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*Ecclesiastes*

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## Introduction

### *A Painful Viewpoint*

Ecclesiastes is not the same as other books in the Bible. Many other books begin with a positive statement about God. Ecclesiastes begins with a cry about the meaninglessness (uselessness) of life. “Meaningless [useless]! Everything is meaningless!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, NIV). This beginning sounds more like modern worldly writers than a prophet of God. But, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe Ecclesiastes was put in the Bible because God has a message in it for us.

The book of Ecclesiastes does not avoid questions. For instance, many Bible thinkers claim that the author was not King Solomon. Often the same thinkers claim that Daniel was written in the second century B.C. or that Moses did not write Genesis. Instead, we believe Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. This belief is based on Christian and Jewish history and on clues inside Ecclesiastes that point to Solomon as the author. Ellen White also points out that “the book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age after he discovered that all the pleasures of earth do not satisfy people. Solomon shows that it is impossible for riches to satisfy the soul’s wishes. Solomon also shows that it is wisdom to enjoy God’s gifts with a thankful spirit and to do right. This is because all our works will be brought into judgment.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1164.

But anyone who has ever studied Ecclesiastes knows it is hard to understand. Sometimes the greatest challenge comes from the verses we think we understand, but really do not. So a few simple points of interpretation will help us with our study of Ecclesiastes:

1. Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes at the end of his life. He was bitter and angry at himself and his backsliding.<sup>1</sup> What is special about Ecclesiastes is that in some verses, Solomon is writing from the viewpoint of someone separated from God. Like modern authors, Solomon is giving us thoughts that flow directly from his head. We see the world as it appears through his eyes.

We will do well to listen to the words of *The SDA Bible Commentary*: “There are verses in Ecclesiastes that come from the experience and reasoning of Solomon’s years of backsliding. We should not take the verses to be of the mind

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<sup>1</sup>backsliding—separation from God; doing things that do not please Him.

and will of the Holy Spirit. But they are the Holy Spirit–influenced record of what Solomon really thought and did during that time (read Ellen G. White’s *Prophets and Kings*, p. 79). That record holds a serious warning against the wrong kind of thought and action. . . . These verses should not be taken out of their context.<sup>2</sup> They should not be made [used] to teach false truth that God never wanted to be taught.”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1060.

2. But how do we know which verses these are? This question leads to the second important principle for studying Ecclesiastes: We must read Ecclesiastes with the whole Bible in mind. What is the Bible’s basic message about life, death, and our purpose in life? When a verse in Ecclesiastes does not seem to agree with the themes of the Bible, we can be sure Solomon is thinking back on his life of separation from God. We should not use these verses for studying God’s Word. We should use them as warnings about what happens when we forget that God is our Creator and Savior. Ecclesiastes teaches us how bitter and empty life is without God. It is our hope that we can learn this lesson from our study of Ecclesiastes.

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*James W. Zackrison was director of the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists when he helped write these lessons.*

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<sup>2</sup>context—setting of a verse; what the verses mean before and after a particular verse will help us understand what that verse means.