

Explore the Bible Series for July 23: Our understanding of God's ways is limited

July 12, 2006

Posted: 7/12/06

Explore the Bible Series for July 23

Our understanding of God's ways is limited

- Ecclesiastes 1:1-3:22

By James Adair

Baptist University of the Americas, San Antonio

Like Job, Ecclesiastes is a book that challenges the traditional wisdom of its day. It questions the notion of a moral cause-and-effect universe, the idea that the righteous inevitably are rewarded and the wicked are punished.

However, while Job deals with the darker question of God's justice, or theodicy, Ecclesiastes addresses the practical question of what humans can know about God and God's ways and what the implications are for living our lives.





[For a printer-friendly version, click on the printer icon at bottom of page.](#)

The book of Ecclesiastes is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, because of references to the “son of David, king in Jerusalem” in 1:2, 12, and 2:9. However, most scholars believe these references are literary devices, much like Dante uses the character of Virgil to lead the narrator through the Inferno in the first portion of his Divine Comedy.

The language of the book is Hebrew, but the Aramaic and even Persian loanwords indicate it probably was composed during the period of Persian hegemony over Judah, perhaps in the 4th century B.C.

If this date is accurate, the problem addressed by the book comes into sharper focus. The Jews living in Judah during the Persian period lived relatively uneventful lives in comparison with the fortunes of their ancestors who lived during the numerous Assyrian and Babylonian incursions into the land.

Although they experienced peace with their overlords, they did not have political independence, nor any hopes of obtaining it, and this political situation probably led many people to experience a sort of despondency, a feeling that their destiny was out of their own control.

In addition, contact with the Persians led to developments in Jewish thought, for example, concerning ideas about God and the afterlife. It was a period of change, and traditional answers to the profound questions of life no longer satisfied everyone. It was in this setting that the book of Ecclesiastes was written.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

This introductory section sets the stage for the entire book. The author, or protagonist, of the book is identified with the Hebrew word Qoheleth, a word traditionally rendered “preacher,” or one who addresses the assembly. Some commentators suggest the word should be understood to mean “gatherer,” that is, one who gathers many things, such as wealth, wisdom and possessions. If the word means “gatherer,” allusions to Solomon are certainly applicable, since he was famous for his excesses in gathering many things—wisdom, women and wealth.

Ecclesiastes begins and ends (in 12:8) with the phrase, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The expression “vanity of vanities” is the Hebrew way of indicating the superlative, “the greatest vanity.” Vanity refers not to a narcissistic attachment to one’s appearance, as the word is often used today, but rather to the fleeting, ephemeral nature of life itself. As the author says, life proceeds, sometimes at great speed, but nothing really changes. Streams flow to the seas, but the seas are not full. The eyes take in images continually, but they never stop seeing because they are filled to capacity. Life goes on, but there is nothing new under the sun.

Such sentiments might reflect a kind of despondency, but this is merely the beginning of the author’s quest. If the world really is a continual cycle of events, which are repetitions of past events, how should we live our lives? This is the basic question of the book.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

The form of the book of Ecclesiastes is a reflection, a consideration of one’s life from the perspective of advanced years. The author says he has tried

several approaches to life in an attempt to find meaning, to get beyond the emptiness (vanity) that seems to characterize it.

His first attempt at finding meaning and happiness was through the pursuit of pleasure. He describes the accumulation of beauty, wealth, entertainment and women, yet at the end of the day, he discovered pleasure was devoid of real, lasting meaning. It was “vanity and chasing after the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

Since pleasure failed to prove worthy of his pursuits, he turned to wisdom. Wisdom undoubtedly has its benefits, he says, for its value is greater than either madness or folly, but in the end, the same fate awaits the wise as awaits the foolish. This arrangement didn't seem fair to the narrator, but since there was nothing he could do about it, he again despaired, finding the pursuit of wisdom also to be vanity.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Undoubtedly the best-known section of Ecclesiastes is the first part of the third chapter, which lists the times of life. This passage is often read at funerals, to remind mourners that death is another of the times of life to which we are all susceptible. (It was also made famous in song by The Byrds as an anti-war anthem.)

Contrary to its common use as a statement of comfort, the author's list of the times of life is an indication of the randomness of life, at least from a human perspective. Yes, there is a time to be born and a time to die, but humans are woefully ignorant of when those times arise. There is a time to

seek and a time to lose, but who knows which time it is, before it happens?

Verses 2-8 must be read in the context of the statement in 3:11, “God has put eternity in their hearts, yet they cannot discern the works of God from beginning to end.” The author says God has created us with a sense of the eternal in the core of our being. We can grasp the idea of God, but what do we really know about God and God’s works? We may think we know what God is up to, but do we really? People work hard all their lives, and we know God is at work as well, but what is the relationship between the two? As was the case with pleasure and wisdom, work seems to offer no lasting reward, nor does it shed light on the meaning of life.

The “preacher” will conclude his investigation of life before God in next week’s lesson, then he will begin to analyze the results of his investigation in passages to be covered in weeks to come.

Discussion questions

- Christians often make statements about God and God’s deeds, but how sure are we about the veracity of our statements? Is it possible other people of faith could view the same set of events and understand something entirely different about God?
- Of the three pursuits that the author discusses—pleasure, wisdom and work—which are the most commonly pursued today? What are the pros and cons about pursuing each of these goals?
- What goals do people today pursue in search of life’s meaning? Are significant differences in the goals pursued by people from different religious backgrounds? By people from different parts of the world? By people in different socioeconomic classes?

- How would you compare the statement in Ecclesiastes 1:18, “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow,” with Proverbs 4:7, “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight”? Is it possible to have too much wisdom?

>



News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.