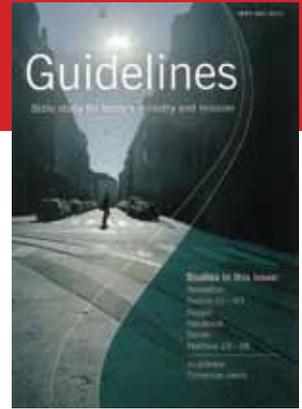


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A Sample from BRF's Guidelines Bible Reading Notes

Ecclesiastes by John Goldingay

Introduction

Ecclesiastes is one of the 'Wisdom Books', along with Proverbs and Job. Their writers are more like theologians or philosophers than other Old Testament authors. Now there are theologians and philosophers who are good at raising questions, and others who are good at providing answers. Proverbs belongs more in the second category, Job and Ecclesiastes more in the first. David Hubbard, former President of the seminary where I teach, put it this way: 'Proverbs says, "These are the rules for life. Try them and you will find that they work." Job and Ecclesiastes say, "We did, and they don't."' Proverbs offers us ground rules for understanding life. Job and Ecclesiastes help us to live with experiences that belie the ground rules.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon is a test case for discussing how far we can find answers to the big theological and philosophical questions, though it never uses Solomon's name. This in itself hints that we are not to take the allusion to Solomon literally. The same applies to the Talmudic rabbi's description of Solomon as writing the Song of Songs with the enthusiasm of youth, Proverbs with the wisdom of maturity, and Ecclesiastes with the disillusion of old age.

Ecclesiastes' language is more like the Hebrew of New Testament times and afterwards than any other parts of the Old Testament. The word for a garden in 2:5, for instance, is *pardes*, which comes from the Persian word from which we get the word Paradise (in the Old Testament it otherwise comes only once in Nehemiah and once in the Song of Songs). This itself suggests that Ecclesiastes may be one of the later books in the Old Testament. But dating matters less with Ecclesiastes than it does with some other parts of scripture. Its questions are timeless.

I use the New Revised Standard Version.

Week 1 Day 1: The pointlessness of rushing around *Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–11*

The author(s) of this book put their reflections on life on the lips of one they call *qohelet*, which NRSV and NIV translate ‘Teacher’. The word comes from *qahal*, an assembly or congregation. The word Ecclesiastes (‘churchman’) itself comes from the Greek word for an assembly, so that gets it right. The theology in this book is the kind that raises more questions than it provides answers, but it is proper ‘church’ teaching, not some kind of exercise in destructiveness.

I live in a society characterized by a relentless activism. Christians as much as anyone else spend their lives rushing around ceaselessly on the freeway and never stop doing business on their cell-phones. ‘What do they gain from it all?’, Ecclesiastes asks. Relentlessly they pursue new experiences—new music, new films, new fashions, new holiday destinations. ‘The eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing’, Ecclesiastes observes. If in due course they collapse in front of the television, the adverts inexorably promise them something new—a new car, a new hamburger, a new computer, an ‘all-new episode’ of the series that follows. But ‘there is nothing new under the sun’, Ecclesiastes comments. Their society through no fault of its own has no past, though it longs for one, and it has no way of knowing what it might look like in the future. ‘The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of things to come’, Ecclesiastes reflects.

Southern California is the society where Western civilization is tested to destruction, so the rest of the West had better pay attention to how the experiment is going. The West in general lives by the myth of progress. Because technology advances, therefore humanity has progressed. Now I am grateful for the invention of the flush toilet and mains sewage, but it is hard for us to acknowledge that in most areas that matter, humanity has made no progress over the millennia. Ecclesiastes offers to deliver us from our self-deception.

Week 1 Day 2: The futility of research and self-indulgence *Read Ecclesiastes 1:12—2:11*

The person behind this book is not only a ‘churchman’ but a son of David and king in Jerusalem. Israel of course had only one person who was traditionally thought of as its great philosopher-king, David’s immediate successor, Solomon. His reputation makes him the ideal person to imagine undertaking the

investigation that concerns this book. He was the original Southern Californian. He tried everything. He can testify from experience concerning matters that ordinary people can only speculate about. In addition, he had the reputation as the great philosopher. He thought as well as acted. That, too, should enable him to reflect on human experience in an instructive way.

1:12–18 constitutes an introduction to his testimony, summarizing the results of his great experiment. He confirms the claim of 1:2–11, and specifically confirms that our vast human activism cannot achieve things that matter or put right the real problems of the world (1:15). The country that can put a man on the moon cannot solve the problems of poverty, prejudice and inequality in its back yard. The society that puts huge emphasis on research into psychological and social problems cannot enable people to find happiness. The logical result is to be quite disillusioned with the notion of research.

2:1–11 then reports on Solomon's experiment with pleasure in particular. Now if there is a society that has tested pleasure to destruction, it is also the land of Los Angeles, Hollywood and Disneyland. It drinks fine Californian wines and watches countless comedy programmes on television and in the cinema. It is one of the music capitals of the world and one of the sex capitals of the world. It has built fine houses and museums, planted thousands of fruit trees, and constructed monumental irrigation systems. It attracts cheap labour from countries around the world. It comprises half of a state that has an economy greater than that of most of the actual countries in the world. And it is a deeply and widely unhappy society, which proves the truth of the testimony of Solomon without acknowledging the fact to itself.

Week 1 Day 3: So what shall we do? *Read Ecclesiastes 2:12–26*

Solomon's great experiment does not make him conclude that research, work and relaxation are pointless. They are indeed *absolutely* pointless, but they are nevertheless *relatively* worthwhile. They cannot provide ultimate answers or fulfilment, but they can provide something.

One of the foundations of modernity was the attempt to discover ultimate answers by starting from scratch rather than from supposed 'divine revelation'. Descartes thus began from 'I think, therefore I am'. But the subsequent history of thought has established that philosophy cannot generate answers to ultimate questions. In that sense, wisdom is useless. But wisdom still excels folly as light excels darkness (v. 13). It is *absolutely* useless but *relatively* useful.

One way we seek to find meaning is through work, but our work is also *ultimately* meaningless. Who knows how our successors will carry it on, whether they will ignore it or undo it or prove it wrong? Second-hand bookshops and university library stacks are full of the dusty, now-unread writings of 19th-century biblical scholars, and the works upon which I labour will soon join them. But our work is *relatively* useful. Perhaps my writing these notes may help someone see how Ecclesiastes impacts on their life. That is not nothing.

So in a moment I can break for lunch and rejoice in what I have done this morning (v. 24a). It is a gift of God that I can do that (v. 24b), and this is perhaps one reason why I can rejoice in it. We cannot start from ourselves and reach the conviction that God is there. But if we start from the conviction that God is there, that changes the way we look at our lives and the little things that give meaning to them. And the conviction that God is there and is the source of life's little pleasures is as reasonable a conviction as Descartes's 'I think'. God has not given us the answers to the big questions, but God has not given us nothing.

Straight after that little encouragement, however, Solomon pulls it back. Even our capacity for those little enjoyments is qualified by an awareness that there is a randomness about who receives them (v. 26). Ecclesiastes will not let us turn little answers into the big answer.

Week 1 Day 4: For everything there is a time *Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–15*

The book abandons Solomon's imagined testimony and moves in a new direction. Different experiences and activities all have their time. The passage speaks of very different kinds of experiences and activities. On one hand, birth and death are events we have no control over. They happen to us; we do not make them happen. The first expression literally means 'a time for giving birth' (AV margin), which suggests a more solemn contrast. Weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing are also experiences built into life. We have no control over the events that provoke them.

In contrast, human discernment and decision-making are involved in planting and uprooting, in demolishing and building, in throwing away or collecting stones (which might be connected with building, but the expressions are a puzzle). The same is true of embracing and refraining from embracing, gestures that suggest entering into friendship and making commitments. It is true of seeking and giving up for lost, keeping and throwing away. It is true of tearing your garments in mourning and repairing them to begin normal life again, and it

is true of silence and speaking. It is true of love and hate—in other words, of war and peacemaking. This last pair may also help us to understand the statement that there is a time to kill (the word means ‘slay’) as well as a time to heal. If ‘a time for birthing’ means ‘a time for being born’, perhaps this denotes ‘a time for being slain and a time for being healed’.

There are thus uncertainties about the details of this poem, but what about the whole? When the Byrds made it a top ten hit in the 1960s, the idea that there was an appropriate or necessary time for life’s activities and experiences presumably came across as a comfort. Ecclesiastes’ subsequent comments about times in verse 9–15 fit with that, though they qualify it in a way consistent with ‘Solomon’s’ testimony. Yes, all these human experiences have their time. But what is the framework in which they all fit? God has not told us. It is a clearly postmodern point in a quintessentially postmodern book. We cannot know the nature of the big picture into which everything fits. But perceiving the nature of the little pictures that make up life is not to be despised.

Week 1 Day 5: In the place of justice, there is wickedness *Read Ecclesiastes 3:16—4:3*

Like the Torah, the Wisdom books interweave theology and ethics. If Ecclesiastes is going to agonize about existential questions, then, they will include ethical ones. Why is there so much injustice in the world? Ecclesiastes was as familiar as we are with a world in which people like him and us are able to control the rules by which society and economics and politics and the law work. Without doing anything illegal, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The rich own their land (or their home), eat well, and provide for retirement. The poor do not. In the community of faith (Israel or the Church) there ought to be ‘justice and righteousness’. We could paraphrase these as ‘power and authority exercised in a way that reflects the rights of people who are bound up together by mutual commitment, like people in a family’. Instead there is ‘wickedness, wickedness’. We could paraphrase that as behaviour that ignores the way we are bound together. So what attitude do we take to that?

Suppose we look forward to a day when God will judge everyone (3:17). While there have been occasions when God has intervened in Israel’s life in this way, there have been long periods when God has not, and the intervention that may come one day is little use for people who are dying today. If we affirm the conviction that God will undertake a great judgment at the End, there is no empirical evidence

for that, and no teaching in Israel's tradition about this either. Ecclesiastes likes being empirical, starting from what we can know. What we know is that everyone dies, human beings as well as animals. What happens afterwards is speculation (3:18–21).

While he then comes back to his regular practical solution, that we should enjoy what we do have (3:22), he follows that with a more gloomy alternative perspective. Our human inhumanity to one another is indeed overwhelming. People who have not been born and have therefore not yet witnessed it are more fortunate than those who have (4:1–3).

Week 1 Day 6: The advantages of companionship; the perils of religion
Read Ecclesiastes 4:4—5:7

The attempt to achieve is an inherently lone venture. We are seeking to make our mark, to do better than the next man. I use the gender-specific language advisedly, because in our culture this has usually been a male affair. The same seems to have been true of Ecclesiastes' culture. Ecclesiastes' exhortation is one that in our culture women have more often instinctively lived by, though they have now been able to join the rat race. The book urges that collaborative work is better than individual work. Admittedly its argument is very down-to-earth in the advantages it sees in two people working together (4:10–12a). Three people working together is even better (4:12b).

Ecclesiastes is also down-to-earth in the insight he offers on religion. His first warning corresponds to one that recurs in the prophets. A well-to-do person, at least, is able to do just the right thing by way of sacrifices, but this may not be accompanied by the kind of life that God approves outside the temple. It is wiser to listen to what prophets, priests, and philosopher/ethicists have to say (5:1). The Torah itself was never interested in sacrifice unaccompanied by right living.

Second, the Psalter is full of praises to sing and protests to utter, some going on at great length. Ecclesiastes believes we need to set the awareness of God's awesomeness alongside the awareness of God's approachability (5:2–3). We might compare the stress on reverence and awe in Hebrews 12 with the stress on childlike freedom in Romans 8.

Third, both the Torah and the Psalms also assume that people often make promises to God, but Ecclesiastes wants people to think before they pledge.

Don't make a promise you are not prepared to fulfil (5:4–6). This might be a special danger at a moment of great enthusiasm in worship, or of great personal need.

Fourth, the development of apocalypses such as Daniel reflects the way God can guide through dreams. Ecclesiastes joins with a prophet such as Jeremiah who emphasizes the way in which dreams that allegedly come from God may actually come from people's own imaginations (5:7). How the sentence works is obscure, but the punch line is clear: 'have reverence for God'. Translations tend to render this phrase 'fear God', but Ecclesiastes no more wants people to be afraid of God than other Old or New Testament writers do.

Guidelines

What is the significance of this extraordinary book? Here are some possibilities to consider:

Is it a statement of the darkness into which the gospel came? It has been used in evangelistic Bible Studies to help people face the reality of life without Christ.

Is it an essentially positive book—one that first portrays the nature of the darkness, and then shines out with light?

Is it a book that gives believers permission to face hard questions? We do not have to avoid these, even if we cannot always answer them very well.

Is it a book that actually urges believers to face hard questions, rather than pretending that we have all the answers?

Is it a book that simply acknowledges the contradictoriness of life and faith, and leaves us with it?

Which makes sense of your own reading of the book and of you yourself, in the light of what it is and what you are?

Week 2 Day 1: The best things in life are free? Read Ecclesiastes 5:8—6:9

One of Ecclesiastes' recurrent themes is money. It acknowledges that money is

really important, but urges that it is less important than people think.

It is strangely deceptive, or strangely unfulfilling (5:10). A current television advert acknowledges that the most precious things in life are priceless, but for all the rest we have a certain credit card. We decline to acknowledge that more money and things will do us no good (cf. 6:7–9). And as a result, we are inhibited from enabling some poor people (for whom a little more could make a huge difference) to have that little more.

Increased wealth never seems to go as far as you think it will (5:11). The cost of acquiring it has to be offset against the gain from it.

Increased wealth brings anxiety with it. An ordinary working man may not have much, but he has enough, and he does not have to worry about how the stock market is faring (5:12).

This wealth is always precarious. You can never be sure you will make the right decision about when to buy and when to sell (5:13–14a). You can make a bad decision and end up with nothing, which is hard in itself, but even harder when you put so much effort into making your money in the first place instead of (say) lying on the beach (5:14b–16).

Or your affairs may collapse through no fault of your own, or death may deprive you of the chance to enjoy them (6:1–6). Then your anger and frustration can make you much more unhappy than the person who never had what you lost (5:17).

We have to sit loose to money, and a starting point is acknowledging what Ecclesiastes says. The sensible thing is to enjoy the good things of life that God gives, without pretending that they can provide ultimate satisfaction or meaning. Once more, they are not everything, but they are not nothing (5:18–20).

Week 2 Day 2: Facing human limitations *Read Ecclesiastes 7:1–7, 23–29*

Call no one happy till they are dead, said the Athenian statesman and philosopher, Solon. Only then can you make a definitive judgment. Death is a good thing, then, because it makes a definitive judgment possible (7:1). The comment reminds us how temporary our reputations can be, and how provisional our judgments must be.

We are going to die. It is a fact that we work hard to avoid. Ecclesiastes believes that it has decisive importance for the life we live before death. Keeping aware of where we are bound helps us make happier decisions now. Only a fool forgets that (7:2–4). It is but one facet of the fool’s unreliability (7:5–7).

Again Ecclesiastes reminds us that his conclusions have limited significance (7:23–25). Here he seems to be reverting to giving ‘Solomon’s’ testimony about what he has discovered. This is supported by the introduction of another reference to the ‘Teacher’ in verse 27, the first since 1:12. That may point to part of the explanation for what follows.

Verses 26–29 seem extraordinarily misogynistic, and puzzlingly so. How could their author go on to write 9:9? Indeed, verse 29 (which suggests that all human beings fail) looks in tension with verse 28 (which suggests an exception to that rule). Further, ‘man’ in verse 28 (*adam*) is actually the word for a human being, the word that recurs in verse 29. This underlines the problem.

Three possibilities may help us with the text. First, if ‘Solomon’ speaks again, the thousand women are the ones mentioned in 1 Kings 11:3, whom he indeed allowed to lead him astray. The warning is then couched as a warning about women, but ironically so, because it is as much a warning to men about themselves. Second, an implication would be that if this is one man’s warning testimony about the mess one can get into with women (a warning about our capacities as men!), then it invites a responsive formulation in which women reflect on the way men can be ‘bitter as death’. Third, Roland Murphy among other commentators neatly undoes the problem by changing the punctuation of verse 28: ‘What my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found, is that ‘one human being among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found’. This statement is one Ecclesi-astes goes on to disagree with. Men are not even one-tenth of a per cent better than women. All have perverted their way. It is an even gloomier conclusion, worthy of Ecclesiastes.

Week 2 Day 3: Facing the facts about death *Read Ecclesiastes 9:1–12*

Here are the facts, then. First, death comes to everyone (9:1–3, 11–12). God is the one who gives life and the one who eventually takes it back, but we can see no rationale about how God does that. The righteous and wicked, the clean and polluted, the good and evil, the religious and the irreligious, the wise and the mad, the people who take oaths and the people who refrain from this: they all die. Belonging to the first group ought to make some difference: maybe you

should live longer. But both groups are in God's hand, and how and when you die seems to be a matter of whim.

Second, death means your human experience is all over (9:4–6, 10b). You have no hope. While you are alive, you may still have prospects. When you are dead, you have none. Nothing will ever again happen to you. Death means no knowing, no reward, no being remembered, no loving, no hating, no jealousy, no acting, no thinking.

Ecclesiastes presupposes some practical facts about death that are common to Old Testament thinking as a whole. They overlap with death as we experience it, though not as we always think about it. Old Testament faith assumes that what happens to the body is a guide to what happens to the person. This is a natural assumption if you believe that the body is a true expression of the person, but the hold of Greek thinking on Christian faith often makes us assume that the body does not really matter.

When a person dies, the life visibly disappears from them. They cannot move, act, laugh, cry, or worship. If the body cannot do these things, it is hardly conceivable that the person (the 'soul') can do so. Being human is too bodily for that. We await the resurrection of our bodies so we can do these things again. But Ecclesiastes had no basis for believing in such resurrection, and insists on being rigorously empirical and not consoling us with pie in the sky when you die.

It is precisely against the background of the fact of death that Ecclesiastes invites his audience to affirm life (9:7–10a). The fact that it is all we have is reason for enjoying it, not for devaluing it.

Week 2 Day 4: Attitudes to the king *Read Ecclesiastes 9:13—10:20*

In Egypt, teaching of the kind that we have in the Old Testament Wisdom books was collected to form a resource for the education of people who would work in the civil service. Both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes include material on how to relate to the king, and this might form a natural part of wisdom for someone involved with the royal court. Ecclesiastes' material on the subject reflects his characteristic hard-nosed stance.

First, an ordinary person with insight may fulfil a role that is actually more important than the king's, but ordinary people are unlikely to be remembered

for that (9:13–18). One senses that Ecclesiastes would rather be the ordinary person with insight than the person who merely has position and power. It is another sign that Ecclesiastes is hardly to be identified with Solomon in real life.

Second, you need to be able to keep cool if you work at court (10:4). As long as the king stops short of ‘off with his head’, keeping cool will probably be your salvation.

Third, on the other hand Ecclesiastes is a political and social conservative and believes in the proper order of things (10:5–7). There are people who belong to the ruling class and people who belong to the ruled, and both should stay in their place. Otherwise chaos rules (cf. 10:16–17).

Fourth, you need discretion if you are to survive (10:20). It is amazing how rulers sometimes get to know things.

The material on kingship is not very coherent and thus mirrors the nature of Ecclesiastes as a whole. One of the perceptive commentators on the book, Michael V. Fox, has written about *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield, 1989). It is one of the glories of Ecclesiastes not to oversimplify things. Both the theoretical questions about life, and the practical ones, are complicated.

Week 2 Day 5: Remember your Creator in the days of your youth *Read Ecclesiastes 11:7—12:7*

The contradictoriness of Ecclesiastes continues in this last section of the concrete teaching in the book. On the one hand, we are to enjoy our lives. As young people we are to rejoice in our youth, as old people we are to rejoice in the number of years we are given, and we are to ‘think positive’. Yet we are also to keep in mind that youth yields to old age, life yields to death, the length of life is far exceeded by the time we spend dead, and in old age continuing life can become more a burden than a privilege.

12:1–7 constitutes a profound conclusion to Ecclesiastes’ treatment of death, though a puzzling one. The puzzlement and the profundity issue from its combining several pictures, which interweave literal description and imagery to convey the loss that old age and death involve.

The first image is that of fading light and a gathering storm (12:2). The picture of old age begins with an equivalent to our talk of the autumn of our lives. The image reverses the process in Genesis 1 whereby God brings light into being

and sets sun, moon and stars in the sky. In old age, a person may have more and more difficulty seeing the light, and at death these lights go out for the individual.

The second image is a great house gradually falling into disrepair and disuse (12:3–4). Its staff and its inhabitants are getting older and incapable. The house has lost its place as a centre of life and activity in the community. The silence of death has descended upon it.

Third, the passage pictures an old man losing his faculties. Initially it speaks more literally (12:5a), though it complicates this by describing his deterioration by means of a number of figures (12:5b). One way or another the passage describes the increasing weakness of old age.

Finally the passage portrays the arrival of death itself (12:6–7). It does this first in figures and then in theological language that again sees death as a reversing of God's acts of creation, when God shaped the first man's body from dirt and breathed life into it. The life-breath disappears and the body dissolves.

Ecclesiastes is not wrong. There may be more to be said about what happens after we die, but that can only be said after we have accepted the facts that Ecclesiastes urges.

Week 2 Day 6: The value of a goad *Read Ecclesiastes 12:8–14*

The book closes where it began, only more so. 'Vanity of vanities', it repeats from 1:2. The expression forms a bracket round its teaching. 'Vanity' (*hebel*) is one of Ecclesiastes' favourite words. He is responsible for half its appearances in the Old Testament. Literally it means a breath or a breeze, but it is usually used figuratively to denote something that has no substance. It is often applied to images of gods, which have no substance and are useless and empty. The repetition of the word suggests 'utter emptiness', 'utter futility'. The conviction from which the book starts is that life goes nowhere and history manifests no progress, and this fact makes human life look quite empty. The conviction with which it closes is that the fact of death carries the same implications.

The last paragraph of the book then closes in the third person, so that 12:9–14 pairs with 1:1. Whoever wrote or compiled the material in 1:2—12:8 with that summarizing bracket around it, the opening and close of the book are someone else's comments. In his study of the way different books of the Old Testament

are 'shaped to function' as canon, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Brevard S. Childs has particular success with Ecclesiastes. He shows how these opening and closing words invite readers into a balanced attitude to this book as these words take it on its journey towards becoming scripture.

On one hand, we have noted that these comments begin by calling the writer 'churchman'. They now repeat the term, and add that what we have been reading is indeed the work of a 'wise man'. This is a theological term in the Old Testament, not a merely academic one. These are words of truth, well-taught (12:10). The summary goes on to a brilliant encapsulation of how this wise man's teachings work. They are like goads (12:11). They hurt you, they make you say 'Ouch', but they do that in order to drive you forward. Once the kind of thing that Ecclesiastes says is out there, it cannot be unsaid.

On the other hand, enough is enough (12:12). One Ecclesiastes in the canon is a good idea. A canon full of Ecclesiasteses would not be. The reader needs to keep in mind the basic convictions of wisdom and to set Ecclesiastes in its context (12:13). The fact that there is no empirical evidence for some statements of faith does not mean they are not true (12:14).

Guidelines

As I write these notes, my wife is lying on the settee at the other end of the room, to safeguard against her getting pressure sores. She has multiple sclerosis. Twenty years ago, she worked as a psychiatrist. Just last week we had a Christmas card from one of her psychotherapy patients, who remembers the sessions she had with Ann and looks back on them as a decisive shaping influence on her life. Today Ann cannot remember what country she lives in, nor what day it is, nor what are the names of the two carers who have shared in looking after her for over two years, nor what is the name of the grandson who brought her such joy when he was here a few weeks ago. She is virtually unable to swallow (she eats via a feeding tube) or to speak. She is watching the television news, though I am not sure how much she takes in. On that news we have been hearing of the terrible cost of the Russian invasion of Chechnya, of the suffering of the local people and of the Russian bodies surrounding their tanks. The pictures were too grim to show us. In a moment I will take her out for a walk in her wheelchair in the warm January sun, and we will have an ice-cream, and if we are lucky she will be able to eat a little of it, and as I push her back up the hill to our apartment I will sing silly songs and pretend I am not going to make it to the

