

Reading Ecclesiastes

The Big Picture

1:1 Author's Intro

1:2–12:8 The "Teacher's" words

12:9–14 Author's Conclusion

****Key Observation:** Ecclesiastes is not *written* by the "teacher." Someone else, the author, has collected the teacher's sayings and words and organized them into this book. *BUT*, 12:9–14 shows that although the author sees value in the preacher's words, *he does not endorse all of his teachings.*

Main Themes in the Teacher's Musings:

1. Death and the cyclical patterns of the world call all human effort into question
 - Cyclical patterns: 1:2–11
 - Death is the great equalizer: 3:17–21, 9:1–3, 9:9–10
2. Wisdom and fearing God have some practical benefit...
 - Wisdom makes for a better quality of life: 7:11–12, 9:13–18
 - Fearing God can lengthen one's life: 8:11–13
3. ...but death brings any naivety or idealism about wisdom and success into question: 2:12–16
4. There is no clear connection between one's moral behavior and the consequences. Wise people still suffer, and foolish or wicked people succeed: 9:11–12 (so don't be too extreme in your moral efforts, 7:15–20)
5. God's justice and ways are ultimately inscrutable: 8:16–17
6. So enjoy whatever good things that come your way, this is "the gift of God": 2:24–26, 3:12–13, 5:18–20, 8:14–15, 9:9–10

Main Themes in the author's Conclusion (12:9–14)

1. Qohelet's words are valuable and provocative: 12:9–11
2. But one must be wary of their skepticism: 12:12
3. Fearing God and keeping the Torah is the bottom line: 12:13–14

There can never be a real, final hope for man unless man first faces and fully takes into account the utter hopelessness of death.... No man can really find peace in life unless he has first made his peace with death. Within the larger context of the Bible, the teacher in Ecclesiastes is essentially a kind of negative theologian, asking questions that can be answered only by a future revelation of God, and clearing the road for this revelation by smashing any and all false hopes to pieces.... Ecclesiastes is the Bible's "night before Christmas."... He shows us human self-sufficiency stretched to its absolute limit and found sadly wanting.
– Robert L. Short, *A Time to Be Born–A Time to Die.*

