

Ecclesiastes - Life under the Son ::

Preaching wisdom literature is fraught with difficulties... unless you follow this 6 part outline on Ecclesiastes by CRAIG TUCKER!

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The Strategy of the Book

Ecclesiastes is a book with a strategy – and that’s probably it’s most unique and interesting aspect. The writer clearly thinks that to know God and serve him is the point of life. However, he writes from “concealed assumptions”. To demonstrate the veracity of this assertion he looks at the alternatives. He looks at life without God in the picture (life “under the sun”) to see if you can make sense of life. He examines “enjoying yourself” as the end of life, “accumulating wisdom”, etc. In each case his conclusions are fairly bleak. This “experiment” makes for a head to head clash between worldly ways of viewing life and God’s perspective. Only at the end of the book, when he has pursued the alternatives and found them wanting, does he present his own conclusion.

By and large, this approach means Ecclesiastes has a despairing, wrist slashing air to it. It can also make it a risky book to proof text from (I haven’t seen many posters lately that quote Eccl 9:9.) The “time poem” in Eccl 3 is often quoted out of context as a comforting “every cloud has a silver lining” piece. In the context of the book it has a definite despairing edge – there is a grinding, relentlessness about time, a frustrating helplessness. However, sometimes without warning the Teacher will forget himself and lapse into his real position, dropping a genuine piece of wisdom. As an example, have a look at Eccl 2:24-26 and decide for yourself.

Why Preach on Ecclesiastes?

The commentaries tend to deal with Ecclesiastes as an esoteric, theoretical philosophical treatise. But the Teacher’s approach is much more earthy. In addressing the question “What is life about?”, he’s not so much asking “what is true or noble or the greater good?” as the question “what works?...what is satisfying?”. This makes for lots of connections along the way with the real world. Ecclesiastes is a great book to get people thinking about what life’s about. There is lots of opportunity for practical application. At Western Blacktown it had people stopping and assessing their lives in big and significant ways.

Structure of the Book

Every book on Ecclesiastes has a radically different theory on how to break the book up, and they all contradict each other. There is clearly an Introduction (1:1) and a Conclusion (12:9-14). Beyond that the Teacher will move from one theme to another and then back to the first – in a way that thwarts a neat preaching series break-down of the book. I worked through the book, in a semi-sequential – semi-thematic way. There is a major refrain “Meaningless! Meaningless” and a minor refrain “Eat, drink, enjoy life” that appear through the book – while I think it is helpful to study where these refrains appear, I don’t think they help in identifying an overall structure.

In my opinion, there is deliberately no formal structure to the book. This gives it a wandering, aimless, meandering “hard to get hold of” feel, which adds to the meaningless, purposeless theme of

the Teacher's observations on life. It also gives it a "thinking out loud" rambling effect, of someone searching for something, and not even sure what they are looking for.

Who Wrote the Book?

"The Teacher" is the speaker for most of the material, but the book seems to have been put together by an editor. (The epilogue in Eccl 12 is clearly not written by the Teacher.)

I don't think the Teacher is Solomon, despite 1:1, 1:12, and 2:7. It seems to me, that in the first two chapters the Teacher is play acting in the guise of Solomon. It is part of his experiment. In the end, in preaching, I spoke of "the Teacher" as the one speaking. And left the rest in my study.

Perhaps adopting the persona of Solomon is actually a critique of Solomon. There is not room to expand much on this idea here (wait for my PhD dissertation). But let me pose the question: Is the end of Solomon's life a classic example of what Ecclesiastes analyses and finds wanting? ...the person who seeks to live wisely and well, but forgets about God. Eccl 2 appears to critique Solomon and his pursuit of pleasure (see especially 2:8 and 2:11). Likewise in Eccl 1:12-18, in the guise of King Solomon, wisdom is pursued, but even wisdom disconnected from God offers no clues to the point of life. Is this a savage critique of the king who for in his wealth and wisdom forgot that "to fear God and keep his commandments" is the whole duty of man? Its also interesting that in Eccl 1:1-11 the writer despairs that "seeing order in the world, does not enable you to make sense of life". Yet Solomon is known for a style of wisdom that studied the ordering of the world in great detail (see 1 Kings).

Drawbacks and Pitfalls

If you have a tendency to philosophise, be careful. It would be easy with Ecclesiastes to be too esoteric and bore everyone. But with a little bit of work, its easy to make Ecclesiastes "stick" in very practical ways in our lives.

Because the strategy of the writer is so different from that of other biblical books, I found myself needing to explain quickly each week, (for the sake of the newcomer, and forgetful old-comer) all the stuff on what "under the sun means...", "the real conclusion is at the end of the book", etc. Toward the end of a series, its hard to say the same thing every week, in a way that's fresh. (One way round this, is to start one week with a quiz – Minties or equivalent for prizes – and recap that way.)

Resources

Most commentaries on Ecclesiastes are esoteric and not very useful for the preacher.

Derek Kidner, "Ecclesiastes" in the BST series (subtitled "A time to mourn, a time to dance") is a must. Brilliant. I didn't always agree, but I found it thought provoking and insightful.

The relevant chapter in *The Faith of Israel* by Bill Dumbrell is a must for obtaining an overall grasp of the book. Likewise, the chapter in Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Wisdom* is useful and more detailed, although I found myself agreeing more with Dumbrell than Goldsworthy. John Davies' *Ecclesiastes Bible Probe* is good for what it is (basically a Bible study book). I plundered it for many of my discussion questions. Takes a slightly different line on the writer's approach, sees more "genuine wisdom" scattered throughout the book, but makes good links to the New Testament. Eaton's Tyndale commentary is a good back up for difficult verses (or where Kidner gets a little

carried away), but generally uninspiring (The busy pastor preparing on Saturday night could afford to ignore it).

Talk Outlines

Talk 1 The Meaning of Meaninglessness

Eccl 1:1-11

Key Idea:

What is Life About? The Teacher wants to push us to ponder for ourselves the big questions in life. What are you living for? Why do you get up in the morning and stagger down the hallway to the shower? But as the Teacher looks at “life under the sun” he sees patterns and principles in nature and in life, but no real answers. Its like chasing after the wind. In fact, the world and our lives have a cyclic futility about them.

In the end, Ecclesiastes is an evangelistic book – a logical and passionate plea, to see the stupidity of trying to make life work without God. To give up the idea that you can make good sense of this world without knowing its creator. But also, its a book of challenge for Christians as well. What is your heart set on? What is your life about?

Thinking about the big questions

The Treadmill of Life

The Teacher looks at “under the sun”

(life withoutin the picture)

He sees:

...a meaningless world

...life as a daily grind

...nothing new

A Taste of the End

(Looking ahead at the whole of the book)

Talk 2 – The Pointlessness of Possessions

Eccl 1:12-2:26

Key Idea:

The Teacher embarks on a series of “experiments” to see if various lifestyles are worth living. Each time, he finds that for all its “rewards” it is ultimately unsatisfying and does not answer the question of what life is about. He concludes that the best thing to do is not worry about any ‘ultimate answer’ and to simply “eat, drink and enjoy life”. He also sees that the ability to enjoy life is a gift from God.

The teacher looks at life “under the sun” to see what is worth living for...

Pleasure

Work Achievements

Wisdom

Light at the end of the tunnel...

2:24-25 Enjoying life now is a gift from God

Talk 3 – The Tyranny of Time

Eccl 3

Key Idea:

Our attitudes to time. The “time poem” in 3:1-8 in context is not about the balance and order of life, but has a theme of despair – there is a grinding, relentlessness about time, a frustrating helplessness. It acts upon us as it chooses, we have no say in the “times” of our lives. As well, we chafe at our mortality all the more because God has placed “eternity in our hearts” – we sense there must be a bigger picture to life than we can see, but it is God and not us, who knows the end from the beginning.

The March of Time (Eccl 3:1-10)

A Timeless Creator & his Timebound Creatures (Eccl 3:11-21)

God controls the events in our lives.

“He has set eternity in our hearts”

the dilemma of death (3:11-21)

the wait for justice (3:16-17)

Some Timely Conclusions

Trusting the one who rules over time.

Being eternally minded

Talk 4 – Climbing the Ladder to Nowhere

Eccl 4-6

Key Idea:

The Teacher looks at our motives and sees that the world is driven by envy and ambition (4:4). But ambition destroys relationships (4:7-12). And when you get to the top, there is nothing there anyway, success simply brings more cares and trouble with none of the rewards we were led to expect. When we turn to the NT (Mk 10) Jesus agrees the world is driven by selfish ambition to get to the top, and challenges his disciples to follow him in making it their ambition to serve others.

The Stupidity of Careers

Buying a lemon...

Climbing the Ladder

The things that drive us (Eccl 4:4)

Ambitions & relationships (Eccl 4:7-12)

When you get to the top (Eccl 5:10-17)

A growing despair as the Teacher looks at

“life under the sun” (5:18, 6:12)

Where Does God Fit In? (Eccl 5:1-7)

Listen...rather than speak.

Stand in awe of God.

Talk 5 – Only Fools Miss the House of Mourning Eccl 7-9

Key Idea:

As he seeks to make sense of life, the Teacher touches on the subject of death in almost every chapter. In 7:2 he tells us, it's the fool who has no time to contemplate death, and the wise man who is in the house of mourning. He sees that death, more than anything else, makes life meaningless and empty. It mocks the person who seeks to live a good life. In despairing tones, he concludes that we might as well enjoy what we can in life, while we can.

When we turn to 1 Cor 15, we see Paul considering the same advice, “Let us eat, and drink for tomorrow we die”. But for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus overturns the Teacher's conclusion. Death is better news or worse news, than the meaningless zero the Teacher saw: it either means eternal punishment, or eternal life. The resurrection means life is not about eating, drinking and seeking comfort, but an urgency to share the gospel. The last verse of 1 Cor 15 is the punchline, in light of the resurrection, life is not meaningless (vanity), but our labour in the Lord, is not in vain.

The Value of Death

Missing the house of mourning

”...The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.” Eccl 7:2

The destiny of everyone (Eccl 9:1-10)

Death claims everyone

Nothing is worse than death!

So, eat and drink and enjoy life...

How Jesus makes a difference (1 Cor 15)

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain” 1Cor 15:58

Talk 6 – Life Under the Sun

Eccl 11-12

Key Idea:

At the very end of the book, the Teacher concludes that life is about knowing God and serving him. But in the final two chapters, as the Teacher comes into the home straight, he begins to give positive advice for those who live in God's world. We should be bold and make the most of life ("cast your bread upon the water" is a merchant's term for taking risks and grasping opportunities). We should seek to enjoy life. In a moving and pessimistic portrait of old age (12:1-8) he urges us to be mindful of the shortness of life, and make the most of it for "remembering" (ie. serving and honouring) God.

Meaningful Living

The Conclusion of the Matter:(Eccl 12:12-13)

..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.

1. Be Bold (Eccl 11:1-6)
2. Be Joyful (Eccl 11:7-10)
3. Be Godly (Eccl 12:1-8)

Craig Tucker was the pastor of Western Blacktown Presbyterian Church, when this was written. A parish which boasts a total of seven McDonalds restaurants.