

TERM 3 SERMON SERIES

ECCL 1 A STES



TURN, TURN, TURN
A time for everything.



Thoughts, Notes and Answers

Turn, Turn, Turn.

As our western world is haunted by the Corona virus, riven by racial violence and protest, bedogged by the spectre of climate change and hell bent on an individualism that is ultimately self-destroying we need a 'reality check'. And if there is a blunt 'reality check' in the Bible the book of Ecclesiastes is it.
Its 'motto'

'Vanity, vanity all is vanity'

('Meaninglessness, meaninglessness all is meaninglessness'.)
Brings us up with a start – It that in the Bible? And it is just that sort of reaction that Qoholeth (the teacher), I think, wanted to provoke. As we dig into this enigmatic book and use it as a lens to look carefully, critically and realistically at our own 21st Century Western Culture. and as we ponder what it means to be one of God's people in that society, it is my prayer that we will through these studies see the grandeur of the work of the Creator God and the infinite nature of his gracious actions in our world, particularly in Jesus who comes to bring all things to their true reality.

Greg Holmes (July 2019)

	Week Ending	Passage Title	Preaching Passage	Page
1	Sun 26 Jul	<i>Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26</i>	<i>The Words of the Preacher</i>	
2	Sun 2 Aug	<i>Ecclesiastes 3:1-22</i>	<i>An Occasion for Everything</i>	
3	Sun 9 Aug	<i>Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:7</i>	<i>"One Handful of Tranquillity"</i>	
4	Sun 16 Aug	<i>Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12</i>	<i>"Whoever Loves Money"</i>	
5	Sun 23 Aug	<i>Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:1</i>	<i>"Consider What God Has Done"</i>	
6	Sun 30 Aug	<i>Ecclesiastes 8:2-9:10</i>	<i>"A Proper Time"</i>	
7	Sun 6 Sep	<i>Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:20</i>	<i>"Wisdom is Better than Strength"</i>	
8	Sun 13 Sep	<i>Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8</i>	<i>"Remember Your Creator"</i>	
9	Sun 20 Sep	<i>Ecclesiastes 12:8-14</i>	<i>"The Conclusion of the Matter"</i>	

ECCLESIASTES: TURN TURN TURN – A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

References:

- *Kidner, D. "Ecclesiastes – A time to Mourn and s Time to Dance" (The Bible Speaks Today) (Nottingham, IVP, 1976) – *This is the most helpful of the general commentaries.*
- *Eaton, M.A. "Ecclesiastes" (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries) (IVP, Leicester, 1983). *Again, a helpful general commentary.*
- *Provan, I. The NIV Application Commentary : Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2001).
- Ryken, P.G. "Ecclesiastes (Preaching the Word Commentary) (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2010)

The sections on Ecclesiastes in these are also helpful.

- *Webb, B.G. Five Festal Garments (New Studies in Biblical Theology 10) (Nottinham, Apollos, 2000). *A great little book, scholarly but pastoral.*
 - Dever, M. Promises Made : The Message of the Old Testament (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2006) – *The Ecclesiastes section in here is most helpful in getting the whole flow of the book. You can find the sermon on which the chapter is based at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/wisdom-for-the-successful-the-message-of-ecclesiastes/>*
 - *Kidner, D: The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes (An Introduction to Wisdom Literature) (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 1985).
 - *Waltke, B.K.; Yu, C., An Old Testament Theology (An exegetical, canonical and thematic approach) (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2007)
- The Bible Project overview is also helpful see <https://bibleproject.com/>

Additionally:

- *Eaton, M.A "Ecclesiastes" in Carson, D.A.; France, R.T.; Motyer, J.A.; Wenham, G.J. (Eds) New Bible Commentary (21st Century Edition) (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).
- *Greidanus, S. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2010)
- Halls, T.J. Life and Other Trivial Pursuits (Expositions from Ecclesiastes) (St. Peters, St. Peters Publication, 1992)
- *Longman, Tremper III. The Book of Ecclesiastes (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998)
- *Murphy, R.E. "Ecclesiastes (Word Biblical Commentary) (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1992)
- Peterson, E.H, Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1992)
- *Ryken, P.G. "Ecclesiastes (Preaching the Word Commentary) (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2010)
- *Shepherd, J,E. ""Ecclesiastes" in Longman, Tremper III, and Garland, D.E. (Eds) The Expositor's Bible Commentary - Revised (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2008)
- *I have soft copies of these.

Also very helpful are.

A series of 38 short (6-12 minutes) talks by Dave McDonald to be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERmdhVDyVrk&list=PLIA20JKZo9qaQNebzhIJe-WGDYEsKp0T&index=1> *Thoroughly recommended.*

Also a series of Alistair Begg Sermons at <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/series/chasing-the-wind/>

PLEASE NOTE:

It is probably worth my while explaining what I attempt to do in these 'notes'. My first work on them is to ensure that you can actually answer the questions. It is easy to ask questions that no-one is able to interpret. I then attempt to give some thoughts of my own on each question and then to bring to bear materials from my reading on the topic. Sometimes these are direct answers to the questions but, also sometimes, they are extra, I hope, relevant ideas.

It proves impossible in these studies to delve into all of the themes and implications of the material and I would encourage all people who lead or indeed do the studies to look more widely than the questions and allow Jesus' words to speak to our minds, hearts and lives. (HEAD, HEART, HANDS)

THE SECTIONS OF THE STUDIES

It is good to read through the passage for the week at the start of each study.

It is important to note that studies have as their basis a longer passage of Ecclesiastes and then a focus on one aspect of the passage. Generally, it is the focus section that will be preached on.

THE BROAD VIEW

These look at the basic ideas in the whole passage. I would recommend that each week you have a go at these in order to get some sense of the flow of the text and its important points.

UP CLOSE

This then looks at the 'focus' section of the passage. These questions seek to dig into the material more deeply and to encourage us to grapple with Qohelet's (the Teacher's) thought.

CONNECTIONS

These question attempt to get us to look more widely into Scripture and into the themes raised by the passage.

Generally, they relate to the focus passage but sometimes draw on the wider section.

WALK THE TALK.

The topics and aspects of life that Ecclesiastes are vast and seem to impact all corners of our lives.

It is vitally important that we prayerfully consider how Qohelet's thinking should stimulate and guide our own walk with Jesus.

These Questions seek to get us to think about this.

We need to make the rubber of the 'idea' hit the road of our lives, thoughts and actions. – One of the problems in writing 'application' or 'impact' type questions is not knowing where all the individuals in groups etc. are up to. If you can see a better application of the material – DO IT. – The important thing is to relevantly think about the impact the passage has on us.

Please note that my answers below are not the only 'correct*' answers or what you are trying to get to in the study. I have set them out as a guide to my thinking only and an assistance to you.

**They may indeed be incorrect or misguided.*

These Notes are meant to be the start of the assistance I am willing to give in regard to the studies. If you need anything further DO NOT hesitate to contact me.

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Ecclesiastes: Some Background.

OVERVIEW OF ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes comes to us from an editor (12:9–14) who has compiled the teachings and proverbs of an Israelite king who calls himself Qohelet (“assembler”), a title that alludes to his role as a teacher of wisdom in an assembly—presumably of God’s people (12:9). A prologue (1:1–11) sets forth the basic concern that drives Qohelet’s whole enterprise, namely, the *hebel* (= “breath,” “vapor”; NIV, “meaningless”) nature of human life in a world that continues as it was before and after anyone’s own life span. The book concludes with the words of the editor-compiler, who encourages contemplation of Qohelet’s words as goads for the young, but also warns that there is a proper limit to such speculation (12:12)—and in the end he makes sure that all is placed within the ultimate setting of biblical wisdom: Fearing God by keeping his commandments gives meaning to human life.

The words of Qohelet himself are enclosed (1:2; 12:8) by the melancholy refrain: *Hebel, hebel!* says Qohelet; *Hebel of hebel!* Everything is *hebel*. The rest is an inquiry into how one should live in such a world, since reality isn’t as neat as some expressions of traditional wisdom might lead one to think. And the structure of the book mirrors its content, for there is no immediately apparent order to it. What the author does is to play and replay certain themes, all the while moving toward his concluding advice to the young (11:9–12:7): to enjoy life while they are young, but to do so remembering their Creator. If Qohelet’s material can be divided into coherent subdivisions at all, they would seem to be 1:12–6:12 and 7:1–12:7, the first playing and replaying Qohelet’s primary concerns, the second, while keeping these themes alive, sounding much more like proverbial wisdom.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ECCLESIASTES

Traditionally, no other book in the Bible has been such a difficult read. This is because of (1) the somewhat rambling nature of many of Qohelet’s observations—at least to the Western mind—(2) some strikingly antithetical statements existing together in the same book, and (3) the negative side of some of these statements, which seem so contradictory to the rest of the Bible. But if you try to read the book from the editor-compiler’s perspective—that of a teacher of wisdom who, living before the full revelation of resurrection, recognized the value of Qohelet’s assertion that life in the present world doesn’t always add up—then you will be able to see that the final message of the book is not at all the hedonist or fatalist tract that some have made it out to be. Crucial to understanding this is to appreciate Qohelet’s own context(s).

First, whatever else, Qohelet was written within Israel’s Wisdom tradition, a tradition that was not trying to speak for God in the same way the prophets did, but one that was musing carefully on life in order to teach the young how to live well before God. And somewhat like the author of Job, but in contrast to the way some might mechanistically apply the book of Proverbs, Qohelet is convinced that the ways of the Creator are past finding out. Although he maintains a sturdy trust in God throughout (2:24; 3:11–14; 5:7b, 19; 9:7) and believes God to be just (3:17; 8:12–13), he nonetheless finds the real world not nearly as predictable as, for

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example, Job’s “comforters” do, who see a sure cause and effect to everything and thus represent a kind of “wisdom” that Qohelet is likewise reacting strongly against.

Four realities dominate Qohelet’s overall perspective: (1) God is the single indisputable reality, the Creator of all and the one from whom all life comes as gift (e.g., 3:12–14), including its—for Qohelet—usually burdensome nature. (2) God’s ways are not always, if ever, understandable (3:11; 8:17). (3) On the human side, what is “done under the sun” (2:17) simply is not tidy; indeed, much of it doesn’t add up right at all. The way things should be (the righteous get the good, the wicked get the bad) is not in fact the way things are—at least not consistently in this present life. (4) The great equalizer is death, which happens to rich and poor, wise and foolish alike. Given Qohelet’s lack of hope in a resurrection, then once you’re dead that’s it—without memory, forgotten, no matter what your life may once have meant (9:5–6). And it is this reality that makes life seem *hebel* (a word that occurs thirty-seven times, just over half of its seventy-three OT occurrences).

At issue is what this word means for Qohelet, since it literally means “wisp of air” or “vapor.” Most of the time he uses it as a metaphor for the nature of human existence. But what metaphorical freight does it carry? A tradition that goes back to the Septuagint translates it “emptiness” (cf. the KJV, “vanity,” that is, “in vain”), pointing to the “vaporous” nature of our human lives (along with its companion, “chasing after the wind”). Another tradition, followed by the NIV, goes for “meaningless.” While either of these work fine in some instances, they do not help in others. In most cases the sense seems to be the passing/transitory or unsubstantial nature of things, like vapor itself. This seems especially to be its sense in the prologue, where human life, in contrast to the constancy and “oldness” of the world, evaporates very quickly. Moreover, the “vapor” that is our life is also elusive, lying outside our own control; it is like “chasing after the wind” (an ironic play on *hebel* = “wisp of air”).

So what should one make of such a “vapor,” these “few and *hebel* days” we pass through like a shadow (6:12; cf. 2:3; 5:18), especially in light of life’s inequalities and, for the one who lives apart from God (“the fool”), its utter meaninglessness? Qohelet’s answer is not, as some have accused him, “milk it for all you can, because you only go around once” (a misunderstanding of his repetition of the “eat and drink” theme, 2:24; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7). Rather, his point seems to be that, even if one knows so little except the certainty of the grave, one should live life, *hebel* as it usually is, as a gift from God. This is because, in the end, joy and pleasure come not in “getting” (securing “profit” from what one does)—because that will evaporate—but in the journey itself, the life God has given. Death comes to all alike, but not all live alike; in such a world, joy and satisfaction are to be found in living the rhythms of life without trying to be in control or to “make gain” of what is itself merely transitory.

Even read from this perspective, Qohelet’s wisdom is not altogether comforting. But overall it is an orthodox book. If one misses any mention of the great events of Jewish history, that is quite in keeping with the Wisdom tradition, and if one feels squeamish about great but contradictory realities being set side by side, that is probably because we too, like Job’s “comforters,” prefer things to be tidier than they are. But in the end even Qohelet does not leave the young dangling.

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One way is clearly to be preferred to the other, and the so-called contradictions serve to highlight that fact. The Christian believer, who now reads from the perspective of joyous hope in the resurrection and the certainty of divine judgment, should all the more be prepared to appreciate Qohelet's embracing of life in the present, despite its *hebel* nature.

From Fee, G.D., Stuart, D. How to read the Bible Book by Book (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002)

SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS:

If the book of Proverbs is about wisdom for people who want success, the book of Ecclesiastes is for people who have success. Particularly, it is for individuals who have gotten what they wanted out of life, or at least what they thought they had wanted and then have found it wanting.

Robert Gordis has written, "Whoever has dreamed great dreams in his youth and seen the vision flee, or has loved and lost, or has beaten barehanded at the fortress of injustice and come back bleeding and broke, has passed [the Teacher's] door and tarried a while beneath the shadow of his roof'

Dever: Promises Made.

The website introduction to Alistair Begg's series of sermons says this:

"Trapped in a dark world without God, the writer of Ecclesiastes searches frantically for some light on the path. Indulging in everything this world has to offer leaves him empty and unfulfilled. After climbing high on the ladder of life, he makes the tragic discovery that it was propped against the wrong wall. Growing cynical about life's achievements, he begins to question the rationale behind everything. These studies touch the pulse of a generation caught between material prosperity and spiritual poverty." [I trust that these studies help] us make sense of this relevant book, so that we can live life with purpose and meaning. In order to do this, we must first discover what it means to fear God, which is the beginning of true wisdom."

<https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/series/chasing-the-wind/>

Ecclesiastes is a garment to wear when we have finished with performance and are ready for work—not with an inflated idea of what we can achieve, but with contentment and confidence, knowing that our times are in God's hands. A pair of overalls, perhaps. A garment for those who are through, once for all, with triumphalism and cant, and are willing to face life as it really is.

Webb (Five Festal Garments)

ECCLESIASTES

Study One: 'The Words of the Teacher ...'

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26

Read it Through

Day	Ecclesiastes	Comments / Notes / Prayer Points
1	1:1-11	
2	1:12-18	
3	2:1-12	
4	2:13-26	
5	Romans 8:18-31	

This chart is here to give some guidance for Bible reading during the week. The five passages seek to break the Ecclesiastes passage into manageable, contemplatable chunks and then to include some wider Biblical and New Testament passages to further provoke thought.

ECCLESIASTES

Study One: The Words of the Preacher

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26

The Broadest View.

[An EXTRA not in the Study Booklets.]

Seeing things from a Christian Worldview is vitally important.

We can think about worldview by asking four questions:

What is our nature?

What is our world?

What is our problem?

What is our end?

It would be helpful, I think, to give consideration to what Ecclesiastes is telling us each week about the godly answer to each of these questions.

Read: Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26

The Broad View

It is possible to get badly bogged down in this first set of questions. Look for the 'broad' succinct answers.

Of course, if you wish to pursue any of them further you are welcome to do so and the books in the Reference List will give worthwhile help.

1. What is your first reaction after reading these two chapters?

Whaaaat? Needs some open discussion.

This is not the sort of language we see usually in the scriptures.

This text is going to produce some real challenges as we think it through.

2. What change occurs at 1:3?

It appears that the person 'speaking' changes.

Most scholars agree (though some don't) that 1:1-2 and 12:9-14 are the voice of a sort of 'frame-narrator' (or 'anchor man') who seeks to set in context the words of the Teacher (Qohelet).

Others contend that the introductory part runs to 1:11

3. Who is the Teacher (Qohelet)? And in Chapter 2 what sorts of things does find to be 'meaningless'?

1:12 describes the Teacher (Qohelet) as "King over Israel, in Jerusalem", 1:1 as "the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem".

We are immediately expected to think of King Solomon who was David's son and had a reputation for wisdom. However, this is not explicitly claimed as it is in Proverbs 1:1.

EV Church Booklet *"It is often assumed that the Teacher is Solomon (based on 1:1, 1:12 and 2:7). However, this is never stated outright and is actually discouraged by the statement in 1:16 (see also 12:9-12). In fact, it is quite possible that the Teacher assumed the character of Solomon as a literary device in order to make their point. Solomon, after all, is the pinnacle of Israel's kingship and the greatest of her wisdom figures. If anyone could have figured out how to live a meaningful life, Solomon would be the one to look to! Yet for all that Solomon gained, he forgot the central truth for understanding meaning in life – he forgot to fear God and obey His commandments."*

Webb (Five Festal Garments): *"The Teacher (as the NIV renders qōhelet) is not so much revealed by his name as hidden behind it"*

4. What new element do 2:24-26 introduce?

We come for the first time in this book to the role of God in all of this.

It is important to note carefully the theological presence in this book. It is not prominent, but it is very important. This is God's world 'under the sun' that we are talking about.

Up Close

Look again at 1:1-11

1. Verse 2 (which is repeated in 12:8) stands like a motto in this book. What do you think it means?

Good question and a key to the book.

The word for 'meaningless' is *hebel* which can be translated as 'vanity' (ESV), 'absolute futility' (CSB), 'smoke' (The Message), or 'useless' (TEV). You begin to get the picture.

Greidanus: *"The word translated here as "vanity" is literally "vapor" or "breath." "All is vanity" is literally "all is vapor," "all is breath." Stand outside on a cold winter morning and breath out. What do we see? We see our breath as a vapor. What else do we see? The vapor is there for a second and then disappears. All things in this world are like our breath, the Teacher says. It's here one moment and then it's gone."*

Kidner (BST): *"A wisp of vapour, a puff of wind, a mere breath—nothing you could get your hands on; the nearest thing to zero. That is the 'vanity' this book is about. "... What makes this reading of life disturbing is that this airy nothingness is not seen as a mere flicker on the surface of things, where it might even have had a certain charm. It is the sum total."*

Eaton (TOTC): *"Between 1:2 and 12:8 the Preacher will echo this key statement about thirty times, showing that his book is in fact its exposition. Vanity characterizes all human activity (1:14; 2:11): joy (2:1) and frustration (4:4, 7-8; 5:10) alike, life (2:17; 6:12; 9:9), youth (11:10) and death (3:19;*

11:8), the destinies of wise and foolish (2:15, 19), diligent and idle (2:21, 23, 26)."

2. Note the phrase (V3) 'under the sun'. What do you think this refers to?

What does it not include?

Essentially it is a term for earthly things. The things that exist and happen here on earth.

By making the distinction it implies that there are things beyond this – that 'under the sun' is not in fact everywhere.

3. What aspects of life are referred to in these verses?

Life, generation, daily cycle, the water cycle, nothing new, life's impact.

This introductory part serves to introduce us the wide, almost universal, impact of Qohelet's theme of meaninglessness.

Connections

1. "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). How does this passage reinforce this idea?

Under the sun there is no 'lastingness' it is indeed 'vapor' (hebel).

Implied is we need to look elsewhere.

2. Read Romans 8:18-32. What is the solution to all this meaninglessness?

In a word: JESUS.

The Romans passage points us to the futility (meaninglessness?) of the world and then to the plan of God to bring meaning and salvation out of that futility (caused by sin) through the work of Jesus.

Walk the Talk

1. Work, pleasure, wisdom. What matters?

A good question. And the one Qohelet is grappling with.

For contemporary western society it seems that pleasure, broadly understood, is all that matters.

Discuss.

2. Where do you look for meaning in the world?

Discuss.

3. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?

This question will be in each of the studies and since this is what the Bible claims for itself it is worth asking the question for every Bible passage we look at.

So, for you, does Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 teach you or rebuke you, or correct you, or train you in righteousness. And then in what way.

ECCLESIASTES

Study Two: 'An Occasion for Everything'

Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

The Broad View

1. What is the general point v1-14 is making?

Provan (NIVAC): *"That God, not mortal beings, controls the "times" is a fundamental biblical conviction. Thus, the biblical account of Israel's past does not focus primarily on the social and political forces that drive history or on the great heroes who are said to shape its direction. It portrays the past, rather, as an entity shaped by God, who acts in grace and judgment, in the midst of all the actions of its human and other participants, to move time along towards his own goal."*

2. What point does v15-22 make?

God will call all things into judgement.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *"The Preacher had an intense emotional response to both groups of people—the same holy response that we see in the life of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, he responded to the plight of the oppressed with lamentation, like the tears that Jesus shed for the harassed and helpless people of Israel (Matthew 9:36). On the other hand, he responded to their oppressors with indignation, like the angry words that Jesus had for the moneychangers at the temple (e.g., Luke 19:45–46). But what the Preacher mostly felt was frustration that he could not bring an end to oppression." ...*

"The writer of Ecclesiastes had a good answer to the problem of injustice. He said in his heart, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work" (Ecclesiastes 3:17)."

Up Close

Look again at 3:1-11

Provan (NIVAC): *"IF THE PRECEDING section of the book has advocated the embrace of reality, especially in the light of death (1:12–2:26), the present section underlines the nature of that reality, evoking as it does so the introduction to the book (1:1–11). The universe has a flow and a regularity to it that is beyond any human control and renders futile all attempts at "profit." The wise person lives life in the light of this massive truth."*

1. What does v1 imply about God?

That it is God in control of all these things.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“A Biblical understanding of time and its place in the Christian worldview begins with the sovereignty of God. Although he is not mentioned by name in the first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3, God is mentioned in the verses that follow. Furthermore, the opening verse talks about what happens “under heaven.” Many scholars see this phrase as virtually identical to the more common expression “under the sun.” However, the words “under heaven” seem to have much more positive connotations. Later the Preacher will say explicitly that “God is in heaven” (Ecclesiastes 5:2). So everything that happens in this time-bound universe is under the authority of the God who rules in Heaven. ... In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, his “holy, wise, and powerful” providence governs “all his creatures, and all their actions””*

2. Note especially 3:11. What are the three key ideas in this verse? What does each of them mean for people ‘under the sun’?

First, God has made everything beautiful in its time.

We are to enjoy God’s good creation.

Second, He has also set eternity in the hearts of men;

Here is the hint that there is more yet to come – Beyond time and beyond ‘under the sun’

Third, People cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

We need to have a robust and all-encompassing view of the sovereignty of God. Even when it does not make sense to us.

Note Augustine’s (Confessions i, 1) maxim: *“Augustine’s maxim: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.’”*

Kidner (BST): *“Surprisingly, and superbly, Qoheleth in verse 11 enables us to see perpetual change not as something unsettling but as an unfolding pattern, scintillating and God-given. The trouble for us is not that life refuses to keep still, but that we see only a fraction of its movement and of its subtle, intricate design. Instead of changelessness, there is something better: a dynamic, divine purpose, with its beginning and end. Instead of frozen perfection there is the kaleidoscopic movement of innumerable processes, each with its own character and its period of blossoming and ripening, beautiful in its time and contributing to the over-all masterpiece which is the work of one Creator. We catch these brilliant moments, but even apart from the darkness interspersed with them they leave us unsatisfied for lack of any total meaning that we can grasp. Unlike the*

animals, immersed in time, we long to see them in their full context, for we know something of eternity: enough at least to compare the fleeting with the ‘for ever’.”

3. How are these verses constructed? What do you think is the significance of this?

Longman (NICOT): *“Verses 2–8 contain fourteen pairs of contrasting opposites. The citing of opposites in this way is a common figure of speech (merism) in Hebrew poetry, and it denotes completeness.”*

Provan (NIVAC): *“Merismus involves the statement of polar extremes as a way of embracing everything that lies between them (e.g., north and south; heaven and earth) and is a frequent feature of ancient Near Eastern literature. The totality of things is probably also implied by the fact that our list of opposites comprises twenty-eight items in fourteen pairs—multiples of seven, the number symbolizing completion or perfection in the Bible.”*

4. Which ‘time’ resonates with you at this moment in your life?

It seems that certainly in is a time to ‘refrain from embracing’, a time ‘to weep’ and ‘to mourn’.

But it will have other personal resonances for you in this most unusual of times.

Longman (NICOT): *“Once again, it is important to emphasize that the poem does not advocate these emotions/states/actions, but simply describes them as parts of the full spectrum of human experience.”*

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“The Preacher who wrote Ecclesiastes might ... have said that time is fleeting, that we are running out of time, and that once it is gone, it can never be recovered. With this thought in mind, the American educator Horace Mann once wrote the following want ad: “Lost, yesterday, somewhere between Sunrise and Sunset, two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. No reward is offered, for they are gone forever.””*

Connections

1. Note Romans 5:8 (Galatians 4:4); Ephesians 5:15-16; 2 Corinthians 6:2; 1 Peter 5:6; James 4:13-17. What does the New Testament have to say about our attitude to ‘time’?

The Verses

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Galatians 4:4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,

Ephesians 5:15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

2Corinthians 6:2 For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.

1Peter 5:6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

James 4:13 Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.

It is God who is in control of all times.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“Whenever we find ourselves facing uncertainty, we should wait for God. It is not for us “to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). In the meantime, we are called to wait for God’s timing. We should wait like Isaiah, who promised that those “who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31; cf. 30:18) or like David, who said, “I trust in you, O LORD.... My times are in your hand” (Psalm 31:14–15).”*

2. What ‘time’ should we as Christians, this side of the resurrection, always be looking to?

We are, as the New Testament tells us, already ‘citizens of heaven’ and thus we are ‘aliens’ (strangers) in this world with part of ourselves, our hearts already in the presence of God and so we yearn for that – which should drive us to serve our saviour here and now.

Provan (NIVAC) *“Christians are to live their lives in consideration of this fact, looking ahead to the end times (1 Tim. 6:13–16; 1 Peter 1:3–5; Rev. 1:3; 22:10) without losing hope; for if God is seemingly inactive, it is to be remembered that “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Peter 3:8). That God is in control of time is thus a comfort to the faithful while at the same time being a warning to*

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those who ignore reality and continue to try to manipulate the times to their own advantage as if they were gods. In the rest of the Bible, including Ecclesiastes, whenever mortals think they are gods, suffering for other creatures is bound to follow.”

We are people of the here and now, but we yearn for the there and then.

Our eyes are lifted

from the triumphs and tragedies of the Here and Now

to the glory and wonder of the There and Then

Walk the Talk

1. What should be our personal response to the times which seem to engulf us?

For Discussion.

Provan (NIVAC): *“We cannot truly understand or control “the times,” and so we are cast back on God, who holds our times in his hands and alone knows the span of our individual days. Yet the God on whom we are cast is good, and he is for us (Rom. 8:31). Our response to his grace and blessing should be to seize the time that we have and live it well and joyfully to his glory and praise.*

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26–27)”

2. How do you put the ideas of 3:11-13 together and then how does v13 resonate with you in your daily life?

For discussion.

It is important again to note that what Qohelet is recommending in v13 is for behaviour under the sun. God’s gift is the ability to find satisfaction in the ordinary things of life.

3. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?

Provan (NIVAC): *“We forget that the Bible has not been given to us primarily to satisfy our curiosity, but to engage our lives. We forget that the resurrection itself does not appear primarily in the New Testament as an idea about the future, but as a ground for present faith and holiness.”*

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Study Three: “One Handful of Tranquillity”

Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:7

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:7

The Broad View

1. How do the two sections (1-8 and 9-12) relate in the first part of our passage?

Assuming Ecclesiastes is not just a set of rambling unconnected reflections (and there are scholars who would say that is what it is), it seems to me that 9-12 speaks of an antidote to the problems of v1-8.

The broad application of people co-operating together is a step towards the alleviation of the oppression of the disadvantaged.

2. What is the point of the little ‘parable’ in 4:13-16?

Kidner (BST): *“This paragraph has its obscurities, but it portrays something familiar enough in public life: the short-lived popularity of the great. It shows the faults on both sides, beginning with the stubbornness of the man who has been too long in the saddle—who is out of touch and out of sympathy with the times, forgetting what it was like to be young, and fiery, and hard-up, as he once was himself.”*

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“The point of this closing comparison is that it is better to lead with a teachable spirit than to be too proud to let anyone teach us anything at all. This time the Preacher makes his comparison first, then tells a real-life story to illustrate it. The comparison goes like this: “Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice” (Ecclesiastes 4:13).”*

Remember we are to be the ones who put our trust in the SERVANT King (Mark 10:42-45).

3. What is 5:1-7 speaking about?

How we approach God in our worship gatherings.

More on this below.

Up Close

Look again at 4:1-12

1. In v1-3 what is the attitude to oppression? (Note also 3:16.) Why better off dead?

Longman (NICOT): *“Note the twofold repetition of the phrase ‘There is no one to comfort them.’ ... The repetition expresses Qohelet’s passion and despair about the subject.”*

Eaton (TOTC): *“Although similar to 3:16–22, this unit is a fresh reflection (AV I returned; RSV again). The Preacher is an eyewitness (I saw) of life’s oppressions. No particular era is in mind; injustice characterizes life as a whole. It is evil ‘under the sun’, not under the aegis of any particular ruler (v. 3).*

It is not expected that oppressions will be borne with stoical silence. Grief-stricken Israelites were never inhibited from shedding tears, as psalmists, apostles and their colleagues, and our Lord himself bear witness (Ps. 119:136; John 11:35; Acts 8:2).”

Note Psalm 73:21-26

2. From v4:6 why does Qohelet desire ‘a handful of tranquillity’ (NIV)?

Here the context is the contrast between the quest for security and significance by unrelenting toil (v4) and the laziness of the ‘fool’ (v5).

The answer is to find the secret to contentment. (Philippians 4:12-13,19). For Paul contentment comes from the strength and power and sovereignty of God.

Kidner (BST): *“To both these unhappy ways of life verse 6 holds out the true alternative. The beautiful expression, a handful of quietness, manages to convey the twofold thought of modest demands and inward peace: an attitude as far removed from the fool’s selfish indolence as from the thruster’s scramble for pre-eminence.”*

Ryken: (Preaching the Word): *“Have you learned to be content? The quiet person is like Jesus, who always shows us the best way to live. Jesus did not fold his hands in idleness. Neither did he envy people who had more possessions than he did, which included almost everyone. He simply worked hard in the calling that his Father had given him—the calling to seek and to save lost sinners. As he worked, Jesus trusted his Father to provide for his daily needs; he was content with the basic things in life. Now Jesus invites us to live the same way”*

3. What positive about life is Qohelet encouraging in v7-12?

Here is a commendation of mateship in contrast to the “man all alone”.

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Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“There is a better way to live and work, and the Bible tells us how when it says, “Two are better than one” (Ecclesiastes 4:9). According to this simple comparison, it is better to share our life and work than to try to make it on our own. The Preacher is not simply talking about marriage here, although of course every God-centered marriage is living proof of this principle. But the Preacher is talking about all of our other relationships too. We were never designed to go it alone, but always to live in community with other people. The “buddy system” is not just for school field trips and swimming in the ocean; it is God’s plan for our life and service to him. It has been this way since the beginning, when God created Adam and said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Togetherness is better than loneliness. Connection is better than competition.”*

And a bit further on -

“And remember, too, that when it comes to spiritual friendship, the best partner of all is Jesus Christ, the “friend of... sinners” (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). One of the climactic moments in this passage in Ecclesiastes is when the Preacher does gospel arithmetic to turn two into three. His argument all along has been that two are better than one. But at the end of verse 12 he turns a dynamic duo into a powerful trinity, saying that “a threefold cord is not quickly broken.””

Connections

1. Note Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14–15; Zechariah 7:10; Proverbs 14:31. What should be the Godly persons’ attitude to the ‘oppressed’?

The godly person should reflect Jesus’ (God’s) attitude and actions.

Leviticus 19:13: *Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.*

Deuteronomy 24:14–15: *Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it.*

Zechariah 7:10: *Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor.*

Proverbs 14:31: *He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.*

We have a responsibility, in our society, to be salt and light in this area.

2. Note 5:1-7 again and read 1 Corinthians 11:17-33. What need we be careful about when we meet together for worship?

Basically, the message is don't 'mess' with God.

He is not to be taken in vain.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *"In chapter 5 he addresses us directly, telling us what to do. Now he really does sound like a preacher! This is the section of his message where he gives practical application to teach people the right way to live. The Preacher's admonitions and imperatives are as much for us as they were for people who lived in his day. According to Derek Kidner, they are for 'the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough to church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God.' In other words, the Preacher is speaking to just about everyone who ever goes to church. His words are not for people who never go to church at all. On the contrary, for all his frustration with life, he not only believed in God but was fully committed to worship. So, his exhortations are for people who do go to church but sometimes find it hard to pay attention, whose thoughts wander when they pray, and who are full of good intentions about serving God but have trouble following through. They are for people who know they need to get involved in outreach but usually come up with some excuse for not joining a ministry right now. They have started a serious program for personal Bible study several dozen times but have never finished. They try to pay attention in church but usually spend half their time thinking about the upcoming week. To people like that—to people like us—Ecclesiastes says, 'Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.'"*

Note Ephesians 2:19-22 and what it is saying the 'the house of God' consists of.

Note this little 'story' from Ryken (Preaching the Word):

"The short film JAMES 3 portrays a family of four getting ready for church on a Sunday morning. Even though the viewer cannot hear what the family members are saying, it is not hard to read their lips, or at least their attitudes. They wake up sleepy and grumpy. The dad stumbles over the laundry and kicks it out of the way. The older daughter argues with her mother about what she will (or will not) wear to church. The younger daughter spills her milk and cereal. Angry words are exchanged, especially when the dad slams on the brakes while the mom is trying to put on lipstick in the car."

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As they get ready for church, no one in the family smiles or exchanges even one friendly word... until they walk into church and it is time to put on a happy face. The mom and the dad smile at the first people they meet. Joyfully they take their places in the sanctuary. When they stand to sing, their eyes are closed in reverent adoration. As the film ends, the sound begins, and we can hear what they are singing: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Which is reality? Which is fantasy? And which is the real you? Is it the person who treats people badly at home or the person who acts nice to people in the house of God? When you go to worship, is it really worship, or are you just pretending?"

Walk the Talk

1. Discuss the value of friendship/mateship/partnership?

For discussion.

Here is a little story:

"In the middle of the night, Pastor Samuel Baggaga received a call asking him to come to the home of a church member. When he arrived, he found a house engulfed by fire. The father, though burned himself, had reentered the home to rescue one of his children and emerged with an unconscious daughter. The hospital, in this rural Ugandan setting, was six miles (10 kilometers) away. With no transportation available, the pastor and the father started running to the hospital with the child. When one of them tired from carrying the injured girl, the other one took over. Together they made the journey; the father and his daughter were treated and then fully recovered."

2. Who are the oppressed in our society? What can we as a Church do about it?

Indeed, who are the oppressed in our town?

For discussion.

But, let me say the stuff about 4:8-12 must have some impact on this. At the very least a church, our church must be welcoming.

3. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?

For discussion.

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Study Four: “Whoever Loves Money”

Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12

Read Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12

The Broad View

Eaton (TOTC): *“The various proverbs of this section are bound together by the theme of poverty and wealth. We have reference to ‘the poor’ (5:8), ‘money’ (5:10), the increase of ‘good things’ (5:11), the ‘rich man’ (5:12), ‘riches’ (5:13–14), ‘riches and wealth’ (5:19; 6:2), the ‘poor man’ (6:8).”*

1. Note 5:18-20. What is this saying about everyday life?

Basically – enjoy it while you can.

And recognise it as a gift from God.

Here are a number of contrasts – things are not just evil they are in fact good – but it is constrained.

The contrast between the eternal and life under the sun.

Life does not come with a guarantee of satisfaction. Enjoy the good things

God gives us but they do not supply the meaning and completeness of existence.

2. What is the lot of every person (6:1-7)?

Death and taxes?

Prosperous people, prosperous lives, incredibly long life that are not enjoyed. It is ‘meaningless’, it is a chasing after the wind.

We need to recognise that we are made for more.

3. From 6:8-12, is wisdom worth having?

I think these verses actually leave the question hanging.

We are all left subjected to frustration.

Note particularly the two questions in v12.

Up Close

Look again at 5:8-17

1. What should be our reaction to the oppression of the poor?

Not surprise but recognition of the common human condition.

Eaton (TOTC): *“First the Preacher considers the frustrations of oppressive bureaucracy with its endless delays and excuses, while the poor cannot afford to wait, and justice is lost between the tiers of the hierarchy. At this point the Preacher offers no remedy; this is what human nature is like.”*

The rest of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, encourages us constantly to be generous and helpful to those who are disadvantaged in any way.

2. What is the ‘benefit’ of wealth?

Not many, and certainly not lasting benefits.

Wealth can be hoarded to the harm of the hoarder.

Eaton (TOTC): “Three perennial drawbacks to wealth are crisply presented: it cannot satisfy the covetous (v10); it attracts a circle of dependents (v11); it disturbs one’s peace (v12).”

3. In v15-17 what does Qohelet say is the purpose of life?

To live life and to die

Dust to Dust ... Naked you come – Naked you go.

Toil for the wind – catching the wind.

Jesus (Matthew 19:24): “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Connections

1. Read Luke 12:15-21. What does Jesus say regarding the hoarding of wealth?

You can’t take it with you.

Note also other ‘riches’ passages

2. Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10. What does Paul say is the problem with ‘money’? How does this reflect what Qohelet is saying?

Paul reminds Timothy that the love of money is the root of all evil.

Walk the Talk

1. In the context of our world we are all wealthy. What warnings and encouragements should we take away from what Qohelet is saying?

For discussion.

Be content! Be generous!

2. Is “eat, drink and be merry” a helpful Christian attitude? Why or why not?

For discussion

We are meant to enjoy the blessings of life that God has given us. But we need to recognise that this is not all there is and that this is not our priority. We need to know and prioritise things above the mere blessings of this world.

3. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?

For discussion

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Study Five: “Consider What God Has Done”

Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:1

Read Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:1

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“Some of the proverbs that we read here sound similar to what Solomon wrote in his book of Proverbs. Like the proverbs there, the ones we read in Ecclesiastes cover a wide range of topics. Yet many of them deal with related themes, as we find in the opening verses of chapter 7, where there are practical proverbs about the meaning of life and death (Ecclesiastes 7:1–4), about the difference between wise rebuke and foolish laughter (Ecclesiastes 7:5–6), and about waiting patiently as we look ahead to see what God will do (Ecclesiastes 7:7–10), followed by a statement summarizing the value of wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:11–12).”*

The Broad View

1. Note 7:1-12. What are the benefits of wisdom?

It produces a ‘good name’

It keeps us aware of the reality of life and death and the realities of life.

Awareness of the benefit of life seen from a realistic point of view.

Hears a wise man’s rebuke.

Wisdom’s advantages are summed up in v11,12.

2. What are the traps of being a fool?

They focus on pleasure, heed the songs of other fools, subject to money’s corruption, and is easily angered.

Their view is un-‘realistic’.

3. Note 8:1. What is this commending about wisdom? Note Proverbs 3:13-18.

Note also Hosea 14:9

Eaton (TOTC): *“**Who is really wise? (8:1).** This verse belongs more to what precedes than to what follows, for it forms a fitting conclusion to proverbs which have appealed for wisdom in relation to suffering and sin; it is reminiscent of a similar final challenge at the end of Hosea (14:9). The Hebrew word translated like sometimes speaks of exact likeness to an ideal. It could be translated ‘Who is really wise ...?’. ... Where, asks the Preacher, is the man who discerns his way through the problems detailed in 7:1–29, and who will interpret aright the mysteries of providence? The shining face generally speaks of favour (cf. Num. 6:25). Here it speaks of the wise man*

who is visibly gracious in his demeanour, and (as the next phrase says) whose gentleness is obvious in his facial expression (contrast Deut. 28:50; Dan. 8:23)."

Up Close

Look again at 7:13-29

- 1. Consider 7:13-15. What is the underlying principle here? What implications does that have for the following passage and indeed for the whole book?**

Longman (NICOT): *"The crucial thing to be remembered about the universe is that God has created it (vv. 13–15). Wisdom is not a key that can be used in independence of the Creator to unlock the secrets of the universe, to shape existence after mortal desires, and to control life. Although certain ways of being and behaving are wiser than others and in general tend toward life rather than death, yet in the end we must remember that the universe is not a predictable machine but a personally governed and complex space. Wisdom is not magic. God is not an object to be manipulated, nor does God's world belong to human beings. If God makes something crooked, it is beyond human power to make it straight (v. 13; cf. 1:15)."*

- 2. What is v16-18 commending?**

Eaton (TOTC): *"The Preacher warns against two opposing moral dangers. [Firstly] ... The Preacher holds that there is no righteous man (7:20). 'Do not be greatly righteous' must be taken ironically and must refer to the way a person thinks about himself and presents himself. ... Play-acting righteousness delights in the reputation of wisdom (cf. Matt. 23:7).*

The contrary danger is capitulation to evil. Greatly (RSV overmuch) does not imply that wickedness in moderation is acceptable! To have omitted overmuch, apart from breaking the parallel with v. 16, would have contradicted vv. 20, 29. The Preacher recognizes wickedness as a fact of human experience. The right life walks the path between two extremes, shunning self-righteousness, but not allowing one's native wickedness to run its own course."

- 3. What light does 7:29 shed on the verses before it? What is its main point?**

This verse takes us rushing back to Genesis 3 where upright Adam and Eve chose rebellion against God's righteousness.

Note (not so much on this question) the ONE upright man and not one upright woman (in v28). Is there some element of prophesy here (writing better than he know) of the one upright man – Jesus.

Connections

1. Note Proverbs 5:1-4. How is this related to v26 of our passage?

The warning here is to avoid the ‘adulteress’

In this part of Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman and wisdom is the faithful service of God. The adulteress is one who would lead the person of God away from that faithful service of the true God and to the service of other things – idols, materialism, self etc.

2. Read Romans 11:33-12:3. How does Paul’s message here speak into the ideas in this part of Ecclesiastes?

The point is that true wisdom, wisdom with its eyes lifted beyond ‘under the sun’ seeks wisdom through knowing and understanding the greatness of God and in living His way.

Walk the Talk

1. What is the problem with being what Qohelet calls ‘overrighteous’? What does that mean for us?

Eaton (NBC): *“7:15-18 Perils along the way. Meaningless life (15) is life dominated by the problems mentioned in 1:2-11. Naboth (1 Ki. 21:13) and Jezebel (1 Ki. 18-19, 21) illustrate the point of v 15. Faced with injustice, one tends to move to either self-righteousness (the point of v 16, which could be translated ‘play the righteous person’) or capitulation to sin (17). The final line of v 17 could be translated ‘shall escape them both’ and refer back to vs 15-16.”*

2. What is the trap in v26 and how do we escape ‘her’?

This rather long excerpt from Philip Ryken explains and applies this so well I have included all of it here.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“As disappointed as the Preacher was with life in general, his biggest disappointment was with other people.*

By way of example, Qoheleth describes one kind of woman that it would be wise to avoid: “I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her” (Ecclesiastes 7:26).

The Preacher-King compares this woman’s heart to a trap, like the kind of net or snare that a fowler would lay for a bird. But who was she? The Preacher seems to have someone in mind. If we wanted a Biblical example, the first woman who comes to mind is Delilah, who entangled Samson’s long hair in her loom and eventually robbed that strong man of his godliness (Judges 16). Some commentators make a comparison with the book of Proverbs, where Solomon personifies wisdom and folly as two women in the

street calling out to passersby. According to Proverbs, “The woman Folly... is seductive” (9:13). Perhaps Qoheleth was talking about the same woman in Ecclesiastes—not a literal person but a metaphor for foolish living. Some scholars claim that the Preacher was referring specifically to pagan philosophy.¹²

The trouble with these interpretations is that they are based more on what the Bible says in other places than on what the Bible says in Ecclesiastes 7. Here the Preacher does not make any wider comparisons to wisdom and folly but tells us something that he has learned from his own experience. Somewhere along the way he met a woman who tried to destroy him (cf. Proverbs 2:18–19; 5:4–5). He is not saying that all women are like this, but some of them are, and a wise person will heed his warning to flee from their temptations.

The warning is open-ended enough that it could apply to many situations in life, but one obvious way to apply it is by turning away from the seductions of sexual sin, including the temptations that come on television or over the computer. People call it virtual reality, but the danger is actual. When temptation comes, rather than getting lured in by sinful desire, remind your heart that the seductive woman is a trap! If you give in to her enticements, the result will be more bitter than death. She will lead you into soul-destroying sin, your capacity for true intimacy will be destroyed, and you will never become the man (or the woman) that God is calling you to become.

Know this: there is a way to escape. Ecclesiastes says that although the rebellious sinner will be trapped by the temptress, the person who pleases God will find a way to flee. Never say that you cannot stop sinning; always believe that by the power of God the Holy Spirit there is a way to run away from temptation, as Joseph did when he was caught in the clutches of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39). Believe the gospel. Take your sin straight to the cross and confess it. Grow in the knowledge of God through the ministry of his Word. Pray for holiness, and ask a friend to help you pray. Get the shepherding help of a pastor or elder in the church. Seek the pleasure of God, and by his grace he will deliver you from the power of sin.

By telling us that there is a way of escape (see 1 Corinthians 10:13), the Preacher made it clear that he believed in the possibility of holiness.”

- 3. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?**

For discussion.

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Study Six: “A Proper Time”

Ecclesiastes 8:2-9:10

“He called himself Qoheleth, the Preacher. He said that he was the son of David and therefore the king in Jerusalem. He had embarked on a lifelong quest to discover the meaning of life, as told in the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth’s quest did not end the way that one might expect, however. Usually when people try to figure out what life is all about, they hope to come up with a simple, unambiguous answer—something memorable enough to print on a poster and hang on a bedroom wall. But the PreacherKing never seemed to get a final answer. The more he looked into things, the more he struggled to make sense of his world.” Ryken (Preaching the Word).

Read Ecclesiastes 8:2-9:10

Eaton (TOTC): *“The justification for treating this as a single section in the Preacher’s mind is that the sequence of thought runs parallel to 1:2-3:22. He faces the grim realities of kingly authority (8:2–9) and the injustices of life (8:10–15), and perplexed with the enigma of life (8:16–17) and the ultimate certainty of death (9:1–6), he again turns to a position of faith as the only remedy (9:7–10).”*

The Broad View

1. What broad point does 8:2-15 make?

Be obedient to your rulers.

Showing wisdom in regard to the authorities that God has put in place over us.

2. What is the major thrust of 8:16-9:10? What is it commending?

Looks at life and its work and commends the ‘enjoyment’ of it.

9:7-10 pretty much sums it up.

3. What is the problem Qohelet has with death?

He realises that it overtakes all, but he cannot see what lies beyond.

Life is worth living. But we need to understand where our lives fit.

Up Close

Look again at 8:2-15

1. What attitude to rulers are verses 2-5 encouraging?

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Submission – in the true sense of the word.

Obedience to those in authority.

We need to remember that all earthly powers are there because God puts them there, they are under God's sovereignty.

Note Daniel 1 (and indeed the rest of Daniel 1-6)

2. What warning is there for rulers in verses 6-10?

That their power is limited and, in the end, 'vapour' (meaningless).

3. What do verses 11-14 have to say to our society?

This, from a different point of view is a plea for justice.

And also, a plea for the wicked to get their just desserts.

If there is no judgement to come, then you may as well just live to please yourself.

4. What attitude to living is commended in verse 14-15

To enjoy the life God has given to you.

The important part is that this is related to God. This, note, is life 'under the sun' – the world here.

Connections

1. What does Jesus say about what we owe to rulers? (see Luke 20:20-26)

We give to them due honour.

Remembering we also give to God what is God's.

Note also Acts 5:29

2. Read 1 Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1. What should be the attitude of the Christian to the 'powers that be'.

In a word: Submission.

And remember for the original writers and readers this was an autocratic, authoritarian rule imposed by far off Rome.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *"Helmuth Von Moltke was drafted to work in counterintelligence for Nazi Germany; yet his Christian faith made him a resolute opponent of Adolf Hitler. Although he believed it would be wrong for him to use violent force against the Nazis, von Moltke used his high position to rescue many prisoners from certain death. Not surprisingly, eventually he was accused of treason, put on trial, and sentenced to die. In his final letter home to his beloved wife Freya, Helmuth described the*

dramatic moment at his trial when the judge launched into a tirade against his faith in Christ. “Only in one respect does the National Socialism resemble Christianity,” he shouted: “we demand the whole man.” Then the judge asked the accused to declare his ultimate loyalty: “From whom do you take your orders, from the other world or from Adolf Hitler? Where lie your loyalty and your faith?” Von Moltke knew exactly where his loyalty lay. He had put all his hope and trust in Jesus Christ.”

Walk the Talk

- 1. It would appear that respect for rulers and for our governments is at a very low ebb in our world at this time. What is Qohelet saying to us about Godly attitudes to the “powers that be”?**

For discussion.

We have a say in who our rulers are to be, and we should exercise that right in a godly and ‘wise’ manner. Seeking as far as possible ‘Caesars’ who will allow us to ‘render to God what is God’s’

- 2. Given that Qohelet and Jesus and Paul and Peter all lived under autocratic rule, discuss what living in a ‘liberal democracy’ modifies about how we relate to rulers.**

I wrote this question at the height of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests in the USA and around the world.

The question is what do we as Christians do, and participate in, as we exercise our democratic ‘rights’. (Never mind the complication imposed by Corona virus restrictions.)

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“When people are under the rule of ungodly authority, it is tempting to rebel in an unrighteous way. Instead the Preacher tells us to fight evil with godliness. A good example is the stand that Daniel’s friends took against King Nebuchadnezzar when he commanded all of his subjects to worship him. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (to use their proper Hebrew names) peacefully refused to worship anyone except God alone (see Daniel 3).”*

- 3. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?**

For discussion.

ECCLESIASTES

Study Seven: “Wisdom is Better than Strength”

Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:20

Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:20

Kidner (TOTC) on chapter 10: *“This chapter takes a calm look at life, sampling it at random, so as to help us to keep our own standards high, without being too surprised at the oddities of others, or taken off our guard in our dealings with the powerful.”*

The Broad View

1. What positives and negatives about wisdom can you discern in this passage?

Positives:

Quiet words heard 9v17

Better than weapons 9v18

Inclines to the right (that which is righteous) 10v2

Words are gracious 10v12

Negatives:

Poor man’s wisdom despised 9v16

Not always ‘win’ out 9v11

A little folly can outweigh it 10v1 (similar to 9v18)

Fools are put in ‘high positions’ 10v6

2. What do these verses say about the fool?

Remember that in other wisdom books the fool is defined as the one who says there is no God (Psalms 14:1; 53:1)

10:1 *so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

10:2 *the heart of the fool to the left (that which is unrighteous).*

10:3 *Even as he walks along the road, the fool lacks sense and shows everyone how stupid he is.*

10:6 *Fools are put in many high positions,*

10:12 *a fool is consumed by his own lips.* ¹³ *At the beginning his words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness—* ¹⁴ *and the fool multiplies words.*

10:15 *A fool’s work wearies him; he does not know the way to town.*

It is important to note what these verses say about the words of a fool and to take the warning.

3. What advice is there in regard to rulers in this passage?

These need to be considered in conjunction the other passages about rulers we have touched on before.

9:17 *The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.*

10:4 *If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post; calmness can lay great errors to rest.*

10:5 *There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler: ⁶ Fools are put in many high positions, while the rich occupy the low ones.*

10:16 *Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. ¹⁷ Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time— for strength and not for drunkenness.*

10:20 *Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.*

Ryken (Preaching the Word): “In verse 16 he turns to consider another area where spiritual wisdom is badly needed but is usually in short supply—the exercise of political leadership. ... The words of the Preacher call us to wise government. We can apply his words to nations and kingdoms. Politicians who rule for personal advantage bring disaster to the people they lead. Woe to any nation characterized by sinful entertainment, lazy self-indulgence, and the widespread abuse of alcohol and other drugs, especially among its national leaders. We can also apply the same principles at the personal level. There is a time and a place for feasting in the Christian life. But there is also a danger of wasting our lives by living for our pleasures.”

Up Close

Look again at 9:11-10:1

1. What do verses 11 and 12 warn about?

Betting on a sure thing!!!!

Worth considering the story of David and Goliath.

Or Stephen Bradbury (Speed skater).

Dave McDonald says, “Always plan in pencil.”

Ryken (Preaching the Word): “Time” and “chance” happen to us all. The word “time” may refer generally to the seasons of life. In the words of Martin Luther, “You should understand ‘time’ here not to refer only to the end of life but to every appointed time and outcome.” The word can also be used more specifically to refer to an appointed time of divine judgment (e.g., Ezekiel 7:7). Either way, the time will come when events overtake us.

Before we know it, we will get trapped in a bad situation at work, or afflicted with a fatal disease, or caught in a financial tsunami. At the very end, of course, the time will come for us to die and go to judgment—a time that God knows, but we do not.”

See Proverbs 16:9,31 Matthew 6:25-27.

2. What is the point of the little story in verses 13-16?

It speaks of the importance and the power of wisdom but also bemoans the fact that it is not always celebrated, or its results credited to the wise.

Wouldn't you like to have this story filled out a bit more?

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“Although some commentators have treated this story as a parable, most regard it as the true account of an historical event. It was something the Preacher had seen for himself, not something he invented: a poor man who was wise enough to save his entire city. ... Sometimes one man is wise enough to save a metropolis. In this particular case the Preacher does not tell us how he did it. Nor are we likely to figure it out because according to verse 15, “no one remembered that poor man.” He never became famous like Archimedes. Yet the fact remains that his wisdom saved a city. ... For the Preacher, this was an example of what wisdom can do. Happy is the city that has even one person who is wise enough to rescue its citizens.”*

3. What do you take away from the 3 little proverbs in 9:17-10:1?

Again, here wisdom is commended and acclaimed ...

But the warning is that foolishness is often 'overpowering' in its presence.

Kidner (TOTC): *“for to put it as bluntly as Qoheleth does, it is easier to make a stink than to create sweetness.”*

Also – make sure you put the top on the perfume bottle properly.

Connections

1. How does Psalm 1 illustrate the principles of wisdom and folly?

Read Psalm 1. The blessed man is the wise man.

The point the Psalm makes is the one 10:2 is making that wisdom leads to righteousness and foolishness leads to sin.

Eaton (TOTC): *“The right hand was associated with a strength which saves, supports and protects (Ps. 16:8; Isa. 41:13). The right-handedness of the Israelite no doubt led him to associate left-handedness with disfavour (cf. Matt. 25:33, 41) and fumbling incompetence (cf. Judg. 3:15; 20:16)⁴ To have one's heart in the right place is to be skilful and resourceful in one's daily life. To have one's heart at his left side is to have the 'springs of life' (Prov. 4:23) located in the realm of practical and spiritual incompetence.”*

2. Read Matthew 7:24-27. What does Jesus say in the foundation for wisdom?

Jesus says, in this very well known parable, that the solid foundation for wisdom is hearing His words and putting them into practice.

Much as we will see at the very end of Ecclesiastes.

Remember, James 1:5, *If any of you lacks **wisdom**, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*

Walk the Talk

1. “We live in a world, in fact, in which wisdom—at least insofar as it derives from authority and tradition—is routinely suspected, mocked, and despised.” And “where information is widely privileged over wisdom.” (Provan (NIVAC)). Discuss.

For Discussion

Provan (NIVAC): *“It is as we stand on the Rock that we will learn to recognize and embrace wisdom, wherever it is found (e.g., whether in a poor man or in another, Eccl. 9:16), filtering out all the noise of the culture that distracts us and distorts our values (9:17). It is as we stand on the Rock that we will learn to value wise words over oily words (10:1, 12), whether they come from politicians, advertisers, or indeed preachers. It is as we stand on the Rock that we will learn those necessary skills required even to survive the autocratic and corrupt state (10:4–11).”*

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. (Eph. 5:15–17)

2. Think of a current issue in your life. Which is more important to you in facing it: wisdom or strength?

There’s a curly one!

For discussion.

Note James 3:17: *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*

If you want to duck out from under a personal issue it is worth considering this in regard to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ responses?

3. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?

As usual – discuss.

ECCLESIASTES

Study Eight: “Remember Your Creator”

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8

Kidner (BST): *“The pace quickens now. The scene is unaltered: it has the same deep shadows and occasional highlights as before, but now we look at it resolutely rather than wistfully. We know the worst; so much the better: we can strike out in the right direction. Three separate thrusts put us on the way towards ‘the end of the matter’. We can summarize them in the headings we have chosen here for the three parts of these two remaining chapters: Be bold! Be joyful! Be godly!”*

The Broad View

Alistair Begg says we need to ‘be bold’.

Or as a heading for chapter 11 – ‘Celebrate Life’.

1. What do 11:1-6 have to say to us about our ability to control the times?

That we are not in control of them.

If you have lived through Australia’s ‘times’ in 2020 (Drought, fire, flood, pestilence) then this is not news to you.

These things speak of the inevitability of life (v3), the uncertainty of life (v4), the mystery of life, and the need to move positively forward (v6). (Ephesians 5:16)

2. How is the idea of ‘light is sweet’(v7) illustrated in 11:8-9?

Light gives the ability to see these good things in life.

Enjoy!!

Enjoy life, not endure life.

This life is wonderful enjoy it. It is not superficial it is realistic, it is not unending, nor unalloyed – there may be darkness (v8b)

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“The right way to respond is by rejoicing. Praise God for the goodness of life! Praise him for everything sweet you taste and everything bright you see. The living God is the Lord of light. When he said, “Let there be light!” (Genesis 1:3), there was light, and that light has been shining ever since. According to the prophets, “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2). Now the God of light deserves our praise. We should praise God the way Francis of Assisi did when he said, “Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through Brother Sun, who brings the day; you give light through*

him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.””

3. “Banish anxiety”! (v10) Does Qohelet give any advice as to how to do that?

Your first reaction might be to think – “Easy for you to say”

Verse 9 says to follow the ways of your heart and 12:1 counsels us to remember your creator.

Note Matthew 6:24-34

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“Some commentators think the Preacher is confused here, that he is “giving the contradictory advice that his reader should both enjoy life but also remember that he is going to die.” This is not confusion but clarity. Ecclesiastes gives us a realistic view of life that is joyful about its happy pleasures while at the same time sober about its many sorrows. The book steadfastly refuses to show us anything less than the whole of life as it actually is.”*

Up Close

Look again at 12:1-8

1. Many see 12:1a as the crucial sentence in the whole book. What is it saying?

That we need to look outside ourselves and this world if we want to see the full picture.

To move beyond ‘under the sun’ to the wider reality of God’s universe and his rule.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“The Preacher’s last instruction is mainly for young people, although maybe the people who understand it the best are older. It is a call to remembrance: “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (Ecclesiastes 12:1).*

Here Qoheleth is calling us to live a God-centered life, making the God who made the universe our first and highest priority. In fact, this is the key to all the other things that he has called us to do in this passage. The reason we are able to rejoice in our long years of life or else in our youth and strength is because every day is a gift from our Creator God. The reason we need to walk in holy ways is because our Maker is also our Judge. The best remedy for any pain or vexation is to cast our care upon the God who made us and knows all about us. Everything that the Preacher says in this passage assumes and requires the close presence of God.”

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *“Bono has written: “Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books. It’s a book about a character who wants to find out why he’s*

alive, why he was created. He tries knowledge. He tries wealth. He tries experience. He tries everything. You hurry to the end of the book to find out why, and it says, 'Remember your Creator.' In a way, it's such a letdown. Yet it isn't." No, it isn't. Getting to know our Creator before we grow old and die is the most important thing we can ever do."

2. What help is 'remembering your creator in the days of your youth' as you grow older as illustrated in 12:1b-5?

It gives a solid foundation to view the trial and tribulations (and the good things) as we proceed to 'the severing of the silver cord (death) (v6a).

You could see here a picture of growing on into older age.

Note v4: 'the doors of the street are closed' – Picture of 'lock down'?

The time to remember God is now.

3. What do 12:6-7 have to say about Man's 'end'? How does this relate to 12:1?

Explicitly in v1 and implicitly in v7 we are reminded of God the creator.

God made us and he is the one who 'unmakes' us.

Provan (NIVAC) *"The Creator encompasses this whole section (vv. 1, 7), just as he encompasses the whole of life. That the bowl is golden and the cord from which it hangs is silver speaks of the preciousness of the life that is thus given by God and then in due course taken away."*

4. And what 'motto' is 12:8 repeating? (see Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Qohelet or his 'narrator' bring us back to the earthly premise of the book.

Now in the context of remembering your Creator.

Kidner (BST): *"So in verse 8, with the experience of the whole book behind us, and finally with this chapter's haunting pictures of mortality to enforce the point, we come back to the initial cry, Vanity of vanities, and find it justified. Nothing in our search has led us home; nothing that we are offered under the sun is ours to keep. But we are forgetting the context. This very passage points us beyond anything 'under the sun', in the words, your Creator, and it invites response to Him. It also points us to the present, as the time of opportunity. Death has not yet reached out to us: let it rattle its chains at us and stir us into action!"*

Dave McDonald (Talks): *"Temporary, Temporary all is Temporary"*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF9CjB6U8G4&list=PLIA20JKZo9qaQNebzhJe-WGDYESsKp0T&index=37>)

Connections

- 1. Look at Deuteronomy 8:18 and Nehemiah 4:14. What are these commanding and commending. (Remember also Revelation 3:3a and 2:5a)**

It is all about remembering:

Deuteronomy 8:18 *But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.*

Nehemiah 4:14 *After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."*

A major part of being God's people is to look back at what God has done. Qohelet is calling us remember the creator God, the letters in Revelation remind the Christians both of Ephesus and of Sardis to remember the gospel and their commitment to it.

We have the Scriptures to help us 'remember' the mighty works of God and the saving work of Jesus.

- 2. Remember your Creator: Read John 1:1-14. What depth does this give to the concept of 'the Creator'?**

Really just for you to discuss.

The important thing to note is that the Creation meets its fullness in Jesus.

In John 1 Jesus is the answer and, though Qohelet can't see how it can happen, Jesus is also the answer to the questions that Ecclesiastes poses.

Walk the Talk

- 1. If you are a 'young' person, what is 12:1-8 saying to you? What about if you are an 'older' person?**

It is in our youth that we are to remember our creator.

For discussion

Alistair Begg paraphrases 'Remember your Creator while you still have the opportunity'.

Ryken (Preaching the Word): *"The Preacher's last instruction is mainly for young people, although maybe the people who understand it the best are older. It is a call to remembrance"*

- 2. 'Remember your creator' How do you do that?**

Not just Sunday or Bible Study.

The importance of grace at meals. To acknowledge the Creator of the daily bread we have as a daily thing.

Respect for the Creation.

(Deut. 8:18; Neh. 4:14 again)

Webb (Five Festal Garments): *“Remember your Creator’ implies relationship and obligation. It picks up all the references to creation in the body of the book and brings them to a sharp point of application. There is no conflict in Qohelet’s teaching between enjoyment of life and recognition of God; indeed, they are inextricably linked. God as creator lays down the parameters within which life is to be enjoyed.”*

Provan (NIVAC): *“Modern people tend to view the movement of history, as far as human beings are concerned, as being from primeval swamp to divinity. The beginning was unpromising, but quite against expectation the forces of evolution [Eccl, Song, p. 209] have propelled us along, to a point where we stand on the verge of greatness. We have already overcome so many of the limitations of human life as it was experienced by most of our predecessors. Control of life itself, it seems, is now within our grasp, as we come into possession of the mysteries of DNA and pronounce ourselves capable of manipulating genetic codes so as to bring in utopia—the land of ultimate consumer choices (which hair or skin color do you prefer in your baby? which gender?), freedom from illness and deformity, and happiness for everyone. We look forward to a fresh millennium of endless opportunity.*

The Bible presents us with a rather different view of history as it moves from a garden (Gen. 1–3) to a city (Rev. 21). It tells us of a promising rather than an unpromising beginning, as human beings knew and revered their Creator. It replaces the myth of endless rising up toward divinity with the harsh fact of fallenness, as the mortal seeking of immortality brings with it alienation and wickedness. It knows of technological progress but also knows that it can coexist with barbarism. Whereas those who tell the first story look ahead to boundless possibilities stretching into the future, the Bible knows of a sudden ending to everything, as God’s sovereignty over his universe is displayed in an ultimate way. Here is the reality that must be juxtaposed with our modern myths.”

3. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this passage do these things?

Again for discussion.

Note: Dever (Promises Made): *“The Book of Ecclesiastes in particular, I would suggest plays a special role in explicating and expounding the devastating effects of the Fall, which is helpful for a day like our that idolises the creation rather than the Creator, this life rather than the Author of this life.”*

ECCLESIASTES

Study Nine: “The Conclusion of the Matter”

Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

Read Ecclesiastes 12:8-14

Up Close

- 1. There is some discussion about whether the ‘motto’ (v8) fits best with v1-7 or with v9-14. Or is it both? Discuss.**

This is an interesting way of thinking through the importance of this statement for the book as a whole.

Provan (NIVAC): *“All of Qohelet’s words are to be understood in the context of this beginning in 1:2 and this end in 12:8. The context of the closing remarks makes it particularly clear, however, that “meaningless” is not a good translation for the Hebrew word hebel, for the whole thrust of 11:9–12:8 (and 11:7–8 beforehand) has been that life is a precious gift to be enjoyed, albeit that the days of life are brief (cf. hebel in 11:8). A better translation is this:*

“Fleeting, fleeting,” says Qohelet, “everything is fleeting.””

Shepherd (EBCR): *“As the narrator began his summary of Qohelet’s thought (1:2), so he now brackets Qohelet’s speech with basically the same words, except that mercifully he writes ‘hebel’ (“absurd”) only three times instead of five. It is important to note here that the narrator does not choose one of the so-called carpe diem phrases to introduce and conclude Qohelet’s thought, but rather aptly summarizes his created character’s philosophy with the words for which the book of Ecclesiastes is best known.”*

So how do you understand ‘Hebel’ now.

- 2. Verse 9 begins the ‘frame editor’s’ summing up. Do you think his affirmation of Qohelet (the Teacher) is appropriate?**

There is some discussion whether this is the writer simply adopting the third person or whether it is an actual second writer who set the context in 1:1 and now closes off.

Provan (NIVAC): *“WITH THE CLOSING verses of Ecclesiastes 12 we once again hear the voice of the person who has been reporting the words of Qohelet to his “son” (v. 12) and to us but who has only occasionally and ambiguously indicated his presence throughout the book to this point (1:1–2; 7:27). Now he “adds” to the words of Qohelet his own more extended comments. The Hebrew word ‘yoter’ at the beginning of verse 9 (cf. the same word in 2:15; 6:8, 11; 7:11, 16) seems to mean something like*

“conclusion, epilogue, footnote.” We may paraphrase verse 9a in the following way: “I want to add my own perspective on all this: I consider Qohelet a wise man and someone who taught knowledge to the people.” This is presumably the very reason why he has passed on Qohelet’s words at all. It is not likely that he would otherwise have done so.”

3. It would be easy to read too much into v11. What is it saying?

All the English versions I have looked at have capitalised Shepherd (except the 1611 KJV and the NET Bible). This then directs the reader to thoughts of God (the Message and the TEV make that explicit). Then there is the reference to nails.

Murphy (WBC): *“The “one shepherd” has been identified with Solomon, Moses, and even Qoheleth himself, or simply “any shepherd” (Fox). However, it is also possible to recognize here an allusion to God, the source and giver of wisdom (Prov 2:6; Sir 39:6). The metaphor of shepherd is applied to God, even if often indirectly (cf Ps 23:1; Isa 40:11, etc.).”*

It is important more to look at the focus of the passage – that wise words provoke and prod us.

Ryken (PTWC): *“This is not a prophecy of the crucifixion but an image of permanence and fixity. Some commentators believe that the nails in question are part of the farmer’s cattle prod. But the Bible may simply mean that once a wise saying is driven into the mind, it stays there, like a nail pounded deep into a block of wood. Life may be a vapor, but wisdom can help us pin it down, giving us a place to hang our experience. The Biblical proverbs have a way of nailing us right in the conscience. They also have a way of sticking into our brains.”*

Longman (NICOT): *“Thus, I believe that the frame narrator uses the image of the shepherd and his tools to emphasize the dangerous and painful aspects of wisdom teaching, a very appropriate image after presenting the skeptical and pessimistic teaching of the wise man Qohelet.”*

4. Verse 12 is a favourite among school students. What precisely is it saying in its context?

One thing it is not saying is don’t read, study or write.

It is important to note the first part of the verse where the ‘son’ is warned not to add anything more to the ‘words of the wise’.

Then too much of a good thing is too much.

We need to read and respond.

Provan (NIVAC): *“The commendation of Qohelet and the warning to the son are thus two sides of the same coin: Wisdom is to be embraced and employed wisely rather than used for one’s own foolish ends. The “father” is*

at this point underlining some of Qohelet's own teaching, in fact, for it is Qohelet who, while commending wisdom, warns the reader to use it well and not unwisely (cf. 1:12–18 and, esp. significant, 10:15, where "a fool's work wearies him ...")

5. What is "the conclusion of the matter? (see v13-14)

Trust and Obey

Trust and Obey

For there is no other way,

To be happy in Yahweh (Jesus),

But to Trust and Obey

Our God is to be feared (reverenced and acknowledged as King) and his good commands are to be obeyed.

For God is also the Judge.

This is the punchline.

Connections

- 1. "Fear God and keep his commandments." (Note also 7:18 and 8:13.) What does this mean? Note these verses: Proverbs 1:7; 2:1-8; Isaiah 50:10; 1 Peter 2:17; Revelation 19:4.**

Ecclesiastes 7:18 *It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. The man who fears God will avoid all [extremes].* **Ecclesiastes 8:13** *Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.*

When we talk about the fear of God it is not terror or the sense of afraid-ness that makes us want to cringe that it is talking about. It contains more of the idea of respect, awe and understanding your creatureliness. It can be expanded as the thought of understanding who we are and how creaturely we are and how sinful we are when we compare ourselves to the holiness and greatness of God. Though I suspect that on that day when we see face to face there will be just a tinge of that more primeval fear. (Note Isaiah 6) Alistair Begg: *"To fear God is to recognize his might and majesty. It is to acknowledge that he is in Heaven and we are on earth, that he is God and we are not. It is to say, "Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him?" (Psalm 89:6–7)."*

Proverbs 1:7 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*

Proverbs 2:1 *My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,*

ECCLESIASTES: TURN TURN TURN – A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

² *turning your ear to wisdom*
 and applying your heart to understanding,
³ *and if you call out for insight*
 and cry aloud for understanding,
⁴ *and if you look for it as for silver*
 and search for it as for hidden treasure,
⁵ *then you will understand the fear of the LORD*
 and find the knowledge of God.

Isaiah 50:10 *Who among you fears the LORD*
and obeys the word of his servant?

Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

1Peter 2:17 *Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of*
believers, fear God, honor the king.

Revelation 19:4 *The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell*
down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:
“Amen, Hallelujah!”

Remember Jesus said John 14:15 *“If you love me, you will obey what I*
command.”

The Broad View

- 1. Ecclesiastes is one of the ‘wisdom’ books of the bible which some scholars claim are rooted in creation rather than ‘the law’ which drives the other OT books. How does ‘the creator’ and his creation impact what Qohelet is saying?**

Discuss first. Then there is some very helpful stuff in this longer quote from Barry Webb.

Webb (5 Festal Garments): *“Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–11:*

In Ecclesiastes God is supremely the creator, and the particular ways in which his relationship to the world and to humankind are understood throughout the book appears to draw heavily on the early chapters of Genesis. God is ‘the Maker of all things’ (11:5), and ‘your Creator’ (12:1). In particular, he made human beings upright, though they have gone in search of many schemes (7:29). This is probably an allusion to the creation of human beings in the image of God and their subsequent fall, as in Genesis 1–3. This is made virtually certain by references to man being made from dust and destined to return to it (3:20; 12:7; cf. Gen. 2:7; 3:19). The wording here is so close to that of Genesis that direct dependence seems undeniable.

Furthermore, the view that God has ‘made everything beautiful in its time’ (3:11) may allude to the creation account of Genesis 1. The recognition that there is knowledge and wisdom which God has placed beyond human reach (3:11; 7:23) may reflect Genesis 2, with its teaching about the forbidden tree (a tree to be desired to make one wise). And finally, the teaching of Ecclesiastes that there is a crookedness in the world which God has put there and which human beings are powerless to remove (7:13), and that frustrating toil is a ‘heavy burden’ that God has placed on human beings (1:13; 3:10), suggests that the fall narrative of Genesis 3 is, once again, not far below the surface. [Cf. also 3:11, where ‘eternity’ in the heart may be an allusion to the creation of human beings in the image of God (the eternal one).] As in Genesis, God is judge and the one who determines the conditions of human existence on earth precisely because he is first of all creator.

Qohelet does not simply repeat the teaching of Genesis, however, but works with it in his own distinctive way, and we shall note in a moment [p. 104] how he does so. It certainly appears to play a foundational role in his thinking.³⁵ Indeed it may not be going too far to assert with C. C. Forman (1956: 263) that ‘the early chapters of Genesis represent the single most important influence on the ideas of Ecclesiastes regarding the nature and destiny of man, the character of human existence, and the fact of God’.³⁶ The theology of Ecclesiastes is grounded firmly in traditional Israelite beliefs about such matters.

What is particularly significant for us to note here is that Qohelet’s most distinctive teaching, that everything is hebel, must be understood against this background. Hebel is not simply a brute fact, something which happens to be there without cause or explanation. It is a judgment, a condition, imposed on the world, and on human beings in particular, by God. It is a manifestation of the fall and, positively, of God’s rule as creator and judge.

This provides an important key for understanding the relationship between Ecclesiastes and the kind of wisdom traditionally associated with Solomon.”

So ‘Remember your Creator’ in your youth or wherever in life’s journey you are and don’t forget Him.

2. How does the ‘editors’ summing up help in the understanding of the whole of Ecclesiastes?

What the ‘editor’ seems to be doing is setting the thoughts and arguments of the book into a context that looks beyond ‘under the sun’ and beyond ‘hebel’ (vanity) to what is more universal and eternal and significant. But even this is subtle and not ‘brutal’ in the sense of a “you’ve gotta respond”

kind of way but simply a reminder of the reality beyond the '(somewhat) cynical realism' of the majority of Qohelet's words.

Walk the Talk

1. What have learned about the world, our culture and being one of God's people from Ecclesiastes?

For discussion.

Vischer cited in Kidner (The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes): *"If the Preacher was not right in asserting that all is vanity ..., that man cannot obtain or achieve justice, that death is ultimately the only certainty Why the did Christ come from God's eternal throne above the sun and die outside Jerusalem for the redemption of the whole world "*

2. What have you learnt about yourself?

For discussion

Dever (Promises Made): *"So is futility final? No, Ecclesiastes was never meant to be a substitute for the whole Bible.*

Outside the answer that is found in Christ there is no final answer to the futility of life. Only God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ assures us that there is something beyond the son and beyond the grave.

And only through Jesus Christ do we see the death of death and the birth of a new life that will endure forever.

2Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

1Corinthians 15:58 *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

We will find meaning only when meaning extends beyond this life and world. Only eternity with God makes life 'successful' and 'worth living'. And we will find such meaning only in Christ."

3. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). How does this Ecclesiastes do these things?

Lee Eclov: *"Remember: everything in Scripture is counterintuitive. None of it comes naturally to us or to our people. All of it, every word, is God-breathed. And all of it spells out what was once only unimaginable mystery, that "grace and truth came through Christ Jesus" and "Christ in you [is] the hope of glory." Lee Eclov*

An Extra

The Broadest View.

One of the important things we need to do as we grow as Christians is to develop a Christian Worldview. And one way we can work on that is by asking four questions:

What is our nature?

What is our world?

What is our problem?

What is our end?

So, what has Ecclesiastes told us about the godly answer to each of these questions?

QUESTION:	<i>Ecclesiastes Thoughts</i>
<i>What is our nature?</i>	
<i>What is our world?</i>	
<i>What is our problem?</i>	
<i>What is our end?</i>	



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