

Ecclesiastes



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL

“With frequent references to modern and classical literature, O’Donnell illustrates the ever-present problems and dilemmas of life that Ecclesiastes deals with. But his fresh and relevant style never strays from the biblical text that he so artfully expounds. And he never leaves the various parts of Ecclesiastes alone until he has explored how they testify to the Christ in whom all the riches of wisdom and knowledge are found.”

—**Graeme Goldsworthy**, Former Lecturer in Old Testament and Biblical Theology, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

“Douglas O’Donnell’s new commentary is a delight to read. Although originally preached (in part) as sermons, this commentary is much more than a series of seventeen well-crafted sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes. These footnoted sermons are based on solid research and spiced with wonderful insights, good humor, striking metaphors, clarifying illustrations and quotations, smooth transitions to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and relevant applications. This commentary will serve preachers well for one or more series of sermons on Ecclesiastes. It will provide them with many sermon ideas, solid exegesis and applications, illustrations, and quotations from numerous books, songs, and movies. Above all, this commentary, with its God-centered, redemptive-historical approach, clearly shows how one can preach Christ from Ecclesiastes.”

—**Sidney Greidanus**, Professor Emeritus of Preaching, Calvin Theological Seminary

“This is a fine commentary because it represents the confluence of, first, a deft exegetical precision in dealing with the words and symmetries of wisdom literature, therefore providing the reader with an unusually rich, polychrome understanding of God’s glory amid the dark realities of earthly existence. Second, the book exhibits a masterly tracing of the exalted, Christ-infused, intercanonical connections that will aid the reader in focusing on Christ Jesus, the only answer to an empty life. Third, the author’s engaging style—packed with wide-ranging literary references (from the ancients to Woody Allen)—makes for superb reading as well as study. Certainly its resources will be a boon to all students. And fourth, the commentary’s application of the grand theme of how believers ought to live the brief span of their lives ‘under the sun’ will harrow and elevate the heart of every serious reader. This

book is a tonic for the soul. Doug O'Donnell's *Ecclesiastes* is a masterwork that will be read for generations to come. It deserves an honored place in the libraries of those who would preach and teach the Word."

—**R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church in Wheaton

"Ecclesiastes is a book for our time: its relentless examination of the source of meaning and relevance finds echoes in every facet of contemporary life and its restless pursuit of happiness. Douglas Sean O'Donnell's treatment of Ecclesiastes is both fresh and thorough. Resolutely committed to exposition, O'Donnell makes these sermons come to life and speak with clarity and conviction. Reading these chapters proves a rich and nourishing experience. A wise pastor and careful exegete takes you to the heart of the gospel in Ecclesiastes again and again. A wonderful achievement."

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Editorial Director, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

"O'Donnell is a gifted preacher and pastor who is passionate about Christ and the gospel. In this engaging exposition, he pastors us by introducing us to "Pastor Solomon" (the author of Ecclesiastes), and though him to Jesus Christ, the greatest pastor of all. He shows how the glorious gospel of Christ shines all the more brightly when set against the depressing backdrop of the book of Ecclesiastes."

—**Barry G. Webb**, Senior Research Fellow Emeritus in Old Testament, Moore College, Sydney, Australia

"Witty, insightful, and exceptionally well researched, Doug O'Donnell's new commentary is one that I enthusiastically recommend. If you're a preacher who is interested in communicating the truth of Ecclesiastes in a fresh way, this is a must-have volume for your library."

—**Scott A. Wenig**, Haddon Robinson Chair of Biblical Preaching, Denver Seminary

Ecclesiastes

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

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Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

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Ecclesiastes

DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL



P U B L I S H I N G

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To my three daughters—
Lily Ruth, Evelyn Grace, and Charlotte Elise.
May you always fear the Lord by enjoying his blessings.

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught

Series Introduction

in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

My original preface began: “My comments are slender and insignificant; but those who have nothing better or who, like me, were once led astray by false glosses can find here an opportunity in their wisdom to become better themselves and to find something better.” I then realized that Martin Luther had said precisely the same thing 480 years ago.¹ Alas! There is nothing new under the sun.

On a more serious note, I am thankful to the many excellent commentators who have gone before me and upon whose shoulders I stand. In some sense, the footnotes will show you whose work I found most stable and uplifting; in another sense, if I put a footnote to every thought I have gleaned from another, there would be more footnotes than pages—or, to borrow a Solomonic metaphor, more silver than stone.

The book of Ecclesiastes gets you to think. Have you thought much about death, work, wisdom, time, joy, and fearing God? If not, you will.

These sermons were originally (and in part) preached at New Covenant Church in Naperville, Illinois. I am grateful to the elders for their hearty approval of yet another series on an Old Testament wisdom book and the congregation for their persistent eagerness to hear Christ preached from *all* the Scriptures. I am also grateful for my longtime colleague in the ministry: Pastor Andrew Fulton. Without his steady support, constant encouragement, and prayerful protection, I wouldn’t be freed to study, pray, and preach. I am also grateful for my family. This book is dedicated to my three girls—Lily, Evelyn, and Charlotte. After dedicating books to my wife (Emily) and sons (Sean and Simeon), I have finally succumbed to my daughters’ constant plea,

1. Martin Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” in *Luther’s Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:5.

Preface

“Daddy, when are you going to dedicate a book to us?” (It was too hard to resist.) Yet this book, my three little ladies, is not merely dedicated to you out of feminine pressure or filial fairness. My sincere hope and prayer is that the sober and celebratory truths of Ecclesiastes would make you wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

I also hope this new commentary will be an encouragement to other young preachers to take up, read, study, *and preach* the tough texts of Scripture for the good of the church and the glory of God. Or, as Luther put it:

I hope that someone endowed with a more abundant spirit and more eminent gifts will come forward to expound and adorn this book as it deserves, to the praise of God and of His creatures. To Him be glory forever through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.²

2. Ibid., 15:6.



Ecclesiastes

ENJOYMENT EAST OF EDEN

1

THE *END* OF ECCLESIASTES: AN INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities!

All is vanity. (Eccl. 1:1–2)

How do we read the book of Ecclesiastes?

The first day of my Introduction to Philosophy class at Wheaton College, my professor, Dr. Mark Talbot, nonchalantly declared, “None of you know how to read.” The students, all of whom had scored well on exams in order to get into that college, had various expressions—from “how arrogant” to “I’m dropping this class”—written across their unimpressed faces. Yet most of us, by the end of the term, after we had read all the words, sentences, and paragraphs from classic books such as Plato’s *Republic*, Hume’s *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and Augustine’s *Confessions*, confessed our inability to *really* read.

Ecclesiastes is a tough read.¹ You know it’s a tough read when books that are supposed to help you read it (commentaries) contain sentences such

1. It is certainly true of Ecclesiastes, as Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 1.8 has it, that “all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.”

The End of Ecclesiastes: An Introduction

as: “This book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered,”² and “Two thousand years of interpretation . . . have utterly failed to solve the enigma,”³ and (my favorite) “Ecclesiastes is a lot like an octopus: just when you think you have all the tentacles under control—that is, you have understood the book—there is one waving about in the air!”⁴ And so while I could start this commentary on Ecclesiastes by saying something bold such as “None of you knows how to read it,” instead I will start more modestly. I will safely assume that we all need some help, and thus begin at the beginning of wisdom: in awe of God and in need of his divine assistance.

As I have asked for God’s wisdom and with a prayerful and long-suffering attitude studied the book, and as I now seek to guide you in our understanding and application of it, I believe the best way to read Ecclesiastes is as (1) God’s wisdom literature (2) with a unified message (3) that makes better sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.

GOD’S WISDOM LITERATURE

First, we must read Ecclesiastes as *God’s wisdom literature*. Note that the first word in that short summary is *God’s*. As Christians, we come to this book as believers who are convinced that Ecclesiastes, as peculiar and puzzling as it is at times, is rightly part of the canon of Scripture because it has been uniquely inspired by God.⁵ While it shares similarities with other wisdom literature of the world, including Jewish writings (e.g., Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon), it is unique among the wisdom books of the world in that it has Yahweh’s breath in and upon and around it. And because of this, it is living and active and can cut us to the core of who we are.

Second, it is wisdom literature. This is its genre. It is not an epistle (like Galatians), a lawbook (like Leviticus), or an apocalyptic revelation (like

2. Martin Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” in *Luther’s Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:7.

3. R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1989), 12.

4. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 13, summarized in Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 188. Gregory of Nyssa’s analogy of “wrestling in the gymnasium” is good, too! *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, ed. S. G. Hall (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 33.

5. See WCF 1.2 on the canon and 1.8 on inspiration.

Revelation). And as a book of wisdom, it shares characteristics found in Proverbs, Job, and the Song of Songs. There is a plethora of poetry. There are piles of parallelisms (synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and inverted), as well as many metaphors, similes, hyperboles, alliterations, assonances, and other wonderful wordplays. There might even be onomatopoeia. There are proverbs. There are short narratives with pointed, parable-like endings. There are practical admonitions. There are rhythmic-quality refrains. There are rhetorical questions. There are shared key terms, such as *wisdom*, *folly*, and *my son*. There are shared concepts, such as *the fear of God*. And as is true of much other biblical wisdom literature, it was written by or about or by *and* about Solomon, the Old Testament's ultimate wisdom sage (1 Kings 4:29–34).⁶

In the Christian canon, the order of the wisdom books is Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Proverbs begins: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (Prov. 1:1). Ecclesiastes is introduced with: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1) = Solomon? The Song starts out: “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (Song 1:1). Regarding Ecclesiastes, because Solomon wrote wisdom literature and was literally a “son of David” as well as a “king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1; see also 1:12), commentators before the nineteenth century thought Solomon was the author. Yet for various reasons (many legitimate ones),⁷ most scholars today shy away from Solomonic authorship.⁸ They claim that Ecclesiastes might have been written about Solomon (a fictional autobiography)⁹ or in the tradition of Solomon, but probably not by Solomon.

Whatever the truth (who can know for certain and who doesn't eventually get a headache arguing about authorship?), I will call “the Preacher” (as the ESV translates the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*) *Solomon*. I will call him

6. Cf. 1 Kings 3:12; 5:12; 1 Chron. 29:25; 2 Chron. 1:12.

7. For a helpful, short summary of the grounds for non-Solomonic authorship, see Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), x.

8. What Brevard Childs wrote over three decades ago still well summarizes the situation today: “There is an almost universal consensus, shared by extremely conservative scholars, that Solomon was not the author.” *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 582. But a growing number of conservative scholars now think Solomonic authorship probable (e.g., Walter Kaiser, Duane Garrett, Daniel Fredericks, James Bollhagen, and possibly Richard Schultz).

9. It might be that Ecclesiastes is a “royal autobiography,” that is, that “the person who calls himself Qoheleth pretends to be Solomon in order to argue that if Solomon cannot find satisfaction and meaning in life in these areas, no one can.” Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 7.

Solomon because I'm not completely convinced by the consensus of modern scholarship,¹⁰ and also because I'm sentimental when it comes to the opinions of the ancient church. Plus, *Solomon* is simpler to say than *Qoheleth*.

In fact, simple, down-to-earth preacher that I am, I will call him not only *Solomon* but also *Pastor Solomon*. I add the title *Pastor* because of the book's pastoral tone, motive, and message and also because the word *Qoheleth* is the Qal feminine singular participle of the verb *qāhal*, which means "to assemble." This verb was used of Solomon when he assembled God's people together for the temple consecration ceremony in 1 Kings 8:1 (cf. 2 Chron. 5:2). The implied setting for Solomon's speech here—the body of the book of Ecclesiastes itself—is that of an assembly or a church (*ekklesia* is the New Testament word for *church*).¹¹ This is why Phil Ryken writes that Qoheleth or the Assembler is "not so much a teacher in a classroom but more like a pastor in a church. He is preaching wisdom to a gathering of the people of God."¹² Precisely. So *Pastor Solomon* it is. But whoever the original author was (Pastor Solomon, King Qoheleth, Simon the Sage, Ephraim the Editor, or whatever we want to call him)—and whenever he wrote it (tenth century or third century B.C.)—his timeless message is what matters most. We turn to that message next.

A UNIFIED MESSAGE

The book of Ecclesiastes can be, and too often has been, read as a non-inspired, postexilic Jewish wisdom book that is as unorthodox as it is disjointed. I hold that Ecclesiastes should not be read that way. I find it unlikely, as some estimate, that an editor got hold of the raw material of what we now call *Ecclesiastes* and tried to clean up the contradictions and clear up the

10. For a critique of the consensus, see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 254–67; and Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 31–36.

11. The ancient Greek (LXX) rendering of *Qoheleth* is *ekklesiastēs*, from which we get, via the Vulgate (*Liber Ecclesiastes*), the English word for *church* (*ekklesia*). As Jerome notes, "Now the name 'Ecclesiastes' in the Greek language means 'one who assembles the gathering' (that is, the church)." *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller, Ancient Christian Writers 66 (New York: Newman, 2012), 33–34.

12. Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16.

confusions by adding a corrective verse here and there as well as tacking on an appropriate theological addendum at the end, and still in the end botched the whole project (i.e., that the canonical book remains slightly unorthodox and disjointed). Rather, the best way to read Ecclesiastes is as God’s wisdom literature *with a unified message*.¹³ For as we will see in our study of the whole book, there is persistent literary intention and a consistent theological argument to Ecclesiastes.

With that claim and clarification made, it is nevertheless true that if you look at all the separate parts of Ecclesiastes, the book is an enigma. It is confusing. What is meant by saying “the race is not to the swift” (Eccl. 9:11) or by the image “the grinders cease because they are few” (12:3)? Ecclesiastes is also filled with seeming contradictions. How does the maxim “For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?” (6:12) fit with the refrainlike call to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in our work? And how does the observation “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money” (5:10) blend with the claim that “money answers everything” (10:19)? Ecclesiastes is like a thousand-piece puzzle taken from the box, thrown on the floor, and kicked around by the kids. But if you discipline the children (sit them in time-out or lock them in some “box of shame,” to quote from the marvelous movie *Despicable Me*), quiet the house and your heart, start to lift the scattered pieces from the ground, lay them on a clean table, and slowly, humbly, and prayerfully (as one should always approach God and his Word) piece the pieces together, a clear picture emerges.

The obvious edge pieces are all filled with the unmistakable and undesirable word *vanity*. In Hebrew it is the word *hebel*, which is the same Hebrew spelling as the name of the first man to die, Abel (Gen. 4:8), and it is an example of an onomatopoeic word! As Daniel Fredericks notes: “One must aspirate twice with the initial he-sound, then again with the soft bet, pronounced as ‘-vel’. So the speaker illustrates what the nature of a breath is simply by saying the word.”¹⁴ This word is found thirty-eight times throughout the book, most prominently at the bookends—“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of

13. Since we do not know the prehistory of the book, Michael V. Fox’s proposal that we read Ecclesiastes as a literary whole makes good sense. “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83–106. Moreover, I agree with Garrett that the book is “seamlessly joined” because of “literary technique,” not later redactions. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 263.

14. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 68.

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vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2; cf. 12:8). This word is translated in various ways, including “temporary,” “transitory,” “meaningless,” “senseless,” “futile,” “ephemeral,” “contingent,” “incomprehensible,” “incongruous,” “absurd,” “empty,” and more visually as “a striving after wind,” “a bubble,” “smoke that curls up into the air,”¹⁵ “mist,” or “breath”/“mere breath.”¹⁶

Man is like a breath [*hebel*];
his days are like a passing shadow. (Ps. 144:4)

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [*hebel*]! (Ps. 39:5)

However we are to translate *hebel* (in most contexts, I like “breath” best), listen to a short list of Solomon’s long list of mist. What is like your hot breath on a cold day disappearing into the air?

Every effort	Eccl. 1:14; 2:11, 17, 19
Any fruit of our labors	2:15, 21, 26
Pleasure	2:1
Life	3:19; 6:4, 12; 7:15; 9:9
Youth	11:10
Success	4:4
Wealth	4:7–8; 5:10; 6:2
Desire	6:9
Frivolity	7:6
Popularity	4:16; 8:10
Injustice	8:14
All future events	11:8
Everything!	1:2; 12:8 ¹⁷

15. See William Ernest Henley, “Of the Nothingness of Things,” in *Poems* (London: David Nutt, 1919), 94–97. Jerome suggested “smoky vapor.” *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 36.

16. For example, Fredericks’s translation is “Breath of breaths,” said Qoheleth, “Breath of breaths. Everything is temporary!” “Ecclesiastes,” 65. Robert Alter’s is “Merest breath . . . All is mere breath.” Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 346.

17. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 30–31.

Look again at Ecclesiastes 1:2, and let this ash-in-your-mouth, curse-filled concept fill your imagination. It reads, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” In Hebrew, as in English, there is a nice wordplay on this superlative genitive: *vanity of vanities* (English) or *hābēl hābālīm* (Hebrew). As “the Song of Songs” is the best of all songs, “the God of gods” is the greatest or the only God, and “the heaven of heavens” is the highest heaven, so Solomon sounds this sad and sober message of “vanity of vanities”—everything is utterly futile. Put differently, because of God’s curse on creation (the consequences of the fall recorded in Genesis 3:14–19 are assumed throughout),¹⁸ in all our endeavors we cannot find *much* meaning or *sustainable* joy in this world or present age. It’s vanity. Vanity. Vanity. Vanity. Vanity. It’s all vanity.

These are dark pieces to the puzzle. They constitute the black border that connects to the dark gray pieces of death, injustice, and other bleak realities. And yet like a Rembrandt painting, in which darkness and light play off each other and blend together in seemingly inexplicable ways, those gray pieces of Ecclesiastes do eventually connect with God, who is at the center of the picture and is bright in all his incompressible glory and wisdom.

This God of glory and wisdom is touched, if you will stay with my puzzle analogy, only through the *fear of God*.¹⁹ This is the central concept of biblical wisdom literature, and we will explore its meaning and significance in the chapters to come. For now, I’ll summarize this central concept as *trembling trust*. Those who, in the midst of all the hard truths and awful troubles of this fallen world, come before the Lord with trembling trust are given by him the gift of grateful obedience, steady contentment, and surprising joy.²⁰ The puzzle of Ecclesiastes includes the black border, the seemingly random gray pieces, the white, bright center, *and* the multicolored blessings given to those who have given

18. As Barry G. Webb summarizes: Vanity “is not simply a brute fact, something which happens to be there without cause or explanation. It is a judgment, a condition, imposed on the world, and on human beings in particular, by God. It is a manifestation of the fall and, positively, of God’s rule as creator and judge.” *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 104.

19. Eccl. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13.

20. Eccl. 2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:9–12:7.

themselves to God. “The fear of God . . . is not only the beginning of wisdom; it is also the beginning of . . . purposeful life.”²¹

In order to arrive at the picture above, I have taken key words—such as *vanity* (thirty-eight times), *wise/wisdom* (fifty-three times), *God* (forty times), *toil* (thirty-three times), *give/gives/given* (sixteen times), *death* (mentioned or alluded to twenty-one times), *sun*, as in “under the sun” (thirty-three times), and *joy* and derivatives such as *rejoice*, *enjoy*, *enjoys*, *enjoyed*, and *enjoyment* (seventeen times)—as well as key themes such as *God and man*, *futility and fleetingness*, *time and chance*, *gain and portion*, *work and toil*, *wealth and poverty*, *power and domination*, *wisdom and folly*, *justice and judgment*, *eating, drinking, and pleasure*²²—and attempted to show you what Ecclesiastes looks like. It might be better, however, to simply state what the unified message is.

Three authors on Ecclesiastes have summarized the book as follows. (These are the three best I have found.) Michael Eaton claims that Ecclesiastes “defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.”²³ Jeffrey Meyers says that “true wisdom” that Ecclesiastes offers us “is to fear God and keep his commandments, to receive and use the gifts of God with joy and gratitude.”²⁴ And Sidney Greidanus writes this excellent summary admonition: “Fear God in order to turn a vain, empty life into a meaningful life which will enjoy God’s gifts.”²⁵

Another way to get at the unified message is to answer the key questions raised by Pastor Solomon. The first key question is the one raised in Ecclesiastes 1:3, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” The implied answer is “nothing.” Death makes all human work and wisdom and wealth and pleasure “vain.” From a mere observation of this world and its workings, human work, wisdom, wealth, and pleasure appear to be of no eternal value or significance.

21. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 48.

22. See Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 1–5. I added “justice and judgment.”

23. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44.

24. Jeffrey Meyers, *A Table in the Mist: Meditations on Ecclesiastes*, Through New Eyes Bible Commentary (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2006), 17.

25. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 22.

The second key question follows that blunt and realistic reality: “In light of such vanity—the fact that our work and knowledge and pleasures and possessions are ultimately made futile by death—how, then, should we live this temporary life under the sun?” The answer to that riddle is simple. We are to live our earthly lives by abandoning human “illusions of self-importance” and “all pretense of pride” and by embracing divine wisdom.²⁶ This is done, according to Ecclesiastes, by trusting the Lord and doing what he says: “[This is] the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:13). Obedient trust—that is the *end* (or goal) of Ecclesiastes.

IN LIGHT OF THE CRUCIFIED, RISEN, AND RETURNING CHRIST

That might be the end of Ecclesiastes (its goal and its conclusion), but it is not the end (the conclusion) of God’s story of salvation. When the last chapter of Ecclesiastes was completed, hundreds of chapters in God’s inspired book were yet to be written. Soon Ezra and Jeremiah, as well as Peter and Paul and all the others, would pick up their pens and add their voices to the divine drama ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

While Ecclesiastes contains no obvious messianic prophecy or promise, and while the New Testament rarely quotes from or alludes to the book, my ultimate concern as a Christian preacher is to preach the words of “the Preacher” in light of the words and works of the Word incarnate. This is not a concern or commission laid upon me by my local church or the denomination in which I am ordained, but by Jesus himself. Our Lord taught us to read our Old Testaments with him in mind—“everything written about *me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). Even “the Psalms” (or “the Writings”), which includes Ecclesiastes, bear witness to him (John 5:39) and can “make [us] *wise* for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). So woe to me if I teach through Ecclesiastes as though Jesus had never touched his feet on this vain earth!

Derek Kidner writes that one way to read Ecclesiastes is to see “the shafts of light” (i.e., the call-to-joy refrain) and “the author’s own position and

26. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 278.

conclusions” to get to the purpose of the book.²⁷ To that helpful reading strategy, we may add that if we read the book *through* the lens of Jesus Christ—the true embodiment of wisdom who has crushed the curse of death on the cross, brought hope through his resurrection, and will bring justice at his return—we actually understand the book better. Put simply, the best way to read Ecclesiastes, as we have noted, is as (1) God’s wisdom literature (2) with a unified message (3) *that makes better (but not perfect) sense in light of the crucified, risen, and returning Christ.*

Earlier, I painted the picture of Ecclesiastes—with its black border, shades of gray, and white, bright center. There is another image of Ecclesiastes that I have found tremendously helpful in reading the whole book. It is the banner that Marge Gieser made for the original book jacket for Phil Ryken’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, which is aptly and cleverly titled *Why Everything Matters*. The banner has three colors—black, gold, and red. In the black section, which takes up the bottom third of the banner, are words such as *meaningless, wearisome, twisted, toil, nothing, grievous, madness, and folly*. Those words are in gold. Above the black section is a red section, also with words, such as *pleasure, contentment, abundance, and joy*. Those are also written in gold. The black and red sections are divided by a slanted, slightly off-center gold cross that is faintly lifted above the rest of the fabric. About the design Gieser wrote:

Words such as meaningless, wearisome, . . . folly, etc., cover the background of the banner, describing life as it really is. Life without God is futile. But for the believer, redeemed by the blood of Christ, life takes on meaning, and there is hope for all of life’s tough questions.

The colors included in the banner all have a meaning. Black symbolizes life lived in struggle and confusion with no hope; the gold of the cross that cuts through the entire design symbolizes the redeeming work of Christ, who intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father in Heaven; the red background at the top of the design stands for Christ’s blood shed for us, offering us a hopeful and eternal worldview.²⁸

Jesus Christ redeemed us from the vanity that Pastor Solomon so wrestled with and suffered under by subjecting himself to our temporary, meaningless,

27. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 93.

28. See “About the Book Jacket,” in Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 319.

futile, incomprehensible, incongruous, absurd, smoke-curling-up-into-the-air, mere-breath, vain life. He was born under the sun. He toiled under the sun. He suffered under the sun. He died under the sun. But in his subjection to the curse of death by his own death on the cross, this Son of God “redeemed us from the curse” (Gal. 3:13). By his resurrection, he restored meaning to our toil. And by his return, he will exact every injustice and elucidate every absurdity as he ushers those who fear the Lord into the glorious presence of our all-wise, never-completely-comprehensible God.

LOVE AND DEATH . . . AND GOD!

In Woody Allen’s comedy *Love and Death*, Allen’s character, Boris, and Diane Keaton’s character, Sonia, have the following exchange:

Boris: Sonia, what if there is no God?

Sonia: Boris Demitrovich, are you joking?

Boris: What if we’re just a bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason.

Sonia: But if there is no God, then life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just commit suicide?

Boris: Well, let’s not get hysterical; I could be wrong. I’d hate to blow my brains out and then read in the papers they’d found something.²⁹

In the small book of Ecclesiastes we will discover (it’s quite the finding!) a great God who brings rock-solid meaning to everything under the sun by means of his Son. We will discover that he brings meaning to our work, learning, possessions, and pleasures. We will discover that he will bring meaning even to the world’s accidents, injustices, oppressions, absurdities, and evils.

And so our quest begins!

29. Woody Allen, quoted in Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 51.

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