

Introducing the Old Testament
Worksheet for Week 6
Ecclesiastes

Our study topic for this week is the book of Ecclesiastes. This wisdom book is often overlooked, but is enormously important when we try to understand the world in which we live and raise our children. Frankly, an Ecclesiastes-like world-view permeates many college campuses, as well as our popular culture – Live for the moment! The one who dies with the most toys wins!

I suggest you begin by first reading the chapter on Ecclesiastes in Philip Yancey’s book. Then, read the introduction to Ecclesiastes in your study bible and, if you have one, the entry on the book in your Bible dictionary. Then read through the passages suggested on this worksheet. The book is pretty short, so consider reading it all! As with the other Old Testament books, a freer translation, like the New Living Translation, may help you.

What do we make of this book!?

You don’t have to read much of Ecclesiastes before you find yourself asking how this book made it into the Bible. At first glance, the book seems to endorse a despairing view of life and creation. In the opening phrases, we are introduced to the Teacher’s teaching: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The Hebrew word that the NRSV translates as “vanity” is *hebel*, which literally means breath or vapor. The NRSV retains the archaic word “vanity” because of its long tradition in English (e.g., you may remember the book and movie, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*). Here, the word means something close to “meaninglessness” and that is how the NIV renders it.

There seem to be as many approaches to this book as there are commentators, so don’t be surprised if you find it challenging. One way to see the book’s structure is to compare it to Job. In Job, there are the introductory scenes, followed by the long (and fruitless!) speeches by Job and his friends, followed by the arrival of God and the restoration of Job’s fortunes. Ecclesiastes opens with a short prologue where the narrator tells of the Teacher’s sayings (1:1 – 1:11). Then there are 11 or so chapters where the Teacher speaks for himself (also fruitlessly!). At the end of the book, our narrator returns and offers us some perspective (God’s perspective!) on the Teacher’s philosophy. (12:9-14)

Hill & Walton¹ suggest that there are four main themes in Ecclesiastes:

- We should not expect life to be self-fulfilling.
- Our frustrations in life are unavoidable.
- We must accept the seasons of life.
- We can enjoy life only through a God-centered world-view.

Many Old Testament writers paint pictures for us, calling us to look for the truths behind the picture. For example, Micah 4:1-8 is a picture of God’s kingdom. I tend to see Ecclesiastes as a picture of a life lived without God. It is a bleak picture that pulls no punches. If there is no God or if we choose to live as if there is no God, then life is “meaningless,” and we might as well “eat, drink, and be merry.” There are a few brighter moments in the book, but they only lure one back into the Teacher’s world of the absurd, back into the his efforts to make his way through his meaningless life. Actually, if you believe your life has no purpose or meaning, his advice is pretty good!

Ecclesiastes testifies to Israel’s willingness to confront the hard realities of life, the sense of purposelessness and drift that afflict us all from time to time. Israel saw that for mature, caring adults, life is really not very simple and it is not a life of endless victories. The ordinary experiences of life test our faith. Still, as the narrator tells us at the end of the book ~ when all has been said and all the absurdities of life confronted, we are called to our duty: to fear God and obey him.

¹ Hill, Andrew E. & Walton, John H. *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000)

Bible Readings for Week 6

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 The Prologue</p>	<p>Day 2 Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:23 Fulfillment can't be found</p>
<p>Day 3 Ecclesiastes 2:24-3:15 Since fulfillment can't be found, the solution is to quit looking for it!</p>	<p>Day 4 Ecclesiastes 8:1-17 There are limits on human power</p>
<p>Day 5 Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 The Epilogue</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>