

Reading Ecclesiastes

At the end of last week, you began reading the very relatable, but often confusing book of Ecclesiastes. We can certainly relate to the feelings expressed by the ‘preacher’—the frustrations of life in a fallen world. Yet, confusion involves the tone of the preacher’s message. In other words, how do we put the positive and negative statements (both of which are found in the book) together?

One often overlooked dimension in Ecclesiastes is that there are two ‘voices.’ We see this in terms of the pronouns used. We have a third-person narration (1:1-2 [and probably verses 3-11, as the narrator quoting the preacher]; 7:27; 12:8-14) and a first person ‘autobiography’ of sorts (1:12-7:26; 7:28-12:7). This does not necessarily mean more than one author (though this is debated), but it does mean two voices. The third-person narrator, though limited in length, seems more positive in tone, whereas the first-person monologue is predominately negative—even in the so-called ‘calls to enjoyment’ passages (e.g., 2:24-26).

Upon closer examination, it would appear that the two voices are centered around two perspectives. The negative perspective is associated with an ‘under-the-sun’ perspective (a phrase found 29X in the book; also, ‘under heaven’ and ‘upon earth’)—on how things appear, whereas the more positive perspective is associated with what we might call an ‘above-the-sun’ perspective (especially in 12:8-14).

Much more could be said about this but there is relevant application for us regarding this point. Living as children of God in a fallen world involves dealing with tension—namely, the tension between how things appear and how God says they really are. This is what Paul highlights in terms of walking by faith versus sight (2 Cor 5:7), and looking to the things that are unseen, not the things that are seen (2 Cor 4:18). Remember how the book of Job spoke of ‘wisdom’ not being found in the land of the living? In the midst of the pandemic and in combination with whatever else you may be going through at this time in your life, *what is your perspective?* Do you draw your conclusions primarily from what you see and how things appear ‘under the sun’? OR are you seeing things primarily by faith through the lens of God’s word? We know the right answer between those options, but we often struggle to live accordingly.

The 17th century puritan, Thomas Brooks, in his work, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* (1652), highlights a common temptation of the enemy which is especially relevant. We are tempted to sin and be drawn away from following after Christ because we see that often, the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous are oppressed. Indeed, this is a big struggle for the preacher in Ecclesiastes. Brooks goes on to offer scriptural remedies to temptations like these.

That is why it is so important to be in God’s word daily. Without it, we default to walking by sight and are prone to asking, ‘did God really say...?’ During these challenging days, keep seeking the Lord and keep reading!

Jason Hunt