

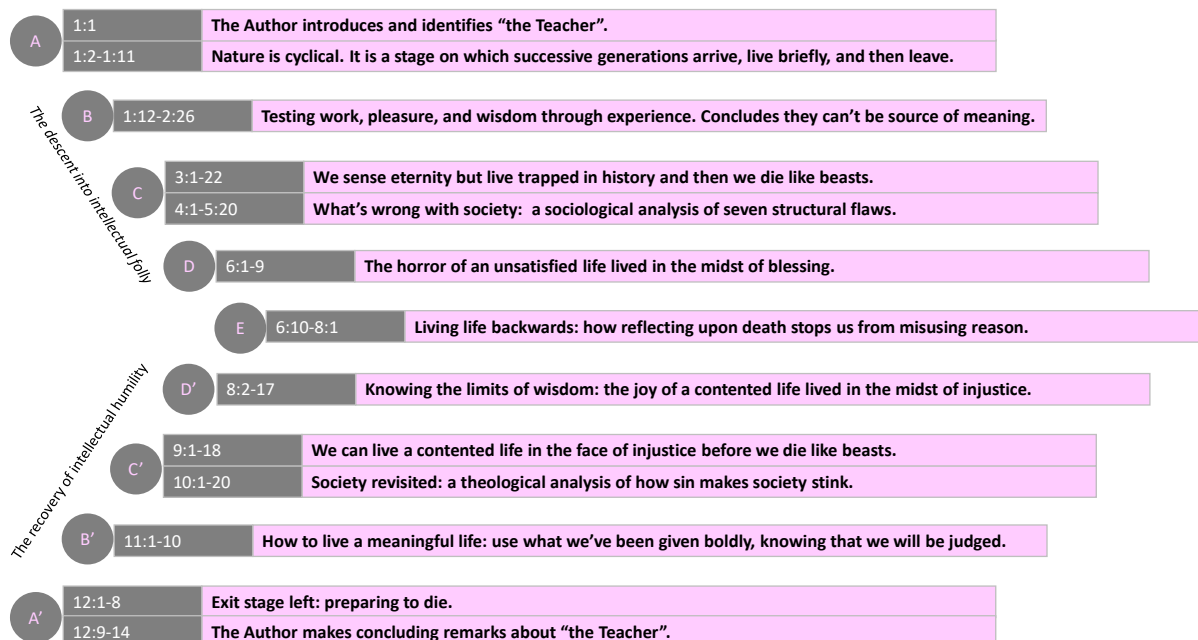
# A Reading Plan for Ecclesiastes

## Introduction

There are a few important principles to remember when reading the book of Ecclesiastes.

1. The book recounts a journey. Nearly the whole book is an autobiography of a character called simply “the Teacher”. So, like any autobiography, we should expect the teacher to make false steps and sometimes go in wrong directions in his search for a meaningful life.
2. The arc of the story is a descent into the darkness of utter meaninglessness (chapters 1-6) and then a gradual recovery to a place of sanity, illuminated by a Biblical worldview.
3. The Teacher gets to the point where (in crude terms) he believes the truth of Genesis 1-6 (there is a Creator who controls history, humanity has fallen and therefore experiences the frustration of life in a fallen world, there will be a final judgement). But he never comes to know the love of God or the hope of resurrection. So we need to read Ecclesiastes canonically – in other words, we should use it as a ‘backdrop’ or a ‘foil’ for the great truths expounded in Romans 8, the Lord’s parables, the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul’s distinction between the temporal and the eternal in his letters to the Corinthians. You will not find the full Gospel in Ecclesiastes.

## Proposed Structure



## **Summary of Section A: 1:1 – 1:11**

Nature does not “progress”. It operates like a giant cycle. So we cannot discern the goal of living by looking at Nature herself. Nature is like a stage: each generation enters, plays out their little drama, and then exits. Generations come and go.

## **Summary of Section B: 1:12 – 2: 26**

The Teacher uses experience, observation, and wisdom to investigate the source of meaning in life. He is an artist, an engineer, a scientist, and a philosopher. He tries hedonism (wine, women and song); he builds amazing things; he tries to lose himself in the Arts; he amasses enormous wealth; he achieves a lot of political power. He discerns that there is a wise way to live, and a foolish way. But the transience of life, the inevitability of death, causes him to hate all he has achieved; he even despairs of wisdom. Why? Because we cannot talk of “contributing to humanity’s progress” (as many atheists try to do) because the next group of actors who replace us on the stage of life may well be idiots who vandalize everything: just look at what the ideologies of the Progressive Left are doing to our Judeo-Christian heritage for an obvious example of that principle! Humanity, like Nature herself, is not on some cosmic elevator called “Progress”. It merely changes.

In the end of this section, he concludes that toil, food and drink are good gifts to be enjoyed. But we spoil them when we try to use them to find ultimate meaning.

## **Summary of Section C: 3:1 – 5:20**

Chapter 3 deals with the relationship between time, eternity, and death. The famous “At time to be born, and a time to die” poem should be read to the sound of a Grandfather Clock with its swinging pendulum. If the natural world operates like a cycle, human history operates like a pendulum. History can be viewed as action followed by reaction. So we swung from the cultural creativity of the Renaissance to the control and order of Modernity. Then Romanticism rebelled against Modernity, and so on. Even in some of our lifetimes we have seen the swing from modernism to postmodernism. The problem Ecclesiastes raises here is that we are trapped in the historical period in which we are born. Historical processes have so much momentum that they cannot be stopped. We dance to a tune that we didn’t compose.

Only God gets to see the whole sweep of history, from beginning to end. He is the orchestrator and conductor of history. We can sense the tug of eternity but we cannot discern the big picture because we are prisoners of time. So we have to learn to live within the limits of our own finitude, using God’s gifts to live happy and good lives while we are on the stage of life.

But what happens when we have to exit the stage? Who knows what lies on the other side of death? For all we know, we die like beasts. At this stage in his thinking, the teacher believes that death is God’s instrument to deal with human wickedness, introduced for the first time in 3:16-22. The problem of evil, and the suffering that it

brings, is a huge theme in Ecclesiastes. But at this stage in the book, he looks at evil the way a sociologist would look at it.

The problem of social injustice is discussed in 4:1-5:17: Oppression (1-3) is caused by seven factors: wrong motivations for work (4-6); putting profit before people (7-12), political ambition (13-16); the uselessness of social religion (5:1-7); the inefficiency and institutional stupidities of the State (5:8-9): the only good thing about the State is that it is better than anarchy! Then comes consumerism (5:10-12) and the hoarding of wealth (5:13-17). The seven factors identified by the Teacher are astonishingly modern.

The section ends with the same section-marker we found in 2:24-26. He is not saying “eat, drink, and be merry for today we die” here. He is saying that wisdom involves accepting God’s good gifts with gratitude.

### **Summary of Section D: 6:1-9**

Thinking back to the previous section, can we blame history and society for our sense that life is meaningless? “No!” says the Teacher. Things get really dark here, as we are approaching the low point of the book. He paints a picture of a man who has everything: wealth, possessions, honour (6:2), a quiver full of children (6:3), and longevity (6:6). But even a man in such a position ends up feeling that his life is futile and meaningless. The Teacher uses the darkest metaphor in the whole book to describe the futility of an unsatisfied life: the desperately sad moment when a child is stillborn. In that moment, birth and death are telescoped into the one moment. This is probably as close as the Teacher gets to the concept of “absurdity” that the Existentialists taught in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Summary of Section E: 6:10-8:1**

In numerical terms, in the original Hebrew, the last two verses of Chapter 6 form the centre point of the book. It’s worthwhile reading them on their own (6:10-12). Verse 10 makes the point that we are trapped by our past. And verse 12 makes the point that our future is unknown and we certainly cannot control it. So how can we make sense of the present? In the middle of that little sandwich, we hear the Teacher’s lament about the uselessness of words – presumably referring to philosophical ideas. As someone once said, philosophy only allows you to be intelligently miserable.

Chapter 7 is the most difficult chapter in the book – scholars agonise over how to translate it. But some obvious points stand out. First, the Teacher decides to live life backwards. In other words, he thinks about death and then invites us to think about our lives in the light of that reality. He invites us to a funeral. That’s not a bad way to think about life. In the delivery suite of a hospital, a newborn baby is seen as having such potential. But at a funeral, the focus is on how the dead person’s potential had been realised over a lifetime. In the delivery suite, someone might coo and say: “She’s just like her mother”. But at a graveside, someone might say: “in the end, she was just like Jesus”. For the only time in the book, the Teacher describes something

as *precious*, as truly valuable. And that thing is a person's character (7:1). So death involves the loss of something of genuine value.

It is that perspective which allows the Teacher to recover from the intellectual folly of regarding life as not worth living. He withdraws from the intellectual fools who laugh at death, or who try to say that death is nothing. And he re-focuses his intellect on less arrogant tasks than trying to explain the whole of reality. I (tentatively) suggest that he repents of intellectual folly in the second half of Chapter 7. "In my vain life" he says in verse 15, and then describes two pitfalls that philosophers have fallen into. There is the pragmatism which sneers at truth and righteousness (16-17). And then there is the man who is seduced by Lady Folly (26-28). Smart people can get lured into a fetid, dark place where they think they have gained secret knowledge about the Universe that ordinary people like you and me never get to know. It's the darkness of Gnosticism, really. So someone can be sitting in an armchair in their home, but their intellectual arrogance is causing them to sin more seriously than a man in a brothel. This sin, says the teacher, is more bitter than death.

By humbling his intellect, by comparing the genuine worth of moral qualities with the sin that perhaps has lurked in his own mind since childhood, the Teacher makes a discovery that transforms his understanding of the world. He discovers what we call the doctrine of the Fall (verse 29). He discovers that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (verse 20). So the light starts to come on in his mind: he lives in a good world gone bad. And the pervasive effects of sin have even damaged his own mind.

In the early chapters of the book, the Teacher thought he could observe everything clearly using his own powers of reason. But sin has destroyed his mental apparatus. Intellectual arrogance has damaged his ability to perceive reality as it really is. Think of it this way: if I complain that the Mourne mountains have become blurry, the most obvious explanation is that my glasses need to be cleaned. Or worse, I have diabetes. There's nothing wrong with reality. The problem lies with my ability to perceive reality.

### **Summary of Section D': 8:2-17**

The first step the teacher must make in his recovery from the horrors of Chapters 6 and 7 is to recognize the limits of his own wisdom (8:16-17). He still has to live in a society full of injustice (8:10-14) where the wicked apparently get off scot free. But we can dimly discern a strengthening belief in a final judgement (8:12-13).

In the first half of the book, the teacher had felt trapped in history. For the atheist, the only solution to that reality is to rebel. Think of the Marxist Revolutionary concepts. But the teacher's strengthening belief in a God who controls history over the long term leads him to counsel against revolution (8:2-9). We can live contented lives (8:15-16) even while we wait for God to right social injustice. In this section, the teacher is starting to view life and reality through the lens of a Biblical worldview (belief in Creation, the Fall, and a Sovereign God who sits behind history).

## Summary of Section C': 9:1 – 10:20

The Teacher's new found intellectual humility causes him to admit one terrible thing. He doesn't know whether or not he is loved by God; is God for him or against him? He doesn't know (9:1). But on his road to recovery, there are now three things that he does know.

First, he feels moral outrage that death doesn't distinguish between good and bad people. Back in chapter 3, when the Teacher last said that we all die like beasts, he thought that God used death to teach us about the transience of life. But now, when he thinks about the fact that death comes to us all, he is morally outraged that death doesn't distinguish between the righteous and the wicked (9:2). *He* distinguishes between righteous and wicked, good and evil, clean and unclean, those who sacrifice and those who don't, the saint and the sinner, the profane and the those who refuse to swear oaths. But death makes no distinction. So death itself cannot be seen as an instrument of judgement. There has to be a final judgement.

But at the same time, the Teacher recognizes (9:3) that we're all sinners. Sin has infected every one of us. He is now starting to think theologically about the world, seeing it through the lens of the doctrines of Creation, the Fall, and original sin.

The final thing the Teacher knows is that he isn't dead yet! (9:4-6). That realization leads straight into verses 7-10 where we get a real burst of joy at the prospect of living a life enriched by loving relationships. At long last the Teacher can see a way to find meaning in work, not as a source of ultimate meaning, but just for the sheer creative fun that it brings. He encourages us to work hard, to work with all our might and not slum around in laziness. We should live a meaningful life. ***(If I'm reading the text aright, it is the belief in a final judgement after death which has brought about this newfound enthusiasm for living – see 11:9).***

We live life as if it has meaning despite the fact that at time it looks as if life is governed by time and chance (9:11). We can live proactive, energetic lives full of personal agency even though sometimes life treats us like passive birds or fish ensnared in nets (9:12). We also live meaningful lives even though we know full well that we will be forgotten. Gratitude doesn't hang around for very long (9:13-16).

In Chapter 10, the teacher re-visits his analysis of society. Way back in Chapters 4 and 5, he had identified seven big structural problems in society. Things like wealth hoarding and the stupidity of big bureaucracies. Now all the points he makes are valid. But now in Chapter 10 he re-visits his view of society. But this time he looks through a theological lens. He sees how sin can infect an entire culture.

A morally foolish idea, he says, can destroy a society the way a dead insect can turn a beautiful bottle of precious perfume into a death-like stench. Folly then becomes institutionalized within a society's governance structures (5-6, 16). Officials become incompetent (8-11) falling into an endless number of scrapes. They start to spout foolish talk (12-15), they become wind bags who can't give clear and simple directions. Society starts to decay like a house that a lazy owner has let fall into ruins (18). All that matters is money (19). And surveillance becomes a feature of life. We end up as a nation of tale-bearers (20). If ever there was a description of our own

society, Ecclesiastes 10 gives it! The ideologies of the Progressive Left are like the dead insect that has turned our society rotten.

It's not wrong to view societies through the lens of a sociologist. But the deeper analysis is theological.

### **Summary of Section B': 11:1-10**

The right way to live is now revealed in this chapter. The key verse is the last one. Live a free, enterprising life. Don't be paralysed by fear. Don't be like the man in the Parable of the Talents who buried his single coin. Give your life away and don't hoard it. BUT, says the Teacher in verse 11, do this knowing that God will one day bring you into judgement.

This can seem like such a counter intuitive idea to evangelicals. But in some ways, this is the answer given by the whole book. **A meaningful life is an accountable life**. The playboy we met in Chapters 1 and 2 tried sex and drugs and money. He pursued every avenue to meaning that he could find. But he ended up wishing that he had been aborted. Why? Because nothing he did mattered. But now consider the idea that your life, your behaviour, your attitudes, your quiet years of service, one day that will be examined by Almighty God. That is the route to a meaningful life! Because you know that what you do down here actually matters!

### **Summary of Section A': 12:1-14**

The Teacher has come to believe in God as Creator and Judge. But how many years did he waste in intellectual folly? With a wistful expression he urges young people not to make his mistakes. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. And think deeply about your own mortality before it draws near. Because an examination of death is the road to a meaningful life: (1) death makes us realise that only our moral characters have any real value; (2) But death itself makes no distinction between the morally upright and the moral fool. (3) Therefore, if moral qualities do in fact have value, then there must be a final judgement after death. (4) In the light of that logic, we should live accountable lives. And that gives us meaning.

### **Further Resources**

*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, Derek Kidner [BST]

*Living Life Backward*, David Gibson

*Ecclesiastes*, William Barrick [FOTB]

*Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, Daniel Fredericks [Apollos OT]

*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Tremper Longman [NICOT]