

Contents

1	The Rise and Fall of the House of Solomon — <i>December 30–January 5</i> —————	5
2	Nothing New Under the Sun — <i>January 6–12</i> —————	17
3	“All That My Eyes Desired” — <i>January 13–19</i> —————	29
4	Of Being and Time — <i>January 20–26</i> —————	41
5	More Life Under the Sun — <i>January 27–February 2</i> —————	53
6	Rich Man, Poor Man — <i>February 3–9</i> —————	65
7	“Striving After the Wind” — <i>February 10–16</i> —————	77
8	God Made Man Upright? What Happened? — <i>February 17–23</i> —————	89
9	Seeing Through a Glass Darkly — <i>February 24–March 2</i> —————	101
10	“Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do” — <i>March 3–9</i> —————	113
11	Dead Flies and Snake Charmers: More Life Under the Sun — <i>March 10–16</i> —	125
12	The Way of the Wind — <i>March 17–23</i> —————	137
13	The Conclusion of the Matter — <i>March 24–30</i> —————	149

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ECCLESIASTES: *The Painful*

***Solomon
shows us
that earthly
vanities fail to
satisfy the
longing soul.***

Unlike other books in Scripture, which often begin with a strong affirmation about God (“The Word of the Lord to . . .”), Ecclesiastes commences with a cry about the meaninglessness of life. “Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity.” This opening sounds more like modern secular writers than a prophet of Yahweh. Nevertheless, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe that Ecclesiastes was placed in the canon of Scripture because God has in it a message for us.

Nothing, though, about this book, its message, or even its origin, has avoided controversy. For instance, many scholars claim that the author, whoever it was—wasn’t King Solomon. Of course, these are often the same scholars who claim that Daniel was written in the second century B.C. or that Moses never wrote Genesis, so we can dismiss them out of hand. We are, instead, proceeding on the assumption that Solomon was the writer, an assumption based on Christian and Jewish tradition, on internal evidence inside the book that points to Solomon as the author, as well as on Ellen White’s statements that “the book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age, after he had fully proved that all the pleasures earth is able to give are empty and unsatisfying. He there shows how impossible it is for the vanities of the world to meet the longings of the soul. His conclusion is that it is wisdom to enjoy with gratitude the good gifts of God, and to do right; for all our works will be brought into judgment.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1164.

Yet, anyone who has ever studied Ecclesiastes knows its challenges. Some texts are obscure, their meanings difficult to discern; sometimes, though, the greatest challenge comes not from when we don’t know what the texts mean but when we do. Thus, a few simple points of interpretation will greatly help us as we undertake this study.

To begin, Solomon was writing at the end of his life, a life full of

Perspective

bitterness and anger at himself and his apostasy. What's unique about the book is that in some places Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone alienated from God. Like modern authors, he's giving us thoughts that flow directly from his head. We see the world as it appears through his eyes.

In such places it's well to heed the words of *The SDA Bible Commentary*: "Those portions of Ecclesiastes that relate the experience and reasoning of [Solomon's] years of apostasy are not to be taken as representing the mind and will of the Spirit. Nevertheless, they are an inspired record of what he actually thought and did during that time [see *Prophets and Kings*, p. 79], and that record constitutes a sober warning against the wrong kind of thought and action. . . . Passages such as these should not be wrested from their context and made to teach some supposed truth that Inspiration never intended them to teach."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1060.

How do we know, though, which are those passages? This question leads to the second important principle for studying Ecclesiastes: We must read it in the context of the whole Scripture. What is Scripture's basic message about life, death, and our purpose in life? When a text of Ecclesiastes seems to conflict with the grand themes of the Bible, we can be sure it's Solomon reflecting on life from the perspective of alienation and separation from the Lord. These texts, of course, shouldn't be used as the basis of theology; they should be used, instead, as practical warnings about what happens when we lose sight of God, our Creator and Redeemer.

In the end, that's what this book is really about: It's God showing us how cynical, bitter, and empty life is apart from the knowledge of Him. It's our hope that we can learn this lesson from our study of Ecclesiastes, in contrast to how its author, Solomon, had to learn it—the hard way.

James W. Zackrison was director of the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries departments at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists when he wrote this guide.

How to Use This Teachers Edition

Get Motivated to Explore, Practice, and Apply

We hope that this format of the teachers edition will encourage adult Sabbath School class members to do just that—explore, practice, and apply. Each weekly teachers lesson takes your class through the following learning process, based on the Natural Learning Cycle:

1. Why is this lesson important to me? (Motivate);
2. What do I need to know from God’s Word? (Explore);
3. How can I practice what I’ve learned from God’s Word? (Practice); and
4. What can I do with what I’ve learned from God’s Word? (Apply).

And for teachers who haven’t had time to prepare during the week for class, there is a one-page outline of easy-to-digest material in the “I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .” section.

Here’s a closer look at the four steps of the Natural Learning Cycle and suggestions for how you, the teacher, can approach each one:

Step 1—Motivate: Link the learners’ experiences to the central concept of the lesson to show why the lesson is relevant to their lives. Help them answer the question, Why is this week’s lesson important to me?

Step 2—Explore: Present learners with the biblical information they need to understand the central concept of the lesson. (Such information could include facts about the people; the setting; cultural, historical, and/or geographical details; the plot or what’s happening; and conflicts or tension of the texts you are studying.) Help learners answer the question, What do I need to know from God’s Word?

Step 3—Practice: Provide learners with opportunities to practice the information given in Step 2. This is a crucial step; information alone is not enough to help a person grow in Christ. Assist the learners in answering the question, How can I apply to my life what I’ve learned?

Step 4—Apply: Finally, encourage learners to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Invite them to make a life response to the lesson. This step provides individuals and groups with opportunities for creative self-expression and exploration. All such activities should help learners answer the question, With God’s help, what can I do with what I’ve learned from this week’s lesson?

When teachers use material from each of these four steps, they will appeal to most every student in their class: those who enjoy talking about what’s happening in their lives, those who want more information about the texts being studied, those who want to know how it all fits in with real life, and those who want to get out and apply what they’ve learned.