

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

# RECOVERING EDEN

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THE GOSPEL  
ACCORDING TO

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ECCLESIASTES

ZACK ESWINE



“In *Recovering Eden*, Zack Eswine has provided a pastorally poetic guide to the endlessly ‘wild and strange wonder called Ecclesiastes.’ He reliably reminds the reader that a search for life’s significance begins with a trustworthy God who fills life with meaning throughout life’s seasons and ends with this One who makes all things new in Jesus Christ. Be sure to reflect on the weighty questions that Zack provides after each chapter. They offer the reader a timely opportunity to respond to the author’s thoughtful observations of an ultimately hopeful text.”

—**Donald C. Guthrie**, Director of the Ph.D. (Educational Studies), Professor of Educational Ministries, The Jeanette L. Hsieh Chair of Educational Leadership, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“While very few of us are professional philosophers who deal with the abstract problems of meaning, all of us are daily dealing with the functional problems of meaning. We all want our lives to count for something. Every one of us craves meaning—it’s human nature to yearn for it. The question is, where are we looking to find it: work, pleasure, our children, our spouse, beauty, sex, our possessions, our position, our reputation, our accomplishments? What are you depending on to make life worth living? What keeps you going?

“Ecclesiastes won’t allow for pat answers to these deeply existential questions—it forces us to look beneath the surface. C. S. Lewis once wrote, ‘Human history . . . [is] the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.’ This is, in short, the message of Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes is not interested in pious platitudes and theory. He’s not some ivory-tower pontificator. Rather, he’s slogging his way through life on the ground, desperately looking for something to make him feel alive, something that will satisfy, something to give him the meaning he longs for. Ecclesiastes is an honest look at life without God. It explores

the ways in which people try to save themselves apart from God, and in doing so, it blows our cover—it removes our fig leaves. It leads us to the abyss and drives us to despair. It reveals the meaninglessness of life ‘under the sun’ and causes us to cry out, ‘Who will rescue me?’

“My friend Zack Eswine helps us to see that all the answers sought for by the writer of Ecclesiastes (and us) under the sun come to us from above the sun, in the person and work of Jesus. Reading Ecclesiastes in the light of Christ’s finished work tells us that ultimate meaning is found in God through Christ, who defeats death and brings meaning to life. Jesus subjected himself to the curse of a meaningless world in order to free us from it.

“For those who see no end to their laborious search for meaning and satisfaction, Jesus promises rest: ‘Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ Apart from Jesus, we are left in despair, crushed by the words ‘Everything is meaningless.’ Only in Christ are we freed from the bondage of vanity. Christ has completed our labors, he’s secured our meaning, he’s rescued us from futility. Thank you, Zack, for reminding me of this. I keep forgetting.”

—**Tullian Tchividjian**, Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO  
THE OLD TESTAMENT

*A series of studies on the lives  
of Old Testament characters, written for  
laypeople and pastors, and designed to  
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,  
and preaching of the Old Testament*

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# RECOVERING EDEN

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO  
ECCLESIASTES

ZACK ESUINE

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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*For Jessica, Nathan, Abigail, and Caleb*

The days of darkness will be many,  
but light is sweet,  
and it is pleasant to see the sun.

Ecclesiastes 11:7-8



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## FOREWORD

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;  
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.  
(Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the Prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged for an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament—not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah, but also by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

## AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament series was begun by my former professors, Tremper Longman and Al Groves, to whom I owe an enormous personal debt of gratitude. I learned from them a great deal about how to recognize the gospel in the Old Testament. I share their deep conviction that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. This series of studies will continue to pursue their initial aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

These volumes are written primarily for pastors and laypeople, not scholars. They are designed in the first instance to serve the church, not the academy.

My hope and prayer remain the same as Tremper and Al's: that this series will continue to encourage the revival of interest in the Old Testament as a book that constantly points forward to Jesus Christ, to his sufferings and the glories that would follow.

IAIN M. DUGUID





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the partnership of Iain Duguid with his time, editorial skill, and love for God as he reveals himself in the Old Testament. I give thanks for Marvin Padgett and the staff at P&R Publishing for this opportunity to meditate on God through this wild and strange wonder called Ecclesiastes.

I also continue to learn the gospel from the congregation of Riverside Church, here in Webster Groves, Missouri. Their partnership in affording me friendship, time, editorial help, and daily gospel encouragement for my life and ministry makes writing this book possible.



## CHAPTER ONE

# AN UNEXPECTED VOICE

*“A long moan answers, rising in our talk.”<sup>1</sup>*

When readers in the early 1960s first perused the book *A Grief Observed*, many found comfort but some felt troubled. The troubled ones were accustomed to hearing solid strength, strong faith, formidable apologetics, and credible worship from the pen of C. S. Lewis. Suddenly now, to read his doubts and questions so raw and transparent was unusual, strange, and befuddling. This widower’s voice, like his aging head, his dripping nose, and his heaving shoulders, leaned heavy onto the chest of the page, and some who held him there as they read his grieving words became restless, frightened, and disconcerted. “It doesn’t really matter whether you grip the arms of the dentist’s chair or let your hands lie in your lap,” Lewis wrote. “The drill drills on.”<sup>2</sup>

Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, where is God? . . . Go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and

what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis's readers did not expect someone like that to talk like this. The book sat on their shelves next to *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *The Weight of Glory*, but some felt less certain about their desire to read it and how or if they were meant to use it.

Many people who cherish the Bible express a similar reaction to the book of Ecclesiastes. We do not expect the words we find there. What many of us have come to expect from the Bible in general and this messenger in particular, doesn't match. Yet, the same God who inspired the Psalms and the Gospels speaks here too. These inspired words which disturb us reveal aspects of God too often neglected by us. If one has only driven a car with automatic transmission, driving manually will take some getting used to. What do we need to know in order to "get used to" the way this book functions in its attempt to get us from one place to another?

## SEEKING DOUBLE KNOWLEDGE

The pastor and theologian John Calvin believed that we discover wisdom and life by means of double knowledge: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, if we want to know God, we must learn moment by moment to furnish our mind with the contemplation of God.

The books of the Bible invite us to this double knowledge. Some books, like Romans, put God center stage. We learn about him mostly by contemplating him directly and less by paying attention to ourselves.

But one of the ways that God leads us to know him is by making us pay attention to ourselves. He reveals himself

by recovery of our humanity. He shows us what we were made for and then bids us to look at what has become of us. This is what you will want to admit about Ecclesiastes. In the same way as books such as Ruth or Esther, in Ecclesiastes God intends you to know him by requiring you to look plainly and without polish at yourself, your neighbors, and the world in which you and I live. God puts himself in the background, as it were, in order to place self-concern front and center.

“We are prompted by our own ills,” says Calvin, “to contemplate the good things of God.”<sup>6</sup> In the Spirit’s hands, Ecclesiastes confronts us with our own ills in order that by knowing ourselves as we are we might come to know God as he is.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THIS VOICE

The one whom God has designated to tell us about ourselves is “the Preacher” (Eccl. 1:1). The word translated “Preacher” refers to “the gathering or assembly of a community of people, especially for the worship of God.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the king of Israel, the son of David, is “like a pastor in a church,”<sup>8</sup> preaching. In that light, Ecclesiastes “is a sermon with a text (‘vanity of vanities,’ 1:2; 12:8),” an explanation of that text (Eccl. 1–10), and an application of what that text then means for our lives (Eccl. 11:1–12:7).<sup>9</sup> But this sermon unsettles immediately, for what the Preacher does is step to his pulpit and shout at us, “Vanity! Everything is vanity!” (see Eccl. 1:2).

But this Preacher-king takes up the title “son of David” and identifies himself as the heir to the psalm-singing, sling-shot-hurling, shepherd-king, whom God said was “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14). Even more, “son of David” signifies the mantle that God’s promise would in time place upon Jesus (Matt. 1:1). Such credentials promote our expectation of a powerful and uplifting biblical

sermon. Yet, the Preacher-king steps up to his pulpit and tells us that what God gives us in this life amounts to little more than “an unhappy business” (Eccl. 1:13).

Furthermore, Ecclesiastes lets us hear the voice of an older pastor/disciple-maker. He is a sage mentor speaking to his students not only as a giver of words, but also as a companion for living so that the young can learn (Eccl. 12:1). Like the wise before him (Prov. 23:26), and the apostles after him (2 Tim. 2:1), and Jesus with his followers (John 13:33), we are to hear the Preacher too, as offering affectionate speech, like a spiritual father instructing his dearly loved spiritual children (Eccl. 12:11).

Similarly, like David the king who preceded him (Ps. 23) and the Lord who came after him (John 10:11), we are meant to hear the Preacher’s words as if we who listen are a flock under the care of one Shepherd (Eccl. 12:11). He intends that we will hear something resonant with the voice of this one Shepherd in the midst of his human voice. We are surprised then when this sage mentor tells us that he “hated life” (Eccl. 2:17) and that gaining wisdom and knowledge does nothing but stress us out and make us sad (Eccl. 1:18).

Like those who were bothered by C. S. Lewis’s book on grief, we too might wonder how a spokesman for God could talk like this in God’s name and whether or not we should listen to a preacher who sermonizes in this way. We might think to ourselves, “This guy just doesn’t sound like Isaiah, Jeremiah, or John or Peter. More importantly, he doesn’t sound like Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

These thoughts make sense when we recognize that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes offers a different category of sermon than what Isaiah, Jeremiah, John, or Peter offered to us. (We will come back to the question of whether or not the Preacher sounds like Jesus in a moment.) Most of us have not encountered this kind of wisdom preaching or sage pastoral perspective before. So, we do not know what to make of it. Like an American driver in New

Zealand, we need to switch our sights to a different side of the road than we are used to and to a different vantage point in the car, in order to navigate these opposite streets. Sometimes making this switch takes a little time and feels quite scary.

### A WISDOM VOICE

Making this switch begins with recognizing what kind of terrain we are traveling. The neighborhoods of Ecclesiastes are filled with wisdom streets. Many Christians have grown up traveling the prophetic roads of the Old Testament and the Pauline highways of the New Testament. Wisdom highways are less traveled. The Song of Solomon is like a back-road brothel to us. (As a young man, I was told by a pastor not to read this book until after I was married!) Job is like a long stretch of desert road with no night light and no gas stations or rest stops for miles. People can get stuck out there with no help, so we rarely travel there without a great deal of preparation. James is like an old law building that doesn't seem to fit the gospel landscape. We drive around it and wonder if we should bulldoze it. Ecclesiastes sounds like a crazed man downtown. He smells like he hasn't bathed—looks like it too—and as we pass by he won't stop glaring at us and beckoning to us that our lives are built on illusions, and that we are all going to die. So, most of us choose to get our lunch at a different shop on a less dreary corner of town. Meanwhile, we usually like our visits to the Psalms, except for the ones that we feel we need to rewrite or edit because of how uncomfortably raw the emotions they express are. Their moodiness can ruin a good time.

In short, most who have grown up in the Christian community have very little acquaintance with the neighborhoods of wisdom. The wisdom books are like those neighbors at which we smile but with whom we rarely

converse because they live on the “other side of the tracks.” No wonder Ecclesiastes sounds foreign to us.

But, as J. I. Packer once said, “The Bible is God preaching.”<sup>11</sup> Though this voice in Ecclesiastes is strange for many of us to hear, the biblical Wisdom Literature reminds us that God (unlike many of us) has not been squeamish about speaking with riddles, maxims, metaphors, or poetry to his people. God has not been afraid of transparency, mystery, emotion, appeals to nature, or an intimate familiarity with the beauties and messes of people and things.<sup>12</sup> Like two acquaintances who as they get to know each other say, “I didn’t know you could talk like that,” the biblical Wisdom Literature in general, and Ecclesiastes in particular, show us more of God than perhaps we knew or are comfortable with.

## VOICING THE EXCEPTIONS

As we think about this wisdom approach, we can meditate on the fact that if Proverbs focuses on the norms and rules, “Ecclesiastes focuses on the exceptions.”<sup>13</sup> As students, many of us hate learning about exceptions. It takes so much effort just to learn the rules. When we finally do master the rules, the teacher then says, “It does not always work according to the rule you’ve just learned.”

For example, as a child learning how to spell in English, it can take a while to learn the helpful rule that “*i* comes before *e*.” This rule helps us to correctly spell words like *believe* or *grieve*. We receive a gold star on the spelling paper that suggests we’ve mastered the rule. But then, the teacher introduces words such as *neither* or *neighbor* or *receive*. She then writes down several exceptions for us to learn. She expands the rule to account for exceptions and says, “*I* before *e* except after *c* and sometimes *y* and in words that sound like *a* such as *neighbor* and *weigh*.” A student who cannot overcome her impatience with the



exceptions and who remains hasty to avoid anything but the rule will struggle to spell. So it is in life.

The Wisdom Literature needs Ecclesiastes then, in order to keep us from entrusting ourselves to trite formulas under the sun. It is not that Proverbs ignores exceptions. It too makes plain that rules aren't enough and that context matters for how we apply wisdom.

Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
 lest you be like him yourself.  
 Answer a fool according to his folly,  
 lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Prov. 26:4–5)

But our recurring inability as human beings to deal in more than just appearances with God and with our neighbors reveals our strong need for the Preacher's sermon in Ecclesiastes. For example, Proverbs teaches us a principle. "Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good" (Prov. 13:21). In this light, "Job's friends seem warranted in their assessment of Job's condition. . . . What else is there then but that Job needs to repent?"<sup>14</sup> His disaster reveals to everyone that he has sinned. Yet, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes tells us an exception "under the sun."

In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. (Eccl. 7:15)

Contrary to how his religious friends interpreted him, Job was actually a righteous man. The story of "Job illustrates the sort of thing for which Ecclesiastes is preparing his students. The difficulty that arose between Job and his friends did so because Job's experience did not correspond to the standard categories."<sup>15</sup> It's as if Job's friends knew a proverbial rule that "*i* comes before *e*," but they had no category for "after *c* or sometimes *y* or

with sounds of *a* like neighbor and weigh.” Therefore, they misapplied true things and damaged their neighbor instead of loving him—and all of this, they did misguidedly in God’s name.

Ecclesiastes echoes and foreshadows this recurring temptation. After all, Jesus’ disciples were no different. When a man was born blind they assumed that this disaster was caused by sin, his own or his parents’. Jesus let them know that they were mistaken (John 9:1–3). When some were murdered in a political coup or when a tower fell and several were tragically killed, the disciples assumed that those who died did so because they were worse sinners than others (Luke 13:1–5). Jesus let them know that he sees things differently than that.

Similarly, Ecclesiastes offers an exceptional voice to remind us who are like Job’s friends or Jesus’ disciples that we cannot walk out into our neighborhoods under the sun and hand out a “one size fits all” shirt. Life under the sun isn’t that tidy. Contradictions abound with human beings and the world. The Preacher does not shy away from these. We are prone to clean our house before guests arrive. The Preacher doesn’t. He lets the house remain as it is. He asks us to see it and to ponder what it reveals about us, our place, and God.

By taking up this untidy voice, the Preacher isn’t using this sermon to describe life as we expect it, or as he desires it or as what good theology says that life should be. Rather the Preacher describes life as it actually presents itself “under the sun.” If someone were to say to him, “You shouldn’t talk about such things,” it is as if he responds, “But people already go through this kind of stuff and have to talk about it under the sun.” If someone were to say to him, “The things you talk about shouldn’t happen,” it is as if he says, “No, they shouldn’t, but they do, so now what?” Therefore, “without question, Ecclesiastes regularly points out things that many people in the church prefer not to acknowledge.”<sup>16</sup> The Preacher does not stick to the

rules of what should be but addresses the exceptions to account for what is.

We would be remiss, however, if we thought of this Preacher as only dealing in exceptions and contradictions. On the contrary, Ecclesiastes teaches us plenty of norms (Eccl. 7). But most of these norms are of a different kind. More often than not, these norms have to do, not with didactic principles, but with the kinds of circumstances and situations or “seasons” that one must navigate under the sun. If Proverbs is like math, mostly dealing in equations in which one thing adds up to equal another, then Ecclesiastes is like music, all mood with melody and tone. If Proverbs is like meteorology giving us indicators so as to predict certain outcomes, then Ecclesiastes is like the actual weather, fickle and unpredictable in its ability to rant with storms or breathe easy with a mid-morning breeze. In Proverbs a good man plus God’s love and wisdom equals a good life. In Ecclesiastes a good man plus God’s love still dies like the beast or the fool. In Proverbs, wisdom gives us eyes to recognize the storm clouds and what to do in response. In Ecclesiastes, death is a piece of tornado from which no proverbial basement can shelter us.

For this reason, the Preacher is a skeptic but of the kind commended in the Scripture. Unlike folly, this Preacher does not rush in to accept the first thing he sees or hears. He is no simpleton. He is not naive like those who do not ponder the path of life. These wander but do not know it (Prov. 5:6).

Instead, the heart of the wise thinks through their ways of doing life (Prov. 4:26). It “ponders how to answer” (Prov. 15:28) because it has come to learn that “there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12). Therefore the wise take a posture that examines, waits, listens, hears the best arguments, and gives time to search out what is presented without minimizing or exaggerating or denying it.

The one who states his case first seems right,  
until the other comes and examines him.  
(Prov. 18:17)

If he is a pessimist, he is so as one who believes that God and truth remain. This kind of skepticism is rare for many of us and therefore strange to our experience.

## A WISDOM KIND OF OUTREACH

Our discomfort with this Preacher's voice also rises because, like Job and Proverbs, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes does not require us who listen to possess explicit Bible knowledge. Unlike most other books in the Bible, here, there is no mention of Abraham, or Moses or David or the coming Messiah, or the history of Israel. A person with no knowledge of the Bible can sit in the pew as this Preacher speaks, and they can feel that he is using their language to speak about things that they themselves know. In fact, "strikingly absent" from this Preacher's message "are the great themes of biblical history, such as the exodus, covenant and the conquest of the land. God's role as deliverer and lawgiver, in turn, is scarcely mentioned."<sup>17</sup> "Ecclesiastes does not focus on God's redemptive acts."<sup>18</sup>

For those who are accustomed to sermons that purpose to "get us saved," or that are filled with phrases such as, "God says," or "the Bible says," Ecclesiastes is strange. If we are accustomed to hearing sermons given by preachers who speak formally rather than personally, in churches that see asking questions as a lack of faith, among Christians who see reading poetry, stories, and riddles as a waste of time, with a mindset that believers are not to be in the secular world, this book in the Bible can baffle, flabbergast, and even infuriate us. This Preacher is no old-school evangelist from the American South or Midwest. His kind

of relationship with God and neighbor is older still. His approach is new to many of us, not because his way of doing ministry is newfangled, but because it is so old and wise as to be forgotten.

His approach makes central his humanity rather than his faith, his creatureliness rather than his redemption. Ecclesiastes starts decidedly with the truth that all of us are in the world no matter who we are and that all of us have this one thing in common: we are human and as such we must commonly navigate the same God-governed and maddening world together. The Preacher speaks, not so much as a Jewish believer, then, but as a human being. He recovers a sense of our common humanity.

Centuries later the apostle Paul would sometimes preach his own sermons in like fashion. Of course, when he spoke in the synagogue among those who knew the Scriptures, Paul preached of the promised deliverer, the history of Israel, and our own hearts in that light. He quoted explicitly from the Bible and spoke explicitly of Jesus (Acts 13:16–41).

But, standing up before a crowd of people who knew nothing about the Hebrew Scriptures or of the God to which they point us, Paul could take the culture and not the Bible for his text. He could quote their own poets rather than the Scriptures to introduce them to God. He could speak, not of the Redeemer of Israel, but of the Creator and sustainer of the world, who has sent someone to us and has raised him from the dead. Paul can preach in such contexts without mentioning the explicit name of Jesus (Acts 14:8–18; 17:22–31). Then, as some wanted to talk more in these settings, Paul would gladly do so and go further (Acts 17:32).

Perhaps it can help us to think about Ecclesiastes as an incomplete forerunner to this kind of Pauline sermon. This kind of sermon introduces but does not answer everything. After we hear it, we want to talk further and grapple more deeply with what we've just heard.

Like Paul when he was among neighbors without the Bible, this Preacher in Ecclesiastes, who looks at the world from the vantage point of the Scriptures, chooses nonetheless neither to open them up nor to expound explicitly from them as we gather to hear him preach. Not this time. Instead, he chooses the cultural experiences and texts from our being human under the sun, and from there, as one of us, he tells us about the God who created us and governs the world. With Paul, this Preacher believes that we will stand before God after we die and give an account of our lives (Eccl. 3:17; 11:9; 12:14). But unlike Paul, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes does not answer us about the resurrection. Instead, this Preacher joins us in the search for the answer (Eccl. 3:21). He is a fellow human being interrogating the world and our experience. He recognizes the limits of our knowledge and the real questions that nag us. In this light, he does not give voice to the most trite of human objections about God and the world. Rather, he gives voice to true human angst.

Therefore, as we who believe in the God of the Bible hear him, this Preacher can apprentice us. We can learn how a follower of God is meant to talk to the world about the world as a fellow human being. We learn a wisdom kind of outreach, an evangelism or testimony as those who are human beings wrestling with it all. It is as if the Preacher causes us to put off our religious persona and get honest about our being human in a fallen world.

Likewise, as we who do not believe in God hear this Preacher, we cannot help but resonate with the credibility, the honesty, the humanity, the wisdom of what he says. For what he says rings true to what is there in the world and within us.

Consequently, whether we believe or not, as human beings we can access Ecclesiastes and hear our questions and our culture's answers on the Preacher's tongue. We feel our lament in his pain. We see our own tantrums in his frustrations. We touch our own longings as he cries out with his. The Preacher gives language to our ache, poetry for our dreams, and exclamation for our search. He resists

anything trite, pretentious, sentimental, or dishonest. By this means, the God who inspired this text shows us his empathy and his profound understanding of our plight in all of its confusing, emotional, tragic, and maddening forms.

In this light, the Preacher-pastor has an apologetic aim. An apologist is one who gives a defense or reason for the faith (1 Peter 3:15). Ecclesiastes is an apologetic sermon. Like “an essay in apologetics . . . it defends a life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.”<sup>19</sup>

For this reason (to borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer), Ecclesiastes can apprentice us in what it means to communicate as a human being with “the man without the Bible.”<sup>20</sup> He models for us how a student or disciple who seeks to follow God can engage our neighbors as human beings under the sun. Therefore, as you prepare to read his message, the Preacher will not preach at you with unquestioning rhetorical polish as an expert. Instead he will humble himself in your presence, share his own intimate questions about life with you, and reach out for God with you, as he too is a fellow human being. Most of us have rarely encountered this kind of preacher with this kind of approach. Many of us have little idea of how to jettison our religious language and garb and to humble ourselves in creaturely ways as we sweat together with our neighbors on this parched earth.

The Preacher shows us how. From him we learn to listen; to represent without spin how people think, feel, and act; to admit that we ourselves must weather the same conditions, and that we too long to recover for ourselves a credible and honest answer to what troubles us.

## RECOVERING EDEN

Sometimes answering what troubles us takes us back to first things.

On one occasion for example, the apostle Paul and Barnabas found themselves confronted by the beliefs and interpretations of those around them. When those from the culture of Lystra saw God's power in these preachers, they interpreted them from their own cultural way of thinking. "The gods have come down to us," these neighbors shouted. "Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker" (Acts 14:11-12).

Paul and Barnabas responded in a threefold way. First, they proclaimed their humanity and related as human beings to those who heard them. "We also are men, of like nature with you," they cried out (Acts 14:15). Second, they stated that they were bearers of a good message that they had to share with those in Lystra (Acts 14:15). Third, they spoke, not about Jesus (not yet), but about "a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:15).

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:16-17)

For people who interpret life without the Bible and who do not know about the God whom that Bible reveals, Paul points to the "witness" that God has given us as human beings. This divine witness attends creaturely things such as rain, farming, and fruitful labor. Our life and work can offer a pleasantness to our hearts and we can enjoy our food, and by implication the toil that produced it, with gladness.

A witness is someone who gives testimony to what they have seen, heard, or personally experienced. Paul reminds us that creation and our lot within it to work, harvest, eat, and enjoy what we've been given is itself a witness in the



world, testifying to us about the existence and character of God toward us.

In an analogous way, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes seems to have this same kind of purpose in mind. This Preacher also interacts with how people in the world interpret God. He too takes our common humanity as his starting place. He too has a message, and this message has to do with the witness of our lot with God. This witness is his apologetic.

The phrase “There is nothing better” travels powerfully off this Preacher’s lips as he states his convictions. His wisdom compels us to compare our response to his. What would we say is the best good in this hassled life? For the Preacher, the best good in life is that we have work, family, and food in a place to enjoy.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (Eccl. 2:24–25)

There is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man. (Eccl. 3:12–13)

There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. (Eccl. 3:22)

In other words, the best good in the madness under the sun is found when we recover some small resemblance to what we were made for in Eden. We remember that God’s gift to humanity has not quit, even though we have and the world now groans. We remember Adam and Eve’s season prior to their fall, and we learn again to long for that recovery while we are migrants here, worn out among the shanties.

We hear him tell us that “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (Eccl. 7:29). But though our many schemes sabotaged life under the sun, the gift of having a place to dwell, a thing to do, sustenance to cultivate, and a people to enjoy it with has not left us. God, and this witness to him, remains.

So, in a manner not so different from some of Paul’s preaching, “there are clear connections between Ecclesiastes and the beginning of redemptive history as recounted in the early chapters of Genesis.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, “it would seem that the Preacher is drawing on the themes of these Genesis chapters and is pressing home their implications” to us.<sup>22</sup>

God created us. His good gifts remain for us and for our joy. Counterfeit gifts, forged advantages, and illusory pleasures now abound like weeds bent on choking out the flowerbed. Everything is without meaning now. But there are these flowers that still bloom, these leftover beauties that do not quit. These small voices give witness still to the moaning world.

## AN EVANGELISTIC HINT

What does this mean but that as a preacher/sage mentor/apologist this book brings with it an evangelistic hint? An evangelist is one who declares and commends his beliefs to others in the hope that they will convert from their ways to the ways commended by the evangelist. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes similarly hopes that the one hearing his message will believe it, convert to it, and leave the unsatisfactory paths that damage it. He hopes to convert us to his way as “a skilled craftsman in the art of teaching and persuasion.”<sup>23</sup>

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher

sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. (Eccl. 12:9–10)

In this light, his ramblings are not haphazard. Behind the strangeness of this sermon resides a thorough study, an intentional craft, and a commitment to confront those listening hearers with the gift of God. Even more, the aim of this Preacher’s message is that we who listen will come to believe in God and to recover our purpose with his gift and to see that our whole purpose as human beings is a God-centered relationship toward all things. This Preacher hopes to persuade us to recognize that God is the one to whom we belong and in whom we must place our trust. God’s ways and words as spoken in the Scriptures identify the ways and words that the Preacher longs for us to take up. The Preacher ultimately wants us to believe that evil and good are real, that our sins in secret will be found out, and that along with those who’ve sinned against us we all will give an account of our lives to God. In fact, even under the sun, with its madness, unanswered questions, exceptions, contradictions, and vain striving, the whole purpose or duty of one’s life is still God himself.

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl. 12:13–14)

## WHO IS THIS PREACHER?

When C. S. Lewis first published *A Grief Observed*, he did so by veiling not only his own name but also by veiling the name of his wife, Joy. He identified himself as N. W. Clerk and referred to her as “H.” After his death, the book was published in his own name. Why would someone

publish under a pseudonym? Mary Anne Evans authored her famed books by using the name George Eliot, so that people could seriously receive her work amid the male-dominant reality of her generation. For Lewis, the kind of attention he received publicly made anonymity desirable as he was still living out the raw and personal account of his own life. We do not know why the writer of Ecclesiastes veils his real name and instead writes under the pen name “the Preacher.” But the fact that he does has meant that people differ regarding who they think this Preacher is.

Historically, Christians have recognized the author of Ecclesiastes as Solomon. Who else could say, “I have acquired great wisdom surpassing all who were in Jerusalem before me?” (Eccl. 1:16; see 1 Kings 3:12–13). Furthermore, Solomon is the actual son of David, the king of Israel, and what the Preacher describes about wisdom, riches, and pleasures mirrors Solomon’s own life. There is also this strong hint of identity located in the parallel phrases.

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.  
(Prov. 1:1)

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king  
in Jerusalem. (Eccl. 1:1)

But because he does not mention his name, many Bible scholars now suggest otherwise. Their contrary assumption states that if Solomon wrote this book, he would plainly say so. But Solomon is a human being like any other. As we have seen, sometimes writers have purposes for changing or veiling their names.

Others point out that it seems strange for a king to say things, for example, that criticize wealthy kings who oppress the poor (Eccl. 5:8). Yet, this too is inconclusive. After all, the writings of Israel differ from the spin that other kings and histories write for themselves. The Old Testament repeatedly shows us the foibles, follies, and sins of even its best kings. Theologically, the one writ-

ing Ecclesiastes does so as the appointed king for God's people. It does not surprise that a righteous king will therefore join in with the rest of the Scripture's teaching to condemn oppression of the poor, in contrast to kings like Ahab who in their history cared little for the poor and acted unjustly in God's name. King David rebuked the misuse of the innocent and the poor by the wealthy, not realizing that he thereby condemned himself. Upon realizing this, the king of Israel publicly repented. By doing so, he showed God's people that how he had acted as king was wrong and not for imitation by those who follow God (2 Sam. 12). It is just as plausible therefore that Ecclesiastes and Solomon simply follow this biblical pattern.

Still others wrestle with the different voices in the book. A good bit of the book is written from the standpoint of a first-person author, like the giving of one's testimony. The Preacher says things like, "I said in my heart," or "I applied my heart." But in Ecclesiastes 12:9ff, the voice shifts, and the words of the Preacher are spoken of in the third person. This view suggests that it seems odd that a person should speak of himself in the third person. Therefore, there must be at least two authors for the book. Either one of them or neither of them is Solomon. However, this too is inconclusive. For example, the apostle Paul will at times shift from first person to third person speech about himself (2 Cor. 12:1-5). This rhetorical move is not unheard of.

My point is that credible reasons are offered either way. Though I lean toward the now-minority view that Solomon is the actual author of this book, for our purposes we will follow J. I. Packer's sound advice in our approach.

Whether this means that Solomon himself was the preacher, or that the preacher put his sermon into Solomon's mouth as a didactic device . . . need not concern us. The sermon is certainly Solomonic in

the sense that it teaches lessons which Solomon had unique opportunities to learn.<sup>24</sup>

Solomon's strong identity, story, and unique opportunities to learn what the Preacher here addresses will form the backdrop for this unexpected voice.

## CONCLUSION

In his grief, Lewis wrestled plainly with two seeming contradictions. The first has to do with the felt absence of God, our illusions about him, and the unsettling frankness of our speaking of it.

Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not, "So there's no God after all," but "So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer."<sup>25</sup>

The second has to do with the presence of God that comes in a quality that we do not expect in order to meet desires that we cannot deny we have. In terms of desire, Lewis admits that in his love for Joy, "no cranny of heart or body remained unsatisfied." And yet, he says,

We both knew that we wanted something besides one another—quite a different kind of something, a quite different kind of want. You might as well say that when lovers have one another they will never want to read, or eat—or breathe.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, Lewis acknowledges that God does not answer his questions. While earlier in the book he described God as silent behind a double-locked door, later he speaks dif-

ferently about how unexpectedly God’s silence is “not the locked door” as we imagine it to be.

It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, “Peace, child; you don’t understand.”<sup>27</sup>

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes wrestles too. As a sage mentor for his students, he makes an apologetic case with an evangelistic hint for our recovery of what is truly good—the recovery of a resonance with Eden’s gift with God. But he too is human. He too listens for the answer to his questions on this side of the locked door.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If Ecclesiastes is like a sermon, how does this sermon differ from the kinds we normally hear from our pastors? What do these differences teach us about the way God sometimes preaches to us?
2. Ecclesiastes causes us to resist formulaic approaches to life with God. Discuss why Ecclesiastes matters to us in light of Proverbs or how Job’s friends related to Job.
3. What do you make of the idea of double knowledge? How does knowing ourselves help us to know God?
4. What is a “wisdom kind of outreach”? How does this kind of outreach differ from the kind of evangelism or defense of the faith that you are used to hearing?
5. How does Ecclesiastes resemble some of the apostle Paul’s sermons?
6. How does Ecclesiastes relate to the book of Genesis? What do we mean when we say that in some ways the Preacher is recovering Eden in Ecclesiastes?

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