

CLASS NOTES -- ECCLESIASTES

AUTHOR --

Certainly, Solomon wrote this book (Ecc. 1:1, 12). Only Solomon, and (for a brief time) Rehoboam, were descendents of David reigning over **Israel** in **Jerusalem**. Rehoboam could not have been the author, for he was certainly not wise!

SOLOMON, his life and his writings --

We have the history of Solomon chiefly in First Kings chapters 1 - 11 and Second Chronicles chapters 1 - 9.

That which caused his spiritual downfall is stated in 1 Kings 11:1 and dramatized in the Song of Solomon. That song relates a time when Solomon already had 140 wives, and countless virgins awaiting his pleasure (Song 6:10). Then, it seems, he met the one woman he really wanted, and who could have satisfied him if he had been willing to wait on the Lord to lead him to her -- and could not have her. He lost her to her girlhood suitor, her shepherd lover (see Class Notes on the Song of Solomon).

In Ecclesiastes Solomon appears to be looking back on his apostate years, years of frustration and disillusionment. As he does so he finds a final wisdom which he can pass on to the young (Ecc. 12:1). He wants to spare them the tragedy of seeking meaning in life by taking the by-paths he (in spite of his initial wisdom) took.

THEME --

The emptiness of life "under the sun." See 1 Cor. 15:19. He declares that the simple physical pleasures of life (eating, sleeping, etc.) are the best rewards (5:9, 12, 19; 6:20) -- but even these do not really satisfy (6:7).

The whole book demonstrates that **humanism** is not the answer to man's longings. Humanism is "*A doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; specially: a philosophy that asserts the dignity and worth of man and his capacity for self-realization through reason, and that often rejects the supernatural*" -- Dictionary definition.

While Solomon was **not** an agnostic or atheist, during the time he was trying out the humanistic approach to life he was so far from a **vital faith** that he fell to worshipping other gods (1 Kings 11:3, 4). It is sadly possible today to be a true Christian and fall into humanistic thinking in practical things.

KEY WORDS OR EXPRESSIONS --

"Under the sun" or "under heaven" (28 times); "vanity" or "vain" (36 times); "vexation," "despair," "grief," "evil" (often); "I saw" (18 times); "I" (75 times); "heart" (40 times).

VIEWPOINT --

He sets forth the best that even the wisest of men can know by experience, investigation, and logic. "I considered in my heart" (2:1); "I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven" (1:13).

NOTE:

Solomon does not base his teaching on revealed truth -- though the book **is** an **inspired account** of Solomon's quest for answers to life's problems. Solomon had several of the

books found in our Old Testament -- yet he never quotes a **single verse** or even refers specifically to any revelation from God. He limits himself to the search carried on by the best of men ("natural" men -- 1 Cor. 2:14) under the sun. He **does** refer to God's commandments (12:13) without mentioning what they are or where they are found. Both the existence of God and the moral principles expressed in His "commandments" can be known without special revelation (Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:14).

He **knows** much that could be found in Scriptures which were already written, to which he no doubt had access (Genesis through First Samuel, and probably Second Samuel, the book of Job and his father's psalms), but does not tell us where he learned it. He knows that there is one God (God is mentioned by name almost forty times in this book) and that He will bring men into judgment (12:14). He tells us that there is such a thing as sin (2:26), that **all** do sin (7:20), and that sin will be judged (3:17). He also speaks of the need for sacrifice (in the temple -- 5:1) and tells us that angels exist (5:6), that man has a spirit (12:7), and that God is sovereign (3:14; 8:3).

BUT -- there is much he does **not** know -- or at least does not take into consideration. In this book: **1.** There is no clear indication of life after death, or resurrection (8:14, 15; 9:3 - 5; etc.). **2.** There is no hope offered for forgiveness or justification. **3.** There is no reference to the **grace** of God. **4.** There is no exhortation to **know** God, to **love** God, or to tell others about Him (except 12:1, 13).

NOTES:

1:2 - 11. Here is the proposition he tries to amplify and prove in the rest of his thesis. Verse 13 sets forth his method or approach to his subject. He will take into account **all** things done **under heaven** and depend on **his own wisdom** to find the answers. His qualifications to undertake this task are listed in verse 16. Compare 1 Cor. 2:9, 10 and context.

1:4. Even that which seems most permanent (the earth) to human observation and logic will **not** abide forever. See Isa. 65:17; 2 Cor. 4:18; Heb. 1:10; 2 Peter 3:4 - 13.

1:8. What frustration! One may labor unto weariness (see NASB) for an ever higher "life style" but find no satisfaction. Man cannot explain why this is so. He doesn't really know what he wants -- what will bring contentment. What is missing, of course, is the spiritual content of a life lived by faith.

1:9. Here is the doctrine of **UNIFORMITARIANISM** (which sounds so logical and "scientific"). See 2 Peter 3:4 and context.

1:16 - 18. Intellectualism is not the answer! (See the note at 2:12 - 16 below). Wisdom is better than folly (2:12 - 14-a) but both fall far short of being the answer to the heart longings of man (2:12 - 16).

The "strange woman" of Prov. 5:3 does not want to think seriously about what she is doing. So she keeps changing the program (Prov. 5:6). Likewise Satan is willing to have a man change religions, follow intellectualism, emotionalism, hedonism, aestheticism, or a path of strict self righteousness -- just so he does not seriously ponder his path and, turning to Christ in faith, come to know His **GRACE**.

1:16. Solomon was not merely boasting here and in 2:7, 9, 15. See the record in 1 Kings 4:29 - 34. He emphasized his wisdom in order to show how well qualified he was to carry out this investigation and write this book.

1:18. Our increased "wisdom" today (knowledge at least) has given us the atomic bomb, germ and chemical warfare -- to say nothing of the smog problem and depletion of natural resources.

2:1 - 3. HEDONISM ("The doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the sole chief good in life" -- Dictionary definition) is not the answer. Our society in America today is strongly Hedonistic.

2:4 - 11. MATERIALISM is not the answer to man's longing for satisfaction and meaning in life.

2:8. AESTHETICISM ("A doctrine that principles of beauty are basic to other, especially moral, principles" -- Dictionary definition) is not the answer.

2:12 - 16. INTELLECTUALISM is not the answer either, and who is better qualified to know this than Solomon? See note at 1:16 - 18.

2:16. The principle stated here is often true, but Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived (apart from our Lord), is remembered to this day.

2:24. See 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:9; 12:11; 1 Cor. 10:31.

3:1 - 11. In life, as in material things, there is a fourth dimension -- **time**.
 --- In material things: 1.Length 2. Breadth 3. Height 4. **Time** (the size of an ice cube depends on when you take the measurements).
 --- In life: 1. What? 2. Where? 3. Why (motives)? 4. **When?** In time, or eternity?
 (etc.)

3:11. "The world" should be "eternity." A note in the Berkeley translation states, "One great reason for our lack of satisfaction lies in this innate sense of the eternity of the inner self, which no earthly thing or doings can fully meet."

The Amplified Bible translates this verse, "He also has planted eternity in men's heart and mind [a divinely implanted sense of a purpose working through the ages which nothing under the sun, but only God, can satisfy]."

3:14. If a man's salvation is totally of God (as many Scriptures plainly teach) it cannot be terminated in time. If it is not forever, it is not what God has done, but only what man has been seeking to accomplish.

3:15. It is not enough that a man arrive at a place where he finally is able to live a sinless life for the rest of his days (even if that were possible). He is still held accountable for his **past**. What man needs is not reformation (which can only affect the future), but **redemption**

(which takes care of the past, present and future!).

3:16. Man is incapable of exercising judgment that is totally just, and all men stand in dire need of total justice. Therefore God must judge **all** -- and there is a time when He will do so (see verse 17). He judged the believer's sins at Calvary; He will judge his life as a believer at the Bema Judgment Seat (for rewards); and He will judge the sins of all the lost at the Great White Throne. In all of these there is **perfect justice**.

3:20. Physical life only is in view here.

3:22. Even this does not satisfy however. See 2:11, 20, 21; 4:4. How much better to rejoice in the **Lord!** (Phil. 4:4).

4:1. Praise the Lord we **DO** have a "Comforter!" John 15:7 with Rom. 8:9. Our Comforter is in great contrast to the "comforters" of Job! (Job 16:2).

4:2, 3. For lack of a comforter, and because of the oppressors, Solomon considered life worse than the failure to exist, or the release found in death. Paul had a Comforter, and was more than conqueror over all those things which could not separate him from God's love (Rom. 8:37 - 39), yet he preferred death -- because to be with Christ is better than life here (Phil. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:8).

4:12. The friend (vs. 9, 10) or the wife or husband (v. 11) are a real help, but bring the Lord into the picture and you have a very strong threefold cord. The key to many marriages is "another man." If that man is Christ, the marriage is ennobled, enriched and strengthened. Any other man brought into the picture can destroy it.

5:3. Is he suggesting that we dream about the things we have been deeply involved in during our waking hours? A dream, thus, would reveal what one has been **doing**, while what a fool says reveals who he **is**.

5:9. Even a king may go hungry during severe famine. The most important occupation, in the last analysis, is farming. See 2 Chron. 26:10 where Uzziah, a good and wise king, was really a farmer at heart.

5:11. This sounds like one of "Murphy's laws" (a collection of unwritten laws which seem to express, in a humorous way, how things usually turn out). One of "Murphy's laws" which is similar is, "Expenses always rise to stay ahead of income."

5:12. Unlike the working man, the rich man does not lack for a good bed or all the nice things money can buy (today: air conditioners, electric blankets, soft music, sleeping pills, etc.), but he cannot get to sleep. He probably lies awake worrying about his money. Compare 6:2 where, in spite of all the gourmet foods, he cannot eat.

5:13. Hoarding is evil not only because it causes a shortage on the market and drives prices up, but because it harms the one doing the hoarding:

* The hoarder may lose it all through a bad investment. Verse 14 reads, "When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him" (NASB).

* He cannot take it with him (vs. 15, 16).

* Putting in long days (breakfast before sunrise and supper after sunset), in order to have the things he is hoarding, results in grief, sickness, and anger (because he is wearing himself out). "This, too, is a grievous misfortune; in all points as he came so shall he go, and what profit did he get from wearing himself out for wind, all his days eating in darkness with plenty of grief, sickness and wrath?" (verses 16, 17 -- Berkeley translation).

5:19. Compare 6:2.

5:20. "For he shall not often think of the brevity of his life, because God keeps his heart occupied in gladness" -- Berkeley.

6:2. A rich man on a diet! See 5:12 where he also, in spite of his soft bed, cannot sleep. See 5:19 where it is a blessing from God to be able to enjoy what He has provided.

6:4, 5. I.e. the one who is a miscarriage -- referred to in the last part of verse 3.

6:8. "For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? [Being worldly wise is no secret of happiness.] What advantage has the poor man who has learned how to walk before the living -- publicly, with men's eyes upon him? [Being poor is not the secret of happiness either.]" -- Amplified Bible.

6:9. "Better is the sight of the eyes [the enjoyment of what is available to one] than the cravings of wandering desire. This is also vanity -- emptiness, falsity and futility; a striving for the wind [and feeding on it!]" -- Amplified Bible.

6:12. "For who [limited to human wisdom] knows what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spends as a shadow [going through motions, but accomplishing nothing]? For who can tell a man what will happen [to his work, his treasure, his plans] under the sun after he is gone?" -- Amplified Bible.

"How impressive throughout Ecclesiastes is the evidence that, while Solomon is doing his utmost to prove that life is futile and not worth living, the Holy Spirit is using him to show that these conclusions are the tragic effect of living 'under the sun' -- ignoring the Lord, away from God the Father, oblivious of the Holy Spirit -- and yet face to face with the mysteries of life and nature!" -- Footnote in the Amplified Bible.

While we cannot be sure of what will follow on this earth after we have died, we can be very sure of what lies ahead of us in glory! Compare 2 Cor. 4:16 - 18 and Col. 3:1, 2.

7:1. It is better to **be** good than to just **smell** good!

7:2 - 6. Life is not just a picnic. **We** need to face realities and cope with them rather than to major in amusements. "**Muse**" means to think: "**a-muse**" means to **not** think. How many today, tragically, are laughing and dancing their way into hell!

7:7. "Oppression" is "extortion" in Berkeley. The "gift" refers to a bribe.

7:8. The dedication of a building means more than the ground-breaking does. Not every project is completed. Compare the fool who began to build before he had counted the cost, and contrast God's ability to complete what He begins (Phil. 1:6).

7:10. It is not wise to be always asking, "Where are the good old days?"

7:11. I.e. those who are still alive are the ones to receive the inheritance. However, one may receive it without it doing him any real good. To profit from an inheritance requires wisdom in how to use it! In Berkeley it is translated, "wisdom is as beneficial as a legacy -."

7:16, 17. Is Solomon suggesting a "moderation in all things" approach to life, a "middle of the road" policy? A "middle of the road" policy may make sense to man, but to sit on the fence with a view to "having one's cake and eating it too" is not the wisdom which comes from God.

The Amplified Bible translates (and interprets) these verses, "Be not [morbidly exacting and externally] righteous overmuch, neither strive to make yourself [pretentiously appear] overwise; why should you [get puffed up and] destroy yourself [with presumptuous self sufficiency]? [Although all have sinned] be not wicked overmuch *or* willfully, neither be foolish; why should you die before your time?"

7:20. Even man "under the sun" can tell by observation that this is so. Paul acknowledges this in Rom. 3:10 - 12.

7:21, 22. Don't take things that people say too seriously. Everyone speaks inadvisably, and without thinking, at times.

7:28. Is he saying that he has found one man in a thousand who is honest and upright -- but not one woman in a thousand whose heart is not "snares and nets" (verse 26)? He should know -- he married a thousand women. Is he saying that not one of his wives measures up to his mother's description of the virtuous woman in Proverbs thirty-one? A footnote on Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews --book VIII, chapter VII, paragraph 5) suggests that this verse is a reference to Solomon's wives.

However, when competing with 999 other women, his wives must have had to lay snares and nets just to see him and get his attention! He couldn't have known any of them well enough to **love** them or have a "meaningful relationship" with them! It might be interesting to know what they thought about him!

8:6, 7. Man, in himself, knows neither the **what** nor the **when** of the future, though he knows judgment is ahead, somehow, sometime. If he is wise he will be obedient in light of these considerations (v. 5). Compare 1 Pet. 1:11 where the OT prophets searched out the "**what**" and the **when** of Christ's first coming. Because of clear N. T. revelation we now know most of the "**what**" in regard to His return, but still do not know **when**.

8:11. Here is part of the reason for the prevalence of crime in the United States today. Delay in the courts encourages crime in the streets.

8:15. See 1 Cor. 15:32 where this solution is seen to be logical **IF** there is no resurrection.

9:3. I.e. they all die. One of the greatest enigmas faced by Solomon was death -- of both good and bad, just like animals.

9:4. "While there's life there's hope." Death does indeed end hope for the unbeliever. No more chance to be saved! Compare 1 Thess. 4:13.

9:5. **IF** this verse teaches soul sleep (as the Companion Bible claims in the Appendix) then the passage also teaches the following:

- * There is no reward for those who die (9:5).
 - * There is no difference between the righteous and the wicked; between the clean and the unclean; etc. (9:2).
 - * **ALL** men **WILL DIE** (9:5). Contrast 1 Cor. 15:51.
- Notice this same expression ("know not anything") in 1 Sam. 20:39; 2 Sam. 15:11 and 1 Tim. 6:4. In none of these does it mean unconsciousness! Nor does it mean that here!

9:11. See Psa. 33:16 - 19 and Amos 2:14 - 16. It is more than merely "time and chance," for God often stands behind what happens -- both for good and ill. Here Solomon is looking at history "under the sun" and ignores God's hand in it.

There is a song, "Not to the strong is the battle, not to the swift is the race, but to the strong and the faithful victory is promised through grace."

9:11, 12. He is saying that "luck" -- good or bad -- is often the deciding factor in life. To the man "under the sun," and apart from revelation, it would surely seem so.

9:13 - 18. Wisdom has its limitations. It is good, but:

- * It may leave one poor (v. 15).
- * The good springing from it may not be remembered (v. 15).
- * The words of the wise may not even be heeded (v. 16).
- * One sinner can destroy the good brought about by the wisdom of the wise (v. 18).

In the NASB the marginal reading of verse 15 is, "- he **might have** delivered the city -." This translation would make the verse say, "The poor wise man spoke quietly and was not heard. His wisdom **would have been** better than the weapons of war, it might have saved the city! But the foolish king probably was shouting and his people foolishly listened to **him!** The king is remembered as a hero, but no one remembers the poor wise man!"

9:17. "Words of the wise, heard quietly, are better than the shouts of a ruler among fools." -- Berkeley.

10:4. "If the ruler's temper rises against you do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses" -- NASB.

10:11. "If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer" -- NASB. So for men, it is not prevention we need, but a remedy! We have already been bitten by sin. See the case of the fiery serpents in Num. 21:6 - 9. It would not have done any good for Moses to take the serpents away – the people had already been bitten. The remedy, the brazen serpent on the stick, pointed forward to Christ -- our remedy (John 3:14).

10:15. Compare Heb. 11:10, 14 - 16. This is an interesting comparison. Is he saying that the fool thinks he can attain to the city by his works? Or is he just saying something like, "The fool doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain"?

10:20. Is this where we get the expression, "A little bird told me"?

11:3. One cannot undo the past.

11:4. One cannot predict the future -- so don't let fear of it become an excuse for laziness. Get busy. Compare vs. 5, 6.

11:5. So, today, we do not know how the Holy Spirit is forming the Body of Christ, but He is doing it! It is the work of **God**.

11:6. Our part in building the Body of Christ is to sow the seed -- everywhere, at all times -- trusting the Holy Spirit to use it as He chooses.

12:1 - 5-d. Here is a very poetic description of the advancement of old age:

- * Life holds no pleasure (v. 1).
- * Vision fails (v. 2-a).
- * The clouds (of depression -- Amplified) come (v. 2-b).
- * Legs become weak (v. 3-a).
- * Stooped shoulders and bent back (v. 3-b).
- * Loss of teeth (v. 3-c).
- * Blindness (v. 3-d).
- * Speech impaired (v. 4-a).
- * Loss of hearing (vs. 4-b, 4-d).
- * Wakefulness (v. 4-c).
- * Fear of falling or stumbling (v. 5-a).
- * White hair (Almond blossoms are white) (v. 5-b).
- * Weakness (v. 5-c).
- * Appetite and sex drive Failing (v. 5-d).

12:5-e - 7. Here is a poetic description of death and its aftermath:

- * Departure of the soul (v. 5-e).
- * Mourning of those left behind (v. 5-f).
- * Possible causes of death:
 - ** Snapping of the spinal cord (v. 6-a).
 - ** Crushing of the skull (v. 6-b).

** heart attack (6-c).

* Separation of body and spirit (v. 7).

12:9. He realizes how very little he knows -- but is wise enough to not let that keep him from teaching what he does know.

12:13, 14. This is good -- as far as it goes. It is legalism and leads only to judgment, for man cannot accomplish his whole duty. Man under the sun can go no farther. Only by direct revelation does he learn of grace and salvation.

THE VALUE OF THE BOOK --

1. It proves the absolute necessity for revelation. 3:11, 21; 6:12; 7:24; 8:17; 10:14, 15 (10:15 -- Is this similar to our saying, "He doesn't know enough to come in out of the rain"? Since the hope of Israel is a city [Heb. 11:10, 16; 12:22] this may be saying he doesn't know how to be justified. His labor wearies him, but does not justify him).

2. It shows that the wise, the educated, and the religious do not have the answers (apart from revelation of course). See the notes on 1:16 -- 2:16.

3. It demonstrates the truth of 1 Cor. 2:14.

4. It helps us to understand the thinking of the unsaved -- and to be able to answer them.

5. It demonstrates the necessity for eternal life -- for only this can answer his argument at 2:13 - 16 and elsewhere in the book. Nothing in life has real meaning unless the results can be projected beyond death into eternity.

SOME CONTRASTS between Solomon (in Ecclesiastes) and Paul (in his epistles).

Solomon

Paul

1. "Under the sun," "I saw under the sun," (3:16) - etc.

2. "All is vanity."

3. Vexation, despair, travail, grief, etc.

sorrow, evil.

4. He sought only his own pleasure (2:1 - 11, specially v. 10)

5. He tried almost everything (for 4:5).

himself) (2:4 - 7).

6. Nothing new (1:9, 10).

7. A time for everything under the sun -- or under heaven (3:1 - 8).

times (Eph. 6:18

1. 2 Cor. 4:18.

2. 1 Cor. 15:58.

3. Rom. 5:3; 8:28; 2 Cor. 12:10; Phil. 4:4;

4. 2 Cor. 11:23 - 28; 1 Cor. 9:25 - 27; Phil. 3:7, 8.

5. "Do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5).

6. 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:15; etc.

7. Paul adds: a time to be saved -- **NOW** (2 Cor. 6:2); a time to awake (Rom. 13:11); a time to pray -- at all

NASB); a time to do

good -- while we have

6:10); and he tells us

Cor. 7:29).

8. No comforter (4:1).

9. Sorrow is better than laughter.

10. Any kind of life is better than death
(9:4).

11. The living know they shall die (9:5).

the opportunity (Gal.

the **time is short** (1

8. 2 Cor. 13 - 5;

9. Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 4:18

10. To die is gain (Phil. 1:21).

11. We shall not all die! 1 Cor. 15:51;

1 Thess. 4:15 - 17.

--- William P Heath

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