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## Becoming Wise All Over Again

*Ecclesiastes 1:1*

### Discussion Guide

#### **Main Idea:**

The life of Israel's King Solomon is a study of the highs and lows of a personal walk with God. Solomon gives us an object lesson on what a life can look like when one obeys and follows the commands of a holy God, but also how disobedience and self-focus can derail spiritual growth. Eventually, Solomon comes to the conclusion that a successful life is not wrapped up in what you do or how much you own, but to whom you belong.

#### **Discussion Points:**

Solomon had the problem of taking his focus off of God and placing it onto himself and his personal desires. These periods of life were marked with disobedience and poor choices. Thankfully God is faithful to forgive and restore Solomon, and He continues to forgive restore the wayward to this day.

- Are there any periods in your life where you can see your focus shifting from God and His truth onto your desires and your truth? How did/does life differ and change?
- Why do people trust in things outside of God's plans and commands for life and satisfaction?
- How does reading scripture help keep our focus on God?
- What are some instances where God has showed His faithfulness and forgiveness in your life?

Ecclesiastes is the Greek term meaning 'gathering an assembly'. In the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, Solomon happens to be 'The Preacher' leading this gathering. The world offers plenty of its own 'Preachers', whether seen on television, in political arenas, or due to celebrity, to compete with God's message.

- What and where are the places you gather with others? How much time do you spend at each gathering?
- Which 'preachers' do you listen to most often? Are they encouraging you to keep your eyes focused on the Divine instrument panel or are they causing disorientation?
- How much consideration do you give when choosing which gathering to join with? Are there any that you should reconsider or add?

## **Discussion Guide Cont.**

Solomon tells us what he wants us to remember when life gets confusing, mysterious, unfair or as black as night - keep your trust in Creator God's plan.

- What does it mean to your life when you contemplate a Creator God?
- Why is it important to remember that God has a plan in mind?
- How does it change a situation when you stand on the knowledge that you can trust Him?

### **Gospel Connection:**

God's redemptive power was shown to Solomon over his lifetime of ups and downs, and He shows us this same redemptive power today through Jesus Christ. Trust in Jesus and the salvation He offers through His substitutionary sacrifice which allows a believer to be restored into a new relationship with God.

### **Practical Implications:**

**Think:** Consider the eternal implications of a life lived in obedience to Creator God versus a life focused primarily on achieving earthly success or attaining personal pleasures. To whom do you belong?

**Pray:** Praise and thank God for His continued faithfulness and forgiveness in your life.

**Do:** Trust in the Lord, keeping your eyes on the Divine instrument panel, even when life is dark and disorienting.

## Becoming Wise All Over Again

*Ecclesiastes 1:1*

Several years ago I had lunch with a man in our church who had been an F4 Phantom Jet pilot in the Vietnam War, flying in more than 150 combat missions. He told me that one of the most serious challenges during his career was flying on night missions when the sky was so dark you couldn't see anything. He said that it was all-too easy to become disoriented, even to the point of not knowing if he was right-side up or upside-down. He confirmed that it would all feel the same.

Due to this disorientation, he almost lost his life. One night he was so intent on his mission that he failed to check his instrument panel for several moments. When he happened to glance down at his panel he discovered that, though he believed he was flying straight ahead, he was actually angled nearly straight down. He corrected his error and pulled up safely just in time; in fact, he came within 100 yards of flying his jet into planet earth.

He told me that the only way to avoid the dangers of disorientation while flying in the darkness is to follow the instrument panel. Otherwise you might think you are flying straight only to find yourself heading toward a collision.

That rings true not only in a fighter jet but also on the journey through life. You had better follow the inspired instrument panel of truth, especially when everything around you is dark.

### THE FLIGHT OF A KING

If there was ever a man who knew better than to fly by the seat of his pants but tended to

depend on himself rather than the instrument panel of divine guidance, it was a man named Solomon.

If you're old enough in the faith, you might remember that Solomon's life is an amazing flight reaching incredible heights and experiencing stratospheric achievements, but it is also a flight that nearly ends in a fatal collision.

Solomon was the son of King David and Bathsheba – and that's another sermon or two. Solomon was destined for the throne of Israel from the very beginning of his life. As Solomon was growing up, his father David conquered everyone around Israel, virtually ensuring a safe kingdom for his son. David gathered all the materials needed to build a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, while Solomon would be entrusted with the privilege of building it as the centerpiece of Israel's worship of the one true and living God.

Near the end of David's life when Solomon was crowned King of Israel, it couldn't have been a more perfect take-off for the trip of a lifetime.

Then *1 Kings, chapter 3* records an event that had never occurred before or since in human history – God appeared to Solomon in a dream and effectively said to him, "Make a wish and I'll grant it."

This wasn't Aladdin or a genie in a bottle; this was the real thing. God was signing over to Solomon a blank check.<sup>1</sup>

And to everyone's surprise, I'm sure, Solomon did not write words like Riches or Power or Fame or Health on that blank check,

instead he wrote the word Wisdom. And God responded and the record of the Kings includes these words:

*And it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, "Because you have...not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind..." (I Kings 3:10-12).*

God says, "I'm going to give you your wish for wisdom and discernment because you didn't ask to get rich or live a long life or become invincible" – and if that isn't exciting enough, God isn't finished yet – He goes on to say to Solomon in *verse 13*:

*I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days (1 Kings 3:13).*

Solomon is going to get the whole truck load. He is going to get it all. He is in for the ride of his life – and off he soars.

Early during his reign, Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon, a passionate love story, but at the same time he penned this text he began personally distorting love and marriage by marrying the daughters of neighboring kings. We are told that Solomon ends up marrying 700 princesses in all, using them as nothing more than pawns for military alliances (*1 Kings 11:1*).

The most prominent of the princesses was the daughter of Pharaoh. When Solomon married her, this was especially insulting to the power and providence of God who had delivered the people of Israel from Egypt centuries earlier.

During the middle years of his reign, he wrote and collected proverbs of wisdom, what we now refer as the *Book of Proverbs*. Trouble is, again, while collecting and writing these proverbs of wisdom, he defied the wisdom of God.

It is clear from what we can observe in scripture that Solomon had turned his focus of

life from God and onto himself. For example, it took him seven years to build the enormous gold-covered temple for God; but he took 13 years to build his own home. We can't even begin to imagine the splendor of that palace.

Solomon also collected horses and chariots, symbols of military power, which the Lord specifically forbade Israel's kings from doing in order to trust in Him alone. Not only did Solomon gather these military symbols, he chose to have cities built to handle his collection. He ended up breeding and selling his horses to the Hittites and Syrians, which essentially provided them with the weapons of warfare to turn around and attack Israel later on (*1 Kings 10:29 & 20:1*).

How could he become so foolish?

Meanwhile, he was unsatisfied with everything he had, so along with his 700 wives he started collecting a harem of 300 concubines. Or as one little boy mispronounced it, 300 cucumber vines, which I think is perfect because the concubines did indeed tangle up his heart and trip up his feet. On average, he was marrying 17 princesses a year and adding a concubine to his harem at the pace of one every other month.

Not only was that incredibly selfish and destructive and immoral, it was spiritually devastating. In fact, God had warned him of what it could mean for him spiritually, in *1 Kings 11*:

*For they will surely turn your heart away after their gods. The very next phrase still reads: Solomon held fast to these in love (1 Kings 11:2).*

*He held fast*, in other words, he didn't just marry them, he flaunted them and paraded them without embarrassment or shame.

And it wasn't long before God's word came true and a hill of shame east of the City of David was to become a place where he built shrines to his wives' false gods.

It is obvious that Solomon had taken his eyes off the instrument panel of divine instruction. He was upside down; he had lost track of where he'd been and where he should have been going.

He was racing toward a fatal collision and catastrophe.

Maybe that is you today? You hear my voice, but your mind is somewhere else. You are calculating the effects of a decision you are making; your heart is beating faster and faster because this is a crossroads in your life and you are weighing your options.

What does God have to say about it?

Solomon slides into his later years a man without distinction or moral character. He went through the motions but his heart had grown cold.

The surprising news to discover is that something happened in Solomon's life. We are not sure exactly when or how since we are not given the details. But as an old man his heart was rekindled toward God.

My guess is it was the same thing that I have seen change many a person's perspective and cause them to ask questions. Perhaps a life-threatening disease combined with old age, or maybe simply growing old enough to realize there isn't much time left.

This reminds me of a man I would invite to church whenever I saw him in the community once or twice a year. He was a successful businessman and would just laugh off my invitation and tell me that Sunday was his day off; he wasn't about to ruin it by spending it in church. But then he contracted cancer, and by the time they discovered it he was given only a few months to live unless treatments could reverse the course.

The treatments didn't slow anything down and that is when he contacted me. I went over to visit a man who was no longer brave; he had been stopped in his tracks and all of a sudden he was very interested in the Bible.

After explaining to him the gospel, with tears coursing down his cheeks, he repented of his pride and his sin and cast himself upon the mercy of Jesus by faith alone.

It was amazing to me to see his life change so quickly and his joy and hunger for spiritual things those last few months until he died. God

in His mercy made that man sick and gave him just enough time to think.

Solomon is now an old man. From the clues we pick up from his journal, he has completed his building projects, he has grown bored with his possessions, and he has finished his collection of proverbs. His body is now bowed and bent. Maybe his personal physician told him he didn't have much time left.

We are not told when or how or what happened that brought Solomon to write this closing message to his family and nation, but we do know that Solomon comes to the end of his life refocused on the instrument panel of Divine instruction.

I would agree with conservative commentators, including Matthew Henry who wrote over 300 years ago, that at the very end of Solomon's life, he recognized his sin and repented.<sup>ii</sup>

He recognized the danger, the coming collision, and he pulled up just in time.

## GATHER AROUND

If we put the clues together, Solomon's third and final book of wisdom literature was written in these last days. We call this the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. It includes wise sayings, poems, rhetorical questions, riddles, problems, and much more.

Many people think *Ecclesiastes* is a waste of time; even the early Jewish leaders debated if it should even be included in the canon of scripture believing it is just a rambling book written by a bitter old man. The truth is just the opposite. Sometimes you get the best advice and the richest truth from someone who knows they don't have much time left to live.

You will notice the book title is *Ecclesiastes*. *Ecclesiastes* is the Greek term for someone who is convening or gathering an assembly.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, if you look at the title, you can see in the first part of it the word *ecclesia* – or *ekklesia* – the New Testament word translated church.

Now you don't have a church in the Old Testament but you do have an assembly

gathered to hear a message. The title is essentially an invitation for everyone to gather around. You could write in the margin of your Bible underneath that title the words ‘gather around’.

The Hebrew equivalent to Ecclesiastes is Qoheleth, which is translated in *verse 1* and several times throughout this book as ***the Preacher***. He is the one who called the assembly; he is the one with a message to deliver. And in this case, the preacher and lecturer is Solomon.

You might think of *Ecclesiastes* as a journal, a last will and testament, a sermon, or a personal testimony, but it is all of them and more.

In *verse 1*, we are given an introduction to the author of this message. We read:

***The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem*** (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

If you look directly across the page at *verse 12*, Solomon adds,

***I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem*** (Ecclesiastes 1:12).

You could translate this: *I have been and still am king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

Solomon is the only son of David who reigned over a united Israel in Jerusalem. After his death the kingdom was divided.

So this is the memoir, the autobiography, and the personal testimony of none other than Solomon.<sup>iv</sup>

In order to understand this memoir, you can’t start at the beginning – you need to start at the ending. And I say that because *Ecclesiastes* is one of the few books in the Bible that tells us why it was written. Solomon tells us why in the closing chapter:

***Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth*** (Ecclesiastes 12:1a).

Remember your Creator! Solomon effectively says, “Don’t be like me. I had forgotten God. Remember your Creator.” In fact, remember that you were created. You are not an animal; you are not an accident. You were crafted by Creator God and you can relate

to Him, worship Him, walk with Him, and look forward to living with Him.

Solomon is wrapping it up by essentially saying, “Without Him, life is without meaning under the sun.”

And get this, old man Solomon is saying here, “Don’t forget God.” When? In the days of your youth when you are taking off! When you have the world by the tail - when all of life is in front of you - remember God then!

You happen to be flying into a culture that is darkened by unbelief and it is getting darker by the minute. Don’t try to fly by the seat of your pants or by your own intuition. You might think you are flying right-side up when you are really upside down.

Then at the very end of this chapter, the close of his message, Solomon writes,

[Here’s] ***The end of the matter; [after] all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man*** (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

This is how to make life matter. This is how to avoid the collision that comes from sin and defiance.

J. Sidlow Baxter wrote decades ago, in his introduction to the *Book of Ecclesiastes* that:

One of the saddest ironies of fallen pride is that successive generations of human beings commit the same sins, repeat the same big blunders, fall prey to the same ensnaring stupidities, and suffer the same agonizing disillusionment, as those who have lived and died before them; all because they will not take to heart the testimony of Solomon.<sup>v</sup>

Solomon is inviting us here to, “Gather ‘round. I’m an old man and I can’t talk loudly, so listen carefully.”

If I could summarize his memoir with the right perspective – Solomon is delivering the most important message of his life at the end of his life. He is going to sit us down in this assembly and open up his heart to us. He is going to pour out his soul. And there are people who haven’t been able to handle his message. It is a little too real. There are no platitudes in

here, no quick promises, no easy answers, and no guarantees to making sure everything makes sense.

Solomon is going to say to us, listen, I want you to remember:

- Even when life is confusing and it seems futile and meaningless and repetitious – remember, there is a Creator God.
- Even when His plans for your life will at times be mysterious – and even unfair – God has a plan in mind.
- Even when all the while the world is black as night and offers no hint of sight or help – you can trust Him.

Solomon is going to drive home the point that what you do is not the primary question of life for the believer. The primary question is to whom do you belong?

A professor at an evangelical seminary wrote about a convicting conversation he had with a foreign exchange student from Africa. The African student hadn't been in the States very long when he came up to the professor after class one day and he was puzzled. He asked the professor why strangers in America, Christians and non-Christians alike, very quickly get around to asking upon meeting each other, "What do you do for a living?"

The professor said, "That's our typical conversation starter. So what do you and your countrymen ask each other?"

And the student replied, "We ask, 'Are you a Christian?'"<sup>vi</sup>

As Solomon invites us to gather around we discover an old man who was once wise yet became foolish, but now in his old age is wise once again.

And we know that because, once again, the most important aspect of life to Solomon is not what he did but to whom he belongs.

So at the outset of our study through this sermon from Solomon; here is *Ecclesiastes* in a nutshell:

- No matter how high you soar through life
- No matter how low the valleys your life takes you
- Keep your eye on the Divine instrument panel of inspired soul-satisfying truth.

*This is the message of the preacher . . . the son of David, the king in Jerusalem.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 08/18/2019 by Stephen Davey.

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i Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* (Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 13

ii Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Volume III* (reprint, Fleming H. Revell), p. 980

iii *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 6* (Zondervan, 2008), p. 256

iv Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Crossway, 2010), p. 16

v J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Zondervan, 1960), p. 157

vi John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?* (EP Books, 2016), p. 17