as easy to find as in most other Bible books (in fact, compare any two commentaries, and they're pretty much guaranteed to present radically different ideas of how the book is structured!). So well done for taking it on!

However, despite the challenges facing us, we're going to see that Ecclesiastes is a wonderfully helpful book, which smashes to pieces our great idols (work, wealth,

worthiness and wisdom), teaches us humility before God, and actually plays a significant role in the Bible and God's progressive revelation (see Overview summary).

Enjoy!

More study guides can be found at www.miningthebible.co.uk.

OVERVIEW STUDY

Questions:

Read through the whole of Ecclesiastes. Have the questions below in mind as you read through, then try to answer them.

1) What are the main things the Preacher finds so frustrating about life? Make a list as you read through.

The book of Ecclesiastes has often been understood as largely the perspective of someone writing (or pretending to write) from a sceptical, ungodly worldview, in order to demonstrate the meaningless and frustration of a hedonistic life lived without God in the picture; before concluding from a Biblical worldview right at the end in 12:9-14.

2) What evidence is there both for and against that view?

3) What reasons does the Preacher give for why the world is the way it is?

4) What are the main ways the Preacher says we ought to respond to the realities of life in this world? Why?

5) How would you summarise the Preacher's world-view?



Summary:

The book of Ecclesiastes has often been understood as a comprising, for the most part, the perspective of someone ('the Preacher') writing from a sceptical, cynical, and ungodly worldview, in order to demonstrate the meaninglessness and frustration of a hedonistic life lived without God in the picture. This view sees the book as ultimately concluding with the perspective of a second writer, a narrator, who has used the Preacher's words as a foil for the Biblical worldview that he presents right at the end in 12:9-14.

It's easy to see what makes this view appealing; the book contains much confusion and dissatisfaction with life, contains no obvious hope beyond the grave (it speaks of the dead all going to the same place in 3:19-20 & 9:10), and appears at points to advocate living for the moment; whereas we might expect a man who was both wise and godly to have more answers, more hope, and more of a future-oriented mind-set.

However, the multitude of references towards the goodness, justice and sovereignty of God throughout the book, and the need to fear him (e.g. 3:17, 5:1-7, 11:9; which are in line with the ultimate conclusion of 12:13-14), and the endorsement of the Preachers' words at the end (12:10-11) as being both true and God-given, make this view extremely unlikely.

Much of the confusion and apparent short-sightedness is explained by understanding this book in the context of progressive revelation. At this point in salvation history, God had not yet revealed on a wide-scale his ultimate plan to destroy this world and make a perfect new creation; that comes principally in the book of Isaiah and some of the prophets after him (N.B. Hebrews 11 suggests that certain individuals before this point had grasped something of God's ultimate plan, but there's nothing to indicate the people of Israel generally knew about the new creation; there's no explicit mention of it in the Bible before Isaiah!).

With that in mind, it seems best to understand Ecclesiastes as the musings of a godly believer, who is genuinely wrestling with the frustrations of living in a fallen world, while applying real godly wisdom to what he sees and experiences, and explaining how to respond in a godly way, given the revelation that is available to him at the time.

We'll need to take care, therefore, with our application, because how we apply the book now may be slightly different in the light of the further revelation we've had as New Testament believers. The reason that the Preacher's worldview often feels gloomier and more confused than we're comfortable with as Christian readers is not that it doesn't have *God* in view (as many claim), but rather that it doesn't have *the resurrection* in view.



#PRINCIPLE – Progressive Revelation.

The Bible is not a static book of doctrinal instruction—it's a story! It has a beginning, a middle, a climax (Jesus!) and an end, and the story develops as you read through. It's what's called *progressive revelation*. This is a really important principle when it comes to applying the Bible. We can't simply open the Bible at any point and assume that it all applies directly to us in exactly the same way (which is great, because it means now we can eat bacon...see Lev 11:7 & Mark 7:19!). As God's plan progresses through different phases (and our understanding of the big picture of his plan also progresses), so do his instructions of how his people are to act (some will be the same, but others may have changed). A life of faith looks different, in lots of ways, for a New Testament Christian to how it did for an Old Testament Israelite—God's plan has moved on to a new phase!

Structure of the book:

Read ten commentaries on Ecclesiastes and you're likely to find ten completely different suggestions for how the book is structured! One thing there at least seems to be some agreement on is that certain phrases that appear relatively frequently in the first half of the book don't recur in the second half (for example, 'striving after wind'). We want to suggest that the book splits quite neatly into the following two parts; but you can be the judge of that as you work through it...

Part 1 (1:1-7:14) - The frustration of... striving for stuff in a world with no gain.

Part 2 (7:15-11:6) - The frustration of... trying to live wisely in a world that's unfair.

Conclusion (11:7-12:14)

STUDY 1: 1:1-18

Questions:

1) What exactly is so frustrating about life in v1-11?

a. Try to summarise what's frustrating in each of the following groups of verses:

v3 -

v4-6 -

v7-8 -

v9-10 -

v11 -



#METHOD – Doing a word study.

If you've worked through previous study guides, you'll know we've thought a lot before about the importance of repeated words and phrases. Sometimes you'll come across such words or phrases that seem to be significant, but it's not immediately obvious what is meant by them. If you've checked the word 'vanity' in v2 in other translations, you'll see a range of suggestions around the idea of futility and meaninglessness. Of course, one thing we can do to help us is go to a commentary. But first it might be worth having a look at the context in which the word or phrase occurs at other points in the book to see if they help give us a clue to the sense of it. In this case, if we look at its use in 11:10, the idea of meaninglessness doesn't fit very well with the argument of the verse (if youth is meaningless, why is this a reason to urgently make the most of it, as v9-10 encourage us to do?!). ***A decent commentary will tell you that the Hebrew word 'hevel' (translated 'vanity') can mean breath or vapour or mist.*** Those are things that quickly disappear, here one moment, gone the next; hence the word

can convey the idea of something that is *fleeting*. We think that concept of brevity fits the argument of 11:10 much better ('your youth is fleeting, so make the most of it!'). Of course, there are many uses of the word in the book that might not so neatly fit the 'fleeting' idea, so we'll need to look at those too. But by doing this we can start building something of a range of ideas that the author is trying to convey when he uses the word.

It will be most helpful to think of 'vapour' as the Preacher's basic metaphor for life, and then consider why that is an appropriate metaphor and what different facets of the image the Preacher compares life to through the book.

b. How do v3-11 help us begin to see why the preacher compares life to breath/vapour and 'striving after wind' in v2?

c. Think of some cycles in your own life that you could add to the Preacher's list (see v4-6).

2) According to the Preacher, why is the world like this? (v12-18)

a. Who does the Preacher say is responsible for life being like this? (c.f. 7:13)

b. We might think that the preacher has drawn the wrong conclusions from what he's observed about the world. How does he defend himself against that accusation?

- i) **Can you paraphrase his claims in v15 and v18?**

- ii) **Who is the Preacher (use the information in v1 and v12 to work it out), and what difference does that make to his credibility?**

3) Have a go at coming up with a short summary sentence for chapter 1.

Application:

1) As a Christian, how comfortable are you with the Preacher's attitude towards life? Why?

2) How does this passage point us back to the fall in Genesis 3?

3) Read Romans 8:18-21. How does this passage help us rejoice in the privilege of the revelation we have as New Testament believers?

NB The word 'futility' in Rom 8:20 is the same as the word used to translate 'hevel' ('vanity') in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is often quoted in the New Testament).

4) How should we respond when we feel bored with the monotony of life where "there's nothing new under the sun"? (i.e. how do thinking about both Genesis 3 and Romans 8 help?)

Summary:

The refrain of 1:2, repeated several times through Ecclesiastes, really sets the tone for whole book from the word go. We're in for a rollercoaster of a journey through the agitated musing of a frustrated mind.

The Preacher's frustration with life appears well grounded given his observations of the world in v4-11. They can be divided into four related thoughts. V4-6 are all about endless cycles; the world goes round and round, but doesn't seem to end up anywhere. V7-8 are about how things never seem to come to completion; water keeps running into the sea, but it never gets filled up. Nor do eyes or ears; you never wake up one day and find they've completed their task and are no longer needed! V9-10 are about how there's nothing really new in the world; it's all been done before. Technological advances might seem radical and life-changing at the time, but really they're just variations on a theme. We already had entertainment, communication and shopping before the internet—it just made those things faster! V11 is about how things are so quickly forgotten. Sure, certain significant people and events have been recorded in history (a tiny proportion when you think about all the lives and events there have ever been). But even then, how often does Napoleon feature in your daily thinking?

Put all this together, and you end up with a somewhat bleak picture of the world. Everything changes; and yet everything stays the same. Nothing lasts; and yet everything that's new isn't really anything new at all—we've seen it all before. The world doesn't seem to be going anywhere!

This feeling will be familiar if you've ever built a sandcastle. Of course, you're probably proud that your sandcastle is unique, like no other; but really, it's nothing new; it's still a castle made of sand. And what's more, you know it won't last; the tide, that perennial beach bully, is going to come in and erase your efforts, and all evidence of them ever having happened will have gone. Go back and build another sandcastle the next day, and the same thing will happen.

We know this, so we're happy enough accepting the brief pleasure of our efforts. But imagine our whole life was dedicated purely to building sandcastles on the beach. We'd feel pretty unsatisfied by the knowledge that there was no lasting outcome to all our efforts.

And yet, says the preacher, that really is what life is actually like for all of us! Think through the basic pattern of your average day. Wake up, go to work, come home, eat, relax, go to bed. Then repeat it all the next day. It's a cycle. And where does it get us? "Well, if I work hard, I'll be able to retire early and break out of that", you may say. But you'll just be moving into the next phase of a different cycle: be born, grow up, go through working life, enter retirement and die. It was the same for your parents, and it will be the same for the next generation. You're just one rotation in the never-ending cycle. It's gone around billions of times through history.

As the Preacher reflects on this, v3 sums up his frustration in one burning question: 'what ultimate *gain* is there from all that we do?' There doesn't appear to be any! Life just goes round and round in circles.

The remainder of the chapter, v12-18, the Preacher begins to give something of a justification for his observations. First, in v12, we get the biggest clue in the book to the Preacher's identity: Solomon was the only son of David who ruled over *Israel* in Jerusalem (the Davidic kings after him ruled over *Judah*, after the nation split in two under Solomon's son Rehoboam). As we will see, this makes a lot of sense of various things he says about himself in the first two chapters (scholars debate whether the Preacher was actually Solomon himself or merely someone who is putting himself into Solomon's shoes; we find arguments to the contrary unpersuasive and think the natural reading of the book is that Solomon wrote it, and either way the book clearly intends for us to think of this as Solomon's worldview, so we will henceforth refer to the Preacher as Solomon).

Solomon then explains why the world is so frustrating; this is the way God has decided it would be (v13). The world we live in since the fall in Genesis 3 is just like this—it is broken. In response to our sin, God cursed the world.

And Solomon wants us to accept that fact. There's nothing we can do about it; we can't straighten it out (v15a). Nor can we find an intellectually satisfying solution (v15b); when he says that 'what is lacking cannot be counted', Solomon is saying that it's not the case that he's simply not understood the world, that there is some solution out there he simply didn't find. No, the solution just isn't there to be found. In case we doubt his credentials, he reminds us of how wise he was (v16; see 1 Kings 3:12); he really was the wisest man ever to have lived. If he didn't find an answer, no-one would.

In short, this is how life is, and we've just got to accept it. The wiser a person gets, the more frustrated at life they'll be (v18)!

As Christians, we can relate to much of Solomon's frustration about life. Yet how much more privileged are we that, unlike him and the believers of his day, we have a certain hope that the world is going somewhere: God has since revealed to us that it's heading to a New Creation! There is a day when the frustrations of this life will be brought to an end. Ecclesiastes helps us to appreciate what a big deal having that hope is. An honest look at life would be so much more exasperated without it.