

ECCLESIASTES 1–3; 11–12

Ecclesiastes 1

1:1

Ecclesiastes is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Koheleth*, which means “preacher or member of an assembly.” Accordingly, the full name of this book in the King James Version is “Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher.” Scholars are not absolutely certain who wrote Ecclesiastes and know only that the book is “the words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (verse 1). The fact that the Preacher was the son of King David leads us to believe that the Preacher was Solomon. There are other indications in Ecclesiastes that the writer was Solomon. Ecclesiastes 1:12 says, “I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Solomon was the third king of Israel). Verse 16 says, “My heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” This is further evidence for Solomon’s being the Preacher since scholars acknowledge that Solomon was incredibly wise.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

1:2–3

A key to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes is the word *vanity*, which was used five times in some form or another in verse 2. It was used over thirty times in the entire book. The word, as used by the Preacher, refers to life’s endeavors’ being futile, temporary, and fleeting. The Preacher reasoned that everything that we do “under the sun” (in other words, in this mortal life) is only momentary and transitory. Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, he cautioned his readers to not rely too much on pleasure, wealth, and knowledge as “all is vanity.” See Ecclesiastes 2:11, 17, and 26 for examples of the Preacher’s use of the word *vanity*.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

1:4–8

The Preacher relied on his worldly view of things to make his points. Someone who does not believe in God or in a life hereafter would perhaps make such statements as the Preacher made in these verses. With that kind of thinking, earthly life would probably be monotonous, give little satisfaction, and seem to have little purpose. However, because of the restoration of the gospel, we in our day have the blessing of understanding things beyond mortality. The gospel not only shows us a purpose to earthly life but also reveals to us an eternal plan. With that view and purpose in mind, life can give us great satisfaction, without the “vexation” that the Preacher felt and wrote about.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

1:9–11

The Preacher continued to describe a worldly person’s view of mortal life “under the sun.” To that person, everything seems to be repetitive; there is nothing new that has not already existed or been done. As we read these verses, we see the Preacher’s quest to find purpose and satisfaction in this mortal existence.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

1:12

As was mentioned in the commentary to Ecclesiastes 1:1, the Preacher is believed to have been Solomon. According to history, Solomon was undeniably a king over Israel; he succeeded his father, King David, to the throne.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

1:13–15

The Preacher continued to search for a purpose in mortality. He stated that he enthusiastically searched for the meaning of this mortal life “under heaven.” The Preacher acknowledged God in his pursuit of understanding and wisdom. In verse 13, he mentioned the “sore travail” that God has given us. “Sore travail” (painful and difficult trials) is what we all must experience in mortality. It is part of God’s plan. The Preacher, however, did not seem to recognize God’s plan. Therefore, to the Preacher, everything under the sun was “vanity and vexation of spirit.” To him, every earthly thing was “crooked,” suggesting everything was mysterious and unexplained. It was difficult for him to understand the meaning and purpose of things.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

1:16–18

The Preacher was a very wise man. He claimed to have had “great experience with wisdom and knowledge.” He also tried to understand wisdom better by pondering on the opposite of wisdom: “madness and folly.” This still led to “vexation of spirit,” grief, and sorrow, perhaps because he saw the calamities, misfortunes, and heartbreaks of life as a result of the unwise things that mortal people had done. His ponderings were leading him to an understanding of life’s purpose. Our own ponderings on the difficulties of life will also lead to the same: understanding, wisdom, and knowledge concerning the meaning of life.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

Ecclesiastes 2

2:1–3

The Preacher recognized the vanity of chasing after pleasure. It was foolishness to him. He came to that conclusion after examining and pondering the significant distinctions between acting foolishly and acting wisely. He depended on the strength of his own acquired wisdom to guide him in comprehending what was good and what was not good for God’s children while in mortality. We are reminded of Genesis 3:22, which reads, “And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.”

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

2:4–8

In his attempt to distinguish between things that were good and things that were bad, the Preacher acquired riches and a variety of possessions, all of which were suitable for a king.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

2:9–11

The Preacher was proud of his labors and of all his possessions. He initially found joy in those things. However, having used the wisdom that he had acquired, he considered the value of all his assets. In the end, he only found vanity and displeasure in such worldly things.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

2:12–16

The Preacher recognized his greatness as a king. Regardless of that, he still felt the need to examine whether he was being wise or foolish in his role as king. His musings led him to see that wisdom is more beneficial than foolishness. However, being wise was vanity to him because in the end, both the wise and the foolish die. He realized that immortality does not necessarily favor the wise. Furthermore, the Preacher perceived that the wise are just as much forgotten in the long term after their demise as are the fool-hearted. The Preacher considered everything in earthly life as futile.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

2:17

Because all seemed futile to the Preacher, he felt that his life was disappointing; he saw little purpose to it. All that he had accomplished through his labor and wisdom was, to him, fleeting. Again, we see reference to “under the sun,” meaning that he was looking at his life through a worldly view.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

2:18–23

The Preacher continued to speak of vanity and vexation. He was anguished over the fact that all his earthly labor would be futile, especially since the credit for his labor would possibly be acquired by his regal successor, who could either be “a wise man or a fool.”

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

2:24–26

The Preacher was not in total despair about worldly endeavors. From 2 Nephi 2:25 we read, “Men are, that they might have joy.” Joy comes from the pursuit of virtue and wisdom rather than the pursuit of worldly things. The Preacher recognized that there is good in righteous labors. God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those that do good. The sinner also has an opportunity to feel joy, but because of their evil deeds, they only receive sorrow, which is of no benefit: “This also is vanity and vexation of spirit” (verse 26).

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

Ecclesiastes 3

3:1–8

We often quote these verses. We know that God is a God of order (see 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40) and that He expects order from all of us. All events have their proper time and sequence, beginning and ending with birth and death. Between those two events in this natural world is a wide range of experiences to choose from. As we make choices, it is up to each of us to exercise our agency, to take control of the natural man or woman, and to bring about orderliness in all things.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

3:9–13

The Preacher observed that there is much “travail” and vanity in our labors, and he wondered what the purpose of it was. However, he also recognized that God has a purpose in everything. In God’s time, He will reveal to us the beauty of His works. If we open our eyes now, we can see much of that beauty. However, because of the limitations that God has given us (“He hath set the world in [our hearts], so that no man can find out the work that God maketh” [verse 11]), the natural man will not be able to comprehend all God’s works while in this mortal life.

As the Preacher acknowledged in Ecclesiastes 2:24, joy is a gift from God: “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.” Despite the fact that we cannot comprehend all God’s works, we should not be resentful. Instead, as Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 suggests, we should rejoice in the works of God that we do recognize and comprehend. We need to continue our own good works in this life, which will ultimately result in blessings from God.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

3:14–15

The Preacher briefly departed from his “under the sun” way of thinking and pondered God’s eternal influence in his life. We, too, should ponder what God has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for us. We should “fear” (revere), honor, and appreciate God for doing all things on our behalf.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

3:16–17

The Preacher returned to his worldly way of thinking. He saw the opposing forces of righteousness and wickedness in mortal life, and he understood that God would ultimately judge both the righteous and the wicked.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

3:18–22

The Preacher continued to ponder human vanity and destiny. He saw that humans are not more significant than animals, for all living creatures will die and return to dust from where they came. The Preacher acknowledged that man’s spirit will “go upward” (to heaven). See Ecclesiastes 12:7, in which the Preacher said, “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” Despite his affirmation that earthly life seemed to be essentially meaningless, he said that we should strive to at least enjoy this life.

In verse 21, the Preacher said that eventually the spirits of animals “goeth downward to the earth.” What the Preacher did not understand, but which was revealed in latter-day revelation, is that the spirits of animals will return to God. See Doctrine and Covenants 29:24: “For all old things shall pass away, and all things shall become new [in the resurrection] . . . both men and beasts.”

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

Ecclesiastes 11

11:1–4

In previous chapters of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher tended to be very pessimistic and cynical. In this chapter he expressed more hope and faith.

There are several interpretations of these verses. A common interpretation of verse 1 is found in modern-day expressions: “What goes around, comes around” and, “We reap what we sow.” There is a reward for every good deed. However, bad deeds also have their just reward.

Verse 2 can be interpreted to mean that we should go the extra mile in giving and doing, even if we do not know the outcome. That attitude can protect us from unforeseen disasters.

In verse 3, the Preacher understood that when we die we will remain what we became. We will be judged for our actions and thoughts up to that point. President Brigham Young said, “I do know that as we lie down [die], so judgment will find us.”¹

In verse 4, the Preacher advised us to not procrastinate our deeds because of fears. For example, if a farmer fears potential winds and a possible lack of rain and therefore does not plant his crops, he will never obtain a harvest. We need to be cautious as we live our lives; however, we should not be so overly cautious that we cannot accomplish anything.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

11:5–6

There are many things that we do not understand about life. God created us; He has blessed us with His miraculous works. We cannot fully understand and explain these things, but a lack of understanding of God’s works should not hinder us in setting worthwhile goals and in confidently working towards the future, even if we may not always know the outcome of our labors.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

11:7–8

We should rejoice in each new day. When rejoicing, we need to remember that evil and darkness can still disrupt the day. But that disruption is only temporary—a bright new day will follow.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

11:9–10

The Preacher encouraged youth to be happy, but at the same time to be careful as they will one day stand before God and account for their actions in mortal life.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

Ecclesiastes 12

12:1–7

At the end of chapter 11, the Preacher encouraged the youth to be happy. In this chapter, he continued with that wisdom and counseled youth to find pleasure in that stage of life—before old age takes over

¹ Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, UK: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–1886), 4:53.

(before “the years draw nigh”). The Preacher went on to give several analogies of being elderly: potentially senses would be dimmed (“darkened”), strong men would become bowed over, some would lose their teeth (“grinders”), opportunities would be lost (“doors shall be shut”), and so forth. The Preacher warned youth to find joy before it became too late because all people will eventually die (“goeth to his long home”).

In verse 6, the Preacher compared death to a broken bowl, pitcher, and cistern. All these objects hold water and when they break, water is spilled. Water is often seen as a symbol of life in the scriptures. For example, see 2 Samuel 14:14: “For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground.” The Preacher added that when we die, “then shall the dust return to the earth . . . and the spirit shall return to God.” After all his bitterness concerning the vanity of life’s labors that he had expressed in previous chapters of Ecclesiastes, at the end of the book, the Preacher acknowledged that our spirits would live on and return to God.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

12:8–12

In verse 8, the Preacher once again proclaimed that everything in mortality is temporary. Remember that at the beginning of Ecclesiastes the Preacher always spoke as someone “under the sun,” or as someone in this mortal life. However, the Preacher had been pondering life’s meaning. He had been studying, learning, and sensing the purpose of this mortality. He taught others what he had learned. He wrote much. He carefully chose his words and expressed them honestly (using “words of truth”). The Preacher’s words were wise and prodded his students to live lives of moral stability (“as [fastened] nails”).

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

12:13–14

Throughout the entire book of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher mostly wrote from the perspective of someone “under the sun.” He emphasized the vain, or temporary, nature of mortality. However, after much pondering, the Preacher eventually came to the conclusion that life would go beyond the grave. He expressed this in verse 7: “And the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” In these two verses, the Preacher closed the chapter by saying that we will all stand before God to give an accounting of our mortal lives. Therefore, our task in this mortal life is to joyfully and faithfully respect God and keep His commandments.

Source: Book of Ecclesiastes Minute by W. Breitenstein

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