

# WHO, WHAT, AND HOW?

Chapter I of Ecclesiastes offers a brilliant introduction to the whole book. Who is the speaker? What is the problem? What is the method of solving it? These three questions not only set forth the scope of the book but also draw us into the book's process of questioning. We feel the intensity of the Preacher's search, and we identify with it, because he is asking our own most fundamental questions about how to make sense of what we see and experience in our brief span of time on earth.

### DAY ONE—WHO IS THE SPEAKER?

To begin, read through the first chapter of Ecclesiastes. What are your first impressions of this speaker?

We first meet the speaker as "the Preacher" in Ecclesiastes I:I. Some translations just call him "Qoheleth"—the actual Hebrew word, meaning "one who assembles or calls together." In fact, our title "Ecclesiastes" comes from the Greek translation of "Qoheleth." This title for the speaker appears three times in Ecclesiastes I, once in the middle of the book (7:27), and three times at the end.

I. What do we learn of this Preacher in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10?

2. What else do we learn of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 1:12?

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- 3. How do the following verses relate Solomon to the one named Qoheleth?
  - I Kings 2:10-12

• I Kings 4:29-34

• I Kings 8:1-2, 5, 14, 22, 65-66

4a. Note that the Preacher, in the book's first and final lines, is introduced in the third person ("he"). But in the main

body of the book, beginning in Ecclesiastes 1:12, how does the Preacher refer to himself?

b. How might this narrative perspective affect the book and our reading of it?

DAY TWO—WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

I. What general observations would you make about the book's opening prologue/poem in Ecclesiastes I:2-II?

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For reflection: The Preacher states the main problem of the book in the sudden, dramatic cry of Ecclesiastes 1:2. Look briefly to Ecclesiastes 12:8 to see that he will unify the book by returning to this ringing cry at the book's end; only then will he provide the proper solution to the problem of the book.

2. The Hebrew word for "vanity" is hebel, which connotes something unsubstantial or fleeting—like a breath or a vapor. ("Vanity of vanities" is a Hebrew superlative, implying not just much, or more, but the most vanity possible.) This word hebel occurs thirty-six times in the book. Look through just the first two chapters: How many repetitions of this word do you find? Comments?

3a. The Greek version of *hebel* appears in Romans 8:20, translated into English as "futility" or "frustration." Many believe that this is the only New Testament reference or allusion to Ecclesiastes. In Romans 8:20–21, what do you learn about this futility?

b. According to Genesis 3:17–19, when and why was the creation subjected to futility in this way?

c. According to the same verses in Genesis (3:17–19), to what is Adam made subject at this point?

4. Now read Ecclesiastes I:3, and in the context of these other verses, comment on the Preacher's frustration.

5. Do you relate to the frustration expressed in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3? In what situations have you experienced or witnessed similar feelings?

6. From what viewpoint is the speaker looking at human toil? Page through the book and look for repeated occurrences of the last three words of Ecclesiastes 1:3. (They occur twenty-nine times in all.) Write down some thoughts concerning the perspective revealed by these words.

# Day Three—Elaborating on the Problem

What does the world look like through the eyes of a fallen man—searching under the sun, trying to find meaning in a fallen world?

I. In Ecclesiastes I:4, what aspect of human life stands out in contrast to the earth itself?

2. When the Preacher looks into the world of nature (vv. 5–7), what aspect of that world emerges, and how, through the three particular examples he chooses?

3. Think on the lines of Ecclesiastes 1:8. How is it a response to the three preceding verses?

4. In Ecclesiastes 1:9–11, how does he answer the question he asked in Ecclesiastes 1:3?

5. In what sense is the Preacher right to say that "there is nothing new under the sun"?

# Day Four—What Method Will the Preacher Use?

The Preacher has poured out the problem in the poetic prologue: life is fleeting and meaningless. Now he introduces his method of exploring this problem.

I. Ecclesiastes I:12–18 summarize his method in two brief cycles, which will be more fully developed in Ecclesiastes 2. How do the two cycles (Eccl. I:12–15 and I6–18) conclude similarly in their final two verses?

2. In the first cycle (vv. 12–15), what specific things does the Preacher want us to know about his search?

3. The book first mentions God ("Elohim": the sovereign, Creator God) in Ecclesiastes 1:13. What is the initial perspective on God here?

4. The end of Ecclesiastes I:13 reads most literally: "What a burdensome toil God has laid on the sons of the man," or, on the sons of "Adam." How might the more literal translation enlarge our perspective on this verse?

5. How do the two pictures in the proverb of Ecclesiastes I:15 appropriately sum up this little section?

6. In the second cycle (vv. 16–18), what is the method and focus of the search?

7. Find all the references to "wisdom" in Ecclesiastes I:12–18. From this context, what can we say about wisdom?

- 8. How do the following verses enlarge our understanding of wisdom?
  - Proverbs 9:10

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• Jeremiah 8:9

• Daniel 2:27–28

• I Corinthians I:18–25

# Day Five—Pondering This Search

I. What do the repeated pictures of the wind in Ecclesiastes I make you see, feel, and understand?

2. In the context of the whole of Ecclesiastes I, of what sort of vexation and sorrow does its final proverb (Eccl. I:18) speak? How have you perhaps experienced or witnessed this kind of vexation and sorrow?

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3. Many people regard Ecclesiastes as incredibly relevant to our modern culture. Just from your reading of Ecclesiastes I, in what ways do you find this to be true?

4. Which verses of Ecclesiastes I strike you most personally, and why?

5. We've seen that Ecclesiastes already points our thoughts back to Genesis and the stark reality of a fallen world cut off from God. In conclusion, take a peek ahead and meditate for a few minutes on the very end of the story, in Revelation 21:1–5. What perspective do these verses bring to Ecclesiastes 1?