

THE DILEMMA OF A WISE MAN

Study 1

Under the Sun



Ecclesiastes chapter 1

Ecclesiastes is a record of many sad conclusions arrived at by a man who obviously set out to explore the real meaning of life. It seemed to him that life was a matter of experiment! As the king's son, possessing wealth, wisdom and time, Solomon had every opportunity to do this. We shall study **chapter 2** in our next lesson, but it is worth noticing how deliberately he set out to sample all that he felt life could offer. Just notice how deep his concern went. **"I said in my heart." (2: 1) "I searched in my heart." (2: 3)** This is one of the recurring phrases in the book which emphasises the fact that the matters considered are not merely superficial but the product of deep thought.

Why should such a book as Ecclesiastes find its way into our Bible? Its atmosphere is very different from many other Scriptural writings. Yet it forms a part of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and holds an important place among these writings. Notice how the book begins and ends. **"Vanity of vanities, says the preacher; all is vanity." (1: 2)** Not a very bright start for us, is it? Then, **"Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity." (12: 8)** It ends as it begins; this sad verdict aptly describes all the energies of the writer as he sampled life. His pursuits set him problems and his problems, seemingly, were unanswered by his experience. We are going to study the problems of this book together, and as we do so we shall notice how wonderfully they can be answered in Christ as He is revealed in the New Testament.

Let us look, in this first study, at the phrase, **"Under the sun"**, This is often repeated throughout the book. It will prove interesting for you if you look through the book and mark the places where it occurs. It describes the SPHERE within which the writer viewed life. It is true to say that the thinking of the writer rarely rises higher than three areas.

1. **The Earth - "Under the sun". (1: 3)**
2. **Material values** - Pleasure, mirth, labour, etc.
3. **Himself** - Selfish interest: "I", "my", and "me".

We shall notice in a very definite way that Christian living offers that which is higher and greater than the things around which this book is centered. Christ has so much more to offer than this - that is why life in Him is so satisfying.

We can give three reasons why just looking at life **"Under the sun"** is bound to bring problems and also prove dissatisfying.

1. The sphere is TOO LOW.

Everything is confined to earthly things. If it is labour and work he thinks about, it is **"under the sun."** If it is pleasure and enjoyment, again it is only **"under the sun."** Wisdom, folly, oppression and all the rest - **"under the sun."** If this is the only way in which we look at life there is something wrong about it. Christian living is never meant to be merely on the level of earthly things. It is designed to lift our lives above the dissatisfying nature of worldly values. The Lord Jesus is a living Saviour and we share His wonderful life when we belong to Him. Look at **Colossians 3: 3** and **1 Peter 1: 3-5**. These tell of great blessings - belonging to Christians - and the sphere of them is not **"under the sun"** but **"above"** where the Christ is. This lifts the Christian into a much higher sphere altogether. Think about this.

2. The sphere is TOO LIMITED.

I used to pass a field in which there was a horse. I soon realised that, although the horse could run around, it was tied to a stake. The length of the rope set the limits to its freedom. This is just like someone who lives for material things. Read the early verses of this chapter and notice how meaningless life is to this preacher - just one round of futile events.

He illustrates his point in a brilliant way. The sun rises and goes down. Generations come and go. The wind moves around - increases in force - but then subsides. All rivers rise at their source and eventually they run into the sea. Yet nothing seems to be achieved by those activities. What has been, will be - no excitement - no change. Life on an earthly level is just a futile business, ending in oblivion. But the Christian life is so different! **"Godliness is profitable"** (not futile), **"having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come," 1 Timothy 4: 8.** The Christian is able to find, in Christ, life with unlimited possibilities. It is life to the full, useful, effective, eternal.

3. The sphere is TOO SMALL.

The whole reasoning of the writer revolves around himself. "I" - "me" - "my". He hardly ever looks outside his own interests. Maybe if he had looked further, he would have had less problems. A selfish world is a very small world. Reading **verses 12-18** you will notice that all that he sought in the world, he sought for himself. **Verse 16** tells us just how much he found. He outstripped everyone that had been before him in knowledge and wisdom, but the sad conclusion of a selfish life will always be that it is too small. Christ always widens the horizons of life for the believer because He makes it Christ-centred, which leads, to activities involved with the needs of others. Those who live and serve the Lord Jesus are able to live in a world that is satisfying, because it becomes increasingly selfless.

Study 2

Everything - Yet Nothing

Read Ecclesiastes, chapter 2

When we consider the man who speaks in this chapter we would be forgiven for being baffled. He is thinking about the material possessions and advantages which make up his life. The extent of them is staggering! In position he was the king's son, and as far as earthly possessions were concerned, he had unlimited wealth. With this went the power to command and the ability to build. His own wisdom guided his actions. Notice how he says this twice in **verses 3 & 9**. He really planned to get the best return for his energy output. Whatever his eyes desired he obtained; whatever his heart longed for became his. (**verse 10**) Through his actions he became great, (**verse 9**) and very rich. (**verse 8**) Look at him, and no doubt you could say, 'What a fortunate man - he should be happy!' Nothing could be further from the truth. **"I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labour in which I had toiled, and indeed all was vanity,"** (**verse 11**) and again in **verse 17**, **"Therefore I hated life: because the work that was done under the sun was grievous to me."** He had everything - yet in the end he realised that he had nothing.

I hope you will read this passage carefully. We must ask ourselves where he went wrong. This brings to mind the words of the Lord Jesus, for **"One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."** (**Luke 12: 15**) This has been expressed as, 'A man's true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be'. The tragedy of the story of this man's search is that the very thing that was the object of his quest he ultimately came to hate. What an admission - **"I hated life"**. Like a spoilt child who grows tired of one thing after another, he threw it down in disgust as it had lost its charm. Now God means us to enjoy life. He does not mean us to waste our time gaining those things which fail to give satisfaction.

It is therefore essential that we look for God's guidance in our lives in order that we do not make these mistakes which will spoil our enjoyment of life. Let us study this in three ways:

1. Life must be more than an EXPERIMENT.

The saying, 'Life is made for living', is very true. True life begins within. Instead of seeking to pour into our existence that which is merely physical and of natural origin, we need a life which begins within - and stems from, the Lord Jesus Himself. **"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent."** (**John 17: 3**) Notice, **"This is life"**, not an experiment but a satisfying experience. Faith in the Lord Jesus starts us off upon a life which does prove satisfying in itself. We live out that which is within. We can find an illustration of this in **John 4** - the story of the woman at the well. She brought her waterpot to the well to get her supply of water. But she met Jesus and He offered her water that she had never heard of. He said to her, **"Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him WILL NEVER THIRST. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."** (**John 4: 13-14**) Notice **"in him"** - this is the secret. True satisfaction begins within!

2. Life must be more than just EXISTENCE.

Animals do, in many senses, just what the writer of this chapter did. They seek their food, satisfy their instincts, build their own animal world. Man is more than just a creature that exists. **Matthew 6: 25-26** tells us that our concern should be not so much for clothes, food and material things, but for life which seeks after God. The God who sustains the sparrows and makes the grass and flowers grow, knows what we need. Trusting in Him makes it possible for us to have all our needs supplied. When you study the scope of the preacher's desires, you realise that all his seeking brought only a pointless existence - not a satisfying life.

3. Therefore, life must find spiritual ENJOYMENT.

A Christian needs to get his priorities right. **"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added to you."** (**Matthew 6: 33**) In John Bunyan's book 'Pilgrim's Progress' there is a picture given in the Interpreter's House of a man with a muck rake. He is seen raking among the straw, sticks, and dust of the floor, hoping to find jewels and treasure. From above him there is one who offers him a crown, inviting him to leave the dust and possess the crown. The lesson there is obvious. He was looking in the wrong direction. His energies were being wasted on worthless things. Even had he found little bits and pieces of treasure they were nothing compared with that which was above him - the CROWN OF GOLD. **Verse 11** is the death-blow to the hopes of satisfaction from natural things. **"I looked. . . there was no profit."**

The message comes over clearly. It is so easy to miss the wonderful joys that life in Christ has for us, if we are occupied with the passing empty pleasures and pursuits of an earthbound existence. The CHALLENGE given by the Lord Jesus so long ago is still relevant now, **"What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"** (**Mark 8: 36**) A Christian's PURSUITS must be geared to right PRIORITIES.

Study 3

The Passing of Time

Read Ecclesiastes, chapter 3

Time is a commodity of which we never have enough. How often we have said, 'I haven't got time!' Sometimes it is just an excuse, but more often it is a valid reason for not doing something. Many proverbs have been coined to describe time. 'Time and tide wait for no man' - and so on. We have calendars and clocks to measure time. The birthdays and anniversaries which we celebrate all mark different points in the passing of time. So the preacher, as he dwells on this theme, says clearly, **"To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven."** (**verse 1**) This is one of the finest chapters in this book and it is worth careful thought and study.

Looking at the chapter, you will notice in **verses 1-8** that the writer outlines some of the features of life in relation to time. We are creatures of time. Our lives had a beginning and will, sooner or later, have an end. In between these two limits there is time for all the other things that one can imagine. There is time for the trivial, such as gathering stones, and a time for the essential such as planting and building up. There are emotional times when we laugh and weep. There are good times when we experience peace

and love, and there are such very bad times bringing war and hatred. All these we see in our world of time and space. Notice that while man is limited to time, **“Whatever God does it shall be forever.” (verse 14)** This implies that God belongs to a different order altogether.

Are we only made for time and the things of time? It is a fair question very often asked, I am sure. Look at **verse 11, “He (God) has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts.”** You notice some have translated instead of world - eternity. It seems to tell us that though we were made by God for time and its limits, yet within us there is the unlimited existence of eternity. We shall be studying in a later lesson the preacher’s ideas on death, but here let us think of the idea of time, and its relationship for us to eternity.

1. TIME and ETERNITY meet together in man.

This is a strange concept on the surface but has a deep meaning for us. This certainly cannot be said of the animal creation. In connection with the ‘time concept’ **Psalm 90** is most interesting to read. It outlines the frailty of man compared with the eternal nature of God. A thousand years in God’s sight is like yesterday. **(verse 4)** Man is like grass which flourishes in the morning but dies in the evening. **(verses 5 & 6)** Our days are just like a story that is told. It may be interesting, thrilling, even enthralling - but it is soon told. But **“from everlasting to everlasting You are God”.** **(verse 2)** This is fine language but it leaves us very much to our own frailty and weakness. Yet when we come to the New Testament we are introduced to the ‘eternity concept’. **John 5: 24** makes it clear that in these ordinary human lives we can enter into the possession of eternal life through the Lord Jesus Christ. Made for time and eternity - this is the nature of man. Our bodies end in dust after we die. But there **IS** a part of our being that exists for eternity.

2. TIME and ETERNITY are explained for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is one of the most wonderful things about the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world. Although He was real man and knew the ordinary things of time, He proved by His power that He was beyond time in His character. He could speak of that which was before the world began, **John 17: 5 & 24**. He claimed that He was sent into the world by his Father. **(John 6: 44-47)** It seemed so clear that His coming into the world was planned in the calendar of God. As Paul said in **Galatians 4: 4, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman”.** It was just at the right time He came, He died, He rose again. And He came into time to bring to us the possibility of eternal life. How wonderful it is. In time we find the Lord Jesus - decide to trust in Him as a living Saviour - and He gives to us life which is eternal, far beyond the limits of time. This life is bound to be different NOW. **John 10: 10** explains something of its quality. **“I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly”.** It is good to notice that the life Christ imparts to us is not only defined in words, it is transmitted into ACTION and ENJOYMENT when He lives within us. Eternal life means life in a new dimension. It is vitally different.

3. In TIME we prepare for ETERNITY.

What is your understanding of the word ‘eternity’? It certainly means that death is not the end. There is so much time beyond this life. The words of the preacher in this chapter suggest that we only see things from the point of view of time. However life which begins with Christ in time, will find

its completion in Heaven, and can be enjoyed with Christ forever. How important that we find time, and use our time for Him. So many people today have time for everything else except Christ and His interests.

This speaks of a dangerous neglect of the real issues of life. What is the opposite to Heaven? The answer, without a doubt, is Hell. Here is the peril of pursuits that are only linked with time. To die without knowing Christ as Saviour is to die unprepared for eternity. You MUST read **Luke 16: 19-31** if you have any doubt about the consequences of such unpreparedness. There is a sad, wide gulf between the man in Heaven and the man in Hell and it can NEVER be bridged. Think about this seriously. Even the preacher in our chapter sensed that there was, among all the other ‘times’, a time when God would judge the righteous and the wicked. **(verse 17)** When you have finished this study, read **John 3: 36** and **1 John 5: 19-21**.

Study 4

Two are Better than One

 **Read Ecclesiastes, chapter 4**

I wonder what you think of this book by now? We have done three studies. We have noticed the sphere of the preacher’s reasoning. We have thought on his materialism and we have considered his ideas regarding time. And against each of these we have set the answers to be found in Christ, as the problems have been presented - problems which expose the inability of earthly values to satisfy the human heart. I hope you are beginning to grasp something of the importance of this Bible book.

The chapter we now study begins with a strange idea. The preacher becomes aware of the fact of oppression, **“under the sun”**. Again notice the location of his observations. There are the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors seem to be able to do just as they please. They have unquestioned and unlimited power. The oppressed have no defence and are without comfort. There is injustice here and the preacher rebels in his mind. His conclusion seems strange. Better not to exist at all than to exist under such circumstances. The dead are better off than the living. The problem is age-old, but his answer spells out the philosophy of despair. In life today there are many examples of such inequalities of power. Humanly speaking there is no answer. Cruelties and injustices increase and often there is no voice raised against them. The Lord Jesus did not let these matters go unnoticed and in reading the Gospels you will observe that He condemned them outright. But He did more - He offered a positive answer of comfort and care. **Matthew 11: 28-31** is beautiful - the mender of broken hearts and lives. He still is able to help and sustain us today.

Look now at **verses 7-12**. They deal with the sadness of being alone and the value of companionship. Loneliness is a very real problem in life. We can be surrounded by many advantages - riches and power, pleasures and pastimes can belong to us, yet they can never fill the gaps of a friendless life. Perhaps as you work on this study you know something of the meaning of this. There are lonely young people as well as older ones. Look at two ideas from this section of the chapter.

1. The tragedy of being alone.

“There is one alone and without companion”. (verse 8)

What ideas can we build around this? Loneliness in failure is suggested. (verse 10) When we commit wrong, or fail to be what we should be, somehow it leaves us alone - we feel guilty. There is no loneliness like the loneliness of guilt and sin. There are times, especially as we think of sin and God, when we feel very much alone. Perhaps this was the worst part of the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross - the loneliness that was His when He died for our sin. Notice the cry in **Matthew 27: 46**. Then in **verse 11** of our chapter, perhaps rather a strange verse, there is the coldness of being alone. Loneliness is so lacking in warmth, especially if the warmth of love is missing. There is nothing more tragic than the loneliness of a loveless life. How many there are who would love to be loved and no one even knows about it? There, are the wistful eyes of children who are unwanted. There are the blank defeated bodies of older folk who in their loneliness have lost hope. Life can be so cold for them! Then again in **verse 12** there is the loneliness in conflict - to have to meet the foe alone.

This is especially true when Satan tempts us and we feel something of his power when under attack. How often we feel isolated in our temptations. We need so much a sense of companionship in all the conflicts of a Christian life. What a tragedy to be alone in life without a true friend. We can thank God for our friendships!

2. The test of friendship.

“Two are better than one.” (verse 9) So said the preacher. He was saying something very important. When we think of how cold and lonely life can be - it is wonderful how the Lord Jesus can fill the loneliness of life with His friendship. For our failure, we can find His forgiveness. (**1 John 1: 9**) He will stand by us when we fail and will never give us up. Think how lovingly He stood by Peter when he fell and denied the Lord. He did not give him up. Again, when life is cold, and we perhaps miss the the love of other people, His love and kindness are very real. Then too, in the conflict with evil, the Lord Jesus will give us the strength and power to overcome. He is called the **“Captain of our salvation”**. In every circumstance, we can find in the Lord Jesus a constant companion. **“He will never leave us or forsake us.”** (Hebrews 13: 5-6)

As Christians we have to think this matter through very carefully. We cannot afford in any way to ‘go it alone’. It is disastrous to think we are sufficient of ourselves. How then can we know that we have the presence of the Lord Jesus with us? The New Testament teaching on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit is relevant in this connection. In **John 16** there are some important things said. Jesus was soon to go back to Heaven. He wanted to comfort His disciples who, no doubt, were already beginning to fear the loneliness that would be theirs when He had gone. Notice what He says, **“It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Helper will not come to you. But if I depart I will send Him to you.”** (John 16: 7) This is a wonderful statement. Here was **“another Helper”** who would be with them forever. (John 14: 16) Study these passages carefully. They will tell you all that the companionship of the Lord Jesus can mean when it is made good to you by the Holy Spirit.

‘Two are better than one’. David Livingstone, the great explorer of Africa, knew many lonely experiences in his work. With loneliness often went danger. But he was a great Christian and his favourite text was **Matthew 28: 20**, **“Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** When asked if he believed the Lord Jesus would honour that promise, he said that they were the words of a gentleman of the strictest and most sacred honour. He would not let him down. On that note of testimony we can end our studies.

Questions

Study 1

UNDER THE SUN

1. a) Of which section of the Old Testament Scriptures is Ecclesiastes a part?
b) What does the writer set out to do?
2. What was basically wrong with the way in which the writer conducted his search?
3. How does that life contrast with the life of a Christian?
4. In what way was the writer’s sphere too small?
5. Why has the Christ-centred life got wide horizons?

Study 2

EVERYTHING - YET NOTHING

1. What similarities do you see between the preacher’s ‘search’ in **chapter 2** and that of modern day man?
2. How can we make sure that our life is more than just an experiment?
3. What was the preacher saying in **verses 14-20** of **chapter 2** which is still true today?
4. In what way does our Lord’s teaching in **Matthew 6: 19-34** contrast with **Ecclesiastes 2**? (briefly).
5. What was Jesus really offering to the woman at the well in **John 4**?

Study 3

THE PASSING OF TIME

1. What is the main difference in this chapter between the works of men and God’s works?
2. Give at least three Scripture references which testify to the fact of the eternal existence of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. What is meant by the term **“eternal life”**?
4. Why is it true to say that the life which Christ imparts to us is not only defined in words?
5. In what way can we use ‘time’ to prepare for eternity?

Study 4

TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE

1. What answer did Jesus offer to cruelty and injustice?
2. a) When did the Lord Jesus experience His greatest loneliness?
b) Why was this necessary?
3. What examples does the ‘preacher’ quote as tragic instances of loneliness?
4. Why need the Christian never feel alone?
5. Can you testify to the companionship of the Lord Jesus in your own life?