

Ecclesiastes: Fruitful Working in the Perplexity of Life or, Venturesome Joy on Life's Vexed Journey

Introduction

Ecclesiastes explodes all simplistic, superficial and trite faith that thinks the answer to all life's perplexity is 'come to Jesus and you will never puzzle or struggle again'.

'The Preacher serves this pastoral function by challenging the naïve optimism which assumes that being on God's side carries with it the comfortable wisdom that solves all difficulties, and by countering the gushing expectation of convenient miracles.' (Eugene Petersen)

4 Key truths Ecclesiastes insists we embrace

1. The Brevity of Life: we must grasp the Transience of Man

- Life is ephemeral; it will be passing
 - So we must learn to live with mortality we can't control

To think otherwise is just 'chasing after the wind'!

2. The Bafflement of Life: we must grasp the Transcendence of God

- Life is enigmatic; it will be perplexing
 - So we must learn to live with mystery we can't comprehend

Only God is in heaven, & sees all; we are on earth, 'under the sun'

3. The Bitterness of Life: we must grasp the Tragedy of Sin

- Life is evil: it will be painful
 - So we must learn to live with miseries we can't curtail

7:29; 8:11; 9:3b etc. Hence 1:15; 3:16; 5:8 etc

4. The Beauty of Life: we must grasp the Triumph of the Gospel

- Life is eternal: it does have purpose
 - So we must learn to live with meaning and can be contented

This is not the end of the story 3:17; 12:14. Because we see that, we can 'see the good' and find joy even in a passing world 2:24ff. this is God's good gift

Hence a 7-fold command: **See the joy!** 3:12,22; 5:18ff; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7ff; 11:8; 11:9

The Book of Ecclesiastes

The 'Solomonic' wisdom of 'Qohelet' the Preacher, though perhaps a later work

Key phrases

Hebel – translated **vain, futile, meaningless**. (Lit bubbles, vapour, breath)

Ephemeral, fleeting, ∴ uncontrollable; also elusive & enigmatic ∴ incomprehensible

Striving after wind – repeatedly through the first half of the book only

Under the sun / under heaven – emphasising the limitations of human insight v God's

Structure

The book's structure is much debated, and difficult to define with certainty. However, there is a clear introduction and motto 'all is *hebel*' at the beginning, and the repeated motto and epilogue at the end. In between the Preacher alternates between *observation* & *reflections* on life, and consequential *instructions for life* (though the distinctions between these sections are not absolute).

The following is my very simplified schema which gives some shape to the book

1:1	Prologue: The words of Qohelet (The Preacher)
1:2	Motto: <i>Vain, vain – all is in vain!</i>
1:2-11	Opening Poem: The <i>Past</i> Generations: be serious about the facts
1:12-6:9a	Reflection: - Life is ephemeral and passing & Instruction: - Living with mortality you can't control
6:9b	Pivot point: <i>'this is vanity, a striving after the wind'</i> (<i>exactly 1491 words either side of this pivotal line!</i>)
6:10-11:10	Reflection: - Life is enigmatic and incomprehensible & Instruction: - Living with mystery you can't comprehend
12:1-7	Closing Poem: The <i>Present</i> Generation: be serious about faith
12:8	Motto: <i>Vain, vain – all is in vain!</i>
12:9-13	Epilogue: The words of Qohelet (The Preacher)