



Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
 Ecclesiastes: Wisdom for Today
 A Time For Everything

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This morning we start a new series of messages in Ecclesiastes that I cannot wait to get into. Perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, I believe Ecclesiastes is completely relatable to 21st Century America – especially in a place like the Seattle area where we live. **Ecclesiastes could have been written yesterday for the people of Kirkland and Bellevue and Redmond and the rest of the Eastside and Seattle area.** It is a book of the Bible that examines and experiments with all that life has to offer – money, power, possessions, prestige, brokenness, injustices, death, and more. And, at least on the surface, it is skeptical and pessimistic toward an awful lot of life. It calls out ironies and injustices that we all see around us and which for many people keeps them from a relationship with God their Creator. Where much of the Bible is very confident and makes declarations about God, such as his sovereignty over life, his justice, mercy, and so forth... **Where Scripture tends to make positive statements about those things, Ecclesiastes tends to ask questions.** It is a big “question mark” in a book of periods and exclamation points.

So if you know someone who is a skeptic toward God, who is asking questions about God, or who wonders what the meaning of life is all about, or who is seeking to find purpose and fulfillment and satisfaction in pleasure or power or work...if you know someone who fits those kinds of descriptions, then Ecclesiastes and this is the series for them...or maybe that's you, and this series is for you. Even if you don't know someone like that, or if you've never felt any skepticism toward God or life...or never had any serious questions about God and life, I hope you will join with us each Sunday as we look at some of the key passages and themes from one of the most intriguing books of the Bible.

With that brief introduction, let's read today's passage, **Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.**

So there are a few things right off the bat that I want us to look at in order to understand Ecclesiastes as well as we possibly can. And the fact is: **There are a fair number of questions around Ecclesiastes, such as when was it**

written, who wrote it, and what is the author really trying to convey.

Some questions we can answer with a fair degree of certainty, but others we cannot. And even those questions that we can answer pretty solidly, that often then leads to other questions that we can't always answer. But I want to look at some of this together this morning so we can learn in a context of the faith community and be better prepared to live out our faith in the world. You may have encountered some of these things before; but if not I'd rather get this out in the open here in the faith community rather than pretend these questions and debates don't exist only to have them get raised in some other context.

The first thing to look at is the title – Ecclesiastes. It is a Greek title that has just carried straight through to Latin and then English, though Ecclesiastes was originally written in Hebrew, like 99% of the Old Testament originally was. It's a translation of the Hebrew title: Koholeth (Ko-HEL-eth). Now, to understand what Ecclesiastes means and how we got to this name, we need to look at the first verse, where as you just heard, we are introduced to a person who is simply identified as "The Teacher." Some translations might say "The Preacher." The Hebrew word here is Kohelet which is also the Hebrew title for Ecclesiastes. **The root word for Koheleth is "kahal." Kahal is a verb that means "to gather, or assemble together, or congregate together."** So the Kohelet is the one who leads or does the assembling of a group of people. That's the Hebrew.

Now, starting in the late 200's B.C., and finishing by 132 B.C., the Hebrew Bible – what we call the Old Testament – was translated from Hebrew to Greek. The Greek word that means "a gathering, or an assembly, of people" is the word ekklesia. We see it used in the New Testament over 100 times, and is oftentimes translated as "church" when used to describe a gathering of God's people. That's the Greek title, therefore, for this book. Ekklesia then gets essentially transliterated (or carried straight over) into Latin, which is the root of much of our English as well as you probably know. **So the title Ecclesiastes is an English transliteration of the Latin transliteration of the Greek translation of the root Hebrew word "kahal" which means "gathering" or "assembly."** How's that for a start to a sermon? The sermon text will be available online tomorrow, and in print in the lobby by Tuesday,

so you can re-read these opening paragraphs and really get your head around it if you so desire. The test will be next Sunday. ☺ What this means is that this writing is for those who are gathered together – in particular, those who are gathered together in God’s name, or to worship God, or to learn about and grow in relationship with God.

There’s more for us to take away from this. Koholeth is not a person’s name or official title – like Queen or President or Pastor. **It’s the generic Hebrew word for “teacher” or “leader of a gathering of people.”** There isn’t really a perfect singular definition of this word. In some ways, “pastor” might be a good translation because it encompasses the teaching aspect but also the shepherding and steering aspect that a pastor has of a congregation as well. Most common in our English Bibles is Teacher.

This title here is perhaps a pseudonym for the author. The author is never identified. The closest we get is in the first verse where it says the teacher is a Son of David, king in Jerusalem. Many have therefore presumed this was Solomon: He was King of Israel for some 40 years; He was a son of David (though that was a phrase that applied to many, including Jesus over 900 years after David); He had great wealth which the author of Ecclesiastes says he has; Solomon was known for his wisdom – and Ecclesiastes is a kind of wisdom literature, highly philosophical in its content. **So many people have assumed that the author is the teacher, and that this teacher and author is King Solomon.** Both of those conclusions are debated in scholarly circles – including many Biblically conservative circles. And I think this is important for you to know before I continue on: that even in theological circles that are conservative and hold Scripture as the Word of God, believe the Bible is our rule for life and the primary way to know who God is, who believe that Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life as he claims...even in those historically orthodox theological circles – and in which I would include myself – most people (not all) have come to the conclusion that it is quite doubtful that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. Some continue to believe Solomon was the author, but most have come to a different conclusion.

If Solomon *did* write it, then it was written sometime in the 900’s B.C., when he lived. And probably near the end of his life, which was in 931 B.C.

And there is a lot in Ecclesiastes that fits what we know about Solomon, as I already mentioned – his wealth, his building projects, his acclaimed wisdom, claim to being a king and son of David, and so forth.

But there are also some things in the text that don't mesh with Solomon as the author. **For instance, the Hebrew of the book is different than Hebrew from that we know comes from the 900's B.C, or there-about, such as the Psalms.** It has things in common with Scripture that was written during or after the Exile in the 500's to early 400's B.C., for instance, such as Esther and Nehemiah; There are vocabulary words that appear only in those books and in Ecclesiastes – some of which are Aramaic words that show influence of a foreign culture, and you just don't see that in earlier Hebrew writing. There are grammatical structures that are different than found in earlier Hebrew, and they match structures that are seen only in parts of Scripture that we know were written during or after the exile.

One Biblical commentator says that if you're going to contend that Solomon wrote this, you have to believe that it's possible for something written in English in the 1700's using the English of today – words like “internet” and “automobile” and inserting “like” or “dude” into every other sentence.

Another strike against Solomon as the author is some of the content in Ecclesiastes. Let me highlight three examples:

- **The first is in Ecclesiastes 1:12, where we read, “I, Koheleth, was king over Jerusalem.”** The past-tense (“was”) implies that this is written after his rule as king ended: it's clearly “was” – past-tense. The problem with saying Solomon wrote this is that Solomon's reign as king ended when he died; Scripture is clear on that point. So there wasn't ever a time that he was alive and could reflect on his time when he *was formerly* king.
- **Second, in Ecclesiastes 1:16, the author writes, “I have increased in wisdom over anyone who ruled over Jerusalem (symbolic for the nation of Israel) before me.”** If Solomon wrote this, then this is an odd statement, considering that there were only two kings prior to Solomon – David and Saul. And keep in mind that Saul wasn't considered very wise and is kind of discounted as the first king because he wasn't very

good. So in many ways, he's only saying he's wiser than one king: David. The governing structure before they had kings was such that anyone before wouldn't really have been considered to have "ruled over Jerusalem." So this is not likely a statement that is intended to go all the way back to, say, Moses, and I haven't read anything that tries to argue something like that. So that leaves, at *most*, two kings prior to Solomon, which if that's the case it seems odd for him to say he'd increased in wisdom over all those who'd ruled over Israel before.

- **Third, Ecclesiastes 5:8-9 are what we might call "protest verses" against the king, and other government officials, in particular against the financial profit of the king and those other officials as people paid taxes.** It would be odd – maybe not inconceivable, but odd – for the king to write words that complain about the wealth of the king, especially since the king had the power to make changes to the system. If he thought he/others benefited too much and should allow people to keep more of their hard earned money, and that the labor should be easier on them, and so forth, then all he had to do was declare the necessary changes.

So who wrote Ecclesiastes and when it was written is really pretty uncertain – though it was likely after the exile, which at the earliest would put it in the mid-400's B.C., and a lot of scholars would say it was more likely to be 100 years or so after even that.

Now throughout Ecclesiastes there are some repeated themes and words. One of them we see here this morning: **"Meaningless! Meaningless! ...Everything is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).** This word is "hevel" and most literally, it means vapor or mist. "Vapor, vapor...everything is vapor" it could be translated. Have you ever tried to catch smoke from a campfire with your hands? I can't say that I have, but I've sat around enough campfires to know the futility of it. That's what's being communicated here. "Meaningless" is in the ballpark...but in some ways kind of overstates things. "Puzzling" or "mysterious" might be better: "Puzzling, puzzling...everything is puzzling."

This is a very fitting opening to Ecclesiastes, because Ecclesiastes itself is puzzling, which really makes it a monkey-wrench thrown into Scripture.

It doesn't deny the theology or claims of the Bible, but it does raise a lot of questions, and has a certain degree of tension with the rest of Scripture. It has tension – in fact, contradictions – even within itself. For instance: is life better than death or is death better than life? It states both. Is wealth and material goods a waste of time or should we eat, drink, and be merry and enjoy wealth and material goods? Again, it states both.

And that is why Ecclesiastes is for many people one of their favorite books of the Bible...and why it is also one of the least read and least understood. When the author opens up with “everything is hevel” – vapor, mist, puzzling, mysterious – it may be a comment on what he's observed in the world and in the context of a relationship with God, but it describes Ecclesiastes, too: *It is a mystery, a puzzle. Ecclesiastes is like a vapor, like campfire smoke – you can't pin it down or put it in a box, wrap it up and put a bow on it. It defies being cornered.*

So Ecclesiastes is a reminder to us about God that is not given as clearly or as extensively in any other book of the Bible: That God's ways are not our ways; that God is a “hevel:” a mystery, a puzzle. Yes, God has revealed himself to us from creation to the cross to the empty tomb. God has shown us his character and has given us the way to eternal life. But can you *really* get your mind around a God who has done all this?

Just this week at the men's coffee and donut time on Thursday morning we were discussing the origins of the universe, and the Bible, and so forth. (You'd be amazed what some guys standing in a church kitchen drinking coffee and eating donuts will talk about.) And someone mentioned the scientific theory of the Big Bang and how there are some people who believe that the Universe started that way, and without any divine intervention; That it's all just a cosmic accident. And my response to that is this: that's like dropping a stick of dynamite into a can of paint, and the resulting paint spray coming out on a piece of canvas as the Mona Lisa. That would NEVER happen – even a monochromatic version of the Mona Lisa is utterly inconceivable. Similarly, the Universe is too well-ordered to have been a product of chaos and random chance. God has to have been involved. The point here is this: There are still debates about the Mona Lisa: Is she smiling,

or not? Why doesn't she have eyebrows? Who is she? The Mona Lisa is a puzzle, it's a mystery, and yet we think God isn't? Ecclesiastes reminds us that God is a mystery. In fact, in Ecclesiastes 3:11 the author writes that we humans "can not fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

And if you'd like to explore more of who this God is and what it means to be in relationship with Him...if you want to look into more of the questions that the author raises and what the conclusion is of Koholeth, let's come together each week. **Do you have questions about God? You're welcome here.** Or do you know someone with questions about life and God? Bring them with you. We need not be afraid of our questions. God can handle them; Ecclesiastes is proof of that – it's loaded with questions and it's a part of God's Word to us! So let's join together over the next several weeks as the gathering – the ekklesia – of God's people here at Rose Hill, as we grow in faith together learning from Ecclesiastes. Let's pray...Amen.