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ECCLESIASTES & SONG OF SONGS

Wisdom's Searching and Finding

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



ECCLESIASTES
& SONG OF SONGS

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P U B L I S H I N G

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Philip Graham Ryken	vii
A Personal Word from Kathleen	xi
General Introduction	xiii
Introduction to the Poetry	xv
Introduction to Ecclesiastes	xix
LESSON 1 (ECCL. 1)	
Who, What, and How?	1
LESSON 2 (ECCL. 2)	
Two Tests and Two Responses	19
LESSON 3 (ECCL. 3)	
Trying to Get the Big Perspective	35
LESSON 4 (ECCL. 4–5)	
Holding On to the Big Perspective	49
LESSON 5 (ECCL. 6:1–8:9)	
What Is Good in Life, and Where Shall We Look to Find It?	67
LESSON 6 (ECCL. 8:10–9:6)	
Conclusions Coming into View	81

CONTENTS

LESSON 7 (ECCL. 9:7–10:20)	
How Then Shall We Live?	97
LESSON 8 (ECCL. 11–12)	
Living in Light of God	III
LESSON 9 (SONG OF SONGS, PART 1)	
Encountering the Song	129
<i>(Including the Introduction to Song of Songs)</i>	
LESSON 10 (SONG OF SONGS, PART 2)	
Where There Is Love, There Is . . .	145
Notes for Leaders	163
Outline of Ecclesiastes	169
Outline of Song of Songs	171
Suggested Memory Passages	173
Notes on Translations and Study Helps	175

FOREWORD

Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are two of the most beautiful books in the entire Bible. They are also two of the most difficult books, which explains why medieval scholars commonly identified them as the Bible’s “two most dangerous books.”

These books are connected to one another by more than a sense of danger, however. Although Ecclesiastes is for skeptics, and the Song of Songs is for lovers, both books are attributed to the same author: Solomon, in all his wisdom. As we read these books, therefore, as part of our ongoing quest for love and meaning in life, we receive royal wisdom from one of the world’s most famous kings.

Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs also share certain literary features. Both books contain a good deal of poetry. This makes Kathleen Nielson an ideal guide for studying them, since as a literary scholar she is sensitive to the beauty of language and rich imagery of biblical poetry.

Both books are also complex in their literary structure. Although they both tell a story—of an intellectual pilgrimage in the case of Ecclesiastes, and of a romance in the Song of Songs—they do not always tell that story chronologically. Instead, they give us a collection of episodes, often followed by a thoughtful reflection or emotional response. Ecclesiastes can seem especially disorganized, for despite its overall narrative structure, it is not

just a story, but also an anthology of wise writings on the vanity and futility of life.

Both of these books also give us some unique interpretive challenges. Here Dr. Nielson is to be commended for getting things exactly right, making judicious decisions about disputed matters. With regard to authorship, she correctly shows the connections to Solomon as the Bible's own way of presenting these books, without trying to claim more for Solomon than the books do themselves.

When it comes to Ecclesiastes, Dr. Nielson is careful to show how the author's negative perspective on life is balanced by passages that affirm the pleasures of eating, drinking, and working as gifts from a gracious God. This positive viewpoint is present throughout the book and not just at the end, as some scholars have argued. The result of her interpretation is a balanced view that gets the maximum spiritual benefit from Ecclesiastes.

A major issue for the Song of Songs is whether the book should be read literally or allegorically, as a love story about Christ and his church. Dr. Nielson rightly begins by taking the romance literally, helping us see what the book says at the level of a human relationship. But she also opens up new spiritual dimensions by seeing its love story in the larger context of marriage, which for the believer is always a reminder of our relationship to Christ and the love story of our own salvation—the romance of redemption.

Both Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are important books to master in developing a Christian worldview. They deal with everyday matters such as work, food, and romance in a world that is frustrated by sin but at the same time animated by the love of God.

In its own unique way, each book draws us into a closer relationship with our Creator. Ecclesiastes teaches us to “fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty

of man” (Eccl. 12:13). Song of Songs invites us into a deeper intimacy with the Son of God as both our lover and our friend (Song 5:16). My prayer, therefore, is that the Holy Spirit will use both of these books to help you grow in reverence and affection for God.

Philip Graham Ryken

A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life, in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read*! We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Welcome to a study of two beautiful Old Testament books. This study will treat the books separately, although at the start we should acknowledge their connections. Both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs find their place in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the “Kethubim” or “Writings.” Within that section, both books form part of the “Five Scrolls,” which include the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. All five of these books have been favorites of the Jewish people for centuries, read regularly and publicly at the major Hebrew festivals. Song of Songs was read at Passover, the most important Hebrew festival (celebrating the Jews’ deliverance from Egypt). Ecclesiastes was read at the Feast of Tabernacles, the harvest festival during which the Jews traditionally spent a week in temporary shelters or “booths” to remember their time of wandering in the wilderness.

Another commonality relates to the tradition of wisdom literature, of which Ecclesiastes certainly and the Song of Songs arguably constitute a part. Wisdom literature, written not just by Jewish people but by many peoples of the ancient world, is distinguished by its philosophical approach to questions about the meaning of life. For example, the book of Job asks the deep, hard questions about suffering. The book of Proverbs asks the more practical questions about how we should live and why.

The book of Ecclesiastes is like Job in its deep questions about existence, but it also in parts resembles Proverbs in its practical observations about everyday life. Scholars have argued that the Song of Songs can rightly join the wisdom literature, as it deals with questions concerning the nature of love.

Both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs have traditionally been attributed to King Solomon, but the authorship of both books has in recent generations been the subject of dispute. Each study will address this question, but certainly we cannot fail to note the common textual references to this king of Jerusalem, who is presented in both books as seeking something worthy and lasting amid all the pomp and splendor of human wealth and royalty. Whoever wrote these books at the least resembles the Solomon of Proverbs who understood the power of words—poetic words in particular. Song of Songs in its entirety and Ecclesiastes in alternating sections offer particularly beautiful examples of Hebrew poetry. A basic introduction to this poetry is included in a separate introductory section and is intended to help make the study of this poetry more clear, profitable, and enjoyable.

Through these books, both part of God's inspired Word, we not only peer back into the life of the kingdom long ago; we also peer deep into eternal truths for every member of Christ's kingdom now. May the Lord bless our study of these two Old Testament treasures.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POETRY

Poetry speaks to us as whole people, appealing in unique ways to our imaginations and emotions as well as to our intellects. Song of Songs is one long love poem or series of poems. In Ecclesiastes, sections of poetry alternate with sections of prose. If God inspired so much poetry in these books (and indeed throughout the Scriptures), then it must be important and good for us to take in the poetic form with understanding and enjoyment.

When we read Old Testament poetry, we are reading lines originally written in the Hebrew language. Hebrew poetry's central characteristic is its balancing of "lines" (or units of thought) in a structure often called *parallelism*. What a blessing that this characteristic, in God's providence, can be communicated in translation—unlike such characteristics as rhythm and rhyme. The nature of Hebrew poetry makes it crucial to use a translation that presents the poetry in discernible lines. Most often, two (or sometimes three) parallel lines balance together to create meaning. There are three generally accepted kinds of parallelism:

1. In *synonymous parallelism*, the second line basically repeats the idea of the first line, in different words (and usually adding new shades of meaning):

I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys. (Song 2:1)

Through sloth the roof sinks in,
and through indolence the house leaks. (Eccl. 10:18)

The verses from Ecclesiastes 10 offer examples of poetic proverbs, parallel lines which present practical wisdom in a poetic nutshell.

2. In *antithetic parallelism*, the second line presents a contrasting idea:

The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him. (Eccl. 10:12)

3. In *synthetic parallelism*, the second line continues or adds to the meaning of the first:

As an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
so is my beloved among the young men. (Song 2:3)

Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days. (Eccl. 11:1)

The other outstanding characteristic of Hebrew poetry (and of most poetry) is its *imagery*, or pictures. We should watch for these pictures, try to *see* them, muse over them, and relish them. For example, what happens through the verses above when we picture the beloved as a rose or a lily—or when we picture her lover as “an apple tree among the trees of the forest”? What do

we grasp through the picture of casting bread upon the water? How will we connect the picture of the sun rising and setting and rising again to the sense of vanity and meaninglessness that the writer of Ecclesiastes feels? All of Scripture asks us to take in pictures: pictures of shepherds, water, light and dark, bread, paths, and on and on.

We will do well to watch the words carefully in these books, as in all of the books whose words are breathed out by God through the writers he used.

INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is a book about trying to make sense of this quickly passing, unpredictable, unfair life on earth. It is a book for questioners of all kinds. It is a book for skeptics. It is an honest book. In some ways, it is a shocking book to find in Scripture. What are we supposed to do with this cry of “Vanity of vanities. . . . All is vanity!”? People do not often say such things in the context of a community of faith.

People do say such things on their way to faith. The book of Ecclesiastes is not a bleak, repetitive cry of just one despairing note. It is more like a two-part invention, with higher and lower voices pulling back and forth until the resolution at the end. Ecclesiastes vividly portrays two perspectives: the “under the sun” perspective does not admit God into the picture, and the other perspective lines up everything in relation to one sovereign Creator God. Some scholars conclude that the book was originally written by an unbelieving writer, and that another, God-fearing writer later tried to help by adding some more positive sections about God and the goodness of life.

However, I hope you will find that a careful journey through the text reveals something closer to this: a work of art communicated in the voice of one man who introduces himself at

the beginning, who tells all about his battle between these two perspectives as he tried to make sense of the world, and who ends up offering his clear conclusion that following God is the only way to go. He shapes his journey in the tradition of wisdom literature composed by many “wise men” throughout the ancient world (see the General Introduction). Such literature had a dark, contemplative side, as in the book of Job, and it also included a strain of lighter, practical wisdom, as in the book of Proverbs. Ecclesiastes, in asking its basic questions about the meaning of life, incorporates both aspects, combining some of the darker, weightier questions with a sometimes more reflective, practical tone and content.

Who is this wisdom writer? Verse 1 of chapter 1 points clearly to Solomon, who was “the son of David, king in Jerusalem”—and who was also, of course, known for his wisdom. Various questions (such as why he did not name himself as he did in Proverbs) have led some scholars to dispute Solomon’s authorship and to offer various theories about later writers taking on the person and voice of Solomon. Many trustworthy thinkers today still take the text’s plain pointing to Solomon at face value. Whether the writer was Solomon or someone taking on Solomon’s persona, clearly he wanted to speak in some larger way than simply in his own named voice, and so he called himself Qoheleth (translated “Preacher” or “Convener” or “Teacher”). The title makes sense. Perhaps more than any other book in Scripture, this book deals with and speaks to a large, universal audience: a generic, unspecified “Preacher” would therefore be appropriate. And yet, as study of the book will show, the specifics of Solomon’s life emerge clearly. It is true that no historical passages enlighten us concerning Solomon’s repentance, after many years of turning his heart away from the Lord (see Lesson Five). It is an educated guess, but it is certainly not hard to imagine that he came back to the God he had known and loved so well, and that the Lord’s anointed

was graciously recalled in the end. The voice of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes has known much, tried much, and seen much; he has been sobered by the reality of coming death; such a voice would fit a repentant Solomon toward the end of his life. Of one thing we can be sure: that God through his Spirit inspired this writer—that these words are, as Ecclesiastes 12:11 puts it, “given by one Shepherd.” The Lord God is the Shepherd who guided the writer of Ecclesiastes to grapple so honestly with the struggles of time and eternity. In this study, I have simply called the writer of Ecclesiastes what he called himself, so as to avoid controversy and also to hear the text as the writer himself intended it to be heard.

In Ecclesiastes, the plain meaning of many passages does not always jump right out! It is not a simple book. It is made up of a progression of perspectives and pictures, and it winds around in circles, in a literary tradition that sometimes seems alien to a logical, Western mind. Often the pattern of the words and pictures is crucial to the meaning. As you come across key words and phrases in the course of the study, it may be helpful to mark them in your Bible to make the patterns more visible. A group of “under the sun” phrases or a few clustered mentions of God may indicate a certain perspective emerging or reemerging. Key themes will appear in relation to the different perspectives: fear and joy, for example, regularly emerge in relation to God, but injustice, foolish words, and futile labor continually frustrate everyone under the sun.

The final message of the book is to “fear God and keep his commandments.” The world of Ecclesiastes includes God, commandments, vows and sacrifices at a temple, consciousness of sin and judgment—all the most basic elements of the Israelites’ community of faith. But the struggle of the speaker is a basic one: coming to acknowledge the existence and the rule of God. It is God (Elohim) who appears here—never the more personal, covenant-making LORD (Yahweh). Ecclesiastes portrays

the initial steps and struggles of faith, which grow into knowing the Lord, and ultimately into knowing Jesus Christ.

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes does not know the name of Jesus. And yet, to the eye of one who knows that name, Jesus Christ is the beginning and the end of the Preacher's search. He is the Wisdom from above the sun, which reveals all earthly wisdom to be futile and foolish. He is the Creator, the Judge, the Shepherd toward whom the Preacher is drawn. He is the bread and wine the Preacher celebrates, the giver of the white robe he wears, and the very substance of the Word he receives. To take in this book as part of the Bible's whole story of redemption makes it even more lovely, as the basic melodies echo with all sorts of overtones and harmonies in the air around them.

May the words of the wise be like goads to us, their collected sayings like nails firmly fixed—given by one Shepherd.

Lesson 1 (Eccl. 1)

WHO, WHAT, AND HOW?

Chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes offers a brilliant introduction to the whole book. Who is the speaker? What is the problem? What is the method of solving it? These three questions not only set forth the scope of the book but also draw us into the book's process of questioning. We feel the intensity of the Preacher's search, and we identify with it, because he is asking our own most fundamental questions about how to make sense of what we see and experience in our brief span of time on earth.

DAY ONE—WHO IS THE SPEAKER?

To begin, read through the first chapter of Ecclesiastes. What are your first impressions of this speaker?

LESSON 1 (ECCL. 1)

We first meet the speaker as “the Preacher” in Ecclesiastes 1:1. Some translations just call him “Qoheleth”—the actual Hebrew word, meaning “one who assembles or calls together.” In fact, our title “Ecclesiastes” comes from the Greek translation of “Qoheleth.” This title for the speaker appears three times in Ecclesiastes 1, once in the middle of the book (7:27), and three times at the end.

1. What do we learn of this Preacher in Ecclesiastes 12:9–10?

2. What else do we learn of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 1:12?

3. How do the following verses relate Solomon to the one named Qoheleth?

- 1 Kings 2:10–12

- 1 Kings 4:29–34

- 1 Kings 8:1–2, 5, 14, 22, 65–66

4a. Note that the Preacher, in the book's first and final lines, is introduced in the third person ("he"). But in the main

LESSON 1 (ECCL. 1)

body of the book, beginning in Ecclesiastes 1:12, how does the Preacher refer to himself?

- b. How might this narrative perspective affect the book and our reading of it?

DAY TWO—WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

- I. What general observations would you make about the book's opening prologue/poem in Ecclesiastes 1:2–11?

For reflection: The Preacher states the main problem of the book in the sudden, dramatic cry of Ecclesiastes 1:2. Look briefly to Ecclesiastes 12:8 to see that he will unify the book by returning to this ringing cry at the book's end; only then will he provide the proper solution to the problem of the book.

2. The Hebrew word for “vanity” is *hebel*, which connotes something unsubstantial or fleeting—like a breath or a vapor. (“Vanity of vanities” is a Hebrew superlative, implying not just much, or more, but the *most* vanity possible.) This word *hebel* occurs thirty-six times in the book. Look through just the first two chapters: How many repetitions of this word do you find? Comments?

- 3a. The Greek version of *hebel* appears in Romans 8:20, translated into English as “futility” or “frustration.” Many believe that this is the only New Testament reference or allusion to Ecclesiastes. In Romans 8:20–21, what do you learn about this futility?

LESSON 1 (ECCL. 1)

- b. According to Genesis 3:17–19, when and why was the creation subjected to futility in this way?

- c. According to the same verses in Genesis (3:17–19), to what is Adam made subject at this point?

4. Now read Ecclesiastes 1:3, and in the context of these other verses, comment on the Preacher's frustration.

3. Think on the lines of Ecclesiastes 1:8. How is it a response to the three preceding verses?

4. In Ecclesiastes 1:9–11, how does he answer the question he asked in Ecclesiastes 1:3?

5. In what sense is the Preacher right to say that “there is nothing new under the sun”?

3. The book first mentions God (“Elohim”: the sovereign, Creator God) in Ecclesiastes 1:13. What is the initial perspective on God here?

4. The end of Ecclesiastes 1:13 reads most literally: “What a burdensome toil God has laid on the sons of the man,” or, on the sons of “Adam.” How might the more literal translation enlarge our perspective on this verse?

5. How do the two pictures in the proverb of Ecclesiastes 1:15 appropriately sum up this little section?

LESSON 1 (ECCL. 1)

5. We've seen that Ecclesiastes already points our thoughts back to Genesis and the stark reality of a fallen world cut off from God. In conclusion, take a peek ahead and meditate for a few minutes on the very end of the story, in Revelation 21:1–5. What perspective do these verses bring to Ecclesiastes 1?

Notes for Lesson 1

