

# Ecclesiastes

## Authorship: Solomon:

- ↳ He is “King David’s son who ruled Jerusalem” (1:1);
- ↳ The description of the author’s wealth and variety of experiences fits what we know of Solomon;
- ↳ The book’s great wisdom fits Solomon, who received wisdom as a gift from God (see 1 Kings 3:13) and authored numerous proverbs (see 1 Kings 4:29-34).

**Date and Location:** Ecclesiastes was likely written in the latter years of Solomon’s life, c. 935 BC (see Background), in Jerusalem (1:1).

**Background:** The wise King Solomon (see Authorship), who shared his God-given wisdom in Proverbs, focused in Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life in an imperfect, fallen world. Though Solomon’s faith in God shows through at key places (see 3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:8, 13), he seems for the most part to leave God out of the equation, declaring again and again that life is meaningless. A thorough reading of the book suggests, however, that Solomon’s purpose was to show how utterly meaningless life is apart from God.

The word *vanity*, translated “meaningless” by the NLT and NIV, appears 29 times (37 times in KJV) and sets the tone of despair that pervades Ecclesiastes. The phrase “under the sun” appears 27 times (29 times in KJV) and suggests that Solomon was making his case for despair based only on evidence from the natural world.

As the outline suggests, Solomon dealt with the problem of life’s apparent meaningless in four stages:

- ↳ He stated his “belief” that life is meaningless (1:1-11);
- ↳ He offered evidence for that belief, showing how his and other people’s efforts to find meaning in life yielded only despair (1:12-6:12);
- ↳ He offered advice about how to cope with a meaningless world (7:1-12:8);
- ↳ Having hinted at his own belief in God, he concluded by stating that meaning can be found through faith in and obedience to God (12:9-14).

Ecclesiastes appears to be the work of Solomon made older and wiser by the unforeseeable misfortunes of life and by his own serious mistakes in spite of his great wisdom. Ecclesiastes, which means “teacher” or “preacher,” was Solomon’s pen name for this book as well as the book’s title (1:1).

**Purpose:** Ecclesiastes answers the question, “What is the meaning of life? The way Qoheleth (“the Preacher”) argued was to show at length the failure of the answers offered by those who live life ‘under the sun,’ that is, apart from revealed religion. *Materialists* find life’s object in the abundance of possessions or achievements. *Sensualists* discover meaning in physical pleasure (food, sex, excitement, adventure). Scholars seek purpose through intellectual inquiry (wisdom). All these answers are “vanity of vanities” or “utterly meaningless.” Life’s meaning cannot be discovered; it is only *revealed* by God. Life is brief; judgement is coming; God is sovereign. Qoheleth’s answer is that of divine revelation: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole *duty* of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether *it be good*, or whether *it be evil*” (12:13-14).

## Unique Feature:

- ↳ Because of its focus on the meaning of life, Ecclesiastes has a unique appeal to people of all religions;
- ↳ The repetitions of *vanity* and *under the sun* (see Background) constitute the most prominent emphasis of a single word or phrase in any biblical book.

## Outline:

- I. Life is Meaningless: The Problem (1:1-11)
- II. Life is Meaningless: The Proof (1:12-6:12)
- III. Life in a Meaningless World (7:1-12:8)
- IV. The Birth of a Meaningful Life (12:9-14)

### Key Verse

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities!  
All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2 ESV).

## Sources:

Easley, Kendall H. *Holman QuickSource: Guide to Understanding The Bible*, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2002, (130).  
*Journeying with God: A Survey of the Old Testament*, Purposeful Design Publications.  
Wilmington, Harold L. *Wilmington’s Bible Handbook*, Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale, 1997.