

Ecclesiastes: Hearing the Message

By Bob Young

One of the first steps toward understanding a book of the Bible is to read and analyze generally, to understand the construction of the book. The goal of this initial reading is not to grasp every teaching. This is not the time for study of grammar, syntax, and details of the text. The goal is simple: what is the message?

This brief overview and outline of the book is designed to make your own reading and grasp of the overall message of the book of Ecclesiastes easier. Once the overall message is understood, the specific applications of passages within the book becomes easier.

1:1-11, introduction, with theme statement, all is meaningless

Human striving is futile, see 1:1 and 1:11

As is common in wisdom literature, the writer limits the study, from birth to grave

A thesis is presented, based on a search through nature and the general nature of life in this world

1:12-6:12, observations from life to support the main theme

Examples of futility

Human endeavors, 1:12-15

Pleasures, amusements, 2:1-11

Pursuit of human wisdom, 1:16-18, 2:12-16

Toil, 2:17-23, what is the purpose of toil and labor, everyone has to work

God gives, defines what is better, 2:24-26

God gives sense of eternity, defines what is better, 3:1-15

God gives judgment, defines what is better, 3:16-22

Summary: God helps humans discover what is better and determines what is good for them

Human experience declares futility

Oppression in the name of achievement, 4:1-6

Loneliness, 4:7-12

Advancement, 4:13-16

Reckless religiosity, 5:1-7

Meaning is not to be found in riches, 5:8-17 (see 4:8 for reference to wealth)

Gift of God, 5:18-20

Riches lead to another evil, 6:1-12 (I have seen evils... 4:1-3, 5:13-16, 6:1-3)

7:1-12:8, counsel for life

7:1-29, a poetic section focused on wisdom

8:1-9:12, wisdom defined (this section provides a literary parallel to chapter 3)

Obey the king, God's representative

Wisdom knows proper times and procedures, cf. 3:1-8

The future is unknown

Some lord it over others to their own hurt

Some are evil when punishment is not timely

Life is not fair

All of this is from God

9, a common destiny for all (see 3:18-22)

Here is wisdom summarized, 9:1-12

9:17-12:8, conclusion -- wisdom is better than folly, despite the inequities (9:17-12:8 has poetic meter)

10:1-11:6, the uncertainties of life

11:7-12:8, the fact of aging

Conclusion, 12:9-14