

ECCLESIASTES “Vanity of Vanities”

Introduction. Ecclesiastes, the title given to this book, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth meaning “teacher,” “preacher,” and “one who presides at an assembly.” Scholars believe Ecclesiastes was written in the post-exilic era around 300 B.C.

Qoheleth, the author’s literary name, was a wisdom teacher who lived in Jerusalem. He may have been quite well off, and now, as an old man, is looking back over the meaning of life or the lack of meaning in life; hence, his most famous phrase: “*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!*”

The theme of the book of Ecclesiastes—the vanity of all things—is pursued relentlessly. In his introduction to the book, Fr. Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., writes:

All man’s labors are vain (1:4-11), wisdom itself only leads to greater perplexity (1:12-18), pleasure brings no enduring satisfaction (2:1-12), the wise man as well as the fool ends up in the grave (2:13-17), the pursuit of wealth is a chase after the wind (2:18-26), the unchanging order of events impresses upon life a lamentable monotony (3:1-13), and the uncertainty of the future places a pall over the present (3:14-22). Thus it goes to the end of the book....

The book, therefore, cries out for the revelation of the future life given to the Jews only in the last two centuries before Christ in the books of Daniel (12:2-3), 2 Maccabees (6-7), Wisdom (2-5), and the Gospels. Ignorant of the solution to his insoluble dilemma and his insatiable yearnings, he is forced to satisfy himself with the act of faith contained in the epilogue of his book: “The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man’s all” (12:3)....

It is to the lasting glory of Qoheleth that he sensed and expressed with unforgettable clarity the yearnings of man’s heart for the mansions of heaven long before God made them a subject of divine revelation. Indeed, his unflinching appraisal of the hard and inescapable realities of life prepared his readers to answer a resounding “Nothing!” to the question of Christ (Matthew 16:26): “What does it profit a man if he gained the whole world and suffers the loss of his soul?” (The Men & Message of the Old Testament, pp 514-515)

Commenting on Ecclesiastes, Sr. Diane Bergant writes:

Qoheleth described himself as a man who had the opportunity and the means to pursue all of the pleasures that life had to offer, and he was successful in his pursuits (Eccl 1:12-2:17). Still he was dissatisfied. Where then was one to find satisfaction? The answer to this question is found in those passages that some have misinterpreted as hedonistic; satisfaction is to be found in the very act of living itself. Qoheleth’s message reveals a profound appreciation of the fact that life is primarily for living. Every human endeavor, regardless of its own intrinsic value, holds a secondary place to this. All toil, all progress, all organization have merit to the extent that they promote and enhance living. This is a religious message for Qoheleth, who maintains that the creator has implanted the capacity for happiness in each and every human heart, has made living and exciting venture, and wills that every person be afforded the opportunity to find pleasure in living. (Israel’s Story—Part Two, p.83)

Another scripture scholar, Robert Davidson, writes a final introductory comment:

The author of the book was well aware, as we shall see, of the traditional faith and religious teaching that had shaped his people’s life. Such things, however, no longer seem to ring bells for him. Somewhere along the line the answers he had been taught no longer satisfied him. He takes a long cool look at life and experience as it comes to him, and reaches very different conclusions. Some of his comments are so sharp and provocative that many scholars believe that what he wrote has been toned down and made more acceptable to more conventional religious minds by the addition of verses like 12:13: “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man”... Certainly this is a man who puts a large question mark against many things that others believed. In this he is, perhaps, close to many people today who are brought up in the Church, brought up to accept traditional Christian teaching, yet who find that neither the Church nor that teaching any longer make much sense to them. (The Daily Study Bible Series—Ecclesiastes and the Son of Solomon, pp 5-6)

Division of Chapters

Introduction (1:1-11)

Part 1: Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)

Part 2: Qoheleth's Conclusions (6:10-12:8)

Epilogue (12:9-13)

COMMENTARY

Introduction: Vanity of Vanities (1:1-11)

Words of David's son, Qoheleth, King of Jerusalem:

"Vanity of vanities!" says Qoheleth, "All things are vanity! What profit has man from his labor which he toils at under the sun?" (vv 1-3)

"Nothing is new under the sun." (v.9)

Qoheleth lived many centuries after Solomon. The opening verse is an attempt to provide a link with Solomon, the royal patron of wisdom. It seems to imply that Qoheleth was accustomed to moving in high society. He may have been a counselor or advisor to a king. There is no attempt here to say that the words he speaks are "the words of the Lord," as the prophets did. Qoheleth's words come from his own observations on life. Nevertheless, his words are challenging and provocative, and worth reflecting on.

"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" (1:2) is Qoheleth's theme song. *The Good News Bible* translates these words as: "It is useless! Life is useless!" or "Emptiness, emptiness! All is empty!" or "Meaningless, meaningless! Utterly meaningless!" To Qoheleth, all is vanity because of death. The finality of death places a dark cloud over all of man's labors on the earth. Because of death, life has no ultimate meaning. Qoheleth has no sense of the afterlife.

Verses 2-11 recite the relentless succession of events: one generation succeeds another endlessly; the sun rises and sets every day; we try to explain things but we can't; "all speech is labored"; we think something is new but it is not. Qoheleth never dreamed of the technological innovations of our modern world. But even if he had experienced them, he may not have been impressed. In verse 1, he says that *"there is no remembrance of the men of old."* Little did he realize that people would be reading his observations about life thousands of years after his death.

PART 1: QOHELETH'S INVESTIGATION OF LIFE'S MEANING (1:12-6:9)

Chapter 1:12-18. In his search for wisdom, Qoheleth takes on the persona of Solomon, a man believed to be very wise. Specifically, he will put pleasure, wealth, and even wisdom on trial. He realizes that he has a thankless job. It is like chasing after the wind. You think at one moment you have found the meaning to life, only to discover the next moment it has slipped through your fingers. *"What is crooked cannot be made straight"* (v.15) is perhaps a reference to the strange twists and turns of life that are hard to make sense of. *"For in much wisdom there is much sorrow"* (v.18) is probably a reference to the disillusionment experienced by the wisdom searcher as he tries to figure out what life is all about.

CHAPTER 2: The pursuit of pleasure, wealth, wisdom and other things

"I said to myself, 'Come, now, let me try you with pleasure and the enjoyment of good things.' But behold, this too was vanity." (v.1)

"Nothing that my eyes desired did I deny them, nor did I deprive myself of any joy, but my heart rejoiced in the fruit of all my toil." (v.10)

"I went on to the consideration of wisdom, madness and folly. I saw that wisdom has the advantage over folly as much as light has the advantage over darkness." (vv 12-13)

"There is nothing for man than to eat, drink and provide himself with good things by his labors. Even this, I realized is from the hand of God. For who can eat or drink apart from him?" (vv 24-25).

Verses 1-12—Study of pleasure-seeking. Qoheleth felt that maybe the meaning of life is to be found in wine, women and song, in the pursuit of all the good things that life has to offer. Soon he finds out that pleasure by its nature is transitory. Even though he seems to have no regrets for his pursuit of pleasure, he also discovers that it does not give meaning to life. It is *"all vanity, a chase after the wind"* (v.11).

As for material riches, these in the end will be left to others. We are reminded of the rich young man who built big barns to accumulate and store more wealth, but did not live to enjoy it.

Verses 12-17—Study of wisdom and folly. While wisdom is better than folly just as light is better than darkness, the truth is, and this is the core of Qoheleth’s problem, the wise and the fool die alike, and there is no enduring remembrance of either of them. Like most of the voices that come to us from the Old Testament, Qoheleth has no sense that death will be swallowed up in the victory of the risen Christ (1Cor 15:54).

Nevertheless, life can be enjoyed (vv 18-25). Qoheleth ponders the issue of working very hard to complete many projects. Then ‘Sister Death’ (St. Francis of Assisi) comes and all you have worked to achieve goes to someone who may have none of your concern for your work and be nothing other than a fool. This is not a comforting thought.

Verses 24-25. Qoheleth seeks to come to terms with the hard facts before him. While there are no good answers to the deep questions of God, that does not mean that we should not enjoy life. Qoheleth feels that if God gave us life, we should live it to the fullest. We should enjoy all the good things that come from the hand of God (v.24).

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapters 1 and 2? What gives meaning to your life?

CHAPTER 3: The seasons in a person’s life

“There is an appointed time for everything, a time for every affair under the heavens.” (v.1)

“God has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without men’s ever discovering from beginning to end, the work which God has done.” (v.11)

“I recognized that there is nothing better than to be glad and do well during life. For everyman, moreover, to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of all his labor is a gift of God.” (vv 12-13)

“And I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to rejoice in his work; for this is his lot.” (v.22)

Verses 1-15—Seasons. Now we come to some of the best known verses not only in this book but in the whole Bible and in all sacred books, that deal with the seasons in a person’s life. The text lists fourteen pairs of opposites, e.g., to be born and to die, to kill and to heal, to love and to hate, and so on. Some of the seasons might scandalize us, such as “a time to kill”

and “a time to hate.” While the Fifth Commandment says, “*You shall not kill*” (Ex 20:13), the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 21-24) acknowledges that there is an appropriate time to kill: “*Whoever strikes another man a mortal blow must be put to death.*” And the psalmist has no problem “hating” God’s enemies. Where Qoheleth differs from the rest of biblical tradition is in his lack of confidence that human beings can know the right time to hate and kill, etc. (see v.11 above). Since people cannot figure out God’s mind, what are they to do? Qoheleth responds by reiterating his earlier message that they should eat, drink, and enjoy life and the fruit of their work—as a gift from God (v.13).

The season’s text has been likened to a large tapestry finely put together with many colored threads. We look at it (at our lives) and try to understand it. What is the divine purpose in it all? We may die wondering. The well known piece called “The Weaver” speaks to this question.

*My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Oftimes He weaveth sorrow,
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper,
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why
the dark threads are as needful
in the Weavers’ skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.
(Author Unknown)*

Pause: What has been the happiest and most painful season in your life? How would you describe this season in your life?

Verses 16-22—Man is no better off than the beast. Noting the lack of justice at the highest government levels, Qoheleth declares, “*The fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same. Who knows if the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?*” (vv 19-21). Not knowing what lies ahead, Qoheleth once again says: “*There is nothing better for a man than to rejoice in his work; for this is his lot*” (v.22).

CHAPTER 4:1 to 6:9: Sayings of the wise

In his introduction to Qoheleth, Peter Ellis states that the author “*reflects on his subject in varying moods. Sometimes his mood inclines him to see the wintry side of life; at other times it is the springtime that catches his fancy*” (Ibid, p.516).

In writing 4:1-6, Qoheleth is certainly in a wintry mood: “*The dead are more fortunate than the living.*”

Chapter 4:7-12—Two are better than one. Team-work is better than working alone simply because a team makes more money. Marriage is better than being single because a marriage partner is a good bed-warmer.

Verses 13-16. A young wise man is far better than a foolish old king. One who begins in humble circumstances and is willing to learn could exchange a prison cell for a palace.

Verse 4:17. In one of his few references to temple worship, Qoheleth is respectful of God and scornful of the hypocrisy that he has seen.

Chapter 5:1-7 continues the focus on religious expression introduced in 4:17: “*Be not hasty in your utterance*” (5:1).

Robert Davidson writes: “*Do not rush into God’s presence pouring out a torrent of words, as if the more you have to say, the more acceptable you will be to God. ‘Let your words be few’ (v. 2). Again we are reminded of the words of Jesus: ‘In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words’ (Matt 6:7). If Qoheleth is only pleading for a little verbal economy and discipline in worship, then many of us would want to say ‘amen’ to that. There are times when people seem to believe that the more they say and the more passionately they say it, the more likely God is to listen. It sounds as if they had a bad connecting line to God and needed to extend the call to make sure he got the message. Words, words, words, far from bringing us nearer to God can sometimes act as obstacles between us and God*” (Ibid, 34).

Pause: Do you tend to dominate the conversation when you are praying? Assuming that at times you find God distant, how do you deal with it?

Chapter 5:4-6. Qoheleth tells us to mean what we say when we make promises to God (see Deut. 23:21-23).

Chapter 5:7-19—Material wealth. Sadly, Qoheleth says that we should not be surprised by injustices in our system of government. Then he goes on to speak about the danger of riches. It’s addictive—the more one has, the more one wants. Hoarding wealth is no good: “*I have seen riches kept by their owner to his hurt*” (5:13). Qoheleth ends this chapter by stating once again: “*Life is short, there is no reason to be miserable. Accept life as it comes to you as ‘gift from God’*” (v.19). In other words, live life to the full day by day. The more you pack into your life, the less likely you are to be depressed by the thought that life is short and passing quickly.

Chapter 6:1-12. We may sometimes envy people who are blessed materially. Maybe we shouldn’t because they may not always enjoy their blessings. Qoheleth gives two illustrations of this:

- There is the well-to-do, highly respected man who can have all the things he desires, yet “*God does not give him power to enjoy them*” (6:2). It may be brought on by a crippling disease or an early death. Then “a stranger” may take over all his possessions.
- Another man may be blessed with a large family and live to a ripe old age. Yet for some reason, he does not *enjoy* his blessings. It would have been better if this man had never been born. For Qoheleth, it’s all about the *quality* of one’s life.

Chapter 6:7. “*All man’s toil is for his mouth, yet his desire is not fulfilled*” suggests that people are always chasing after happiness in the things of this world but never find it. Augustine says: “*The heart of man is restless until it rests in God.*” So often, the more money people make, the more they want.

Chapter 6:10-12. Qoheleth is back in one of his wintry or darker moods: all is vanity, life makes no sense. In dealing with God, we are dealing with one “stranger” outside of ourselves, one whose ways we cannot understand. Commenting on these verses, Bruce Davidson writes:

Even people with a much more robust faith sometimes find themselves in situations where they come very close to Qoheleth, and are forced to say “it does not make sense.” Listen to C.S. Lewis in the immediate

aftermath of the tragic death of the woman he had loved so deeply and so briefly (*Shadowlands*, p.10).
Where is God? Go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You might as well turn away. The longer you wait the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once....

Yet C.S. Lewis did not turn away. He waited, he agonized, he struggled—you can relive his pilgrimage in *A Grief Observed*—he struggled until he discovered the truth of what he put onto the lips of one of the characters in another of his books: “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You yourself are the answer. Before your face, questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words, words, to be led out to do battle against other words....” (Quoted from *Shadowlands*, p.153). The trouble with *Qoheleth* is that for him God himself cannot be the answer. God is an enigma, a distant enigma in heaven, while he has come to terms with so much that he cannot understand here on earth. (Ibid, p.43)

PART 2: QOHELETH’S CONCLUSIONS

As we move to Part 2 of this book, we should remember that there is no good or easy way to subdivide this book.

CHAPTER 7: Six home truths; Critique of sages on justice and wickedness

“A good name is better than good ointment.” (v.1)

“The heart of the wise is in the heart of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” (v.4)

“I have seen all manner of things in my vain days: a just man perishing in his justice, and a wicked one surviving in his wickedness.” (v.15)

Verses 1-9 contain six sayings. The first saying: “A good name is better than good ointment, and the day of death better than the day of birth” is usually cited as an example of Qoheleth’s technique. He takes a common saying or proverb and turns it on its head by ridiculing it. In the above saying, he claims that death is better than birth.

The second saying about the ‘house of mourning’ being better than the ‘house of feasting’ reminds us

that we learn more from the painful experiences of life than from joyful experiences. Verse 8 has to do with beginning a project and not finishing it.

Verse 13. We have heard the cliché that “God writes straight with crooked lines.” Qoheleth does not necessarily agree. Experience has taught him that one cannot do much about the crooked things in life but to accept them.

Pause: Do you agree that we learn more during the painful events of life than during the joyful times? If so, can you give an example?

Verse 16 exhorts us not to be overly just or wise, meaning perhaps not to be too self-righteous. Early church Father St. Jerome explains the warning against excessive justice as a reference to the self-righteous man who is so stern that he is never willing to forgive others.

Verses 23-24. In chapter 1, Qoheleth was on a search for life’s meaning. Here he concedes that his search has failed, that it is too far-reaching. Who then can find it? (See Job 28:12-14.)

Verses 26-29—On women. Qoheleth shares the prejudice faced by men who live in a patriarchal society. He must have been married to a nagging wife. But his feelings about men are not much better. He has only come upon one good man out of a thousand. Verse 29 says that God made mankind good, but humans have messed it up.

Pause: In the last century, women’s rights have come a long way especially in the western world. What are some ways that women are still not treated as equal to men?

CHAPTER 8: Advice for the young; Why do the wicked prosper?

The purpose of a wise man in many societies in the ancient world was to draw attention to attitudes and actions which led to a successful life. In verses 1-9, Qoheleth presents us with his own thoughts on how to be successful in a king’s court.

Verses 10-17. Qoheleth raises the age-old question of why the wicked prosper. They are even praised in the holy places. Perhaps because of some good things they do despite their being crooked in other ways. Hitler saved Germany out of economic chaos.

Qoheleth, like many of us, believes that the criminal pursues his evil work knowing that justice is not executed promptly. Because of this flaw in the justice system, Qoheleth goes back to one of his key themes: “Eat, drink, have fun” for the remainder of your days.

CHAPTER 9: Happy and gloomy words

“Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works.

“At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head.

“Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of the fleeting life that is granted you under the sun. This is your lot in life for the toil of your labors under the sun.

“Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going.” (vv 7-10)

“Though I said wisdom is better than force, yet the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words go unheeded.” (v.16)

Some have wrongly called Qoheleth a hedonist because he so frequently encourages us to eat, drink and be merry, as he does once again in this chapter. But he has never told us to get drunk or be promiscuous. Qoheleth is essentially a man of faith. All good comes from God and even though many things in life vex Qoheleth, he says all we can do is to enjoy our life, celebrate, dress up, wear perfume, and enjoy our spouse.

CHAPTER 10: A bag of wise sayings

“Words from the wise man’s mouth win favor but the fool’s lips consume him.” (v.12)

Qoheleth is very much in his role as a wisdom teacher. *The Collegeville Commentary* calls this chapter “a grab bag of wise sayings from conventional wisdom” (p.819). There is a strong contrast between the wise and the foolish person.

CHAPTER 11: Nothing ventured, nothing gained; Celebrate Life

“Cast your bread upon the waters; after a long time you may find it again.” (v.1)

“You know not the work of God which he is accomplishing in the universe.” (v.5)

“Cast your bread upon the water” may refer to a spirit of adventure in business or to generosity in almsgiving.

Verse 2 encourages us to save for a rainy day, but to avoid putting all our eggs in the same basket.

Verse 3. There are some things we cannot control, such as the weather, yet we cannot keep putting off what we can do today. If we keep waiting till we know what God wants of us, we may wait a long time. So go ahead and sow the seed and see what happens.

Pause: Would you say you tend to be more cautious or adventurous?

CHAPTER 11:9-12:8: Poem on youth and old age

“Rejoice, O young man, while you are young, and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth.” (11:9)

“Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.... When the guardians of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent.... And dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to the God who gave it.” (12:1-7)

The Collegeville Bible Commentary states:

The final hymn is to life. This is one of the most hauntingly beautiful poems in all of literature. The impact is achieved by a careful conjuring up of images and balancing of structure.

We can see the sun shining, the clouds gathering, the dawn and the sunset, the birds in the trees, the village well. Yet these images are also carefully balanced against opposites. Light and darkness, the nothingness of death and the life breath jostle one another. The strong stand but they are bent; the mill still grinds, but slowly; the birds sit in the trees, but do not sing; the well is full of water, but no one is around, and as one looks, the rope breaks and the bucket falls into the depths.

So also the addresses to the youth and the aged are contrasted. Qoheleth gives four verses to youth and then multiplies this to eight verses for those his own age. It is this careful structuring of image against image, age against age, that gives an internal rhythm to the thought and produces the right mood. (p.820)

First, Qoheleth tells the youth to enjoy their days of youth while they have them, for youth is fleeting.

In chapter 12, Qoheleth, now an old man, uses rich imagery to describe his life as the sunset settles down upon it. The *Collegeville Commentary* reads:

Qoheleth stands at the end of the road. He is like an old man wandering into a silenced village. The sun has gone behind the clouds, the menservants stand bent over, the women waiting at the mill are few, the ladies in the house only occasionally peek out of the windows. The doors of houses are closed; the birds do not sing; the old man totters along precariously as though on a precipice, fearing a mugging; the trees blossom but do no more. And as he passes through this silent village, he arrives finally at the well, the center of town. But no one is trading news at the well. As he looks at this source of life—for good water is called living water—he sees the whole apparatus of pulley, bucket, and counterbalance fall into the pit as the rope breaks. Need anything more be said?

“And the dust returns to earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it” (12:7).

Qoheleth shrieks for some greater knowledge. Faith says that life is safe in the hands of the Life-giver. But how? And why? (p.820)

Epilogue (12:9-13)

It is generally recognized that the epilogue of this book was written by a disciple of Qoheleth who is referred to in the third person. The final editor of the book emphasizes four things:

- Qoheleth’s role as a wisdom teacher who sought to get his message across in an attractive way.
- Yet Qoheleth’s message is a goad—intended to spur us on, to push us to examine. So at times, the good wisdom teacher will say things that are uncomfortable.
- Verse 12 seems to be saying that while it is okay to read many books, reading in itself will not make you wise.
- Finally, the final editor of Ecclesiastes tells us that what is really important is that people ‘fear God and keep his commandments’ (v.13). In Wisdom literature, fearing God doesn’t mean shaking in our shoes before God. Rather, it means keeping God at the center of our lives and seeing all of our plans, hopes and dreams in this larger context. The editor is saying that the only wise way to live is to be in awe of the incomprehensible God who lives behind

appearances of things, and to try to be holy as God is holy. One day, God will reveal what it’s all about. *“God will bring to judgment every work, with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad”* (v.14).

Concluding word

Robert Davidson writes: *“To have the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible is at least to be reminded that it is possible to rejoice, to rejoice in the richness of the life God has given us, and yet live with many questions unanswered both about life itself in this world and about the life hereafter”* (Ibid, p.92).

Pause: Who have you seen age well? What helps you deal with the aging process?

Resources

- Collegeville Bible Commentary—Old Testament
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament
- Daily Bible Study Series—Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon