

Living a Meaningful Life

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes 1:1

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Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Scripture

During the 2007 NFL regular season, New England Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady set the record for most touchdown passes (50) in a regular season, paving the way for his winning the MVP award. At the age of 30, he has already won three Super Bowls—an accomplishment that sets him apart as one of the best quarterbacks ever to play the game.

In 2005, Tom Brady was interviewed by *60 Minutes* journalist Steve Kroft. Despite the fame and career accomplishments he had achieved already, Brady told Kroft that it felt like something was still lacking in his life:

Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, "Hey man, this is what [it's all about]." I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, "It's got to be more than this. I mean this isn't—this can't be—all it's cracked up to be."

Kroft pressed Brady as to what the right answer was, and Brady added:

What's the answer? I wish I knew. . . . I love playing football, and I love being quarterback for this team. But at the same time, I think there are a lot of other parts about me that I'm trying to find.¹

Tom Brady is surprisingly frank about his quest for finding meaning in life.

People today want to live a meaningful life. They have questions such as:

- What is the meaning of life?

¹ Source: www.cbsnews.com and *60 Minutes* (CBS, 2007).

- Why am I so unhappy?
- Does God really care?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?
- Why is there so much injustice in the world?
- Is life really worth living?
- Is this life all there is?

You may have entertained one of these questions at some point in your life. Perhaps you are thinking about one even now.

Today I plan to begin a new series of sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes answers these questions. The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live a meaningful life. And so I have titled this series, “Living a Meaningful Life.”

As you know, I just finished a series of sermons on the New Testament letter of Jude. In my introductory sermon I mentioned that “Jude is one of the most neglected books of the New Testament.”² If Jude is the most neglected book in the New Testament, then Ecclesiastes is the most neglected book in the Old Testament. In fact, it may be the most neglected book in the entire Bible. Listen to what various commentators have to say about Ecclesiastes:

- It’s best to be frank at the outset: Ecclesiastes is a difficult book.³
- Ecclesiastes may be the most difficult book to interpret and preach.⁴
- No book of the Bible has been so maligned and yet so misunderstood as the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.⁵
- Ecclesiastes is one of the most puzzling books of the Bible.⁶

² See my sermon on “Introduction to Jude” in *Contend for the Faith*, April 11, 2010.

³ Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 23.

⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 1.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Quality Living* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979), 11.

⁶ J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1137.

- There is perhaps no book in the Old Testament that has caused so many problems for interpreters as the book of Ecclesiastes.⁷

And yet, while Ecclesiastes may indeed be a difficult and neglected book, the great American novelist Herman Melville called Ecclesiastes “the truest of all books.”⁸ The reason is that Ecclesiastes tells us how to live a meaningful life.

So, with that in mind, let me read Ecclesiastes 1:1:

¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (Ecclesiastes 1:1)

Introduction

Eutropius had fallen into disgrace. As the highest-ranking official in the Byzantine Empire (late fourth century), he served as the closest adviser to the emperor Arcadius, then ruling in Constantinople. But Eutropius abused his imperial power and aroused the anger of the empress Eudoxia, who orchestrated a campaign against him that resulted in a sentence of death.

Desperate to save his life, Eutropius slipped away from the palace and ran to the Hagia Sophia, where he clung to the altar and claimed sanctuary. Soon an angry mob of soldiers surrounded the great church, denouncing Eutropius and demanding his execution. Eventually, the crowds dispersed, but the next day was Sunday, and so they returned the following morning to see whether the pastor would give in to their demands for the execution of Eutropius.

The pastor was John Chrysostom, the famous preacher who served as the Bishop of Constantinople. As he mounted his pulpit, Chrysostom could see a church crowded with worshipers and thrill-seekers. They, in turn, could see Eutropius groveling at the altar. The great man had become a pitiable spectacle, with his teeth

⁷ Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, UBS handbook series; Helps for translators (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1998), 1.

⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Boston, MA: C. H. Simmonds Co., 1892), 400.

chattering and hopeless terror in his eyes.

The dramatic sermon Chrysostom preached that day may have been the finest he ever preached.⁹ For his text Chrysostom took Ecclesiastes 1:2 (“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity”), and for his primary illustration he used the decline and fall of Eutropius.

Here was a man, Chrysostom noted, who had lost everything—position, wealth, freedom, safety. Only days before, he had been the second most powerful man in the world. But it was all vanity, as events had proven, for now Eutropius had become “more wretched than a chained convict, more pitiable than a menial slave, more indigent than a beggar wasting away with hunger.” “Though I should try my very best,” Chrysostom said, “I could never convey to you in words the agony he must be suffering, from hour to hour expecting to be butchered.”

Chrysostom did not stop there, however. His purpose was not to condemn Eutropius but to save him, and also to give his listeners the gospel. To that end, he challenged his listeners to recognize the vanity of their own existence. Whether rich or poor, one day they would all have to leave their possessions behind. They too would face a day of judgment—the judgment of a holy God. Their only hope then would be the hope that they should offer to Eutropius now—mercy at the table of Christ.

The sermon must have hit its mark, for as Chrysostom came to a close, he could see tears of pity streaming down people’s faces. Eutropius was spared—a life saved by the preaching of Ecclesiastes.¹⁰

Because Ecclesiastes is the Word of the living God, it can have the same impact in our lives today. Ecclesiastes teaches us that there is more to life than what we can see with our eyes. Ecclesiastes warns us to live our lives in light of eternity. Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live a meaningful life.

⁹ For a full account, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 147-149.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 11-12.

Lesson

In today's lesson I simply want to answer some important questions as an introduction to Ecclesiastes. Here are the questions:

1. Who wrote Ecclesiastes?
2. Who were the original recipients of Ecclesiastes?
3. When was Ecclesiastes written?
4. Where was Ecclesiastes written? And,
5. Why was Ecclesiastes written?

I. Who Wrote Ecclesiastes?

So, first, who wrote Ecclesiastes?

Ecclesiastes 1:1 says, **“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”**

The author of this book identifies himself as **“the Preacher,”** which is *Qoheleth* in Hebrew (1:1-2; cf. 1:12; 7:27; 12:8-10). *Qoheleth* is a title and not a name. In the Greek translation of this book *Qoheleth* is translated as *Ekklesiastes*, which is where the English name of this book comes from. Both *Qoheleth* and *Ecclesiastes* mean, “one who calls an assembly.” And that is why various Bibles translate the word as **“the Preacher”** (ESV, KJV), “the Teacher” (NIV), or “the Leader of the Assembly” (NIV margin).¹¹

Traditionally, biblical scholars identified King Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes. But if Solomon were the author, why did he not identify himself as the author of Ecclesiastes as he did in Proverbs (1:1) and Song of Songs (1:1), the two other books he wrote? Instead, we read in Ecclesiastes 1:1, **“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”** The author is simply identified as **“the Preacher”** (*Qoheleth*).

If Solomon were the author, why would he conceal his name? One simple reason is that he may not have been the author of Ec-

¹¹ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-), 975.

clesiastes. One scholar argues, “It is much more likely that the nickname Qoheleth was adopted by the actual writer to associate himself with Solomon, while retaining his distance from the actual person. It is a way of indicating that the Solomonic persona is being adopted for literary and communicative purposes. In brief, the wise man who adopts the nickname Qoheleth pretends to be Solomon while he explores avenues of meaning in the world.”

However, regardless of who wrote it, whether Solomon or a later Jewish sage, the presence of this book in the Bible indicates that it is God’s Word.¹² Throughout this sermon series I will refer to the author usually as *the Preacher* and sometimes as *Qoheleth*.

II. Who Were the Original Recipients of Ecclesiastes?

Second, who were the original recipients of Ecclesiastes?

One scholar says that the recipients were “young Israelite men who were living at better than subsistence level, probably in or near Jerusalem. They might include government officials, businessmen, and farm owners. . . . Junior members of the bureaucracy may have been the principal audience.”¹³

Another scholar says that the Preacher’s “‘congregants’ were apparently preoccupied with all sorts of social and economic issues—the volatility of the economy, the possibility of wealth, inheritance, social status, the fragility of life, and the ever-present shadow of death. Qoheleth drew on these concerns and employed idioms that were familiar to his audience in order to subvert their preoccupations.”¹⁴

Even though Ecclesiastes was written several thousand years ago, I hope you will come to see, as one commentator says, “Ecclesiastes is the most contemporary book in the Bible.”¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*, 976.

¹³ Elizabeth Huwiler, “Ecclesiastes.” In *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Eds. Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1999), 177.

¹⁴ Choon Leong Seow, “The Socioeconomic Context of ‘The Preacher’s’ Hermeneutic.” *PSBul* 17/2 (1996), 195.

¹⁵ Leland Ryken, “Ecclesiastes” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 274.

Ecclesiastes is an exposé of the very things which dominate modern culture: sex, work, education, fame, drink. The writer creates a rogue's gallery of satirical portraits of the hedonist (2:1-11), the workaholic (2:18-23), the big shot (5:8-17), the fool (7:1-8), and the unfaithful woman (7:26-29). Ecclesiastes stands as the ultimate critique of secular humanism.¹⁶

III. When Was Ecclesiastes Written?

Third, when was Ecclesiastes written?

Ecclesiastes was most likely “written many centuries after Solomon, most probably in the third century BC. The main reasons for this dating are three: the character of the Hebrew in which it is written, its mood and style of argument, and its place in the history of thought. Each of these considerations would be sufficient in itself to prove that it is one of the latest compositions in the Old Testament.”¹⁷

It was a period of “intense economic development. . . , expansion of international trade. . . , opportunities for great fortunes to be made by entrepreneurs. Money as a means of exchange assumed an importance which it had never had before. These developments help to explain Qoheleth's preoccupation with money and profit.”¹⁸

IV. Where Was Ecclesiastes Written?

Fourth, where was Ecclesiastes written?

“The references to climatic conditions such as the unpredictability of the weather, dependence on rainfall. . . and to successions of rainstorms (12:2). . . reflect those of Palestine. . . . Among local customs mentioned by Qoheleth we find several which are characteristic of Palestine. . . , such as the hewing of wood (10:9)

¹⁶ James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms* (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), n.p.

¹⁷ Roger Norman Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

and the use of cisterns (12:6). . . . Equally decisive for a Palestinian locale are the references to the Temple [5:1-7; 8:10; 9:2].”¹⁹

V. Why Was Ecclesiastes Written?

Fifth, why was Ecclesiastes written?

Some people think that Ecclesiastes is about the meaninglessness of human existence. However, that perspective is not quite right. Ecclesiastes is the meaninglessness of life *without God*. Because the Preacher never gives up his belief in God, his ultimate purpose is to show us how meaningful life can be when we see things from God’s perspective. His message is not that life has no meaning, but rather that life has meaning only when we live it in a right relationship to God. The Preacher teaches us how to live a meaningful life.²⁰

Conclusion

Why study Ecclesiastes?

First, we should study Ecclesiastes because we will learn how to interpret correctly an Old Testament book. Sidney Greidanus, professor emeritus of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, said that in 1976, while serving as a pastor in Delta, British Columbia, he preached a series of sermons on Ecclesiastes. After hearing one of his theocentric sermons, a retired pastor approached Dr. Greidanus and asked, “I appreciated your sermon, Sid, but could a rabbi have preached your sermon in a synagogue?” Dr. Greidanus was dumbfounded by the question, but it set him to think about the issue of Christocentric preaching. And what he learned is that every book of the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of redemptive history. In other words, we will show how Ecclesiastes fits into God’s plan of redemption. We will learn how to do this so that a rabbi could not preach my Christian ser-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 12.

mon in his synagogue.²¹

Second, we should study Ecclesiastes because it his honest about the troubles of life. More than any other book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes captures the futility and frustration of living in a fallen world. It is honest about the drudgery of work, the injustice of government, the dissatisfaction of foolish pleasure, and the mind-numbing tedium of everyday life. Think of Ecclesiastes as the only book of the Bible written on a Monday morning. Reading it helps us to be honest with God about the problems of life—even those of us who trust in the goodness of God. In fact, one scholar describes Ecclesiastes as “a kind of back door” that allows believers to have the sad and skeptical thoughts that we usually do not allow to enter the front door of our faith.²²

Third, we should study Ecclesiastes to learn what will happen to us if we choose what the world tries to offer instead of what God has to give. The Preacher talked about one who had more money, enjoyed more pleasure, and possessed more human wisdom than anyone else in the world, yet everything still ended in frustration. The same will happen to us if we live for ourselves rather than for God. “Why make your own mistakes,” the Preacher is saying to us, “when you can learn from an expert like me instead?”

Fourth, we should study Ecclesiastes because it asks the biggest and hardest questions that people still have today. The Preacher addresses the questions that people have had in every generation: What is the meaning of life? Why am I so unhappy? Does God really care? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why is there so much injustice in the world? Is life really worth living? Is this life all there is? These are the kinds of intellectual and practical questions that the Preacher answers. One scholar says, “Wisdom is his base camp, but he is an explorer. His concern is with the boundaries of life, and especially with the ques-

²¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), x-xii.

²² Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, trans. Sean McEvenue, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 1.

tions that most of us would hesitate to push too far.”²³ The Preacher is not satisfied with the kind of easy answers that children sometimes get in Sunday school. In fact, part of his spiritual struggle is with the very answers that he has always been given. He was like the student who always says, “Yes, but. . . .”

Fifth, we should study Ecclesiastes because it will help us worship the one true God. For all of its sad disappointments and skeptical doubts, Ecclesiastes teaches many great truths about God. It presents him as the Mighty Creator and Sovereign Lord, the transcendent and all-powerful ruler of the universe. Studying Ecclesiastes, therefore, will help us grow in our knowledge of God.

And sixth, we should study Ecclesiastes because it teaches us how to live for God and not just for ourselves. Ecclesiastes gives us some of the basic principles we need to build a God-centered worldview, like the goodness of creation and our own absolute dependence on the Creator. Then, on the basis of these principles, Ecclesiastes gives many specific instructions about everyday issues like money, sex, and power. It also has many things to say about death, which may be the most practical issue of all.

In short, there are many good reasons to study Ecclesiastes. This is especially true for anyone who is still deciding what to believe and what not to believe. It is a book for skeptics and agnostics, for people on a quest to know the meaning of life, for people who are open to God but are not sure whether they can trust the Bible. If Ecclesiastes serves as a back door for believers who sometimes have their doubts, it also serves as the gateway for some people to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life, which is why for some people Ecclesiastes turns out to be one of the most important books they ever read.²⁴

²³ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 13.

²⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 14-15.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

We live in a world that is complex. We live in a time that is filled with uncertainties.

Help each one of us learn how to live a meaningful life.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.