

<b>Book:</b>	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
<b>Series:</b>	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
<b>Lesson 1:</b>	<i>An Overview</i>
<b>Text:</b>	Overview
<b>Date:</b>	Sunday, January 13, 2013

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<b>Next Lesson:</b>	<i>Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 2:1-11</i>

# Colonial Hills Baptist Church

## Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter



### TEACHING TIP

The resource that we ordered for you, Derek Kidner’s *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (*The Bible Speaks Today* series), has arrived and is available for you to pick up tomorrow night (Wednesday, January 9) at the Welcome Center. There is no charge. Also, if you did not receive it during the ABF Staff Meeting last Friday, you can pick up a copy of chapter 6 (“Ecclesiastes: A Life Worth Living?”) in Derek Kidner’s *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*. These are both excellent resources as you study through this provocative book.

For additional resources, I encourage you to check out Dr. Jim Berg’s “Secrets of the Good Life” seminar (handouts and MP3s of all 13 sessions can be downloaded at the following link—[www.jimberg.com/messages](http://www.jimberg.com/messages)) and Warren Wiersbe’s *Be Satisfied* devotional commentary (especially helpful for illustrations—<http://amzn.to/Uz4FnK>).

Finally, if you missed the ABF Staff Meeting last Friday, you will soon be able to access all the notes and handouts from that meeting here—<http://www.colonialindy.org/ecclesiastes-series>. This will be the webpage to which all study resources related to this series will be uploaded.

As we commence our study, consider the following: “In Ecclesiastes 12:8–12, Solomon explained how he wrote this book: he sought out the best words and arranged them in the best order. As he wrote, he included ‘goads’ to prod us in our thinking and ‘nails’ on which to hang some practical conclusions. Keep this in mind as you study. His work was inspired by God because he was guided by the “One Shepherd” (Ps. 80:1).”<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

**Illustration:** Do you remember the first time when, as a child, you received a chocolate Easter bunny? Most of us probably have that fantastic memory. But, undoubtedly, it was followed by the bitter moment when you sunk your teeth into it, only to discover that it was hollow. Tragedies of tragedies! You had been deceived, conned into thinking that you would be satisfied with a solid chunk of chocolate, when in reality it was just a hollow illusion, just a shadow of what it promised.

In a nutshell, that is the message of Ecclesiastes, even as the opening words of this book depressingly declare: “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” Indeed, in our own personal experience during the daily grind of life, those same words often ring with truthfulness. Although believers ought to be the most contented people on earth (Hebrews 13:5-6), we often find ourselves unsatisfied, searching for something we do not know.

The wisest man to ever live found himself in that same discouraging state of mind. Having heaped to himself wisdom, possessions, and pleasures (which same commodities our current society promises will fulfill us), he still concluded that “all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (Ecclesiastes 2:17). Nevertheless, although life sometimes seems to have little or no meaning, Solomon concludes that it is because of a misdirected focus.

Throughout his intriguing book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon exhorts us to focus once again on the God who has “set [eternity] in [our] heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Only the eternal God can satisfy the eternal longing that has been programmed into the very fiber of our being. Therefore, while he does indeed encourage us—almost surprisingly—to “eat, drink, and be merry” (Ecclesiastes 8:15), he preaches that the only context in which that will indeed be enjoyment is in the fear of God (Ecclesiastes 12:13). So, as we study this book together, let’s pray that God will transform our focus and redirect our hopes to the only One who can truly fulfill them (cf. John 10:10).

Today, we just want to lay a foundation on which to build our understanding of this book. We’ll consider the author, the purpose, and the fulfillment of Ecclesiastes.

## AUTHOR

The Hebrew title of this book comes the word “Preacher” in verse 1, and is *qoheleth*. The Greek Septuagint uses the term *ekklesiastes*, providing us with our English title. The Greek term is derived from *ekklesia*, meaning “assembly” or “congregation” (usually translated “church” throughout the NT epistles). Thus, this *Ekklesiastes* or *Qoheleth*—this Preacher or Teacher—was a leader of that assembly and, in this context, the one who addresses it.



What clues in this book suggest that Solomon is its author?

*See next paragraph*

According to verse 1, this Preacher was a son of David and a king in Jerusalem. According to 12:9, he also “was wise...taught the people knowledge...and set in order many proverbs.” Further, the book chronicles the quest of one who had virtually unlimited power, possessions, and pleasures. All of these profile characteristics strongly point to Solomon, in which case the date and purpose of this book become clear.

**Transition:** Having considered the author of Ecclesiastes, now let’s consider his purpose for writing this weighty book.

## PURPOSE

Solomon is apparently writing in his latter years. Ecclesiastes serves as his autobiography, detailing his quest to “figure out” God, life, and his role in it.<sup>2</sup> In a word, he describes his search for satisfaction and meaning. That quest revealed to him—and now to us—that there are really only two ways to live, and in this book, he effectively warns all who will listen to him regarding these two diametrically opposed paths.



In some of our recent studies, where have we seen New Testament authors depict this same dichotomy? See next paragraph

Throughout the New Testament (especially in James, sometimes considered the Proverbs of the New Testament), we see this same theme highlighted. Paul reminded us to “set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:2); James contrasted the “wisdom that is from above” with that which is “earthly, sensual, devilish” (James 3:13-18); and Peter watched the roads of true faith and false teaching diverge in front of him (2 Peter).

Here, however, the wisdom and warning of this great Philosopher Preacher is bared of all nicety and decorum. The Qoheleth has learned too deeply the danger of the one path, that he cannot but lay bear its deception, scorn its allurements, and reveal its disappointments. Therefore, his tone is sharp, and his teaching poignant.<sup>3</sup> His purpose is clear—he seeks to demonstrate that there are two ways to live (and die): “under the sun” or in “the fear of God.”

### 1. Life “under the sun”

Solomon employs several repeated phrases to depict this worldview—“vanity,” life “under the sun” or “under heaven,” “vexation of spirit” (KJV) or “striving after wind” (NASB), life with “no profit.”

**Illustration:** Since Solomon, people have rediscovered the same sobering truth about life on planet earth. The Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem once described life as “a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that.” The American poet Carl Sandburg compared life to “an onion—you peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep.” The British playwright George Bernard Shaw said that life was “a series of inspired follies.” Matthew Arnold’s paints this dark description of life in his poem “Rugby Chapel”:<sup>4</sup>

*Most men eddy about  
Here and there—eat and drink,  
Chatter and love and hate,  
Gather and squander, are raised  
Aloft, are hurl’d in the dust,  
Striving blindly, achieving  
Nothing; and then they die—*



What do you think the term “vanity” means? See next paragraph

Solomon most clearly depicts this way to live with the term “vanity.” Consider the following helpful explanation of this term:

*Literally the word means “vapor”...and conjures up a picture of something fleeting, ephemeral, and elusive, with different nuances to be ascertained from each context. When applied to human undertakings or the pleasures and joys of earthly life, it indicates that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31); applied to the darker realities of living in a fallen world (e.g., death), it expresses frustration, anger, or sorrow; applied to the Preacher’s search for understanding of all things, it indicates something that remained incomprehensible or inscrutable to him (e.g., Eccles. 1:14–15). This last-mentioned usage is particularly significant, as the book presents itself as primarily a quest to “figure out” all of life (see esp. 1:12–18).<sup>5</sup>*

In future weeks, we will follow Solomon’s journey down this particular way to live—this life “under the sun.” And with Solomon, we will experience the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11), the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11), the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17), the frustrations of labor (2:18-23), the elusiveness of life (3:1-9), the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16), the disappointment of wealth (5:10-17; 6:1-9), and the finiteness of humanity (6:10-12). Indeed, life “under the sun” is “vanity” and “vexation of spirit.”

**Illustration:** Michael Jordan is arguably the greatest basketball player and one of the most influential athlete-marketers of all time. His current net worth is around \$500 million, and he was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame in 2009. His Hall of Fame press conference reveals that life “under the sun” reaps as much “vanity” today as it did during Solomon’s lifetime. Jordan lamented,

*This is not fun for me. I don't like being up here for the Hall of Fame because at that time your basketball career is completely over. I was hoping this day would be 20 more years, or actually go in when I'm dead and gone. Because...all along...you always [could] put shorts on and go out and play. Now, when you get into the Hall of Fame, what else is there to do?*



**Application:** How have you sensed the “vanity” of life? *open discussion*

What are some things that even Christians live for that turn out to be empty, vain, meaningless, a vapor, silliness, insignificant, etc.? *open discussion*

What other celebrities, etc. taught us with their lives or death that this way to live—life “under the sun”—is a vain pursuit? (1) Kurt Cobain, 1994—*“When we're back stage and the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowds begins, it doesn't affect me the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury, who seemed to love, relish in the love and adoration from the crowd which is something I totally admire and envy. The fact is, I can't fool you....The worst crime I can think of would be to rip people off by faking it and pretending as if I'm having 100% fun....I've tried everything within my power to appreciate it (and I do...believe me I do, but it's not enough). I appreciate the fact that I...have affected and entertained a lot of people....I have a goddess of a wife who sweats ambition and empathy and a daughter who reminds me too much of what I used to be, full of love and joy, kissing every person*

*she meets...And that terrifies me to the point to where I can barely function. I can't stand the thought of [my daughter] becoming the miserable, self-destructive, death rocker that I've become.”* (2) Tom Brady, 2005—*“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 is. 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 what it's all cracked up to be.”* “What's the answer?” asked interviewer Steve Kroft. “I wish I knew. I wish I knew,” Brady replied. (3) Others

## 2. Life “in the fear of God”

As Solomon wrestles with significance in life and begins to point his feet down a secondary path, he discovers what Derek Kidner refers to as “mitigations.”<sup>6</sup> These are those things in life that help take some of the sting out of it. Solomon addresses three, labeled by Kidner as “simple joys” (2:24-26; 3:10-15; 5:18-20; 8:14-15; 9:7-9; 11:7-10), “common sense” or wisdom (2:12-17; 7:1-8:1; 9:13-18; 10:1-15; 11:1-10; 12:11-12), and “enterprise” (11:1-6). These are not the solution, but lead us toward a solution. Here’s how. Consider what Kidner says about each one.

Regarding “simple joys”:

*Two turns of speech, however, keep reminding us that these modest pleasures are not goals to live for, but bonuses or consolations to be gratefully accepted. First, they are “from the hand of God,” and to be taken as such with a clear conscience....Secondly...these joys, however innocent, are passing, like all else that is “under the sun.”*<sup>7</sup>

Regarding “common sense”:

*The common-sense sayings are too numerous to be simply foils for the occasional paradox or dark thought. Their role is positive and bracing: to show that there is much that can be done by plain good sense, since all too many of our troubles are of our own making. Just as the brevity of life is no reason to reject its joys...so its blows and hazards are no argument against our intelligence to mitigate them. The only proviso is that we treat this as a mitigation, not an answer.*<sup>8</sup>

Regarding “enterprise”:

*If our very existence is a mystery—we did not have to solve it to be created or to procreate! (5)—we need not be paralyzed by the lesser things we cannot know or alter: only be reminded of what does lie within our reach, in the context of what is known only to God “who makes everything.”*<sup>9</sup>

Together, with the explanation that the Preacher provides throughout, these mitigations lead us towards the climax of the book and the statement of solution: “fear God.” This counsel starts in 3:11-15, rings louder in 5:1-7, is echoed in 7:13-14, 8:16-9:1, and 11:5, 9, and is declared in 12:1, 13-14.

Consider again Kidner’s explanation of how Solomon reveals this answer of living “in the fear of God”:

*Where other writers would commend the light to us directly, Qoheleth does it by making the darkness intolerable, allowing the light only the rarest gleam to provoke the observant into second thoughts. “Remember your Creator” is, apart from the clear daylight of the epilogue, the last of these moments before the clouds close in again; and on this occasion Qoheleth is explicit in his warning that they will indeed*

*close in, and in his appeal for a right relationship with God before they do.*<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this book, Solomon uses the theme of a future judgment to motivate us down this path, for judgment proves that “nothing is meaningless, for God assesses it; and no-one is forgotten, however short may be the human memory....If every act, every person, matters to the eternal God, man can play his part in earnest.”<sup>11</sup> “To be sure, what God finally condemns can have no other name than vanity; but what He finally approves cannot be held in anything but honor. In that possible approval there is at last something, indeed everything, to live for.”<sup>12</sup>

**Application:** Again Kidner writes, “Now the fear of God emerges as not merely man’s duty...but as his very *raison d’être* [“reason for being”]; and the judgment of God has, as it must have, the last word.”



What “simple joys” have mitigated the seeming meaninglessness of life’s existence for you? Praise God for those joys. *open discussion*

How has “common sense” spared you from increased vanity in life? *open discussion*

On a scale of 1-10 (1 = never; 10 = daily), how regularly is the assessment of God a motivation to you? *open discussion*

What does it mean to live “in the fear of God”? *open discussion*

**Transition:** To conclude our overview lesson, let’s briefly consider Ecclesiastes’ fulfillment in the New Testament.



## FULFILLMENT

We already suggested that Solomon's purpose in Ecclesiastes was less to be light and more to make the darkness intolerable. However, it very clearly does point to the light, which the New Testament unveils in brilliant clarity. It certainly seems that Paul had this book in mind when he wrote (using the Greek form of the Hebrew word for "vanity") in Romans 9:20-24a—

*For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of Him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope.*

**Illustration:** In June 1942, the powerful Nazi businessman Oscar Schindler witnessed the corralling and deportation of Jews for the death camps. This would have been a rather normal scene for him, except for one little girl dressed in red who, alone, stood out from the mass of Jews being herded to the trains and to their death. That little girl forever changed Schindler, who was so moved by that scene that he ended up repudiating Nazism and rescuing over 1,100 Jews. When Steven Spielberg retold the story in *Schindler's List*, the main body of the film was shot in black and white, except for the glow of candles and the two scenes in which the girl in the red coat appears, picked out in color.<sup>13</sup>

**Application:** The same effect is discovered in Ecclesiastes. This book portrays life "in black and white, emphasizing the captivity and destruction of a whole race—the human race—gathered together under the shadow of death. But there is color. The occasional candle flickers and soon others begin to glow and illuminate the scene. The brightest color appears when the cameras focus upon one Person vividly illuminated against the drab back-drop—not a little girl in a red coat, but God, the Creator

of human beings. As the camera pans away and the span of biblical history is revealed, we see that same God among the seething mass of humanity, sharing in their suffering and death—Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup>

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this message! He is "the way" that leads to meaning, satisfaction, fullness, and life (John 14:6; 10:10)! "From a Christian theological perspective, reading the biblical story line as a whole, one can see analogies between the Preacher and Jesus Christ who is the 'Son of David' (Matt. 1:1), king (Matt. 2:2; Acts 17:7; Rev. 17:14; 19:16), 'wisdom from God' (1 Cor. 1:24, 30), and 'one Shepherd' (Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; John 10:11, 16), in whose ministry 'something greater than Solomon' has arrived (Luke 11:31)."<sup>15</sup>

Again, we allow Kidner to clarify the joy of this fulfillment:

*If God calls for man's response and gives him an awareness of eternity (3:11), it can hardly be with a view to God's discarding all but the memory of him. "If the Lord had meant to kill us" (it was argued in a very different context), "He would not have accepted a burnt offering...or shown us all these things" [Judges 13:23]. Job glimpsed this implication of what he had experienced; so too, evidently, did certain psalmists [Psalm 16:8-11; 17:14-15; 49:12-15; 73:23-26]; and Jesus found nothing less than resurrection implied in God's commitment to the individual whom He accepts (Matthew 22:31-32).<sup>16</sup>*

And so we are reminded to keep the end in mind (Psalm 73:17), in which God will fulfill our hope by replacing the temporal futility of life on earth with the eternal joy of life in His presence!

## CONCLUSION

So, is life really worth living? Well, it depends on how you live it. There are only two ways to live—life "under the sun" and life "in the fear of God." If God is your orientation, then we "know that [our] labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> “The units fall into the three categories of recollections, reflections, and mood pieces. All of these are expressed by a narrator who in effect tells the story of his quest to find satisfaction in life. This quest is reconstructed from the vantage point of someone whose quest ended satisfactorily. The transitions between units often keep the quest in view: “so I turned to consider,” “again I saw,” “then I saw,” etc. As the quest unfolds, one is continuously aware of the discrepancy between the narrator’s present outlook and his futile search undertaken in the past. In effect, the speaker recalls the labyrinth of dead ends that he pursued, recreating his restless past with full vividness but not representing it as his mature outlook” (Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008], 1195).

<sup>3</sup> “As a genuine wisdom teacher, he has a gift for penetrating observation and for stating things in a profound and challenging manner that spur the listener on to deeper thought and reflection. Many of the difficulties or paradoxes in the book can be reasonably explained in terms of: (1) his provocative style; (2) the general method of wisdom teaching, which can state apparently contradictory principles (e.g., Prov. 26:4–5) and leave it to the listener to work out which principle applies in a particular situation; and (3) the fact that, rather than focusing primarily on stating general truths that are applicable to most situations (as is the tendency with the teaching of the book of Proverbs), the Preacher devotes much of his attention to examining unique individual situations (e.g., Eccles. 4:7–8; 5:13–14; 9:13–16), which can represent deviations from what one might normally expect (e.g., 4:13–16; 9:11). Thus, while he does not deny the validity of the general depiction of reality found in the Wisdom Literature, the Preacher is also keenly aware of the complexities of life in a fallen world, which result in many individual exceptions to the “rules” of biblical wisdom” (Ibid., 1194).

<sup>4</sup> Illustrations taken from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> *The ESV Study Bible*, 1195.

<sup>6</sup> “In his *Unfolding Message of the Bible*, G. Campbell Morgan perfectly summarizes Solomon’s outlook: ‘This man had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun ... until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light’” (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1961, p. 229 quoted in Wiersbe).

<sup>7</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 100.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 103

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>13</sup> Illustration adapted from Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>15</sup> *The ESV Study Bible*, 1195.

<sup>16</sup> Kidner, 104.