

Without Regrets: A Study of Ecclesiastes by Kristi Burchfiel

Here a sample from the Introduction and First Session of Without Regrets: A Study of Ecclesiastes

Introduction

“I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work which You have given me to do.”

These words, spoken by Jesus and recorded in John 17:4, sum up the entire life and works of Jesus. He did everything the Father had for Him to do. As Jesus prayed that prayer in the garden of Gethsemane the night before His death, He was able to look back over His life here on earth. He saw many things He could have done but didn't. After all, there were several more people He could have healed, countless more sermons He could have preached, and thousands of towns He never set foot in. However, He was able to look back on His life and say, “I did everything I was given to do by my Father. I have no regrets.”

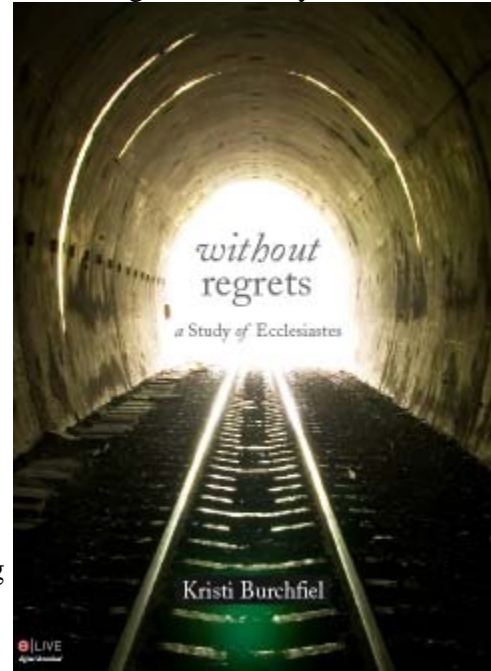
So then, when we look back on our life thus far, what do we see? Do we have situations in our past we wish we would have done differently? Some of these changes might be inconsequential when we look at our life as a whole, such as, “I wish I would have studied French instead of Spanish.” These types of regrets are minor and usually have little to no guilt or remorse attached to them. On the other hand, some of the changes might be more profound, such as, “I wish I had never cheated on my spouse,” or “If only I had been a better witness for Christ while in college.” These types of regrets can result in lots of guilt and shame and have lasting consequences. God, in His grace and mercy, forgives us our shortcomings and makes us new. The question becomes, “How do we avoid having additional regrets from this point forward?”

This study takes us through the book of Ecclesiastes. In this book, we are able to learn from the experiences, observations, and advice Solomon, once king of Israel, gleaned from his own life. Solomon, with all his wisdom, also had a great many regrets. He offers this book as encouragement to us to learn from his mistakes.

What does it take to live a life without regrets? Join me as we explore that question further in the sessions to come.

Session 1: Without Regrets

Regrets. Many people don't think about them until after they are actually experiencing them. We live today in such a fast-paced world that it can be difficult to stop and reflect on our decisions before we make them. The effects of how we choose to live our lives impact many people besides just ourselves. Since we can't go back and change actions or words that occurred in the past, it is important to understand what leads us to actions that result in regret. If we can identify



ways to avoid those actions, we can avoid a lot of regret down the road. This brings us to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is not exactly the most studied book in the Bible. I've attended church my entire life and can remember only hearing a couple of sermons or messages preached from this book. Some of you may have read a chapter or two on your own and decided that it wasn't the book for you. While I was studying Ecclesiastes, I started asking friends of mine from both religious and non-religious backgrounds what they had heard about the book or what they thought about it. I heard a wide array of response including depressing, pointless, not relevant in today's world, and boring. After spending time studying the book, I agree with preacher and author John Philips, who has described the book of Ecclesiastes in his messages and commentaries as the book of Solomon's regrets.

Why Study Ecclesiastes?

The theme of Ecclesiastes is pretty straightforward: making much of nothing, striving after wind, earnestly seeking after something that vanishes in thin air. What a picture of disappointment. The second verse into the book states that "Everything is meaningless." So if everything is meaningless, why bother delving further into the book? There are several reasons that you and I should study the book of Ecclesiastes. I'll list the three main ones that I discovered while studying it.

1. It's in the Bible. Every book of the Bible is inspired by God and is powerful. This fact alone makes the book worthy of study.
2. It's written as a warning. We'll get into this later on, but this book is designed to be a warning to people so that others do not fall into the same temptations as the writer.
3. The truths are relevant to today's world. Again, we'll see this in more detail later, but the truths covered throughout the book are ones that still are debated by people in general.

My study of the book of Ecclesiastes began after a time of personal struggle. I had been a follower of Christ for many years and had become, in a sense, a little overconfident in my own faith in Christ. Some of you may know what I mean by that. It can be easy in this culture to say that we have faith in Christ but then spend all our time doing for ourselves without really feeling it necessary to trust in Christ. In this culture especially, we pride ourselves on being able to "pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps." However, this attitude of self-reliance is neither biblical nor Christlike.

My struggle reached a critical point when I realized I was willing to compromise in an area I had never thought I would even be tempted. Things I knew were wrong began to be easily justified as a means to an end. My thoughts ran along these lines: *Surely God won't mind if I do just a little bit of this. After all, it's not that big of a deal, and the end result may help me in the long run.* Thankfully, I came to the point where I actually listened to what I was saying and realized what a potentially dangerous situation I had put myself in. I started to run through in my mind some of the things I had been telling myself that had led to the edge of such a slippery slope. I discovered, much to my surprise, that I had my own self-pleasure in mind, not God's plan. That was when I realized a profound truth: I can't trust myself to know or do what is best for me.

That is when my crisis hit. If I can't trust myself, how am I supposed to make the necessary day-to-day decisions? How do I handle not being in control? How do I avoid landing myself in situations guaranteed to create feelings of guilt and regret later? What do I do now? That is when God led me to the book of Ecclesiastes. Instead of just handing me the answers to my questions, God had me search through and find them for myself. This journey changed my life, and I believe God will change you through this journey as well.

As we begin to study the book of Ecclesiastes, my prayer is that, whether you are at a spiritual crossroads or not, you will search out for yourself God's truth in this book and that He will help you avoid some of the pitfalls I experienced as well as some of the pitfalls the writer of Ecclesiastes experienced.

Solomon: The Author

Solomon is generally accepted as the author of Ecclesiastes. When studying any book, it is important to study the author, if possible. Every author has a specific purpose, perspective, and people in mind when writing. We're going to spend the remainder of this session getting familiar with the background behind the writing of the book before we dive into Ecclesiastes itself.

The Author's Purpose

Most authors have a purpose in writing. Sometimes they just want to explain facts so people will have a better understanding about something. Other times, the author is trying to persuade the reader to do something, believe something, buy something, etc. Other purposes might be to feel better about himself or get something off his chest, such as journaling. Frequently, authors have multiple purposes.

Based on Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 and 12:9–14, summarize Solomon's purpose for writing Ecclesiastes.

The Author's Perspective

Authors also have a perspective from which they are writing. Regardless of how objective a person tries to be, God has allowed each of us to experience different situations that have given us a certain perspective on life. Solomon had experienced many things throughout his life, and these events led him to write this book. Solomon was also at a specific place in history prior to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Here is a listing of some of the generally accepted background information regarding Ecclesiastes.

Principal Personalities	The Preacher or Teacher, generally Solomon
Historical Setting	Around 935 bc at the end of Solomon's life. (He died in 930bc) Unified Kingdom of Israel
Geography	He was king of Israel in Jerusalem

Style	Autobiographical and Instructional. Meant to be a sermon
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Another important aspect in understanding a person's perspective is any life experiences the author has been through. The following scriptures give a synopsis of Solomon's life.

Read 1 Kings 2:1–4 and 3:1–15 and describe the major events of Solomon's early life.

Read 1 Kings 9:1–9, 10:23–25, 11:1–13, 26–43. What devastating piece of news does Solomon receive late in life? How does he respond?

Once Solomon learns that his son will not be inheriting the kingdom that he has worked so hard to build and expand, he is overcome with anger. What's more, the kingdom will be split, and a majority is going to be given to one of Solomon's servants. Solomon is so angry that he tries to have the servant killed. In the wake of these devastating events, Solomon sits down to write Ecclesiastes.

The Author's People (Audience)

The very act of writing something down implies that it will be read at some point, either by the author or by someone else. Solomon does not name a specific person or group of people to whom he is addressing himself. However, he gives us a clue by how he identifies himself in the book.

What is the title that he uses to refer to himself (Ecclesiastes 1:1)?

Based on him calling himself a preacher or teacher, who would you assume he is writing to?

Most preachers have congregations that listen to them, and teachers have students. In a broader sense of the word, preaching refers to teaching others in order to help them live correctly. Many parents have preached to their wayward teenager. Preaching is done (or should be done) out of a deep love and desire to see the recipient return or continue right living, avoid difficulty and discipline, and eliminate ignorance. However, even the most effective preaching cannot change things for a person who will not listen or heed the warnings given.

Conclusion

While there are many detailed answers to the above questions, when looking at all of them together, a statement can be made about why Solomon wrote this book. In short, Solomon wrote to all those who would listen (people), in order to instruct and entreat them (purpose) to not make the same mistakes that he made and suffer the same regrets (perspective). Certainly, this is a worthwhile goal that gives us something to look forward to in the sessions ahead.