We are beginning a new series on the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. Contrary to modern understandings, wisdom has a divine origin, not a human one. As we read wisdom literature, we can easily get the mistaken impression that wisdom involves the memorization and application of certain texts. The fact is, wisdom is not just common sense based upon experience, it is a result of a relationship with God.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge… Proverbs 1.7

The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding. Job 28.28

13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12.13-14

The divine origin of wisdom means that at its foundation wisdom is not a lesson to be learned but a relationship to enjoy. The wisdom we see in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs did not come from simply human origin; instead it comes from the very heart of God.

9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. 11 The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. 12 Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Ecclesiastes 12.9-12

Of all the books in the Bible, Ecclesiastes has historically been one of the most misunderstood. Many have concluded that this book does not belong with the rest of Scripture, and if it does, it reflects what life would be without God.

"Meaningless! Meaningless! … Everything is meaningless." Ecclesiastes 1.2

Who Wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes?

Seven times the author gives to himself the name Qohelet (1.1, 2, 12; 7.27; 12.8, 9, 10). This word, translated “the Teacher,” has the idea of “One who speaks in the assembly of the wise.” The book identifies its writer as “son of David, king in Jerusalem,” (1.1).

What Difference Does It Make When It Was Written?

Our understanding of the book will depend upon when it was written. The historical setting for the book was the reign of Solomon (970-931 B.C.) and this was one of the grandest times in Israel’s history. At this highest point, Israel was the envy of all the surrounding kingdoms. Israel was also at the highest point of its blessings under God’s great Abrahamic, Davidic, and Mosaic promises. It is easy then to see how the historical setting will deeply influence one’s interpretation. It is not a book of pessimism or negativism, but rather it is a book that pushes us to view life and all of its pleasures in realistic terms.
What Is The Purpose of Ecclesiastes?

The book of Ecclesiastes was written as an instruction on how to make people wise and happy. It makes them wise by showing them the futility of building their hopes on the fleeting material and social goods of this world. It makes them happy by showing how, within the context of fearing God, they can fully enjoy the goods of this world.

Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom tradition of Israel and as such it takes a hard look at all sides of life, the good as well as the bad. The writer looked at a world where wrongs went unpunished, children still died, and evil people still dominated. The question then becomes: How can someone live with all this without despair? Qohelet answers these and other difficult questions, and though his answers may not be easy to accept, they are true to reality.

Key Phrases

- "Everything is meaningless" (1.2, 14; 2.1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21; 3.19; 4.4; 12.8, etc.)
- "A chasing after the wind" (1.14, 17; 2.11, 17, 26; 4.4, etc.)
- "Under the sun" (1.3, 9, 14; 2.11, 17-20, 22, etc.)
- "Find satisfaction," “enjoy,” “be happy” (2.24; 3.12-13, 22; 5.18-19; 9.7,9, etc.)
- "Fear God" (3.14; 5.7; 7.18; 8.12-13; 12.13)

Key Passages

- Ecclesiastes 11.7-12.1

   "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (12.1), introduces one of the most fascinating allegories in Scriptures. Using a picture of an old house, Qohelet sets forth the reason for men and women to begin acting decisively and strenuously for their Creator to his glory.

- Ecclesiastes 2.24-26

- Ecclesiastes 3.1-15

This is the theological high point of the book. It is a biblical view of the times of our lives. This is what life is all about.

- Ecclesiastes 5.7; 7.13-14

- Ecclesiastes 12.8-14

13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.
14 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12.13-14

The words of Qohelet speak to the issues of life. As we approach them, we need to allow the Shepherd to speak to our hearts as we are instructed to walk in awe of God and enjoy life.