

Ecclesiastes

Final Bible Study

Considerations

Following the structure first proposed by Addison Wright in 1968, which divides the book into units of thought. Wright's structure commends itself for three reasons: 1) it is based objectively on the repetition of key phrases in the text of Ecclesiastes, rather than on subjective interpretations of the content; 2) it is accepted by more scholars — admittedly still a tiny minority — than any other; and 3) it brings work-related topics to the foreground. We do not have time to reproduce Wright's arguments, but we will indicate the repetitive phrases that delineate the units of thought he proposes. In the first half of the book, the phrase "a chasing after wind" marks the end of each unit. In the second half, the phrase "not find out" (or "who can find out?") performs the same function. Wright's structure will contribute directly to our overall understanding of the book.

Did the Structure of the writing influence the way you felt about what you read? Did the repetitious phrases help, hinder, direct, or express?

Commentary

Matthew Henry

We are among Solomon's happy men, his happy servants, that *stood continually before him to hear his wisdom*; and they are the choicest of all the dictates of his wisdom, such as were more immediately given by divine inspiration, that are here transmitted to us, not to be heard, as by them, but once, and then liable to be mistaken or forgotten, and by repetition to lose their beauty, but to be read, reviewed, revolved, and had in everlasting remembrance. The account we have of Solomon's apostasy from God, in the latter end of his reign (1 Kgs. 11:1), is the tragical part of his story; we may suppose that he spoke his *Proverbs* in the prime of his time, while he kept his integrity, but delivered his *Ecclesiastes* when he had grown old (for of the burdens and decays of age he speaks feelingly, and was, by the grace of God, recovered from his backslidings. There he dictated his observations; here he wrote his own experiences; this is what days speak, and wisdom which the multitude of years teaches. The title of the book and the penman we shall meet with in the first verse, and therefore shall here only observe,

1. That it is a sermon, a sermon in print; the text is (Ecc. 1:2), *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*; that is the doctrine too; it is proved at large by many arguments and an induction of particulars, and diverse objections are answered, and in the close we have the use and application of all, by way of exhortation, to *remember our Creator, to fear him, and to keep his commandments*. There are indeed many things in this book which are dark and

hard to be understood, and some things which men of corrupt minds *wrest to their own destruction*, for want of distinguishing between Solomon's arguments and the objections of atheists and epicures; but there is enough easy and plain to convince us (if we will admit the conviction) of the vanity of the world, and its utter insufficiency to make us happy, the vileness of sin, and its certain tendency to make us miserable, and of the wisdom of being religious, and the solid comfort and satisfaction that are to be had in doing our duty both to God and man. This should be intended in every sermon, and that is a good sermon by which these points are in any measure gained.

2. That it is a penitential sermon, as some of David's psalms are penitential psalms; it is a recantation-sermon, in which the preacher sadly laments his own folly and mistake, in promising himself satisfaction in the things of this world, and even in the forbidden pleasures of sense, which now he finds more bitter than death. His fall is a proof of the weakness of man's nature: *Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom*, nor say, "I shall never be such a fool as to do so and so," when Solomon himself, the wisest of men, played the fool so egregiously; nor *let the rich man glory in his riches*, since Solomon's wealth was so great a snare to him, and did him a great deal more hurt than Job's poverty did him. His recovery is a proof of the power of God's grace, in bringing one back to God that has gone so far from him; it is a proof too of the riches of God's mercy in accepting him notwithstanding the many aggravations of his sin, pursuant to the promise made to David, that if his children should commit iniquity they should be corrected, but not abandoned and disinherited, 2 Sam. 7:14, 15. Let him therefore that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall; and let him that has fallen make haste to get up again, and not despair either of assistance or acceptance therein.

3. That it is a practical profitable sermon. Solomon, being brought to repentance, resolves, like his father, to teach transgressors God's way (Ps. 51:13) and to give warning to all to take heed of splitting upon those rocks which had been fatal to him; and these were fruits meet for repentance. The fundamental error of the children of men, and that which is at the bottom of all their departures from God, is the same with that of our first parents, hoping to be as gods by entertaining themselves with that which seems good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise. Now the scope of this book is to show that this is a great mistake, that our happiness consists not in being as gods to ourselves, to have what we will and do what we will, but in having him that made us to be a God to us. The moral philosophers disputed much about man's felicity, or chief good. Various opinions they had about it; but Solomon, in this book, determines the question, and assures us that to fear God and to keep his commandments is the whole of man. He tried what satisfaction might be found in the wealth of the world and the pleasures of sense, and at last pronounced all vanity and vexation; yet multitudes will not take his word, but will make the same dangerous experiment, and it proves fatal to them. He, 1. Shows the vanity of those things in which men commonly look for happiness, as human learning and policy, sensual delight, honor and power, riches and great

possessions. And then, 2. He prescribes remedies against the vexation of spirit that attends them. Though we cannot cure them of their vanity, we may prevent the trouble they give us, by sitting loose to them, enjoying them comfortable, but laying our expectations low from them, and acquiescing in the will of God concerning us in every event, especially by remembering God in the days of our youth, and continuing in his fear and service all our days, with an eye to the judgment to come.

Pastor Chuck Swindol
Bible Teaching Ministry
Insight.org

What's the big idea?

Ecclesiastes, like much of life, represents a journey from one point to another. Solomon articulated his starting point early in the book: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” ([Ecclesiastes 1:2](#)), indicating the utter futility and meaninglessness of life as he saw it. Nothing made sense to him because he had already tried any number of remedies—pleasure, work, and intellect—to alleviate his sense of feeling lost in the world.

However, even in the writer’s desperate search for meaning and significance in life, God remained present. For instance, we read that God provides food, drink, and work (2:24); both the sinner and the righteous person live in God’s sight (2:26); God’s deeds are eternal (3:14); and God empowers people to enjoy His provision (5:19). Ultimately, the great truth of Ecclesiastes lies in the acknowledgment of God’s ever-present hand on our lives. Even when injustice and uncertainty threaten to overwhelm us, we can trust Him and follow after Him (12:13–14).

Comments?