



The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes

Script References

Introduction

00:00–01:04

Jon: We're exploring three books in the Bible known as the wisdom literature: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. And they're all asking the question: What does it mean to live well in this world?

Tim: So we've looked at Proverbs, who you can think of as a bright young teacher.

Jon: She's all about pursuing wisdom, an attribute of God that's woven into reality. And she's optimistic that if you use wisdom, you will build a successful life.

Tim: But then we come to Ecclesiastes, who's more like this sharp middle-aged critic. And he says: Critic: "You think using wisdom will bring you success? You'd better think again because life here under the sun is meaningless."¹

1. Ecclesiastes 1:14

Jon: And that's a phrase he uses a lot in this book.

Tim: But to understand this book, we have to realize first that we're hearing two voices.

Jon: So first there's the teacher, and we've been calling him the critic. He's the main voice in the book.

Tim: But he is introduced to us by another figure, the author. And he's the one who has collected the critic's words, and then at the end of the book, summarizes everything and gets the final word.

Three Disturbing Things About the World

01:05–03:19

Jon: So why does the author want us to hear from the critic?

Tim: He wants to turn your view of the world upside-down, and he's going to let the critic explore three really disturbing things about the world.

Jon: And we should warn you. These are pretty intense.

Tim: Yeah. So the first is the march of time, or as the critic says:

Critic: "Generations come and generations go,
but the earth, it's been here long before us,
and will be long after.
No one remembers people from long ago,
and all the people yet to come,
they too will be forgotten by those who come after them."²

2. Ecclesiastes 1:4, 11

Tim: So on a cosmic scale, you and I, we are just a blip. Stars are born and then they die and form planets which orbit new stars. And those planets, they change over time and eventually burn up.

Jon: And amidst this cosmic backdrop, my entire existence is like a blink in time.

Tim: Which leads to the critic's second disturbing observation, that we are all going to die.

Critic: "Humans face the same fate as the animals, death. All people—the righteous and the wicked; the good and the bad; those who offer sacrifices to God and those who do not—they all share the same destiny. All this activity and madness, then we all join the dead."³

3. Ecclesiastes 3:19, 9:2-3

Jon: Man, this book is depressing.

Tim: And so is the final disturbing thing for the critic, and that is life's random nature.

Jon: So in Proverbs, life isn't random. There's a clear cause-and-effect relationship between doing the right thing and being rewarded.

Tim: But the fact is, life doesn't always work that way. The critic has observed a glitch in the system. He calls it chance, or in his words:

Critic: "The race doesn't always go to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food always come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the educated;
time and chance happen to them all."⁴

4. Ecclesiastes 9:11

Tim: So his point is that you can't really control anything in life. It's just way too unpredictable.

Jon: So if I want to master life?

Tim: Then you're setting yourself up for a fall.

All Is Hevel

03:20–04:06

Tim: Now, throughout the book, the critic uses a metaphor to tie together all of these disturbing ideas. Nearly forty times he says that everything in life is hevel. It's a Hebrew word that means "smoke" or "vapor." Like smoke, life is beautiful and mysterious.

Jon: It takes one shape and before you know it, it takes a new shape.

Tim: And smoke looks solid. But try and grab it, it'll slip right through your fingers.

Jon: And when you're stuck in the thick of it, like fog, it's impossible to see clearly.

Tim: Now our modern translations have lost the metaphor, and they usually translate hevel as "meaningless." But if you read closely, the critic isn't saying that life has no meaning, but rather that it's meaning is never clear. Like smoke, life is confusing—it's disorienting and uncontrollable.

The Surprising Wisdom of Ecclesiastes

04:07–05:01

Jon: So what are we supposed to do with all of this?

Tim: Well surprisingly, the critic first of all acknowledges the perspective of Proverbs. He says it's a really good idea to learn wisdom and to live in the fear of the Lord.

Jon: Really? I mean, he just said that doesn't guarantee success.

Tim: But he knows it's the right thing to do. But secondly, and more often, he says that since you can't control your life, you should stop trying. Learn to hold things with an open hand because you really only have control over one thing, and that's your attitude towards the present moment. Stop worrying, he says, and choose to enjoy a good conversation with a friend, or the sun on your face, or a good meal with people that you care about.

Jon: The simple things in life.

Tim: Yes, and both the good things and the bad because both are rich gifts from God. And that's the surprising wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

Jon: Listening to the critic is painful and can lead you into some dark places.

Tim: And that's why the author speaks up at the end of the book. He doesn't want you to lose hope. He wants to make you humble—into someone who trusts that life has meaning even when you can't make sense of it, that one day God will clear the hevel and bring his justice on all that we've done. And so he tells us that the proper response to all this is to fear the Lord and keep his commandments.

Jon: And that's the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, there's one more voice in the Bible's wisdom literature, and that's the book of Job.

Tim: And he will bring us the final much needed perspective on our journey into wisdom.