

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

PART ONE – CHAPTERS 1 AND 2. - SOME TOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT LIFE

King Solomon wrote three remarkable Bible books. All of them raise puzzling questions. Proverbs is packed full of practical, brilliant wisdom. But why did such a wise man not follow his own advice when he was old? Song of Solomon is a beautiful love poem. But is the girl he writes to his future bride or a girl friend he should not have had?

Ecclesiastes asks many difficult questions about the meaning of life, most of which go unanswered in the book itself. When did Solomon write this? As a youth still searching for the wisdom which was later revealed to him? Or as an older man doubting what he had once known? He refers to the wisdom given to him and to some of his building achievements so he cannot have been so young.(2:1-11) The suggestion that the book was written in his old age as he questioned his mistakes in multiple marriages and the idolatry his wives drew him into seems an attractive idea. But there is no indication in I Kings that Solomon ever found his way back to a wholehearted faith in the God of Israel.(I Kgs.11:1-13) So we can only conclude that Ecclesiastes belongs to the middle part of his life, the critical period when he was at the crossroads. Perhaps it is his mid-life crisis? If so understanding Solomon's questions and searching the rest of scripture for answers to these timeless struggles could be immensely helpful to many in our time.

Solomon acknowledges that he is the writer of the book although he does not use his name.(1:1, 12) Interestingly it is as 'the Preacher' rather than as king that he introduces himself and then farewells his audience.(12:8-10) He recognises that it will be by his Bible teaching that he will be remembered rather than for his building projects.

Immediately he sets out his theme – 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity'. The Hebrew word translated vanity is 'hebel' which means vapour or breath; for the moment something is real but quickly it has gone. Solomon looks at individual human life and how brief it is. He compares it to the endless cycles of sunrise and sunset, of changing winds which return to where they started, and to rivers flowing into the sea from which, in the form of clouds, the water returns to the source of the rivers. In this endless cycle of repetition there is nothing truly new so what is the point?(1:1-11)

As king in Jerusalem, Solomon has tried to understand the world and to improve it, but what is the value of his work if nothing can be changed in a lasting way? He could have earned an endless stream of PhDs for the huge variety and depth of his knowledge but all he feels his wisdom has done is to increase his pain. The more we know about human life, the more it hurts. In our modern world, watching the news on TV is mostly depressing, with an endless catalogue of violence, betrayal, deceit, selfishness and lust.(1:12-18)

In chapter two Solomon decides to test his proposition that all human life is futile. One by one he works his way through the various activities that people claim make their existence meaningful. His first idea is humour. To some, turning everything into a joke makes it acceptable. You must be crazy says Solomon if you find suffering funny!(2:1,2) Next he

tries alcohol which makes reality look different, but that definitely does not work either. After the hangover the world remains unchanged. His third avenue is fancy real estate but creating an impressive environment does not bring lasting satisfaction either. This is followed by having power over others, a big bank account, and endless women. It was all futile. His success as king and his impressive intellect and financial resources open vast opportunity for pleasure for him, but nothing works.(2:1-11)

His fruitless exploration of pleasure as the secret of life leads him back to question the wisdom God gave him above all other possessions. It is obviously so much better than stupidity but he remembers again how it will all be lost in death. He wonders if leaving the results of his hard work to his heir would perpetuate the value of his wisdom but if his son turns out to be a fool, it will still all be wasted.(2:12-23)

The chapter ends with a moment of profound revelation. He decides not to be troubled by the question of what will others do with the fruit of his labours but simply to enjoy working for its own sake. The secret of fulfilment in work is in his enjoyment of the Lord Himself. If we trust Him, life will be the greatest pleasure imaginable, whether we are working or not. If we do not enjoy the Lord, regardless of the task or the recreational activity, it will be an empty waste of time.(2:24-26)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR FURTHER STUDY

1. What questions does Solomon ask in these first two chapters about the meaning of life? How are people today asking very much the same questions? What do you find futile about your life?(chap.1,2)
2. What answers has he found by the end of chapter two? Are they adequate answers for today? What other solutions are proposed in our society for these questions? If they do not work how can we help as Christians? What would you have liked to tell Solomon had you had opportunity to meet him?(chap.2)