



## An Apologetic from Ecclesiastes: Does Anything Make Sense?

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*Doubt everything, find your own light.<sup>1</sup>*

So recommends the last words of the Buddha. It sounds like good advice, but then the human heart invariably presses on to doubt itself! After all, what security, what authority, what kind of assurance can we have that this light is real light or true? The hunger for meaning, the quest for understanding, the search for answers and solutions are central features of the human condition. For instance, what is the nature of reality? What is it (existence) all about? What is the purpose of life (if any), and to what should we try to give answers? A much-neglected source and resource for reflection in this area, perhaps due to a more rationalistic approach to apologetics, is the book of Ecclesiastes or the Preacher (Qoheleth in Hebrew). It is a book that speaks profoundly to our times by asking questions, by setting out contradictions, and by forcing the reader to “feel” what absurdity as an outlook is really like.

As the book opens, we are confronted with its most famous words, “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Eccl. 1:2). Or in the New International Version: “ ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher, ‘Utterly Meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ ” Not a very inspiring start! Why does he say this? Well, he has devoted himself to explore life, to examine what is good for men to do under the sun, and his observations have yielded some depressing results.

- Everything in life seems to be fixed, determined, and bound (perhaps) by inevitability.
- Human freedom appears to be constrained by overwhelming necessities, leading to a sense of helplessness.

- The endless cycle of repetition leads to a sense of boredom, pointlessness, and despair.

Many a sage, philosopher, or guru has come to similar conclusions. What is unique to Ecclesiastes is how the author tackles the issues and what he leads us to see. The book was possibly written as an educational tool for young men entering into roles of leadership and responsibility. (This is not a sexist comment; it was just the dominant cultural reality of the time.) Some commentators consider Ecclesiastes as an Old Testament apologetic text. By laying out the vanities of life, the propensities of youth, the all-encompassing reach of death, and the vast urgency of wisdom (as a potential life philosophy), it engages a chaotic world with some serious reflections.

As to its relevance for our times, Peter Kreeft of Boston College writes, “Ecclesiastes is the one book in the Bible that modern man most needs to read, for it is Lesson One, and the rest of the Bible is Lesson Two, and modernity does not need Lesson Two because it does not heed Lesson One.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, our modern and postmodern worlds are steeped in distractions, diversions, and multitudes of self-help and self-improvement strategies. There is little felt need for God, little sense of our own fragility, little understanding of real *need!*

Kreeft continues: “Whenever I teach the Bible as a whole, I always begin with Ecclesiastes. In another age, we could begin with God’s beginning, Genesis.



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But in this age, the Age of Man, we must begin where our patient is: we must begin with Ecclesiastes.”

So Lesson One from this ancient writer for modern apologetics is “the art of effective diagnosis.” Chapter 2:1–10 is a case in point. Stepping into any bookstore today we are confronted with books and magazines that commend our culture’s priorities and values with a screaming urgency. But they are really no different from those of earlier times; the Preacher has tried them all. In fact, he calls them to the “witness stand.”

He explores laughter and humor (v. 2), projects and possessions (vv. 4–7), entertainment, sex, and sensuality (v. 8), and of course the pursuit of prestige and recognition (vv. 9–10).

He reminds us of Mark Twain’s insight, “You don’t know quite what it is you want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache you want it so.”<sup>3</sup>

He presses us to face our hungers, our deepest longings, our expectations, and he puts them on trial. His conclusions are stark. In essence, he says he’s tried it all, evaluated it all, and it’s all pointless. There is a recurring word for pointless or vanity or meaningless used by the author; it is the Hebrew word *hebel*. Jacques Ellul comments on this word. He says,

*In Qohelet as in Isaiah, everything concurs to suggest the idea of uselessness. This idea is so strong that we might conclude that hebel suggests the idea of nothingness: from the point of view of reality, unsubstantiality; from the point of view of the truth, a lie; from the point of view of efficiency, uselessness; and from the point of view of security, deceit.*<sup>4</sup>

The European existentialist writers and many post-modern film makers arrive at the same conclusion and lead us to the same place. This is where we learn Lesson Two from this ancient writer: the limits of reason, rationality, and analysis.

“Wait a minute! I thought RZIM [Ravi Zacharias International Ministries] fostered a more rational, a more reasonable, and a more analytical approach to the faith and questions?” We do, but we also recognize that they have limits and limitations. George Bernanos captures this well: “In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.”

A real danger I have come across (in this kind of ministry) is a type of person who first discovers apologetics, learns of its power and its use, but who then elevates it to more than it can deliver. And when the elevated expectations fail to deliver the unrealistic

goals, the resulting backlash is anger, at times despair, and very often cynicism (see Eccl. 2:17–23).

Ecclesiastes is a hard book. As Brian Thomas says, “Reality is what we bump up against when our beliefs (often illusions) fail.” This writer believes in reality, even if facing it is tough and demanding at times.

Lesson Three is this: life from an earthly perspective so often seems pointless. Wisdom (it is said) is better than folly, but it too is limited. In the face of all that we must encounter, the Qoheleth states, “God exists.” After all, we are discussing or exploring “reality,” but what *is* it?

Lesson Four, I believe, is the necessity of an answer. Why do we seek meaning at all? Why do we so deeply long for answers?

- Perhaps it is a survival instinct and purely the result of our response to nature’s power and threats (naturalism).
- Perhaps the very desire itself is a symptom of our attachment and need, and enlightenment and liberation will resolve it (Buddhism).
- Perhaps we are ignorant of God’s will and ways, and by education and obedience we can find the solution (Islam).
- Perhaps it is all an illusion or the result of our failures to perform our duty, so we are locked in a cycle of bondage (Hinduism).

Social scientists also weigh in on these big issues. In fact, “the denial of death” is seen as a thoroughly modern preoccupation. Sam Keen comments, “The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.”<sup>5</sup> This seems so blunt, so strong, so challenging... and yet?

This is hinted at here in the United States. Our movies are currently fixated on end-of-the-world disasters, vampires and their immortal pursuits, various super-smart killers or criminals whose main attraction is their limitless enthusiasm for death and destruction, which seems mirrored in the audience’s fascination with it all. If we allow Ecclesiastes to do its work, we come to some conclusions. We need to reflect on... God’s existence and overarching sovereignty.

- Death’s power and its all-consuming inevitability.
- Life’s overall incomprehensibility.
- History’s seeming unpredictability.
- Humanity’s incredible vulnerability.

Lesson Five from our wise counselor: accept and face the limits of knowledge (Eccl. 8:16–17). In the book of Genesis (3:4–6), we see a primal desire expressed to attain knowledge in order to be godlike. Knowledge, we are told, is power. This power attracts. It draws;

it compels; it pulls on our hearts. It renders status; it yields success; it makes us look good and feel good, and we want as much of it as we can get. As with all idolatrous trends, we face a process that leads us to absolutize relative things while simultaneously relativizing absolute things. When knowledge is viewed as an instrument of order and control, when it becomes a demanding tyrant in our lives, it is time to take stock.

So where does this lead us? The writer takes us on a journey through life, and he deals with the questions and exasperations that we all inevitably encounter. His own desire was to try and figure things out so he could live well and be happy, and encourage others to do the same. I'm sure he hoped to discover *the key*, or the missing ingredient, or the clues to true and lasting success and happiness. He found it all right, but it is not as he expects.

What do I mean? The world he begins to "see" is one that displays both good and bad at the same time. He sees the superiority of wisdom, yet even the wise are reduced by death. He sees injustice being done and oppressors prevailing, yet he also notes there is a higher justice. He cites the sayings and actions of wise people but then goes on to point out how quickly they are forgotten! It is *the tone* that wears on us.

We see ambiguity, fuzziness, mixture, pain, and problems, but they are not alone. There is also fun, food, friends, wisdom, and most of all, *God!* These things all dwell in the same world, at the same time. This is hard for many of us to digest. We want better answers, we want tidier analyses, we want more comforting visions, and we have them, but not here.

Remember Peter Kreeft's comments on Lesson One and Lesson Two: that Ecclesiastes is diagnosis, and you can't help patients who do not know they are sick. Speaking of Ecclesiastes as divine revelation, Kreeft writes,

*It is inspired monologue. God in His providence has arranged for this one book of mere rational philosophy to be included in the canon of Scripture because this too is divine revelation. It is divine revelation precisely in being the absence of divine revelation. It is like the silhouette of the rest of the Bible . . . In this book God reveals to us exactly what life is when God does not reveal to us what life is. Ecclesiastes frames the Bible as death frames life.<sup>6</sup>*

So what *can we* learn from this ancient book? First, I would recommend his strategy of exposure. There is nothing like "listening" to the famous or dominant voices of our era or context to expose what is often felt as missing in life. Let me share a few examples.

*The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.*

—Vaclav Havel, Letters to Olga

*Exile accepted as a destiny, in the way we accept an incurable illness, should help us see through our self-delusions.*

—Poet Czeslaw Milosz

*We are threatened with eviction, for this is a point of entry and departure, there are no permanent guests! And where else have we to go when we leave here? We're lonely. We're frightened.<sup>7</sup>*

—Tennessee Williams

These are just a few samples of the kind of thing that surrounds us, and what it points to: restlessness, longing, hunger, and human angst. Ecclesiastes points us to the human condition as an arena for careful reflection.

Second, I commend his strategy of relevant application. What do I mean? We are masters of escape, self-denial, and avoidance. Our willingness to judge others is matched by our unwillingness to be judged. Our ability to see through others' hypocrisies is matched by our blindness to our own. Our skill at detecting others' excuses is matched by our own careful use of rationalization. The apologetic task presented by the Qoheleth is the awakening of understanding and the dismantling of illusions that blind us to reality.

The third strategy is to remember the value and role of hope. The world as we know it is disordered, damaged, and fallen. Even prior to the coming of the Messiah, the writer closes with the vital reminder that God is sovereign, that he is the judge of all, and that everything will be accounted for (Eccl. 12:13–14). Now, we don't end here. The Gospel reminds us: "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14; see Heb. 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–20). Ecclesiastes serves as good diagnosis, but we require the Gospels to offer the fuller picture of "hope" that the biblical narrative outlines.

It seems to me we have done a great disservice in our Christian communication by sometimes offering answers when the audiences have no sense of the questions and consequently little enthusiasm for the solutions, which can seem unrelated to anything in life they actually care about. In contrast, G.K. Chesterton wrote in *What's Wrong with the World*: "Certainly, at least, we need a theorist. A practical man means a man accustomed to mere daily practice, to the way things commonly work. When things will not work,

you must have the thinker, the man who has some doctrine about why they work at all.”<sup>8</sup>

So what we have here is an ancient book for modern times. It offers a diagnosis, a prognosis, some exposure, and a jolt to our senses, our hopes (true and false), and our expectations. I commend this book to you as a useful apologetic strategy, and I’m confident that, though written so long ago, its timely feel will reach down into our time, and into the lives of those exposed to it. This *is* wisdom to walk by, and it *does* make sense.

## Notes

1. Terry Breverton, *Immortal Words: History’s Most Memorable Quotations and the Stories behind Them* (London: Quercus Publishing Place, 2009), p. 13.
2. Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 20.
3. Mark Twain, cited in Barry Morrow, *Heaven Observed: Glimpses of Transcendence in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), p. 71.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 52.
5. Sam Keen, cited in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Free Press Paperbacks, 1973), pp. xii–xiii.
6. Kreeft, *Three Philosophies*, pp. 22–23.
7. Cited in Os Guinness, *The Journey: Our Quest of Faith and Meaning* (Colorado Springs: The Trinity Forum, NavPress, 2001), p. 19.
8. G.K. Chesterton, cited in Guinness, *The Journey*, p. 80.

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