

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Ecclesiastes: Making Sense of Life

The book of Ecclesiastes can be perplexing to the casual reader. But a few keys unlock a message that reveals it to be the most relevant book in the Bible for modern man.

“‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’” (Eccl. 1:2).

The word “vanity” in this opening line — meaning futility, emptiness, or meaninglessness — sets the tone for the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes. The author struggles to find some kind of purpose in life, but, at least initially, a purpose escapes him: “all is vanity and grasping for the wind” (1:14). To the casual reader, Ecclesiastes is the most depressing book in the Bible.

But God put this little book in the Bible for a reason, and the pessimism that pervades its pages is there for a reason. As difficult as the quest might be, we can profit from exploring the Preacher’s painful view of life.

Three keys unlock the book’s message for the modern reader. Read with these keys in mind, and it makes sense.

First, unlike other Biblical writers, the author of Ecclesiastes writes from the standpoint of personal experience, not divine guidance. Nowhere in this book do we read, “thus says the Lord”; instead, the author tells us again and

again, “I have seen” (1:14; 5:13; 6:1; 10:5; etc.). In other words, he is describing his attempt to figure out the purpose of life on his own, without any direction from an outside source. Like every skeptic before and after him, the author is determined to figure out life on his own. However, this approach restricts his evaluation of life to a very narrow view of reality. His range of observation is vast, but it is still limited to what is done “under the sun”—a phrase that is used 29 times in the book. With that self-imposed limitation, his observations may or may not be valid.

Second, the author is obsessed, not with the general rules by which life should be lived, but with the exceptions to those rules. In this respect, Ecclesiastes is the antithesis of Proverbs. Proverbs catalogues general maxims which will lead to a happy, successful life; Ecclesiastes dwells on the occasional exceptions to those maxims.

Finally, unlike modern skeptics, the author has an open mind, a willingness to learn from his quest. While he starts from a position of skepticism, his inves-

tigations teach him truths that believers take for granted. That’s why, despite all the gloom and pessimism that pervades the book, God makes frequent appearances throughout the book (2:24; 3:13-18; 5:18-20; etc.). The author comes to realize that only by acknowledging the overarching hand of Providence can life on this earth make any sense.

If we study Ecclesiastes with these three keys in hand, the book reveals itself to be perfectly suited to a skeptical age such as our own. It acknowledges that life can be unfair, full of contradictions and pain, having no obvious purpose. But it also points us to our Creator, who gives life meaning and purpose.

The author began his quest with a despairing premise, “all is vanity.” But his search finally revealed that even the smallest details of life have meaning—if performed under the watchful eyes of God: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:13-14).

– David King