

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today we introduce the book of ECCLESIASTES - PART 1. Due to the difficulty of explaining the various translations of the text of this book, the interpretation in this study is based on the Hebrew text.

### **POINT 1. THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**

#### **First. The name of the book.**

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the book is called "Qohelet", and in the Greek Old Testament it is called "Ecclesiastes". It is not clear how the word should be translated. The word is derived from words that mean *to assemble* and *the peoples' assembly*. The name is found several times in the book itself, for example in Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, where it is translated with the word *Teacher* or *Preacher*. It is clear that this person has something to do with an assembly. He may have been the person who called the assembly together, or who led the assembly or who actually spoke at the assembly. Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 says, "Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true." Therefore, the best is to regard him as the person who is so filled with wisdom that he actually speaks in the assembly in order to instruct others. Therefore, the name "Teacher of wisdom" or "Preacher of the Way" are very good translations.

#### **Second. The writer of the book.**

According to Jewish and Christian traditions, the writer was king Solomon himself. This conclusion was based on several facts. Ecclesiastes 1:1 says, "The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:12). Ecclesiastes 1:16 says, "I thought to myself, 'Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me.'" According to Ecclesiastes 2:4-9, he undertook great building projects, possessed many slaves and owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before him. He amassed gold and silver, a harem of women and became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before him. And Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 said that he was a teacher of wisdom to the people and a writer of many proverbs. The only person in the history of Israel that fits this description perfectly is king Solomon, the son of David.

However, there are other arguments, which show that it may not have been king Solomon. In the book of Proverbs, king Solomon's name is directly used, but in the book of Ecclesiastes the writer only calls himself by a pseudonym. While king Solomon only had two kings who ruled before him in Jerusalem, this writer gives the impression that there were many kings who ruled before him in Jerusalem. Although these kings could have been Gentile kings of Jerusalem, it is not likely that the writer was referring to them. In Ecclesiastes 8:2-3, the writer urges people to obey the king's command and not to leave the king's presence in a hurry. In Ecclesiastes 3:16, 4:1 and 5:8, the writer says that he saw injustice in the legal system, the rights of the poor were denied and they were oppressed. Ecclesiastes 10:6 even says that fools were appointed in high government positions. Some people feel that such social evils could not have happened when Solomon was king. However, the strongest argument that is used against Solomon being the writer is the fact that the Hebrew used in this book belongs to the period between the Babylonian exile and the establishment of the Old Testament Canon. It uses the same kind of Hebrew that is used in the books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and the later Jewish writings.

If that is the case, then why does the writer speak as if he is king Solomon? This is not deliberate deceit, but rather a form of literature in the east, namely, to use the example of a very well known person to teach truth. The writer puts his teaching in the mouth of Solomon, because king Solomon was the best known example in history of a wise, wealthy and powerful king. It seems that the writer introduces king Solomon as speaking from the ancient past, because Solomon would undoubtedly have been the king who discovered all this wisdom.

It is not really important who actually wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, king Solomon or another unknown wise Teacher. The important thing to remember is that the real Author of the book of Ecclesiastes is the Spirit of God, and therefore it does not matter which human instrument he used to write this book.

#### **Third. The time and place the book was written.**

If king Solomon himself wrote the book, it must have been written before 932 B.C. But because of the kind of Hebrew language used, the writer was more likely another unknown wise teacher or preacher after the Babylonian exile. Because the same kind of social evils as described in the book of Ecclesiastes existed among the Jews during the last period under Persian rule, the book was most probably written before 333 B.C.

#### **Fourth. The place of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Canon.**

The Hebrew Canon consists of three parts, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Writings consisted of three parts. The first part consisted of the books Psalms, Proverbs and Job. The second part consisted of five books that were read during five Jewish festivals: Song of Songs was read during Passover. Ruth was read during Pentecost. Lamentations was read during the Commemoration of the destruction of the temple of Solomon. Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast of Tabernacles. And Esther was read during the Purim festival. The third part consisted of the books of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah and Chronicles. We follow the Greek translation and Canon, which placed the book of Ecclesiastes within the group of five Poetical books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

#### **Fifth. The use of the book of Ecclesiastes in the New Testament.**

There is not a single quotation from the book of Ecclesiastes in the New Testament. This is also true of other Old Testament books, like Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah. But this does not mean that the New Testament writers did not know or read Ecclesiastes or these other Old Testament books.

Ecclesiastes 2:4 and 18 say, "I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ... I hated all the things I have toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me." Compare these with the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21.

Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." Compare this with Matthew 6:7. "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

Ecclesiastes 7:9 says, "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools." Compare this with James 1:19. "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Ecclesiastes 7:18 says, "The man who fears God will avoid all extremes." Compare this with Matthew 23:23. "Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices - mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness."

Ecclesiastes 12:14 says, "God will bring every hidden deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." Compare this with Romans 2:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. "God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ. ... We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

#### **POINT 2. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**

The theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is the following: "**Finding the lasting significance of all man's toil here on earth is futility.**"

The book focuses on the meaninglessness of life, work and toil without God. This theme is also mentioned by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:20, when he said, "The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it."

The book of Ecclesiastes begins and ends with the words "Meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (1:2 and 12:8). A better translation would say, "Everything is vanity or futility." The same theme occurs in several places in the book, for example, in 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." Throughout the book, the writer describes the hard work and toiling of man in various areas of life, and then ends with the remark that all that hard work and toiling is *meaningless*. In Ecclesiastes 1:3, he says, "What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?" But the writer's intention is not to judge life on earth negatively. In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, he says, "Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." The real purpose of the writer is to preach the meaninglessness of things that do not have eternal value, in order to cause people to seek the things that do have eternal value. Thus, the book of Ecclesiastes is also a part of the gospel, a part of the good news that Christians must preach. The human heart always longs for that which can permanently satisfy. But only when people realise the insignificance and the lack of value of all their earthly toil, accomplishments and possessions, will they seek after that which is eternal and imperishable. Only Jesus Christ can give eternal and imperishable life and satisfaction to the human heart!

#### **POINT 3. THE DIVISION AND A SHORT SUMMARY OF ECCLESIASTES**

The book of Ecclesiastes may be divided into four parts: The introduction to the book in chapter 1, the development of the argument in chapters 2 to 10, the practical conclusions in chapter 11:1 to 12:7, and finally the conclusion of the whole book in chapter 12:8-14. This point will be completed next week in part 2.

## **First. The introduction of the book.**

### **Chapter 1:1-11. Introducing the question.**

The big question of the Teacher is, "What is the advantage, what is the essential or enduring value, what is the lasting significance (meaning) of man's work (labour, toil) on earth (3)?" Many things have happened and are happening *under the sun*, that is, here on earth. Throughout the book, the teacher is speaking from the perspective of man's work and activities under the sun, that is, here on earth. Generations of people come and go. The cycles of nature come and go. At the apparent changes in generations of people and in the cycles of nature are nevertheless happening again and again. Although there is continuous activity among people and nature, it does not produce anything lasting (3-8). Everything that has happened before will happen again, and everything that has been done before will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun (9). All human toil is just wearisome. Therefore, there is no enduring value or lasting significance in any human toil on earth (3).

### **Chapter 1:12-18. Introducing the theme.**

The theme is the following: "Finding the lasting significance of all man's toil here on earth is futility." All man's toil under the sun to find wisdom, that is, to find an answer to the above question, is futility. The Teacher devoted himself to study and explore the wisdom in everything that is done under the sun (12). His discovery was that it is in vain that people try to find *wisdom*, that is, the essential or enduring value or the lasting significance in what they are doing here on earth. It is useless to try to discover a reasonable meaning in anything they do on earth. There is so much that is crooked and so much that is lacking in what people do, that it is impossible to discover wisdom or a reasonable meaning in anything people do (15). The seeking after wisdom causes only much sorrow and the gathering of knowledge causes only more grief (18). Therefore, the seeking after wisdom and knowledge is a chasing after the wind (17).

## **Second. The development of the argument.**

From chapter 2 to 10, the Teacher describes the various ways and means he has employed to try to discover the real meaning of man's endeavours in this life.

**Chapter 2:1-11.** Pleasures and possessions prove that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility. The Teacher tries to find an answer to the question of the meaningfulness of human toil by the way of pleasures and possessions (1-3). He did everything possible to make his experiment succeed. Great projects were undertaken, great quantities of wealth were amassed, and not a single desire or pleasure was denied (4-10). And yet, all pleasures and possessions were a disappointment, because in all the toil to gain these pleasures and possessions nothing worthwhile was found. What he had toiled to achieve was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. After so much toil under the sun, nothing was gained under the sun (11). There is no permanent value in human toil for pleasures and possessions. This is exactly what the apostle John says in 1 John 2:16-17, "For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away."

**Chapter 2:12-23.** Leaving all one's possessions to others prove that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility. The Teacher turns his thoughts to the matter of wisdom and folly. Although wisdom is better than folly, the wise person and the fool will both share the same fate and die. Everything the wise man had gained and achieved by tiresome toil he must leave to the one who comes after him, no matter whether that person is wise or foolish (12-16). Although he had employed the greatest wisdom to gain and achieve things, all his laborious work will prove in vain, because he must leave everything to another person. Therefore he hated all the things he had toiled for on earth (18).

**Chapter 2:24-3:15.** The inability to determine whether he will enjoy the fruit of his labours prove that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility. Only God determines whether a person will enjoy the fruit of his labour or not. If it pleases God, he gives to one wisdom, knowledge and happiness. But if it does not please him, he gives to another only tiresome toil in order to hand it over to another person. Man is completely dependent on God for everything he does and receives (2:24-26 and 3:12-13). God has sovereignly determined a time for everything. If it is not in the hand of man to dispose over the fruit of his labours, but in the hand of God to sovereignly decide what he gives to each in his own time, then there is no enduring value or lasting meaning in all man's tiresome toil on earth (1-8). The Teacher does not deny that toil according to God's decree is without value, but only that toil by itself is a burden and without value (9-10). Therefore, he acknowledges that God has made everything beautiful in the time God has determined for it and not in the time man determines for his activities. "God has set eternity in the heart of man" means that God has given man the desire to think about what happens in time, but he has not given to man the ability to fathom what God is doing from the beginning to the end of time. God's sovereign rule cannot be fathomed with the human reason. It can only be accepted by faith in God's revelation (11). Whatever God gives to each to eat, drink or enjoy in his work is purely a gift of God (12-13). God's sovereign plan and deeds will endure forever and no man can change that. Man is completely dependent on God, so that he will learn to fear and revere God (14). Whatever has happened will happen again, because it is God who determines what happens in all times in history (15).

Chapter 3:16-4:6. The injustice on earth proves that finding the lasting significance of all man's toil is futility. The Teacher saw wickedness in the place where justice should be spoken (3:16). He saw the oppression of the oppressors and the suffering of the oppressed and concluded that to be born in this life is a great sorrow (4:1-3). Although there comes a time when God will judge both the righteous and the wicked (17), for the present he temporarily allows injustice to happen in order to put people to the test and make them discover their own insignificance. Taken by themselves, that is, without God, people are equal to animals and die like animals (18-20). Although the spirit of man rises upward to God (12:7) and the spirit of animals goes down into the earth, there is no one who can observe this distinction. For people looking only from a human point of view, there is no difference between humans and animals (21). People cannot see God's future justice, but only live under the present injustice on earth. Therefore, there is no good reason for a man to enjoy his work (22). Because envy plays such a great role in man's labours and achievements, the seeking of an enduring value in human toil is in vain (4:4). It would be foolish not to work (5), but in all work there is hardship and pain (6). This is exactly what God says in Genesis 3:17-19, "Through painful toil you will eat of the cursed ground all the days of your life. ... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food ... until you return to the dust from which you were taken."

#### **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. During the next week, read Ecclesiastes 7-12. Next week we will introduce Ecclesiastes - part 2.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net)

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".