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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 10: ECCLESIASTES – 2

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the citations given from the book of Ecclesiastes as you study the units on this book.

FINDING THE MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES:

We have looked at the background to this fascinating book, but how should we interpret its message? Some feel that the book is an argument against seeing any meaning in life, while others feel that this is not the case at all. In this unit we will see that the evidence lies with the latter understanding – that the message of Ecclesiastes is ultimately a positive one. First, we will look at why the book is so commonly not understood and then we will focus on its message.

HOW ECCLESIASTES TEACHES:

Like all the works included in the Bible's Wisdom Literature, Ecclesiastes is designed to instruct, and it is important to realize how it does that. If we do not recognize *how* the book teaches, we will not recognize *what* it teaches. Uniquely in the Old Testament wisdom writings, Ecclesiastes employs a discussion format in which it frequently enters into dialogue with other, established wisdom. This is somewhat like the way in which Jesus sometimes taught by saying: "You have heard that it was said ..., but I tell you that" (Matthew 5:21-22; etc.). Ecclesiastes frequently states what appears to be an established proverb or wisdom saying and then disagrees with it – showing the other side of the coin, so to speak. In the second chapter of the book, for example, we read:

The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. (Ecclesiastes 2:14)

Here, the contrast between what appears to be an existing saying: "The wise have eyes in their heads ..." is clear as the author continues "but I came to realize ..." His point is, of course, that the wise and the foolish come to the same end. Chapter four provides another clear example:

Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves.
Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls
with toil and chasing after the wind. (4:5-6)

The contrast between the proverb-like saying “Fools fold their hands [don’t work] ...” with the author’s comment “Better one handful ...” is very clear. Although not working might be said to be disastrous, one could argue that being content with a little is better than a great amount of work “chasing after the wind.” Another example of this kind of dialogue with proverbial material can be seen in chapter seven:

A good name is better than fine perfume,
And the day of death better than the day of birth.
It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting. (7:1-2)

The initial thought “A good name ... perfume” clearly sounds like a proverb. In the Hebrew it balances two parallel sounding things (*shem* = name, *shemem* = perfume), as proverbs often do, and it also resembles the thought found in Song of Songs 1:3. The word “and” with which the second line begins is the same conjunction translated “but” in Ecclesiastes 2:14, and this is really its sense here – a good name may be like perfume (which was worn for birthdays and other feasts), *but* Ecclesiastes argues, despite this apparent proverbial saying, ultimately the day of mourning (when perfume was not worn) is better.

But the author of Ecclesiastes does not appear to use only proverbial wisdom sayings in stating his teachings, but he also uses poems in the same way. This seems to be the case with the most famous poem found in the book – that known as “There is a time for everything” found in 3:1-8. This beautiful poem is so frequently read and quoted out of context that it is difficult to see it in the way in which the author of Ecclesiastes intends. Notice, however, what comes directly after the poem:

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens ...
I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (3:1, 10-11)

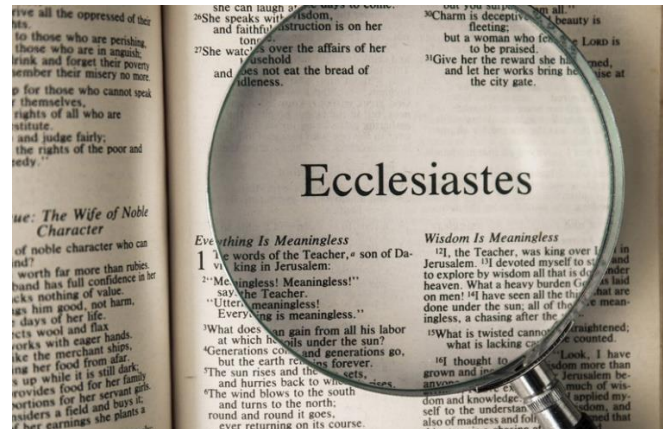
Immediately after the poem the author responds with several comments regarding time. The expression translated “beautiful in its own time” in this line means “appropriate in its own time.” He mentions that although humans may have an understanding of the concept of eternity, we cannot grasp what God does “from beginning to end” – throughout the trajectory of time discussed in the poem. In other words, he tells us that although God orders events so that they happen at their appropriate time, we cannot know what the purpose is or grasp its meaning.

In all these cases, and in many more in the book, Ecclesiastes engages traditional wisdom and urges us to see that wherever we look, wisdom does not answer the ultimate questions of life or explain things that appear to be meaningless. We will see the significance of these seemingly negative responses below, but first it is important that we understand what Ecclesiastes means by meaningless!

THE MEANING OF MEANINGLESS:

The most important single word in Ecclesiastes is doubtless “meaningless” – the word that begins its central discussion (“‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless’” – 1:2) and ends it almost identically (12:8). There is an undeniably negative sound to this in English, but the Hebrew word *hebel* from which meaningless is translated literally means breath, vapor, fog, or smoke; and figuratively means that which is insubstantial, temporary, or fleeting (11:10 NIV).

The King James translation of these verses “Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity” (see Note 1) uses the English word vanity in its sense of something that is not lasting, empty, or of little value, and this is a little closer to the Hebrew word in some ways than the more modern translations which use “meaningless.” The main thing to realize is that the word *hebel* essentially connotes that which is of limited duration, value, purpose, or meaning. Like vapor or smoke, it seems to be there, but it is completely insubstantial.



MISUNDERSTANDINGS REGARDING ECCLESIASTES:

Seeing how the author of Ecclesiastes often instructs us and what he means by “meaningless” allows us to correct four major misconceptions about the message of the book.

First, it is often said that the message of Ecclesiastes discounts or ignores God. But God is actually very present in the book – from the first chapter to the last. In fact, God is mentioned some forty-two times within the twelve chapters of the book – an average of almost four times each chapter! We need only look at passages such as 2:24-26 that mention God repeatedly to wonder why so many people presume that the book somehow denies God.

Second, it is often said that Ecclesiastes carries a message of total pessimism and the unhappiness of life, but this is also a misunderstanding. Interestingly, the book does make a number of apparently conscious allusions back to the curses of Genesis chapter three (Ecclesiastes 7:29; 9:18; etc.), and Ecclesiastes appears to be deliberately drawing on this imagery to show that much of the “meaningless” nature of this life is a result of the fall. Yet Ecclesiastes frequently urges us to rejoice in the good things we experience (11:8-10; etc.), so while it recognizes the inherent unhappiness in life, it also is clear that we need not necessarily succumb to it.

Third, it is often said that Ecclesiastes denies any kind of afterlife. The book does state:

Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. ... All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth? (3:19-21).

But this provisional statement of the uncertainty of anything beyond life from the physical perspective does not prevent the author later stressing that the human spirit does return to God (12:7) and that there will be a future judgment (12:14).

Finally, despite another common misconception, the theme of the book is not that nothing matters. As we noted in the last point, Ecclesiastes concludes with the summary that “For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (12:14). This echoes an earlier statement: “Follow the ways of your heart ... but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9), showing that ultimately everything that is done does matter.

THE MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES:

Now that we are armed with an understanding of some of the reasons why and how this book is often misunderstood, we can begin to see its message. Like the book of Job, Ecclesiastes does not avoid the hard questions of life, but comes to grips with them directly. Like Psalms, it admits the pain and frustration that is present in life, and it contains many teaching sayings like Proverbs. But Ecclesiastes differs from the other biblical Wisdom books in being skeptical of the ability of *anything* physical – even wisdom itself – to provide ultimate meaning and satisfaction in life (1:18; etc.).

Although the tone of Ecclesiastes often appears to be pessimistic, its author is not a pessimist. Repeatedly, just when it seems that the book is suggesting a negative understanding of life, he pauses and gives a positive summary regarding what he has said. The first occurrence of this is after his discussion of the limits of wisdom – when he says in Ecclesiastes 2:13 “I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.” After showing the “meaninglessness” of work and struggle, he tells us in 2:24: “A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.” After discussing the ultimate futility of action and accomplishment, he states “there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live” (3:12), etc. These are not concepts that the author is disagreeing with, but his own conclusions in each case: “I saw that ...” (2:13), “This too, I see ...” (2:24), “I know that ...” (3:12), etc.

Ecclesiastes searches the whole range of human experience – including pleasure, work, wisdom, and even foolishness – and finds it all empty and “meaningless” in the long term, but it does not say not to enjoy any of these things, it simply puts them in true, eternal context. Six times within the book the author of Ecclesiastes encourages us to enjoy that which we eat and drink, the work we do, and even doing good – which is hardly the hallmark of a despondent pessimist who sees no pleasure or purpose in anything:

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness. (2: 24-26)

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil— this is the gift of God. (3:12-13)

God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked ...So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. (3:17-22)

This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them— for this is their lot. (5:18)

So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. (8: 15)

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. (9: 7)

Notice that in every one of the six passages the author states or implies that these things are the gifts of God for us to enjoy. Ecclesiastes is not saying that there is nothing to enjoy in life, but that anything we enjoy is ultimately “meaningless” in that it is of a limited temporary nature (1:8; etc.). The reason for this teaching is that *humanly we tend to look for satisfaction and meaning in the very things that Ecclesiastes criticizes*. The point of the book is that anything, and especially work, ambition, and pleasure – the things most people get wrapped up in and try to derive satisfaction from – will not provide lasting meaning in life. Ultimately Ecclesiastes warns us against the illusion that meaning can be found in life apart from God. Solomon, or someone who had the same massive opportunities to experiment with everything in life, tried it all and found that without God life is sadly wanting, ultimately empty, insubstantial, and fleeting – like vapor, breath or smoke.

The purpose of Ecclesiastes is, in short, to teach the futility of life without God. It does not teach that life is meaningless, but that seeking meaning in anything apart from God is meaningless. The book that begins with “Meaningless! Meaningless!” (1:2) ends with the injunction “Remember your Creator” (12:1) and the summary: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind ...” (12:13). Ecclesiastes tells us that we cannot find meaning beneath the sun or the heavens – it is only above them that the One who gives ultimate meaning resides.

* Note 1: The doubling of the word vanity in “vanity of vanities” found in the King James version of Ecclesiastes or “meaningless! meaningless!” in many newer translations reflects the Hebrew form used to express intensity or the ultimate of something, as in the phrase “holy of holies.”

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Background Basics

1. Write a short summary stating why the teaching method of Ecclesiastes is unique in biblical Wisdom Literature.
2. Think about Ecclesiastes 1:14 “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” and write a short paragraph showing why this verse shows both the physical perspective of the book and the essential meaning of “meaningless” as used throughout Ecclesiastes.
3. Explain why Ecclesiastes teaches that even though they are all ultimately “meaningless,” we can still enjoy many physical aspects of life.
4. After reading Ecclesiastes carefully, select and memorize the verse you feel best shows the positive nature of the book.

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