

# Editorial: Recovering the Message of Ecclesiastes for the Church Today

*Stephen J. Wellum*

**H**OW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND the book of Ecclesiastes? Should we view the book and its author as giving us God’s wisdom regarding the affairs of life, or does it reflect a skeptical, fatalistic, and unorthodox understanding of life “under the sun?” Is the message of the book constructive, realistic, and crucial for us to grasp if we are

truly going to live wisely as God’s people today? Or does the message of Ecclesiastes reflect a more pessimistic outlook and thus something we should learn from only negatively? Ever since the book was first written and included in the canon of Scripture, the people of God have wrestled with these very questions and it seems, as many of our articles demonstrate, that these questions are still debated vigorously today.

In fact, Ecclesiastes has received a mixed review throughout Jewish and Christian history. In the first century the Jewish community wrestled with

whether to retain the book in the canon, which obviously they voted in the affirmative. By the fourth century many Christian readers handled the perceived negative message of the book by interpreting it allegorically. Thus, for example, Ecclesiastes 2:24—“A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink”—was interpreted as a reference to the Lord’s Supper and not everyday human activities. Or, Ecclesiastes 4:12—“a cord of three strands is not quickly broken,”—was taken as a reference to the work of the Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even though there is nothing in the context which warrants such a reading. In the contemporary era, critical readings of the book not only discount Solomon as its author, they also interpret the author as a kind of skeptic, agnostic, even fatalist when it comes to discerning the purpose and meaning of life. One common way of overcoming the negative outlook of the book is to distinguish between what the Teacher (Heb. “Qoheleth”) says within the book from the overall author who frames the Teacher’s pessimistic outlook with a theological epilogue (12:9-14)

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that reminds the reader to “Fear God and keep his commandments.”

The problem, however, with interpreting Ecclesiastes in this negative way is twofold. First, it does not do justice to the fact that the people of God throughout the ages have recognized Ecclesiastes as Scripture, and more importantly, that God in his providence has led his people to put it in the canon. Given this fact, it is better to conclude that Ecclesiastes as *Scripture* has much to teach; we must then work harder on discerning its message without resorting to allegory or viewing it in a disparaging manner. Second, a careful reading of Ecclesiastes does not warrant the negative treatment it has received. In regard to this latter point, two further observations need to be made.

First, it is crucial to interpret rightly the word, *hebel*, or what has been variously translated, “vanity” (ESV, NRSV, NASB), “futility” (HCSB), and “meaninglessness” (NIV, NLT). As a number of our articles contend, these common ways of translating *hebel* are not helpful. Instead, a better translation is that of “vapor” which conveys a number of nuances depending upon the context, but it is clear that *hebel* does *not* teach that the author views life as mere vanity and futility. In the use of *hebel*, the Teacher is *not* affirming the meaninglessness of life; instead he is affirming that life lived under God’s providential rule *in a fallen, sin-cursed world* is rarely understandable to us and hence incredibly elusive and often enigmatic, hence the need to trust the Lord and to walk before him obediently. This is certainly an important point to consider.

In other words, life lived “under heaven” (1:13, 2:3; 3:1), “on earth” (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2; 12:7), and more commonly, “under the sun” (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, etc.), is *not* simply speaking of the limitations of the Teacher’s secular observations; it is speaking of how one attempts to understand and live life in a fallen, abnormal world, as God’s creature, who is not given an exhaustive revelation of God’s plan and purposes and who, in the end, must give an account to the Judge of all the earth (Gen 18:25). Precisely because we are creatures and not the Creator, and we live in this sin-cursed world

reserved for judgment, life is often inscrutable to us. Even for believers who have uniquely experienced God’s saving grace, we are not exempt from the “vapor” of life since we too live on this side of eternity. Sin and all of its effects upon the created order, including death, still affect us until Christ returns. We too experience simultaneously the joys of God’s good gifts, the effects of sin’s curse in our lives, and the truth that we do not know it all, especially in regard to God’s providential ways which are often inscrutable. Whether we like it or not, this is simply a fact of life and Ecclesiastes more than any other canonical book not only reminds us of this truth, it also encourages us to trust, know, and reverentially fear God.

Second, it is also important to remember that Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. The purpose of this genre is to teach us how to live life skillfully as godly men and women. Its purpose is not to depress us; rather it intends to teach us how to live for his glory in the toughness of life. It teaches us to view everything “in light of eternity” (*sub specie aeternitatis*) and to be circumspect about our lives. It reminds us how easily and foolishly we can become idolaters by treating our lives, careers, wealth, and pleasure as ends in themselves. Life “under the sun” is coming to an end; we will all stand before God’s judgment throne no matter who we are. As such, we must learn to fear God, walk humbly with him, and grasp the things of this life very loosely. Furthermore, especially when we place Ecclesiastes in the larger storyline of Scripture, i.e., in light of the coming of Christ and his redemptive work, the lessons that Ecclesiastes teaches us must be applied in a greater way, as we learn anew to enjoy our lives, to work hard as God’s gift to us, but also to realize that it is only what is done for Christ which ultimately lasts.

The vitally important message of Ecclesiastes must be recovered for the church today, even with greater urgency now that Christ has come. May this issue of *SBJT* in some small way enable us to do this, for the glory of Christ and the good of his church.