

ECCLESIASTES - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. Ecclesiastes means "The Preacher." Why do you think this book would have a name like that? Does this book, as a whole, contribute anything of significance to our understanding of God? If it doesn't help us much, do you think it may have helped the onlooking universe? What would the universe learn? Why would the Holy Spirit inspire the recording of the feelings of this tired old king? Do you think Abraham, Moses, or Daniel would have written a book like this? Wouldn't it take courage and inspiration for Solomon to tell the truth without hiding or glossing it over? How different would Solomon's testimony have been if he had been faithful all his life? Is there any "good news" in Ecclesiastes?

"The title of this book is from the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning 'assembly' or 'church,' and is a transliteration of the Greek *ekklesiastes*, 'one who calls an assembly,' taken from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). The Hebrew title is *qophelet*, from the root *qahal* meaning 'assembly' or 'congregation.' It occurs with the definite article in 12:8 and so is usually translated 'the Preacher' or 'the Teacher,' the one who assembles or ministers to a congregation. This is uncertain, however, since the word occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament.

Author and Date: "A strong tradition, generally unquestioned until the seventeenth-century Enlightenment, affirms that Ecclesiastes was written in the tenth century B.C. by King Solomon, son of David. The name Solomon, however, never occurs in the book, the author choosing to describe himself only as 'the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem' (1:1; cf. v. 12). This has led many to suggest alternatives to Solomonic authorship. Many hold that the book was written in postexilic times, and that no deception was intended or perceived by the original readers in using Solomon as the central character through whom the author spoke. The message would be, then, that if anyone could find meaning in life through wealth, pleasure, or speculative wisdom, it would have been Solomon.

"The case for non-Solomonic authorship is weak and inconclusive: (1) Although Solomon is not named, it is most likely that 'the son of David' (1:1) was understood as David's immediate successor rather than a later descendant. (2) Autobiographical data, expressed in the first person, certainly fits Solomon (1:16; 2:4–9; 7:26–29; 12:9; cf. 1 Kin. 3:12; 4:20–34; 10:23–27). (3) The phrase translated 'was king' in 1:12 can just as well be translated 'have been king,' indicating that Solomon was writing late in his life, as Jewish tradition claims. (4) Martin Luther rejected Solomonic authorship because of 'impressions' drawn from allusions to exilic and postexilic conditions. These conditions to which he apparently referred (cf. 4:13–16; 6:2, 3; 9:13–18) probably existed late in the Solomonic era as well. (5) There are no linguistic phenomena which cannot be attributed to Solomon, and the arguments for a later date on this basis are inconclusive. The roots of some of the questioned words have been found in Genesis and other early Hebrew writings. The linguistic differences from other Old Testament books of whatever age are better explained by the fact that Ecclesiastes belongs to a different type of literature. The Aramaic influences upon the Hebrew in Ecclesiastes do not preclude Solomonic authorship, inasmuch as the political and commercial ties of the Syrian areas with Israel during Solomon's reign were probably closer than at any other period of history. Canaanite/Phoenician influences discovered in the book confirm this. Was there ever a king of Israel more cosmopolitan than Solomon? Was there ever a ruler of Israel who had more opportunity to amass the wisdom of the world than this successor of David? (6) There is remarkable affinity in expressions and phraseology within Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. Any differences can be justified easily by the varied subject matter and by the possible wide span of years during which the writing occurred. **Some**

scholars suggest that the former books were written in Solomon's youth, while this book was penned in his old age (cf. 2:17).

"In view of these facts, then, it is best to accept Jewish tradition and assume Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes in the interpretation of the book. As one commentator, who does not hold Solomonic authorship, has admitted, 'Surrendering the traditional opinion, we are, however, at once cast upon an ocean of surmises, which are wholly derived from internal evidence as this strikes different readers.'" (*Believer's Study Bible*)

"According to the tradition of the synagogue, the book of Ecclesiastes is attributed to Solomon, son of David. One Rabbinic source declares that he wrote the Song of Songs, with its accent on love, in his youth; Proverbs, with its emphasis on practical problems, in his maturity; and Ecclesiastes with its emphasis on the vanity of life, in old age (Midrash, *Shir Hashirim Rabba*, 1:1, Sec. 10)." (*KJV Bible Commentary*)

"Date. If placed within the reign of Solomon, the book would probably fall near the end of his reign just prior to his death in 931 B.C. Among those who reject Solomonic authorship, there is a wide range of suggested dates extending down to the second century B.C. Extremely late dates are highly questionable in light of fragments of Ecclesiastes found at Qumran and dated between 175 and 150 B.C." (*KJV Study Bible*)

"This book is a search for meaning in life. What can humans do to find satisfaction and happiness? What is worthwhile in life? The search begins with a gloomy outlook—life is boring and as senseless as chasing the wind.

"Ecclesiastes looks at one area of life after another, to see whether meaning and purpose for living can be found. The book decides that humans cannot understand the meaning of life, and that life is too short and unfair. This may seem depressing, but Ecclesiastes also shows that some things in life are better than others. For example, it is better to be wise than to be foolish. And God does intend for people to enjoy his gifts of work, food, drink, friendship, and marriage. And most important of all:

Respect and obey God!

This is what life

is all about.

God will judge

everything we do,

even what is done in secret,

whether good or bad. (12:13,14)"

(*Contemporary English Version*)

"Within the history of the church there have been two basic views on the theology of the book. On the one hand, some describe the contents of the book as **pessimistic, cynical, skeptical, hedonistic, or agnostic, and picture the author as a man of doubt who has wandered far from God. On the other hand, many interpret the book quite positively: the author is a man of faith, a realist, who sees that man simply cannot put the whole of life together.** The latter view is favored since the author believes God is good (2:24; 3:13); believes God has a wise plan (3:11,14; 7:14; 8:17); believes God is just (3:17; 8:11–13); and always exhorts men to fear God (8:12,13; 12:13,14).

"The thought of the book centers in six key ideas. Three of these are negative and revolve around the problems of life:

(1) All is vanity.

(2) Man is limited.

(3) God is hidden.

The other three are positive and give the solution to life's crises:

(1) Fear God and keep His commandments.

(2) Enjoy life.

(3) Use wisdom properly.

All six ideas are scattered throughout the book, but taken together they demonstrate that the purpose of the book is **to show men that they should lead godly and joyous lives, though they live in a world of divinely condoned mysteries.**” (*KJV Study Bible*)

“As the world enters the twenty-first century, more and more people are struggling to keep their heads above a rising tide of pessimism about prospects for the future. To be sure, a handful of optimists predict a better, brighter tomorrow. Still, the mass of humanity remains less than convinced.

“A hundred years ago, faith in human reason and progress was probably at an all-time high. Today, it is as low as ever. There are growing doubts as to whether the world can ever solve its problems on its own.

“Ecclesiastes speaks to this condition. It well expresses the profound disappointment that people feel when they realize that life should be better, but isn’t.

“It’s about life in a fallen world. Ecclesiastes says we can deny it, fight it, hide from it, even try to make sense of it. But we can’t escape it. The only meaningful response is to live in it one day at a time, fearing God and cherishing as best we can the ‘stuff’ of which life is made— food, family, work. These are gifts from God’s hand.” (*Word-in-Life Study Bible*)

“The Book of Ecclesiastes has a powerful message for our selfish, materialistic age. It teaches that great accomplishments and earthly possessions alone do not bring lasting happiness. True satisfaction comes from serving God and following His will for our lives.

“But another important truth from Ecclesiastes is that life is to be enjoyed. The Preacher repeats this truth several times so it does not escape our attention: ‘There is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God’ (Ecclesiastes 3:12,13; see also 2:24,25; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–10). Our grateful acceptance of God’s daily blessings can bring a sense of joy and fulfillment to our lives.” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)

“In Ecclesiastes Solomon sets forth his philosophy of life on the basis of his own experience. In succession he had sought ultimate happiness through the pursuit of knowledge, in sensory pleasure and luxury, and by magnificent building projects and vast enterprises (Ecclesiastes 1 and 2). As a powerful young ruler blessed with unique wisdom and wealth, he had lacked no facilities in his quest for happiness, yet when he had secured all that human ingenuity could provide along each path of endeavor he found only ‘vanity and vexation of spirit’ and concluded that in none of them was there any ‘profit under the sun’ (Ec. 2:11). **What distressed him more than anything else, however, was the fact that at the close of a lifetime of labor the wise and diligent man was no better off than the fool, since both were alike in death, and what he had learned and gathered and produced must be left to men who may prove to be fools** (Ec. 2:14–23). Therefore he despaired of his labors and came to hate life itself (Ec. 2:20,17). Instead of happiness he had found only vexation of heart (Ec. 2:22). **A cynical attitude darkened his outlook on life and, for practical purposes, he became an agnostic.** Losing sight of God, his natural tendencies gained the supremacy over reason, and with his reason increasingly subordinated to inclination, his moral sensibilities were blunted, his conscience seared, and his judgment perverted. Toward the close of life he realized that a lifetime of folly had made him into ‘an old and foolish king’ (Ecclesiastes 4:13). Conscience awakened and he saw folly in its true light. Spurred on by sincere repentance he sought to retrace his wayward steps, as best he might, and chastened in spirit he finally turned, wearied and thirsting, from earth’s broken cisterns to drink once more at the fountain of life.

“Having himself learned the great lesson of life the hard way, Solomon sought to counteract his years of evil influence, and to guide others along the pathway to faith in God. Guided by Inspiration, he recorded the history of his wasted years, with their lessons of warning, setting forth a sound philosophy of life and clarifying the purpose

of man's existence and stating in simple terms man's duty and destiny. In this life men are to be content with the opportunities and privileges God has afforded them (Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12,22; 5:18), making the most of them in cooperation with, and obedience to, their Creator. In fact, 'the conclusion of the whole matter' is that 'the whole duty of man' can be summed up in the one admonition to 'fear God, and keep his commandments' (ch 12:13), in view of the fact that when life is over man must be ready to stand in judgment before God (ch 11:9). In the prologue Solomon dwells upon the futility of life (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11). Next he relates his own futile experience in quest of happiness (Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26). Nevertheless, he affirms that there is a purpose to life, that there is an appropriate time for everything, and that even the seeming injustices of life are not without purpose (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4:8). He then contrasts the value of companionship, wisdom, reverence, and justice (Ecclesiastes 4:9-5:9) with the folly of materialism, the incomprehensibility of suffering, and the seeming futility of human effort (Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:12). Character, an understanding of God's dealings with men, and a balanced outlook on life are the things worth striving for (Ecclesiastes 7:1-22). The closing chapters of the book summarize the disappointments and conflicts he has encountered in his search for wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:23-8:15). God's ways are often inscrutable, but one may be content amid the vicissitudes of life in the certain knowledge that every deed will have its due reward (Ecclesiastes 8:16-12:14)." (SDA Bible Dictionary)

"Having considered the uncertainty of human happiness, the Preacher turns to contemplate the actual misery with which the world is filled. For a world full of distress the 'wise man' does not propose any kind of 'welfare state' as a solution to social inequalities and injustices. As the Preacher draws his survey to a close, he sets forth a series of practical suggestions. Individually, we should give such help as we can to the poor and to those who suffer. **But the most important thing is to give our hearts and our affections to God, to yield obedience to Him, and so be ready for the final judgment. Ecclesiastes thus provides a sound philosophy of life, of the purpose of man's existence, of duty and destiny.**" SDA BC 3/1058

"He recounts the tyranny in the world, the injustices, the disappointments that might undermine man's faith in his Creator. But the day of retribution cannot be ignored or postponed indefinitely. Even though inequalities persist for a time, these are often essentially disciplinary measures; therefore man's duty and final happiness consist in meeting life with the determination to seize its opportunities and to make the most of them. God will take care of the future."

"But restoration to favor with God did not miraculously restore the wasted physical and mental strength of former years (see MH 169). 'Through sin the whole human organism is deranged, the mind is perverted, the imagination corrupted' (MH 451), and Solomon's repentance 'did not prevent the fruition of the evil he had sown' (Ed 49). 'He could never hope to escape the blasting results of sin' (PK 78).

"It pictures in vivid terms his pursuit of pleasure, popularity, wealth, and power; but the thread that binds this sad narrative together is Solomon's own candid analysis of the perverted thought processes by which, in his own mind, he had justified his wayward conduct. Those portions of Ecclesiastes that relate the experience and reasoning of his years of apostasy are not to be taken as representing the mind and will of the Spirit. Nevertheless, they are an inspired record of what he actually thought and did during that time (see PK 79), and that record constitutes a sober warning against the wrong kind of thought and action." (SDA Bible Commentary - Ecclesiastes)

Ecclesiastes is not a book about theoretical concerns or simply ideas. This is a book about "where" people live. Its emphasis is on what we do and think on a daily basis. The U. S. Bill of Rights suggests that the most important things in our existence are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Solomon tried to pursue happiness in all the wrong places.

How much of our lives do we spend pursuing the most important things in life? Most of us seem to get caught up in the everyday rat-race of our daily existence and we end

up spending very little of our lives on what we state are the most important matters of life. The book of Ecclesiastes is a summary of Solomon's attempts to find happiness in worldly pursuits and his ultimate failure. We are able to find real meaning in life only as we are able to step back from the daily grind and ask ourselves what it is we are really accomplishing. Do we believe that we will succeed where Solomon failed? Do we have more resources, more money, more wisdom, more wives or servants to look after our every need? Never! We need to look away from our race to keep up with the Joneses and really evaluate what we want in life. The book of Ecclesiastes can really give us a hard-nosed look at those issues. God wants us to be happy. He cares about our everyday needs. He wants us to be happy with our lifetime partners. Our world seems to be filled with misery. But in partnership with God we can find happiness in reaching out and serving others. We can look beyond ourselves to some ultimate good. These are the things that will count when God tallies up the records.

2. Are all the statements in Ecclesiastes true? **Could something that is not true be “inspired?”** Is it true that “The sun still rises, and it still goes down, going wearily back to where it must start all over again”? (Ecclesiastes 1:5) Considering all that people are inventing and discovering now, was Solomon right in saying “there is nothing new under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:9,10; compare 3:15) Is it true that “God has laid a miserable fate upon us?” (Ecclesiastes 1:13, *GNB*) Is it true that “all is vanity and a striving after wind?” (Ecclesiastes 1:14) Is it true that “what is crooked cannot be made straight?” (Ecclesiastes 1:15) Is it true that “the more knowledge, the more grief?” (Ecclesiastes 1:18) Is it true that the wise and the foolish end up in the same place—and in days to come we will all be forgotten? (Ecclesiastes 2:14-17) How could the dead who have already died be happier than those who are still living? (Ecclesiastes 4:2) Is it true that, “Everything that happens was already determined long ago?” (Ecclesiastes 6:10) Would you agree that “A man might have a hundred children and live to be very old. But if he finds no satisfaction in life and in the end does not even get a decent burial, I say he would have been better off born dead?” (Ecclesiastes 6:3)

If these are the dictated words of God, then we have a real problem. But if these represent Solomon's opinions in his final years of discouragement and depression after he was told by God that he had destroyed the kingdom and much of it would be taken away from his descendants, the words seem quite natural under the circumstances. But are such words “inspired?” **God inspires humans to express their ideas in their own words. These are not God's own words.** Some of these statements represent what we would call a limited world view. Others, represent Solomon's discouragement. **Do discouraged, depressed, even mentally ill people whose thinking is not always exactly correct have a right to be called children of God? Would God ever use such a person to write a portion of Scripture?**

If we wanted to take these statements very literally to establish our own world view then they would be a problem. If we recognize them for what they are—Solomon's depressed feelings at the end of a largely wasted life—then they should not cause us a big problem. But why would God ask such a tired old king to add anything to our understanding of God Himself by writing a portion of Scripture. Or do we expect such a book to add anything to our understanding of God? Why was this book written and preserved for us to read?

3. In Ecclesiastes 2:1-17, he says that he would make a test of certain pleasures and things, but found them all to be vanity. He tried wine, sensual pleasure, great works of architecture, pools and parks. He bought many slaves, great possessions, He gathered silver and gold, He got many concubines. Solomon says, “My wisdom remained with me and I kept my heart from no pleasure. Behold all was vanity!” **Was everything that Solomon tried to pursue in this record inherently evil? To really enjoy something, do you have to be the very first human to try it?** (Ecclesiastes 2:12) How does one use material like this? In what sense is it inspired? And after it was all over he laments that it was all a useless endeavor because he would have to leave everything to his successor who might even be a fool! (2:18,19)

Solomon appears to be going through the ultimate “mid-life crisis”. He is struggling with what kind of legacy he is going to leave behind. In your opinion what kind of legacy did he leave? It was not as bad as he seemed to think it would be, but it certainly could have been better. **With the kind of advantages he started out with in life, he could have been a marvelous spiritual giant and an example to much of the civilized world of his day. He could have explored ways to disseminate true religion and a correct knowledge of Yahweh throughout the world. He could have pointed out the foolishness of pagan religions. He could have established a group of spiritual leaders to go to all the nations of the world to teach them the truth about life, God, and the future. He could have established a government system that provided very well for all of its citizens so that everyone could live happy, prosperous lives. He could have establish centers for the study of nature, religion, and even how to live longer, healthier lives.**

Instead, he ends up consumed with worrying about his own happiness! All he seems to care about is his personal happiness and how he will be remembered! But Solomon is surely not the only one whose life went like this. **How many people today feel like Solomon did?** Does reading the life of Solomon and considering his final “reflections” help such people to think about what is most important in life? Doesn’t God want to reach out to them as much as to any of the rest of us? There are many issues discussed in this book that are important for each one of us to consider. Wouldn’t it be appropriate for God to challenge us to think about these issues?

4. What is the meaning of Ecclesiastes 7:16,17–“So don't be too good or too wise—why kill you yourself? But don't be too wicked or too foolish, either—why die before you have to?” (*GNB*) Is it safe to go through the Bible and make selections of what we like or what is “right” and what we think is “not right?” Doesn't this book show us the dangers of plucking texts from here and there?

This passage “does not apply the ‘golden mean’ to morality, nor does it constitute a warning against excessive observance of religious ritual. Rather, it warns against self-righteousness or the idea that one has actually achieved righteousness. Ecclesiastes 7:17 does not mean that moderation in wickedness is acceptable! It is an accommodation to human frailty. Solomon is saying, Avoid the extreme of self-righteousness and, at the same time, hold in check your wicked nature (cf. Eccl. 7:20) so it does not run its natural course to spiritual and moral ruin.” (*KJV Study Bible*)

“Few verses in Ecclesiastes are more susceptible to incorrect interpretation than these (vv. 16–18). This is not the so-called golden mean that advises: ‘Don’t be too holy and don’t be too wicked; sin to a moderate degree.’ The Preacher was warning instead about pseudo-religiosity and showy forms of worship. The Hebrew verb for ‘be wise’ may be rendered ‘think yourself wise,’ and to ‘be overly righteous’ would mean ‘righteous in your own eyes’ (see Prov. 3:7).” (*Nelson Study Bible*)

“Both human illusions of perfection in this life and the abandonment of oneself to wickedness have God for an adversary...Pride can masquerade as righteousness, even in small things; on the other hand, there is an impulse to lawlessness that goes beyond everyday standards of life.” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

“This verse is probably the language of an ungodly man to which Solomon answers, as in the following verse, “Do not multiply wickedness; do not add direct opposition to godliness, to the rest of your crimes. Why should you provoke God to destroy you before your time?” (*The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*)

“These verses have generally been interpreted as teaching the “golden mean” or a moderate lifestyle, avoiding both overzealous righteousness and overindulgent sinfulness. And righteousness here is generally interpreted as referring to legalistic or Pharisaic self-righteousness. But this interpretation fails to relate these verses adequately to Solomon’s

argument against the rigid application of the doctrine of retribution in God's distributing adversity and prosperity. Moreover, the meaning of the verb *tisûsûoÆmem* (from *sûamem*) must be correctly interpreted. Though almost universally interpreted in the sense of 'to destroy or ruin oneself,' the verb in this form never means this elsewhere. Instead it means 'to be appalled or astounded' (cf. Dan. 8:27, 'appalled'; Ps. 143:4, 'dismayed'). This fits in nicely with Solomon's argument here. He urged his readers not to be overrighteous or overwise 'lest they be confounded or astonished.' He meant they should not depend on their righteousness or wisdom to guarantee God's blessing because *they* might be confounded, dismayed, or disappointed like the righteous people whom Solomon had seen perishing in spite of their righteousness (Ecclesiastes 7:15).

"Also the fact that God did not punish in some cases (Ec. 7:15b) should not be taken as a license to sin (do not be overwicked, Ec. 7:17); God might judge them and they might die before they had to (die before your time; cf. Ps. 55:23). Solomon closed his argument in this section by noting that it is good to follow both warnings and by recommending that one who fears God (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13) should avoid all (or better, 'both') extremes (7:18). As in 2:14 and 3:19, the Hebrew word *kol* can mean either 'both' or 'all.' The two extremes to avoid are (a) depending on one's own righteousness and (b) becoming loose in one's living (being overly wicked).

"It should be noted what Solomon *did not* say or imply in Ec. 7:16-18. Solomon's advice should not be taken to imply that he believed in halfhearted obedience to God's commands or advocated a little wickedness and a little folly. Though he believed that complete righteousness is unattainable (Ec. 7:20) and that some folly is unavoidable, he never advocated folly or wickedness. Instead he advocated living life in the light of God's judgment (11:9; 12:14). Though he had observed exceptions to the doctrine of retribution (7:15; 8:10-11), he nevertheless believed that God would judge (3:17; 8:12-13). Solomon's only uncertainty about God's judgment was its timing; like everything else, it would be in God's time (3:17; cf. 3:11). So people should avoid folly and wickedness as much as possible and live as wisely and as righteously as possible." (*Bible Knowledge Commentary* - article on Ecclesiastes 7:16-18)

"16. Righteous over much. A rebuke to legalism with its reliance on outward forms and expressions. True religion is a personal relation to the holy God (Lev. 19:2; Eph. 3:14), and the Saviour Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:17-19).

"Over wise. Solomon has spoken of the value of wisdom; now he warns against an attitude that might bring one to question God's leadings. The apostle Paul gives the same injunction (Rom. 9:20-23).

"Destroy. The Hebrew form of the verb is reflexive, thereby emphasizing the fact that conduct decides destiny. The Pharisee in the parable is an example of one who, in self-righteousness and human wisdom, destroys himself (Luke 18:9-14).

"17. Over much wicked. Do not cast off all restraint; eventually the point is reached where the Holy Spirit is no longer able to bring about sincere repentance. Beware of ignoring or underestimating God (Ps. 10:11; cf. Mal. 1:2, 6; 2:17; 3:8, 13).

"Foolish. The man who sins deliberately, deceiving himself into the belief that God ignores what he does, may become so obsessed with a certain course of action that, in his spiritual blindness, he comes to think there is no God at all (Ps. 14:1)." (*SDA Bible Commentary*)

"Extremes are to be avoided (7:15-22). A person should not be 'overrighteous' or 'overwise'—or 'overwicked.' Solomon was aware that there is 'not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins' (v. 20). He supposed that the middle road of avoiding all extremes was the best road to take. To be overwicked would lead to an early death. To be overrighteous to the torments of guilt." (*The Teacher's Commentary*)

5. Would you agree with these conclusions from Solomon?

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25: ²⁴ The best thing anyone can do is to eat and drink and enjoy what he has earned. And yet, I realized that even this comes from God. ²⁵How else could you have anything to eat or enjoy yourself at all?" (GNB)

3:12-13: ¹²So I realized that all we can do is to be happy and do the best we can while we are still alive. ¹³All of us should eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for. It is God's gift." (GNB)

3:22: ²² So I realized then that the best thing we can do is to enjoy what we have worked for. There is nothing else we can do. There is no way for us to know what will happen after we die." (GNB)

5:18: ¹⁸ This is what I have found out: the best thing anyone can do is to eat and drink and enjoy what he has worked for during the short life that God has given him; this is man's fate." (GNB)

7:28,29: ²⁸I have looked for other answers but have found none. I found one man in a thousand that I could respect, but not one woman. ²⁹This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated." (GNB)

8:15: ¹⁵ "So I am convinced that a man should enjoy himself, because the only pleasure he has in this life is eating and drinking and enjoying himself. He can at least do this as he labors during the life that God has given him in this world." (GNB)

9:7: ⁷ "Go ahead—eat your food and be happy; drink your wine and be cheerful. It's all right with God." (GNB)

Was Solomon trying to assuage his conscience by rationalizing that what he had done with his life was the right thing to do? Not at all. Solomon here is recognizing that happiness can be found in enjoying the "simple pleasures" of life. God intends for each of us to be happy. But God cannot provide each of us with all the "resources" for happiness that Solomon had! Solomon tells us that "things" can't buy happiness. Someone once said, "Money can't buy love, but it makes shopping for it a lot easier!" Solomon is telling us to find our happiness in the things that we already have and not kill ourselves striving for something that is always just beyond our reach.

This is not advice that we should all be gluttons and alcoholics, but a recognition that we need to find meaning and fulfillment in life with the simple things that can be a part of our everyday lives. This does not mean that we should not strive for some great things in life, but that we need to find happiness in what we have now. Paul said it like this:

Philippians 4:12,13: ¹²I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learnt this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. ¹³I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me." (GNB)

6. If we reach old age without being able to show "any worthy action done" will God treat us any differently? In contrast to Solomon—who did not remember God throughout his life—can you think of anyone in the Bible who did?

What if Solomon had lived a life like Enoch, Daniel, Moses, Job, John or even David, his father? What might have been his conclusion to this book? Enoch and Elijah ascended to heaven without tasting death. Moses made some mistakes, but he made it to heaven also. Each of these others, despite their problems had a relationship with God that could not be shaken. When they came to the conclusions of their lives they had some great things to say about God and the value of their relationships. Job "said of God what was right." (Job 42:7,8) Enoch walked with God. (Genesis 5:21-24; Hebrews 11:5) Daniel risked his life rather than interrupt his daily communion with God. (Daniel

6) Moses was jealous for God's reputation on more than one occasion. (Exodus 32:11-14 ; Numbers 14:11-25) John actually realized that God Himself wants to treat us like friends! (John 15:15; 16:26) Even David, whenever he recognized his sins immediately turned to God. (Psalms 51)

Solomon, by contrast, seemed to be stuck on the basic level of obedience: he said, "God is watching everything you do, even in secret, so you better behave!" (See Ecclesiastes 12:13,14) **What do we want to leave as a legacy at the end of our lives? We have been given the privilege of living in the most exciting time in earth's history. God has given us, as the people living in the final period of this earth's history the information and capacity (with the Holy Spirit) to finish the gospel and see Jesus return at the second coming! So what are we saying about God?**

7. How would you have ended the book? Are we terrified that "God will bring every work into judgment, whether it be good or evil?" (Ecclesiastes 12:14) *If God asked you to write a book about your life and its accomplishments, what would you say?*

See # 6 above. Even if we are sinners and rebels we have nothing to fear from our gracious God. But what a waste to perish in the presence of such a gracious God. Think about it. What would you tell your friends if you could gather them all for a short time to hear what you had to say about God?

8. Are we afraid to have our lives come up in review by our gracious God? Are we afraid of a "punishing God?" Is it what we know about ourselves that makes us afraid? Is it what we know about Him that makes us afraid? Even if our final diagnosis is "unsavable," do we have anything to fear? Compare 1 John 4:17,18, "In this is love perfected . . . that we may have confidence for the day of judgment . . . there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment and he who fears is not perfected in love." (RSV)

God will do everything possible to save everyone who is safe to live next door to for eternity. But God is not willing to just let us go without a "fight." He will do His best to impress upon us that what we are doing is serious. He may even "threaten" to take us to court for a trial! But when it is all over, He always respects our freedom. It may seem embarrassing to admit to God the truth about even the secret things in our lives that we somehow hope will always remain secret, but the Bible makes it very clear that God knows all about us already. So it is much better for us to speak honestly to Him about our foibles.

Hebrews 4:13: ¹³There is nothing that can be hidden from God; everything in all creation is exposed and lies open before his eyes. And it is to him that we must all give an account of ourselves." (GNB)

Romans 14:12: ¹²Every one of us, then, will have to give an account of ourselves to God." (GNB)

See also Psalms 139; Pr. 5:21; 15:3,11; Romans 2:16

9. Some are afraid to sin because it will make God angry. Others are afraid to sin because it grieves God. Still others are afraid to sin because of what sin does to the sinner or others around him. Should we be afraid to sin? If so, why?

This is a thought question for each of us to ask ourselves. When we do, I hope we will consider all that we have discussed above and also the following passages:

1 John 1:9: ⁹But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing. (GNB)

Exodus 34:6,7: The LORD then passed in front of him and called out, "I, the LORD, am a God who is full of compassion and pity, who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness. I keep my promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin; but I will not

fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents.”

Romans 8:1: “There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus.” (GNB)

There is no need to be afraid of God.

“We are not to regard God as waiting to punish the sinner for his sin. The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result. Every act of transgression reacts upon the sinner, works in him a change of character, and makes it more easy for him to transgress again. By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death.” Letter 96, 1896; *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 235; *FLB* 84; *6BC* 1085,1110; *1MR* 130,131; *The EGWhite 1888 Materials*, p. 1576

“God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression; but He leaves the rejectors of His mercy to themselves, to reap that which they have sown.” *The Great Controversy* 36 (1888); *4SP* 36,37 (1884)

“This is not an act of arbitrary power on the part of God. The rejectors of His mercy reap that which they have sown. God is the fountain of life; and when one chooses the service of sin, he separates from God, and thus cuts himself off from life. He is ‘alienated from the life of God.’ Christ says, ‘All they that hate Me love death.’ Ephesians 4:18; Proverbs 8:36. God gives them existence for a time that they may develop their character and reveal their principles. This accomplished, they receive the results of their own choice. By a life of rebellion, Satan and all who unite with him place themselves so out of harmony with God that His very presence is to them a consuming fire. The glory of Him who is love will destroy them.” *The Desire of Ages* 764 (1898)

God does not desire obedience that springs from fear or obligation.

“The man who attempts to keep the commandments of God from a sense of obligation merely—because he is required to do so—will never enter into the joy of obedience. He does not obey. When the requirements of God are accounted a burden because they cut across human inclination, we may know that the life is not a Christian life. True obedience is the outworking of a principle within. It springs from the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer. This will lead us to do right because it is right—because right doing is pleasing to God.” *Christ’s Object Lessons* 97,98 (1900)

“A sullen submission to the will of the Father will develop the character of a rebel. By such a one service is looked upon as drudgery. It is not rendered cheerfully, and in the love of God. It is a mere mechanical performance. [If he dared, such a one would disobey. His rebellion is smothered, ready to break out at any time in bitter murmurings and complaints.] Such service brings no peace or quietude to the soul.” *MS* 20, 1897 (*MR* # 970); *Signs of the Times*, July 22, 1897 (*3ST* 400:2:1) - section in [. . .] omitted in *That I May Know Him* p. 120; *12MR* 236

10. God not only forgave Solomon but honored him by having him write another book of the Bible. Did God not know the details of Solomon's life? God watched Solomon do all the things that he did. But when he came back, a genuinely-repentant but tired old king, God didn't just forgive him, He honored him and treated him like “a holy man of God.” (2 Peter 1:21) Did forgiveness give him back the wasted years? **Isn't the story of the life of Solomon a living illustration of the “prodigal son?” What made Solomon finally come back to the true God?**

Maybe Solomon’s wisdom actually did him some good in his old age! He may have come to realize how worthless all those other “gods” were. He must have recognized that it was wrong to sacrifice his children! (1 Kings 11:5-8) Maybe he realized how gracious God had been to his father and mother. (See handout # 46: **DAVID: A MAN AFTER GOD’S OWN HEART?**) But unfortunately Solomon and the nation had to live with the consequences of their actions.

11. What does it mean to really “fear God and keep His commandments?” (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

See Handout #56 - **Proverbs - A Teacher’s Guide** - # 9.

In order for any progress to be made as we learn the real meaning of being Christians, we must have respect and even reverence for God. Without these, little progress is possible. God is simply stating a fact about the way the human mind works. So if we really want to learn something about Him, we must be prepared to respect Him and be willing to at least try to do what He asks us to do. Furthermore, when we come to understand what He is asking us to do, it always makes good sense. In fact, throughout eternity we will want to do what He wants us to do because it is right. Which of the ten commandments would you like to leave out? Do you wish it were okay to murder, steal, lie, dishonor your parents, dishonor God, commit adultery, or be perpetually covetous which is probably what leads people to do all those other sins. Would you want God to allow people who do those things to enter heaven and carry on their activities there? If not, then it only makes sense to do as Solomon suggests and respectfully follow God’s suggestions for our lives.

12. Would you agree with Solomon's conclusions? Are you happy with them? Who came to better conclusions—Solomon or Job? Did Solomon “say of God what is right?” (Compare Job 42:7,8)

Solomon’s conclusions about God seem to be what we might expect from a relative beginner. See #6 above. With all his wisdom shouldn’t Solomon have taught us great truths about God and His character and government?

Behavioral experts suggest that there are levels of maturity demonstrated by how we respond to issues. The basic level is the level of fear of punishment or hope of reward. This seems to be where Solomon was even at the end of his long life. The next level comes when we choose to do things because they are the accepted pattern of behavior among our peers. We look to the crowd for our morals. But it is possible to go beyond that and come to the level where people think things through and choose to do what is right because it is right. That is the level that God seems to want from us. See #9 above.

13. What does it say to you about God that He gave all that wisdom to Solomon, but did not take away his freedom even to misuse God's gifts?

Freedom is absolutely essential if we are to experience true love. See handout on “**Love**”. God knew what Solomon would do with his talents even before he was born. But God apparently felt that there were some important lessons that the rest of us could learn from Solomon’s experiences. Thus God used him in the way that we have recorded in Scripture. God wants to use each one of us! God does not limit Himself to using perfect saints. If He did, He wouldn’t get anything done here on planet earth unless He did it Himself or used angels! But God expects us to be able to see through Solomon’s problems and learn the lessons his writings convey.

14. What are we supposed to learn from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8? What are we to learn from Solomon’s words: “Everything that happens in this world happens at the time God chooses.” (3:1, *GNB*)

“¹There is a right time for everything:

² A time to be born;	A time to die;
A time to plant;	A time to harvest;
³ A time to kill;	A time to heal;
A time to destroy;	A time to rebuild;
⁴ A time to cry;	A time to laugh;
A time to grieve;	A time to dance;
⁵ A time for scattering stones;	A time for gathering stones;
A time to hug;	A time not to hug;
⁶ A time to find;	A time to lose;

A time for keeping;	A time for throwing away;
⁷ A time to tear;	A time to repair;
A time to be quiet;	A time to speak up;
⁸ A time for loving;	A time for hating;
A time for war;	A time for peace." (TLB)

Does this suggest that there is supposed to be some balance in our lives? We all want the good times! But we also experience the bad times. Does it help to recognize that there is a right time for both? But is there ever a right time for killing? War? Hating? Dying? None of this was a part of God's original plan. But now that we have become wicked, these things seem to be an inevitable part of life. Did God give Solomon this message because he needed it? He seemed to spend all of his time searching for happiness. Was God trying to tell him that even for wise and wealthy kings life goes on and has its "times" for everything?

15. Would you agree with Solomon's conclusions?

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Ecclesiastes 1:2

"There is nothing new under the sun." Ecclesiastes 1:9

"God has laid a miserable fate upon us." Ecclesiastes 1:13

"In much wisdom is much grief." Ecclesiastes 1:18

"To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven." Ecclesiastes 3:1

"Eat, drink, and be merry, it is God's gift." Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:13; 8:15

"Someone who is always thinking about happiness is a fool. A wise person thinks about death." Ec. 7:4

"There is no one on earth who does what is right all the time and never makes a mistake." Ec. 7:20

"²⁸I have looked for other answers but have found none. I found one man in a thousand that I could respect, but not one woman. ²⁹This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated." Ecclesiastes 7:28,29

The wife God gives you is your reward for all your earthly Ecclesiastes 9:9

"Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth." Ecclesiastes 12:1

"Of making many books there is no end." Ecclesiastes 12:12

"Fear God and keep His commandments." Ecclesiastes 12:13

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