

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Ecclesiastes: Sitting with Cynicism and Gratitude

Preliminary: *Ecclesiastes* is not a book for new Christians or for those who cannot sit with theological tension. Possibly more than any other book in the Hebrew Bible – *Ecclesiastes* invites us into the awareness that we all utilize a lens in our reading of the Bible. There is no “God’s-eye” perspective available to the human reader. Experience does not and cannot replace Scripture, yet experience inevitably shapes **HOW WE READ** Scripture.

Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful. – Seneca, The history and decline of the Roman Empire, 1776.

What are the experiences of the common person, of the wise and of rulers that impact the lens of how religious belief is appropriated? Can we be common people who discern where religion is true - wise people who decipher where religion is false - and leaders who avoid utilizing religion as a means of control over common people?

So, why begin the study of *Ecclesiastes* with such a cynical thought? Because this book asks us to create space for cynicism while also inviting us to embody hope.

I. Intro - *Ecclesiastes* holds hope and cynicism together: not as a passive shrug that says “nothing matters,” but as a trust that says we cannot master outcomes, so we learn to live faithfully within them. Its wisdom is neither naïve optimism nor nihilism; it is the courage to admit what we cannot know, the humility to release what we cannot control, and the hope to receive what still can be enjoyed as grace.

A. The **world BEHIND the text** is the historical setting of Israel’s **wisdom tradition**—likely shaped by post-exilic questions about power, wealth, suffering, and mortality; the **world OF the text** is Qoheleth’s probing meditation on life “under the sun” as vapor, toil, mystery, and gift; and the **world IN FRONT of the text** is the reader’s invitation to relinquish control, resist easy answers, fear God, and receive ordinary life with gratitude.

II. Authorship / Date (c. 4th BCE) - *Ecclesiastes* presents itself through a Solomonic voice, but the authorship/date question depends upon whether its voice is literal, or literary.

A. Traditionally, many Jewish and conservative Christian interpreters identify Qoheleth (translated as “the Teacher” or “the Preacher”) with Solomon, since the speaker is “son of David, king in Jerusalem” and claims unmatched wisdom and wealth.

B. However, several details make modern scholars think the book was written later, likely in the Persian or early Hellenistic period: **Eccl. 1:12** says, “I the Teacher **was** king over Israel in Jerusalem,” which sounds like a retrospective literary perspective rather than Solomon speaking during his reign. Solomon died while still king, according to **1 Kings 11:41–43**, so he would not naturally describe himself as someone who “was king.” The Hebrew of *Ecclesiastes* fits a later, post-exilic stage of the language; the book appears to contain Persian-era “loanwords,” and scholars such as Choon-Leong Seow note that money or coinage (which is a major theme in Eccl.) was not minted until the Persian period.

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C. The basic position is: *Ecclesiastes* may use Solomon as a *wisdom persona*—but the book itself likely reflects later authorship and perspectives.

III. Major Themes

- A. Life is elusive, temporary, not easily mastered and resists simple explanations.
- B. Human effort cannot guarantee lasting meaning (e.g., work, achievement, wisdom, pleasure, wealth, legacy - may be good, but they cannot bear the weight of guarantee).
- C. Certainty is not the same as faith. And, faith is less about possessing answers and more about trusting amid mystery.
- D. Receive ordinary life as a gift. Eat, drink, work, love, and enjoy the portion given by God. Since we cannot control the future, we learn to receive the present.
- E. Reverence. Live responsibly before God, but relinquish the illusion that you can see, explain, fix, or control everything.

IV. Vanity (Q- Which human endeavors are done in vain?)

Eccl. Ch 1 – The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ²Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! **All is vanity.** ³What do people gain from all the **toil** at which they toil under the sun? ⁴A generation **goes**, and a generation **comes**, but the earth remains forever (**in context, unchanged**). ⁵The sun rises, and the sun goes down and hurries to the place where it rises. ⁶The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. ⁷All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. ⁸All things are **wearisome**, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing or the ear filled with hearing. ⁹What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is **nothing new under the sun**. ¹⁰Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been in the ages before us. ¹¹The people of long ago are **not remembered**, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

¹²I, the Teacher, **was** king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an **unhappy business** that God has given to humans to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun, and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. ¹⁵What is **crooked cannot be made straight**, and what is lacking cannot be counted. ¹⁶I said to myself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a **chasing after wind**. ¹⁸For in much wisdom is much vexation, and **those who increase knowledge increase sorrow**.

A. Eccl. 1:1-2, 8 “All is vanity” or “wearisome.”

v.3 Toil / Work

v.4, 11 “generations come and go” – without legacy / no one is remembered.

vv.9-10 “nothing new under the sun.”

vv.12-14, 16-18 The pursuit of wisdom brings sorrow without certainty.

v. 15 “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.”

1. The key word **hevel**—often translated “**vanity**,” “meaningless,” or “vapor”—doesn’t necessarily mean life has no value; it suggests life is elusive, fragile, hard to grasp, and

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impossible to master. *Ecclesiastes* explores the absurdity of life when human beings try to extract ultimate meaning from what is temporary, unpredictable, and beyond their control. So, the cynical edge remains intact while still allowing room for hope, reverence, and the simple gifts of life.

V. Que Sera Sera and Carpe Diem

A. Que sera sera passages (“Whatever Will Be, Will Be”):

Eccl. 1:15 — “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.”

Eccl. 3:1–8 — “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...”

Eccl. 3:11 — “He has made everything suitable for its time... yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

Eccl. 7:13–14 — “Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider...”

Eccl. 8:7 — “they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be?”

Eccl. 9:11–12 — “The race is not to the swift... but time and chance happen to them all.”

B. Carpe Diem passages (“Seize the Day”):

Eccl. 2:24–25; 3:22; 5:18–20; 8:15 — “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil... this also, I saw, is from the hand of God.”

Eccl. 3:12–13 — “There is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live... it is God’s gift.”

Eccl. 9:7–10 — “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart... Enjoy life with the wife whom you love... Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might...”

Eccl. 11:7–10 — “Rejoice, young man, while you are young...”

C. A helpful way to frame them together: *Ecclesiastes*’ “Que sera sera” says: you do not control the whole. Its “Carpe Diem” says: therefore, receive the part given to you with gratitude, joy, and reverence.

VI. *Ecclesiastes*: a Critique of Certainty

Abraham doesn’t look certain. Israel argues with God. Job protests. The psalmists rage. Jeremiah isn’t certain. The disciples aren’t certain. Thomas certainly isn’t. Even Jesus cries out from the cross in words that Christians have struggled to understand for two thousand years. The Bible isn’t embarrassed by uncertainty. Why are we? What Scripture consistently calls us toward is trust—not certainty.

VII. The Hope

The hope of *Ecclesiastes* is not the denial of anxiety, grief, or absurdity, but the quiet courage to release what was never ours to control, and to discover that even in a crooked world, we can still experience joy and approach every day with grace.

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