

ECCLESIASTES

Main Message: Ecclesiastes records the oral teachings of a man referred to as the “Preacher” (or teacher), whom many people believe to be King Solomon. A word which the ESV translates as “vanity” occurs 38 times throughout the book. “Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity.” The word literally means “vapor” or “smoke.” The point being that life is so temporary and fleeting. The Preacher tells poems about time and death in order to show that no matter who you are and what you accomplish in your short little life, it will quickly disappear and be forgotten. Therefore the book is a challenge to consider what really brings purpose and meaning in life.

Purpose: The conclusion of the book is key to understanding the purpose of its message. The author (who is not the same person as the Preacher) reveals that the reason he records the teachings of the Preacher is not to communicate that everything under the sun is meaningless; but rather to communicate that living your life for the One who is above is the only thing that can give life meaning. Therefore, after the author uses the Preacher’s teaching to deconstruct any attempt to find meaning in life from anything other than God, he concludes by telling his readers to fear God, obey His commandments, and remember that judgment is coming. Thus living your life for the Lord is the only thing that is not “vanity.”

LAMENTATIONS

Timeline: The Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem for years (which led to starvation, intense suffering, and lots of death), and then ultimately sacked and burned the city in 586 B.C. Lamentations is a poetic expression of pain, reflection, and hope from a man who experienced and survived this devastating event. Many assume that the author was Jeremiah the prophet.

Literary Design: Lamentations has been referred to as a “literary masterpiece.” Chapters 1-4 are acrostic poems, which means that each line starts with a corresponding letter in the alphabet. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, therefore each poem has 22 verses (with the exception of chapter 3, which gives 3 lines per letter). The point seems to be that the author is expressing the full spectrum of pain and suffering from “A-Z”, he is giving order to that which is chaos, he is attempting to emphasize the reason for hope (in ch. 3), and he is admitting that even he cannot make complete sense of all the suffering (which is why chapter 5 is not an orderly acrostic poem).

Main Message: Life is hard (especially when you rebel against the Lord), but God is good. Israel forsook the Lord and broke the covenant. They received the just judgement that the prophets had warned about for centuries. However, nothing can thwart the covenant faithfulness of God. His mercies are new every morning. Therefore hope in him. That is the message of Lamentations.

ESTHER

Timeline: The story of Esther takes place in the capital city of the Persian Empire about 100 years after the Babylonian Exile. Some Jews had returned home upon the decree from Cyrus in 538 B.C., but many did not. Hence the population of Jews scattered throughout the Persian Empire.

Main Message: Unlike any other book in the Bible, Esther never mentions God. However, this is clearly by design to make a point because God's fingerprints are glaringly obvious throughout. It is a thrilling story about kings, queens, villains, vengeance, justice, courage, romance, and (most of all) God's sovereignty. Haman was not the first man to come up with a plan to exterminate the Jews, nor would he be the last. But Esther is a story of one of the many ways that God has faithfully preserved His people throughout history. And because He did so the offspring of Abraham and David were preserved, Jesus was born, the nations are being blessed with the gospel, and David will never lack a son to sit on his throne for all of eternity.

DANIEL

Timeline: Daniel was included in the first wave of Babylonian exiles (605 B.C). He served Nebuchadnezzar and his sons in the Babylonian court until Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. Cyrus made a decree that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem (as prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah). But Daniel, who would have been 90+ stayed in exile.

Key Themes: The Preservation of God's People: Daniel is a story of hope for God's people who endure suffering and persecution at the hands of wicked, arrogant, worldly kingdoms. Daniel and his 3 friends are models for how to respectfully serve pagan leaders without compromising ultimate loyalty to God. The book includes multiple examples of how God can miraculously deliver those who are faithful to him (such as the fiery furnace and the lion's den).

The Humbling of God's Enemies: The events in the book of Daniel take place in wicked earthly kingdoms ruled by wicked, arrogant kings, and it includes multiple visions and prophecies of future earthly kingdoms which will also be wicked and oppressive. The book consistently reveals the kings (who represent the kingdoms) as beastly figures (whether it be in real life in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, or in the visions). The point seems to be that when people and kings and kingdoms arrogantly rebel against God it reverses the created order (think Genesis 1-2). Instead of having dominion over the beasts (like Adam was given), pride turns kings into the beasts they are supposed to rule.

The Hope of God's Kingdom: Even though the course of history has seen every wicked human kingdom be replaced by another wicked human kingdom, there will be a day when the Kingdom of God will be ushered in and the kingdoms of this world will fade away forever and ever. And God will do this through the one who is like the Son of Man (from chapter 7), the one born of a woman, who will crush the Serpent and his beastly seed, who will bring triumph for those who trust in Him, and who will reign forever and ever in a heavenly Kingdom that never ends.