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Ecclesiastes: The

*Solomon shows us
that earthly vanities
fail to satisfy the
longing soul.*

Unlike other books in Scripture, which often begin with a strong affirmation about God (“The Word of the Lord to . . .”), Ecclesiastes commences with a cry about the meaninglessness of life. “Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity.” This opening sounds more like modern secular writers than a prophet of Yahweh. Nevertheless, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe that Ecclesiastes was placed in the canon of Scripture because God has in it a message for us.

Nothing, though, about this book, its message, or even its origin, has avoided controversy. For instance, many scholars claim that the author—whoever it was—wasn’t King Solomon. Of course, these are often the same scholars who claim that Daniel was written in the second century B.C. or that Moses never wrote Genesis, so we can dismiss them out of hand. We are, instead, proceeding on the assumption that Solomon was the writer, an assumption based on Christian and Jewish tradition, on internal evidence inside the book that points to Solomon as the author, as well as on Ellen White’s statements that “the book of Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon in his old age, after he had fully proved that all the pleasures earth is able to give are empty and unsatisfying. He there shows how impossible it is for the vanities of the world to meet the longings of the soul. His conclusion is that it is wisdom to enjoy with gratitude the good gifts of God, and to do right; for all our works will be brought into judgment.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1164.

Yet, anyone who has ever studied Ecclesiastes knows its challenges. Some texts are obscure, their meanings difficult to discern; sometimes, though, the greatest challenge comes from not when we don’t know what the texts mean but when we do. Thus, a few simple points of interpretation will greatly help us as we undertake this study.

To begin, Solomon was writing at the end of his life, a life full of bit-

Painful Perspective

terness and anger at himself and his apostasy. What's unique about the book is that in some places Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone alienated from God. Like modern authors, he's giving us thoughts that flow directly from his head. We see the world as it appears through his eyes.

In such places it is well to heed the words of *The SDA Bible Commentary*: “Those portions of Ecclesiastes that relate the experience and reasoning of [Solomon’s] years of apostasy are not to be taken as representing the mind and will of the Spirit. Nevertheless, they are an inspired record of what he actually thought and did during that time (see *Prophets and Kings*, p. 79), and that record constitutes a sober warning against the wrong kind of thought and action. . . . Passages such as these should not be wrested from their context and made to teach some supposed truth that Inspiration never intended them to teach.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1060.

How do we know, though, which are those passages? This question leads to the second important principle for studying Ecclesiastes: We must read it in the context of the whole Scripture. What is Scripture's basic message about life, death, and our purpose in life? When a text of Ecclesiastes seems to conflict with the grand themes of the Bible, we can be sure it's Solomon reflecting on life from the perspective of alienation and separation from the Lord. These texts, of course, shouldn't be used as the basis of theology; they should be used, instead, as practical warnings about what happens when we lose sight of God, our Creator and Redeemer.

In the end, that's what this book is really about: It's God showing us how cynical, bitter, and empty life is apart from the knowledge of Him. It's our hope that we can learn this lesson from our study of Ecclesiastes, in contrast to how its author, Solomon, had to learn it—the hard way.

Got Questions?

Sabbath School University *has answers!*

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Will They Know Him?

I walk through the marketplace in a major city in the Middle East. But it's not the wares that I scan. It's the people. They pray, they give to the poor, but do they know God? Really know Him? Do they know Issa—Jesus? Will they know Him when He comes? Will they cry for the mountains to cover them when He appears? Or will they look up and say, "This is our God"?

I want to stop them, ask them, tell them about Jesus, who loves them, who died for them. But they don't see me as they pass, their eyes on the goods in the marketplace, not on the eternal treasure.

But we can tell them. The Church is working in this country, and our Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will provide funds to open an outreach center where we can invite them to come and see, to learn who Jesus is. I want to tell them, but they don't hear my voice. So I'll help their countrymen tell them. For me, it's personal.

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