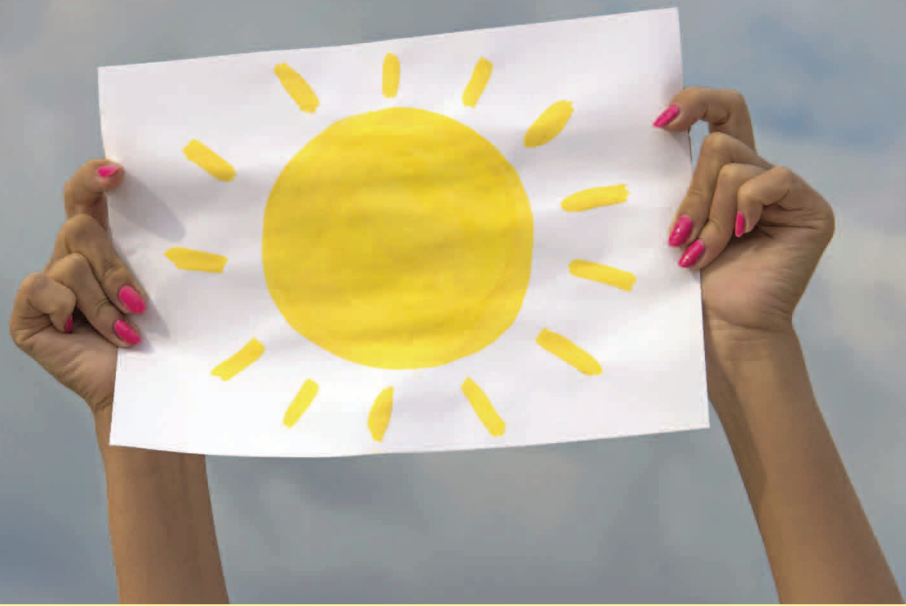


# ECCLESIASTES

Comforting Words When Dealing with Tough Stuff

by Ruth Koch



## Opening Prayer

Holy Trinity, guide our hearts and thoughts into lives of thankfulness, satisfaction, wisdom, and compassion. Amen.

## Solomon the Teacher

Solomon, King David's son and Bathsheba's second son, asked God for wisdom after he was made King of Israel. God graciously granted his request, and Solomon wrote Song of Songs as a young man, Proverbs in the middle years, and Ecclesiastes as an old man. Solomon had it all, lost the joy and, in the end, affirms what is worth having. Ecclesiastes was written about 1000 BC.

## Western Eyes and Eastern Thinking

The Book of Ecclesiastes has been called boring, depressing, confusing, repetitious, and disjointed. To our Western eyes, it could well be all of those things, unless you read the book with Eastern eyes. Let me explain. Western thinking is linear, logical, and follows a prescribed pattern from A to B to C. Each idea flows from or supports the previous idea and leads us into the next thought. Logical. Orderly. Just the way you learned in grade school: **A → B → C**

Eastern-thinking patterns, however, are more like a spiral or a swirl in which an idea is expressed, and then the writer moves forward only to return to that first idea and add a new perspective or detail. Then the Eastern writer moves forward with a fresh idea, but later revisits the first idea with yet another nuance or refinement.

*The Eastern writer's perspective looks like this:*



Ecclesiastes seems circular and repetitious because it was written by an Eastern-thinking Solomon. And, indeed, circling back around to nuance an idea one more time becomes a great teaching method.

## Without God, life is empty of meaning and joy

Solomon is not just a philosopher or wise man; he is speaking for God as he writes the truth of Ecclesiastes, helping you live in a world fraught with Tough Stuff and frequent disappointments.

Even though Solomon had earthly wisdom in his youth and middle years, godly wisdom was God's gift in old age. Throughout his life, he had to deal with the consequences of his sinful choices. Scan **Chapters 10 and 11 of 1 Kings** to discover how Solomon learned that life apart from God is vanity and meaningless. Note below the decisions that guaranteed him serious and unpleasant consequences:

**1 Kings 11:1-3** \_\_\_\_\_

**1 Kings 11: 4-6** \_\_\_\_\_

**1 Kings 11:7-10** \_\_\_\_\_

**1 Kings 11:11-14** \_\_\_\_\_

What is God's judgment? \_\_\_\_\_

Solomon uses the term, "under the sun" 29 times in Ecclesiastes. He is referring to life without God, life after the fall into sin, life from a strictly human point of view, a life filled with Tough Stuff. Read **Ecclesiastes 1:2-4**. Note the contrasts below of Solomon's despair at life-under-the-sun with St. Paul's assurance of life's meaning in **I Corinthians 13:12** — and be encouraged!

### Ecclesiastes 1:2-4

**v.2** Life is an endless loop and is full of troubles

**v.3** You suffer and are discouraged now

**v.4** In the end, you will lose everything

### I Corinthians 13:12

**v. 12a** What you see now is incomplete

**v. 12b** You will "know fully" the God who saves you

**v. 12c** You are fully known by God

Solomon repeatedly spirals back to the topic of materialism. Read **Ecclesiastes 2:4–11** and **Ecclesiastes 4:7–8**. Solomon had every material thing he could ever want. In the end, however, Solomon called it meaningless and a chasing after the wind. How would Solomon answer those who insist that you can have it all? \_\_\_\_\_

In the end, Solomon was disappointed with what earthly wisdom and earthly goods could deliver and had to change his expectations. Have expectations of perfection ever led you into problems within yourself or with others? If you are willing to do so, share an example. \_\_\_\_\_

Solomon was a 1000 BC man with 21st century depression. Even though Solomon had worldwide business interests and was by far the richest man in the world, he still describes his life as unrewarding and joyless.

Note the discouragements in the following verses in **Ecclesiastes**:

**1:8** \_\_\_\_\_

**2:10–11** \_\_\_\_\_

**2:18–23** \_\_\_\_\_

**6:1–2** \_\_\_\_\_

Solomon describes a man with great wealth who has no capacity to enjoy it. The secret Solomon learned is that one can't enjoy wealth if you don't know the God who gave it to you.

Find a private time (or do so now in your mind) and walk quietly through your home, noticing the many ways that you are wealthy, from running water and soft pillows to actually having dishes in your cupboards. Be thankful! As you experience your wealth, recognize once again that the people in your life as well as your possessions are direct gifts from God.

### **Tough Stuff is not always bad. Hard times can bring wisdom.**

Read **Ecclesiastes 7:2–3** and **Psalms 90:7–12**. In these passages, Solomon and Moses are both inviting us to be sobered by life's realities, especially the reality of death.

Your witness: The Tough Stuff under the sun may cause you to experience real feelings of fear, frustration, sadness, anger, and grief. The most powerful witness is not given by the person who pretends to be always happy, but by the person who trusts God when experiencing these difficult and painful feelings.

Growing in godly wisdom: God is not as committed to your short-term happiness as He is to your character. In what ways has God shaped your godly character through the Tough Stuff you have experienced? \_\_\_\_\_

There's a cartoon in the Charlie Brown series that features his friend Lucy, who says, "I don't want the ups and downs of life. I only want ups and upper ups!" I can relate, can you?

As a direct result of the fall into sin, life acquired ups and downs and is sprinkled with Welcome Stuff and Tough Stuff. Read **Ecclesiastes 3:1–11** and consider the rhythm God has built into life and the ups and downs in your own life. With each verse, give an example from your own life:

*Note to leader: Choose one or more for group discussion as time allows.*

A time to be born and a time to die \_\_\_\_\_

A time to sink roots and a time to uproot \_\_\_\_\_

A time to do a really hard thing and a time to heal \_\_\_\_\_

A time to tear down and a time to build \_\_\_\_\_

A time to weep and a time to laugh \_\_\_\_\_

A time to mourn and a time to dance \_\_\_\_\_

A time to throw stones to destroy something and a time to gather stones to build something new \_\_\_\_\_

A time to embrace and a time not to embrace \_\_\_\_\_

A time to search diligently and persistently and a time to give up and move on \_\_\_\_\_

A time to downsize and give away and a time to treasure and keep meaningful things \_\_\_\_\_

A time to tear your clothes in sorrow and distress and a time to mend those clothes and heal \_\_\_\_\_

A time to mind your own business and a time to speak up \_\_\_\_\_

A time to love with a full heart and a time to hate what God hates \_\_\_\_\_

A time to stand for justice and a time to bend over backwards to promote peace \_\_\_\_\_

Solomon assures us that life under the sun requires strong faith and a deep trust in God. We can enjoy life even though we live under the sun and there are so many things that we do not understand. God has made us safe in Christ for all eternity. In a nutshell, here is Solomon's message: *Trust God. Be realistic about life, and enjoy God's gifts!*

### **Closing Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, Creator, we remember Your enduring love for us and the meaning eternal life gives to life under the sun. We thank You, Jesus, Redeemer, for coming to earth to be the Lamb of sacrifice for our sins and for the Holy Sacraments that enrich our lives and strengthen our faith. We thank You, Holy Spirit, Comforter, for Your guidance and Your call to reflection. In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

Sing or say together "We Praise You, O God, Our Redeemer, Creator" (*LSB* #785; *LW* #494; *TLH* #568).

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