Wisdom Literature—Ecclesiastes

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Outline of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes Course Syllabus

Preface

In the preparation of this course, I have discovered more keenly the relevance of OT wisdom for answering the nagging questions plaguing the fallen world of mankind. It is my hope that the student-reader will appreciate the wisdom of Ecclesiastes as much as I have.

Introduction

1. Purpose of the course

The book of Ecclesiastes considers the philosophical question which every generation of mankind, from Adam to the present, has asked: Does life have meaning, and is there any meaning in my work from day to day. It is urgently relevant for the continuing ministry of the church in a lost world with no compass.

2. Summary of Course Content

The course is divided into eight lessons, each covering various sections of the book. See outline.

3. Course Materials

In addition to this textbook, the student must read an additional 300 pages (Bachelors) and 600 pages (Masters). Other commentaries on Ecclesiastes or other books on the OT wisdom literature are acceptable—for example, Proverbs, Wisdom Psalms, Job, Song of Songs, or any books dealing with the interpretation or introduction to wisdom literature. For this course, I would especially like to recommend two books introducing the wisdom literature of the OT: (1) Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—An Introduction to Wisdom Literature*, Intervarsity Press Academic, 1985, and (2) Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom—Israel's Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life*, The Paternoster Press, 1987. I am not sure whether Goldsworthy's book is still in print.

4. Course Objectives

(1) To study Ecclesiastes in community with other students
(2) To grasp the tension presented in the book between the data of empirical observation and the traditional wisdom of the word of God
(3) To be able to answer the objections, questions, and arguments of the skeptics who do not believe that the Bible has relevant answers to today's dilemmas
(4) To develop Biblical sermons and Bible studies on the book of Ecclesiastes which speak practically to the modern Christian and the agnostic skeptic

5. Course Structure

The course will follow the outline of the book of Ecclesiastes. At least fifteen hours of class attendance are required, plus outside reading, preparation of papers and possible preaching assignments.

6. Course Requirements

(1) Participate in fifteen hours of lectures and class discussions.
(2) Complete the questions at the end of each of the eight lessons.
(3) Read the book of Ecclesiastes and the 300 or 600 extra pages of reading described in "Course Materials". Write a three page evaluation (Bachelors) or five page evaluation (Masters) based upon the required reading. You may discuss a particular point of interpretation which may be unique to the author you are reading.
(4) Write one exegesis paper of seven pages single-spaced (Bachelors); one exegesis paper of 10 pages single-spaced and a sermon or Bible study of 6 pages single-spaced based upon the exegesis paper (Masters).
(5) Complete two exams which are based 80% upon the questions at the end of the lessons and 20% on other material in the textbook.

7. Course Evaluation

(1) Class participation (10%)
(2) Questions at the end of each of eight sections (40%)
(3) Reading (3 or 5 page evaluations of additional reading or 300 or 500 pages)—(20%)
(4) Exegesis papers and sermons (20%)
(5) Exams (5% each x 2)=(10%)

8. Course Benefits

In the words of Bruce Waltke,

> The book of Ecclesiastes is the black sheep of the canon of biblical books. It is the delight of skeptics and the despair of saints….literature courses in secular universities commonly select it as a must-read book of the Bible because it represents [according to secular professors] the triumph of the human spirit over harsh reality through unflinching honesty….The church ignores it, and some evangelicals deny that the "preacher/teacher"…reveals infallible truth. These scholars ask, "Who would teach their children: 'Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?'".[1]

Through the modern scholarship of Waltke, Longman, Bartholomew, Fox, Kidner, Eaton, and others, upon which this brief commentary is based, there is no longer any excuse (if there ever was) for ignoring the book of Ecclesiastes. It addresses the problems of modern skepticism and Christian perplexity in ways that no other book of the Bible does. Why else would God have allowed it into the Biblical canon? But even with the help of modern evangelical scholars, the book is difficult. The student is advised that he will reap what he sows (Gal. 6: 7). If he sows to his own flesh (Gal. 6: 8a—too much idle chit-chat and too little study), he will sacrifice the benefits of Ecclesiastes and this course. If he sows to the Spirit (Gal. 6: 8b—studying hard), he will reap the harvest of understanding.

[1] Bruce K. Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, p. 946; words in brackets mine.

For your information:

The reader will notice words in parentheses (words) defining the words that come before the parenthesis. For another example, the words “apathy” on page 3 and “Hellenistic” on page 4 are defined in parentheses as (unconcern) and (Greek), respectively (in that order). I have often used more complicated words than necessary, and then defined them, in order to build the vocabulary of anyone who speaks English as a second language. My desire is to expand the reader’s vocabulary, not to impress anyone with my limited vocabulary. Other theological textbooks, commentaries, etc. will not define words—making them somewhat frustrating to read. Therefore, take some time to build your English vocabulary for future enjoyment of these other books that are well worth reading. For those readers who already know the definitions of these words, please take no offense at my efforts in defining them. I am writing for a diverse audience with significant differences in educational backgrounds and opportunities.

Ecclesiastes

Lesson One—Introducing Ecclesiastes

Introduction

Who wrote Ecclesiastes? It has generally been assumed for hundreds of years that Solomon wrote this book. But did he? Some of the basic problems of Solomonic authorship will be discussed in this lesson. Why was the book written and to whom—to the common Israelite or to the intellectual Israelite who could understand the philosophical struggle occurring in Qohelet's mind?[2] And when did such philosophical discussions arise in Israel? They don't seem to be present in Proverbs where the knowledge of God for wise living is simply taken for granted, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7 NASB). What, exactly, was going on in Qohelet's head as he tells his autobiography? Did Qohelet write the whole book or is there another author, the narrator, who writes Qohelet's autobiography, adding his own conclusion at the end? This leads us to the next question: What is the structure of the book and how does this structure help us understand the book? These questions will be addressed in this lesson.

At the very outset, I would like to encourage the reader to persevere with me through this short commentary. *Ecclesiastes* is one of the most difficult books of the Bible, and any commentary that attempts to explain it will also be somewhat difficult. But if you persevere, the repetition of themes will help you understand the book. Furthermore, it may be helpful to read the questions at the end of each lesson beforehand to guide you through some of the main topics of the lesson. However, the ten questions are by no means exhaustive (covering every concept of the lesson).

Authorship

Although traditional scholarship has favored Solomonic authorship, very few modern scholars do so. Rather, most of them believe the book was written during the latter part of the third century by an unknown Jewish author.[3] But there were notable dissenting critics of Solomonic authorship as far back as Luther (16th century), Hugo Grotius (1644), Hengstenberg (1845), and Franz Delitzsch (1875). Tremper Longman's, Craig Bartholomew's and Bruce Waltke's arguments are summarized below.[4]

There are strong internal considerations which suggest a different author from Solomon.

(1) If the author is Solomon, why would he use the nickname, Qohelet or "Preacher" (1: 1) when nothing would be gained for using this nickname nor would there be any reason for using it?
(2) The past tense is used in 1: 12, "have been king", instead of the present, "am king", when according to 1 Kings 11, Solomon died while ruling Israel. Thus, he would have had no occasion to say, "I have been king."

[2] "Qohelet" (or "Qoheleth") is the Hebrew word for "preacher"
[3] Bartholomew, pp. 39-40, 46.
[4] Longman, pp. 4-7; Bartholomew, pp. 46-47; Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 948.

(3) In 1: 16, he says that he has "increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me". But there was only one king in Jerusalem before Solomon and that was his father David (King Saul never ruled in Jerusalem).
(4) The association between "the preacher" (Qohelet) and King Solomon lasts only the first three chapters, after which this association ends. For example, in the first three chapters we have references to being king in Jerusalem (1: 12), his wisdom (1: 13), extensive building projects (2: 4-6), and the accumulation of wealth and concubines (2: 8) all of which were true of Solomon's reign. But the rest of the book demonstrates no such association with Solomon and is more general.
(5) When references to kingship occur later in the book, they are references we would not expect from Solomon. For example, the writer says in 4: 1, "Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them." As king in Israel, Solomon was in a good position to "comfort" the oppressed by enacting and enforcing laws against their oppressors; thus, this statement sounds inappropriate coming from a king so powerful as Solomon.[5] Furthermore, we learn from 1 Kings 12: 4 and 11 that Solomon may have been one of the oppressors. His extensive building programs put many Israelites into forced labor.[6] Other verses are blatantly unfavorable toward the institution of the monarchy, accusing the king of corruption (5: 8-9) and suspicious paranoia ("someone's trying to kill me"; 10: 20).
(6) At the end of the book, and after a long life of searching for meaning in all the wrong places, the writer acknowledges that true meaning in life is attained only in the fear of God (chp. 12).
However, we have no evidence from the historical books of the OT that Solomon ever turned the corner on his apostate life with genuine repentance. While the Biblical historian is pleased to report David's repentance in the Bathsheba affair (2 Sam. 12: 13) and even the repentance of Manasseh, by far the worst king of Judah (2 Chron. 33), there is no such report of Solomon's repentance, and his kingdom is taken away from his son Rehoboam (2 Kings 11-12). It is incredible that the Biblical historians would neglect to include the story of Solomon's repentance if it actually occurred. One could argue that the book of Ecclesiastes renders it unnecessary to report Solomon's repentance since it is included at the end of the book. But this begs the question of whether Solomon is the real author, and nowhere in the book is his name explicitly (clearly and pointedly) mentioned.

The last remark brings us to Bartholomew's point that if Solomon were the author, why does the narrative shift from first person to the third person in the final section of the book (Ecc. 12: 8-14)? Bartholomew views this change as "decisive" of non-Solomonic authorship, "Even if Qohelet is Solomon, Solomon would not be the author".[7]

Longman, Bartholomew, et al. ("and others"), conclude that the person who calls himself "Qohelet" pretends to be Solomon in order to argue that satisfaction and meaning cannot be found in all the areas mentioned: power, money, sex, and even wisdom. Solomon had all these things, but he was still not satisfied; therefore, if Solomon can't be satisfied with worldly things, no one can. Once the author establishes the "vanity" (meaninglessness, enigma) of all these things, he also

[5] Delitzsch, pp. 205-210.
[6] But see Ralph Davis, who disputes the theory of Solomonic oppression; *The Wisdom and the Folly—An Exposition of the Book of First Kings*, p. 128, footnote.
[7] Bartholomew, p. 47.

dispenses (does away with) with any association between Qohelet and Solomon.[8] Nothing else written in the book has a close relationship to Solomon.

This Solomonic fiction may present a problem to the evangelical reader. (It doesn't present a problem to liberal scholars who deny, without definitive proof, the authenticity of authorship of almost every book in the Bible.) Why is a book included in the Bible which suggests Solomon as its author when in actual fact Solomon is not the real author? Delitzsch, writing in the 19th century, goes to great lengths in answering this question.[9] To summarize his analysis, it is clear from the text that even though Solomon is suggested as the author, the real author of the book never attempts to cover up this fictionalized autobiography of Solomon's life. As noted above, Solomon could never have made some of the statements in the book, including the one about increasing in wisdom "more than all who were over Jerusalem before me". There was only one king in Jerusalem before Solomon—his father David—a fact which would have been well-known by any Hebrew reading the book. It would also have been a well-known fact that Solomon would not have been helpless to improve the living conditions of the poor who were living under an oppressive regime—his own oppressive regime if he were truly the author.[10] Thus, the author makes no attempt to disguise the obvious fiction of Solomonic authorship. To the Hebrew reader, the fiction would have been readily perceived, and therefore, not deceptive.

> Ancient readers would have recognized the literary device. The author alludes here and elsewhere to Solomon to further his argument, but the fiction is presented in an intentionally obvious way.[11]

However, some modern scholars are convinced of Solomonic authorship including Walter C. Kaiser,[12] T.M. Moore,[13] and Philip Graham Ryken[14] who are not persuaded by the autobiographical fiction theory. But if Solomon did not write the book, then who did? The answer: We don't know. Judging from the philosophical content of the book, he is some unnamed person living in the 3rd Century (?) before Christ when Hellenistic speculation had become well-known even among the Jews. But even if we cannot determine authorship, it makes little difference for the theological message or canonicity of the book which is relevant to every age and resonating so abundantly with the skepticism of modern cultures and the suffering of developing nations.

Audience and Purpose

The purpose of Ecclesiastes—traditionally believed—is to expose the futility of finding meaning in material things or in worldly pursuits—in a word, materialism. The preacher "undertook a more objective investigation of these godless approaches in order to test their validity" At the end of the book, all materialistic approaches to life are found invalid and the fear of the Lord emerges as the only valid approach. Another perspective views the book as a warning against "slick solutions of life's mysteries, so that we must always be open to having the lessons of our experience

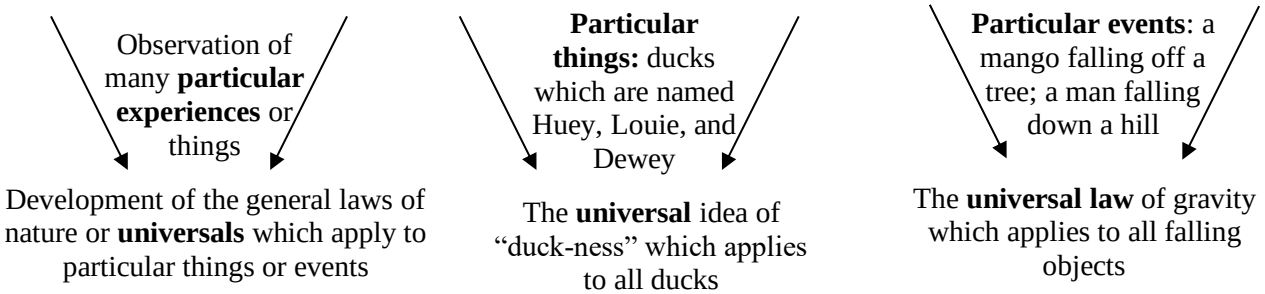
[8] Longman, p. 7.
[9] Delitzsch, pp. 205-210.
[10] cf. Delitzsch, p. 209.
[11] Longman, p. 84.
[12] Kaiser, *Total Life—Ecclesiastes*, page unknown
[13] Moore, pp. 9-10.
[14] Ryken, p. 36.

contradicted by further experience".[15] In J.I. Packer's view, the book warns us not to presume that God will give believers an "insider's" view of God's providential dealings with men.[16]

According to Packer, the purpose of the book is to warn us against unrealistic expectations of attaining wisdom. God is infinitely wise, but there are serious limits to our wisdom. As creatures we are incapable of understanding all the mysteries of life; and if we could, we would be God. According to this interpretation, the book's purpose is very close to that of Job which demonstrates the apparent "hidden-ness" of God's wisdom in human suffering. Job stumbled at God's apparent apathy (unconcern) toward the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the oppressor (24: 1-17). The "preacher" dwells on this mystery in more detail in Ecclesiastes. Moreover, Job demanded answers from God (Qohelet never did) to dispel the hidden-ness of His providence with Job, but never got the answers he expected. In the end, God essentially said, "I created the world; you didn't" (chapters 38-39) and "I control the world; you don't" (chapters 40-41)—end of argument. The specifics of Job's suffering, and that of others, continued to remain mysteries.

The social setting of Ecclesiastes may give us some hint of its purpose and interpretation. If modern scholars are correct in dating the book in the 3rd century BC, then the influence of Greek philosophy may account for the "individualism and autonomy" of its content which is uncharacteristic of ancient Hebrew thought. While not attempting to pin-point the exact philosophical school which influences Qohelet, Bartholomew—agreeing with Michael V. Fox—maintains that his epistemology (the theory of how one attains knowledge) is different from the ancient Near East and is similar to that of Hellenistic (Greek) culture.[17] Qohelet's method of obtaining knowledge is the "'autonomy of individual reason'" in which a person should pursue wisdom through the *inductive* method of empirical observation[18] which characterizes Qohelet's speeches.

The inductive method of scientific investigation can be illustrated the following way.[19]



Universals are necessary to make sense out of life; otherwise, we would miss the relationship of particular things to one another. Whenever I am navigating my way through Mbarara, Uganda, I have the general sense of "car-ness" which applies to all automobiles. Therefore, before I walk out

[15] Goldsworthy, p. 108, 113.
[16] Packer, pp. 94-95; see extended quote in Appendix A.
[17] Bartholomew.
[18] Empirical observation is the observation of sensory experience (sight, touch, hearing, feeling) followed by inductive reasoning.
[19] Based on the *Study Guide for Basic Training for Defending the Faith—A Lecture Series by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen*, Dr. Ken Gentry, Jr., "The Problem of Universals", Lesson 11, based on Lecture 5 of tape series. See also *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, Gary DeMar, editor, p. 201.

onto the street, I look down the road to make sure that no automobile is coming. I don't have to examine each automobile (which looks different from another) to know that if I step out in front of it I will be killed or injured. To use the above example, Huey, Louie, and Dewey are individual ducks which I can eat, but "duck-ness" is a universal principle which is non-material, something I cannot eat. I can eat a particular duck, but not duck-ness. In other words, universals are non-material concepts that cannot be touched. Common universals are abstract ideas about the material world which everyone assumes without proof. (For example, I don't have to prove that when an object is thrown into the air, it will eventually come down because of the universal law of gravity.)

The inductive method applies to Qohelet in the following way: Qohelet has observed the particulars of his world and came to the conclusion through autonomous inductive reasoning that righteousness has no lasting reward. But this is just one example. He has also concluded that because of death, there is no value to men's labor, including *his* labor. Note the illustration on the following page containing many of Qohelet's empirical observations and conclusions found throughout the book.

According to Bartholomew, Qohelet

> …is best thought of as a believing Israelite who has become aware of and attracted by tenets of Greek thought that were in the air. Such thought stressed human autonomy [independence] in knowing, and the central role of experience, observation, and reason in arriving at truth, while being suspicious of tradition…
>
> The postexilic context of Israel, with what appeared to be the demise of the great Israelite experiment, must have led Qohelet and his educated contemporaries to question the reality of the Israelite vision of life into which they were born and nurtured. Qohelet thus sets out to explore the meaning of life with the tools of his autonomous "Greek" epistemology [experience, observation, and reason], while being unable to refute the genuine insights of his Israelite tradition….It is the tension between these two trajectories [Greek thought and Hebrew tradition] that lies at the heart of Ecclesiastes. It would be a bomb on the playing field of those seeking answers in Greek philosophy while being unable to shake off their nostalgia [longing for the past] for the biblical tradition…[20]
>
> Ecclesiastes seems to have been written for third-century Israelites who lived in a period when Yahweh's promises seemed to have come to nothing and there was little empirical [visible] evidence of his purposes and promises. The Israelites were exposed to pervasive Greek thought and culture at this time, and common temptation especially among the more educated was to apply a sort of autonomous Greek epistemology to their experience of desolation, leading many of their young people to conclude that God's purposes in the world are inscrutable and utterly enigmatic.
>
> Ecclesiastes is crafted in this context by a wisdom teacher as an ironical [saying one thing but meaning something else] exposure of such an autonomous epistemology that seeks wisdom through personal experience and analysis without the glasses of the fear of God.[21]

[20] Bartholomew, pp. 58-59; words in brackets mine.
[21] Bartholomew, pp. 94-95; words in brackets mine.

THE PARTICULARS OF QOHELET'S EXPERIENCE

INDUCTIVE REASONING

In much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.

Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

"As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity."

For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?

I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of* rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness.

I tested all this with wisdom, *and* I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?

There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility.

For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him. [2] It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men.

INDUCTIVE REASONING

QOHELET'S CONCLUSIONS BASED UPON AUTONOMOUS INDUCTIVE REASONING

SUMMARY CONCLUSION: "All of life is enigmatic or absurd."

Bruce Waltke concurs with the postexilic[22] dating of Ecclesiastes because of its language and style.[23] The purpose of the book, he suggests, is to illustrate the debate between skepticism and faith with faith being triumphant at the end.[24]

Therefore, the epistemology[25] in Ecclesiastes is poles apart from the epistemology of the traditional wisdom of Proverbs, a theory of knowledge which does not merely believe what it sees but one that is rooted in the fear of the Lord and his word (Prov. 1: 7). In Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is the sure way to God's blessing, but Qohelet's experience has shown him that many who fear the Lord have difficult lives while those who are wicked are at ease (cf. Ps. 73). Everyone has seen this for himself, and African Christians may have seen it more than westerners. This idea, of course, generalizes the teaching of Proverbs, which itself acknowledges the exceptions to the rule that righteousness *usually* pays dividends (rewards) (e.g. the "better-than" proverbs extolling the value of integrity above riches, Prov. 16: 8). However, the exceptions to the explicit promises for righteousness found in Proverbs—as well as wisdom Psalms like Psalm 1—are more subtle in these books while the exceptions to the rule actually dominate the main portion of Ecclesiastes, as well as Job.

Longman's analysis of the structure leads him to interpret the book as a teaching device of a wise man instructing his son.[26] The wise man is the narrator of the whole book who tells the biography of Qohelet (the preacher) in the first person. Qohelet's negative, pessimistic outlook is presented by the narrator only to be qualified by the narrator's positive view in chapter 12: 8-14. Therefore, Longman, among others, views the autobiographical section—the "I" section—as predominantly pessimistic; and Qohelet's pessimism must later be corrected in the epilogue of the book by the narrator who doesn't want his son influenced by a negative outlook on life, 12: 8-14. Thus, Longman translates *hebel* as "meaningless" or "meaninglessness" ("vanity"—NASB, ESV; or "meaningless"—NIV).

Bartholomew, on the other hand, understands some of Qohelet's statements—particularly the "there is nothing better than…" statements—as positive, thus revealing the tension in Qohelet's mind between traditional wisdom as found in Proverbs and the contrary evidence of his experience. Thus, Bartholomew translates *hebel* as "enigmatic" ("confusing") rather than "meaningless" since Qohelet has not come to a firm conclusion about life. David Hubbard maintains that "*Hebel* stands more for *human inability* to grasp the meaning of God's way than for an ultimate emptiness in life." It "speaks of *human limitation* and *frustration* caused by the vast gap between God's knowledge and power and our relative ignorance and impotence".[27] Michael V. Fox translates the word as "'absurdity'". "In his view *hebel* is something that does not fulfill what it is intended to do, thereby being absurd and deceitful".[28] Kathleen A. Farmer says that its basic sense is "a puff of air", "a breath" or "a vapor".[29]

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[22] After the exile of 587 BC
[23] Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 948.
[24] Waltke, p. 954
[25] method of obtaining knowledge
[26] Longman, p. 38.
[27] Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, pp. 21-22; quoted in Waltke, p. 956; emphasis his.
[28] Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, p. 31, quoted by Waltke
[29] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 151; quoted in Waltke.

Waltke says that *hebel*, occurring 37 times, is the key word in the book of Ecclesiastes and the "clue" to its meaning. He proposes two ways in which Qohelet uses the word: (1) for whatever is "unsubstantial", "fleeting", or "lacking in permanence", and (2) "for specific situations for which mortals can find no answer and in that sense are 'enigmatic' or 'illusory'". Continuing, he says,

> Life is absurd because toil produces no enduring profit and because the attempt to make sense of life's many enigmas is "futile." Adam and Eve name their son 'Abel' (Heb. Hebel). "Vapor" [namely, "Abel"] died prematurely (i.e. his life was fleeting), without progeny or a monument (i.e. without gaining any advantage), and apart from faith his life and death are senseless. If one reflects on Abel's life under the sun, it was hebel, "absurd."
>
> The book's structure validates these two uses of hebel. Recall that Seow analyzed the Sayings of Qoheleth into two equal halves: "Everything is Ephemeral [short-lived] and Unreliable" and "Everything is Elusive." In other words, hebel is used for that which is both temporally fleeting (Part I [chapters 1-6]) and intellectually futile (Part II [chapters 7-12]).[30]

The difference in the translation of *hebel* colors (influences) one's entire interpretation of the book. On the one hand, if Qohelet is already convinced that everything is meaningless, then even his advice about enjoying one's work (Eccles. 2: 24; 3: 13) and one's wife (or lover, Eccles. 9: 9) should be taken negatively, as if to say, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Simple pleasures, although ultimately unsatisfying and futile, are the best we have in this meaningless world. So make the best of them." (As the Budweiser beer commercial repeatedly said, "You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto [happiness] that you can get"—"happiness" being defined as more Budweiser beer.) Such advice is also self-contradictory, since any advice he gives the reader falls into the category of meaninglessness; so why bother giving advice in a world which has no meaning?[31]

The resignation to the meaninglessness of life would apply to all the *carpe diem* statements in the book. The words, *carpe diem* do not appear in the book. They are Latin for "seize the day".[32] Such statements appear to offer the reader a glimmer of hope that some things are meaningful after all. In actual fact, Qohelet is simply trying to make the best of a hopeless situation, and these statements may be taken ironically (saying one thing but meaning another). In other words, Qohelet may be saying ironically or sarcastically, "You can try to convince yourself that these things bring enjoyment, but you will find out soon enough that they really don't. I know from my

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[30] Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 956, words in brackets mine

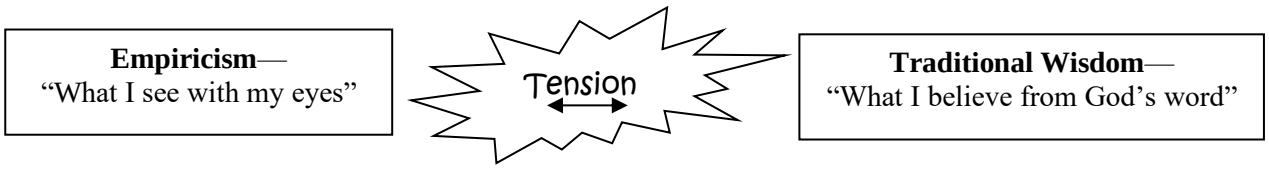
[31] The same could be said for postmodernists who insist that words and sentences have no objective meaning. Language is a social construction imprisoned within the walls of our cultural upbringing. This view destabilizes our confidence in language to give us an accurate picture of the external world. Quite unsurprisingly, the postmodernist also denies objective, absolute moral principles; but this is only the surface problem. Logically, he must deny the very communication he uses to discredit the meaning of language. He blows up the bridge upon which he is standing and then proceeds to walk across the chasm in mid-air. His position is therefore, self-contradictory. For a concise critique of postmodernism, see Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word—Language, A God-Centered Approach*, pp. 303-319. In this book, he argues that language is a valid form of communication because God created it and because man is made in the image of God.

[32] Defined in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* as "the enjoyment of the pleasures of the moment without concern for the future". In English translations, the *carpe diem* sections in *Ecclesiastes* are generally set apart by the phrase, "there is nothing better…than" (Ecc. 2: 24-26; 3: 12-14, 3: 22; 8: 15) with 5: 18-19; 9: 7-10; and 11: 7-10 taking a different form but with essentially the same meaning.

own bitter experience. But, hey, they are better than nothing, so grab any pleasure you can! When you die, you won't experience anything!"

With Bartholomew's (and Waltke's) translation of *hebel*—"enigmatic" (perplexing, confusing, inexplicable)—Qohelet does not conclude that there is no meaning, but that meaning in life appears beyond his reach or comprehension.[33] Upon purely empirical grounds ("I believe what I see."), life is confusing and mysterious. Good people often suffer the most, and unrighteous people seem to get on with life very well without too much noticeable religion or integrity. Nevertheless, Qohelet, a former "king" and a wise man in Israel (according to the author's intentional autobiographical fiction) cannot shake off the traditional teaching he learned from his youth. In spite of the apparent contradictions he sees with his own eyes, he "defaults" to the traditional view—"Life has meaning, because the OT Scriptures say it does." This tendency is revealed in the *carpe diem* statements in which Qohelet resorts to the traditional wisdom of the OT found not only in books like Proverbs but the Psalms and Genesis 1 and 2 which teach that God made man to rule over creation for the purpose of glorifying His name. This means that man's labor is important and that his relationship to God is crucial to his interpretation of everything in life.

From this viewpoint, Qohelet cannot be interpreted as a purely pessimistic preacher. Sometimes he affirms the joys of life which God has given and not from the point of view that "this is as good as it gets; so make the best of it". Rather, he honestly recognizes that there is much in life to legitimately, honestly enjoy in spite of the perplexities. Thus, Qohelet is not the consistent cynic who sees everything as yellow through the jaundiced eye, but rather a seeker who holds in tension what OT wisdom says about the world (Psalms and Proverbs) with his own personal observations that appear contradictory to this wisdom. Perhaps Qohelet's enigma may be diagrammed the following way:



Concerning the two interpretations of *hebel*—"enigmatic" or "meaningless", Bartholomew says,

> It is important to note that Qohelet does not deny that there is meaning, but he finds it impossible to lay hold of. "Enigmatic" expresses this more clearly than proposed translations such as "meaningless" or "absurd," which close down the very struggle that the reader is being called to engage in.[34]

Concerning the inherent contradictions (self-contradictions) of Qohelet's message, he says,

> Commentators remain polarized as to whether Ecclesiastes is fundamentally positive, affirming joy, or basically pessimistic. The majority incline to the latter view. In my view scholars continually fall into the trap of leveling Qohelet toward his hebel pole [everything is meaningless], or toward his carpe diem—affirmation-of-joy pole. This is to ignore the literary juxtaposition [setting two things side by side with one another] of contradictory views that is central to the book and the life-death tension it

[33] Bartholomew, p. 93.
[34] Bartholomew, p. 124.

> embodies. Qohelet's autonomous epistemology, depending on observation, experience, and reason alone, leads him continually to the hebel conclusion, which is juxtaposed [set side by side] again and again with his carpe diem confessions of the goodness of life. The book is about the struggle to live with and resolve the agonized tension between these two poles.[35]
>
> Qohelet puts himself into the shoes, as it were, of the autonomous Greek worldview and applies it to the world he observes and experiences, but only in order to show that it leads again and again to enigma rather than truth. His autonomous epistemology keeps running up against the enigma of life when pursued from this direction, and it appears impossible to find a bridge between this enigma and the good that he experiences and that the biblical tradition alerts one to [the *carpe diem* sections]. The resolution of this paradox is found in the fear of God (rejoicing and remembrance) [11: 9—12: 1], which enables one to rejoice and apply oneself positively to life in the midst of all that one does not understand, including especially death.[36]

Structure of Ecclesiastes

The book is divided into three parts.

I. Prologue (chap. 1: 1-11)

The narrator introduces the "preacher" (Qohelet) in the third person.[37] Some of the themes of the book are introduced in the prologue, especially the unmistakable conclusion of the preacher, "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity"—where the word "vanity", *hebel*, does not mean "pride" but "meaninglessness" or "enigmatic", depending on the translator/interpreter).

II. Monologue by the Preacher (1: 12—12: 7)

This is the main body of the book which is essentially the quotation of Qohelet's words by an unnamed narrator who is using the message of the preacher to teach his son (12: 8-14). This monologue, according to Longman (who follows Michael V. Fox's frame analysis), is "a separate and complete literary unit" enclosed or sandwiched between the prologue (1: 1-11) and the epilogue (12: 8-14) which form a "frame" around the monologue—like a photograph enclosed within its picture frame. The narrator, the second wise man, is not the preacher, but the author of the book who quotes the extended monologue of the preacher as an autobiography of the preacher's life. Longman suggests that the narrator's epilogue and prologue could have been written at a different time from the main body of the book, Qohelet's monologue.[38]

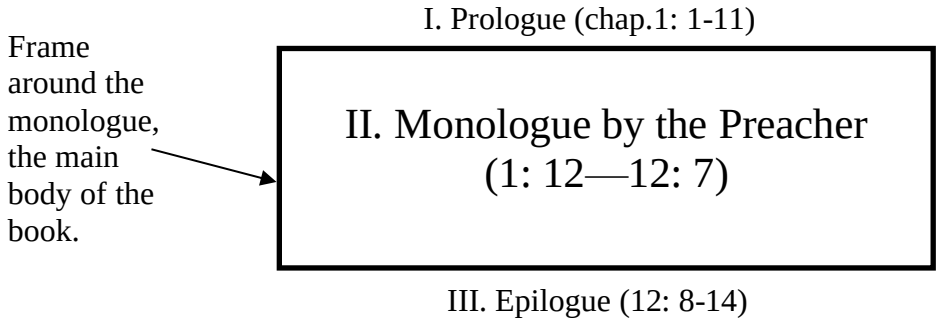
Bartholomew, on the other hand, acknowledges the frame which structures the book, but denies that Qohelet's autobiography and the narrator's prologue and epilogue (the "frame" around the autobiography) are written by two different people at two different times. The author of Qohelet's autobiography and the frame around it is the *same* person. The author creates the person of Qohelet

[35] Bartholomew, p. 93, words in brackets mine.
[36] Bartholomew, p. 95, words in brackets mine
[37] The third person occurs in the pronoun forms of "he", "she", "it", "him", "her", "his", "hers", "its", as opposed to the first person which occurs as "I", "me", "my", "mine", etc.
[38] Longman, p. 21. Thus, a "diachronic" analysis in which the narrator's frame and Qohelet's autobiography are written at two different times.

as a fiction which he presents as the "I" throughout the monologue. The voice of the narrator and the author who creates Qohelet are the same. Interpreted from this perspective, the whole book is written by one person who gives us snapshots (pictures) of Qohelet's two different perspectives—Greek empiricism and the orthodox Hebrew wisdom tradition. These are in tension with one another, a tension resolved by Qohelet at the end of the book. Thus we see Qohelet almost as two people—the "Greek Qohelet" of the pessimistic sections, and the "orthodox Qohelet" of the *carpe diem* sections.[39]

III. Epilogue (12: 8-14)

In the epilogue, the narrator evaluates Qohelet's wisdom. Longman believes that the narrator finds Qohelet's words deficient and presents the orthodox, normative wisdom of the OT, "Fear God and keep His commandments."[40] Bartholomew believes that the narrator does not distance himself from Qohelet but agrees with him, finding him at the end of his monologue consistent with the OT traditional wisdom.[41]



I. Prologue (1:1-11)

A. Superscription (1: 1)

> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (Ecclesiastes 1: 1 NASB)

As mentioned earlier, the author is presenting Qohelet, "the preacher", as King Solomon. Most modern scholars recognize the reference to Solomon as autobiographical fiction—as did, they believe, the ancient readers. He does this to highlight Qohelet's message of the enigma (confusion) of life lived from the perspective of empirical observation.[42] Some would say that Qohelet is presenting the perspective of a godless person.[43] But you don't have to be godless to experience the same thoughts and cynicism as Qohelet. And, yes, Qohelet speaks early in the book as a classic hedonist/narcissist who has abandoned himself to the worship of self (narcissism) and the worship

[39] Bartholomew, pp. 69, 78-79. This view is "synchronic" in which the three parts of the book are written at the same time.
[40] Longman, p. 39
[41] Bartholomew, p. 363
[42] Bartholomew, see above quotation.
[43] cf. Milton S. Terry, who presents the allegory of Ecc. 12: 1-7 as "the old age of the sensualist", p. 307. I once agreed with this interpretation.

of physical pleasure (hedonism). (I will not split hairs with philosopher-types who understand the history and fine distinctions of the hedonistic schools. See Bartholomew for that). Everyone reading Ecclesiastes would have been familiar with the extravagant life-style of Solomon with all his wealth and women. This is why the author has used the allusion (slight hint) to Solomon without using his name. If someone like Solomon had never found meaning in physical pleasure and consumerism (the worship of goods and services), then no one should attempt to do so. Let the African Christian beware. If money and material things have not made Americans happy—some of the most affluent people on earth—then they will also not make Africans happy, either. Learn from our mistakes, as the author wanted his reader to learn from this allusion to Solomon.

Furthermore, the reference at least carries the implication that Qohelet, real or created, was a person who understood OT wisdom and was a religious leader of the people of Israel—one like Solomon.[44] He was not a philosophical hedonist/narcissist[45]; he was one only through temporary experimentation which ended in confessed failure. "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.' And behold, it too was futility [hebel]" (Ecclesiastes 2:1 NASB). Qohelet had the biblical sense to know that all this sensual pleasure was leading nowhere.

The name, Qohelet, is also significant. The word means, "a gatherer"[46] or a "collector of sentences".[47] The implication is that Qohelet is one who is able to pull thoughts together into a coherent (understandable and consistent) unity thus making sense out of a perplexing (confusing) world. Since Qohelet himself admitted failure, it is likely that the author's choice of his name is part of the irony he wishes to express.[48]The one who should have it all together does not have it all together. What's more, it is not likely that anyone else with fewer resources and less intellect than this Solomon-like figure would be able to pull it together, either.

B. Introduction to Qohelet's Thought (1: 2-11)

> [2] "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." [3] What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun? [4] A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever. [5] Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there *again*. [6] Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north, The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns. [7] All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again. [8] All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing. [9] That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. [10] Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new "? Already it has existed for ages Which were before us. [11] There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later *still*. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 NASB)

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[44] Bartholomew, p. 104; see also Ecc. 12: 9-10 in which the narrator refers to Qohelet as a "wise man" with no hint of irony or sarcasm.
[45] See definitions in parentheses on the previous page.
[46] Bartholomew, p. 113.
[47] BibleWorks 8, 2008
[48] Bartholomew, p. 113. If we admit the element of irony (saying one thing and meaning another) in Qohelet's speech, then we may assume that the author/narrator put it there as part of his overall purpose for Qohelet to resolve the tension between empiricism and traditional wisdom at the end of the book.

The message of the preacher is clear from the beginning: "Life is enigmatic, incomprehensible." Coming as it does from one who is likened to Solomon, the statement hits us between the eyes; it is shocking. It is also shocking from the perspective of Genesis 1 and 2 in which God outlines his agenda for man to fill the earth and have dominion over creation for His glory—or, if you like, "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever"[49] by working in His garden, the earth. Life and work were supposed to be meaningful and enjoyable—and enjoyable because they were meaningful. Even the word, *hebel*, brings us back to Genesis, for it is the name of Adam and Eve's second son, Abel (Gen. 4: 2; *Hebel* in the Hebrew language). Without knowing it, they gave him a name which would one day allude (indirectly refer) to Qohelet's nemesis, his ultimate conqueror—death. And death has no favorites, for Abel the righteous son would live a short life,[50] while Cain the unrighteous would live longer and father sons who would build cities, develop the art of animal husbandry, create and play musical instruments, discover metallurgy, and write poetry—poetry boasting about murdering someone (Gen. 4: 17-24).

The author of Ecclesiastes uses *hebel* purposefully, knowing that the original Hebrew audience (especially if it is a 3rd century BC, post-exilic audience) will make the necessary connection—"Life is surely *hebel*, and we Hebrews know why. We are under God's judgment for idolatry and disobedience." Rabbis interpreting Ecclesiastes would one day compare the seven "'vanities'" of v. 2 ("vanity"= 1; "vanities" = 2) with the seven days of creation. Thus, Qohelet is calling into question the recommendation of a "good" creation and God's benevolent purpose for man. In Qohelet's preliminary investigation, the whole thing seems, instead, to be a "grievous task" and "great evil" (Eccles. 1: 13; 2: 21). But it didn't have to be this way if man had kept to the original program, "embracing his creatureliness" rather than attempting to make himself God through autonomous (independent) reasoning.[51]

Life is confusing; consequently, every aspect of life is confusing, including what man does for most of his life—work (v. 3). The preacher phrases this sentiment in the form of a rhetorical question suggesting, but not demanding, a negative answer. "What advantage does a man have in all his work...?" Answer: "Probably nothing, but let's explore the question together." Bartholomew believes that this is the "programmatic question that informs the whole of Ecclesiastes, not just the immediate context".[52] The question is rhetorical, but this does not imply that Qohelet had already come to a final conclusion.[53] The question of the meaninglessness of life is yet to be answered, and "this openness invites the reader to participate in Qohelet's struggle about the meaning of life….But it is important to note that this summary statement does not close the debate but rather opens it".[54] However, if, as Longman suggests, Qohelet has his mind made up, there is nothing more to explore, no debate. He will therefore spend the rest of his message to convince the reader of life's meaninglessness. Hence, the *carpe diem* passages must be interpreted, a priori (without

[49] *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. The instructional summary of the doctrine of most reformed and Presbyterian denominations based upon the *Westminster Confession*, a larger summary of reformed doctrines.
[50] Bartholomew, pp. 113-115.
[51] Bartholomew, pp.115-116, 124.
[52] Bartholomew, p. 106. The "programmatic question" is the question which directs and guides the reader through Qohelet's whole monologue. Qohelet's quest throughout the whole book is an attempt to answer this question.
[53] Naturally, this would imply that the reader is interpreting the word, hebel, as "enigmatic" rather than "meaningless".
[54] Bartholomew, pp. 107, 114.

further research) as ironic or sarcastic encouragement to enjoy life without any honest reason to enjoy it.

Following the programmatic question of v. 3 is an initial illustration to the enigma Qohelet is facing. In spite of man's best efforts, nothing ever really changes. The earth remains exactly the same (v. 4). Just as the rivers run to the sea, but the sea never gets full (v. 7), so life is full of sameness and weariness (v. 8). "There is nothing new under the sun" (v. 9). Everything which is now being done has already been done in the past and no one can say of his discovery or his work, "See, this, it is new" (v. 10). Along with being repetitious, activity "under the sun" offers no net gain or profit.

> The constant flux of creation yields no gain in spite of its endless cycle of sunrise/sunset, evaporation/rain, and cycling of the wind (1: 2-11): for Qoheleth this is a representation of hebel's first meaning, which pertains to absurdity in the sense of proving to be ephemeral [short-lived] and so without compensation/gain. When Qoheleth says that there is nothing new under the sun (v. 10), he refers to the lack of something fresh that breaks into the cycle of life and gives it meaning and value, not to nothing ever being unfamiliar or novel. Remember that he has not experienced the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is new. At the first section's end, he concludes that forgetting and alienation of profit are inseparable.[55]

The conclusion is found in v. 10. The generations who live after us will forget everything we have done in the present. There will be no remembrance of our contributions to mankind; thus, nothing one accomplishes will be of any benefit or profit—at least to him—because he will be dead. Furthermore, the work of future generations is equally enigmatic since their posterity will not remember what they did either. The cycle of nature and history are analogous to one another. Water moves via (by way of) rivers to the sea, returns to the sky, and then back to the earth through rain; likewise, man's history is an endless cycle of sameness. Man works; man dies. So, what is the point? For Qohelet, death is the big enemy, for death deprives man of being remembered for his work.

Of course, the preacher lived in a day in which the accumulation of knowledge was meager in comparison to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There has been more accumulation of technical knowledge in these two centuries than in all the previous centuries combined. Just think of what man has been able to accomplish since the last quarter of the nineteenth century (the late 1800's) through the twentieth century: industrialization and the mass production of goods, the inventions of the automobile, washing machines, TV, air travel, space travel, medical technology and computer technology. We would be tempted to argue with Qohelet and say that his "wisdom" is now out of date and utterly refuted by man's achievements over the last 1300 years.

But our boast would be an empty one. The Egyptians built massive pyramids without the help of modern technology and were highly sophisticated in their use of medicine. Hammurabi developed a highly sophisticated legal code long before the Roman civilization. Yet few people appreciate the achievements of ancient Egyptian culture, and most people have never even heard of Hammurabi ("Hammu..Who?"). Philip Ryken makes note of the Chaco Canyon of New Mexico built by the Anasazi people 1000 years ago containing five-story buildings with hundreds of rooms.

[55] Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 957.

Near St. Louis, the Cahokia community grew to 40,000 people, the largest city in North America until Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the 19th century.[56] My reaction upon reading this?—"Never heard of them." "Besides," Qohelet would say, "They're dead; therefore, they have no personal benefit from their achievements."

The meaning of life has eluded (escaped the understanding of) the most brilliant men. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and other famous Greek philosophers wrestled with the question of the meaning of man's existence and never found it. Brilliant philosophers in our day are still wrestling with this question and coming up empty-handed. In the history of the United States many famous entrepreneurs (businessmen) who amassed great fortunes for their accomplishments were tormented and unhappy men, many of whom took their own lives. The United States is the most affluent nation on earth, but it also has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world. With all the technology and comfort which money can buy, there is no "happy pill" that we can swallow to convince us that we should be happy with material affluence or that we make significant differences in the world with our achievements. There have been too many "movers and shakers" (influential men and women) who have not been happy even knowing that their names would be remembered—let's see, at least a hundred years (?)

But most famous men are long forgotten. Only a few Americans (excluding me) can name the former presidents of the United States, much less what they achieved. John F. Kennedy, US president in the early 60's and the darling of the liberal media, is now remembered more for being assassinated and for his adulterous affair with sex idol Marilyn Monroe than for standing down the Soviet Union during the Cuban missile crisis. Some Pharaohs believed that they would be remembered for their pyramids at Giza, but most people today cannot name the Pharaohs who built them. I have seen them with my own eyes, but I only remember the name of the largest, Khufu. Besides, as Qohelet would say, they're all dead; so what does it matter?

No, the preacher is right. We will all be forgotten by those who live after us, the least of us and the greatest of us; and our work will be forgotten along with our name. Every one of us is a drop on an ocean of water. Therefore the question of v. 3, "What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?" sets the "program" for the rest of the book. It has not yet been decided how this question will be answered, but based upon what he has said so far in vv. 2-11, we are not optimistic.

Summary and Conclusion

The most likely answer to authorship is not Solomon, but some unknown author writing in the 3rd century when Greek (Hellenistic) philosophical thought had become well-known among Jewish intellectuals. Admittedly then, this book is difficult, but we must be willing to wade into its turbulent waters and make sense of it. The structure is basically a frame narrative with Qohelet's autobiography in the middle. Qohelet has not concluded that everything is meaningless, otherwise, he would not have finished his autobiography. Everything appears meaningless at times; at the very least it is enigmatic (confusing) or absurd. Nevertheless, there are bright spots in the

[56] Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes—Why Everything Matters*, p. 30

autobiography in which Qohelet holds tenaciously to the traditional wisdom—what he believes from the written word of God rather than what he sees.

Lesson One Questions

1. Give three main reasons why the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes is seriously questioned by modern scholars.
2. Discuss different translations of hebel. How does the translation of hebel affect the one's interpretation?
3. In what way does Qohelet acquire knowledge? That is, what is his "epistemological" method?
4. What is the main tension (contradictory ideas) of Ecclesiastes?
5. What is the general structure or outline of Ecclesiastes?
6. Why does the author allude (hint) to Solomon as the preacher?
7. Briefly discuss the author's allusion to Genesis 1 and 2 and its significance for the message of Ecclesiastes.
8. What is the "programmatic question" of Ecclesiastes and what is its significance for interpretation? (Hint: Be sure to read the footnotes.)
9. How does Qohelet illustrate the answer to the programmatic question?
10. Give three possibilities of the author's purpose in writing Ecclesiastes?

Lesson Two—The Necessity of the Proper Starting Point

Introduction

In this lesson, we will discuss Qohelet's experimentation with materialistic pleasures (money, wine, sex, and song) to find his way back to the Garden of Eden. He approaches his task with the assumption that independent, objective investigation and human reasoning are sufficient to answer his questions about meaning in life. He comes to the end of this investigation and concludes that materialistic pleasures will not satisfy the human heart. Moreover, Qohelet concludes that even "wisdom", the knowledge gained from observation and reasoning, leaves him empty. The difference between Qohelet's concept of wisdom and the Bible's concept are discussed as the wrong starting point versus the proper starting point of any investigation. Scientific investigation is not wrong in itself; and through it—and through God's common grace—man has vastly improved his lot in life. However, the same autonomous reasoning that may improve life through industrialization, medical technology, etc., has also resulted in child slave labor, genocide, euthanasia, and abortion. There is no "brute" factuality. All facts have to be interpreted and applied either through the lens of independent human reasoning or Biblical wisdom.

Moreover, death renders wisdom and work enigmatic. What is the point of acquiring wisdom (through empirical investigation) if your wisdom will be nullified at death, and what is the point of all our labor when the fruits of our labor will be passed to someone who may be a fool and if all of our accomplishments will be forgotten? To answer these questions, we need a biblical starting point and a biblical view of creation and work. Qohelet demonstrates a brief glimmer of hope in the Biblical solution in the *carpe diem* section at the end of Chapter 2

II. Qohelet's Autobiographical Speech (1: 12—12: 7)

A. Autobiographical Introduction (1: 12)

> [12] I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. (Ecclesiastes 1:12 NASB)

The preacher speaks in the first person for the first time in v. 12. Notice that the narrator introduces the preacher's thought in v. 2 in the third person ("says the preacher"). Now the narrator is using the first person ("I") to present an autobiographical sketch. We know from OT history that only two Israelite kings ruled over Israel from Jerusalem, David and Solomon. After Solomon's kingdom, Israel was divided between the northern kingdom of Israel, with Jeroboam I as king, and the southern kingdom of Judah, with Rehoboam as king. The tribes were never formally reunited under a Davidic king until the typological fulfillment of the Davidic kingdom in Christ's first advent. As noted earlier, this statement: "have been king over Israel in Jerusalem", as well as 1: 16; 2: 7, 9: "more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem", are inappropriate if Solomon were the real author. Solomon was king in Jerusalem until his death and could never have mentioned his kingdom in the past tense—"have been".

Furthermore, the plural form "all" is inappropriate since only David preceded Solomon. I cannot agree with Ryken's argument, namely, that since Jerusalem had been occupied centuries previously by the Jebusites (including Melchizedek), Solomon is referring to these kings as well

as David.[57] Waltke dismisses this theory without explanation.[58] Little or nothing of these foreign kings or their accomplishments would have been known to Qohelet's readers. Rather, the narrator is giving his readers subtle hints that this is a fictional account of Solomon's life.[59]

B. "Solomon's" Quest for the Meaning of Life (1: 13—2: 26)

1. The enigma of wisdom and pleasure (1: 13—2: 11)

> [13]And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It* is a grievous task *which* God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. [14] I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. [15] What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. [16] I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." [17] And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. [18] Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.
>
> [1]I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. [2] I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" [3] I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. [4] I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; [5] I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; [6] I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. [7] I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. [8] Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines. [9] Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. [10] All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. [11] Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:13-2:11 NASB)

The preacher has searched for meaning in many places: in the pursuit of diverse knowledge in many fields of study, in construction and horticultural projects (1: 16; 2: 4-6), in excessive drinking (2: 3), in the possession of many slaves who provided the labor for such projects (2: 7), in gold and silver (v. 8a), in music (v. 8b), and in sex (v. 8c). He had the money and power to pursue any endeavor and to purchase any object which would bring him pleasure—including women whom he treated as objects to be used—sexually or politically—rather than persons to be loved. He could have anything he set his eyes on, and whatever he saw he acquired. If we are honest, most of us at one time or another have given ourselves to luxurious fantasies. If money were not limited, what would we purchase or pursue? We have wondered what life would be like if we were rich enough to purchase all we could see. We can only speculate what this would be like, but I would not

[57] Ryken, p. 42.
[58] Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 948.
[59] "Fiction" being defined as a story which is created by the author but not true. On the other hand, there is still a close allusion (indirect reference) to the actual events of Solomon's life—close enough to convince many scholars that Solomon is the author.

recommend engaging in such unhealthy fantasies. However, in this fictional autobiography, Qohelet was such a man; and there are many millionaires and billionaires living today who are not fictions. For all practical purposes, they can purchase everything they see, including women who have no ethical boundaries. But does it really work, and do we have to speculate about whether unlimited time, money, sex, and education would make life fulfilling?

Did this make Qohelet's life fulfilling? Quite the contrary, his quest for meaning in knowledge, work, possessions, and sexual pleasure ended in disillusionment (1: 17-18; 2: 1-2, 11; 7: 26-29). There is something about life on earth which is fundamentally flawed; and since God is in control of it all, what He (?) has made crooked cannot be straightened by human endeavor (1: 15)[60] This may be a reference to the curse. Man has sinned, but man cannot curse the ground and render life "crooked" and enigmatic. Only God has that kind of power, the power of His anger.[61] The Apostle Paul comments upon the futility or enigma of life in Romans 8: 18-25. In that passage, he explicitly says that God subjected the world to "futility" because of man's sin.[62] For this reason, there is no resolution (or solution) to our apparent meaninglessness apart from Jesus Christ. What God has made crooked, only He can straighten.

While we can understand from the Bible that money, wine, women, and song (vv. 3, 8) cannot bring meaning to life, the pursuit of "wisdom" should be an exception and should have prevented the pursuit of reckless pleasure. Proverbs teaches us that wisdom is from the Lord (Prov. 2: 6), and it will watch over those who search for it and will give long life to those who don't forget it (Prov. 2: 4; 3: 2; cf. Proverbs 1-3). However, the preacher...

> immediately demonstrates his radical discontinuity with the wisdom teachers of Proverbs...when he calls his task *evil* in this verse [v. 13] and later when he questions the traditional claim that wisdom brings life (cf. Prov. 8: 35). He apparently rejects that view, believing rather that in the light of death wisdom is meaningless (2: 13-16)....
>
> Proverbs emphasizes that wisdom brings joy and life. Qohelet begs to differ, complaining that it brings frustration and pain.[63]

However, we may legitimately question whether the "wisdom" (*hokma*) Qohelet seeks has the same definition as "wisdom" in Proverbs, although it is the same word used in Proverbs. In Proverbs, wisdom has its foundation in the fear of the Lord (Prov.1: 7), the same fear advised at the end of the Ecclesiastes by the narrator advising his son (Eccles. 12: 13). One observation we must make is that Qohelet not only seeks wisdom (Eccles. 7: 25), but uses wisdom as a methodology to gain knowledge (1: 13; "by wisdom"). However, at this point we must question the kind of wisdom employed. How does he go about acquiring his diverse knowledge of the world? Does Qohelet begin with the standard of knowledge found in Proverbs and the Law of Moses—the fear of God? Or, does he begin—as did Adam and Eve at the fall—with purely empirical investigation independent of what God had already said? It is evident that Qohelet's empiricism does not deter him from experimenting with excessive alcohol and sex (Eccles. 2: 3;

[60] Longman, p. 82; cited reference his
[61] "Who understands the power of Your anger And Your fury, according to the fear that is due You? (Psalm 90:11 NASB).
[62] *mataiotes*; the same Greek word used to translate *hebel* in the Greek translation of the OT
[63] Longman, pp. 80, 85, emphasis his, words in brackets mine.

compared with Prov. 20: 1; Eccles. 2: 8; compared with Prov. 5: 18; "wife of your youth", not "wives of your youth")? We need not question his "full immersion" into sensuality.[64] If, indeed, the wisdom with which he begins his search is the same as traditional wisdom, something has surely been lost in translation. Bartholomew believes that his use of the word, "wisdom", is ironic—saying one thing but meaning another.

> As we will see, Qohelet's use of "wisdom" here is ironic, because Qohelet's epistemology—the method he uses to find answers to his questions that he can trust as true—turns out to be very different from the wisdom of Proverbs. Indeed, the difference from Proverbs is already evident in the dominance of the "I" we encounter from this point on. The center of Qohelet's quest will be his own consciousness, as manifest in observation, reason, and experience.[65]

In other words, Qohelet is aware of the difference between biblical wisdom which begins with the fear of the Lord and the wisdom he acquires from experience and independent reasoning. But he—or the narrator who is actually writing Qohelet's autobiography—uses the word in a sarcastic or ironic way as a further means of stimulating the reader to think. The reader should respond to his claim to wisdom with skepticism, "Is this the wisdom of God, or the wisdom of man?" There is a tinge of Hellenistic (Greek) flavor in Qohelet's epistemology (theory of knowledge).

> It is worth noting that Qohelet's affirmation of individual experience, in particular the experience of pleasure, seems to bear a significant similarity to Hellenistic popular philosophy, whose central purpose was to find a way to individual happiness by the use of human reason alone. The Epicureans sought happiness through pleasure and freedom from fear, the Stoics through the shedding of desire and passions. Both schools agreed that the inner realm of human experience is the locus [location] of freedom and happiness, as does Qohelet. Others looked to virtue and duty, without, however, setting social change as the goal. Qohelet did not choose these precise paths, but in his fundamental goals and methods, he bears significant similarities to Hellenistic philosophy….
>
> Qohelet's epistemology is, as far as I can tell, foreign to the ancient Near East. It is, however, paralleled in his Hellenistic environment.[66]

On the other hand, the wisdom tradition of the OT is epistemologically dependent upon absolute principles which are not always explainable or verifiable with empirical observation or human reasoning—thus, the enigma Qohelet is confronted with. These absolute principles, moreover, are true whether anyone believes them or not, and they defy empirical verification.

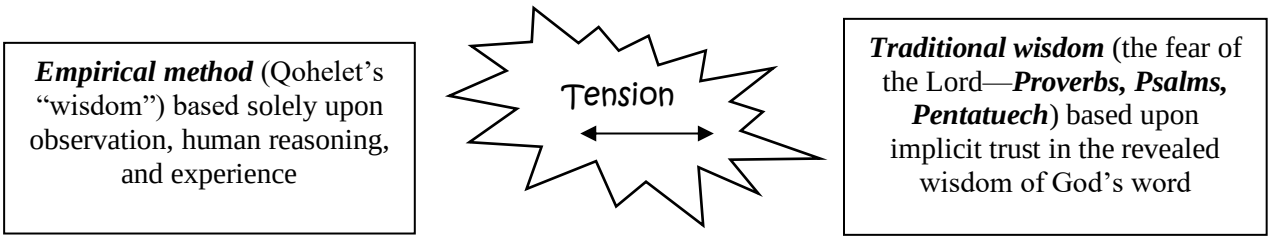
> In the usual wisdom conception, wisdom is essentially *independent of the individual mind*. What the individual knows would be known even without him. Knowledge exists "out there," waiting for man to appropriate. It need not be proved, only discovered and applied. This notion is nowhere stated, but it is implicit in the way wisdom is personified and by the way the sages speak about the way it is gained.
>
> Personified wisdom in Proverbs (1: 20-33; 8: 1-36; 9: 1-12)…represents the same wisdom that is taught and praised elsewhere in the Wisdom texts….The personification represents wisdom as existing, archetypically [from the original pattern], in essence if not in specifics, prior to [before] mankind….

[64] Bartholomew, pp. 130-131.
[65] Bartholomew, p. 123.
[66] Fox, pp. 7, 81, words in brackets mine.

> The teacher in Proverbs 1—9…enjoins the pupil to "hear" and "keep" his father's wisdom. Whereas for Qohelet "seeking" and "finding" wisdom refer to *exploration and discovery*, in Proverbs these concepts imply striving for and succeeding in absorbing existing truths….
>
> The sage need not prove the truth of his wisdom, because if it is wisdom, it is not essentially his. He has partaken of it, not produced it….
>
> Job 28 resembles Qohelet in conceiving of wisdom as the product of discovery, but the author of the former presents this concept only in order to insist on the invalidity of such an approach.[67]

In Fox's view (and Longman's), Qohelet never departs from this independent empiricism, rendering all the *carpe diem* statements as cynical or pessimistic resignations to life's meaninglessness. This interpretation follows from the frame-narrative perspective in which Qohelet's speech (see outline) is reported in first person in contrast to the narrator's introduction and conclusion which refer to Qohelet in the third person. Contrarily, Bartholomew would argue that Qohelet moves back and forth between his empirical method and the "old paths" of traditional wisdom which depend implicitly upon the eternal wisdom of God revealed in the Scriptures and creation—thus creating his confusion. We are reminded of James' invitation and warning, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind".[68]

Once again, remember the tension which plays an important part in the book.



We must not conclude, however, that the Bible departmentalizes wisdom into one specific area (e.g. moral correctness) to the exclusion of other areas (e.g. science). We should remember the numerous notations concerning the wisdom of meticulous craftsmanship (Ex. 28: 3; 31: 3; 35: 31) and the wisdom of foreign kings (1 Kings 4: 30). Solomon's wisdom became famous relative to the wisdom of others (1 Kings 10; 1 Kings 4: 30). If there is any truth about anything—carpentry, metallurgy, or nuclear physics—it belongs to God who bestows this wisdom to men by His grace, either special grace given only to believers or common grace given in different measure to all men. In this sense, all true knowledge is derivative—derived from God and originating in God. Note well that I did not say that everything men *claim* to know has its origin in God. God is the author of truth, not falsehood. There is much that men claim to "know" today that will one day be proven false by further investigation.

[67] Fox, pp. 83-85, emphasis and words in brackets mine.
[68] James 1:5-6 NASB.

The achievements of Cain's ungodly descendants prove that unbelievers are still in the image of God and share His creativity and knowledge in a limited sense (Gen. 4: 17-22). Unconsciously they obeyed the creation mandate to rule and exercise dominion over the earth. Unintentionally, they brought glory to God through their dominion pursuits. But without the proper starting point—"the fear of the Lord"—all of it is like "catching wind" or "shepherding the wind".[69] Thus, in a day in which educational credentials seem to mean everything, especially in Africa, we are warned that a superb education and prodigious knowledge in many fields of study cannot bring fulfillment in life. ("If I could just get to the US or UK and get a degree, I would be happy and fulfilled." Not according to Qohelet.)

It appears that Qohelet abandoned the proper starting point in his quest for knowledge and meaning—the word of God in the OT Scriptures. His experimentation with alcohol and sex explicitly betray this flaw. The OT wisdom is clear about the proper use of sex and alcohol (Prov. 5: 18-20; Ps. 104: 14-15; Deut. 14: 22-26). Setting aside any argumentation concerning the legitimacy or illegitimacy of polygamy in Qohelet's day, it is clear from his own testimony that love was irrelevant in his relationships with "many concubines" whom he describes as "the pleasures of men"—namely, objects to be exploited, but not persons to be loved. The point at issue is that Qohelet, like Adam and Eve, sets aside the express word of God, "Don't eat", in order to find the truth independently of God through observation and human reasoning. ("The fruit looks good to me!" "Yes, I know what the Scriptures say about sex and alcohol, but I wish to find out experientially and empirically whether the Scriptures are really true, and whether these things can bring me happiness, after all.") Thus, Qohelet sets out on his quest for meaning and knowledge with a blank slate, as it were. The truth of God's word is subjected to verification through experimentation. He will judge for himself whether his personal experience of sex, alcohol, and consumption, fits with the Biblical data. If his experience presents a different conclusion from the word of God, then maybe the Bible is not true after all.

But Qohelet's sexuality and inebriation (drunkenness) are just two consequences of his flawed starting point. The enjoyment of material comforts—his "better homes and gardens"—also fails to satisfy him. Better Homes and Gardens, as well as Southern Living, are published magazines in the US for those who wish to spend a large portion of their free time and a great deal of money adorning their houses—only God can make a "home"—with the latest decorations. (I would call them superfluous [unnecessary] "ditties".) Rearranging their gardens for maximum aesthetic effect becomes an obsession. Of course, there is nothing essentially wrong with attractive homes and gardens. As the Garden of Eden demonstrates, God created beauty and takes pleasure in it. However, some Americans are so preoccupied with their "castles" that they have little interest in anything else—including the kingdom of God—or anyone else. Qohelet's myopic (lacking foresight) quest is especially applicable here. If Qohelet could find no ultimate satisfaction in his exotic "Better Homes and Gardens", how do American Christians believe that they can find any real satisfaction in their homes and gardens which are modest by comparison? And if not, why do they continue to allocate so much time and resources to them while neglecting God's kingdom (cf. Hag. 1: 2-9)?

[69] Bartholomew, p. 124.

We should take note of the selfishness of Qohelet's pursuit. He is not a philanthropist (a person who is concerned about the plight of others).[70] Everything he pursues is "for myself", a phrase which is repeated in 2: 4, 5, 6, 8a, 8b. Count the times he uses the word "I" from v. 4 through v. 11 (NASB): fourteen times. We get the impression that we are in the presence of a classic narcissist, a worshipper of self. But is this surprising? For this is what we all are, broadly defined, apart from grace. From time to time Christians become sufficiently self-aware to discover themselves worshipping at this unholy shrine. We should not be surprised, for this is the cultural and spiritual heritage of man qua man (man in the character of man) no matter what culture he comes from. Westerners think it very strange that Africans sacrifice to their departed ancestors, but is it not ironic that Westerners worship celebrities—the pop singers and movie stars who would not give these devoted worshipers the time of day. They even worship the dead celebrities! Elvis Presley was a popular singer in the 60's who died of drug abuse. His unwashed underwear has been publicly auctioned for a large sum of money. Strange, indeed! Thankfully, believers are being renewed to the original, unflawed image of God day by day and thus progressively delivered from this madness (Col. 3: 10; 2 Cor. 4: 16).

It has also been noted that Qohelet's gardening pursuits, including the planting of fruit trees (2: 4-6), may be his attempt to return to paradise.[71] Somehow, we must "get ourselves back to the garden". Older Americans reading this (if any) may recall the lyrics of "Woodstock", a song by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young dedicated to the Woodstock concert in New York State back in the 1960's. The participants in this concert also failed to "get back". Many of them died of chronic drug abuse. In the aftermath of the Woodstock concert, the hundred or so plush acres donated to this outdoor rock 'n roll "crusade" became a garbage dump littered with beer bottles, used condoms (public sex was common), partially smoked marijuana cigarettes, and piles of assorted trash costing the property owner thousands of dollars to clean up at his own expense. Unquestionably, they would have trashed Eden as well. The desire for Eden is significant, for it is understandably the desire of men to have heaven on earth—but without the inconvenience of God and His sovereign rule.

It is understandable because heaven on earth is what God gave Adam and Eve physically and spiritually until the fall—except with Him, not without Him. And this is what He will give His people, the true church, in the new age at Christ's return (2 Pet. 3: 13; Isa. 65: 17; 66: 22). But what men have now without God is "futility" or "enigmatic". Qohelet, like all men, desired to manufacture his own private heaven on earth. Most men and women attempt an economy version of this goal. Qohelet, with seemingly unlimited material resources, entertained the possibility that he just might pull it off with flash and style. To his disappointment, he discovered that heaven on earth is unobtainable on any budget. Bartholomew comments on the relevance of Qohelet's materialistic quest for our age, particularly the West.

> Consumerism, one can argue, is the dominant ideology of our age, and central to consumerism is the quest for pleasure through possessions and experience. The [so-called] heroes of Western culture have multiple houses, accumulate phenomenal wealth, and are able to buy all the pleasures of life they desire. The undermining of modernity and the shattering of socialism have created an ideological vacuum in

[70] Longman, p. 90.
[71] Longman, pp. 90-91, citing Adrian Verheij, "Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2: 4-6," JSOT; so also Bartholomew, p. 133, who also cites Verheij

> the West, and it has been filled by the grand narrative of consumerism that is driven by market fundamentalism. Thus pleasure attained through alcohol, sex, multiple residences on different continents, music, and art have become the Good [as well as the god] of our day. Yet the quest for fulfillment and meaning remains as elusive as ever. Depression has become so common that some are calling our age the "age of melancholy," in contrast to the "age of anxiety" that followed World War II. To this context Qohelet's test of pleasure and his decisive no to its effectiveness speaks powerfully. Central to the problem with hedonism is its idolatry—pleasure is a creational good but hedonism seeks in pleasure what can be found only in the Creator. The allusion to Gen. 1 and 2 and thus the depiction of Qohelet as playing God alert us to this danger—Qohelet is attempting to recover meaning and even paradise by playing God.[72]

Like alcoholism and gluttony, consumerism is the opposite of godly dominion. Wise and moderate use of alcohol, food, sex, and all other gifts of creation demonstrate man's mastery of creation. Overindulgence and misuse demonstrate idolatry—the worship of creation and creation's dominion over man, a repetition of the fall in which the serpent exercises dominion over the image of God. Man either rules creation, or he is ruled by creation.

But satisfaction through knowledge and education—reason—was also unobtainable. Qohelet's remarkable intellectual pursuits in engineering, horticulture, irrigation, forestry, wineries, and music left him empty. Roughly twenty-one centuries later[73], the Enlightenment of the 18th Century AD (1700's) promised unparalleled freedom and prosperity for man. Its dream of a perfect world (utopia) is summed up by Francis Schaeffer in five words: "reason, nature, happiness, progress, and liberty".

> The humanistic elements which had risen during the Renaissance came to flood tide in the Enlightenment. Here was man starting from himself absolutely. And if the humanistic elements of the Renaissance stand in sharp contrast to the Reformation, the Enlightenment was in total antithesis [complete disagreement] to it.[74]

Why is it that men cannot be satisfied with material, educational, and sexual pleasures? One would think that such things would "work" for him. The primary reason is that man is the image of God and made for the worship of God and fellowship with God. Any attempt to worship what God has created (idolatry) is a foundational denial of who we are. We cannot be ultimately satisfied with anything but God (Ps. 73: 25). Many wealthy people attempt to mask (hide) their dissatisfaction, but inwardly they are like Qohelet, disillusioned with the unmet promises of material happiness.

2. Wisdom rendered enigmatic because of death (2: 12-17)

> [12]So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? [13] And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. [14] The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. [15] Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then

[72] Bartholomew, pp. 136-137; words in brackets mine.

[73] If we accept a dating of Ecclesiastes in the 3rd century BC

[74] Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Life?—The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, p. 121. See Appendix B for a brief discussion of the philosophy of the Italian and French Renaissance and its consequences in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the genocide of Hitler Germany during WW II.

> have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." [16] For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! [17] So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 NASB)

Qohelet begins this section by declaring the superiority of wisdom to folly (v. 13), but his reasoning is purely utilitarian. That is, wisdom is superior to folly only in the sense that it is useful—it "works". The preacher uses the metaphor (v. 14) of the wise man who has eyes which see and the fool who is blind and walks in darkness. The wise man can maneuver through life with a minimum amount of awkwardness and stumbling, while the fool stumbles over one mistake after another (cf. 10: 3). Thus, the wise man will generally succeed in life while the fool will squander his opportunities and fail.[75] Yet, there is one inevitable fate which befalls both the wise man and the fool—death (v. 14b). The wise man and the fool will both die, and their death will render folly and wisdom indistinguishable from one another. Not only so, but the wisdom of the wise man will be as readily forgotten as the folly of the fool (v. 16).

Once more Qohelet contradicts the wisdom of Proverbs which says, "The memory of the righteous is blessed, But the name of the wicked will rot" (Prov. 10: 7; cf. Longman, p. 99). He also contradicts the wisdom of the Psalms, particularly Psalm 34: 16 which specifically singles out the wicked as those whose memory will be cut off: "The face of the LORD is against evildoers, To cut off the memory of them from the earth." To Qohelet, however, it is "all one" (cf. Job 9: 22). The wise and the fool will suffer the same fate, death; and death will have a leveling affect rendering everything in this life an enigma, including the superiority of wisdom to folly.

3. Work rendered enigmatic by death (2: 18-23)

> [18]Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. [19] And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. [20] Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. [21] When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. [22] For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? [23] Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 NASB)

The preacher next turns his attention to man's most time-consuming endeavor—making a living. With Qohelet, of course, it was not merely making a living but whatever elaborate hobbies a rich man could pursue to stimulate his mind. He has said earlier that he occupied his time with elaborate building projects including multiple houses, gardens, parks, and vineyards. All of this was also striving after wind. With all the exertion of time and energy—and sleepless nights (2: 23b)—there is no guarantee that the man who works hard will leave the results of his labors to one who deserves it. The one who inherits the "fruit" of the wise man's labor may be a lazy fool who cannot, or will not, manage it wisely (vv. 19-21).

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[75] Longman, p. 98.

This complaint connects 2: 18-23 with 2: 12-17. Qohelet admits that wisdom has much practical value for negotiating one's way through life; but since everyone dies, the fool and the wise man alike, these practical benefits have no lasting value for the wise man. "But," someone may object, "at least the fruits of your wisdom can be passed on to your children, giving your labor value beyond your death." "Not so," implies Qohelet, "my children and grandchildren [whom he refers to dispassionately as "the man who will come after me"] may be lazy and foolish, mismanaging their inheritance or generally making a mess of their lives. What then for all my work under the sun?

No. I've seen how this works many times [Qohelet's empirical method of gaining knowledge], and I have met many fools who are living off their father's wealth. It goes through their hands like water." Thus, the wise man's descendants—whose integrity cannot be assured—negate any practical, material benefits acquired through the father's wisdom. They who have not worked hard themselves will enjoy the fruits of one who has worked very hard. This, too, is enigmatic (v. 21). Qohelet's self-appraisal in v. 15 may be ironic. He asks, "Why then have I been extremely wise?" The narrator/author, putting this appraisal in Qohelet's mouth, so to speak, draws the reader's attention once again to the definition of "wisdom". Is Qohelet, indeed, wise?[76]

Qohelet's fears have been realized time and again by wealthy fathers who have left huge material inheritances to their children and grandchildren but with no spiritual foundation to use it wisely. Some children have blown through millions of dollars in very little time and end up penniless. But there are others who invest "wisely" (from a worldly point of view) and continue to live extravagantly, careless of how this wealth could be used to help others. Either way, the poverty of mind and spirit dominates the outcome.

More fundamentally, the common fate of all men, death, loomed large in Qohelet's thinking. His empirical observations pointed to the conclusion that physical death was the end. (Had he or anyone else seen a person come back from death?) At this point in Israelite history (3rd Century BC, if modern scholars are correct), the promises to Abraham seemed remote and uncomforting; and the empiricism of some Greek philosophers, Aristotle included, encouraged Qohelet to take a second look at the traditional wisdom promising life, health, and wealth to the wise and righteous man. Qohelet's observations seemed "to turn traditional wisdom on its head".[77]

The unwise handling of Proverbs will easily lend itself to the health and wealth gospel peddlers (2 Cor. 2: 17). But there are many qualifications in Proverbs and Psalms clearly deconstructing the conclusion that righteousness always results in material riches, no exceptions (Ps. 37: 16; 84: 10; 119: 72; Proverbs 3: 13-14; 8: 11; 15: 16-17; passim [that is, in many other places]). We must also remember that the definition of riches in Proverbs is much broader than that of health and wealth preachers in America or Africa—like those making grand entrances at wedding celebrations in chartered helicopters, as one did recently in Mbarara, Uganda. The parallelism of Proverbs 8: 18-19 implies that the riches of v. 18 should be interpreted not exclusively, nor primarily, as material gain but as the "riches" of honor and righteousness which are "better than" gold and silver.

[76] Bartholomew, p. 143.
[77] Bartholomew, p. 143.

> "Riches and honor are with me, Enduring wealth and righteousness. [19] "My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold, And my yield *better* than choicest silver. (Proverbs 8:18-19 NASB)

Moreover, the riches of Proverbs are "enduring wealth" which is not here today and gone tomorrow.

> Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, Cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens. (Proverbs 23:4-5 NASB)

Surely such passages fundamentally refute the teaching of health and wealth preachers who selectively use the promises of prosperity in Proverbs to push their agenda without responsibly considering the context of the whole book. They distort the Scriptures to their own destruction and the destruction of others (2 Pet. 3: 16).

4. Nevertheless, "Carpe Diem!" ("Seize the day!") (2: 24-26)

> There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. [25] For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? [26] For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 NASB)

a. Interpreting the "carpe diem" passages—honest joy or sarcasm?

The "better-than" formula occurs four times in Ecclesiastes, each in association with the *carpe diem* ("seize the day") texts.[78] It almost seems that the preacher is reversing himself in these verses. Earlier in 2: 18-23, he makes a case for the enigma of work and productivity since the fruits of one's labor may be left to a fool or a sluggard. Now he tells us that "there is nothing better for a man to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good." He also says that the sinner gathers for the righteous man, in full agreement with traditional wisdom: "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, And the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous (Prov. 13:22 NASB). Quoting Derek Kidner, Ryken says, "The contrast here…

> '...is between the satisfying spiritual gifts of God (wisdom, knowledge, joy), which only those who please Him can desire or receive, and the frustrating business of amassing what cannot be kept, a business which is the chosen lot of those who reject Him.' If we live for God's pleasure, we will be richly rewarded with all of the spiritual blessings that God loves to give'.[79]

In fact, Ryken calls Ecclesiastes 2: 24-25 "an oasis of optimism in a wilderness of despair" and agrees with Martin Luther that the end of chapter 2 is a turning point in the whole book.

[78] Bartholomew, p. 150.
[79] Ryken, p. 74.

> Martin Luther called the end of Ecclesiastes 2 "a remarkable passage, one that explains everything preceding and following it." It is "the principal conclusion," he said, "in fact the point of the whole book."[80]

In light of subsequent pessimistic statements by Qohelet, we may question whether chapter 2 is a turning point. What seems like a reversal has been interpreted by some as a resignation that this is the best we can expect out of life. Life's inequities can't be explained; thus, "there is nothing better" for us to do than (or, "the best we can hope for" is) accept life's meaninglessness and enjoy what little benefit God will give us.[81] Notice that the text says that there is nothing better than for a man to "tell himself that his labor is good." Another rendering is: "cause his soul to see good in his labor".[82] Thus, the preacher may be telling us to convince ourselves that there is benefit in our labor, even if it is forgotten in the long run and its fruits awarded to those who don't deserve it. Fleeting enjoyment is the best we can expect. Thus, Qohelet advises a kind of self-hypnosis. Say to yourself, "Life is good. Life is good. Life is good", even when it isn't. But there is a different way of looking at the *carpe diem* passages examined below.

The last verse of this section (v. 26b) seems, well, enigmatic. Qohelet has been complaining a little earlier that the productive man who works hard may end up giving his legacy to one who is a fool or a sluggard. Now he seems to complain about the fact that God gives good things to the wise while the sinner works hard only to gather for the good person. This would seem very acceptable to one who has just complained that his legacy may end up with worthless descendants. Why should he now label as *hebel* (enigmatic) that God should give it to the wise man? Some would argue that v. 26b, "This too is vanity and striving after wind", must be applied to vv. 18-23 but not vv. 24-26a. However, the complaint in v. 26a would have to apply equally to the immediate context of vv. 24-26a. Longman notes the difficulty but offers no satisfactory explanation.[83]

Bartholomew, on the other hand, refuses to interpret the *carpe diem* passages either in terms of mitigated (lessened) despair ("Life is terrible, but let's find something to enjoy, anyway.") or in terms of unmitigated (unreserved) joy ("It's a wonderful life!"). Rather, Qohelet's despair is juxtaposed (placed side by side) with his joy without the necessity of contradiction or resolution. (Resolution does not come until Chapter 12). Necessary to this theory is the view that Qohelet is not a rank and file pagan but an OT believer who, in spite of his behavioral and philosophical inconsistencies, has not completely abandoned traditional wisdom. Thus, the positive *carpe diem* passages are "an alternative vision set in contradictory juxtaposition to the conclusion of *hebel* that Qohelet's epistemology leads him to". However, the traditional vision of God giving good things to those who trust Him seems to be contradicted by what he sees—the basis of his empirical epistemology. This apparent contradiction between what Qohelet observes (1: 12—2: 23, so far) and what he believes from traditional wisdom (2: 24-26a, so far) produces the enigma stated in 2: 26b, "This too is vanity and striving after wind."[84] How, then, does Qohelet reconcile the

[80] Ryken, p. 71.
[81] Longman, pp. 107-108.
[82] NASB, marginal note.
[83] Longman, p. 110.
[84] Bartholomew, p. 152. At first, the *hebel* statement of v. 26b seems completely out of context with the *carpe diem* of 2: 24-26a. But this is the first time Qohelet has made a positive *carpe diem* statement advocating the ancient wisdom of Proverbs. Thus, what he believes from Proverbs and what he observes creates the enigma of v. 26b.

retribution (pay-back) of good and evil[85]—extensively described in Proverbs 1—9 and summarized in 2: 24-26a—with his own personal experience of 1: 12—2: 26a? Thus, a tension between these two things, traditional wisdom and contradictory experience, is established; and this tension begs for resolution. "Ecclesiastes is about the resolution of that tension".[86]

One can see that the translation of *hebel* as "enigmatic" or "meaningless" is necessary to the different interpretations of the *carpe diem* passages. If life is perplexing or enigmatic, then the pessimistic passages (the bulk of Ecclesiastes) can be set side by side with the positive passages of joy (carpe diem) without straining the exegesis to reconcile both statements into an either/or interpretation of a positive or a negative variety. In other words, many commentators have attempted to present Qohelet's statements as entirely "orthodox" and positive (after all, they are in the Bible). Such attempts have resulted in strained exegesis since many of these statements are blatantly unbiblical (e.g. 3: 19). Other commentators have interpreted him as entirely negative. If Qohelet has already come to a settled conclusion that everything is "meaningless", then even the positive statements of joy must be interpreted as sarcastic cynicism (per Longman). Life has already been judged as meaningless, and there are no real answers to Qohelet's dilemma. The *carpe diem* statements, therefore, reflect his resignation to make the best out of a hopeless situation. But if Qohelet is saying that life is enigmatic, then the *carpe diem* statements are not sarcastic cynicism but may be honest expressions of joy in the midst of life's troubles and seeming absurdities. Qohelet admits the confusion while also embracing traditional wisdom's interpretation of life and work. He holds out hope for resolution.

Every Christian has his ups and downs while enduring the seeming absurdities of this world. The things we believe in the Scriptures do not always have the empirical verification we would wish and often seem to be contradicted by what we see. Isn't this what Paul meant when he admonished the Corinthians, "for we walk by faith *[implicit trust in what God has said]*, not by sight *[independent empirical investigation and reasoning]*"? (2 Cor. 5:7 NASB) If we asked Paul, "Why?", I think Paul would say, "Because if you walk only by sight—by empirical observation alone—you will certainly become disillusioned." "The good life", he would say, "is the life lived by faith—implicit trust in what God has said. Besides, we can't see everything clearly, anyway. Only God can do that."

There are no "brute facts" or brute observations (Cornelius Van Til). Every fact or observation is filtered through the lens of our own experience and culture—the unproven assumptions we make every day. One of these unproven assumptions is voiced in 10: 19, "money is the answer to everything." Well, God's word clearly tells us that money is *not* the answer to everything. For the proper interpretation of our observations, we must understand the relationship of the fact or observation to God (2 Cor. 10: 5).[87] We often fail to relate everything we observe back to God; and thus, our interpretation of fact is often mistaken. That's why we must rely on Scripture. Our situation is not essentially different from what Qohelet was going through. Can we not also admit that our verbal witness of the truth on one day is often quite contrary to what it was the day before and will be the day after? The pendulum of our thoughts may not swing as widely, or as wildly, as

[85] What Bartholomew calls the "character-consequence structure" (p. 315).
[86] Bartholomew, pp. 152-153.
[87] "*We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ," (2 Corinthians 10:5 NASB)

Qohelet's; and with the privilege of more special revelation (the complete Bible) than he had, it shouldn't. However, our pendulum does, indeed, swing as we try to make some sense of our existence in light of the promises of Scripture and the perplexities of observation. The pendulum may swing even wider during times of extreme difficulties, as it did in Job's experience.[88]

b. The relation of our work to creation

Bartholomew points out the significance of Ecclesiastes 2: 24-26 for the biblical doctrine of creation through Qohelet's mention of "eating, drinking, working" and "wisdom, knowledge, joy". Note the text carefully from v. 24 through v. 26a.

> [24] There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. [25] For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? [26] For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy….

Citing Karl Barth, Bartholomew agrees that "'man's creaturely existence as such is not his property; it is a loan. As such it must be held in trust'".[89] He also cites Wendell Berry who believes that people, particularly Westerners, have forgotten the privilege and joy of eating and drinking which form our most significant connection with creation.

> Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.[90]

The last part of this quote reminds me of God's answer to Job (Job 38—41) and Job's response (Job 42: 2-6), paraphrased, "I didn't know what I was talking about." Bartholomew continues,

> Berry here rightly makes the connection with eating and God—as Qohelet says, this is from the hand of God, it is a gift. As Berry notes, however, our approach to food nowadays is miles away from this perspective. We [i.e. we Westerners] live in an age of fast food and mass production for the market, but "like industrial sex, industrial eating has become a degraded, poor and paltry thing." Consumerism [the worship of purchased goods and services] has enveloped the food chain, and our kitchens have become like filling stations, our homes like motels. How do we escape this and recover Qohelet's vision for eating as a gift of God? "By restoring one's consciousness of what is involved in eating; by reclaiming responsibility for one's own part in the food economy".[91]

Berry's practical advice is to grow your own food and to prepare your own meals as much as possible. The "eater" should also be aware of where his food came from and should as much as possible eat locally grown food (the kind that has not been prematurely picked and transported across the country, using up thousands of gallons of diesel fuel in the process—like the

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[88] A pendulum is an object suspended in air moving back and forth by the force of gravity. Here it means that our thoughts and opinions are moving back and forth between two opposing ideas—God's word and our empirical observations.

[89] Bartholomew, p. 154.

[90] Wendell Berry, "Pleasures of Eating," in *What Are People For?,* p. 152, cited from Bartholomew, p. 154.

[91] Bartholomew, p. 154, words in brackets mine.

"cardboard" tomatoes I have eaten in Mississippi during the winter). Whenever possible, buy the produce you don't grow yourself directly from local farmers (through farmers' markets which, I have learned recently, can be ruined by city governments that don't appreciate the connection between eating and God). Learn as much as you can about industrial food production—lest you end up eating horse meat instead of beef.[92] Is Berry convinced that this knowledge alone will encourage us to produce more of our own food? Yes. Learn how to farm. Study food species.[93]

Ouch! This "wisdom" is quite a stretch for someone like me who cannot grow common lawn grass, but none of this is new for the average rural African who—like his ancestors before him—has been growing his own food his whole life.[94] I offer the African reader Berry's and Bartholomew's insight for one reason. Many Africans would very much like to be liberated from the burden of growing their own food, and others who have been so liberated often look with disdain upon anyone who must still do so—like so much dirt under his feet. It is past time for the African farmer to hold his head (or her head) high and give God glory and thanks for the great gift of eating food produced with his own hands. Everyone likes to eat, and if it were not for people like you, some of us would be in great trouble.

As I have noted in my previous sermons on labor, God did not dress Adam in a navy-blue suit and red tie and put him behind a desk at Barclay's Bank.[95] He put him in the garden where he got dirt between his toes and under his finger nails. Before the fall, Adam could not have been happier. But something happened. He sinned, and the labor of growing food "under the sun" on cursed ground became a burden. However, Christ has recovered for us the meaning, purpose, and joy of labor. He has taught us through his apostle, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Col. 3:23-24 NASB, originally addressed to slaves). So—"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31 NASB).

Citing Berry again, Bartholomew makes note of this gift of labor.

> …our consumer culture denatures work for billions of people, all in the service of the economy and production. In contrast to such an economy of competition, Berry invokes the notion of an economy of pleasure. He refers to Rev. 4: 11, according to which God created all things *for his pleasure*, and Berry suggests that our motivation for work should be similar: "Our truest and profoundest religious experience may be the simple, unmasking pleasure in the existence of other creatures that is possible to humans." Our responsibility, then, as stewards, the responsibility that inescapably goes with our dominion over the other creatures, according to Revelation 4: 11, is to safeguard Gods pleasure in His

[92] The recent scandal exposed on international news—*Aljazeera* and *BBC*—horse meat packaged and sold as beef
[93] Bartholomew, pp. 154-155, citing Wendell Berry, pp. 149-150.
[94] I am indebted to Bartholomew who quoted from Berry's book recommended to me months ago by a young friend of mine, Stephen Shelt, who has taught new methods of farming in Uganda and Sudan. I have now read Berry's book, but don't know if I have the courage to implement it, at least the personal farming part. However, the horse meat story made me think twice.
[95] *"Working for the Lord—The Slave Becomes a Free Man"*; Col. 3: 22—4:1; Eph. 6: 5-9

> work. And we can do that, I think…by safeguarding *our* pleasure in His work, and our pleasure in our own work."
>
> One might think with all our pleasure industries [in Western countries] that ours is an age of pleasure par excellence, just as was Qohelet's experiment with pleasure in 2: 1-11. However, the very existence of pleasure industries "can only mean that our economy is divorced from pleasure and that pleasure is gone from our workplaces and our dwelling places." Rightly understood, and as evoked here in [Ecc.] 2: 24-26, work perfects pleasure: there is nothing better![96]

But as the saying goes in America, TGIF, "Thank God, it's Friday!" "Tomorrow is Saturday, and I don't have to work! I can go skiing on the lake, hunting, watch football, play golf, or watch recorded soap operas[97] missed during the week. I can forget the drudgery of my job at least for a short time." Come Sunday night, a deep melancholy (sadness) overtakes the American worker, and he gets this sick, uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Tomorrow is Monday, the beginning of the work week. But is this any way to live? I have been there in other jobs, and I had to repent of this attitude.

Summary and Conclusion

To reach the proper destination, one must begin with the proper starting point. Investigation and human reasoning independent of the word of God is not the proper starting point. The beginning of true knowledge is the fear of the Lord by which we may properly interpret the data of creation. Left only to human reasoning and the urges of human biology, we would predict that sexual relationships with multiple partners would make us very happy; but the Bible says that sexual happiness will be achieved when we are faithful to one partner throughout life. ("Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be exhilarated always with her love"; Proverbs 5:18-19 NASB). Human reasoning would assume that the "man with the most toys and money wins". He is the most successful. But the Bible says that wisdom is better than gold and silver (Prov. 8: 19) and that simple food eaten in a home filled with love is superior to choice meat eaten in a home filled with strife (Prov. 15: 17). While Scripture-guided observation will verify the truthfulness of these Biblical alternatives, we don't have to experiment with their opposites to know what is good for us. We can simply believe what God has said.

Likewise, work does not become meaningful just because we make a lot of money or because we have achieved name recognition by others. Our work becomes meaningful as we work under the watchful eyes of our Creator who gave us our work. This is true whether we are corporate executives, truck drivers, carpenters, or stay-at-home mothers and housewives.

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[96] Bartholomew, p. 155; emphasis his, words in brackets mine.

[97] "Soap operas" are silly TV shows that are mainly about adulterous affairs, fornication, pregnancy out of wedlock, lying, murder, and a host of other moral problems which plague the US. Women, primarily, watch them religiously. I have never watched them but the previews I have seen are sufficient to reveal their plots.

Lesson Two Questions

1. What do I mean by Ecclesiastes being a “fictional” account of Solomon’s life?
2. Is Qohelet’s use of the word “wisdom” the same as that of Proverbs? Explain your answer.
3. Is the wisdom of the Bible only moral wisdom, or does it include anything else? Explain your answer.
4. What do I mean by the statement, “All knowledge is derivative”?
5. Explain Qohelet’s independent reasoning by relating it to the fall of Adam and Eve.
6. How does the proper “starting point” help us avoid Qohelet’s mistake in determining truth merely from observation?
7. What grammatical clue do we have to prove that Qohelet’s quest for knowledge was selfish?
8. Explain the reference to paradise in Eden found in Ecc. 2: 4-6.
9. Discuss two interpretations of the carpe diem sections in Ecclesiastes.
10. What is the relationship of work to creation implied in Ecc. 2: 24-25?

Lesson Three—God's Inscrutable Providence

Introduction

Lesson Three covers Qohelet's "A Time for Everything" speech. Different viewpoints are discussed as to whether he is being optimistic, pessimistic, or realistic. The speech brings up the important question of the providential dealings of God with men. Secondly, the question of justice and judgment is explored as Qohelet raises the question whether there is any difference between the death of men and beasts. Empirical evidence eludes him, and he gravitates to the traditional wisdom that the God of justice will judge between righteousness and wickedness. We will also explore the general question of how much the OT saints knew about the afterlife and whether they had any excuse for their ignorance. Lastly, we breach the subject of the existence of evil in a world created and sustained by a good, all-powerful God.

C. The Quest Continues (3: 1—6: 9)

1. The burden of the proper time (3: 1-15)

> There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven--[2] A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. [3] A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up. [4] A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance. [5] A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing. [6] A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away. [7] A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak. [8] A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.

We can see from the diagram below that Qohelet is listing a series of events serving as specific examples of the general parallel heading of 1: 1, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven…." It is also apparent that every event listed has its opposite—birth-death; planting-uprooting; being silent-speaking, etc.[98]

There is an appointed time	A	
for <u>everything.</u>		B
And there is a time	A	
for <u>every event under heaven</u>—		B
[2] A time	A	
<u>to give birth</u>		B
and a time	A	
<u>to die;</u>		B

Normative Interpretation of 3: 1-8

The passage has often been interpreted normatively or morally. Normatively, there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these activities, even hate. God hates sin and injustice, and so should

[98] For more explanation of OT parallelism, see McNeill, *Biblical Interpretation—OT Poetry*.

we (Ps. 5: 5; 97: 10). There is a time for war since a nation is allowed to defend itself against foreign intruders. Throwing stones may refer to clearing a field while gathering stones refers to the collection of stones for building.[99]Throwing stones does not likely refer to the practice of capital punishment by stoning. "A time to kill", however, may be a reference to capital punishment sanctioned in the OT (Gen. 9: 6; Ex. 21: 14), and upheld by the Apostle Paul in the NT (Acts 25: 11). Or it may refer to an extreme act of self-defense (Ex. 22: 2-3). The passages about hate must also be balanced with the command to love (Matt. 5: 44-48).

Providential Interpretation of 3: 1-8

On the other hand, Qohelet may be speaking of the providential ways of God which include both moral and immoral activities of men. For example, although murder is a sin, God ordains (predetermines or decrees) murder in His providential ordering of the world to accomplish His ultimate purposes. Thus, there is a time in God's economy for "killing", although God judges murder and punishes it in His own time. Adam's rebellion in the Garden of Eden was sinful, but even Christians who question God's sovereignty in election would agree that God ordained Adam's fall beforehand. If He didn't, then the whole history of the world was affected by something God couldn't control.

> The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these. (Isa. 45:7 NASB)

> Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, Unless the Lord has commanded *it*? [38] *Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High That both good and ill go forth? (Lamentations 3:37-38 NASB)

> "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, [10] Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; (Isaiah 46:9-10 NASB)

The providence of God includes the sinful actions of men who are responsible and culpable (blameworthy) for their actions even while these same actions are ordained and governed by God. It cannot be otherwise, unless man is really the one in control rather than God. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* says of God's providence,

> God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.[100]

Question 11 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What are the works of providence?" The answer is as follows,

[99] Bartholomew, p. 164.
[100] Williamson, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, p.46.

> God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.[101]

If God governs all creatures and all their actions, His governance must include man's sin. Bridges says of this section of Ecclesiastes,

> There is, then, a *season* for every work of God, and it comes in its *season.* Every work has its part to fulfill, and it does fulfill it.[102]

So also Eaton, who interprets Qohelet's speech as a positive affirmation of God's providence.

> Chapter three has often been interpreted as a lament of the ceaseless round of life. Instead it is part of the basic optimism of Koheleth….The Old Testament commonly sees purposefulness in life coming from God's providential oversight of its occasions and seasons. Each aspect of life has its 'time'….The Preacher holds a similar viewpoint: the 'times' of life cannot be fully known (9: 11f.), but 'in all time' (9:8) one should be content….Over it all the Preacher sees God in complete control. It is a warrant at the same time for both humility and confidence.[103]

Interpretation of 3: 1-8 as Complaint

Other interpretations, as indicated by Eaton, claim that Qohelet is complaining (lamenting) that every event has its time, but there is nothing man can do about it. Thus Qohelet is writing descriptively, not prescriptively. This is the way it is; not necessarily the way it *should* be. He is saying that these activities happen and that God ordains them, but they are out of human control and part of the meaninglessness of man's existence. Neither the timing of our birth nor the timing of our death is within our control. In the same way a plant cannot control the timing of its planting or its uprooting (v. 2). There is a time for all these things whether we like it or not; they are activities making up the human experience—a grievous experience at that (v. 10).

Qohelet continues.

> [9] What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? [10] I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. [11] He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. (Eccles. 3: 9-11)

Following the negative interpretation, there is little evidence that the preacher is trying to put a positive face on human existence—just the opposite. The immediate context of v. 9 seems to indicate that his outlook on life is very dismal. In this verse he repeats his complaint of 2: 22. Man's labor is useless and profitless. There is a time for everything, but this does not imply a purpose for everything. The similarity of the language in v. 10 with 1: 13-14 gives some reason to believe that the "task" in view in v. 10 is the same "evil" or "grievous" task which God has given man in 1: 13-14. The preacher has surveyed the field of human activity, and it is a grievous task that men have been given (Longman, pp. 118-119).

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[101] Williamson, *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, p.40.
[102] Charles Bridges, p. 48, emphasis his.
[103] Michael A. Eaton, pp. 91-92; emphasis mine.

In addition to the futility or "meaninglessness"[104] of work, God has made man to hope in the possibility of eternal life and in the possibility of understanding the meaning of human existence (v. 11). Such hope is placed within his heart, the center of his being. Yet, Qohelet's epistemology (method of gaining knowledge) does not allow him to believe that man will live forever or that he will ever understand God's purpose for him. Commenting on v. 11, Delitzsch remarks,

> The author means to say that God has not only assigned to each individually his appointed place in history, thereby bringing to the consciousness of man the fact of his being conditioned, but that He has also established in man an impulse leading him beyond that which is temporal toward the eternal: it lies in his nature not to be contented with the temporal, but to break through the limits which it draws around him, to escape from the bondage and the disquietude [uneasiness] within which he is held, and amid the ceaseless changes of time to console himself by directing his thoughts to eternity....
>
> In fact, the impulse of man shows that his innermost wants cannot be satisfied by that which is temporal. He is being limited by time, but as to his innermost nature he is related to eternity. That which is transient [temporary] yields him no support, it carries him on like a rushing stream, and constrains him to save himself by laying hold on eternity....
>
> It is not enough for man to know that everything that happens has its divinely-ordained time. There is an instinct peculiar to his nature impelling him to pass beyond this fragmentary knowledge and to comprehend eternity; but his effort is in vain, for... "man is unable to reach unto the work which God accomplisheth from the beginning to the end." The work of God is that which is completing itself in the history of the world, of which the life of individual men is a fragment....A laying hold of this work is an impossibility, because eternity, as its name 'olam denotes, is the concealed, i.e. is both forwards and backwards immeasurable. The desiderium aeternitatis [desire for eternity] inherent in man thus remains under the sun unappeased [unsatisfied]. He would raise himself above the limits within which he is confined, and instead of being under the necessity of limiting his attention to isolated matters, gain a view of the whole of God's work which becomes manifest in time; but this all-embracing view is for him unattainable.[105]

Longman concurs by saying,

> ...the verse is yet another cry of frustration on Qohelet's part....It is as if God is baiting or toying with his human creatures, giving them a desire for something that is well beyond their reach...[106]
> If the bigger picture of life is inscrutable [unknowable] to human beings, then they are reduced to lesser goals [what Delitzsch calls "isolated matters; see his quote above]. Once the search for ultimate meaning in life is thwarted, the best course is to seek the little, sensual pleasure of life.[107]

Qohelet continues.

> [12] I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; [13] moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor-- it is the gift of God. [14] I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has *so* worked that men should fear Him. [15] That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by. (Eccles. 3:12-15 NASB)

[104] Longman's preferred translation of *hebel*
[105] Delitzsch, pp. 261-262; words in brackets mine.
[106] Longman, p. 119.
[107] Longman, p. 121, words in brackets mine.

Consistent with the pessimistic interpretation of the time-for-everything speech, it follows that the *carpe diem* statement must also indicate resignation, not optimism. Qohelet despairs of any hope of understanding God's grand scheme of things—the meaning and purpose of everything God is doing in its appropriate time. He then repeats the negative refrain of 2: 24: "There is nothing better..." (vv. 12-13). Since we mortals can't find ultimate meaning and purpose in the universe—and God won't allow us to find it anyway—then we might as well "seize the day" by enjoying all the lesser pleasures that can be squeezed out of this meaningless existence. This is the best we can do. His conclusion to the very poetic "time-for-everything-speech" is pessimistic resignation, not enthusiasm for God's providence. Moreover, the ability to enjoy even the simple, fleeting pleasures of life is a gift not given to everyone. God gives this gift of enjoyment to some but not to all, and we should not take it for granted (v. 13).[108] From the whole tone of the book, it seems reasonable to assume that Qohelet was not enjoying life, and he says himself that the enjoyment of sensual pleasures was "meaningless and striving after the wind" (2: 1-2, 11). He goes further in his pessimistic conclusions by saying that no one can change God's plan by adding anything to it or by taking anything away from it (v. 14), so we might as well make the most of it.

Qohelet then makes a somewhat self-contradictory statement in v. 15. (At least, it seems contradictory if we interpret vv. 12-15 pessimistically.) He says that the purpose of God doing what He does is so that "men should fear him". Having confessed that there was no discernable purpose for what God does in the world, he now offers the suggestion that there *is* a purpose after all: striking fear into man's heart "to frighten him into submission".[109] If one views this section pessimistically, this is another one of those inconsistencies in Qohelet. "We can't know God's purpose for what He does, but I *know* that God's purpose is to frighten us into submission."

Bartholomew's Interpretation

Taking a contrary view, Bartholomew disagrees with the "deterministic" (and pessimistic) approach to vv. 1-8 and maintains that almost everything on the list with the exceptions of birth and death are within the sphere of human decision-making. God has created order in the universe, but man has a responsibility to live and act in accordance with this order.[110] He may respond righteously or sinfully. He has freedom to plant or not to plant (cf. Prov. 24: 30-34). He has the responsibility to preserve human life (heal) or to take it if the situation demands it. The right time to speak or to be silent is highlighted in Proverbs 26: 4-5. From this perspective, the question of v. 9 (a continuation of the "programmatic question") is rhetorical, having an open-ended answer which Qohelet does not supply. Qohelet is not concluding that all work is meaningless and without profit or that God's providence is a burden rather than a blessing. Rather, he confesses that it is difficult to determine what its profit is, and this renders our work enigmatic—confusing, but not conclusively meaningless.

God has determined the time for everything, but men can't discern what that time is. The reason for this is that men lack the bigger picture of the universe required to make sense of everything.[111] It may be helpful at this point to repeat Delitzsch.

[108] Longman, pp. 121-122
[109] Longman, p. 124.
[110] Bartholomew, pp. 162-163.
[111] Bartholomew, p. 167; cf. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, "God's Wisdom and Ours".

> There is an instinct peculiar to his nature impelling him to pass beyond this fragmentary knowledge and to comprehend eternity; but his effort is in vain….He would raise himself above the limits within which he is confined, and instead of being under the necessity of limiting his attention to isolated matters, gain a view of the whole of God's work which becomes manifest in time; but this all-embracing view is for him unattainable.[112]

As an example of the enigma of determining the proper time, consider the work of Jim Eliot, a famous missionary murdered in Ecuador in 1953 at the age of 27. Eliot built a school for Quechua children in Ecuador only to have it washed away by a flood. He later lost his life, along with four others, in a bold—some said "reckless"—attempt to reach the Waodonae Indians with the gospel.[113] Was this a terrible waste of five youthful, talented lives? Or take the example of a young, first-year medical student, Chuck Frye, who wanted to spend his medical career in service to the sick and suffering of the developing world rather than making a lot of money practicing in the US. Diagnosed with leukemia in May of his first year, he was dead by November the same year.[114] Some disadvantaged people in developing countries did not receive proper medical care because this young man's life was short. Was it not the "appropriate" time for them? And was it not the "appropriate" time for Eliot to build a school for disadvantaged Ecuadorian children and to bring the good news to the Waodonaes? From the purely empirical perspective, it would seem not.

God Will Not Waste Our Labor—Will He?

Yet, traditional wisdom—not empiricism—would teach us that Chuck's efforts to get into medical school and Eliot's efforts in building a school and reaching the lost were not wasted. There was a time for every event. God accomplished His own purposes that may be impossible for us to understand or comprehend (Prov. 19: 21). Appealing hopefully to the traditional wisdom (vv. 12-15), Qohelet says, "I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime." In other words, even though we cannot see the forest for the trees, it is good for man to rejoice in his labor, knowing that in the mind of God it has purpose. The apostle Paul encourages believers to keep working, knowing that their labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15: 58). We may not—and probably will not—see the immediate significance of our labor, and we may see some of the fruits of our labor washed away (like Eliot's school), but we rest in the assurance that in God's plan it has eternal significance.

Qohelet is thus torn between two opinions, one positive (vv. 12-15) and one negative (vv. 10-11).[115] The tentativeness (hesitancy) between these opinions is consistent with the tension which has been discussed earlier. On the one hand, traditional wisdom advises us to rest in the providence of God who holds all time and all activity in His hands. Man's labor has purpose even if he is lost in the trees and can't see the forest—the bigger picture. On the other hand, a strictly empirical examination of man's activity in this world does not always inspire confidence that there is any reason for his labor—like building a school in Ecuador only to have it washed away by a flood that God could have prevented. (And why didn't God give Eliot the wisdom to build the school on higher ground?)

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[112] Delitzsch, pp. 261-262.
[113] Eliot, *The Shadow of the Almighty*
[114] James Dobson, *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, p. 3.
[115] Bartholomew, p. 169.

The question of the meaning of labor—the programmatic question central to Ecclesiastes—is explored once again (v. 9; cf. 1: 3).[116] The *carpe diem* statement of v. 12, viewed positively, reminds us that exhaustive knowledge of the future is not necessary for our enjoyment of the present. The promises of blessing to those who do good (Prov. 1—9; Ps. 1) are sufficient to sustain us through the uncertainties and perplexities of the present. But why is this so? It is so because God is unchangeable, and His decrees are unchangeable (v. 14). God declares the end from the beginning, and His decree ensures that what He has spoken beforehand will certainly come to pass.

The works of men are contingent first upon the primary cause of God's will and secondly upon the secondary causes that God ordains—e.g. the forces of nature (floods, leukemia), the activity of other men, their own abilities or liabilities which bring success or failure. Perhaps Eliot *could* have built the school on higher ground, but it was in God's inscrutable plan for him to build it in the flood plain where it would be destroyed. Go try to figure it out, but don't hold your breath until you do. God is sovereign, but man is responsible. With God there can be no failure or disappointment because everything is predetermined (Eph. 1: 11b). And because God is the primary cause of everything—and we His dependent creatures—we should fear Him (v. 14). Again, the ancient wisdom is demonstrated, "Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman keeps awake in vain" (Psalm 127:1 NASB). Thus, the fear of v. 14 is not negative, but positive.

> That which is affirmed here is true of God's directing and guiding events in the natural world, as well as of the announcements of His will and His controlling and directing providence in the history of human affairs. All this is removed beyond the power of the creature to alter it. The meaning is not that one ought not to add to or to take from it…, but that such a thing cannot be done….And this unchangeableness characterizing the arrangements of God has this as its aim, that men should fear Him who is the All-conditioning and is Himself unconditioned: He has done it that they (men) should fear Him...[117]

If we take Qohelet's *carpe diem* statement as positive rather than negative, we must come to terms with v. 15 which appears to present a cyclical view of history,

> [15] That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.

The Bible, on the contrary, presents a linear view of history, although it recognizes the similarity of events and cycles of human history (e.g. the cycles of sin and judgment which are evident in the book of Judges).[118] Despite cyclic activity, man's history is moving toward a definite destination and purpose which is the return of Christ and the restoration of a new heaven and a new earth. But what Qohelet has in mind is the predictable order of creation which is the consequence of physical and spiritual laws established by God. When someone throws a stone, the stone will eventually fall to the ground because of the law of gravity God has set in motion. It will not float through the air. Throw a second stone, and the one-millionth stone, and the same thing will happen, no matter

[116] Bartholomew, p. 165.
[117] Delitzsch, pp. 263-264.
[118] A linear view of history recognizes that history is not an endless cycle of events going nowhere. History is progressing toward a goal or moving in a straight line. From a Christian perspective, the goal is the new heavens and new earth inherited by God's people.

how big or how little the stone is. Without predictability, there would be no possibility of life on earth.

> The unchangeableness of God's action shows itself in this, that in the course of history similar phenomena repeat themselves; for the fundamental principles, the causal connections, the norms of God's government, remain always the same. [119]

God has set in motion unchangeable, inviolable (cannot be violated) spiritual laws which cannot be ignored without serious consequences. If husbands or wives are unfaithful or abusive, marital discord and divorce will occur. If merchants and vendors are persistent liars, or if clerks cannot be trusted to handle the merchandise, no meaningful, predictable markets can be established with loyal customers. Meaningful commerce requires trust. If governments consist of large numbers of "kleptocrats",[120] their countries will fail economically.[121] Men can no more violate God's spiritual laws without suffering the consequences than they can violate the physical laws of nature God has put in place. If you jump off a ten-story building, you are going to die—barring some miracle. If you sin, you will eventually suffer the spiritual consequences either in this life or the life to come, or in both.

2. The enigma of injustice (3: 16-22)

> Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. [17] I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. [18] I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." [19] For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. [20] All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. [21] Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? [22] I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him? (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 NASB)

Beginning in v. 16, Qohelet treats another subject and yet another source of his frustration. In the place where justice should prevail—i.e. the law court[122]—there is nothing but injustice. Nevertheless, he if believes that as "there is an appointed time for everything", there is also a time for God's justice to prevail (v. 17)—or is there? He seems to cast doubt upon this confidence beginning in v. 18, for he questions whether there is any difference between the death of animals and that of men. From Qohelet's empirical starting point, the fate of beasts and the fate of animals is the same. No human being has ever been able to observe someone in heaven or hell. Apart from this empirical verification, there seems to be no advantage for man over beasts (v. 19). The inevitability of death looms over Qohelet's thinking from the start of Ecclesiastes to the finish, pouring cold water on the *carpe diem* texts ("there is nothing better…than). If men suffer the same

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[119] Delitzsch, p. 264.

[120] "kleptocrats" is a coined term for government bureaucrats and leaders who steal from public funds (I don't know who coined it or where I first came across the term).

[121] William Easterly *The White Man's Burden—Why The West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. pp. 79-81.

[122] Longman, p. 126.

kind of death as beasts, how can we believe that God will champion the cause of the righteous over the wicked? And how can God be a God of justice?

This is yet another example of the tension in Qohelet's thinking—the tension between the traditional wisdom of the OT and the man-made "wisdom" of empirical epistemology. On the other hand, if Qohelet is already absolutely convinced that everything is meaningless, it is an example of inconsistency—i.e. v. 17 is inconsistent with vv. 18-20. From one perspective, the question of v. 21 is rhetorical, suggesting a negative answer. No one knows for sure that man's "breath"[123] will ascend upward into heaven. Judging from experience alone, it is more likely that the breath of man and beast both descend downward to the earth and never rise again. From this perspective, the *carpe diem* statement of v. 22 is another resignation—death is the end, so make the most of the life you now have.

Viewed alternatively, the question of v. 21 is open-ended. Qohelet doesn't really know for sure about the afterlife since empirical observations cannot confirm the answer one way or the other. The *carpe diem* advice of v. 22 is not cynical (sarcastic) realism, but the encouragement to genuinely enjoy one's life as a gift from God. No one can know about life after death one way or another, Qohelet reasons, so why should this mystery keep us from enjoying the life we have now? From either perspective, Qohelet does not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the afterlife which would be expected of a NT believer.

> Living prior to the Christ event, Qohelet would not have had access to a clear doctrine of the afterlife and the renewal of all things through Christ at the end of history. However, contrary to much of the OT he espouses a view of history as cyclical, rather than cyclical *and* linear.[124]

The OT doesn't give the believer a revelation of the afterlife comparable to that of the NT, although isolated texts speak of it (e.g. Dan. 12: 2, probably the most explicit statement of the resurrection in the OT; and Isa. 25: 8 and 26: 19). Commenting on Qohelet's concept of the afterlife, Longman observes,

> Thus, Qohelet questions the concept of afterlife in this and the following verses. It is difficult to know what the common theological belief about the afterlife was at the time of his writing. Little in the OT bears on it, and we do not know when to date Ecclesiastes relative to other texts that assume or allude to an afterlife (Ps. 49: 15; Isa. 26: 19; Dan. 12: 1-4). Whether belief in the afterlife was common or not, his questioning of it does not allow him to resolve the real issue of the passage—retribution. When will God set things right?
>
> ....Qohelet probably has in mind some concept of the afterlife here [v. 21]. To make sense of this question, it is likely that some people or schools of thought believed that such a distinction was indeed the case and that life after death was a reality. However, in light of our uncertainty concerning the date of the book, this would be difficult to establish with confidence. At the very least, then, Qohelet is frustrated with the unknowability of the afterlife, if not its existence.[125]

[123] Or possibly his "spirit". The same word "ruach" is used in the Hebrew for "spirit" and "breath".
[124] Bartholomew, p. 145, emphasis his.
[125] Longman, pp. 129-130; words in brackets mine.

However, it is worthy of serious consideration that Christ did not excuse the Sadducees for their disbelief in the resurrection from the dead, a doctrinal distinction distancing them from the Pharisees. In proof of its reality, Jesus does not appeal to Isaiah or the later OT period of Daniel's prophecy, but quotes the Pentateuch written by Moses.

> But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God….But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." (Matthew 22: 29, 31-32 NASB)

Further, Qohelet should have understood the implicit contradiction involved in a final judgment of unrighteousness men without the existence of life after death. You cannot have it both ways. From his empirical basis, he surely understood that many unrighteous men went to their deaths without being paid back for their sins. This empirical observation created an unresolved question about retributive justice (v. 17).[126]

The need and demand for final justice is deeply rooted in the heart of man who is created in the image of God who Himself is just. This awareness is one of the inescapable proofs for the existence of a holy God who renders to every man according to his deeds (Matt. 16: 27; Rom. 2: 5-6). One of the most problematic realities of life in a fallen world is that often wicked men seem to go unpunished while better men suffer. The inability to observe firsthand the rewards of righteousness or the punishment of wickedness after death leaves righteous men in despair—like the psalmist, Asaph (Ps. 73: 1-14). To find resolution to this dilemma (this enigma), Asaph later abandons the conclusiveness of empirical evidence and clings to the revelation of God which became clear only when he entered the sanctuary (Ps. 73: 15-28).

Those who have experienced the ravages of genocide in Rwanda and the continual warfare in Sudan, South Sudan, and DR Congo may also cling to the revelation of Scripture that there is a God in heaven who is just. It may seem to us—as it did to Qohelet—that the final state of beasts and men is the same (3: 18-19), as well as the fate of God's people and the fate of those who live as predators—feeding, as it were, off the flesh of men, women, and children.[127] But surely it is not the same, and God will one day avenge the deaths of His saints (Rev. 6: 9-11) as well as the death of any victim (Dt. 21: 1-9; Num. 35: 1-34). Until that time, we must live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5: 7), and we must leave personal vengeance in the hands of God (Rom. 12: 19) while leaving temporal justice in the hands of the civil magistrate ordained by God (Rom. 13: 1-14).

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[126] Bartholomew, pp. 178-179. Retributive justice means being "paid back" either for bad deeds or good deeds. There is a Biblical concept of payback found in the Wisdom Psalms (Ps. 1) and Proverbs (Prov. 1: 20-33) as well as the NT (cf. Matt. 16: 27; Rom. 2: 5-8). There is also the mistaken theology of rigid retribution found in the book of Job which teaches that God *always* blesses good people materially during this life (see McNeill, "Job"). The Greek word for "repay" is *apodidomi*, used in Matt. 16: 27, Lk. 10: 35, and Rom. 2: 6. These verses do not teach salvation by works, but salvation which inevitably produces good works. Jobs friends, however, mistakenly believed that God's payback—reward for good and punishment for evil—must occur during the present life. We know from the analogy of faith taught elsewhere in the Bible that in order for God's payback for good or evil to be true, there must be judgment in hell and rewards in heaven.

[127] Perhaps this is why life in Africa is often viewed so cheaply by the Africans themselves.

The stories in the OT leave the reader with the impression that God's retributive justice will win the day. The Naboths will be vindicated and the Ahabs and Jezebels will be punished (1Kings 21—22; 2 Kings 9)—although not always in this life, most certainly in the life to come.

3. The enigma of evil in a world created by a good God (4: 1-3)

> Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold *I saw* the tears of the oppressed and *that* they had no one to comfort *them*; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort *them.* [2] So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. [3] But better *off* than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 NASB)

This passage naturally follows from Qohelet's observation that the fate of men and beasts is the same; consequently, the fate of all men is the same. From empirical observation alone, there is insufficient grounds for believing that God judges the wicked more than the righteous. Everywhere Qohelet looked were people who were suffering from the injustice of powerful people, but there was no one to comfort them. Those who were dead did not have to continue seeing this terrible state of affairs, or perhaps experiencing the suffering first hand if they were living among the oppressed masses. Better for them if they had never been born than to suffer such mistreatment.

This is one of many sections in Ecclesiastes that causes us to question Solomonic authorship. It would be disingenuous (hypocritical) for Solomon to lament the helplessness of the oppressed by saying that there was no one to help them. Arguably the wealthiest king of either northern or southern kingdoms of Israel, he had sufficient resources at his disposal to aid the oppressed.[128] Even discounting government aid to the poor, he certainly had the power to protect the oppressed from their persecutors by enforcing the Mosaic Law which was surely prominent in the early years of Solomon's reign.[129]

The Mosaic Law had many provisions for the poor and oppressed. The laws of gleaning were instituted for the poor who were able to work in the fields gathering grain left purposely by landowners (Lev. 19: 10; 25: 35; Ruth 2). Special provision was made in the tithing laws for the orphan and widow whose circumstances rendered them landless. The tithe of the third year was stored in each town for their consumption, as well as for the Levite and sojourner who had no land to produce crops (Deut. 14: 28-29). Those who loaned to the poor were forbidden to charge interest, and God promised the lender (or those who gave outright) that they would be duly blessed for their generosity (Ex. 22: 25; Prov. 19: 17). Poor Hebrews who sold themselves into indentured (contracted) slavery for six years were allowed to go free on the seventh year without payment (Ex. 21: 2). Mosaic Law forbade bribery in the courts which would essentially deprive the poor of legal justice (Ex. 23: 6-8). As Israel turned away from God and His law, such provisions for the poor were ignored with impunity (Amos 2: 6; Isa. 1: 16-17, to note only two of many prophetic

[128] Cf. 1 Kings 10: 14. The weight of Solomon's annual gold revenues was almost 25 tons!

[129] Some interpreters have actually included Solomon as one of the oppressors of the working man (Longman; p. 133; citing 1 Kings 11, probably referring to vv. 27-28; cf 1 Kings 9: 15-22), but see Ralph Davis, *1 Kings* (p. 56; 1 Kings 5: 13) for an alternative view.

texts). Instead, institutional religion was substituted for obedience (Isa. 1: 12-15). Unrighteous kings were unsympathetic to the poor and even participated with the wicked in their oppression (1 Kings 21, the stoning of Naboth). Qohelet's words reflect a time in Israel's history in which the word of God was being ignored by exiled Jews, leaving the poor no defense against powerful oppressors.

This situation continues to persist today in many places. The Sudanese government of al-Bashir has rivers of blood on its hands for the atrocities of Darfur and southern Sudan (now South Sudan). All of these people, including both Muslim and Christian, have been virtually helpless against the relentless attacks of helicopter gunships and armed militias commissioned to wipe out whole villages, often taking women and children as slaves for northern Sudanese Arabs. While we may rightly criticize Qohelet's "better dead than alive" rhetoric as unbiblical (v. 2), most of us reading this (especially Westerners) have never experienced anything resembling the atrocities upon many people groups throughout the world. Most Westerners have not been exposed to acute hunger, extreme heat, or lack of potable (drinkable) water. We have not seen our children dying of preventable diseases if clean water, basic nutrition, or basic pharmaceuticals had been available for just a few dollars per person each day. Westerners are afflicted with "affluenza", a self-afflicted disease of the affluent, those who are wealthy relative to the rest of the world.

Texts like this do not stagger westerners because the situations they describe are remote to us. Moreover, westerners have seen situations like this so many times on the news media that we have become inoculated (made insensitive) to normal sympathies. At least we can give Qohelet credit for opening his eyes and heart, for many of us never do. Some of my African readers, on the other hand, have experienced severe oppression first hand; and they are more capable than I will ever be to understand this section of Scripture and its application.

Human trafficking in household slaves and sex slaves has grown into a multibillion dollar industry exceeding illegal drugs. UNICEF (2008) reports 218 million working children, of whom 126 million are working in dangerous conditions—including mines, farms (using hazardous pesticides and other chemicals), and factories with dangerous machinery. Young girls are being sold into household slavery which often includes forced sex or outright prostitution. Forced recruitment of young boys (300,000 in 2008) by rebel armies is another common form of slavery, especially on the African continent.[130]

We feel once again the tension which cries out for resolution. The cheerful advice to be happy in one's activities (3: 22) is hardly consistent with congratulating the dead or those who have never seen the light of day (4: 2-3). It is equally inconsistent to advise the huge masses of oppressed and exploited people to put on a happy face. Something beyond this world of suffering must be offered. Jesus congratulated those who were oppressed for the sake of righteousness (Matt. 5: 10-12); and though some are put to death, not a hair of their heads will ultimately perish (Lk. 21: 16-18). Further revelation in the NT unveils the distinction between the death of the righteous and the death of the wicked (Jn. 5: 28-29). Believers who are presently oppressed by others should not believe that God has abandoned them to their fate. Though Qohelet's advice to enjoy the present

[130] cf. Bartholomew, p. 193; see also E. Benjamin Skinner, *A Crime So Monstrous—Face to Face with Modern-Day Slavery.* The entire book is an exposé of this wretched trafficking in human beings.

may seem hollow, there is a genuine reason to be glad that one has been born once in order to be born twice (Jn. 3: 3).

The tension is not removed for the Christian who is aware of the teeming millions who are oppressed but still have no Savior to comfort them. Those who refuse the offer of salvation and continue unrepentant and unbelieving would have been better off if they had never been born (Matt. 26: 24), eventually consigned to a place separate from God where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13: 42, 50; 24: 51; passim [in various other places].[131] There are millions more who have never heard the offer of salvation who will be judged—albeit (although) less severely—for refusing the light of God in creation (Rom. 1: 18-32). I have often enjoyed the contemplation of eternal life, but I can scarcely contemplate the horrors of eternal judgment for more than a few minutes. Perhaps this is a flaw in my character; for if I had the consistency of contemplating hell, I might feel the greater urgency of sharing the gospel.

Qohelet brings us face to face with gnawing realities that have no simple solutions: How do we prevent the oppression of the masses? And for modern Christians, the additional question: How do we reach the world for Jesus Christ? The existence of systemic (universal) and comprehensive evil in a world controlled by an all-wise and good God is a continuing enigma, and the Christian is not allowed to retreat into pietistic religion which emphasizes personal prayer and Bible reading at the expense of social and political activism. There is a time for reading the bible and prayer, a time for writing letters to congressmen and MP's, a time for helping the disadvantaged develop viable businesses for self-support, and a time for helping the helpless.

We have no concise answer to this enigma beyond Paul's statement in Romans 9: 22-23. God endures the evil of this world for the time being in order to demonstrate the glory of His wrath and power against unbelievers and the glory of his grace to believers. Jay Adams believes that Paul's answer is clear and that it should be satisfactory to all believers, including theologians.[132] The problem of evil, he says, is not really a problem for those who accept Paul's explanation. However, I think it is unlikely that Paul intended for this to be an exhaustive answer to a complex problem which we are incapable of understanding at the present time (Deut. 29: 29; Jn. 16: 12). I agree with John Frame that Adam's book is biblical, but that it is overly optimistic in removing the mystery of evil in a world sovereignly controlled by a good God. Frame asks,

> Why should the display of God's power and good name require the employment of that which is totally opposed to everything that God is? Cannot God display his power without contradicting his goodness? Cannot God display his name without making little babies suffer pain? How can a good God, through his wise foreordination make someone to be evil [e.g. Pharaoh], even when that God hates evil with all of his being?[133]

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[131] I am not an annihilationist who believes that the wicked will one day cease to exist. As appealing as this theory may seem to be at first, it once again avoids the question of God's justice. Is it justice for God to simply erase the consciousness of the wicked, especially if these wicked have oppressed and shortened the lives of other wicked people who live shorter, less enjoyable lives than those who oppressed them? It is different for believers who are murdered and oppressed. They live eternally and happily with God, but even then, justice has still not been served if the annihilationists are correct.

[132] Jay E. Adams, *The Grand Demonstration—A Biblical Study of the So-Called Problem of Evil*, especially Chapter 1; but the whole book is well worth reading.

[133] Frame, pp. 151-152, words in brackets mine.

Process theologians have attempted to solve the problem by diminishing or eliminating the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty. If God is all-powerful, they argue, then He cannot be supremely good; otherwise, He could—and would—eliminate all evil in this world. Therefore, to protect God against the charge of being evil, process theologians simply argue that God is not able to prevent evil.[134] Of course, this argument would have to apply equally to the fall of Adam and Eve which introduced the problem of evil into the world in the first place. Consequently, God was unable to prevent Adam and Eve from being tempted and from falling into sin and unable to prevent Satan from doing the tempting. As Frame points out, giving up the sovereignty of God who works all things according to His decreed will (Eph. 1: 11) is a price far too big to pay. Not only is this god (little "g") not worth worshipping,[135] he is not capable of saving anyone from the forces of evil beyond his control.[136]

When one reads the liberal Jewish theologian, Harold S. Kushner,[137] he is left wondering why Job is full of God's wonder at the end of the book. Instead, Job should be filled with sympathy, even pity, for a "god" who had good intentions of helping Job in his distress but just couldn't pull it off. I need—we all need—a God who is capable of saving us even if we cannot fully understand Him or His ways. Analogously, if I am having a serious cardiac operation, I don't need to understand the surgeon or the surgical procedure. If the surgeon refuses to explain the whole operation to me, do I then dismiss him as incompetent? I just need someone who has the ability to perform a successful operation to save my life, regardless of any incomplete disclosures about the procedure.

Frame concedes that his book does not provide definitive answers to the problem of evil in a world created and controlled by a good God (contrary to Adams' assurance that the definitive answer is found in Romans 9).

> My own verdict is that we are unlikely to find complete answers to all of the questions—answers, that is, which are not subject to further questions.[138]

Nevertheless, Frame argues that even as God took His time reconciling His holy justice with the forgiveness of sin—a problem solved a full 2000 years after Abraham—He will also reconcile His perfect goodness and omnipotence with the existence of evil in His own good time.[139]

Summary and Conclusion

We can be thankful that God has provided us more information about the inevitable judgment of the righteous and the wicked and life after death than He gave the OT saints. Yet, many of life's complicated questions remain unanswered after the writing of the NT. This should not be surprising for a people who are told to live by faith and not by sight. Why does a good God continue to allow evil in this world, and such a kind of evil which is scarcely imaginable, affecting even

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[134] Frame, p. 153.
[135] Frame, p. 154,
[136] so also Frame, p. 157.
[137] *When Bad Things Happen to Good People—A Commentary on Job*, also cited in Frame, p. 157.
[138] Frame, p. 152.
[139] *Apologetics to the Glory of God* is well-worth reading for someone attempting to sort through the traditional theodicies (defenses of God's goodness) and biblical arguments. See also Appendix C.

infant children whose only sin is the imputed sin of Adam? Qohelet allows us to enter into these enigmatic questions, forcing us to the NT to find further light. Part of the answer is there, but like Qohelet, we must still wait for more. There is a time for everything according to the wise providential rule of God over His creatures and their actions. There will also be a time for God to explain more of Himself to creatures who are equipped to receive it (Jn. 16: 12).

Lesson Three Questions:

1. Explain Ecc. 3: 1-8 in terms of God's providence.
2. Briefly explain Delitzsch's interpretation of Ecc. 3: 11.
3. Briefly discuss the difference between Longman's view and Bartholomew's view of Ecc. 3: 1-8.
4. What is the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility?
5. Explain the difference between primary cause and secondary cause.
6. Discuss Qohelet's view of the afterlife.
7. Is mankind's demand for justice an argument for the existence of God? Explain.
8. Did the Mosaic Law make provisions for the poor Israelite? Explain.
9. How do Adams and Frame answer the question of the problem of evil? Whose argument do you accept?
10. How do process theologians fail to provide biblical answers to the problem of evil?

Lesson Four—Things Fall Apart

Introduction

In this section, we explore the Biblical motivation for labor and the folly of both the sluggard and the lonely miser—the "workaholic" who amasses wealth for reasons he cannot explain. Things fall apart, and life does not proceed according to expectations. The workaholic ends up being a lonely miser and the sluggard starves to death. The ruthless pursuit of wealth produces unhealthy competition (some competition is healthy) in which we are indifferent to the needs of others and unwilling to sacrifice our time and money to help them beat down the thorns and thistles of a cursed ground. Keeping up our personal reputations sacrifices the joys of community. In the midst of this foolishness is the wisdom of the laborer who shares his work with a loyal companion.

Like money and success, political power is a fleeting, tenuous thing, subject to the whims and perceptions of people who may not understand the issues involved. Moreover, the political system, ostensibly (on a surface level) designed to protect its citizens, may end up the most efficient means of oppression the nation has ever seen. Citizens must be protected from the very government they supported to protect them. Governments fall apart.

Even religion falls apart when we use it to manipulate God instead of worshipping him sincerely.

4. The enigma of labor (4: 4-16)

a. Foolish motivation (4: 4)

> I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of* rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:4 NASB)

Having stated earlier his dissatisfaction with his own labor, he now criticizes its common motive. His observations cause him to dismiss the possibility that men can labor meaningfully for the glory of God. He has also forgotten the biblical record of men like Bezalel who was filled "with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship" (Exodus 31:3 NASB). This is the first mention of a man being filled with the Spirit in the OT, and it confirms God's original intention for man to cultivate the entire earth for His glory (Gen. 1 and 2). Man's work is significant only if done to give God pleasure. For Qohelet, such nobility in labor was not generally apparent in the market place. Instead, men only wished to make a name for themselves (cf. Gen. 11). He should know, for he has already exposed his own pride in wishing to be distinguished above all who ruled Jerusalem before him (1: 16; 2: 9).

Once more we must distinguish between Qohelet the believer and Qohelet the skeptic who is torn between biblical principle and empirical observation—men striving to make themselves immortal through material success. "At the end of life, the man with the most toys wins"—an American expression that Qohelet radically disputes in the second chapter. Even empirically, the maxim does not hold up to scrutiny. Things fall apart, and life throws us some unexpected results. Some of the richest Americans in the world have committed suicide. They won many battles with others but lost the war within themselves. As we have already seen in the first chapter, "there is no

remembrance of earlier things" (1: 11). A few years after my death, my "neighbor" will not remember how big my house was or the kind of car I drove. "Keeping up with the Jones-es" (another Americanism) is a silly waste of time. "What use is such competition?" laments Qohelet. "It is just more striving for the wind." Jesus' definitive statement of the problem: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16: 26a)

"Keeping up with the Joneses" can also be dressed in African clothes. Why do some African men have so many wives? Apart from sexual gratification, I have been told that the number of wives a man has determines his social standing in the village—provided they bear children. The number of wives indicates a man's financial ability to care for them. Actually, the wives are taking care of *him*, but he's sticking to the story that he is caring for *them.*

Competition can be a healthy thing, and it can be historically and empirically demonstrated that modern products making life more livable and survivable have been the consequence of competition in the market place driving prices down, thus making these goods and services affordable for average people. Picks, shovels, hoes, clothes, cell phones, and computers are items made more affordable through mass production and competitive technology.[140] Quality tools and electronics are the consequence of the Industrial Revolution that is criticized by many historians.[141] Instead of legitimate competition, many are calling for increasing government controls to protect us from greedy businessmen who are attempting to maximize profits. Social and economic liberals don't realize that the government becomes the greediest corporate institution of all, consuming more and more of the worker's hard-earned money through taxation but producing no marketable goods. Governmental favors also promotes false capitalism—also known as crony capitalism—in which some businesses and individuals are given unfair market advantages over others. Many also do not realize that profits (earnings beyond the costs of labor and capital) are essential for staying in business and expansion.[142]

However, much competition in the market place—the "rivalry" Qohelet is talking about—is needlessly reckless and ruthless, the pursuit of profit alone at the expense of integrity. One example I can think of is hostile takeovers of smaller companies by larger ones, costing the jobs of long-term employees who have difficulty finding other employment. In other cases, human relationships become expendable as friends betray friends as a means of moving up the corporate ladder. Healthy marriages succumb to the collateral damage of the husband or wife being "married" to the corporation—a kind of "corporate adultery"—or through the extended separation of husbands and wives who work in different cities.[143]

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[140] I wish some of this competitive technology would show up here in Africa in the form of quality picks, shovels, hoes, and common household brooms. The junk tools we have to use here are pathetic and wear out after a few months. As someone who has been on the working end of many picks and shovels, I know the difference between a quality tool and one that has built-in obsolescence (designed to break quickly so it will have to be replaced).

[141] There were, indeed, many abuses during the Industrial Revolution—children working 16 hours a day under dreadful working conditions, poor wages, etc. However, were it not for the Industrial Revolution, modern life as we know it would not exist. Working conditions continue to be poor for millions of people in developing economies which still use child labor and impose poor and dangerous working environments. While Christians should actively oppose poor working conditions and child labor, we need not throw the baby out with the bath water.

[142] See Appendix D

[143] The common problem in Africa which contributes heavily to actual adultery.

Is it all worth it? In the end will our "success" not seem like so much sand sifting between our fingers? Qohelet, one of the most "successful" men who ever lived, would say so. Solomon himself would now say the same for many of his "achievements". Some people live in iron prisons with heavy metal bars. Others live in the prisons of their own affluence, the expectation and reputation for success depriving them of the freedom of giving their time, money, and abilities to ensure the success, self-sufficiency, and happiness of others—including members of their own families. Their motive for work is "keeping up with the Joneses", "rivalry between man and his neighbor" rather than community and mutual helpfulness (Eph. 4: 28).[144]

b. The folly of extremes in leisure and labor (4: 5-6)

> The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. [6] One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:5-6 NASB)

There is no escape from the hard realities of a lethargic (lazy) life. Things fall apart for the sluggard just as surely as they do for the workaholic. "The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh" (v. 6)—he starves to death.[145] In the state of starvation, the major functions of the body—particularly the brain, heart, liver, kidneys, etc.—still need nourishment and will get it anywhere they can. When the body finally consumes the muscle tissues, the individual shrivels up into a skeleton covered only with skin. He gradually dies as his bodily functions shut down. For the sluggard, leisure time is very important; but eventually, he consumes the very life he sought to enjoy through leisure. There is no exception for fools who live off relatives or government assistance. Too much subsidized leisure often leads to obesity, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual perversion, and numerous other forms of self-destruction consuming the person's life ("his own flesh"). God designed the human being for labor, not for leisure. Six days are given for work and only one day for rest.

Although not Solomon, at this point Qohelet's wisdom reminds us of Solomon.

> Go to the ant, O sluggard, Observe her ways and be wise, [7] Which, having no chief, Officer or ruler, [8] Prepares her food in the summer And gathers her provision in the harvest. [9] How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? [10] "A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest "—[11] Your poverty will come in like a vagabond And your need like an armed man. (Proverbs 6:6-11 NASB)

Qohelet acknowledges that the practical reality of feeding oneself necessitates a certain minimum of productivity—that is, unless the fool can recruit others to provide what he needs, making them bigger fools.[146] In v. 6, Qohelet possibly mimics the reasoning of the fool who believes in spite of his poverty that lots of leisure time is much preferred to the material rewards which come from excessive labor. The phrase, "folds his hands" is parallel to "one hand full of rest" and "two fists

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[144] For additional reading on the communal aspect of labor and business, see Appendix E

[145] At least in cultures that don't think the government has the solution to every individual problem. The only way for a lazy person to starve to death in the US is his failure to access multiple means of public support. And even if these efforts fail, he can always live off friends and relatives who have succeeded in accessing these support mechanisms.

[146] I should know, having been conned many times by people I tried to help but who simply wanted a free ride. I know what it means to feel foolish.

full of labor". In other words, the entire verse expresses the fool's worldview. An alternative interpretation is that Qohelet's thoughts shift suddenly from v. 5 to v. 6. In v. 5, he reflects the opinion of Solomon on the folly of laziness, but in v. 6 he recognizes the apparent "wisdom" of laziness in a world which offers little reward for diligent labor. Once again, we see the tension in Qohelet's thinking.

> If the work is of the sort observed in v. 4 [Prov. 4: 4], then a little bit of rest is better than working and striving after wind. Perhaps the fool is right after all.[147]

Much poverty all over the world is the result of causes beyond the control of individuals (poor government, draught, etc.). However, we are confronted here and in Proverbs 6: 6-11 with another cause of poverty, the poverty of the mind. Some people are poor not because of insurmountable political and economic forces, or even natural causes, but because of fatalistic attitudes and the poor life-choices which accompany them.

Poverty of mind believes that the world was created with a fixed number of resources which cannot be increased. Wealthy people have seized an "unfair share" of the world's resources and left the crumbs for the poor—known as the zero-sum theory of economics. In the real world, however, the economic pie (or loaf of bread, if you prefer) can be made bigger with everyone receiving larger slices. This is precisely what has happened in South Korea since the 1960's. Although economically equal to Uganda in the 1960's, South Korea has made a bigger economic pie for its people through savings and capital investments.[148] The primary resource of any country is its people who innovate by creating new products and new ways of making a living.[149] In this text, the fool folds his hands and refuses to exercise personal responsibility for his well-being. Qohelet himself is struggling with doubts about the value of his own labor and his prodigious exploits in building and planting (cf. chapter 2). He may be willing at this point to grant the fool the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the fool can be just as content in his poverty as rich people in their riches—or maybe both of them are equally discontent. Industrious labor or sloth doesn't seem to make much difference one way or the other.

Poverty of mind may also result from repeated economic setbacks. Qohelet has seen many hard-working people never get ahead in life. No matter how hard they labor, they are only one step away from poverty. After a while, they give up. I know someone in Uganda who planted a field of corn which produced abundantly only to have thieves come at night and steal the harvest.

c. The folly of a lonely miser (4: 7-8)

> Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. [8] There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches *and he never asked*, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task. (Ecclesiastes 4:7-8 NASB)

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[147] Bartholomew, p. 188.
[148] Capital investments are companies' investments in machinery, infrastructure (buildings), research, and people, including the training of labourers. Without capital investments, a nation's economy grinds to a halt.
[149] See Appendix F.

On the other side of the isle from the sluggard is the "workaholic", the man who labors night and day, day after day with little rest only to build a reputation for riches, to purchase everything his eyes desire, or simply to count his money. This particular man has no one who will inherit his fortune. The "workaholic" is also a fool, for one day he may leave his accumulated wealth to someone who values rest over labor, in this case someone who is not family (2: 18-23, 4: 8, "neither a son nor a brother"). Things fall apart. Verse 7 is a transition statement ("Then I looked again") in which Qohelet is considering two opposite ways of looking at the problem. On the one hand is the lazy fool who values leisure; on the other is the "workaholic" fool who never thinks about the implications of amassing riches that he has no time to enjoy nor anyone to inherit. Qohelet cannot be so closely identified with this man, for he did not deprive himself of pleasure, although he may have identified with the lonely miser to some extent.[150] Thus, whether one enjoys the fruits of his labor or not, the value of one's labor is still questionable—an enigma. The pleasure-seeker is a fool, and the miser is a fool, thus leaving the question of the value of labor unanswered[151]—that is, apart from the practical value mentioned above.

The Biblical answer is discovered in finding the connection between our labor and the kingdom of God. The clue, as I have mentioned earlier, is the craftsmanship of Bezalel (Ex. 31), a man filled with wisdom to create all sorts of fine artwork in gold, silver, stone, and wood. But you don't have to be a craftsman to please God. Everyone is gifted with some potential which must be developed and honed to produce the skills God intended for him to use. As I mentioned in Appendix E, we need encouragement from others to recognize and develop these potentials into useful skills. Whatever we do for the Lord will be rewarded, nothing excluded (Col. 3: 23-24; Eph. 6: 7-8; 1 Cor. 15: 58).

d. The advantage of companionship (4: 9-12)

> Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. [10] For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. [11] Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? [12] And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 NASB)

Having noted the folly of working alone, Qohelet now extols the advantage of having companionship in one's labor.[152] The "return for labor" may imply the advantages of having two heads working on a problem rather than one. The combined talents of a partnership can be an advantage over a sole proprietor who has to learn everything for himself. The main advantage, however, is the encouragement and protection one receives from his partner. They can keep one another warm on a cold night—perhaps a metaphor for supporting one another in a poor economy. Incidentally, it was acceptable in the Near East and in other non-Western societies today for two men to share a bed.[153]

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[150] Longman, p. 140.
[151] Bartholomew, p. 188.
[152] cf. the discussion of community in Appendix E.
[153] Bartholomew, p. 190. Likewise, in the African context, men hold hands walking down the street together, but this in no sense suggests that they are homosexual. The practice is actually more common than African men and women holding hands in public.

Two men can resist a thief more effectively than one, a statement which may include cooperation in protecting their business assets from corruption and embezzlement (v. 12a). It may be questioned whether Qohelet is talking about marriage since his unsatisfactory experimentation with many concubines has caused him to forfeit the pleasure of genuine companionship in marriage (7: 26-29; cf. Prov. 5: 18-19). A marriage companion would also not fit with the advantage of having another male companion to fight off a thief (v. 12).

Alternatively, I for one can testify to the advantage of having a faithful wife who encourages me in my work and who supplies multiple skills I do not possess. It is especially enjoyable having her around to consult with and talk with about our ministry. But this companionship in labor did not begin with our mission work in Uganda. Fran and I once did a lot of planning and decorating together when we bought and sold old homes. From time to time I did work alone as a trim carpenter, cabinet-maker and house painter, but a large part of my work history consisted of working at home with her on our rundown houses. We didn't make much money, but I would not trade our working relationship for a bigger bank account.

Two working together is better than one, and three is better than two. There can be strength in numbers. The upshot (conclusion) of this section is: If things can fall apart, they will; so it is better to have a loyal companion working with you when they do.[154] Longman suggests that this advice could represent "a tinge of pathetic longing" (sad wishful-ness) of a very lonely sage who had never known true companionship in anything.[155] If he is correct with his thesis that Qohelet is a convinced cynic, then vv. 9-12 can be interpreted as Qohelet's occasional inconsistency with his conclusion that everything is meaningless. If all labor is meaningless, then companionship in labor is likewise meaningless. What is different in this context is that Qohelet does not come back with a qualifying statement negating the positive statement. He does this in 2: 13-14 by saying that wisdom is better than folly; however, both the wise man and the fool die anyway. In other words, he pours cold water on any encouragement to be wise in v. 14. However, he does not do that in 4: 9-12. He never says, "Two are better than one, but since life is meaningless anyway, what difference does it make whether you are a lonely miser or have a good partnership?" The *hebel* formula, "This too is vanity and it is a grievous task", comes before v. 9 but is not repeated after v. 12.

Following Bartholomew's thesis—Qohelet is an OT believer honestly struggling with the tension between his faith and life's harsh, observable realities—we can interpret his positive advice of vv. 9-12 as another repetitive departure from pessimistic empiricism. The difference is that this departure itself is based on Qohelet's observation of the benefits of working together rather than alone. In other words, *not everything* he sees rubs against the traditional wisdom. The empirical evidence is not always negative; it is often a positive verification (proof) of biblical principles. If empirical skeptics like Qohelet were honest with themselves, they would see more empirical proof of God's wisdom than proof of the exceptions.

[154] For those who are inclined to allegorical interpretation, the "two" cannot be interpreted as the Father and the Son, and the three as the Holy Trinity. See also Longman, p. 143, for examples of other fanciful interpretations promoted by early interpreters.
[155] Longman, p. 140.

5. The tenuousness of political power (4: 13-16)

> A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction. [14] For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. [15] I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. [16] There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16 NASB)

By itself, v. 13 sounds like one of the "better—than" proverbs. Qohelet tells the story of three (or two) people who become king. Longman believes there are three different people in the story.[156] Eaton opts for two.[157] The difference of whether there are two or three does not significantly affect the moral point of the story. The "second lad" of v. 15 is the lad who "has come out of prison" to replace the first lad who is now "an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction". The first king has grown too proud to accept wise counsel from others (cf. Prov. 11: 14).[158] Thus, Qohelet acknowledges the foolishness of kings who will not listen to wise counselors, further confirming the suspicion that Qohelet is well aware of the ancient wisdom and often affirms it in Ecclesiastes. This old king is supplanted by this poor, yet wise young man who had been imprisoned by the old king. Perhaps through some coup (a political takeover) he is able to get out of prison and wrest the kingdom from this foolish old king. He had only one asset, his wisdom; everything else, including his humble beginnings as a poor man, was against him.[159]

After an indefinite period of time, the second young lad, now king, also loses favor with the people, perhaps supplanted by a third person in the story whose charisma (winsomeness) exceeds that of the "second lad" (think of Absalom, who charmed his way into the hearts of the people of Israel).

The biggest problem with politics is people, and people are not only fickle (changing and unpredictable), but in time they change in constituency. In other words, the same people who put the second lad in power may not be around several years later, and others will take their place. Notice v. 16, "There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him…." Qohelet may imply that changing populations and moods will dictate changes of leadership; therefore, leaders must stay on track with the changing population. Perhaps the second king, and then the third (?), failed to interpret the times and became entrenched with old policies which became unpopular. Neither old age, nor earthly wisdom, nor popularity ensures a lasting reign. Political power is tenuous (shaky) at best. Political popularity is vaporous (evaporates like mist).

There is a connection between the enigma of labor in 4: 4-16 and the enigma of political power in these verses. No matter how hard the king/political ruler works to establish his power, his whole political empire can fall apart in a matter of years, months, or even weeks. In the US where people are hired for six-figure incomes to dig up dirt on political opponents, one can lose an election over one piece of personal history exposed to the public on TV. The facts are often revised, and always

[156] Longman, pp. 144-147.
[157] Eaton, p. 111.
[158] cited by Longman, p. 145.
[159] Eaton, p. 111.

edited, to show the politician in the worst possible light—unless he is a liberal Democrat, in which case he may get a fair hearing or ignored altogether. If the Apostle Paul were running for election in the US, he would be slandered for his stand on homosexuality and women elders. His name would never make it to the ballot. The US populace does not deserve God-fearing politicians running the country.[160]

Although monarchies are not as subject to celebrity worship as modern democracies, one can see the shakiness of some monarchies in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel. In a period spanning 20 years, four kings of Israel were assassinated. In his denunciation of Israel, Hosea makes note of this instability as proof of God's judgment (Hosea 7: 7). One's military strength and charisma were important assets to staying in power. They are still important, and "At times Qohelet's analysis is so contemporary that it is easier to apply it today than to grasp its ancient significance".[161]

The isolation of the lonely miser may be analogous to the increasing isolation of the old king who becomes so arrogant that he is not willing to listen to counselors.[162] As this is being written, the "Arab Spring" which began in Tunisia and spread to Libya and Egypt is now engulfing Syria. Assad, like his murderous father Hafez before him, never listened very much to his people; and the growing isolation has evolved into military attacks upon once peaceful protests and now a seven year, full-scale civil war between the Syrian army and the Free Syrian Army. As I heard one news commentator say shortly after the Syrian uprising began, "It has not been a good year for dictators." Even for dictators, people can be a problem. Only a few years ago, Muhammar Qadaffi of Libya was prancing through the whole continent of Africa with lofty ambitions of being something equivalent of the emperor of Africa. I will never forget the terror-stricken expression on his face broadcasted to millions of viewers just moments before his own countrymen put him to death. Political power falls apart—sooner or later.

6. Religious formalism and the "God-manipulators" (5: 1-7)

> Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. [2] Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. [3] For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words. [4] When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! [5] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. [6] Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger *of God* that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? [7] For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God. (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 NASB)

Traditional exposition (e.g. Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*) has favored a positive interpretation of this passage in terms of a wise man's warning against dishonest religion, including insincere

[160] See Appendix G.
[161] Bartholomew, p. 199.
[162] Eaton, p. 112.

prayer. Many modern expositors also share this interpretation. T.M. Moore paraphrases 5: 1 the following way:

> How brazen and dishonest people are with their religion. They will go as far with it as suits their needs; so they attend services and sing the hymns, and when they have to, give a little money to the Lord. But do they live as one should do who's made a vow to God? Don't kid yourself. Among their friends their faith is on the shelf. They go to service not to hear the Word of God, but so that they can tell the Lord what he should do for them. They think that he exists to make them happy. He should be ecstatic just to see them! They are fools who think such evil pleases him who rules the worlds.[163]

Likewise, Derek Kidner,

> Whereas the prophets hurl their invective against the vicious and the hypocrites, this writer's target is 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….If we are tempted to right this off as a piece of Old Testament harshness, the New Testament will disconcert us equally with its warnings against making pious words meaningless, or treating lightly what is holy (Mt. 7: 21ff; 23: 16ff; 1 Cor. 11: 27ff.). No amount of emphasis on grace can justify taking liberties with God, for the very concept of grace demands gratitude; and gratitude cannot be casual.[164]

Indeed, some of Qohelet's advice sounds similar to Jesus' admonition in the Sermon on the Mount against vain repetition in prayer.[165] Religion for the sake of impressing others, or God, is meaningless. Going to the temple (church attendance; v. 1), long public prayers (vv. 3, 7), public vows or promises to God (vv. 4-6)—all of this is meaningless if the heart is not sincere. When men are exhausted through long hours of wearisome labor, they dream dreams which make little sense to them. Likewise, long prayers which are nothing but a multiplication of words are void (empty) of meaning (v. 3, 7).[166]

If Qohelet's entire discourse in Ecclesiastes is interpreted pessimistically, and the *carpe diem* sections sarcastically or cynically, then this section must also flow in the direction of cynicism.[167] If he is a convinced cynic who believes that all of life is meaningless, from whence (from where) comes his concern for true religion? What does he care whether one is sincere or hypocritical? All religion is striving after wind, and religious people die like irreligious people (2: 14-15). According to this view, Qohelet warned us earlier that God has so ordered every event in its proper time (3: 2-8) so that men would recognize that He is in control and so that man cannot do anything to discover the meaning and purpose of his existence. This mystery is designed for one main purpose (note the self-contradiction): to make man fear Him (3: 14). Qohelet comes to the same conclusion in 5: 7, "Rather, fear God." He has offered similar advice concerning vows. It would be better not to make a vow at all than to vow and not keep it. You would only make God angry with you (v. 6). Following the pessimistic interpretation, Qohelet does not view God in the covenantal sense of Yahweh, the promise-keeping God who is intimate with His people. He does not even use the word, Yaheweh, throughout his autobiography. Rather, God is a judge who keeps account of our

[163] Moore, p. 43.
[164] Kidner, pp. 52-53.
[165] compare Ecc. 5: 2b, "let your words be few" with Matt. 6: 7-8, cited by Longman, p. 151.
[166] cf. Delitzsch, pp. 286-287.
[167] see Longman's analysis.

sin (cf. Job 7: 20) and gives man the grievous task of living in this world without knowing the purpose of living.

However, if we interpret Ecclesiastes from the perspective of a believer clinging to traditional wisdom despite perplexing observations, then he is giving us genuinely wise advice on the biblical nature of worship and practice. Considering the first interpretation, does Qohelet counsel the reader to be brief with God because of God's distance (His transcendence) and possible indifference?[168] Verse 2b might seem to indicate this, "For God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore, let your words be few." In other words, God is distant from you, so why should you disturb yourself by spending long hours in prayer when God is unconcerned about your needs?

Considered from the other angle, should God's dwelling place in "heaven" and our dwelling place on "earth" simply remind us of our place—that is, the Creator-creature distinction? Qohelet may simply be advising us to know our place by recognizing this distinction. Having done so, we should know that there is no use trying to manipulate God with excessive words.

> The want of this "preparation of heart" to speak in the Lord's ear makes the heart careless and irreverent, and brings guilt upon the holy exercise. The thought of "the Lord in heaven sitting on his throne," and the defiled sinner *on earth* standing before him (Isa. vi. 5-8), the infinite distance between his greatness and our vileness—'this would keep us from that heart-nonsense, which, though the words be sense [i.e. intelligible], yet through the inattention of the heart, are but as impertinent [disrespectful] confused dreams in the Lord's ears'. Here is a wholesome bridle to *our rashness*, but no restraint upon the Spirit of adoption. The way is open—not only to a Father's throne, but to a Father's heart.
>
> The *few words* here directed are words well weighted—well chosen and ordered. They contrast strongly with the "vain repetitions"—such as the frantic orgies of Baal—the Romish Pater-nosters—or the Pharisees' long prayers—"thinking they shall be heard for their much speaking." But 'God hears us not the sooner for many words; but much the sooner from earnest desire, to which let apt and sufficient words minister, be they few or many' The *fewness of the words* is not the main concern; but whether they be the words of the heart—'whether they be gold or lead'—what life there is in them. For 'nothing is more unacceptable to God, than to hold on speaking, after we have left off praying.' So long as the heart and the tongue flow together, never suppose that your Lord will be weary of our many words. The exercise may be indefinitely extended—the true spirit of the rule is not transgressed. It stands indeed to remind us 'that his goodness must not cause us to forget his greatness;' that "the throne of grace" is a throne of majesty…and therefore that the confidence of the child must be tempered with the humility of the sinner.
>
> But the *few words* imply the heart set in order before utterance—a thoughtful mind in a spiritual habit. It is often large and mighty prayer in a narrow compass. There is more substance in a few minutes' real communion, than an hour of formal exercise. There is no artificial method—all is full of feeling and confidence—all is sealed with gracious acceptance.[169]

Religious formality is a constant danger; and it is no respecter of persons, affecting mature Christians and immature alike. Who among us has not found himself singing a song, or even praying, without concentrating on the meaning of the words? But religious piety during worship is not the full solution. We may understand the word intellectually without practicing it—word without deed. The Israelites confused the true worship of God with performance of the temple liturgy, something Isaiah addresses forcefully at the beginning of his ministry (Isa. 1: 10-31). God

[168] Longman, p. 151.
[169] Bridges, pp. 102-103, emphasis his, words in brackets mine.

became nauseated with animal sacrifices, religious assemblies and feasts when the people as a whole had no regard for orphans, widows, and justice. True belief in the word of God gives expression to deeds of mercy and kindness, and commitment to the truth—word and deed (cf. 1 Jn. 3: 16-18).

God also gets offended when we come for personal (man-centered) entertainment instead of God-centered worship. While the formalism of fixed liturgy in Anglican, Episcopalian, and Catholic churches may become a substitute for worshiping in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4: 24), the lust for entertainment and emotional "highs" can be just as formidable a substitute in other denominational circles.[170] The music—in western contexts sometimes evolving into semi-professional choirs and lead singers—becomes the drawing card for thousands of music lovers who come to church for not much more than a weekly concert—free of charge, since most do not contribute significantly. The sermon in such churches, usually "short and sweet", rarely does justice to the announced text and serves primarily as the "feel-good-about-myself" pick-me-up that so many Westerners crave. Most people will not tolerate serious exegesis from the pulpit[171]—too much to think about. I have discovered a similar intolerance for thinking in the African church, with the singing service devolving into some kind of emotional high of men and women dancing in the aisles or in front of the church. I'm not saying that some of this is genuine worship, but I often wonder whether it is simply a different form of entertainment.

When we examine the Psalms—which were supposed to be sung—they are rich in theological content. The Psalmists' call to the congregation to praise the Lord was always based upon some aspect of God's nature, His works in creation, or the salvation of His people.[172] The dumbing-down of theology in most churches—or its virtual elimination—has left church members in starvation mode without them ever knowing what happened.[173] Once again, the God-manipulators are at work; but as always, God will not be manipulated, and He is now judging entire generations for despising His word.

Moving back to the text, it was commonly held in ancient cultures that overwork led to many dreams (v. 3a).[174] The analogy suggested is that just as overwork produces too many dreams, the "overwork" of one's mouth reveals the fool underneath. Moreover, the multiplication of words in prayer can be as meaningless as many dreams which make no rational sense (v. 7). Again, Qohelet reveals his knowledge of the ancient wisdom of Proverbs.

> When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise. (Proverbs 10:19 NASB)
>
> Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent" (Proverbs 17:28 NASB).

We are duly cautioned by Bridges (see above quote) to think clearly about our prayers and requests before God and not to insult Him with foolish and impulsive requests as if by many words He may

[170] Bartholomew, p. 210.
[171] Bartholomew, p. 211.
[172] McNeill, "Biblical Interpretation—Old Testament Poetry"
[173] *Wells, No Place for Truth—Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, "The New Disablers".
[174] Bartholomew, p. 206.

be manipulated against His will to grant our desires. Vain repetitions appear to be the modus operandi (mode of operation) of many false religions whose gods must be "man-handled" into doing what men want them to do. The Christian God, the only true God, cannot be "man-handled" or manipulated but "does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:35 NASB) Just as the prophets of Baal exhausted themselves with much loud screaming and self-mutilation to no avail (1 Kings 18), those who worship a god made in man's image will exhaust themselves with many words, accomplishing nothing. Religious formalism falls apart.

In syncretism, men confuse the worship of the true God with the worship of false gods. There is much syncretism all over the world. In the West, professing Christians often worship God on Sunday but their money the other six days a week. Their refuge and strength is not in the Lord, but in their stocks and bonds—until the market crashes. In Africa, the worship of money is also common, and the summoning of the ancestors is generally for economic aid. Other forms of syncretism can be similar to that of the OT worship of Baal or other gods. Even some "Christian" pastors have shrines behind their houses for sacrificing to the ancestors (personal testimony of a former colleague). One simply does not wish to make the ancestral spirits angry.

The less obvious forms of syncretism involve the habit of public prayer. Living anywhere in Uganda, one can often hear the "man of God" (a common designation for Pentecostal preachers) praying to God through the aid of a public address system with large amplifiers, volume maxed out to the point of distortion. The staccato of his prayers, like the rapid fire of a machine gun, reminds me of auctioneers in the US—especially the used car variety—whose speech is unintelligible except for entrepreneurs who attend such auctions regularly. I suppose the more words per second, the more likely that the "man of God" will be heard and receive his request; some of his "bullets" will hit the mark and subdue God somehow. I heard of one such preacher being asked by a friend of mine, Mike Boyett, why he turned the volume of his amplifiers so high. (Prayers continued long into the night, even early morning, thus depriving all the surrounding neighbors of sleep, including my friend.) His answer, "God is far off, and I have to call him to come near." African pastors can also preach long-winded "prayers" with loud voices and much animation, effectively whipping the congregation into emotional responses. Again, I cannot know what is in their hearts, and I try to give them the benefit of the doubt; but when their sermons are so bereft of biblical content, I wonder.

A less obvious form of this God-manipulation is found in the "preacher tone" in which the person changes the tone of his voice from a conversational tone to a raspy, booming pitch, that in my opinion, is used as much for impressing the congregation as for impressing God. (But I have also heard Americans change their voices to a very mellow, pious-sounding tone quite distinct from their normal conversational voice). Where do we get the idea that God is moved more by religious tones than intelligible speech generated from a sincere heart? Or does God respond more favorably to prayer when His name is repeatedly evoked? Some African Christians use the name "Jesus" or "Father" or "Father God" after every sentence in the prayer. I have heard some of my own students use the name Father at least 30 to 40 times in a short prayer. (I admit to counting out of pure curiosity.) In this way, the name or names of God may be taken in vain unintentionally. By way of contrast, Jesus only used the Father's name once in the prayer He taught His disciples to pray, a prayer with few words. To be sure, much religious formality may be unintentional and not

designed to manipulate God in any way. We must exercise Christian charity to those who engage in such practices, for we may be guilty of far worse.

But how do we reconcile the prohibition against many words with Jesus' insistence upon perseverance in prayer (Lk. 18: 1-8)? As with most parables, one major point of comparison is urged. God is not an unjust judge who is reluctant (hesitant) to hear our prayers. Jesus urges just the opposite contrast. If even an unrighteous judge who does not fear God or care about people will grant the repeated requests of this widow, how much more will a righteous, generous God grant the requests of the children He loves? But the sovereign love of God does not bypass or set aside the responsibility of believers to continually bring their requests to Him. Prayer is one of the means of grace which God has foreordained to bless His people and accomplish His will. Christians must, therefore, make abundant use of this means, trusting God to answer their prayers according to His infinite wisdom which cannot be manipulated or improved.

The mention of vows in vv. 4-6 reminds the reader of the Mosaic Law and is connected to the impulsive speech of vv. 2-3. This section demonstrates once again that Qohelet is familiar with OT law and wisdom.

> "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the LORD your God will surely require it of you." (Deuteronomy 23:21 NASB)

Vows are not required in the OT legislation; they are optional. They were made to God in the presence of the temple priest who would hold the vow-taker accountable if he wished to renege on his vow (break his word). The "messenger" (v. 6) is either the temple priest or a representative sent by the priest to remind the person of his unpaid vow.[175] Since the vow was to God who never forgets anything, it will do no good for the vow-taker to claim that he made a mistake in making it. Rather, his fear of God should regulate his speech in making impulsive vows, as well as his speech in making impulsive prayers (v. 7b). Against the common practice of illegitimate oaths by the Pharisaical sect, Jesus advises to let our yes be yes and our no to be no without any unnecessary oaths (Matt. 5: 37). James, His half-brother, mirrors this concern (James 5: 12). But just as there are legitimate vows, there are also legitimate oaths which may be made in times of extreme necessity (cf. Gal. 1: 20).

7. The enigma of injustice by those ordained to enforce justice (5: 8-9)

> If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. [9] After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land. (Eccl. 5:8-9 NASB)

Qohelet abruptly turns his attention to the denial of justice to the poor by corrupt officials. Don't be surprised at governmental corruption, he says, because government officials are like a "good old boys' club" in which one official is watching the back of another one to cover his tracks and hide his indiscretions.[176] If all of them are cheating, there will be no one to hold them accountable

[175] Eaton, p. 115.

[176] So also Eaton, p. 116, and Bartholomew, p. 217; contra Delitzsch and Kidner who interpret the watchfulness of other officials in a threatening manner.

since none of them will squeal on the other. In this way systemic (pertaining to the whole system) corruption will continue unchallenged since poor people have little voice in public affairs.

Longman interprets v. 9 as follows: "The profit of the land is taken by all; even the king benefits from the field"[177] meaning that corruption goes all the way to the top, even to the king himself. Notice the phrase, "and there are higher officials over them" (v. 8b), indicating a chain of corrupt officials all the way to the throne. I believe the NIV has the best rendering, "The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields." Sound familiar? Corruption—and the cronyism that always attends it—are not new. "There is nothing new under the sun."

What is not generally recognized is that v. 9 is stated ironically or sarcastically.[178] While the king should be the one protecting the property rights of his subjects (Prov. 23: 10-11), he is often the very one from whom the common citizen must be protected. Judging from the denunciations of wealthy land owners by Isaiah and Amos (Amos 2: 6-7; 4: 15 NASB; Isa. 5: 8), we are inclined to believe that the wicked confiscation of Naboth's property was no isolated event (1 Kings 21). It is quite true that the increase of the land is taken by all, especially corrupt kings and confiscatory (theft by over-taxing) governments.[179]

Other interpretations have favored a positive view of v. 9 implying that the king provides checks and balances upon all the other governmental officials in order to limit their corruption.[180] But Qohelet does not seem to have any optimism about governmental leadership (4: 1-3; 8: 2-6); thus, a positive comment about the monarchy would seem out of place for him.[181] The verses seem more easily understood from the point of view of one who had observed firsthand just how out of touch most bureaucrats are with the common citizen. They really do not "feel our pain" as former US president Bill Clinton claimed.[182]

Summary and Conclusion

Qohelet warns us against false expectations of our unproven assumptions. What we think will "work" for us—unceasing labor or unceasing leisure, political power or religion—may yield poor results in a world where things routinely fall apart. However, the recommendation for companionship in this harsh climate is unqualified.

Lesson Four Questions

1. According to Qohelet, what is the motivation for most labor?
2. What text in the OT gives us the starting point for understanding our labor?

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[177] Longman, p. 157.
[178] So also Bartholomew, p. 218.
[179] See Bartholomew, pp. 217-218, for an excellent treatment of this very difficult verse.
[180] Eaton, p. 117, noted in Longman.
[181] Cited in Longman, p. 159. At this point in Ecclesiastes, the fictional biographical connection with Solomon has been abandoned altogether.
[182] See Appendix H.

3. Although profits are essential, as well as healthy competition, what are the negative consequences of cutthroat competition and the lack of communal spirit?
4. How does Qohelet balance the excesses of the lonely miser?
5. What is the worst kind of poverty? Explain your answer.
6. In 4: 9-12, how does Qohelet include the aspect of community in business enterprise?
7. Why is political power tenuous (fragile)?
8. Besides not really thinking about the words we are singing or praying, how else may we become hypocritical and formal in our worship?
9. How may emotionalism become another form of religious formalism?
10. What does Qohelet say about political leaders and their cronies?

Lesson Five—God's Gift of Enjoyment

Introduction

Qohelet takes aim at mindless acquisition of wealth and possessions. Riches may actually possess their owners. On the other hand, he is no ascetic (one who shuns material wealth and comforts). All of God's creation should be enjoyed, provided it is enjoyed to the honor and glory of God.

8. Owning riches, or being owned by them? (5: 10-17)

> [10]He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity.

Qohelet returns to the familiar subject of riches. Whoever establishes riches as the goal of life will never be satisfied. When he becomes rich, he will simply want more. When he owns a big house with expensive furniture, he'll want a bigger house with more expensive furniture. It may be asked whether Qohelet's "wisdom" here is in conflict with the wisdom of Proverbs where wealth by itself is not an evil thing but a blessing from God and a possible reward for righteousness.

> Qohelet does not wait until the very end…to give us his conclusion concerning the love of money. It is *meaningless* (see 1: 2). This conclusion is in tension with the predominant attitude of Proverbs toward wealth. There, wealth is something that can result from wise behavior, is a gift of God (Prov. 3: 9-10, 16; 8: 18; 13: 21; 14: 24; 15: 6; 19: 4; 21: 21; 24: 3-4), and worthy of pursuit. While Proverbs recognizes that one can get rich and can be wicked, or be wise and poor, it is fair to say that Qohelet does not share that book's optimism about riches.[183]

However, in Prov. 8: 18, Lady Wisdom is once again calling out, promising riches, honor, wealth, and righteousness. The temporal promises of "enduring wealth" and "riches" must be understood within the context of v. 17.

> "I love those who love me; And those who diligently seek me will find me. [18] "Riches and honor are with me, Enduring wealth and righteousness. (Proverbs 8:17-18 NASB)

The temporal blessings are a consequence of the *primary* pursuit of Lady Wisdom herself, the personification of the Wisdom of God. She loves those who love *her*; she does not love those who love wealth and riches. Further, true riches and enduring wealth are found only in the house of Lady Wisdom ("with me") implying that "wealth" may have a much broader definition than we "moderns" are willing to give it. Peace with God and others is a form of wealth (Prov. 15: 17). In fact, wealth and riches separated from wisdom are *not* enduring, as the passage from Proverbs below indicates. From the same text below, I fail to find any suggestion in Proverbs that wealth for its own sake is something "worthy of pursuit". Rather, it is a means to the end of helping others (Prov. 22: 9). We also find the following exhortation in Prov. 23: 4-5.

> Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, Cease from your consideration *of it.* [5] When you set your eyes

[183] Longman, p. 165.

on it, it is gone. For *wealth* certainly makes itself wings Like an eagle that flies *toward* the heavens.

While Qohelet is often at odds with the traditional wisdom of Proverbs, I believe him to be entirely consistent with it in 5: 10a. The "enigmatic" part is found in the fact that Qohelet says in v. 10b, "This too is enigmatic." What, exactly, is enigmatic? One possible answer: Having had his fill of riches, Qohelet has learned experientially that they do not bring satisfaction. Yet, he also knows from Proverbs that they can also be God's blessing. Why, then, have riches brought *him* so little satisfaction? The answer was but a short distance away in his own mouth, "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money", and the inclusion of God in vv. 18-20. Money is a blessing *if* it doesn't take God's place; and in Qohelet's experience, it seems to have done this at least for a time.

But this should not have been *hebel* (enigmatic) to someone like Qohelet familiar as he was with the OT teaching on wealth. The message of Proverbs is not understated: Wisdom is better than material wealth.

Prov. 3:13 How blessed is the man who finds wisdom And the man who gains understanding.
Prov. 3:14 For her profit is better than the profit of silver And her gain better than fine gold.

Prov. 15: 16 Better is a little with the fear of the LORD Than great treasure and turmoil with it.
Prov. 15: 17 Better is a dish of vegetables where love is Than a fattened ox served with hatred.

Prov. 16: 8 Better is a little with righteousness Than great income with injustice.

Prov. 17: 1 Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it Than a house full of feasting with strife.

Prov. 22: 1 A good name is to be more desired than great wealth, Favor is better than silver and gold.

Prov. 11: 4 Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, But righteousness delivers from death.

Prov. 11: 28 He who trusts in his riches will fall, But the righteous will flourish like the green leaf.

These and many other proverbs indicate a balanced approach to wealth in the book of Proverbs and Proverbs' consistency with NT teaching (Matt. 6: 24; 1 Tim. 3: 3; 6: 10, 17-19; 2 Tim. 3: 2; Heb. 13: 5). Material wealth is a blessing, but its worth must not be overestimated. Integrity is worth more than silver and gold; love and peace better than abundance of food. Qohelet's familiarity with the traditional wisdom is demonstrated in the *carpe diem* section of 5: 18-20 (see below).

For now, we must wrestle with the following observations with which all of us are familiar.

[11] When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?

When wealth increases, so do those who consume them. The phrase, "those who consume them" is a reference to the multiplication of "friends"[184]or relatives who hang around to "share" the rich

[184] "Wealth adds many friends, But a poor man is separated from his friend." (Proverbs 19:4 NASB)

man's wealth. They could include spoiled children who are "allergic" to work; but most likely they are unemployed "friends", acquaintances, or relatives who are always "looking" for money rather than "earning" it. Relatively wealthy people in Africa have many friends; but many of these friendships are not real, but merely mercenary "partnerships" with people attaching themselves to others for the sake of material gain. If the money dries up, so do these friendships.

But this phenomenon is by no means limited to Africa. An old song by an American rock group in the 1960's sums it up, "And when you've got money, you've got lots of friends crowding 'round your door. But when the money's gone, and all your spending ends, they won't be 'round any more."[185]

Developing such "relationships" is considered an ordinary, acceptable means of survival in African culture.[186] Some of this sentiment (opinions and mentality) can be understood in societies in which there is very little upward social and economic mobility because of chronically poor economies and lack of financial access to educational opportunities. Hard work is often not rewarded in the market place of poor economies, and there are much fewer work opportunities to pursue. It is often perceived that the only way "up" economically requires many relationships ("partnerships") with people farther up the social and economic ladder. (If I am mistaken about this, I wish to be corrected.)

According to Qohelet, the only satisfaction the rich man has is in his wealth is the visible proof of his success measured in material things (v. 11b) "So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on?" (NASB) The ESV renders the verse, "When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?" This could imply the satisfaction of displaying one's wealth. Moreover, in African culture, as in most cultures, being a donor is viewed as a means of elevating one's status in society; thus, those who approach him for financial help do not view their requests as altogether one-sided. By asking him for financial help, they also give him the opportunity to increase his "social currency" as a generous man in the town or village.[187] This social currency (prestige, reputation) has not been significantly understood by expatriates living in Africa, and westerners have often been annoyed at continual requests for money. However, wealthy Africans are also becoming increasingly annoyed[188] and regularly shelter their income through real estate investments. It is common to see uncompleted commercial and private property in Africa, not necessarily because the builder didn't count the cost but simply because he is building with cash, not borrowed money. When the relative comes by for a "loan" that would not likely be repaid, the wealthy African simply says that he doesn't have the money—which may be true, since his money is tied up in building projects.[189]

Qohelet has seen these mercenary friendships for what they are, but he is overlooking the fact that sometimes *genuine* relationships can be initiated—though not sustained—with financial generosity. Given the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16: 1-13), we must admit this possibility;

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[185] The rock group was named "Blood, Sweat, and Tears".
[186] Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters*, "People of Means". (My own experience in Africa has confirmed Maranz's analysis).
[187] Maranz, p. 131.
[188] Maranz, pp. 125-126.
[189] See Appendix I.

and at times this has also been my personal experience in Uganda. In this parable, the master praises the unrighteous steward for the foresight of using his (the master's) money to make friends. These friends would one day be able to return the favor and help him out in a financial tight spot. It should be noted that Jesus does not praise the steward's theft, but only his foresight. Jesus calls him "unrighteous". Rather, the master (representing Jesus) praises the steward for using money more wisely than many believers. Many believers fail to use their money to develop genuine friendships through generosity. Moreover, it's not even their money. It's their "masters" money—God's money.[190] Instead, they use God's money to buy more and more "things" (like Qohelet did) which don't satisfy them. Their stupidity is overshadowed by the wisdom of this unrighteous, swindling steward who did not use this stolen money for a nice house or a vacation on some resort island in the Mediterranean Sea. He used it to make friends who would benefit his future. Likewise, Christians should use their money wisely to develop genuine friendships which will last eternally. When they get to heaven, they will be welcomed by the recipients of their generosity (Lk. 16: 9).[191]

Wise use of money depends on the proper sense of ownership. We are never owners. We are but managers or stewards. This principle is illustrated in the Mosaic Law (the ancient wisdom) in which any family land sold to others due to poverty would revert back to the original family in the Year of Jubilee, thus preventing the concentration of wealth into the hands of a few people (Lev. 25: 10). Further justification for this law lay in the fact that God alone owned the land. "The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me" (Leviticus 25:23 NASB). In an agricultural society where land is the primary source of all wealth, this law taught, by extension, that everything belonged to God (likewise the law of the tithe which represented the whole). The nation of Israel existed as stewards and managers of the Promised Land, but they did not own it. Nevertheless, those who humble themselves before God will inherit the earth (Matt. 5: 5).

Qohelet didn't have the benefit of Christ's parable of the unjust steward, but he did have the Pentateuch; and he should have known better than to overlook the genuine benefits of wealth in helping people. The traditional wisdom has much to say about the joys and reward of generosity (Prov. 14: 21, 31; 19: 4, 17; 22: 9; 28: 8, 27; 29: 14; 31: 20). But this is what we have learned to expect from a man whose empirical epistemology (knowing and reasoning from what we see) has soured his outlook on life and caused him to often—but not always—forget the ancient wisdom. Who are we to judge him? Do we not often forget the ancient wisdom ourselves even in the light of additional revelation in the NT? My own forgetfulness is part of my reason for believing (along with Bartholomew) that Qohelet is not a rank pagan, but a believer whose outlook has, much as ours, been unduly affected by what he sees rather than what he believes. He is living by sight rather than by faith, and his interpretation of his experience is readily skewed by other experience. He is reasoning in a circle.[192] Qohelet is looking at the world through glasses with yellow lenses; consequently, everything he sees is yellow. If he would simply take off the yellow glasses of his very limited experience and open the eyes of faith, he would see things more clearly as God sees them. As it is, the sensory data seems to be pointing in the opposite direction from the ancient

[190] Notice the parallels in Luke 16: 12, "that which is another's" compared with "that which is your own".
[191] For a closer look at this parable, see McNeill, "The Synoptic Gospels".
[192] Like the evolutionist who says that a fossilized animal is ten million years old because it was found in a particular geological strata, and then dates the strata at ten million years according to the fossilized animals found in it.

wisdom, but without God's perspective (God's revealed wisdom), Qohelet is only considering a small part of the data. His experimentation and conclusions are therefore skewed and incomplete.[193]

Continuing with Qohelet,

> [12] The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep. [13] There is a grievous evil *which* I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt.

While the working man can at least sleep at night because of exhaustion, the rich man lies awake at night thinking of other ways to make money or worried about losing what he has (v. 12). I heard an anecdote (short story) about someone who commented to a well-known rich man, "I suppose you don't have to worry about money", to which he replied, "Yes I do. I worry about losing it." Or, the rich man may worry about death, Qohelet's worst nemesis (archenemy). Ryken quotes Simon Dyson who had just completed one of his most successful years as a professional golfer. Asked if there was anything he feared, Dyson said, "'Death. I'm in a position now where I can pretty much do as I want….Dying wouldn't be good right now.'" Contrast this attitude to that of Martin Luther, famous reformer of the 16th Century, " 'As I shall forsake my riches when I die, so I forsake them while I am living'".[194] Better to leave our riches behind now—psychologically and spiritually speaking—than later. Michael Card sings, "It's hard to imagine the freedom we find in the things we leave behind." This is not an encouragement to become an ascetic monk who retreats from the world, but to be free from our riches spiritually and psychologically.

Furthermore, it is often the case that someone who has labored all his life amassing wealth never really enjoys it (v. 13). I remember someone like this in my own hometown. He had saved his money assiduously (diligently) and in old age had become relatively wealthy; but you would not have known it by his life-style, for he lived very simply, enjoying very few material things. The story I heard was that as his aging wife lay dying, she said to him, "We really haven't had much of a life, have we?" He could only say, "No." This does not suggest that a simple life is not preferred even for the rich. My personal opinion is that it is; yet, it is appropriate to enjoy with gratitude all of the good things God gives us without being consumed by them (see comments below). Take a short vacation or buy a new couch. I would also suggest that the best way to enjoy material things is to enjoy them with someone else. Some people are so concerned about financial security that they never do this. Hoarding money is a sign of insecurity, or else false security in wealth.

> [14] When those riches were lost through a bad investment and he had fathered a son, then there was nothing to support him. [15] As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came. He will take nothing from the fruit of his labor that he can carry in his hand. [16] This also is a grievous

[193] This is really the inescapable and fatal flaw of empiricism. To know *anything*, one must know *everything*. How could Qohelet personally observe the life situations of everyone in the world to know, for example, that God does not reward righteousness in this life, or that the wicked live longer than the righteous? While aware of many exceptions to this rule, I can think of many more practical examples which prove that righteousness is, indeed, rewarded during this lifetime. But it is impossible to prove this principle empirically since we are not omniscient (all-knowing) or omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time) like God.

[194] Ryken, pp. 134-135.

> evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind? [17] Throughout his life *he* also eats in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger. (Eccl. 5:10-17 NASB)

The rich man may also lose his money through some misfortune (vv. 14-15). In the US during the late 1920's, the stock market plummeted from record highs all the way to the bottom. Those who had become rich almost overnight also became poor overnight. It was one of those economic "glitches" which investors dread. Rich men, who were suddenly poor, were seen jumping to their deaths out of their expensive high-rise office windows (again, Prov. 23: 5).

Verse 16 is a return to the programmatic question beginning in the first chapter.

> What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun? (Eccl. 1:3 NASB)

> [16] This also is a grievous evil—exactly as a man is born, thus will he die. So what is the advantage to him who toils for the wind?

Whether or not the rich man can hang on to his wealth in this life, he is sure to leave it at death—a subject Qohelet comes back to often in Ecclesiastes. As he came naked from his mother's womb, so he will return to the earth at death (cf. Job 1: 21; 1 Tim. 6: 7). He will take none of his wealth with him to the grave, so what advantage is all his wealth? (vv. 15-16) There is a well-known joke (probably over-used in the US) about a rich man's friends conversing with one another at his funeral. Standing next to his coffin, one says to the others, "I wonder how much money he left." Another dryly responds, "All of it."

Moreover, the rich man who hoarded his money to his own hurt was one of those who were deprived of any enjoyment of his riches, who ate his meals "in darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger" (v. 17, cf. the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 who never helped anyone but himself). Does eating his meals in darkness mean that he was too stingy to use any oil to light his home at night?[195] Is he also too stingy to pay for a doctor when he is ill? He is also angry. With whom is he angry? For what reason?

But people like this rarely need a reason for their anger. They are simply angry—angry with everything and everyone because they are angry with God. Although God has blessed them abundantly, they have no gratitude for what He has done for them (Rom. 1: 21), and this anger affects their relationship with everyone else. I am reminded of Mr. Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, a very wealthy man who despised everyone and enjoyed nothing. Like the wealthy man who hoards his money "to his own hurt", Scrooge lived a miserable life.

9. Enjoying life—the gift of God (5: 18—6: 12)

> Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun *during* the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. [19] Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of

[195] So also Fox, p. 237.

> God. [20] For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart. (Eccl. 5:18-20 NASB)

The conclusion of the matter is the well-used formula, *carpe diem*, "seize the day!" Enjoy life as much as you can, including your wealth, for this is your reward. From the perspective of some commentators, Qohelet is implying that this is man's only reward, so he should just make the best of it. The "depressing tone" of the *carpe diem* statement may be detected in the words, "the few years of his life" (v. 18). Furthermore, not everyone is given this gift of enjoyment, only some. So, if you have this gift of enjoyment from God—and, according to this view, Qohelet didn't have it—then, use it to the fullest (v. 19; cf. 6: 2).[196] Although pleasure has no ultimate meaning, it can at least anesthetize or dull the pain of living a meaningless life in a meaningless world. Money will not make you happy, but at least you can be miserable more comfortably. If our minds are "occupied" with enjoying simple pleasures, at least we may momentarily forget that life is so absurd (v. 20). So also Fox, who says,

> This is the antithesis of the "sick misfortune" of 5: 12-16. To be sure, man cannot determine whether he will be able to do this. God must grant the possibility of enjoyment. If he does, he allows man a great gift: oblivion [forgetfulness]. God keeps man occupied, distracts him with pleasures. Pleasure dulls the pain of consciousness, the same pain that wisdom exacerbates [makes worse] (1: 18).[197]

I no longer agree with Longman's view of the *carpe diem* passages, but I would agree with him about the anesthetizing (dulling) effects of wealth. There are millions of people who have filled their lives with expensive entertainments masking the emptiness inside. The many years of their lives slip away because they have efficiently (?) occupied their time with the worldly (not biblical) enjoyment of their wealth (a possible interpretation of v. 18). The multiplication of expensive "toys" by the rich is endless: automobiles (some people collect them, but seldom drive them), clothes, yachts, houses in various exotic resorts around the world which are seldom visited, exotic vacations, etc. Some people can almost convince us that they are succeeding where Qohelet failed (2: 1-10), giving the impression that they are happy with their money without God. They have enough wealth to amuse themselves, endlessly avoiding the ultimate question: And what is the meaning and purpose of all this—especially since I am going to die?

Continuing with the pessimistic interpretation, in contrast to those who successfully dull their pain with the enjoyment of eating, drinking, and labor (5: 18, and other verses) are those from whom God has withheld this ability. God has not allowed millions of people to enjoy their wealth. We can think of many hypothetical but realistic examples of such people. Some rich people suffer from prolonged health problems; others are despised by their own children who torment their parents with multiple sorrows—financial and moral irresponsibility, poor marriages, poor work ethic, etc. (6: 3; contrasted with Ps. 127: 4). Other rich people are entangled in many legal disputes with people who are determined to destroy them.[198]

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[196] Longman, p. 168

[197] Fox, p. 239, words in brackets mine.

[198] Henry Ford, inventor of the assembly line process of vehicle manufacturing in the early 1900's, was by some accounts one of those people.

In vv. 15-18, God is mentioned three times, and Qohelet's attitude toward God in these and other *carpe diem* passages is variously interpreted. One interpretation suggests that Qohelet's God is "distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel". He uses only the generic name for God, Elohim (thirty-seven times according to my count), and never once uses the covenantal and more intimate name for God, Yahweh.[199] However, it should be noted that the narrator, who supposedly corrects Qohelet's monologue in the conclusion,[200] also uses Elohim rather than Yahweh (12: 13-14). Working also from the same hypothesis, Fox is even more frank (matter of fact).

> Qohelet's God is a hard ruler. He shows the world a steely countenance. He does not seem to love mankind, nor does Qohelet seem to love him. Qohelet fears God, certainly, but without warmth or fellowship. His God is unpredictable. He lays down the rules and judges those who transgress them, but he does so inconsistently and, from the human perspective at least, rather erratically.
>
> God runs the world like a distant monarch ruling a minor province. The ruler must be feared, not cherished. His subjects await his decisions nervously. He may expropriate one subject's property and give it to a favorite. Disobey him and he will harm you. Obey him and you'll be spared harm. Maybe. Renege on what you owe him and he'll punish you in kind. He offers little aide or assistance to his subjects….
>
> God assigns man tasks. He sets him to the quintessentially [concentrated essence of something] human chore of trying to understand the world, yet he deprives him of adequate tools for the job. He imposes on man a life of toil without real profit. If the toil does bear fruit, God may let the worker enjoy it, or he may take it away in a "bad business" and give it to someone else.[201]

For an alternative interpretation, Kidner calls 5: 18-20 "A more excellent way." For him, "the key word is God…"

> …and the secret of life is held out to us is openness to Him: a readiness to take what comes to us as heaven-sent, whether it is toil or wealth or both….Once more, a positive note has broken through, and as the chapter ends we catch a glimpse of the man for whom life passes swiftly, not because it is short and meaningless but because, by the grace of God, he finds it utterly absorbing. This will be the theme of the closing chapters…[202]

Likewise Eaton, commenting on 5: 18-20,

> But the Preacher does not allow any to forget that there is another aspect to life….The possibility is held out of wealth combined with power to enjoy it. Secular-minded men may assume the two invariably go together; the Preacher regards them as distinct. The secret of such a life is God's will, for all depends on whether God gives the wealth and the power of enjoyment….The thought here [v. 20] is…that life will be so occupied with jubilation that the vanity of life will be well-nigh forgotten.[203]

Bartholomew also suggests a positive interpretation,

> Verses 8-17 and vv. 18-20 represent radically different ways of approaching life "under the sun" in

[199] Longman, p. 35
[200] Longman, pp. 278-281
[201] Fox, pp. 136-137, words in brackets mine.
[202] Kidner, pp. 58-59; emphasis mine.
[203] Eaton, p. 119.

> which wealth does not last….In v. 17 one eats with darkness, vexation, sickness, and anger, whereas in v. 18 one eats and drinks with joy coram Deo, before the face of God.[204]

The reader can see the difficulty of coming to a consensus in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes.

From the positive perspective,[205] one that I share on 5: 18-20, Qohelet is now demonstrating his understanding of traditional wisdom in contradiction to what his senses perceive. Although many do not enjoy the good things God gives them (vv. 10-17), there are others who do (vv. 18-20). The difference between these two groups of people is two-fold. First, it is God's pleasure to allow some to enjoy His good gifts but not others; and second, some fail to enjoy them because they choose to ignore the God who gave them. The gift of enjoyment, then, has both a divine and human dimension. Though God is sovereign in the distribution of gifts, man is responsible to enjoy them coram Deo; and when he fails to eat and drink to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10: 31), he has no right to complain that material things provide no satisfaction.

> The world that God created is full of many rich gifts, but the power to enjoy them does not lie in the gifts themselves. This is why it is always useless to worship the gifts instead of the Giver. The ability to enjoy wealth or family or friendship or food or work or sex or any other good gift comes only from God. Satisfaction is sold separately. So the God-centered verses at the end of Ecclesiastes 5 call us back to a joy that we can only find in God. The person who finds the greatest enjoyment in life is the one who knows God and has a relationship with him through Jesus Christ.[206]

So also, Waltke.

> By associating enjoyment in the context of God's goodness, the preacher also rejects denial ("all is well") and false optimism ("I will be happy'). When pleasure is pursued as an end in itself, it leads, as Qoheleth painfully learned, to dissatisfaction and emptiness. But when accepted as a gift from God and used responsibly in the fear of God, there is nothing better under the sun…(3: 12-13).[207]

Moreover, rich people are not the only ones who can enjoy good things. Qohelet's advice in vv. 18-20 applies to anyone who will pursue life from a theocentric (God-centered) perspective. Neither will he be concerned about the brevity (shortness) of life, for through thanksgiving to God he has been enabled to live life to the fullest, however brief. This view mirrors the wisdom of the "better—than" proverbs cited above.

> There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men—[2] a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction. [3] If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however many they be, but his soul is not satisfied with good things and he does not even have a *proper* burial, *then* I say, "Better the miscarriage than he, [4] for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. [5] "It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything;* it is better off than he. [6] "Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?" (Eccl. 6:1-6 NASB)

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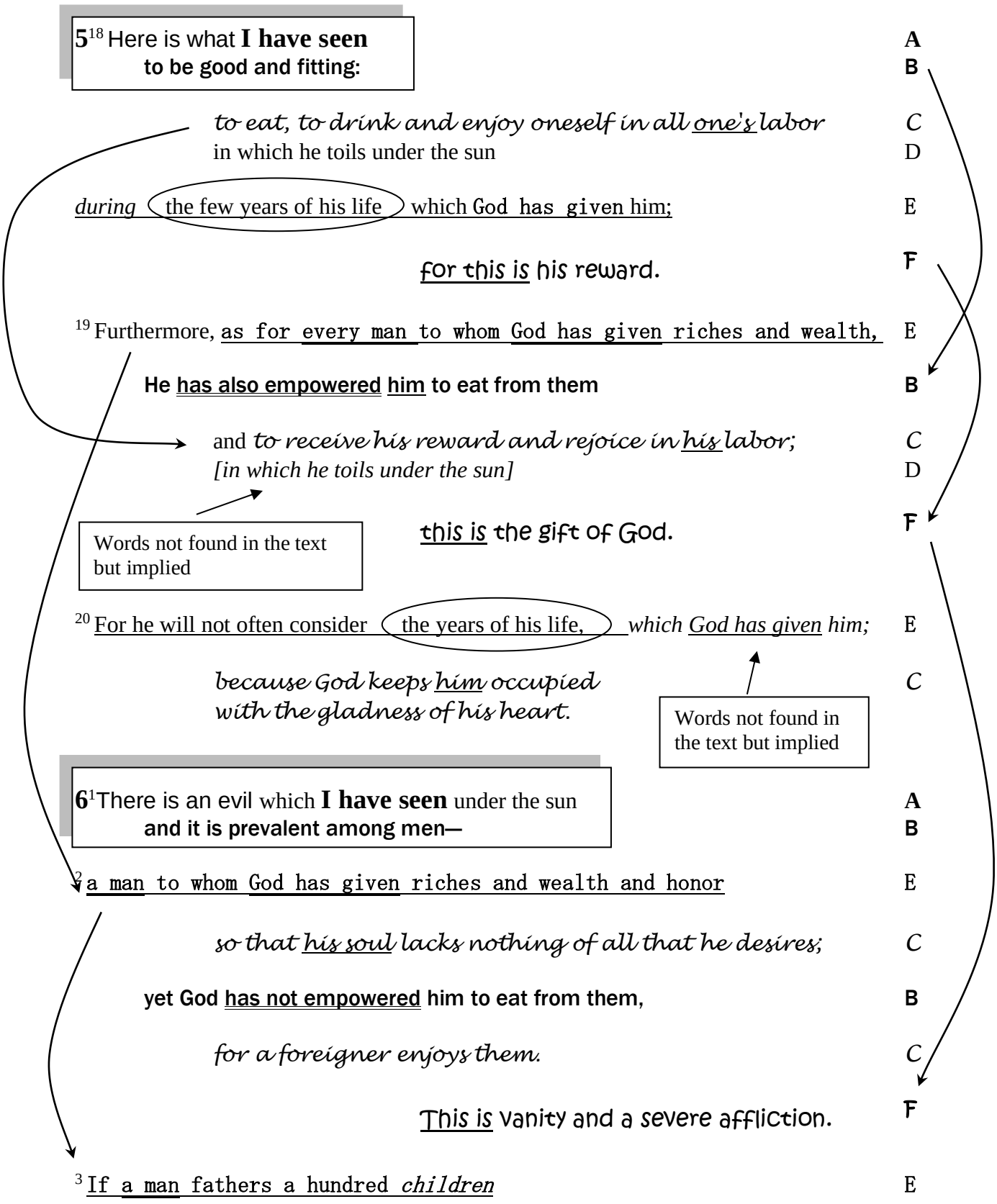
[204] Bartholomew, p. 226.
[205] Bartholomew, Eaton, Kidner, Waltke, Ryken.
[206] Ryken, p. 137.
[207] Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, p. 962.


5[18] Here is what I have seen
to be good and fitting:
A
B
to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor
C
in which he toils under the sun
D
during the few years of his life which God has given him;
E
for this is his reward.
F
[19] Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth,
E
He has also empowered him to eat from them
B
and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor;
C
[in which he toils under the sun]
D
this is the gift of God.
F
Words not found in the text but implied
[20] For he will not often consider the years of his life, which God has given him;
E
because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.
C
Words not found in the text but implied
6[1] There is an evil which I have seen under the sun
and it is prevalent among men—
A
B
[2] a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor
E
so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires;
C
yet God has not empowered him to eat from them,
B
for a foreigner enjoys them.
C
This is vanity and a severe affliction.
F
[3] If a man fathers a hundred children
E

and lives many years, however many they be,

but his soul is not satisfied with good things C
and he does not even have a proper burial,

***then* I say,** A

"Better the miscarriage than he, F

4 *for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity;* C
and its name is covered in obscurity.
5 "*It never sees the sun and it never knows anything;*

it is better off than he. F

6 "Even if the *[other]*[208] man lives a thousand years twice E

and does not enjoy good things C

—do not all go to one place?" F

The connection between 5: 18-20 with 6: 1-6 is seen in the diagram above. "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun…" (6: 1) is parallel to "Here is what I have seen" (5: 18). The phrase "enjoy oneself in all one's labor" is parallel to "to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor". Note also the parallels, "the few years of his life" and "the years of his life". I have put the synonymous and antithetic parallels[209] in the same font style. For example, "to be good and fitting" is antithetically parallel to "there is an evil"; and "to receive his reward" is antithetically parallel to "for a foreigner enjoys them." Another important antithetical parallel is "He has also empowered him to eat from them" and "yet God has not empowered him to eat from them".[210]

The man who is wealthy in material things may be compared to the father who is wealthy in children who also "lives a thousand years twice" (note the hyperboles [exaggerations], "a hundred children" and "a thousand years twice"). But who is this "foreigner" or "stranger"? (v. 2)

[208] The word "other" in v. 6 does not appear in the Hebrew, and some translations do not include this word. Verse 6 may either be talking about the rich man of vv. 1-2 or the same man who has fathered a thousand children (vv. 3-4).
[209] Synonymous parallels express the same or similar idea while antithetic parallels express a different idea.
[210] For further study on the relationship of grammatical structure and interpretation, see McNeill, "Biblical Interpretation—New Testament Epistles and Old Testament Poetry". See also "Biblical Interpretation—Synoptic Gospels and Old Testament Narratives", to see how Old Testament writers use parallels in reporting historical events. I am indebted to Bennie Wolvaardt, *How to Interpret the Bible—A Do-It-Yourself Manual*; to Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*; and to Dale Ralph Davis and his commentaries on Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings in which Davis unfolds many literary parallels.

According to the context, could the stranger be the man's own children whom he doesn't know in any meaningful way? Upon the father's death, the children show their last hostilities against him by burying him in some indecent fashion or not allowing his friends to pay their respects to him at his death. Perhaps they don't even go to the funeral (v. 3). If the person in v. 2 is a literal foreigner, then perhaps the rich man has lost his fortune in war or to a marauding (raiding) band of thieves. We are given no details. At least the child who dies at child birth did not have to suffer the indignity of this aged father (vv. 4-5) or the dissatisfaction of the wealthy man who never enjoyed his riches. If a man doesn't receive the gift of enjoying life, Qohelet says that he is worse off than this child who never sees the light of day (v. 6). He insists that riches, many children, and long life do not bring satisfaction *if* (and this is a big "if") God does not grant the enjoyment of these things.

Another important antithetical parallel is found in 5: 18 and 6: 1.

[18] Here is what I <u>have seen</u>
to be good and fitting:

What he believes ("sees") with the eyes of faith

[1]There is an evil which I <u>have seen</u> under the sun
and it is prevalent among men—

What he actually observes.

What Qohelet sees (believes) to be "good and fitting" is man's enjoyment of life and the fruits of his labor, but what he actually observes to be "prevalent" or "common among men" is just the opposite. This is probably an exaggeration on his part, not a statistical analysis. As I have said earlier, people who are disillusioned about life tend to exaggerate the bad at the expense of the good. "All appears jaundiced (abnormally yellow) to the jaundiced eye." However, Qohelet is likely correct even from a statistical standpoint. "Under the sun" in a sinful world, there are probably more people not enjoying the fruits of their labor than those enjoying them.[211] More importantly, Qohelet is not enjoying his life except for those rare moments in which he lives by faith and not by sight (e.g. 5: 18-20 and other *carpe diem* insights). Beginning in 6: 1, Qohelet has drifted back into the pessimism of 5: 10-17.

However, the significant thread holding 5: 18-20 and 6: 1-6 together is God. God is acknowledged in both sections as the giver of enjoyment or the withholder. Just as God is sovereign in the bestowal of wealth, long life, and children, He is also sovereign in the bestowal of their enjoyment ("yet God has not empowered him to eat from them"). This is the fundamental teaching of all the "better—than" proverbs. "A dish of vegetables", "a little", "a dry morsel" are all better than "a fattened ox", "great income", "a house full of feasting", with "hatred", "injustice", and "strife". Enjoyment is a "gift" on God's terms (note the repetitive phrases, "God has given" along with "this is a gift of God". Enjoyment is not an entitlement (a legal right) to anyone who wishes to live his life entirely on his own terms. Solomon affirms that long life is in wisdom's right hand and riches in her left hand (Prov. 3: 16). Those who receive wisdom will have years of life added to them (Prov. 4: 10). The implication is that this extended life will be a blessing and not a curse regardless of external circumstances.

[211] Whether one believes that this percentage will continue depends on his eschatological outlook. See Julian Michael Zugg's two separate books on the MINTS website, "Eschatology" and "Revelation" (www.mints.edu).

But the terms are clear. Long life or a full life lies in Wisdom's hands, i.e. in the hands of God who alone gives wisdom. Likewise Psalm 127: 4-5 affirms the blessing of children in distinct contrast to Ecclesiastes 6: 3, but children who reject wisdom will not be a blessing to their parents (Prov. 10: 1, 5).

> Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. [5] How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; They will not be ashamed When they speak with their enemies in the gate. (Ps. 127:4-5 NASB)

> The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a father glad, But a foolish son is a grief to his mother. (Prov. 10:1 NASB)

> He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, *But* he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully. (Prov. 10:5 NASB)

Without God's gift of enjoyment, Qohelet says, it is better never to have been born (6: 3b-5). For some, life can be a living death (Eph. 2: 1-3). While Qohelet emphasizes the sovereignty of God in granting or withholding enjoyment, there is also its corollary, man's responsibility to be grateful for whatever God has given him. Many people are not grateful. They are bitter. No matter how many benefits God has given them, nothing quite satisfies them. The problem was not their outward circumstances—which were much better than those of most people in this world—but their attitudes. Millions of them are just biding their time waiting to die, and they are seldom visited even by their own children.

On the other hand are many old people who are pleasant, lovable and a blessing to anyone who knows them. They have accepted the hard things in life along with the good and will not let the "bumps in the road" spoil their enjoyment of the good things. Long life to them has been God's favor as well as a favor to all their loved ones. My own mother, who is almost 91 years old, is one example. She now has severe dementia disabling her from conversing with or even recognizing others, but she was a wonderful mother whom I now miss as if she were already gone.

Furthermore, we should not make the mistake of thinking that only Christians will have this gift of enjoying life. Others have it in a relative sense. Through "common grace", God affords unbelievers this gift as well, although temporarily. Quite often the unbeliever, not the Christian, is easier to love and live with than the believer. It is sometimes the unbeliever who has a more positive attitude about life. This seems contradictory, and it should be; but we must remember that God "causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45 NASB). The enjoyment of life and good things is included in the sun and rain God sends upon the unbeliever as well as the believer.

For Qohelet, the positive prospect of long life is overshadowed by the inevitability of death (v. 6). The still-born infant and the man who lives 2000 years eventually go to the same place; and if the aged man has not enjoyed life, he has no advantage over the still-born.

> All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. [8] For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What *advantage* does the poor man have, knowing *how* to walk before the living? [9] What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind. [10] Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute

> with him who is stronger than he is. [11] For there are many words which increase futility. What *then* is the advantage to a man? [12] For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime, *during* the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun? (Eccl. 6:7-12 NASB)

Riches alone do not bring happiness because man's appetite is never satisfied (v. 7). The wise man has no advantage over the fool since "in much wisdom there is much grief" (v. 8; cf. 1: 18; again, we must interpret "wisdom" differently from the wisdom of Prov. 1—9). Moreover, the poor man who manages to improve his life by pleasing others has no long-term advantage for the same reasons. The "roving desire" of his eyes (cf. NIV) will never allow him to be satisfied.[212]

Qohelet repeats his cyclical view of history in v. 10a.[213] This cycle includes the fall and God's judgment upon man, the consequences of which are seen in every place ("it is known what man is"). Furthermore, there is no use for man to argue with God that he has gotten a raw deal, as Job attempted to do (vv. 10b-11).[214] In the final analysis man doesn't have sufficient wisdom to know what is good for him because he lacks foresight (v. 12).

Summary and Conclusion

In Lesson Five, we discuss the important questions of wealth and happiness. Qohelet's pessimistic view of wealth contrasts with the Biblical view of wealth which God meant for man to enjoy and to use for the benefit of others. (Before the fall, Adam enjoyed limitless wealth; and so shall we in the new heavens and earth.) Nevertheless, Qohelet has his finger on the correlative truth (the truth which relates to the previous truth) that wealth without wisdom cannot be fully enjoyed (or even enjoyed a little bit by many) and may become a curse instead. The rich man may see his wealth consumed by thankless children or would-be "friends" who are only interested in his money. God never meant for man to enjoy life fully on man's own terms; and if he enjoys anything, this enjoyment is part of God's common grace. He is not entitled to it, because all wealth belongs to the God who gives it.

By the same token, a parent may only enjoy his children by God's grace. He is not entitled to love and respect, and if he rejects God's wisdom in rearing his children, he probably will not receive them. Qohelet once again confirms the theory that he is aware of the ancient wisdom concerning parentage found throughout Proverbs (which, I believe, had already been written before Ecclesiastes). Therefore, the carpe diem section of 5: 18-20 is a legitimate, honest admonition to enjoy life, wealth, and children on God's terms. If not, it would have been better if he had not been born.

[212] Kidner, pp. 61-62; Eaton, p. 123.
[213] Bartholomew, p. 238; cf. 1: 4-10.
[214] Kidner, p. 62.

Lesson Five Questions

1. Why does money not satisfy?
2. Qohelet learned from experience that riches would not make him happy. How can the Christian know this from traditional wisdom?
3. Are riches evil in themselves? What is the key word in 5: 10 for understanding the place of riches in one's life?
4. How do the "better—than" proverbs help us understand the relative value of money (i.e. the value of riches in comparison with other things)?
5. Does money alone produce genuine friendships? Explain your answer.
6. Explain this statement: Wise use of money depends on the proper sense of ownership.
7. Is 5: 18-20 positive or negative? Explain two views.
8. What is the connection between 5: 13 and Jesus' wisdom in Luke 12, the parable of the rich fool?
9. Explain the vertical and horizontal dimensions of enjoying wealth.
10. Discuss the phrase, "the enjoyment of life is not an entitlement". Related to this is the statement, "life must be enjoyed on God's terms".

Lesson Six—Reasoning in a Circle

Introduction

Interpretations of this large section vary widely, as well as translations. One important factor in their interpretation is whether the interpreter believes that Qohelet is an "orthodox" wise man in Israel (like the orthodoxy of Psalms and Proverbs) or an "unorthodox" wise man who is confused.[215] I think Qohelet is a believer who gets confused and thinks inconsistently. Don't we all? Qohelet contradicts himself many times because he has not as yet resolved the tension between his empirical observations and the traditional wisdom. This movement back and forth between the pessimism of empiricism to his belief in objective revelation, and then back again, was seen in 5: 10-17; 5: 18-20; and 6: 1-12. It is seen in Chapter 7 as well.

D. Miscellaneous (Assorted) Wisdom (7: 1-22)

> A good name is better than a good ointment, And the day of *one's* death is better than the day of one's birth. [2] It is better to go to a house of mourning Than to go to a house of feasting, Because that is the end of every man, And the living takes *it* to heart. [3] Sorrow is better than laughter, For when a face is sad a heart may be happy. (Eccl. 7:1-3 NASB)

In these verses, Qohelet offers us an assortment of "wise" sayings—some good, some bad, some inconsistent with what he has said previously. Consistent with his pessimistic conclusions concerning long life (6: 3-6), the day of death is preferred to the day of birth (v. 1b). The "ointment" of v. 1a may be a reference to the embalming perfume used upon dead bodies (cf. Jn. 19: 40). While ointment will conceal the stench of a dead body, it will not conceal the stench of a poor reputation; therefore, a good name is better.

Going to a funeral (v. 2) is better than attending a feast since it keeps one in touch with the inevitability of death. Many people will simply not talk about death. They may be the life of any party with much joking and laughing, but it is difficult if not impossible to draw their attention to serious matters, particularly the reality of death. They avoid such discussions, or else make inappropriate jokes about death and dying.

In the same way, sorrow is better than laughter since it more realistically takes account of the gravity of death.

> A frivolous attitude toward life is contradicted by the fact that there is oppression in the present and death in the future....The point of the passage is that a *troubled face* reflects reality and thus shows that

[215] Longman (p. 37) makes note of the fact that there were "wise" men in Israel who were not righteous men (Jonadab; 2 Sam. 13: 3). We can also think of Ahithophel, David's counsellor who defected to Absalom. "The advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, *was* as if one inquired of the word of God; so was all the advice of Ahithophel *regarded* by both David and Absalom" (2 Samuel 16:23 NASB; the Biblical writer may have written the underlined words sarcastically). Shrewdness is not the same thing as true wisdom which begins with the fear of God. The "spin-masters" in Washington, D.C. (USA) who twist the facts to their own advantage are modern-day "wise men" who are ungodly and unorthodox. They are "wise" only in one respect: they know how to get things done. But when it comes to accomplishing their goals, they believe that the end justifies any means.

> one is not living in denial, or, in the words of John Jarick, "through the contemplation of serious matters such as death which causes a person to wear a severe or sad facial expression, the mind is improved".[216]

Instead of "happy", Longman translates the word "made well".[217]

> The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure. [5] It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man Than for one to listen to the song of fools. [6] For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot, So is the laughter of the fool; And this too is futility. (Eccl. 7:4-6 NASB)

People who are wise will not shun the contemplation of death while fools will blot out all thoughts of death through foolish revelry (fun and games) (vv. 4-5). Like the somber but edifying atmosphere of a funeral, the unpleasant occasion of a rebuke is preferable to making merry in the local tavern with fools. The laughter of fools, often concealing a troubled heart, sounds like the crackling of burning thorn bushes and lasts about as long (v. 6)[218]. The revelry of fools is enigmatic. What are they so happy about?

The seeming inconsistencies in this section reflect Qohelet's admission that life is enigmatic. In 5: 18, the reader is encouraged to enjoy eating and drinking, and there is no clue from the context that this same eating and drinking would not be appropriate with a larger group of people looking for a legitimately good time (as in 7: 2, 4).[219] Furthermore, the concern for a good reputation (7: 1) seems out of place for someone who believes that the day of death is better than the day of birth or for someone who believes that more wisdom brings additional pain (1: 18). Just a few verses later, Qohelet advises restraint in the pursuit of wickedness (7: 17) but also advises restraint in the pursuit of righteousness and wisdom (7: 16). Yet, once again, different moods produce different admonitions which may not be inconsistent considering the differences in context. Enjoying life responsibly is not the same thing as the reckless and thoughtless revelry of fools who are seldom serious.

There is much in Proverbs resembling the exhortations of this section. For example,

> A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding Than a hundred blows into a fool. (Proverbs 17:10 NASB)

> A wise son accepts his father's discipline, But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke." (Proverbs 13:1 NASB)

It is difficult to determine the connection of v. 7 with what precedes.

> [7] For oppression makes a wise man mad, And a bribe corrupts the heart.

Delitzsch concludes that the first half of the verse has been lost.[220] Bartholomew disagrees, saying

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[216] Longman, p. 184; emphasis his.
[217] Longman, p. 180.
[218] Longman, p. 185.
[219] Bartholomew, p. 247.
[220] Delitzsch, p. 317.

that the incoherency is just part of Qohelet's continuing struggle to make sense out of an enigmatic (confusing) world. Taken by itself, the verse can mean that even wise men can buckle under oppressive regimes, becoming subject to bribery and extortion.[221]

> The end of a matter is better than its beginning; Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit. [9] Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, For anger resides in the bosom of fools. (Eccl. 7:8-9 NASB)

In v. 8, the end of a matter is better than the beginning in the same way that the end of life is better than birth. The end means that we have gotten the matter over with. Verses 8b and 9 resemble other Proverbs.

> He who is slow to anger has great understanding, But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly. (Proverbs 14:29 NASB).
>
> A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1 NASB)
>
> A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, But the slow to anger calms a dispute. (Proverbs 15:18 NASB)
>
> He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city. (Proverbs 16:32 NASB)

Verse 10, likewise, is orthodox teaching against inappropriate longing for "the good old days" which appear always better than the present—a mistake older people often make when they selectively forget the harsher parts of history. Besides, "there is nothing new under the sun" (1: 9).

> Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this. [11] Wisdom along with an inheritance is good And an advantage to those who see the sun. [12] For wisdom is protection *just as* money is protection, But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors. (Eccl. 7:10-12 NASB)

Wisdom and inheritance go well together since wisdom can be used to guide one's use of money (v. 11). Wisdom and money are similar in that they are two forms of security ("protection"), but wisdom is better than money in that it will preserve a person's life (v. 12). This admission is parallel to Prov. 3: 2 and Prov. 2: 1-5 in which the son is encouraged to search for wisdom as he would treasure.[222]

> My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments; [2] For length of days and years of life And peace they will add to you. (Proverbs 3:1-2 NASB).

Some of this cannot be reconciled—and doesn't have to be—with Qohelet's previous admission that the wise will die just like the fool (2: 16) and that both wisdom and folly are alike enigmatic. The statements are also inconsistent with what he says a few verses later in 7: 15 to the effect that often a wise man dies sooner than the fool. Again, we must distinguish between the wisdom of Proverbs with its starting point in the fear of the Lord and the kind of "wisdom" Qohelet is talking

[221] Bartholomew, pp. 248-249; Kidner, p. 67.

[222] Yet, see another possible interpretation below in which the advice of vv. 11-12 may be purely utilitarian or practical.

about with its starting point in human observation and human reasoning. Qohelet vacillates back and forth between the two sources of knowledge—and so do we. It's part of the sinful human condition.

We may also wonder whether Qohelet views wisdom in vv. 11-12 in a purely pragmatic, utilitarian sort of way. Proverbs never places wisdom and money on the same level, and "it is hardly a flattering comparison for something whose true worth is incalculable, according to Proverbs 8: 11…." Moreover, "The phrase in 11b, *an advantage to those who see the sun*, may well be a double-edged remark, a reminder that there is a time-limit to the help that even wisdom, at the level of general good common sense, can offer. It pays no dividends in the grave.[223]

Qohelet commonly reverses himself, and his statements often adhere to one another like iron and clay (Dan. 2: 43). "He starts with traditional wisdom and then problematizes this each time, so that we are left with no clear answer as to what constitutes the good life".[224] There are nuggets of normative, orthodox wisdom scattered throughout his autobiography that conflict with his negative outlook expressed elsewhere. Much of the advice in this section is good, and it inclines one to interpret it as he does the *carpe diem* sections of the book in which Qohelet embraces traditional wisdom.[225] Yet, the mixture of truth and error subdues our confidence. Qohelet's first statement that the day of one's death is better than the day of his birth can be reconciled with the Christian perspective of the afterlife,[226] but Qohelet has not yet given the reader any confidence that there is anything beyond death. We must not be overzealous in importing Christian theology into his words.

> Consider the work of God, For who is able to straighten what He has bent? [14] In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other So that man will not discover anything *that will be* after him. [15] I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs *his life* in his wickedness. [16] Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? [17] Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? [18] It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. (Eccl. 7:13-18 NASB)

Qohelet admonishes us to accept the good along with the bad (v. 14), because God has ordained both (cf. Job 2: 10). Besides, nothing God has bent can be straightened anyway, and there is nothing we can do about it (v. 13; cf. 1: 15). The additional advice is that we should submit to the sovereign purpose of God in our lives (cf. 3: 14). However, Qohelet does not tell us here to be "happy" in the day of "adversity", but in the day of "prosperity". For the former, we can grab whatever happiness we can; for the latter, we must simply accept it and go on with life. God has so ordered providence that He conceals what He plans for man's existence and does not allow him to understand His overall plan (v. 14b). We have little evidence from other parts of his autobiography that Qohelet is consistently happy to rest in the providence of God, although he does so in the *carpe diem* sections and the end of the book. There are times when he reveals a certain degree of frustration in God's providence, and it would be presumptuous to believe that he

[223] Kidner, pp. 67-68.
[224] Bartholomew, p. 251.
[225] Following the opinion of Bartholomew, Waltke, Kidner, and others, rather than Longman and Fox.
[226] Bridges, p. 134.

had now turned a corner and was resting in it. This conclusion is warranted from the remarks immediately following in vv. 15-18.

Attempting a paraphrase of v. 14b-15, "Don't try to interpret providence and come up with any hard and fast predictions about what will happen, for in my lifetime I have seen righteous people who perish sooner than the wicked who seem to lengthen their lives through their own wickedness." Of course, we have seen this before in the book of Job (chapter 24) in which Job complains that God seems to be indifferent to the suffering of the righteous and the criminal activity of the wicked. The wicked live long lives and have descendants who continue their wickedness. "My advice," says Qohelet, "is this: don't be too righteous and don't be too wicked. Moderation is the key" (vv. 16-17).

Some expositors have interpreted v. 16 as the false pretense of righteousness. Charles Bridges, as an example, applies Qohelet's advice as a guard against "false religion" or a "false display of true religion", as a warning to the "insincere professor" and against "high pretensions to superior wisdom".[227] Eaton and Ryken believe he is speaking of self-righteousness.[228] "The right life walks the path between two extremes, shunning self-righteousness, but not allowing one's native wickedness to run its own course".[229] But considering the whole context of Ecclesiastes, it is unlikely that Qohelet had these distinctions in view. In this passage, Qohelet is not doubtful about the value of insincere religion or self-righteousness, but about the value of true religion and true righteousness. There would be no argument in saying that hypocrites die young, but that wicked people prolong their lives, as there is little essential difference between the hypocrite and the wicked.

The force of his argument is that even truly righteous people die early while those who pursue wicked practices die of old age. Qohelet acknowledges the mystery as something he has observed first hand (v.15a), but the phenomenon (occurrence) does not trouble him as intensely as Job (Job 21: 7-18). Furthermore, Job would have never given the middle-of-the-road advice that Qohelet suggests, [230]namely, don't be too excessive in either righteousness or wickedness, since excess in either one will shorten or ruin your life (v. 17). However, such advice doesn't seem consistent with his concern for sincere worship in 5: 1-7, nor is it consistent with the earlier statement about the day of one's death being better than the day of one's birth. One would think Qohelet would favor a shorter life to a longer one. But this is just one of his many self-contradictions.

From a purely secular, pragmatic (whatever works is true) standpoint, we can understand his advice for moderation in religion against the backdrop of human history. Can we not say that many believers are cut down in the prime of life for their radical obedience to truth? Elijah almost lost his life to Jezebel for challenging the prophets of Baal. Many other prophets did not escape. Jeremiah the prophet was scorned during 40 years of ministry and never once taken seriously by an apostate nation. Taken hostage by disobedient Israelites, he died in exile in Egypt. Jim Eliot, a 27-year-old missionary in Ecuador, was killed along with four other equally "reckless men" (Eliot's positive designation for them) for attempting to evangelize the dreaded Waodanae Indians

[227] Bridges, pp. 161-164.
[228] Eaton p.130 and Ryken pp. 166-167.
[229] Eaton, p. 130, also quoted in Ryken, p. 167.
[230] Kidner, p. 69.

of Ecuador in 1953.[231] Christians in Pakistan are regularly persecuted for witnessing to Muslims and pastoring Christian congregations. Politicians in the US don't get elected if they quote the Bible as the standard of their political views. They are much safer sticking with "natural law"[232] as the standard of morality—a view which is sufficiently vague and noncommittal to avoid getting into political hot water.

By putting certain limits on our obedience, we do not arouse as much suspicion from unbelievers; and we are not accused of self-righteous pharisaism from professing believers.

> By the side of that spirited resolve [Job 13: 15], the motto, 'nothing to excess', has never looked so cheap as in these verses, which recommend moral cowardice with so straight a face that we are forced to take them seriously for the moment. In doing so, we realize that it is indeed the morality, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of the worldly man if he is true to his beliefs. We could add that in our present society it is becoming more and more openly the norm. Verse 18 plumbs the depths, advocating, a little cryptically, not mere half-heartedness in good or evil but a generous mixture of the two, since religion will take care of any risks, and one will therefore enjoy the best of both life-styles.[233]

To summarize Qohelet's thought, be moderately good and moderately evil, avoid excess in either direction—hanging on to the world with one hand and to God with the other. Really? There is simply no way to rescue Qohelet from criticism here (and once again, we don't have to). Nor can we reconcile his advice with OT narratives. Lot attempted to have the best of both worlds and lost his whole family in the process. While getting his wife and two daughters safely out of Sodom, he could not get Sodom out of them; and even Lot had to be dragged away (Gen. 19: 16, 24-38). But Jesus warns us of such compromise "'Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses *his life* will preserve it" (Luke 17:32-33).

Moreover, Jesus was not admonishing His disciples to moderate (restrain) their righteousness when He said, "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven", or when he said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect", or "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters", or to the church of Laodicea, "'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. [16] 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth" (Matthew 10:33; 5: 48; 12:30; Rev. 3: 15-16 NASB). No middle-of-the-road advice, here.

Nevertheless, wisdom is valuable, Qohelet argues, so much so that one wise man is stronger than ten city officials without it (v. 19).

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[231] Elliot

[232] Natural law advocates (promoters) hold that a nation's laws should be rooted in the observable patterns of morality and truth discernible to everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, through the ordinary use of human reason. If we insist that moral principles must have their foundation in a transcendent God—in other words, religion—then members of a diverse society have no common ground upon which their legal system can be established. However, it should be obvious that all members of society have not come to an agreement about abortion and euthanasia (the killing of old and sick people) on the basis of the laws of nature. While nature *should* teach us that killing unborn infants is wrong, unbelievers will twist nature to prove their own ethical theories. Hence, natural law cannot be the basis for a society's law. For more on this, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, pp.242-250.

[233] Kidner, p. 69; words in brackets refer to Kidner's footnote.

> Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. [20] Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. [21] Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. [22] For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others. (Eccl. 7:19-22 NASB)

Nevertheless, even wise men are inconsistent and not always wise (v. 20). "In this way, Qohelet does what he so often does—puts forward a positive value and then relativizes it." Wisdom is valuable, but no one can be consistently wise, so don't stress yourself to be overly wise.[234] Take for example, the issue of speaking against others (v. 21). Don't spend any time eavesdropping on your servants or hired hands, for you will inevitably hear them saying some unkind things about you. When you hear this, don't take it too hard, and remember that you have said some unkind things about other people. This is just one example of the many ways even wise men can be inconsistently wise—with their tongues (cf. James 2: 3-12).

E. Qohelet's Wisdom Deconstructed (7: 23-29)

> I tested all this with wisdom, *and* I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. [24] What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?

"I tested all this with wisdom" indicates a summary statement marking the beginning of a new section. Despite his boast to attain wisdom, Qohelet recognizes that he had failed, an admission reminiscent of the one at the beginning of his journey. "And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind" (Eccles. 1:17 NASB). Qohelet has now confirmed through his own epistemological method of autonomous observation and reasoning that wisdom is "remote" and beyond discovery. Job (chapter 28) also speaks of the hidden-ness of wisdom.[235] Man can mine for gold and silver, but where can he find wisdom?

However, as we have seen, the wisdom Job speaks of is a different kind from the wisdom of Qohelet. Wisdom in the Bible is the body of objective revelation from God, while wisdom for Qohelet is knowledge accumulated from autonomous (independent) observation and interpreted through autonomous reason. What Qohelet has been looking for is a unifying system of knowledge that makes sense of the particulars of man's existence. Take, for example, a beautiful sunset. Does the sunset have any meaning beyond the sensory perception of my eyes? No, unless God made the sunset to bring Him glory and pleasure and for His image-bearers to praise Him for creating something beautiful.[236] But to find this unifying system, sinful man assumes without proof the authority and reliability of his autonomous method that often conflicts with traditional wisdom—the wisdom of the Scriptures.

This is why Proverbs insists that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7 NASB). The Hebrew parallelism in this verse requires that "knowledge" in the first half of the verse is equivalent to "wisdom and instruction" in the second half). If a person refuses the knowledge of God and substitutes in its place the knowledge of independent observation and reason, he is a fool, regardless of the quantity of

[234] Longman, p. 199
[235] Cited by Bartholomew, p. 265
[236] Rev. 4: 11; the King James translates the verse, "and for thy pleasure they are and were created."

knowledge accumulated. Thus, according to the Bible, some of the most educated geniuses in the world are fools. And just as biological genius is the gift of God—no one earns his intelligence quota (IQ); he is born with it—the knowledge and wisdom of God is also His gift. He bestows it upon whomever He wills and withholds it from whomever He wills, that no one should have grounds for boasting (Matt. 11: 25-27; 1 Cor. 4: 7).

Our starting point will determine our destination, either true wisdom or folly. To know wisdom we must receive "instruction" which comes from *outside* ourselves, not *within.* This external, objective knowledge from God then becomes the foundation or reference point for receiving and interpreting other knowledge. Fools, on the other hand, forsake the wisdom of God outside themselves and depend solely upon subjective autonomous thought within themselves. Autonomous reasoning then becomes the reference point for formulating autonomous conclusions. Such reasoning operates in a *closed* system in which unbelievers dismiss God as the ultimate reference point of his research. They are, therefore, reasoning in a circle, as Paul says, "…when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding" (2 Corinthians 10:12 NASB). In other words, they measure themselves and everything else according to their own standards. However, because of *common grace* extended to all men, unbelievers are still able to discover the truth about science, technology, music, and art because God allows them to do so (cf. Gen. 4: 16-22).[237] However, they do not know how to relate this truth to the bigger picture of God's kingdom on earth. Based upon their own presupposition[238] that God does not exist, nothing they discover has any ultimate meaning since ultimate meaning cannot exist apart from God. This is what Qohelet understood, and he voices this conclusion at the end of the book, "Remember your Creator".

The Christian is also reasoning in a circle, but his circle is much bigger, existing in the *open* system of God's special revelation in the Scriptures. The Christian uses this special revelation to properly interpret the general revelation of creation in all areas of life—science, literature, ethics, etc.[239]

In the diagram below, letters B, C, and D represent logical processes by which the unbeliever comes to a conclusion E without the aid of special revelation. These steps are all located inside the circle, in the closed system of man's autonomous mind. Contrarily, the logical processes of the Christian (G, H, and I) are outside the circle having access to the open system of special revelation enabling him to interpret general revelation with special revelation—especially the special revelation particularly relevant to the subject being investigated. For example, the subject of geology should be informed by the special revelation of the flood during Noah's day. Any attempt to interpret geological strata which does not take this information into account is doomed to error.[240] I have attempted to diagram this concept below.

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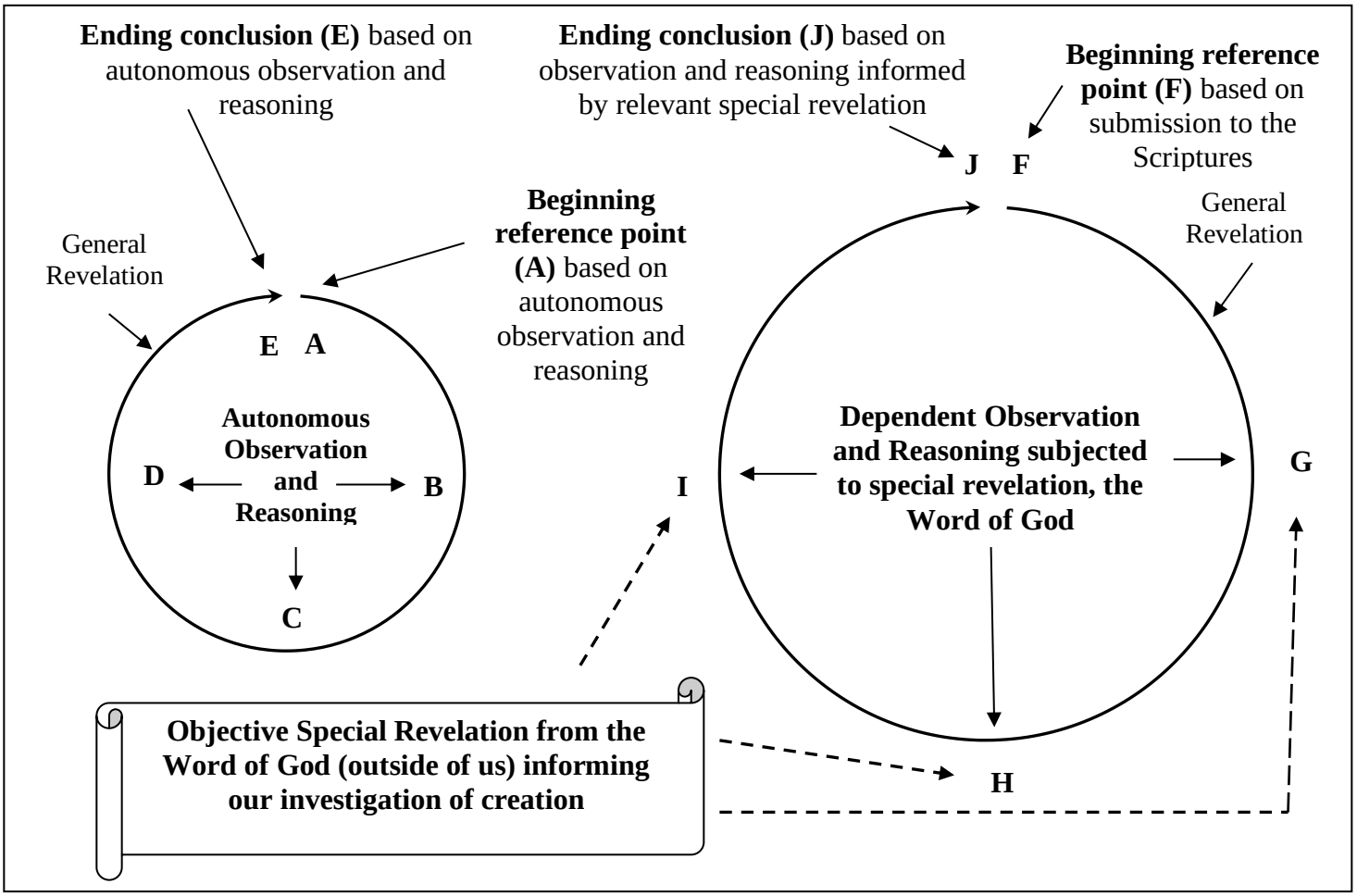
[237] Common grace is the grace that God gives everyone without which man would not be able to exist in a world cursed because of sin (cf. Matt. 5: 44-45). Although God loves His elect people with a special love, He also loves rebellious sinners made in His image, and He treats them well by feeding them and allowing them to enjoy many good things in this world.

[238] Presuppositions are unproven, and empirically unverifiable, assumptions that we make about ultimate questions of meaning and reality. We cannot empirically prove or disprove the existence of God. God does not lend Himself to empirical investigation, but He does give us undeniable proof of His existence and attributes (Rom. 1: 18-22).

[239] Refer back to my comments on natural law in footnote 232.

[240] For an example of an ethical and social experiment doomed to error, see McNeill, "The Principle Features of Medical Ethics and the Crisis of Moral Relativism".



We are back full circle to the sin of Adam and Eve who second-guessed the wisdom of God by determining for themselves what is good or bad through independent experimentation—eating the fruit. "God says one thing. The serpent says another. I'll find out for myself through independent research." Adam did not have to eat the fruit to know that disastrous results would come from it. He could have taken God's word for it. In the same way, Qohelet did not have to experiment with a sensuous and materialistic life-style to know that it would not bring him happiness and meaning. He could have simply believed the Pentateuch and the traditional wisdom of Proverbs that had been passed down from generation to generation. We don't have to experience different kinds of sin to know for certain that they are evil or bad for us personally. We know homosexuality is bad without engaging in homosexuality. We know adultery is bad without committing adultery. We know pornography is a mental form of fornication or adultery because Jesus said that lust is a sin. The word of God saves us from reckless and harmful experimentation with evil.

For Qohelet God's wisdom doesn't appear to stand the test of observation (1 Cor. 1: 18-31). But God has made foolish the wisdom of the world, the autonomy of human thought (1 Cor. 1: 20), which leads logically to "folly" (Eccl. 7: 25). The resolution at the end of Ecclesiastes to "fear God

and keep His commandments" (12: 13) is an invitation to forsake the wisdom of the world and return to the objective wisdom of God—the only true unifying system that makes sense of everything else. This does not imply that we do away with scientific observation and hypothesizing about the way creation and the world works. The Bible does not claim to be a textbook of science or economics. But scientific and economic theory must be subject to the overruling standards of Scripture which provides broad principles about all areas of knowledge.

> [25] I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. [26] And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. [27] "Behold, I have discovered this," says the Preacher, "*adding* one thing to another to find an explanation, [28] which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. [29] "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices." (Eccl. 7:23-29 NASB)

Failing to find satisfaction in his many concubines, we could readily identify "the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains" as one or many of Qohelet's casual lovers. Longman concludes that he expresses the sentiment of a misogynist (one who hates women).[241] Eaton believes that he is speaking of a particular kind of woman,[242] and Ryken that he has a specific individual in view.[243] Kidner says dryly,

> His fruitless search for a woman he could trust may tell us as much about him and his approach, as about any of his acquaintances. It is tempting to add—and could conceivably be relevant—that like Solomon, whose mantle he has worn before, he might have done better to have cast his net less widely than among 'a thousand! He almost says as much in 9:9, with his praise of simple marital fidelity.[244]

But if Qohelet is talking about a literal woman, or women in general, the transition between v. 25 and v. 26 seems abrupt to say the least. Of course, Qohelet's discourse has seemed disjointed before; therefore, this abruptness is not conclusive for an alternative interpretation. However, in v. 24 he confesses that wisdom has remained aloof and remote, giving him doubts that he or anyone else will ever discover it. Nevertheless, in v. 25 he continues his search, and in v. 26 he does find something, a woman. His description of this woman is clearly reminiscent of another woman we meet in the book of Proverbs, the woman of folly (Prov. 9: 13-18).[245] Quoting Seow, Bartholomew agrees that

> "The *femme fatale* [fatal woman] is not, therefore, an individual woman. She is not necessarily a specific type of woman or women in general. Rather, she is a composite image of Folly herself (Prov. 9: 13-18). Folly is out on a hunt, as it were, trying to lure and trap people and lead them down the deadly path." [Seow]…Verse 26 therefore amounts to a statement that summarizes the message of Prov. 1—9: "Flee folly!" Ironically, however, Dame Folly is the very woman that Qohelet has found and *is finding* more bitter than death (v. 26a). Qohelet himself is the sinner who has been seized by her (v.

[241] Longman, p. 206.
[242] Eaton, p. 132.
[243] Ryken, p. 176.
[244] Kidner, p. 72.
[245] Bartholomew, p. 267.

> 26c). His *epistemology* [theory of gaining knowledge] has ironically led him right into her bitter embrace.[246]

Supporting this interpretation is the similarity of language describing the adulterous woman of Prov. 2: 16-19 and the woman of Eccl. 7: 26. Both passages describe this woman as a deadly foe from whose clutches there is little chance of escape.

> [16]To deliver you from the strange woman, From the adulteress who flatters with her words; [17] That leaves the companion of her youth And forgets the covenant of her God; [18] For her house sinks down to death And her tracks lead to the dead; [19] None who go to her return again, Nor do they reach the paths of life. (Proverbs 2:16-19 NASB)

> [26] And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her. (Ecc. 7: 26 NASB)

The significance of this comparison lies in the fact that Woman Folly in Prov. 9 is closely related to the adulterous woman of Prov. 2 through the imagery of sexual immorality. "Stolen water is sweet; And bread eaten in secret is pleasant" (Prov. 9:17 NASB). The woman in Prov. 9: 13-18 and Eccl. 7 represents a philosophy of life juxtaposed (set side by side) with Lady Wisdom who also offers her invitation to whoever will accept it (Prov. 1: 20-33; Prov. 9: 1-18).

Continuing with the association with Proverbs, the woman Qohelet cannot find in v. 28 is Lady Wisdom; and it is strange that in spite of all of her pleading in public places, she has remained hidden to him (Prov. 1: 20-21). This, in turn, begs the question of the methodology of his search for wisdom. He claimed earlier that his mind was guiding him wisely (2: 3), but now he finds himself in the house of Woman Folly. Is God to blame for this ironic twist of events, or is Qohelet to blame? The problem is not that God made everything crooked (Eccl. 1: 15), thus obscuring and precluding (making impossible) man's honest quest for wisdom. Rather, God made men "straight", but men through sin became crooked (v. 29). The "many devices" (v. 29) that men have sought include the device of sinful, independent reasoning which scorns divine revelation as the starting point of any legitimate investigation of the universe. Thus, in vv. 23-29, Qohelet confesses the irony of the quest to find truth on his own terms—leading him not to wisdom, but to folly.[247]

> Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam. (Eccl. 8:1 NASB)

It is probable that 8: 1 concludes the section 7: 23-29. If so, v. 1 is a rhetorical question demanding a negative answer. Having commented on the sinful devices of men, of which he was a part, he then asks, "Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter?" The implied answer is: "No one because there is no one who is wise." This interpretation follows from his admission that he had sought wisdom but it was far from him, and that no one could discover it (7: 23-24). He then adds, "A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam", a statement which is ill-suited to the context unless it is interpreted sarcastically. "...can one imagine a cheery, happy-faced Qohelet at this point in the book, rejoicing in the blithe [cheery, optimistic]

[246] Bartholomew, p. 267, emphasis his, words in brackets mine.
[247] Bartholomew, pp. 267-268.

expression of others who claimed to be wise?[248] Thus, Qohelet may be saying one thing and thinking another. "A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam, but he doesn't realize what a fool he is in thinking that he is wise."

Another possibility is that Qohelet is speaking honestly in accordance with traditional wisdom.[249] A man's wisdom sets him apart from the crowd and gives him confidence in the future, resulting in a cheerful countenance, according to the proverb, "A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, But when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken" (Proverbs 15:13 NASB). However, if this is the interpretation, Qohelet is departing abruptly (but he has done this before) from his darker moments in which he admits no such appreciation for wisdom's benefits, something he makes clear at the outset: "Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain" (Eccl. 1:18 NASB).

Alternatively, if v. 1 is more closely connected to vv. 2-9, then the pleasant countenance (facial expression) before a king demonstrates loyalty and a good conscience rather than the hardened expression of someone scheming to overthrow him. We may similarly interpret Nehemiah's fear when King Artaxerxes asked him what was troubling him (Neh. 2: 1-2). It is not wise to appear sad in the presence of a king; sorrow arouses suspicion.

I believe the sarcastic interpretation seems more plausible (most likely), fitting the previous context (7: 23-26) much better than the following context (8: 2-7). Qohelet has just admitted failure in finding wisdom and 8: 1 is a sarcastic conclusion to this section.

Summary and Conclusion

Lest we spiral into the confusion and cynicism of Qohelet, we must establish the proper starting point of our investigation of what is real. Unbelief starts its investigation with subjective autonomous reasoning independent of special revelation. Man's mind, it is thought, is the measure of all things, even the reliability of Scripture. The result of this independence is skepticism about the value of planning, responsibility, commitment to ethical integrity, the judicial use of one's time, the possibility of discovering truth, or the love of God. Eventually, he despairs of knowing anything ("It was far from me"; 7: 23-24). On his own premises, to know anything, he must know everything; and to know everything, he must be omnipresent, able to observe everything at once. He is therefore in the conundrum (problem) of his own creatureliness. To escape this dilemma, he must submit himself to the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God who plans all things and knows all things. But it is not as if God has left us with nothing. He gives us special revelation enabling us to interpret the world through His eyes—to penetrate His mind, albeit imperfectly and partially. Therefore, when inconsistencies arise between what we see and what we believe, our confusion is resolved in trusting a God in whom there is no inconsistency.

[248] Longman, p. 209, words in brackets mine
[249] Bartholomew, p. 280.

Lesson Six Questions

1. What are some of the internal contradictions in vv. 1-6 compared to what Qohelet has said earlier?
2. What is the general exhortation of vv. 1-6?
3. How does Qohelet demonstrate his familiarity with Proverbs?
4. Why should we not be confused with Qohelet's vacillation (movement back and forth) between human reasoning and God's wisdom?
5. How would you answer Qohelet's call for moderation in righteousness and wickedness in vv. 15-18)?
6. Discuss the similarity and difference between the comments of Job and Qohelet concerning wisdom.
7. How do unbelievers reason in a circle?
8. How do believers reason in a circle?
9. Who is the woman who is more bitter than death (v. 26)? Give reasons for your answer.
10. Is it Qohelet's own fault that he has not found wisdom? Explain your answer.

Lesson Seven—Life Spinning Out of Control

Introduction

No one is "the master of his fate or the captain of his soul", and Qohelet knew this well. We are at the mercy of many people and events which exercise dramatic influence over our lives for good or bad (and Qohelet emphasizes the bad). Powerful kings have life or death authority over their subjects. They send young men into battle never to return. The judicial system under a corrupt king fails to properly punish evil-doers who become bolder in their sins against humanity, leaving the law-abiding citizen in fear of losing life and property. In the midst of this pessimism about life, Qohelet is reminded of God's sovereign control over kings and evil-doers. We should not try to understand his providential ways lest we lose whatever joy God has afforded us.

Yet, like us too often, Qohelet drifts back into pessimism, particularly the uncertainty of God's favor. Who knows whether God will give someone a good life or a bad one? You can't tell what will happen by just looking at a person's character, for sometimes evil men enjoy a prosperous life while good men suffer. Besides, all of them die alike. Life is also controlled (at least from Qohelet's own observations) by chance. The people who get ahead in life are often not the most talented or the hardest working; consequently, a person does not know whether or not he will be rewarded for all his efforts. Finally, our wisdom may fade into obscurity, with no one having ever listened to us. All of this makes for a very dismal prospect of living in this world.

F. Controlled by Despotic Kings (8: 2-9)

> I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. [3] "Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases." [4] Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?" [5] He who keeps a *royal* command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. [6] For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him. [7] If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? [8] No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. [9] All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over *another* man to his hurt. (Eccl. 8:2-9 NASB)

Verses 2-7 advise primarily courtiers (those who attend the king at court) or those who would have personal access to the king on a daily basis.[250] Qohelet may be advising obedience, not out of moral obligation, but out of practical necessity. An alternative view, and a more likely one, is that Qohelet is dead serious about one's moral obligation to obey the king; otherwise, the phrase "because of the oath before God" must be taken as crass sarcasm. (But, as noted above, a sarcastic comment is not surprising from Qohelet.) Or, he could be giving *both* reasons for obeying the king. On a spiritual level, it is the right thing to do; on a practical level, you will live longer if you do.

[250] Longman, p. 209.

If v. 2b is sarcastic, the sarcasm ends here. Qohelet is dead serious about behaving properly before a king.[251] If a courtier or an assistant to the king wishes to stay alive, he should stay clean of any "evil matter" (v. 3)—i.e. any plot to kill or overthrow the king. Also, he shouldn't be hasty to disagree with the king or offer him any advice, for the king speaks with the voice of authority (v. 4). It's better to do what you are told, keep your mouth shut, and stay out of trouble (v. 5).[252] The advice of v. 2 can be corroborated (confirmed) by other wisdom texts (Prov. 24: 21) and the "former prophets" of Judges and 1—2 Samuel, written as the justification for a human king in Israel culminating in the Davidic kingdom. Allegiance to the king was not optional (1 Sam. 24: 6; 26: 9).

> My son, fear the LORD and the king; Do not associate with those who are given to change, (Proverbs 24:21 NASB)

> So he said to his men, "Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD'S anointed." (1 Samuel 24:6 NASB)

Near Eastern kings had life and death authority over their subjects, and one did not want to cross them unless his cause was equally important as his life. Israel as an exception, the divine right of kings to do as they pleased was not questioned in ancient times extending far into Medieval Europe. The king in vv. 2-9 is ascribed god-like authority by the words, "who will say to him, 'What are you doing'", a reference to God's authority found in Isaiah 45: 9.[253]

Even in Israel, kings commonly overstepped their boundaries, but Israel had the unique benefit of the divinely ordained prophetic ministry. The OT prophets were essential to checking the presumption and power of kings. King Saul had attempted to do as he pleased; and his kingdom was wrenched from his hands, Samuel the prophet pronouncing the sentence (1 Sam. 15: 28). David also believed that he was above the Law of God when he took Bathsheba, another man's wife; but Nathan the prophet was commissioned by God to pronounce David's guilt for adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12: 1-12). Although his life was spared, his family and kingdom were not; and he suffered a four-fold punishment for his presumptuous arrogance. King Solomon began well, but succumbed to the idolatry of his foreign wives. For this, God snatched the kingdom out of the hands of Rehoboam his son. Ahijah the prophet acted as God's medium for transferring ten tribes to Jeroboam I (1 Kings 11). King Ahab believed that he could promote the idolatry of Baal worship and that he could steal the inheritance of Naboth through fraud and murder; but he was divinely executed for his crimes by a single arrow shot at random by an unnamed archer (1 Kings 22: 34-35). Once again, the Lord's prophet, Micaiah, pronounced the sentence (1 Kings 22: 27-28).

The entire history of the prophetic office proves that Israel's kings were subject to the law of God and could not act independently of it without severe consequences—the final consequences culminating in the exiles of both the northern and southern kingdoms. Qohelet's comments seem to reflect a time in which Israel was subjected to foreign rulers who did as they pleased (vv. 3-4);

[251] Incidentally, if Qohelet is Solomon, why would he be speaking so negatively about despotic kings who acted as if they were God? See further explanation below.
[252] See Appendix J, an anecdote about Catherine Parr, one of the many wives of Henry VIII of England.
[253] Fox, p. 278.

the king's submission to the Lord seems absent in the text.[254] It is very difficult to determine what Qohelet means by the latter part of v. 5 which is connected to v. 6 by the repeated phrase, "the proper time and procedure". Could he mean that the wise courtier knows when the time is right to plot against the king?[255] But this would seem inconsistent with the wise advice to obey the king and survive. It is tempting to believe that Qohelet is changing the subject altogether, but v. 9 seems to dictate that he is still talking about obedience to the king, a despotic king at that, who exercises his authority over "another man to his hurt". Thus, I am left with the following possibility in partial agreement with Delitzsch: "Obey the king, and you will stay out of trouble, but there is a proper time and procedure for everything, even plotting a conspiracy against a despotic king (or queen mother—2 Chron. 23) when this despot brings unbearable "trouble" upon his own people (v. 6b, "when a man's trouble is heavy upon him"—in which "trouble" is not a personal but national burden). Delitzsch interprets the text as follows:

> The heart of the wise man will see the time and the judgment of the ruler, laying to his heart the temptation to rebellion: for (1) as the author has already said, iii. 17: "God will judge the righteous as well as the wicked, for there is with Him a time for every purpose and for every act: " (2) the wickedness of man (by which, as ver. 9 shows, despots are aimed at) which he has committed, becomes great upon him, so that suddenly at once the judgment of God will break in upon him; (3) he knows not what will be done; (4) no one can tell him how…it, the future, will be, so that he might in any way anticipate it—the judgment will overwhelm him unexpectedly and irretrievably; wickedness does not save its possessor.
>
> …the tyrant knows not that he will die by assassination, and no one can say to him how that will happen, so that he might make arrangements for his protection.[256]

It is possible that Qohelet throws in his usual caveat (warning) at this point. Life is so unpredictable (v. 7) that it is impossible to know what the proper time and procedure is. In other words, no matter how well one plans his conspiracy, predicting what will happen in the future and when it will happen, based on past events, is like restraining the wind with the wind (v. 8). We still lack control. However, if we follow Delitzsch, then Qohelet is saying that even the king lacks control of his own destiny. Even a powerful king does not know what will happen (a conspiracy) or when it will happen because kings can't predict the future much better than common people. Moreover, autocrats have no authority over the "wind" (v. 8)—namely, the wind of public opinion and outrage against their autocratic rule. In other words, the "wind" of their own power will be insufficient to "restrain" the "wind" of public opposition against them. The king likewise has no "authority over the day of death", i.e. his own death. Some form of the word "authority" (*shallit*) is used three times from v. 2 through v. 9. Even a man's god-like authority gives him no control over his own future. The king, after all, is only a man. When the "war" against the king comes, there will be no "discharge" from it because there is no one of higher authority to discharge him.[257] The evil he practiced upon others will not deliver him from the evil that will be practiced upon him (v. 8b). Qohelet has seen autocratic rulers overthrown before after they have exercised their authority over others to their own hurt (v. 9). This is nothing new to him.

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[254] Bartholomew, p. 281.
[255] So also Delitzsch, p. 342.
[256] Delitzsch, pp. 342-343.
[257] Namely, a civil war

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous Lutheran theologian of mid-20th century Germany, paid the ultimate cost of resisting the ruthless genocidal regime of Adolf Hitler. After the failure of lawful, literary attempts to halt the mass murder of Jews throughout occupied Europe, Bonhoeffer concluded that the "proper time" had come for more drastic measures; he took part in a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler. Arrested earlier for his written protests, his part in the assassination plot was discovered later. He was hanged a mere two weeks before Germany was liberated by Allied forces.[258] Hitler survived fifteen such assassination attempts upon his life,[259] but he could not restrain the wind forever. According to one account, he suffered the humility of living in an underground bunker in Berlin for three months before committing suicide.[260]

We need not limit the foreshadowing of Ecclesiastes to Hitler. We have other examples. Pol Pot, butcher of tens of thousands of Cambodians, was cremated without ceremony in 1998. Idi Amin died in exile in Saudi Arabia; Qaddafi was assassinated in his own country; and who knows what will eventually happen to Grace Mugabe in Zimbabwe after Robert was forced out of power? The days of tyrants are numbered. It's not a matter of *if* they will be punished, but *when.* God is a God of justice whose very nature requires retribution either in this life and/or beyond.

The theme of this entire section is our lack of control over our lives. Common people are under the control of despotic kings or psychopathic lunatics (Hitler, Idi Amin, Bashar Assad of Syria) who may execute them over the slightest suspicion of evil (vv. 3-4).[261] We are controlled by kings (and now presidents, congressmen, and MP's) who put men on battlefields to fight wars that are often senseless and beneficial only to the people in power. We also have no control over time. Just as we were not able to control the past, we will be equally incompetent to control the future. We have no control over the day of our death or how we die. We are helpless pawns in a chess game played by powerful, despotic kings and opportunistic politicians who are thinking only of their own advantage. [262] Yet, the same despots who control us are themselves controlled by the inevitable consequences of their own tyranny which eventually catches up with them.[263]

G. Controlled by Injustice (8: 10-14)

> [10]So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are *soon* forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. [11] Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. [12] Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life,* still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. [13] But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. [14] There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the

[258] See the movie, "Bonheoffer." See also Appendix K for additional comments on civil resistance to authority.
[259] Another interesting movie about one of these attempts is "Valkyrie" starring Tom Cruise.
[260] See the movie, "The Bunker" starring Anthony Hopkins.
[261] A psychopathic personality is "an emotionally and behaviourally disordered state characterized by clear perception of reality except for the individual's social and moral obligations…" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary). Thus, Hitler could win Germany to his cause and, for a time, succeed in directing his military to many victories. However, morally and socially, he was a psychopathic killer out of touch with reality.
[262] Opportunism is the practice of taking advantage of opportunities with little regard for ethical principles or the consequences of one's actions.
[263] Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Mubarak of Egypt, al-Assad of Syria. Who's next?

> wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. (Eccl. 8:10-14 NASB)

Furthermore, Qohelet complains that under despotic rulers (v. 9 is the context), the wicked thrive and prosper. Bartholomew calls this "the problem of delayed judgment", using this title for the entire section from v. 10 through v. 17.[264] Wicked men make a show of religion by visiting the temple regularly, but the evil deeds they have done throughout life go uncovered and unpunished (v. 10). At their funerals they are celebrated and praised; nothing is ever said about their ungodly lives or their oppression of others. I have observed in the southern US where I come from that everyone gets converted at his own funeral. Even the infamous scoundrel somehow emerges from his coffin-cocoon as a beautiful butterfly. But I am sure that this miraculous "metamorphosis-conversion" is not unique to the southern US.

This, Qohelet complains, is also enigmatic (v. 10). Not only this, but under corrupt rulers who are reluctant (hesitant) to punish evil—because they themselves are morally compromised—there is much delay in the execution of just punishment (v. 11). Judicial sentences are not carried out quickly; and because of this, the wicked are further encouraged in their schemes. The result is that our lives are somewhat controlled by the fear of injustice and lack of confidence in the judicial system to protect us. As an example, women in India live in fear of being raped. Gang rape has been widespread in India for some time but only recently exposed by the international media. *Aljazeera* also recently reported that one-third of Indian politicians presently in office have criminal records, including rape.[265]

Ungodly leadership encourages criminal activity. Whether civil leaders are corrupt or not, lack of speedy punishment strengthens the hands of those who do evil. In the US, a person convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to death can languish in jail for years awaiting the decisions of multiple court appeals. This strengthens the nerve of others who are likely to commit murder or rape, knowing that they may get out of prison on legal technicalities or endless appeals. Virtually all convicted murderers serve life sentences with the possibility of parole. Compared to the number of murder convictions in the US, the number of executions is too minimal to have any practical effect on the frequency of the crime. To illustrate: there were 1,930 murders in California alone in one year (2017). In the same year, there were 1,459 murders in Texas. In two states the number of murders totaled 3,389 in just one year. The total number of executions in the entire US since 1976 is 1,481. Therefore, the number of executions since 1976 (a period of 42 years) is only roughly equivalent to the number of murders in Texas for one year. How worried should a murderer be of being executed for his crime in the United States? How likely is he to be executed?

For this reason, it is ludicrous (ridiculous) to argue that capital execution does not deter (hinder) the crimes of murder. In societies where capital execution is so rare, how would we know whether it deterred the crime, or not—unless we are willing to listen to Qohelet (v. 11)? (At the very least, executed murderers would not repeat their crimes.[266]) On the other hand, a person planning murder

[264] Bartholomew, p. 287.
[265] *Aljazeera News*
[266] I don't believe in "zombies" (the walking dead) or in ancestral spirits who can harm people.

might think twice if he knew he would be executed in only a few weeks or months if convicted (Deut. 21: 21b). Presently, the wicked are "given fully to do evil."[267]

Qohelet's wisdom on this point is demonstrably true: "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil." Those contemplating criminal activity fear the terror of the civil magistrate even though the magistrate's terror is arbitrary and inconsistent (cf. Rom. 13: 3-4, written during the unpredictable and despotic reign of Nero). If the punishment was quick and consistent, crime would surely be minimized. However, we will probably never see the scientific confirmation of this principle in countries that are more concerned for the perpetrators (those who cause) of crime than their victims. The hypocrisy of those who vehemently oppose the death penalty is astounding. They argue the inhumanity of the practice while completely ignoring the inhumanity practiced upon the victims. Supposedly through the process of evolution, we have become wiser and more humane than the God who ordered capital punishment in the OT (Dt. 19: 11-12). And why did God order capital punishment? Partly, to protect the sanctity of life.

At this point, Qohelet digresses (steps aside) momentarily from his complaint about unrestrained evil to interject a positive note about the retributive justice of God (vv. 12-13). Even if the sinner is able to beat the judicial system and prolong his life in wickedness, it is still to our advantage to fear God "openly", i.e. comply with his commandments. It will be well for the righteous man, but it will not be well for the wicked who will not lengthen his life by being wicked. This is a direct contradiction of what Qohelet has just said in v. 12a about the wicked sinning a hundred times but still lengthening his life.[268] It is also a contradiction of what Qohelet has said in v. 10. Furthermore, if Qohelet is reversing himself by an unqualified agreement with retributive justice ("the wicked are always punished in this life"), he then reverses himself again in v. 14 by admitting the very opposite of retributive justice. In that verse, he frankly acknowledges that righteous men often suffer the fate only wicked men should suffer and that wicked men often receive the blessings belonging only to the righteous. And, doubtless, he is able to round up considerable empirical proof of this notion.

Qohelet has contradicted himself before, but it seems strange that he would contradict himself twice in only a few statements. One possibility is that in v. 12b through v. 13 Qohelet is quoting the doctrine of retribution sarcastically (or "tongue in cheek") in ridicule of those who cling to a rigid doctrine of retributive justice. Here is a possible paraphrase of what he is saying from v. 12 through v. 14, "Now in my experience I have seen the wicked sin a hundred times and never suffer for his sins. He even prolongs his life by his sinful life-style. Still, I know that everyone else insists on the doctrine of retribution, that it is a good thing to fear God and keep his commandments because in the end the sinner will 'get his'—he will be punished for his evil deeds—and his life will be cut short. At least, that is what everyone tells me, but I don't see this happening. Instead, what I keep observing is that righteous men suffer the fate of wicked men while wicked men are blessed. And if you ask me, this is all absurd!"

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[267] About a year ago, a psychopathic Norwegian (?) man murdered 70 or so young people at a camp. He was tried, convicted, and received the maximum penalty under Norwegian law—11 years incarceration. I apologize to Norway if I named the wrong country, but the sentence he received was so utterly absurd that I almost gasped when I heard it on international news.

[268] Longman, p. 220.

We have seen this kind of literary technique before in the book of Job. In Job 27: 13-23, it appears that Job is reversing course and agreeing with his three friends' doctrine of retribution. The change of direction in his speech is so abrupt that some commentators argue that this portion is actually the remainder of Bildad's speech in 25: 1-6 which has been misplaced by copiers. Gibson argues against this conclusion saying that Job is simply repeating the arguments of his friends (possibly to prove that he has been listening) and then commences to deconstruct their arguments by saying that true wisdom does not comply with the doctrine of retribution and cannot be discovered by mortal man (chapter 28).[269]

Qohelet may be doing the same thing here. On the one hand he is simply giving a parody (an imitation of something in a sarcastic or satirical way) of the traditional wisdom of retribution; then, with the other hand he is knocking it down as being indefensible. It could also be said that the rule of despotic, unjust men—the immediate context—favors the idea that the wicked prosper at the expense of the righteous. Despotic government seems to be the context of this whole section (cf. vv. 1-9).

On the other hand, Qohelet may be juxtaposing (placing side by side) two opposing views (traditional against the empirical/autonomous) without any attempt at resolution.[270] He is aware of the contradictions; moreover, he makes the reader "aware that the author is aware of the contradiction"[271] by putting the two positions so close together. He will leave the reader confused along with him. I favor this view, namely, that in vv. 12-13 Qohelet voices the traditional wisdom of retributive justice while acknowledging the enigma of wicked men often faring much better than the righteous. In spite of all the empirical evidence to the contrary, he is not willing to throw retributive justice out the window. Yet, having casts his vote for retributive justice, he repeats the data of his own observation that retributive justice does not work 100% of the time. Sometimes, the rewards of the righteous and the punishments of the wicked seem to be reversed (v. 14).

Throughout his speech, there has been the tension between the traditional wisdom of the OT and his empirical methodology, and Qohelet's mind swings back and forth between the two. As we have seen, his empirical methodology is fundamentally flawed; but there is an even more subtle flaw underlining any conversation he may have about good, evil or retribution. It is this: How can Qohelet speak of the retribution of evil without first defining what evil is? Qohelet never mentions the problem, and it is beyond the philosophical swamp of his day—but very important for our day. Apart from a transcendental standard of good and evil, there is no such thing as "good" or "evil". To quote John Frame,

> Unless God's standards govern our concept of goodness, there can be no talk of good or evil at all. If there is no personal Absolute, values must be based on impersonal things and forces, like matter, motion, time, and chance. But values cannot be based on any of these. They arise only in a context of personal relationships, and absolute standards presuppose an absolute person. Thus, the Christian can turn the tables on the unbeliever who raises the problem of evil: the non-Christian has a "problem of good." Without God, there is neither good nor evil.[272]

[269] McNeill, "Job".
[270] Bartholomew, p. 291.
[271] Bartholomew, p. 293.
[272] John Frame, *The Doctrine of God,* p. 171. For more discussion of this question, see McNeill, WVC 301, Christian Interpretation Lectures.

H. Nevertheless, "Carpe Diem!"—God Controls Everything! (8: 15-17)

> So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils *throughout* the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. [16] When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), [17] and I saw every work of God, *I concluded* that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. (Eccl. 8:15-17 NASB)

Qohelet surrenders his complaint in the *carpe diem* of v. 15. In the midst of the pessimistic prospects of despotism and injustice, we must nevertheless rejoice in the good things God has allowed us to enjoy. Failure to rejoice in God's wisdom and bounty will result in cynicism and despair—even anger against God, which Qohelet may have demonstrated in vv. 2-9. Don't try to discover why righteous men suffer the fate of evil men or why evil men are blessed, because you won't be able to do it (vv. 16-17). Everything that man does in this world, good and bad, is the consequence of "every work of God" commissioned to man "under the sun" (v. 17). Men may appear to be in control, but their autonomy is only an illusion, "their deeds are in the hand of God" (9: 1).

This illusion applies to kings as well as common folks, as Qohelet implicitly believed but did not observe with the eyes of faith: "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Proverbs 21:1 NASB). Moreover, assuming that the prophetic corpus (body) of literature had already been completed when he wrote, Qohelet knew that the most powerful king of Babylon had confirmed the warnings of the psalmist (Ps. 2).

> "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:35 NASB)

The little phrase in v. 17, "and I saw every work of God" has huge implications for understanding Ecclesiastes.

> Qohelet's autonomous epistemology, the bucket with which he gathers his data, leads him to believe that he has observed "every work of God." In terms of his epistemology this is true, but this verse alerts us to the hubris [exaggerated ability] and limits of his epistemology—hubris, because it is arrogant to imagine that the works of God are confined to what Qohelet can observe, and limits, because Qohelet's sort of epistemology can never take into account God's works of creation and redemption.[273]

This contributes to my contention that for Qohelet to know anything, he must know everything. In other words, he must be able to observe human history at all times and in all places; otherwise, he will miss the data necessary to test and confirm other observations. And since this is impossible, his empirical methodology is fatally flawed.

[273] Bartholomew, p. 293, words in brackets mine.

I. Controlled by the Uncertainty of God's Favor (9: 1-3a)

> For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will be* love or hatred; anything awaits him. [2] It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. [3] This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. (Eccl. 9:1-3a NASB)

Qohelet now slips back into pessimism. The complaint expressed in vv. 1-10 is the same we have seen before, only expressed more vividly and pessimistically. Qohelet's view of life and death comes out very emphatically in these verses, and it is anything but bright and cheery.

Wise and righteous men do not know whether they will be loved for their righteousness and wisdom or whether they will be hated instead (v. 1). No man can know the future. The conclusion to which we are led is found in Qohelet's earlier discourse: Why should a man expend great efforts in being righteous (cf. 7: 16)? His life, therefore, is controlled by the uncertainty of God's favor during his lifetime, regardless of what he does. It is unstated from whom love or hatred comes—from other men or from God? The phrase, "their deeds are in the hand of God", implies that he is talking about God's disposition to men, either love or hatred.[274] Righteous living and obedience to religious ritual does not ensure the love of God—if "love" is defined as "good things happening to good people". If both good and bad befall both the righteous as well as the wicked, then God's love and hatred are unpredictable. One does not know whether in this life God will love him or hate him. Judging from the blessings God bestows upon the wicked and the sorrows He sends upon the righteous, it seems at times that He hates the righteous and loves the wicked.[275]

The love or hatred of this verse refers to God's love or hatred manifested in the present life, not after death. The phrase, "anything awaits him" (v.1) cannot refer to death since death is inevitable and predictable for everyone. What is not predictable is how God will treat us before death, and our actions offer no guarantee that this will be good or bad—love or hatred, defined in Qohelet's terms.[276] In other words, Qohelet questions the retributive justice—earlier he affirmed it—often taught in Proverbs and the wisdom Psalms (cf. Ps. 1; 37: 9-11, 25).

As always, we must read Qohelet in the context of his own epistemological dilemma (problem). For him—as for many untaught Christians today—God's love and hatred are manifested entirely through His observable providence—His actions toward His creatures. But as Bartholomew has noted above, Qohelet's confidence in observing "every work of God" in this world is "hubris" (over-estimation of one's abilities). Our creatureliness limits our abilities to either observe or interpret providence in terms of God's love or hate. We have a very limited observation of what God is doing throughout the world.

The rigid, unbiblical view of retributive justice held by Job's three friends is reflected here—as opposed to the Bible's balanced retributive justice in Psalms, Proverbs, and elsewhere. If God

[274] Bartholomew, pp. 299-300.
[275] See the book of Job for more of this enigma.
[276] See also Eaton, p. 142.

treats us well in this life, He must love us. If not, He must hate us. At the very best, we are under God's curse for something terrible we have done. Job's three friends could not interpret his tragedy any other way. They had no other categories or "boxes" in which Job's situation would fit.[277] Present-day believers should see the inadequacy of a concretized (set in concrete, figuratively speaking) retributive justice, but often don't. We are hard-wired to believe that God communicates His love only through *benevolent* providence, His tender care for believers. *Severe* providence is a clue to His wrath and displeasure—always, not sometimes. There is enough truth in this belief to confuse us—as it did Job's three friends. God often blesses the righteous for obedience and punishes the unrighteous for disobedience. He rewards the faithful believer and chastens the faithless one. However, believers should know that we are beloved, not because life always turns up smelling like roses, but because of God's decree.

> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. [29] For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; (Romans 8:28-29 NASB)

Conformity to the image of Christ is the ultimate "good" confirming the love of God for His people. Thus, everything that happens to the believer ("all things") ultimately results in good because God will use these events to conform him into Christ's likeness (cf. Col. 3: 10). But would we know this without Romans 8? We barely believe it, much less practice it, even after memorizing Romans 8. Qohelet must not be judged too harshly even by NT standards.

According to vv. 1-3, death awaits the righteous and the wicked, the clean and the unclean, the religious and the unreligious; and death essentially renders meaningless the difference between the two. Whether we are good or evil will make no difference, anyway. We will all die alike, and this common fate will eliminate any advantage to those who are wise or righteous (v. 2). Yet again, we can see Qohelet waffling between two opinions—(1) the traditional wisdom that assures us, "Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly" (8: 12), and (2) his empirical observations, "There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility" (cf. 8: 14).

The more Qohelet ponders the reality and finality of death, the more evil life on earth seems to be—"There is an evil in all that is done under the sun." The expression "under the sun" is a more poetic way of saying "on earth" and is found 29 times in Ecclesiastes but nowhere else in the OT. Qohelet is speaking of life as he observes it on earth "under the sun", and his autobiography is restricted to this earthly realm.[278] We will notice from chapter 9 that he has little confidence in life after death at this point in his autobiography; otherwise, he could not honestly say that the fate of the righteous and the wicked was the same. On the other hand, contradictory statements betray a glimmer of hope in the afterlife (8: 12 and similar comments). The evil thing he laments in v. 3 is the common fate of all men, and it is the evil of all evils under the sun.[279]

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[277] See McNeill, "Job".
[278] Longman, p. 66.
[279] Longman, p. 227.

J. Controlled by the Certainty of Death and Obscurity (9: 3b-6)

> Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they *go* to the dead. [4] For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. [5] For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. [6] Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun. (Eccl. 9:3-6 NASB)

His low estimate of humanity is disclosed in v. 3b. Men are full of evil, even insanely evil, throughout their lives; and then they die. This comment may support the alternative interpretation of 7: 27-29 in which Qohelet may be speaking of men and women literally.[280] (But I still hold to the interpretation of "Woman Folly".)

Qohelet's self-contradictions found throughout his story emerge again in v. 4 when he speaks of the advantage of life over death. (Previously he had congratulated the dead—4: 2). Even though a lion is clearly superior to a dog while both are alive, "A live dog is better than a dead lion" simply because he is alive. Perhaps people living in sub-Saharan Africa can understand the comparison better than those living in the West. In the West we treat dogs as pets, and after many years they acquire almost human characteristics in the minds of their admiring owners. Gigantic retail stores operate for the sole purpose of selling dog and cat foods of endless variety, and even funeral homes for burying deceased pets are cropping up here and there. (I am not joking.) Only in America have I witnessed this insanity but I suppose we are not the only foolish westerners. In the ancient east, however, dogs were primarily scavengers that lived on garbage and dead animals—even dead humans when available.[281] They were despised animals roaming the streets and endangering human life. The Jews used the term "dog" as the most demeaning designation of the Gentile they could imagine. Thus, what Qohelet is saying here is that although life is preferable to death, it is still a "miserable business" at best.[282]

While a man is among the living there is hope, but when he is dead there is no hope (v. 4). We may ask Qohelet, "Hope for what?" He has told us earlier that "the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth" and that an infant who dies in childbirth is better off than a rich man with many children who is not given the gift of enjoying life (6: 1-5). But now he tells us that while a man is living there is hope—another inconsistency which the reader has now come to expect from Qohelet.

His sarcasm continues in v. 5. The advantage of the living over the dead is that they are conscious. Conscious of what? They are conscious of the inevitability and unavoidability of death.[283] The living know they will die, but the dead don't know anything. This is the dubious (doubtful) advantage of the living. Furthermore, they receive no reward for the life they have lived—an explicit denial of any reward for righteousness in the afterlife. Even the only conceivable reward

[280] Against Bartholomew's figurative interpretation "Lady Wisdom" and "Lady Folly"; but I still prefer Bartholomew's interpretation.
[281] Longman, p. 228.
[282] Longman, p. 228.
[283] Longman, p. 228.

for life—the memory of the dead by his loved ones—will soon fade (cf. 1: 11). From the perspective of someone who shares no belief in life after death, Qohelet is correct. If there is no life after death, then man is nothing but "vapor" (*hebel*) which is here one minute and gone the next (James 4: 14). Better to be a living dog than a dead lion; better to be a living scoundrel than a dead saint. After death nothing will matter—how you lived or what you accomplished while living. All will be forgotten soon enough, and you will have no participation in anything done on earth ("under the sun"—v. 6). "For Qohelet, death is so awful that it completely overshadows any value to life".[284]

K. Nevertheless, "Carpe Diem!" ("Seize the day!") (9: 7-10)

> Go *then,* eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. [8] Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. [9] Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. [10] Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. (Eccl. 9:7-10 NASB)

After a heavy contemplation of death, Qohelet then repeats the *carpe diem* formula in a more emphatic way (with imperatives) and with more detail (vv. 7-10; cf. Bartholomew, p. 303). There is no reward after this life, so enjoy whatever happiness which God affords you while living—eating and drinking, white clothes and oil which protect you from the intense dry heat, the love of your wife (or "woman"). All of this—and only this—is your reward for laboring under the sun. Therefore, whatever work or enjoyment you find in this fleeting life, pursue it vigorously and enthusiastically because one day you will die, and death will mark the end of all your activity. Nothing is happening in Sheol (the realm of the dead) where you are going (v. 10). We can see in this section that what Qohelet grants with one hand, he takes back with the other hand. "Enjoy yourself now, for when you die, you will not be enjoying anything." While the imperative of enjoyment is stronger in this section, so is the pessimism of facing death.

> In v. 9 the life that the reader is exhorted to enjoy is in the context of "all the days of your enigmatic life," and v. 10b undermines v. 10a by confronting it with the empty reality of Sheol. [P. Johnston] …argues that [sheol] is not simply the OT word for the underworld that is the destiny of all, as here. In the OT it is generally reserved for those under God's judgment and seldom refers to all humanity, and when it does it is only in contexts like this that stress life's absurdity and human sinfulness….
> …More than any other of the juxtaposed sections we have looked at, this one witnesses to the enormous tension in the attempt to pursue the logical implications of Qohelet's epistemology while also trying to acknowledge the insights of Israelite religion. The two threaten, as it were, to pull each other apart. As the advice to seize the day becomes imperative, so the enigma of life pulls in the opposite direction, and we see here the imminent explosion of Qohelet's attempt to hold on to both. Once again the exhortation to enjoyment should therefore not just be seen as the answer to the problem of the universality of death. The contradiction remains unresolved: how is one to appropriate joy if one is living like a dog?[285]

[284] Bartholomew, p. 303.
[285] Bartholomew, p. 305.

L. Controlled by Chance (9: 11-12)

> I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. [12] Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them. (Eccl. 9:11-12 NASB)

Qohelet introduces another aspect of life's enigma in v. 11—chance. Time has already been covered. Everyone meets his final destiny in death when his time on earth is extinguished. But another reason life is enigmatic is chance which is no respecter of persons. Because of chance, Qohelet argues, life on earth has no predictability, and therefore, no guarantee of success regardless of any human ability or effort. The race is not to the one who is swift, the one who can run faster than everyone else. The fastest runner in a race may not win because he may get sudden cramps in his legs or trip over another runner. Using another analogy, those who are in the best of health may not necessarily live longer. In my 61 years I have often noticed people living longer who never got sufficient exercise and who did not eat healthy, while enthusiastic runners died of heart attacks or cancer.[286] Never mind that one has a better statistical probability (I will not use the word, "chance") of staying alive if he is physically active and eats more broccoli; there is simply no guarantee that all our striving for physical health will extend our lives. And this lack of guarantee makes us skeptical—proven by the fact that everyone is not running the streets, purchasing health club memberships, or eating broccoli. As one bumper sticker puts it, "Eat well, stay fit, and die anyway".[287]

Men of greater ability are often unrewarded while lesser men, even evil men, carry the day. Proud men who have no regard for their constituents are elected to office while men of integrity, who could have made a real difference, fade away into nameless oblivion. Are those in political office today really the most capable of serving the country, or are they there as God's judgment upon their nations?

Nor is the battle necessarily won by those who are mightier and more thoroughly trained in the art of war. Some chance occurrence may come up during the battle which eliminates their advantage over a weaker force. A soldier may be blinded by the sunlight or stung by a bee and miss his mark. The Spanish Armada, the most powerful fleet of warships known to man in the 16th century, was destroyed in 1588 by a weaker English fleet. A huge storm made the heavier Spanish ships less maneuverable and more vulnerable to attack than the English ships. Had Spain won that battle, my first language would be Spanish, not English—or I might not be here at all.

Those who are frugal in the use of money are not necessarily those who will have something to eat, and those who have business savvy (sense) will not necessarily be the ones who make the most money. Of course, this is not the rule statistically; but there are enough exceptions to the rule to make one skeptical of being overzealous in effort and preparation. The peasant farmer in Africa who cultivates a small plot of ground entertains no illusions of digging himself out of poverty.

[286] The author of the book, *Running*, who's name I have forgotten, died of a heart attack while running.
[287] Ryken, p. 206.

Meanwhile, the government worker passes the day reading the newspaper and taking three-hour lunch breaks, telling you with a straight face that he has not had time to process your work permit.

But in the end, says Qohelet, time and chance overtake us all, so what does it matter? Chance events are unpredictable. In the same way, death will also come suddenly and unpredictably upon the one with ability or without ability and put an end to his life—like fish caught suddenly in a net or birds in a snare (v. 12). While you are chatting with your friends beside the road, a drunken driver swerves suddenly, killing your wife and mother of four children.[288] A hammer falls off a six-story scaffold and hits your hard-working father on the head giving him a concussion and leaving him in a comma for two years until his body succumbs to disease and dies. Your family is left destitute with no one to support it.

> With regard to time, chapter 3 with its 'time to be born,…time to die', and so on, has already shown how relentlessly our lives are swung from one extreme to another by the tidal pull of forces we do not control. All this counterbalances the impression we may get from maxims about hard work, that success is ours to command. In the sea of life we are more truly fish…taken in an evil net, or else unaccountably spared, than the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls.[289]

None of this makes good reporting for Forbes or Fortune 500 magazines who celebrate the "winners"; but they only tell us about the success stories, not the failures—the "losers" who worked just as hard as the "winners" but are now digging themselves out of debt and bankruptcy. The products or services they sold are—in many cases—just as good as those sold by the winners, but their timing of the market was off or "chance" occurrences prevented them from succeeding. Or maybe those who would have succeeded died early in life, thus preventing them from reaching attainable goals.

So how do we apply this section on time and chance to our lives? Happily, we may read what Qohelet is saying with a different perspective informed by the rest of the bible. What Qohelet calls "chance", we call providence—albeit (although) sometimes a severe providence. There is no such thing as "chance", only God's wise ordering of all events and all people for His own glory—swerving automobiles and hammers falling off scaffolds, ruthless political leaders, and unforeseeable events which make some rich and others bankrupt. They are all alike in His hands, although these events make no sense to us. Considering the fact that there is no such thing as chance, the Christian must move forward with his whole effort, leaving the future in God's hands. Nothing that we do for the Lord will be wasted.

Yet, let's not anesthetize (numb) ourselves against the biting, painful realism of Qohelet's frustration. Life is frustrating and painful, and there seems at times to be no wise and benevolent ordering of events by a loving God who cares for His creation—only painful chance occurrences.[290] Ecclesiastes is not given to the church simply to be critiqued as an example of the secular world-view—a "straw-man" argument easily torn down. Even for us, with our knowledge of the afterlife and its rewards, Qohelet's story is painfully real; and we can enter into the story without much difficulty. God seems often distant and indifferent to our plight. I have wondered if

[288] Based on the true story of Laura Sheffer who was killed by a drunken driver in Kampala, Uganda.
[289] Kidner, p. 84.
[290] cf. Packer's comments, p. 3 of notes.

the relatively short life-expectancy in sub-Saharan countries contributes to lack of future orientation, and sometimes energy, in the market place. If someone can only expect to live 45 to 50 years at best, why not simply live for today with minimum effort? No one knows when he will die; therefore, the prospect of an early death will discourage some people from trying to achieve their potential.

M. Controlled by the Obscurity of the Wise and the Visibility of Fools (9: 13-18)

> Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. [14] There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. [15] But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. [16] So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. [17] The words of the wise heard in quietness are *better* than the shouting of a ruler among fools. [18] Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. (Eccl. 9:13-18 NASB)

Just as time and chance overtake both the wise and the fool, rendering wisdom enigmatic, the works of the wise are not remembered—which also makes their value questionable (cf. 9: 5a). Qohelet was much impressed by a story he heard of a poor wise man whose wisdom delivered a city from a superior military force (vv. 13-14). He doesn't go into any detail except to say that in spite of his wise advice, no one remembered the poor wise man for his heroic act (v. 15). The poor man's wisdom was better than the strength of the superior army (v. 18b—"the weapons of war"), but the lesson which could have been learned from his story is lost. Thus, the benefits of wisdom are short-lived through forgetfulness and, therefore, an enigma.

Furthermore, Qohelet has observed that the benefits of one wise man can be quickly undone by the stupidity of one sinner (v. 18), possibly a ruler among fools (v. 17). Rulers who have the oratorical gift of rousing public sentiment may succeed in bringing the nation to war, but unnoticed men who are wiser are able to analyze the situation carefully (vv. 17-18). If they had been consulted, their wisdom would have prevented much loss of life. There were cooler heads around in Germany while Adolf Hitler was rousing the people to nationalistic, hot-headed pride; but Hitler was a master orator who was able to mesmerize educated people into witless dupes (those who are easily deceived). The German Panzer tanks were the most formidable weapons in occupied Europe, but had the German people listened to "The words of the wise heard in quietness" rather than "the shouting of a ruler among fools", no Panzers would have been necessary (v. 18a). There is no lack of political orators who are all form but no substance—convincing speakers who have no wisdom. Unthinking Christians commonly follow them even when their political views are completely opposite from theirs.

It only takes one big mistake—particularly in the political arena—to undo the good of much wisdom (cf. 1 Kings 12: 1-15). Wisdom is good in the short term but in the long term it is either forgotten or undone by fools. The story of the poor wise man teaches that "we should learn not to count on anything as fleeting as public gratitude". [291]Qohelet is thus left without any certainty to the advantage of wisdom. Sir Winston Churchill, the prime minister of England whose courage held the British nation steady during World War II, lost the election for the next term of office.

[291] Kidner, p. 85.

Summary and Conclusion

Qohelet explores many of the questions nagging the modern man. Life seems to be out of our control. Nevertheless, he encourages us to seize the good things God has allowed us to enjoy, recognizing that even the evil of man is really under God's providential control. Drifting back into pessimism, he laments the seeming unpredictability of God's love based on the flawed criterion of good or bad things happening to people in this present life. Since good things happen to evil men and bad things happen to good men, no one knows how to determine whether God loves him or hates him. Moreover, often nothing appears to be controlled by God, anyway, but by pure chance. This renders the value of human effort questionable. Finally, life seems absurd in the way wise men are ignored by the greater part of society while loud-mouthed fools dupe them into following their excesses into questionable endeavors—including senseless wars.

Lesson Seven Questions

1. How was Israel unique in checking the power and authority of kings? Give biblical examples.
2. How is Qohelet's wisdom in v. 11 relevant for modern-day courts?
3. Where does Qohelet make his epistemological problem evident? That is, where does his self-contradiction alert us to the fact that he is making his own confusion obvious to us?
4. What does Qohelet say about the unpredictability of the love of God?
5. How does Qohelet define "love" or "hatred" in 9: 1-10, and how is this passage relevant for Christians struggling with severe difficulties?
6. What does Qohelet have to say about life after death?
7. Why is the carpe diem section of 9: 7-10 unconvincing? Why does it fail to inspire a sense of joy?
8. Discuss how the unpredictability of time and "chance" affect people's lives.
9. How does 9: 13-18 apply to the course of human history?
10. Is Qohelet correct when he attributes historical and life events to chance? What attitude should the Christian have to his statements in vv. 9: 13-18? Explain.

Lesson Eight—Tying Things Together

Introduction

In this final lesson, we will see how Qohelet strings together a long list of proverbial sayings which appear to have little connection with one another (chapter 10). When we get to chapter 11, the first six verses are mutually related to the subject of enterprise and work while 11: 7—12: 7 present a sobering contrast between youth and old age and how one must remember his Creator before the ravages of old age set in. The remainder of the lesson considers the differences in how one may interpret the narrator's evaluation of Qohelet's wisdom, whether positive or negative.

N. Proverbial Wisdom (10: 1—11: 6)

1. Wisdom and honor destroyed by foolishness (10: 1-3)

> Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom *and* honor. [2] A wise man's heart *directs him* toward the right, but the foolish man's heart *directs him* toward the left. [3] Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone *that* he is a fool. (Eccl. 10:1-3 NASB)

This section of Ecclesiastes reads like Proverbs with one saying after another, sometimes with little or no connection with the previous statement. However, the first several verses of the chapter could be connected with 9: 18. The idea there is that a little bit of foolishness ruins a great deal of wisdom. In v. 1, dead flies make the perfumer's oil stink. Presumably it does not take a lot of flies to ruin a large volume of perfume. (I've never tried it.) In the same way a little foolishness is weightier in its consequences than wisdom and honor. If we stop and think about this a moment, it makes considerable sense. Just think of a well-known pastor who has devoted his life to preaching and teaching and is loved by everyone in the church, particularly those he has counseled. A woman in his congregation is attracted to him and manages to seduce him into bed—only one time, after which the pastor repents and regrets his actions. Their one-night stand is discovered, and in one single night, he has lost years of credibility—and his congregation. Sadly, one foolish act impacts the congregation more than years of faithful service.

To use another illustration, perhaps two countries at war have spent months trying to negotiate a peace treaty, and a temporary truce has been declared for two weeks. When they are close to a break-through in negotiations, a private first-class sniper draws the sights of his rifle on a high-ranking officer and pulls the trigger, killing the officer and breaking the truce. All negotiations are off, and the two countries resume hostilities. The action of an insignificant private has more consequence than months of negotiations by high-ranking officers and political leaders. "A little foolishness is weightier than wisdom an honor."

Wisdom and foolishness move in opposite directions, one to the right and the other to the left (v. 2). Qohelet may mean that there is very little resemblance in the actions of a fool and those of a wise man. They are clearly distinguishable from one another, something borne out in the next verse. In the "deep South" (USA), we have an expression for a person who possesses a lot of common sense or common wisdom. He has what is called "walking-around-sense", and I wonder

if this common American expression came originally from Eccl. 10: 3? The fool demonstrates his foolishness even in the way he carries himself and interacts with others; he doesn't have any "walking around sense", and this lack becomes evident to all. Everyone in town knows who the fool is, and his name is a byword for stupidity (cf. Prov. 7: 7; 12: 23).[292]

2. Staying calm in royal company (10: 4)

> If the ruler's temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses. (Eccl. 10:4 NASB)

With no apparent connection to the previous verse, Qohelet gives advice about what to do when the king is angry with you (v. 4). The temptation is to leave his presence, but if you leave him this will simply confirm his suspicion that you are up to no good—a conspiracy perhaps? Your composure (calmness) will assure him that he has no reason to be angry or suspicious.

3. The chaotic society (10: 5-7)

> There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler—[6] folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. [7] I have seen slaves *riding* on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land. (Eccl. 10:5-7 NASB)

The next set of verses also seem disconnected from the verses that precede them. They speak of a world turned on its head ("The world upside down").[293] He introduces this crazy, unexpected, and inappropriate set of circumstances by saying that he has seen an "error" coming from a political ruler (v. 5). The error is identified in v. 6 as the promotion of fools to high-ranking political positions while those of the wealthier class remain outside the halls of power and authority. This is an interesting comparison and perhaps not one we would have expected. We would have expected him to say that the error was in placing fools in high places instead of wise men, not rich men.[294] Evidently, Qohelet, a rich man himself, cannot shake off the traditional attitude which naturally favors the rule of the rich. Haven't the rich always ruled the world, and wouldn't the alternative be unthinkable, he reasons? Likewise, he gets a visceral reaction (an upset stomach) seeing a slave riding a horse while princes walk (v. 7). In a normal society it's the other way around!

But before we write this off as elitist snobbery, we have to reckon with the fact that Qohelet is not the only wise man in Israel who entertained such sentiments.[295]

> Luxury is not fitting for a fool; Much less for a slave to rule over princes. (Proverbs 19:10 NASB)

> Under three things the earth quakes, And under four, it cannot bear up: [22] Under a slave when he becomes king, And a fool when he is satisfied with food, (Proverbs 30:21-22 NASB)

[292] cited by Longman, p. 240.
[293] Longman, p. 241.
[294] Longman, p. 242.
[295] cited by Longman, p. 242.

The general situation presented both here and in Proverbs is that of a chaotic society ruled by political upstarts (inexperienced novices), possibly a situation provoked by senseless rulers (1 Kings 12; Eccl. 4: 13). Qohelet may have in mind the chaotic situation in the days of the Judges when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes", or perhaps he was thinking of wicked Abimelech—the "anti-judge"—who rose to power over the dead bodies of his half-brothers (Judges 9). In the normal course of events, rulers are wealthy. In ancient society, it is not difficult to determine why this was the case. Kings passed on their reign, their wealth to first born sons. Other sons ruled as princes. The king's sons had access not only to their father's wealth but the best education possible at the time. In the providence of God, Moses acquired some of his leadership ability through Egyptian education (Acts 7: 22; Ex. 2: 10).

While all ancient kings presumed to reign by divine right, Biblical history subverts (overthrows) this assumption by God's divine right to place two men of humble origin upon the throne of Israel, Saul and David. David's sons ruled by the divine promise of the Davidic covenant but not without the contingency of obedience, as Israel's history testifies by its eventual exile from the land (2 Sam. 7). God also reserves the right to subvert customary dynastic succession of a kingdom from the father to the son. God's choice of David, and the passing over of Jonathan, Saul's son, was an exception to the rule highlighting God's sovereign prerogative to raise kings up and to remove them according to his will (Dan. 4: 17b, 25b, 32b). Solomon's son Rehoboam lost ten tribes of the northern Kingdom of Israel which God gave to Jeroboam I. God is not subject to the prevailing social order or culture.

Wealth and wisdom are subtly identified in vv. 6-7, but Qohelet will make this identification more explicit later (v. 19).[296] This does not imply that he has any naïve notions about the benevolence of wealthy rulers, for he makes it clear earlier that people often suffer under them (3: 16; 4: 1 ff., 13ff.; 5: 8 f. as well as 8: 2-9 and 9: 13-18).[297] Moreover, he has already given one example that contradicts the ordinary advantage of the rule of nobility (4: 1-3, 13-14).

In modern society, the wealthy rule for much the same reasons—educational advantage and power. Wealth—either theirs or someone else's—allows them to take advantage of educational opportunities and political alliances with other educated and powerful people. I've never known anyone graduating from Mississippi State University (where I graduated) becoming president of the United States, but many graduates of Harvard and Yale Universities have become presidents—but not necessarily to the advantage of the nation. Moreover, they either had wealthy parents or wealthy associations to get there—even considering scholarships. Through superior education, experience, and management skills, such people may become capable of amassing additional wealth and power over a long period of time through experience. If they did not get to the top overnight—the "rags to riches" story—little by little they may have learned to manage not only time and money, but people and power for the benefit of others. To a certain extent they may have learned to manage their own egos, at least so as not to offend those who helped them get ahead. Those who grew up wealthy probably learned management skills through their wealthy parents, most likely the father, who gave them opportunities and experience that people of lower socio-economic status never had—like a son who gradually takes over his father's business.

[296] Bartholomew, p. 323.
[297] Kidner, p. 90

Contrast the normal situation described above to a slave or a fool who is suddenly promoted to unimaginable power and position. What effect will it have upon him? Can the world "bear up" under such a person (Prov. 30: 22)? In a short time, he has risen to a position of authority formerly unknown to him. Can he manage such power to the benefit of others, or will such power get the best of him? In most cases—sinful nature being what it is—such a man will grossly abuse his power and his people. Think of Hitler, the starving artist of Austria; Lenin, the Russian peasant; Idi Amin, the professional boxer. History will testify that there are rare exceptions.

The reader of Prov. 30: 22 will notice that this proverb is given in context with other circumstances under which the "earth quakes"—"an unloved woman when she gets a husband" and "a maid when she supplants her mistress." Was not Hagar impossible to live with once Abraham took her as his wife? Did she not begin to despise her mistress, Sarah, and taunt her? A person with little or no formal or self-education, low social standing and no money (noting some exceptions, like King David, the shepherd boy) who rises quickly to power with little previous leadership experience will generally be ill-equipped to handle it—like a baby handling dynamite. On another level, I have heard it said that the most dangerous thing on the African continent is a 12-year-old African male toting an AK-47 machine gun—more dangerous than a wild animal. Having been previously powerless to save himself and other loved ones from oppression and abuse, he is now suddenly empowered to take destiny into his own hands, dishing out the same death and destruction he deplored in those who abused him.

Is it not true that many African rulers of humble origin have risen to the zenith of power in a short period of time—not by wisdom, prudence, and the ability to manage others benevolently, but by charisma (personal magnetism) and the power of the smoking gun barrel? (Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe, among others) And can we not agree that Africa has "quaked" as a result? "The earth cannot bear up under an arrogant fool".[298]

4. Working smart, not just hard (10: 8-11)

> He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. [9] He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them. [10] If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen *its* edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success. [11] If the serpent bites before being charmed, there is no profit for the charmer. (Eccl. 10:8-11 NASB)

These are some of the most difficult verses in a difficult book. The example of digging a pit and falling into it has a negative connotation (meaning) (Ps. 7: 15; 35: 7). Likewise, it was common for thieves to dig through the clay walls of houses and steal their contents. Interpreted in this sense, Qohelet is warning evil-doers of retributive justice for seeking to harm others. But vv. 9-11 simply speak of ways that people make a living—quarrying stones, splitting logs, and one uncommon occupation, charming snakes. There is never any evil connotation given to any of these activities in wisdom literature.[299] The basic meaning in these tidbits of miscellaneous wisdom seems to be this: It takes more than hard effort to succeed at any task. You also have to work intelligently, even in such a mundane task as splitting logs. If the axe isn't sharp, you will expend

[298] Waltke, Proverbs, p. 493.
[299] Longman p. 244.

twice the effort to split the same number of logs. If you aren't careful, you will fall into the pit you have dug; thus, careful planning and work habits will ensure success in digging the pit. If you are demolishing a wall, you should know what's on the other side, or else proceed with caution. And charming snakes? Well, no one needs to tell you how careful you should be with cobras. Charming snakes could also be figurative for handling difficult tasks with promptness and decisiveness. Failure to act quickly could be deadly, or it could nullify any profit from the activity. "Slackness may nullify inherent skill".[300]

5. The foolishness of fools (10: 12-15)

> Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; [13] the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. [14] Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? [15] The toil of a fool *so* wearies him that he does not *even* know how to go to a city. (Eccl. 10:12-15 NASB)

The next four verses are not connected to the previous four but make up another self-contained unit of thought. While a wise man's words bring the wise man favor, the words of a fool destroy the fool.[301] Or it could mean that while the words of a wise man bring favor to someone else, the words of a fool—far from doing anyone else any good—actually destroy the fool who spoke them (my preference). The beginning of the fool's speech is folly and the end is madness; thus, everything else in between is harmful as well. He seldom, if ever, has anything helpful to say; nevertheless, he keeps on running his mouth (v. 14a) about things he knows nothing about (v. 14b).[302] Although opinionated on every subject, the fool hardly knows the best way to go to town (v. 15). "So the picture begins to emerge of a man who makes things needlessly difficult for himself by his stupidity".[303]

6. A nation led by young fools (10: 16-19)

> Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. [17] Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness. [18] Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. [19] *Men* prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything. (Eccl. 10:16-19 NASB)

In v. 16 Qohelet is back to the subject of kings. An immature lad who ascends to the throne can be bad news for a country; he may act foolishly. Moreover, he may surround himself with other fools (also known as "advisors") who indulge themselves, eating and drinking lavishly in the morning before any productive work has been done. By way of contrast, a mature king of noble birth is a blessing to the people, and he surrounds himself with men of wisdom and sobriety who do not plunder the nation with extravagant and wasteful living (v. 17). The age factor is not the most important one, as the youthful King Josiah demonstrates (2 Kings 22: 1-2). Yet, inexperienced youthfulness often begets arrogance and recklessness (cf. 1 Kings 12: 10). Isaiah

[300] Eaton, p. 154.
[301] Longman, p. 247.
[302] Longman, p. 248.
[303] Kidner, p. 93.

prophesies the ruin of Israel manifested by the removal of honorable and valorous men replaced by "capricious children" who rule in their stead (Isa. 3: 1-4). Amos thunders against the shameless extravagance of the rich who oppress the poor by confiscating their land (Amos 6: 4; 2: 7-8). Yet, once more we see Qohelet's preference of the upper classes for leadership.[304]

We also detect apparent confusion. It would seem that the feasting, high-flying revelers of v. 16 are taking him seriously and "seizing the day", grabbing all the enjoyment they can get out of life (8: 15). He has also previously questioned the superiority of work to leisure (4: 6). Why, then, does Qohelet find fault with princes who party all hours of the day? Once more, he is wrestling with the contradictions. He knows intuitively (without observation) that virtue and integrity—as well as sobriety—are the best course of action for successful and worthwhile living despite the fact that the consequences of one's actions do not always match one's behavior, making cause and effect become seemingly unpredictable. The wise often suffer the calamities belonging to fools (8: 12-14; 9: 1-5). Nevertheless, at the end of the day, he knows that individual or national prosperity *ordinarily* results from wise management, not foolish revelry. A person cannot live in this world without assuming some predictability; therefore, he reasons that a kingdom will fall if it is led by youthful idiots. Likewise, modern philosophers like David Hume have repudiated (rejected) the principle of cause and effect—at least in theory—but they cannot function effectively in this life by any other principle. Rather than jumping out of the window of a two-story building to get to the first floor, Hume always took the stairs, instead.

Upon further investigation of 8: 15, we see that Qohelet is not really contradicting himself by condemning the dissipation (indulgence) of young princes. One's eating and drinking is only joyful in connection with "his toils *throughout* the days of his life"—in other words, as a respite (break) from productive labor. In the same way, the Sabbath rest was instituted as a respite from six days of labor, without which the Sabbath has no meaningful context.

Verse 18 may be taken literally, and it reads similarly to Prov. 6: 6 and other proverbs concerning the "sluggard".[305] I've seen a lot of houses like this in my day. Just a little periodic upkeep would have saved them from the bulldozer's blade (demolition). I've bought and restored my share of them before they reached that point. However, I believe Qohelet is speaking metaphorically (figuratively) of a kingdom ruled by fools, particularly the young fools and princes of v. 16. The rafters of the neglected house sag, and its roof leaks through lack of maintenance; likewise, a kingdom disintegrates through lack of wise management.[306] This so often occurs when the young, economically advantaged rise to power without ever experiencing or learning the hard lessons necessary for economic success. Prosperity is viewed as an automatic entitlement rather than the reward for hard, yet intelligent, labor. The assumption is that the good times will never end, no matter how lazy or extravagant we are. This, of course, reverses any advantage to the rule of the wealthy whose sons never learned the value of labor. Wealth alone will not ensure wise rule.[307]

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[304] Cf. 10: 6-7; Longman, p. 249.
[305] cited in Longman, p. 250.
[306] So also Kidner, p. 95.
[307] By way of application, as the US stands at $16 and one-third trillion in debt, I am wondering when our nation's politicians—many of them Harvard graduates from wealthy families—will finally learn that a nation is not essentially different from a large household. As the individual household cannot spend itself rich, neither can a nation. Eventually, the bills must be paid. The economy of the US was built initially upon the backs of hard-working Americans—most of whom were not Harvard graduates—who saved and invested in their own businesses without favors from

The "meal" and "wine" of v. 19 appears to connect this verse with the revelry of v. 16. The thread holding food, wine, and money together is function. Food satisfies the cravings of the appetite and wine soothes the mind. Money not only purchases food and wine, but satisfies many other cravings. Qohelet is simply repeating the popular consensus (agreement) of his day and our day—money solves everything. But having all the money and monumental achievements he ever wanted (chapter 2), he found that it could not solve his gnawing dissatisfaction with life. Money doesn't solve the cravings of the mind to know the meaning and purpose of life (3: 11).

There may be no connection between v. 19 and the unwise leaders of v. 16, but the connection could be that Qohelet is putting the words of v. 18 into the mouths of the unwise leaders—"more money will solve all our problems". As President Bill Clinton said in his second bid for the US presidency, "It's the economy, stupid." As long as people experience a certain level of prosperity—enough food and wine—the nation's leaders think they can do as they please. They are probably right, since the people generally vote with their back pockets (their wallets) in mind. Never mind that 60 million babies have been murdered in the US since Roe v. Wade in 1973. What's really important is whether the ruling party can improve my standard of living, regardless of its stand on peripheral (unimportant) matters like abortion.

7. Freedom of speech in a world of tyrants (10: 20)

> Furthermore, in your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known. (Eccl. 10:20 NASB)

Be careful what you say about the king or other powerful men even in the privacy of your bedroom. A little birdie will chirp in the king's ear all the terrible things you said about him, and then you will pay the price. So, if you want to live, keep your mouth shut! The idea is that powerful men have complicated networks of people who are paid to keep them informed. Were they not so informed, they would not be able to maintain their power and status.

> They would not have reached their dizzy heights, or stayed there, without a sixth sense for dissidents.[308]

8. The necessity of labor in an uncertain world (11: 1-6)

> Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. [2] Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. [3] If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. [4] He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. [5] Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones *are formed* in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. [6] Sow

government bureaucrats. Many Washington insiders believe that the government has the superior wisdom to create a prosperous economy by spending the same money taken away from private businesses through excessive taxation. However, history has proved that the government is a poor manager and investor. The only thing the US government has done well is to protect US citizens from foreign attack—although a great deal of money is also wasted in the military.

[308] Kidner, p. 95.

> your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good. (Eccl. 11:1-6 NASB)

In this section of Qohelet's wise sayings, he advises his disciple to prepare well for the future. There are certain things he can do to accomplish this. Verse one has commonly been interpreted as an encouragement to be charitable to others. If you give your bread away, one day someone will be equally generous to you, or God may pay you back in some unforeseen way. As it stands by itself, the verse seems completely enigmatic (puzzling), for what good would water-soaked bread be to anyone anyway?[309] Those who hold to this common interpretation are naturally drawing upon their interpretation of v. 2. If you divide your wealth by being generous to others—seven plus one equals eight, a complete number indicating many people—then if you suffer financial misfortune in the future, perhaps your beneficiaries will be as gracious to you as you were to them. We are, of course, reminded of the parable of the unjust steward in Lk. 16: 1-13 who prepared for his future by being generous with his master's money, not his own. It is possible that this parable has influenced the interpretation of v. 2 for centuries.

However, there is no indication from the text to whom the bread or the portion should be given.[310] It does not say "to the poor", and there is no evidence in the context that Qohelet is talking about charity. A widely held view among commentators is that Qohelet is encouraging the risk of commercial ventures.[311]Throwing bread upon the water is a metaphorical expression for maritime (sea) trading of commodities (wheat, oil, cloth, gold, etc.). The author of Ecclesiastes purposely connected the autobiography of Qohelet with Solomon although in such a way as to make the fiction obvious to his ancient readers.[312] Solomon was well-known for his commercial ventures. Through his relationship with Hiram of Tyre—king of the Phoenicians, known for their superior sailing skills—he expanded Israel's commerce with maritime trading (1 Kings 9: 26-27; cf. 1 Kings 5).

Shipping, of course, was risky business; and still is. Thus, the trader is advised in v. 2 to divide his "portion" to seven, or even to eight, different ventures (different ships?) to make sure that at least one or a few of these ventures paid off. One ship, or even a few, may sink, and if the trader had all his money invested in one ship, he could lose everything. Of course, Qohelet is not limiting the examples of investing only to maritime activities, but to any kind of investment activity. Investing always involves risk; thus, it is better to spread your risks over a wide area of economic activity. Modern investors spread their risks by investing in mutual funds which are little pieces of ownership in various companies—little pieces of the "pie". If one company goes out of business, the person owning mutual funds in that company will not lose his whole pie; he will not be seriously hurt by the loss. But someone who had invested all of his money in a particular company's stock will lose everything he has invested—the whole pie.

Investment also takes patience; it is not a get-rich-quick scheme. Solomon's ships were sent out every three years; thus, he had to wait three years to receive a return on his investment (1 Kings

[309] Longman, p. 255.
[310] Longman, p. 256.
[311] Longman, p. 256; Delitzsch [circa (approximately)1872], pp. 391-393, cited by Longman.
[312] Although not so obvious to modern readers; see my introductory remarks on authorship.

10: 22).[313] The Bible takes a long-range viewpoint on the accumulation of riches—patient progress rather than recklessness. It is something to be "gathered" by labor, either mental or physical (Prov. 13: 11). Preoccupation with wealth also leads believers into impatience, temptation and ruin (1 Tim. 6: 10).

Qohelet is giving his disciples some wise advice about preparing for the future which could turn out to be a very stormy sea. If we examine it closely, much of the advice about business activity is very sound advice although inconsistent with much he has said elsewhere. Why should one prepare for the future in a world in which the "character-consequence structure" is unpredictable?[314] Good things happen to the wicked, including those who are lazy; and bad things happen to the righteous, including those who are industrious. Moreover, if riches give us no satisfaction, why should we give ourselves a headache by trying to accumulate it through strenuous labor?

Again, although Qohelet struggles with the enigmas, he lives as if the character-consequence model is probable—in other words, as if righteousness and labor are rewarded and unrighteousness and laziness are punished. Economic survival is improbable if one does not plan for the future. Consider the business advice given in the first two verses. It is sound advice to diversify your business investments in order to spread out your risks (v. 2). It is also sound advice to do some kind of investing in hopes of future profit. True, you may lose money instead of gaining it, but if "nothing is ventured, nothing is gained". Jesus himself told a parable in which the servants who invested their master's wealth were praised for their efforts (Lk. 19: 12-27). The other servant was condemned not because he lost the capital but because he didn't do anything with it. Moreover, while the parable is not specifically for the purpose of promoting material investments, it certainly encourages it. God expects a return on our labor.

The worst thing we can do is to sit around and do nothing (v. 4). A farmer who "watches the wind" and waits for it to become perfectly still so that it does not blow his seed away will end up not planting at all. If he must be absolutely sure that it will not rain on his harvested crops, he will never harvest. Qohelet is not advising the farmer to be reckless or careless by never watching the weather. He is saying that none of us has any control over the weather or the future. If we demand perfect control over the future, we will be so paralyzed with fear that we will do nothing, and we will fail by default—by doing nothing, precisely the reason the faithless servant was condemned (Lk. 19). Verse 3 must be interpreted from v. 4. The examples given are other examples of our lack of control. When clouds are full, it rains whether we want it to rain or not; and when a tree falls, it will fall in one direction or another beyond our control. We have little control over many things in our future.[315] Nevertheless, our lack of control cannot be used as an excuse for inactivity. God's sovereign control does not eliminate human responsibility.[316]

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[313] Eaton, p. 159.
[314] Bartholomew's terms, 335, passim [in other places in the book]
[315] cf. Longman, pp. 255-257; Delitzsch, pp. 391-393.
[316] See Romans 9 and 10, the first chapter concentrating on God's sovereignty in salvation and the second concentrating on man's responsibility to repent and believe. Paul believed that God's sovereignty and man's human responsibility were fully compatible with one another, requiring no complex theological explanation.

We simply don't know what God is going to do with us (v. 5). Qohelet, an ancient writer, could surely say that he did not know how bones were formed in the womb, but the modern reader is not much better off. We can describe the process scientifically, but the human body is still pretty much a mystery to us. Likewise, we don't know what God is going to do with the weather, and even modern weathermen with all their technical apparatuses make big mistakes in their predictions. But the logical conclusion is not idleness. Rather, Qohelet says, "Get going!" (v. 6) Since you can't know the future, you have to cover all the possibilities by sowing morning and evening. One planting may succeed, or both may succeed; or both may fail, but you have to plant anyway.

Earlier, Qohelet says, "I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves" (3: 10), a task which he describes as a "grievous" one (1: 13). Grievous or not, it is our task, Qohelet insists, and a necessary one. Life must go on with no positive guarantees, but inactivity is a guarantee of failure. If you don't sow at all, there will be no crops.

We can see, then, that although he is often a pessimistic skeptic (one who doubts), Qohelet is also a practical skeptic who understands the necessity of hard work. Throughout the book, he has kept reminding us that our labor is one of the few things we have for our enjoyment (2: 10, 24; 3: 13; 5: 18, 19; 9: 9)—even though it is enigmatic (1: 14; 2: 11, 17, 22; 4: 4).

From the perspective of the NT believer, God's sovereign control more than compensates for our lack of control. We are living in the light of greater revelation from which we know that God designs all events for the good of His people. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:28-29 NASB). From this perspective, the believer cannot ultimately lose. The promise does not eliminate sorrow, pain, or failure; but in the midst of life's uncertainties and enigmas, the believer can be comforted with the thought that all the events of his life are designed for his sanctification—conformity to the image of Christ.

O. Enjoying Youth Before the Ravages of Old Age (11: 7—12: 7)

> [7]The light is pleasant, and *it is* good for the eyes to see the sun. [8] Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come *will be* futility. [9] Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. [10] So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.
>
> Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; [2] before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; [3] in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; [4] and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. [5] Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags

> himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. [6] *Remember Him* before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; [7] then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Eccl. 11:7-12:7 NASB)

In his parting words, Qohelet lays before us an allegory depicting the sweeping contrast between youth and old age. Although he has questioned the relative value of life over death and has once declared death to be preferable (4: 2) and never being born as better than life or death (4: 3), it is clear from his concluding words that he can't be consistent with this outlook. It is good, after all, to be alive (v. 7, "for the eyes to see the sun"). Even when life is enigmatic it should be enjoyed regardless of the "days of darkness" which must be endured. The "dark days" could be the daily self-conscious struggle with life's seeming absurdities endured during one's whole life. Or it could refer to the ravages (ruin) of old age which will be described shortly (12: 2-7). Most likely it is the former since he is told to "remember" the days of darkness. One does not need to remember the difficulties of old age he is presently experiencing.

Qohelet encourages young men to live life to the fullest before old age sets in. Could this mean that he is inviting them to live recklessly? In light of Qohelet's failed experiment with hedonism (Chapter 2), it would seem inconsistent for him to encourage others to follow the same path; but he has been known to be inconsistent before. Notice that he says, "And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes." Viewed from the hedonist[317] perspective, this could mean, "If it feels good and looks good, do it!" Such desires would obviously include women, and not necessarily within the boundaries of marriage. The "desires of your eyes" can have a negative connotation in Scripture.[318] Moreover, Qohelet warns, "Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things." Such a warning seems out of place if he is talking about the legitimate enjoyment of sex and pleasure—sex within the context of marriage, moderate drinking and eating, or having fun within morally acceptable boundaries.

However, it is not necessary to interpret Qohelet's advice as an encouragement to hedonism. The reminder of judgment may simply be Qohelet's way of discouraging the young man from pursuing illicit (unlawful) pleasure or from defining life in terms of pleasure. Qohelet found this extreme unrewarding from his own experience (chapter 2). At the other extreme, Qohelet does not advise asceticism as the answer to life's perplexities.[319] Neither does the rest of Scripture: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31 NASB). Jesus was falsely accused of being a hedonistic glutton and drunkard (Matt. 11: 19), but this false accusation would have never occurred had Jesus been an ascetic. Rejoicing is part of the Christian life, a continuing duty in light of what we have been given (1 Thes. 5: 16).

Furthermore, "the desire of your eyes" is an expression used for Ezekiel's wife in Ezek. 24: 16; thus, pursuing "the desires of your eyes" could be parallel with the earlier statement, "Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:9 NASB).

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[317] Hedonism—seeking pleasure as the main goal of life

[318] Cf. Num. 15: 39, cited by Longman; also 1 Jn. 2: 15-16; Gen. 3: 6

[319] Eaton, p. 167. Asceticism—the practice of extreme self-denial as the measure of spirituality

The reference to judgment may be significant (v. 9), coming as it does toward the end of the book. Earlier he had said that there was no difference between the righteous and the unrighteous. Both have the same fate (9: 1-3). However, in that passage Qohelet was speaking about death as the common fate of the righteous and the wicked without making any predictions about the judgment after death. The definite article, "the", comes before "judgment", leading Leupold to conclude that Qohelet is speaking about a specific event, the Day of Judgment.[320] Therefore, though the character-consequence structure is uncertain for the present life, there is no "enigma" about the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked *after death*. Thus, Bartholomew says,

> In v. 9c, in contrast to v. 8c, Qohelet includes a reference to something in the future that is certain—the judgment of God. There is development in his thinking here: contrary to v. 8c not everything that comes is enigmatic—there will be a time for judgment, and the young person needs to note that how he rejoices and lives out his life will finally be held to account by God.[321]

At the same time—adding to the confusion—Qohelet has previously denied consciousness after death, thus begging the question of whether the wicked have any consciousness of judgment or the righteous any consciousness of reward.

> For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything (9: 5)
>
> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. (9: 10)

Such statements make the reward and punishment after death as uncertain as the love or hatred of God during life (cf. Eccl. 9: 1). Qohelet is full of self-contradictions.

> Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; [2] before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; [3] in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; [4] and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. [5] Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. [6] *Remember Him* before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; [7] then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Eccl. 12:1-7 NASB)

In Eccl. 12: 1-7, Qohelet advises his young readers to remember their Creator while they are young before the ravages of old age set in. If 11: 7-10 are interpreted hedonistically, the admonition to remember one's Creator seems abrupt and insincere. It is hardly useful to have fleeting thoughts of the Creator and warm religious feelings while you are simultaneously pursuing the god of pleasure (Rom. 1: 25). There is profound truth to the advice to remember one's Creator while he is young, for some Christian research suggests that if a person does not become a Christian before age 18, there is very little hope of him doing so afterward.[322] His life and values may be set in

[320] Cited by Eaton, p. 165).
[321] Bartholomew, p. 344.
[322] This research is based upon western populations, but it probably would apply to any other culture as well.

concrete by that age. Although many people come to Christ in adulthood—I did—I suspect that very few old people approaching death will turn to Him. They think they have managed well without Him thus far, so why should they need Him at death? The old adage (saying), "'Youth for pleasure—middle age for business—old age for religion'" is poor advice.[323]

However, if 11: 7-10 are interpreted as encouragement to enjoy life within the boundaries of traditional wisdom, then 12: 1-7 are interpreted entirely differently from the explanation given above. Bartholomew says that the passage refers to allowing the notion of God as Creator to shape one's view of life and one's handling of life's enigmas now.[324]

> Up until this section the *carpe diem* passages have always followed enigmatic sections. This shift to having the *carpe diem* section preface and structure the enigmatic section about death is significant, as is the introduction of "remember," which has not yet occurred in a *carpe diem* passage. Previously the two ways of seeing life have been juxtaposed without resolution. This allowing of the *carpe diem* element to shape the whole suggests the possibility of integration and resolution. The bridge element then between the *hebel* and *carpe diem* poles would be rejoicing and particularly *remembering*.[325]

The exhortation to rejoice governs the section from 11: 8-10 while the exhortation to "remember" governs 12: 1-7. Bartholomew also suggests that v. 7 is significant in that

> …for the first time in the *carpe diem* passages the enigma of life is set in the context of joy (and remembrance) rather than the other way around.
>
> Like a beacon alerting us to a major shift in Qohelet's perspective and struggle, 11: 7 unashamedly affirms life and raises the question of what could have shifted Qohelet from his tense struggle between the hebel of life and the affirmation of joy—what is it that has brought such resolution? How has the contradictory juxtaposition of these two opposing approaches to life yielded a positive affirmation of life? The answer is provided in the 11: 8-10 and 12: 1-7.[326]

In other words, in the other *carpe diem* passages, joy is set in the context of enigma. Stated another way, the encouragement to joy comes after the passages stating the problem of enigma. In 11: 7-10, Qohelet tells us to enjoy life (*carpe diem*), followed by the inevitable enigmas of old age. The order is reversed and this reversal may signal a major shift in Qohelet's thinking which ends in resolution. Moreover, Bartholomew argues that

> The theology of remembrance of God as Creator undermines Qohelet's autonomous epistemology, because it is tantamount to [the same as] making the fear of God…foundational to Qohelet's search for wisdom rather than the sort of epistemology he had adopted. Indeed, although the reality of death is stronger than ever in this section, the observational language is absent. Remembrance thus presents the *possibility* of the resolution of the tension in Qohelet's juxtapositions of enigma and joy.[327]

It may be appropriate at this point to summarize three opposing views of the *carpe diem* sections in the book. We have discussed two already. (1) First is the interpretation of expositors like

[323] Bridges, p. 285.
[324] Bartholomew, p. 345.
[325] Bartholomew, p. 343, emphasis his.
[326] Bartholomew, pp. 353-354.
[327] Bartholomew, p. 354, emphasis his; words in brackets mine.

Longman who readily view these sections as "gaps"[328] between the pessimistic sections of Qohelet's speech. After describing the very discouraging aspects of living and working in this world, Qohelet digresses to the *carpe diem* section encouraging the reader to enjoy whatever he can in life—this is as good as it gets. The *carpe diem* sections are, therefore, somewhat cynical and sarcastic resignations to the meaninglessness of life under the sun.

(2) Second, are expositors who treat the *carpe diem* sections as if they were definite, legitimate "answers" to Qohelet's dilemma. Such expositors must reconcile Qohelet's contradictions and blatantly unbiblical statements with traditional wisdom, something very difficult to accomplish.

(3) Bartholomew believes that the *carpe diem* sections are not definitive answers to life's enigmas, but rather exist themselves as gaps in Qohelet's thought process which are antithetical (opposite) to his pessimistic epistemology. In other words, Qohelet from time to time abandons his empirical epistemology of finding truth through experimental observation alone ("I have seen", Eccl. 3: 16) and puts his trust in the traditional Hebrew wisdom revealed in his day ("Still I know", Eccl. 8: 12). Definitive answers to the enigma occur in the epilogue.

> …the epilogue is definitive in indicating finally how the narrator intends us to fill in the gaps, and I suggest that 12: 13 confirms my reading of 12: 1 as the bridge that positively resolves the tension/gap between the *carpe diem* element and the enigma statements.[329]

The remainder of Qohelet's speech is an allegory (an extended metaphor) about the deterioration of the body during old age.[330] Milton Terry argues that the description is not "a good old age" which is described in Prov. 16: 31 and Ps. 92: 12-14, but a sorrowful and tragic old age which suffers the ultimate consequences of a life lived without the knowledge and worship of God. It is the old age of a "sensualist", one who lived his life for pleasure but now is too old to enjoy such pleasure.[331]

However, I find Terry's insistence that this is the old age of a sensualist (another word for hedonist) unnecessary. Of course, our interpretation of this section will depend on how we interpret the rest of the book, particularly the *carpe diem* sections. If these sections are sarcastic irony, then we can agree with Terry. But if the *carpe diem* sections are Qohelet's occasional digressions away from the pessimism and enigma of his empirical observations (most of the book) and toward traditional wisdom, then this section could also be the testimony of anyone experiencing old age, believer or unbeliever.

The physical difficulties and emotional struggles of old age affect believer and unbeliever alike; and although the believer takes comfort in the prospect of eternal life, he is not exempt from the "evil days" of old age. The testimony, "I have no delight in them" refers to the difficulties of getting old; and believers—if they are honest—must confess that old age can minimize one's

[328] Bartholomew's term
[329] Bartholomew, p. 356.
[330] cf. Longman, pp. 268-273, who presents other alternatives but still opts for the allegorical approach. See also Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 306-309; Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 283-298, and Franz Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 405-428. Bartholomew rejects the allegorical interpretation, but his alternative interpretation recognizes the existence of metaphors.
[331] Terry, pp. 306-307.

enjoyment of life. I am not suggesting that old age eliminates our joy in living; far from it. The believer looks forward to being with Christ and having the remnants of sin removed. He still enjoys the fellowship of other believers, and the love of his wife. However, it is not sinful to "have no delight" in chronic back pains, bladder dysfunction, false teeth, poor eyesight, and hearing loss. The ravages of old age are the result of sin which has brought disease, old age, and death. The new heavens and earth will be a place of undiminished health, the way God created the human body to be. We should be *joyful* in every situation (1 Thes. 5: 18), but this does not require that we *enjoy* every situation.

Many metaphors appear in these few short verses which form an extended metaphor or allegory. The light of the sun, moon, and stars may be understood generally as the light of life which recedes gradually behind the dark "clouds" of old age (v. 2; cf. 11: 7 which speaks of light being "pleasant" or "sweet"). The "watchman of the house tremble" (v. 3) is a phrase which refers to the hands and the arms which in more youthful days served as the defenders of his house. In old age, they tremble, helpless to keep out intruders. The "mighty men" which "stoop" refer to the legs that lose their muscular strength and elasticity in old age and become bowed and crooked. The "grinding ones" are the teeth which are now few, making it difficult for old people to eat. Thus, they "stand idle" as the aged person eats less and loses weight because he can no longer chew his food. "Those who look through windows grow dim" is a reference to dwindling eyesight, and the "doors on the street" are the ears which can no longer hear the normal sounds of everyday life (like the grinding mill), but are awakened suddenly by the sharp, shrill sound of a bird (v. 4). The phrase, "the daughters of song will sing softly" is most likely a reference to all the organs of sound including the lungs and voice used in singing. These are now weak and unable to make the joyful noises which they once made. When a person gets old, even his voice is affected, and he can't sing as well as he once did.[332]

In v. 5, Qohelet makes note of the extreme difficulty of any kind of movement in old age. When a man is young, he can run up the stairs or hills with the slightest of ease, but now in old age climbing stairs and slight embankments must be done with great care for fear of falling. Even the simplest obstacles in his path are cause for alarm (v. 5a).[333] "The almond tree blossoms" refer to the white hair which is falling out, and the grasshopper which "drags himself along" is a metaphor for the old man who has "lost the spring in his step" and gets around only with great difficulty. Qohelet really gets personal when he mentions the ineffectiveness of the caperberry, widely used as an aphrodisiac, a drug which increases one's sexual desire. But the old man gets no help from it and no longer has any interest in sex.[334]

The end of his life is near at hand, "For man goes to his eternal home…." When he dies, professional mourners[335] "go about in the street" to make an insincere, public display of grief for an old man they don't even know or care about—a cultural practice which adds to the tragedy of the moment (cf. Matt. 9: 23-24). The "silver cord and the golden bowl" may refer to a golden lamp suspended by a silver cord as a chandelier in a palatial hallway.[336] The silver and gold in the image

[332] Bridges, pp. 290-291; see also Eaton, pp. 168-170, whose metaphorical interpretation is similar to Bridges.
[333] Bridges, p. 291.
[334] Longman, p. 272.
[335] According to Jewish custom—Bridges, p. 292
[336] Terry, p. 309.

may be a reference to the high value of a man's life.[337] The silver cord breaks; the lamp falls and is dashed to pieces, a metaphorical reference to the light of a man's life being extinguished.

> Most memorably of all, the pictures in verse 6 capture the beauty and fragility of the human frame: a masterpiece as delicately wrought as any work of art, yet as breakable as a piece of earthenware, and as useless in the end as a broken wheel. The first half of this verse seems to portray a golden lamp suspended by a silver chain; it will take only the snapping of a link to let it fall and be spoilt. And if this seems too finely-drawn a picture of our familiar selves, it is balanced by the scene at the deserted well—eloquent of the transience of the simplest, most basic things we do. There will be a last time for every familiar journey, every routine job.[338]

The "pitcher by the well" and the "wheel at the cistern" visualize the means of drawing water from a well by lowering a pitcher by a rope that runs around a wheel.[339] These are now all shattered, so that the old, dying man has neither light nor water, both symbols of life.[340] Eventually his body will return to the dust from which it came and his spirit will return to God (v. 7). This is a reference to man's creation in Genesis and his accountability before God.[341]

But if Qohelet is referring to the soul's ascent into heaven, how can this be reconciled with his previous skepticism: "Who knows that the breath [or "spirit"] of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:21 NASB) Longman argues that "This is not an optimistic allusion to some kind of consciousness after death, but simply a return to a pre-life situation. God temporarily united body and spirit, and now the process is undone. We have in this verse no affirmation of immortality. According to Qohelet, death is the end".[342]

Similarly, Kidner says that Qohelet may imply nothing more than the Psalmist in 104: 29 who speaks of the expiration of man and animals: "You hide Your face, they are dismayed; You take away their spirit, they expire And return to their dust. (Psalm 104:29 NASB; see vv. 23-28 for context). On the other hand, he argues that the context suggests something beyond this life and invites us to respond to our Creator.[343]

Hengstenberg, writing in 1869, is more forthright in his opinion that Qohelet is now affirming life after death.

> That the spirit of man does not perish with the body is here…most decidedly taught….The return of the soul to God can only be such an one as that of which the apostle speaks in 2 Corinthians v. 10….No other meaning than this, "that the soul must one day return to God as its judge," is fitted to prepare the way for the admonition, "remember thy Creator," which is the main feature of this entire section.[344]

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[337] Eaton, p. 170.
[338] Kidner, p. 104.
[339] Eaton, p. 170.
[340] Longman, p. 273.
[341] See also 7: 29, "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices."
[342] Longman, p. 273.
[343] Kidner, p. 104.
[344] E. W. Hengstenberg, Ecclesiastes, cited in Bartholomew, p. 352.

Believing that Qohelet has finally turned a corner, Bartholomew concurs with Hengstenberg's conclusion.

> As Hengstenberg notes, to see death in this section as the end makes nonsense of Qohelet's insistence that finally judgment comes before God. For this judgment to be a reality, there must be life beyond death, and although Qohelet lived prior to the revelation of the NT, he envisions, albeit [athough] without elaboration, that life which is a gift of God returning to God, its eternal home (12: 5).[345]

III. Epilogue (12: 8-14)

A. Evaluation of Qohelet's Wisdom by the Frame Narrator (12: 8-12)

> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity!" [9] In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. [10] The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. [11] The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. (Eccl. 12:8-11 NASB)

For the first time since 1: 2, the Preacher (Qohelet) is spoken of in the third person (v. 8). This is a "rather dramatic shift" demonstrating a change of speaker from Qohelet to the frame narrator who is telling Qohelet's story.[346] Thus, 1: 2 and 12: 8 are mirror images of one another which place a "frame" around Qohelet's speech. There can be no doubt about his ultimate conclusion about life—everything is an enigma. The remainder of Ecclesiastes, then, is from the perspective of this second person, the narrator of the story who speaks of Qohelet in the third person rather than the first person ("he", not "I").

Commentators make quite different evaluations of the narrator's comments just as they take different approaches to interpreting the *carpe diem* sections of the book. Does the narrator in 12: 8-14 give a positive evaluation of Qohelet or a negative one?

1. The narrator disputes Qohelet's wisdom

Longman believes that the narrator's use of "wise man" implies nothing more than that he dispensed wisdom sayings as a professional. There were prophets in Israel who were true prophets and those who were false "professional" prophets in the king's employment (cf. Jer. 14: 15; 27: 14-15). Likewise, there were "wise" men in Israel who were morally upright, and those who were evil. Ahithophel, who counseled Absalom to rape all of David's concubines, was one such evil counselor. However, he was no idiot, but a man whose advice was respected even by David himself. "The advice of Ahithophel, which he gave in those days, was as if one inquired of the word of God; so was all the advice of Ahithophel regarded by both David and Absalom" (2 Sam. 16: 23). Thus, Qohelet was another such counselor, a fictionalized one, who "taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs", though he is not given direct credit for actually composing any proverbs.[347]

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[345] Bartholomew, p. 353, word in brackets mine.
[346] Longman, p. 274.
[347] Longman, p. 277.

Continuing with this analysis, the narrator's description lacks any notable marks of deep respect.[348] In the next statement, the scales of this evaluation are tipped to the negative side, but the shift is so subtle (slight) that we can easily miss it. Notice that the narrator says that the Preacher "sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly" (v. 10), he does not say that he actually accomplished this goal. Throughout the story, Qohelet had been attempting to find the truth and to find meaning, but he had never succeeded in doing so. He even admitted that wisdom itself was "far from me" (7: 23). Qohelet never found "delightful words" to share with us. He is hardly a "preacher of joy",[349] and he cannot be credited with much truth when he is constantly contradicting himself as well as the orthodox wisdom of the OT found in the Psalms and Proverbs (and other portions of the OT).

There are other subtleties (slight nuances of meaning) which should be noticed in v. 11. The narrator does not liken "the words of wise men", like Qohelet's, to the "rod and staff" (Ps. 23: 4) of God's protecting providence and corrective discipline, but to "goads" which were rods with one or more points on the end of it, a painful instrument used to prod the animal into submission. The nails, likewise, are intended with a negative meaning as something with a dangerous and harmful effect. Thus, the images given do not present the wisdom teachers of the Qohelet variety as always helpful but sometimes harmful. This leaves Longman one more piece of information to explain. Many commentators (and translators, including the NASB, NKJV, and the NIV) have interpreted the "shepherd" in v. 11 as God. He disagrees with this identification, suggesting that

> The proposed identification between the shepherd and God misleads some commentators, who assert that all of Qohelet's observations and advice are positive and optimistic, if not downright orthodox. This results in extremely strained exegesis in order to harmonize what Qohelet actually says with this evaluation.[350]

Longman thus translates the Hebrew word as "a shepherd" rather than "one Shepherd" (with a small "s" rather than a capital "S"). The designation, "a shepherd", refers generally to the wisdom teachers in v. 11.[351] Older translations like the KJV and the ASV agree with this rendering and do not capitalize the word, even though they do retain the numerical "one" before the word—"one shepherd".

Longman's view of pitting the narrator against Qohelet was first published in *An Introduction to the Old Testament* with Raymond Dillard as co-author. In his commentary on the book, Longman likens the structure of the book to that of Job.

> An analogy with the book of Job further clarifies the situation. The two books are similar in structure and also evoke a similar reading strategy. The body of both books contains dubious teaching when judged in the light of the rest of the [OT] canon. For instance, the arguments of the three friends, Elihu, and even Job concerning the reasons for Job's suffering are too narrow in their understanding, and therefore all of them misunderstand God's relationship to Job's situation. Not that everything that they say is wrong, but much is out of keeping with the divine perspective revealed in the Yahweh speeches at the end of the book.

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[348] Longman, p. 277.
[349] R. N. Whybray's conclusion, quoted in Longman, p. 260.
[350] Longman, p. 279.
[351] Longman, pp. 279-280

> Similarly, the body of the book of Ecclesiastes, composed of the introspective autobiography of Qohelet, contains much that offends traditional OT sensibilities. The positive teaching of both books comes at the end with Yahweh's speech from the whirlwind in Job and the second wise man's warnings to his son in Ecclesiastes.[352]

Bruce K. Waltke objects to Longman's and Dillard's conclusion, calling it logically and exegetically indefensible for the following reasons:

> (1) Job clearly distinguishes the speakers: Ecclesiastes does not, and this lack would confound the book. (2) …Dillard and Longman curiously think "fine words…most honest words of truth" is "faint praise." However, the "praise" is strikingly different from I AM's [Yahweh's] evaluation of the words of Job's friends: "You have not spoken of me what is right." Does one employ even faint praise for false statements? They also think that "goads and nails" are negative assessments because they connote pain, though they admit these figures are normally positive. However, truthful words are painful, but necessary, to spur one on to live wisely. Moreover, "nails" connotes something you can count on. They neither identify the S/shepherd nor evaluate this positive image. In short, the epilogist [the narrator who writes the epilogue], if he be regarded as adjudicator [judge], awards Qohelet the palm for speaking what is right.
>
> With regard to the logical fallacy of Dillard and Longman's position, is it plausible that the narrator created a fictitious [invented] figure to mouth sayings with which he disagrees? Michael A. Eaton argues that it is absurd to think that an editor would issue a book that he fundamentally disagrees with. He observes, "No wisdom document exists in two recensions [revision of a text] with opposite theologies".[353]

2. The narrator acknowledges Qohelet's wisdom

Unlike Longman, and concurring with Waltke, Bartholomew does not believe that the narrator "distances himself from Qohelet"; but, rather, presents Qohelet positively as an orthodox wise man (although not suggesting that everything Qohelet says is orthodox). Moreover, Qohelet succeeds in resolving his struggle with the enigma of life and reaches a conclusion consistent with the traditional wisdom of Israel. In other words, he does not merely seek wisdom, he finds it.[354]

> Here the narrator describes Qohelet positively as wise. In the light of the extremes to which the "Greek' voice of Qohelet has gone [that is, his empirical observations which conflict with traditional wisdom], this affirmation comes as a surprise and is reminiscent of God's startling affirmation of Job in Job 42: 7, in which the Lord expresses his anger against Job's friends because they "have not spoken of me what is right, as has my servant Job." This description of Qohelet as "wise" resonates with the ironic use of "wise" in Qohelet's journey and also indicates from the narrator's perspective that Qohelet does indeed resolve his struggle and arrive at a position that fits with that of traditional wisdom.[355]

> God thus affirms the agonizing struggle that Job has gone through before coming to a position of trust and rest in God and finally being able to say that whereas previously he had heard of God, now his eyes see God (42: 5). Similarly, the epilogue in Ecclesiastes affirms the journey Qohelet has gone through before coming to that place of remembering his Creator. Pastorally this is significant, for Ecclesiastes,

[352] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 37; words in brackets mine.
[353] Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 950; words in brackets mine.
[354] Bartholomew, pp. 362-366.
[355] Bartholomew, p. 363, words in brackets mine.

> like Job, holds out hope for those struggling amid the mysteries of what God is up to in their lives and thus in his world. Such agonizing struggles are affirmed and shown to be integral to the Christian life.[356]

God's affirmation of Job is "startling" in that throughout the book, Job has argued with God about the injustice of his condition and God's "enigmatic" way with him. ("God, why have you treated me this way?") Although admitting that he is a sinner, Job knows that he has not deserved his treatment because of some great sin in his life—his friends' persistent accusations notwithstanding. But since God has also rebuked Job at the end of the book (Job 39-41), we might have expected God to include Job's words with the unwise and presumptuous words of his three friends. Rather, God says that Job has spoken of Him "what is right" (Job 42: 8). While rebuking Job earlier for his own presumption, God nevertheless acknowledges that Job has correctly denied the prevailing retribution theology. A rigid retribution theology presumes to force God into blessing "good" people and cursing "bad" people in this life without any exceptions. However, God cannot be forced into our theological systems.[357]

Likewise, Qohelet was "wise" in that he did not pretend to cover up the enigma of man's existence with simplistic answers ignoring the confusion of life. Rather, he was willing to face this confusion head-on by asking the hard questions. For rhetorical effect, he did not state his objections in the form of questions, but declarations of observable contradictions to traditional wisdom. If the reader is honest, Christian or non-Christian, he must admit that Qohelet accurately describes the same confusion each person faces in this life. If the Bible is true, why do we see so many apparent contradictions to its traditional teaching? By inspiring the books of Job and Ecclesiastes and sovereignly placing them in the canon of Scripture, God anticipated the confusion of generations of believers throughout the history of mankind.

On the other hand, the writers of Psalms and Proverbs were not naïve (gullible, believing anything). They merely stated character-consequence structure more positively in light of a future orientation of judgment, reward, and life after death. This same kind of orientation occurs at the end of Ecclesiastes but is generally veiled (hidden) in most of the discourse.

Moving to v. 11, rather than interpreting the goads and nails of in a harmful sense, Bartholomew says that Qohelet's words "prod us into wise action and, like nails firmly embedded, provide us with a place that holds us".[358] Goads were used by shepherds to move animals safely from one place to another[359] and it is clear from Ps. 23 that a shepherd's job was to lead the sheep to green pastures and quiet waters where the sheep could receive the sustenance they needed. The prodding may be initially painful, but it has a benevolent purpose and goal. Qohelet's words, therefore, feed those who listen to them.

Longman takes v. 12 as the narrator's warning to avoid books like Qohelet's. Contrarily, Bartholomew insists that the narrator distinguishes Qohelet's wisdom from other teaching contradictory to traditional wisdom. "But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body" (v. 12). The NIV reads,

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[356] Bartholomew, p. 371.
[357] See McNeill, "Job".
[358] Bartholomew, p. 366.
[359] Bartholomew, p. 368.

"Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body" (Eccl. 12:12 NIV). Thus, "anything in addition to them" refers to books outside the wisdom tradition, not to Qohelet's words. "In a context in which Israelites were being tempted by Greek philosophy, v. 12 would be relevant as a warning against their 'folly'".[360] Waltke concurs with this positive analysis and argues against the theory that the Biblical writer would create a whole book (Qohelet's biography) only to refute it in the epilogue (see quote above).

The subject of the fear of God has occurred in other texts: 3: 14; 5: 7; and 8: 12-13. Longman has interpreted these exhortations to fear God in the negative context—fearing God's wrath and punishment without revering and loving Him as Creator.[361] Here in 12: 13 the narrator combines the fear of God with keeping His commandments—the traditional view of Proverbs. Longman has interpreted this exhortation as contrary to Qohelet's main thesis of meaninglessness throughout the book, thus denying any overt reference to the commandments.[362] However, 5: 1-7 reveals Qohelet's full awareness of Biblical law, thus indicating that he and the narrator are not poles apart in their final evaluation of truth. Bartholomew does not allow a negative interpretation of the fear of God in the above passages (3: 14, etc.). Rather, Qohelet is expressing the "confessional" or "traditional" view of the fear of God when he presents two conflicting ideas, for example, 8: 12-13.

> Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. [13] But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. (Ecc. 8: 12-13 NASB).

From the point of view of empirical observation alone, the fear of God doesn't seem to count for much because the sinner who does not fear God may lengthen his life without it. But from the confessional/traditional view, the fear of the Lord will prolong one's life while the sinner's life will be cut short. In 8: 12-13, Qohelet does not resolve the contradiction between the two modes of knowing— (1) empirical observation and (2) faith in traditional wisdom.[363] However, in 12: 1-7, the command to "remember also your Creator" is a definitive departure from empirical observation as the primary means of knowing. It can be interpreted as such because it comes at the end of Qohelet's autobiography without further qualification. Moreover, for this to be true, there must be belief in life beyond death, a belief that manifests itself in the phrase, "and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (12: 7). This last phrase is mirrored in the narrator's affirmation of the judgment of God in v. 14, a statement which is in full agreement with Qohelet's warning to the young man in 11: 9b, "Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things." In other words, don't let your enjoyment of life's pleasures go beyond appropriate boundaries.

The standard of God's law and the sure judgment of God provide the boundaries which steer the earthly traveler through the enigma of life. He cannot interpret life merely from empirical data. There will be judgment for every thought and deed of man, whether good or bad. Righteousness will be rewarded in due time, and wickedness will be punished in due time—God's time.

[360] Bartholomew, p. 369.
[361] Particularly, see his interpretation of 3: 14.
[362] *Ecclesiastes,* pp. 282-283).
[363] Bartholomew, p. 291.

Otherwise, both "righteousness" and "wickedness" are meaningless constructs (concepts which are constructed by a mental process but have no relationship to reality).

In Longman's view, Qohelet

> ...presents a true assessment of the world apart from the light of God's redeeming love. His perspective on the world and life is restricted; he describes it as life "under the sun," that is, apart from heavenly realities, apart from God. In other words, his hopelessness is the result of the curse of the fall without recourse to God's redemption.[364]

Bartholomew's alternative interpretation is that Qohelet's pessimistic evaluation of life (most of Ecclesiastes) is qualified by the occasional *carpe diem* sections which reflect the confessions of traditional wisdom found in the Proverbs. These sections produce unresolved "gaps" in the narrative between Qohelet's empirical epistemology and what he believes from traditional wisdom. The gaps are finally resolved in the epilogue of 12: 8-14 in which the narrator's specific conclusion (vv. 13-14) is parallel to Qohelet's imperatives of 11: 9b and 12: 1.

B. The Relationship between Ecclesiastes and the New Testament

Strikingly, the Apostle Paul uses a word in Rom. 8: 18-21 (mataiotes—"futility" or "frustration") which is also used in the Greek translation of Ecclesiastes for the Hebrew word hebel.[365]

> [18]For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. [19] For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. [20] For the creation was subjected to futility [mataiotes], not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:18-21 NASB)

Qohelet's observations concerning the enigmas of life are an experiential commentary on Romans 8: 18-21 centuries before it was written. Regardless of the differences in interpreting *hebel* or the *carpe diem* sections, we may all agree that Jesus' perfect life, atonement, resurrection, and ascension provide the final solution to all of our confusion. In Christ we are set free to observe and interpret all of life through the lens of faith in the expectation of our inheritance in a new heavens and earth where righteousness reigns.

> As we turn to the NT, we see that Jesus Christ is the one who redeems us from the vanity, the meaninglessness under which Qohelet suffered. Jesus redeemed us from Qohelet's meaningless world by subjecting himself to it. Jesus is the son of God, but nonetheless experienced the vanity of the world so he could free us from it. As he hung on the cross, his own father deserted him (Matt. 27: 45-46). At this point, he experienced the frustration of the world under curse in a way that Qohelet could not even imagine. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us"....
>
> As a result, Christians can experience deep significance precisely in those areas where Qohelet felt most oppressed. Jesus has restored meaning to wisdom, labor, love, and life. After all, by facing death,

[364] Longman, p. 39.
[365] Longman, p. 39.

> Jesus conquered the biggest fear facing Qohelet. He showed that for believers death is not the end of all meaning, but the entrance into the very presence of God.[366]

Summary and Conclusion

Through his imperative to the young man to remember his Creator, Qohelet comes to the settled conclusion that life does have meaning and purpose, after all. Though enigmatic, man's youth—and by extension, his whole life from youth to death—must be spent self-consciously in subordination to God's judgment of all activities under the sun. The narrator confirms this conclusion at the end with his words, "fear God and keep His commandments…For God will bring every act to judgment." It is God's final assessment of man's life that provides the basis for meaning.

Lesson Eight Questions

1. What is the meaning of v. 2 and what is its connection with v. 3?
2. What is the general principle taught in 10: 8-11?
3. Explain Qohelet's aversion (opposition) to the rule of non-wealthy people who rise to power. Interact with my interpretation and feel free to disagree with me. (10: 5-7)
4. In 10: 16-19, how does Qohelet demonstrate the traditional belief in predictable cause and effect?
5. What is the meaning of the metaphor in 10: 18?
6. Why is freedom of speech difficult to achieve in a society ruled by a tyrant?
7. What is the meaning of the metaphor, "cast your bread upon the waters", and how does this fit with the fiction that Solomon is the author?
8. Is it admissible for us to take risks? Explain.
9. Is there a major shift in Qohelet's thinking beginning in 11: 7? Explain.
10. Discuss two different views of the narrator's opinion of Qohelet.

[366] Longman, p. 40.

Appendices

Appendix A

> The author speaks as a mature teacher giving a young disciple the fruits of his own long experience and reflection (11: 9; 12: 1, 12). He wants to lead this young believer into true wisdom, and to keep him from falling into the 'York-signal-box" mistake [see pp. 91-92 of Packer]....Clearly, he [the young disciple under the author's instruction] took it for granted that wisdom, when he gained it, would tell him the reasons for God's various doings in the ordinary course of providence. What the preacher wants to show him is that the real basis of wisdom is a frank acknowledgement that this world's course is enigmatic [confusing], that much of what happens is quite inexplicable [unexplainable] to us, and that most occurrences 'under the sun' bear no outward sign of a rational, moral God ordering them at all. As the sermon itself shows, the text is intended as a warning against the misconceived quest for understanding: for it states the despairing conclusion to which this quest, if honestly and realistically pursued, must at length lead....
>
> It is to this pessimistic conclusion [namely, "all is vanity"], says the preacher, that optimistic expectations of finding the divine purpose of everything will ultimately lead you (cf. 1: 17f.). And of course he is right. For the world we live in is in fact the sort of place that he has described. The God who rules it hides Himself. Rarely does this world look as if a beneficent Providence were running it. Rarely does it appear that there is a rational power behind it all. Often and often what is worthless survives, while what is valuable perishes. Be realistic, says the preacher; face these facts; see life as it is. You will have no true wisdom till you do.[367]

Appendix B

During the Renaissance (the revival of art, literature, and learning in Europe during the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries) Michelangelo had carved four statues from rock called The Captives. The figures are barely distinguishable as human beings because Michelangelo shows them coming out of the rock as if they were "'tearing themselves out of the rock'". Michelangelo's message, according to Schaeffer, is that man "will make himself great." Likewise, his 40 foot tall sculpture, David (the King David of the Bible), is equally humanistic—the philosophy that teaches that man is the measure of greatness. The nude, uncircumcised David of Michelangelo is more like a Greek god, Jupiter or Hercules, than the humble shepherd-king of the Bible. Ironically, Michelangelo was 42 years old when Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517, but The Captives were sculpted by him between 1519 and 1536,[368] long after the Reformation had influenced European thought. Michelangelo had not yet learned the truth, and it is not fully known whether he ever did.

It is also ironic that Michelangelo designed St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome under the commission of Leo X, quite possibly the most immoral and corrupt Roman Catholic pope among many corrupt popes. St. Peter's Cathedral was being funded with indulgences[369] and "dispensations".[370] The Dominican monk, John Tetzel, was commissioned by Pope Leo X to collect these indulgences and

[367] J.I. Packer, *Knowing* God, pp. 94-95; words in brackets mine.
[368] Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live*, pp. 70-71
[369] Money paid to the church allowing sinners to buy their way out of purgatory—a preliminary hell
[370] Money paid to the church allowing adultery as well as marriage to close relatives.

"dispensations" in Wittenberg while Luther was teaching as a professor of theology. Luther protested to the Archbishop of Mayence with no result. In 1517, he pressed his case by nailing his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, protesting indulgences and other church heresies.[371] The Reformation, which had already begun with other reformers like John Wyclif and Jan Huss (burned at the stake 100 years before Luther) was now underway on a broader scale with the support of Gutenberg's printing press and other unnamed German heroes who printed and distributed Luther's writings.

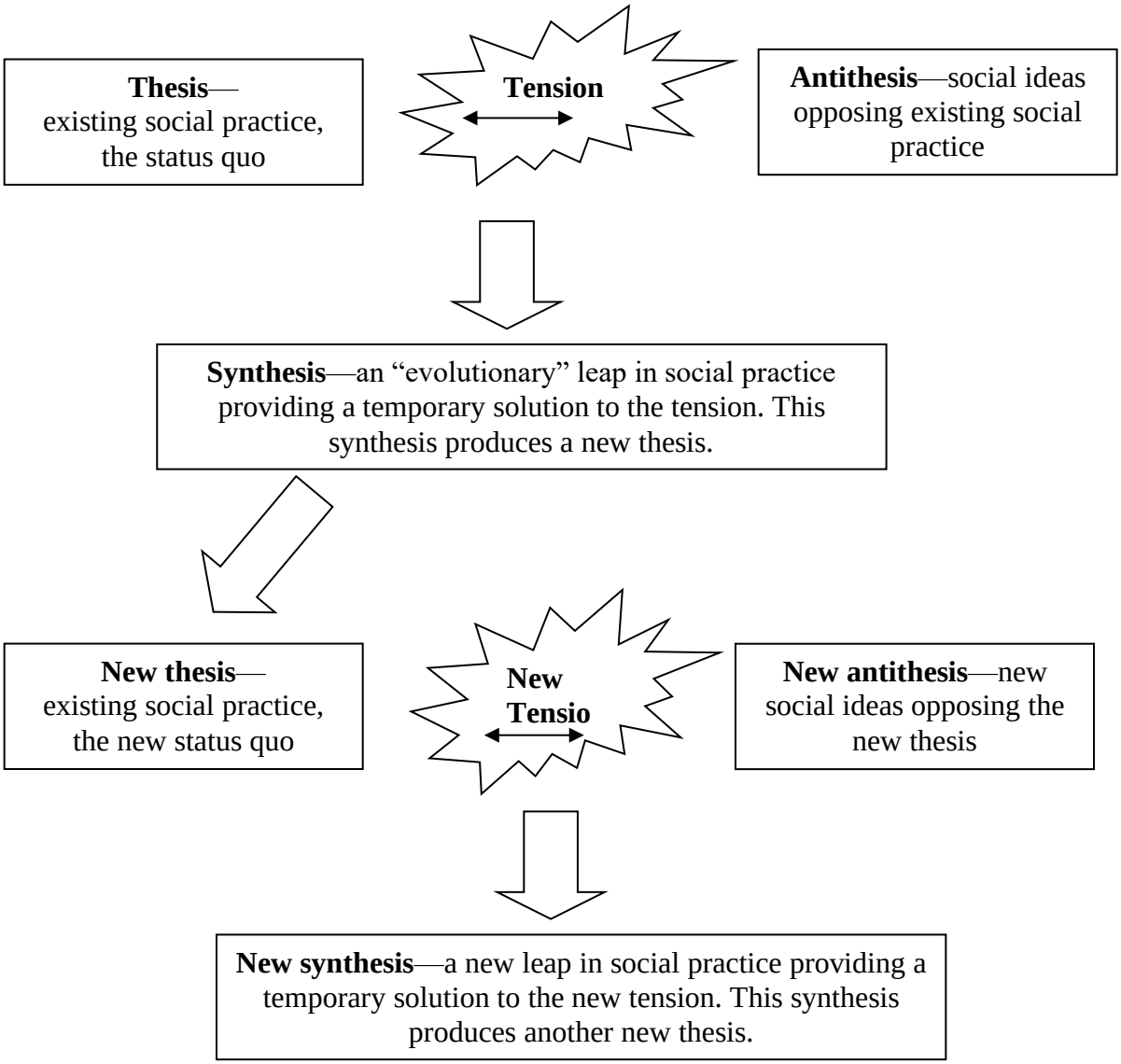
Through the Reformation writers and theologians of the 16th Century—Martin Luther, Melancthon, Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Ulricht Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and many others—a message contrary to the Renaissance was communicated. Man was not perfectible, and his reason could not comprehend the truth about either God or the universe. He was totally, and apart from grace, irreversibly depraved in every aspect of his being. His only hope of renewal and reclamation was Christ. But in the 18th Century, long after Reformation teaching had spread through most of Europe—southern Italy, Spain, and Eastern Europe excepted—the Enlightenment brought men the false "gospel" ("good news") of man's greatness and perfectibility—the foundational principle of the Renaissance.[372] In France, this false "gospel" of salvation without God—or with a Deistic god who does not intervene in the affairs of men—led inexorably (inevitably) to the guillotine, the chosen instrument of execution with which 40,000 people, many of them peasants, were put to death by beheading. Following the carnage of the French Revolution was the oppressive regime of Napoleon Bonaparte.[373]

Qohelet's folly of trusting in autonomous reason looks backwards and forwards. It looks backward to the folly of Adam and Eve who believed that autonomous reason could decide what is true and good while ignoring what God had said. It looks forward to the folly of the French Revolution and modernity, the enthusiasm with which modern intellectuals entered the 20th century 113 years ago. Following two world wars, Hitler's genocide of six million Jews during WW II, and the human carnage and oppression on the African continent from 1970 until today, the optimism about man's greatness has been seriously questioned.[374] Still ignored is the carnage of 55 million abortions in the US alone since 1973. The murder of unborn infants is not seen in the same light as the murder of those who are already born, part of what R. J. Rushdoony calls "intellectual schizophrenia" in his book of that title). Is man getting better, or wiser?

In his book, *The Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin had postulated (proposed) a theory which, intellectuals believed, eliminated the need for a Creator. Man had evolved from lower life forms through the process of natural selection in which nature "selected" those superior individuals within each species to propagate or continue the species. Eventually, new species of animals and plants would arise from the gradual evolution of one species to the next. Mankind—at least for the time being—was the zenith (high point) of natural selection; and it was now man's noble task in the 20th Century to control his own evolution—to control the processes of "natural" selection

[371] Otto Scott, *The Great Christian Revolution—How Christianity Transformed the World*, pp. 7-8
[372] It should be added here that the Renaissance in Great Britain and Germany had a different orientation from the Renaissance in Italy and France. For more on this see McNeill, "Religious Persecution during the 16th Century Reformation", pp. 21-22, or N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, pp. 15-25, for a more detailed explanation.
[373] Schaeffer, pp. 121-124
[374] Bartholomew, p. 125

which produced the most survivable individuals of the human species for future generations. What Darwin applied to biology, Fredrick Engel and Karl Marx applied to the social sciences, although in a modified way to fit the social theory of dialectical materialism (see below). Darwin's theory of gradual evolution did not fit with Marx and Engel's theory of dramatic and violent clashes between different social classes in which the thesis, the status quo (the socially established norm), would clash with an opposing social idea (its antithesis). This social struggle would resolve itself into a dramatic leap in social theory and practice—a solution called a synthesis. This synthesis would, in turn, become a new thesis producing its own antithesis and struggle, producing synthesis, and so on and on.[375]



And so on until the permanent synthesis evolves in which there is no class distinction and no need for civil government.

[375] David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times—The Religious Worldviews of Our Day and the Search for Truth*, chapter 7

While Darwin believed in gradual evolution, Marx and Engels believed in *punctuated evolution* in which species remained static (unchanged) for millions of years followed by a sudden jump or change in life forms over a period of thousands of years—a theory Darwin rejected. Thus, punctuated evolution allowed for "revolution within evolution".[376] In the social sphere, punctuated equilibrium would manifest itself in a sudden upset of the status quo (thesis) by a violent political struggle (antithesis)—a revolution—resulting in an immediate change producing a better and more just society (a new synthesis). Marx taught that man must take control of his own social evolution through violent political struggle. This modified view of evolution gave Vladimir Lenin the justification he needed to impose Marxist rule through the violent Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.[377] It is, indeed, ironic that the social revolution in Russia was already underway when Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin returned to Russia from exile in April, May, and March, 1917, respectively (in that order). The "February Revolution" of 1917—before the Bolshevik Revolution of October, 1917—had already ousted the Russian Czar and had begun to make changes when these three men hijacked the revolution and instituted a repressive regime in its place.[378] Czar Nicholas and his entire family were murdered by the Bosheviks in July, 1918, after the Leninists had the revolution fully in hand. Lenin was convinced that real change must take place quickly, through terror if necessary, rather than gradually.

Ironically the end-goal of Marxism is no government at all. Once the different classes are eliminated—violently eliminated if necessary—then society will be at peace with no need for external government, the final "synthesis".[379] In this sense Marxist eschatology is similar to that of Christianity. The Bible teaches that men and women will live in harmony with one another in the new heavens and earth, a perfect society which does not discriminate on the basis of class and has no need of any external government. This perfect society will be consummated with the coming of Christ and the destruction (violent overthrow) of rebellious men and women who refuse to bow the knee to Christ's rule. Men and women fully renewed by the Spirit of God will afterward govern themselves internally with hearts and minds consistently dependent upon God and submitted to God, thinking His thoughts after Him but expressing those thoughts through individual freedom and personality. Marxism also dreams of a heaven on earth (the present earth) in which men who are not sinful and depraved—terms which do not exist in Marxist ideology—will govern themselves in a perfect social environment cured of any external materialistic causes of oppression and strife. We should not be surprised at the similarities since men are always looking for "a way back to the garden". However, the methods and results, based on the wrong starting point, are quite different from the Biblical record. Marxism views man's problems as external to himself rather than internal, and once these external causes are eliminated, he can achieve his utopia. The external materialistic cause of oppression and strife is primarily private property. This includes the property of women and children, for there is no place in the Marxist system for marriage and family.[380]

Adolf Hitler contributed his part to social evolution through the genocide of six million Jews during World War II. By eliminating the Jewish race, he could then prepare the Aryan race for

[376] Noebel, p. 298
[377] Noebel, pp. 297-302
[378] Schaeffer, *How Shall We Then Live?*, p. 126
[379] Noebel, pp. 606-608
[380] Noebel, pp. 463-464

new evolutionary progress.[381] Hitler also declared war against the physically and mentally infirm before declaring war on healthy Jews and the world. Long before the gas chambers at Auschwitz, he exterminated the sick, insane, and old in "killing centers" across Europe, beginning in 1939. Transportation to these killing centers was done through the euphemistically named "Charitable Transport Company for the Sick". After WWII, in 1946 and 1947, the Boston psychiatrist Leo Alexander was appointed as a consultant to the US Secretary of War during the Nuremberg trials. Alexander said that Hitler exterminated 275,000 such people in centers which were designed as prototypes (models) of larger centers to kill all Jewish and Polish people and to reduce the Russian population by thirty million.[382]

> The first to be killed were the aged, the infirm, the senile [old people whose minds had deteriorated] and mentally retarded, and defective children. Eventually, as World War II approached, the doomed undesirables included epileptics, World War I amputees, children with badly modeled ears, and even bed wetters.[383]

The ironies keep coming. Hitler was correct in one sense. God also wants the perfect race, but His perfect race will include the weak as well as the strong, the black and the white, the yellow and the red, the mentally challenged and the intelligent, the poor and the rich. "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9 NASB).

The grand intellectual irony of the 20th Century is the connection between Marxism and modern evolutionary theory. The absence of transitional fossils[384] has encouraged modern evolutionists to adopt the theory of punctuated evolution—supported by the Hegelian theory of dialectical materialism and punctuated equilibrium championed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. As stated above, evolution, it is claimed, did not occur gradually as Darwin taught, but in dramatic spurts (punctuations) of evolutionary activity followed by longer periods of stasis (no change) during which no significant changes occurred. This would explain why we cannot find convincing transitional fossil forms between species. How convenient! Modern evolutionists like Stephen Gould (a Marxist) have championed this new theory. Darwin himself believed that the fossil record would either prove or disprove his theory.

> The geological record is extremely imperfect and this fact will to a large extent explain why we do not find intermediate [transitional] varieties, connecting together all the extinct and existing forms of life by the finest graduated steps. He who rejects these views on the nature of the geological record, will rightly reject my whole theory.[385]

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[381] An interesting movie about the "Jewish question" is "Conspiracy", starring Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci.
[382] Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race*, pp. 103,106. See also McNeill, "The Principle Features of Medical Ethics and the Crisis of Moral Relativism."
[383] Schaeffer and Koop, p. 106
[384] Fossils showing biological evolution from one species to another species. No such fossils have been found which demonstrate unquestionable evolution.
[385] Noebel, pp. 280-281, 300-301

However, Darwin had seriously underestimated his own philosophical and religious importance. Today, lacking any substantial geological evidence of evolution after 150 years of scientific research, scientists still cling to evolution rather than rejecting it. Even as I write, a new space module, Curiosity, has landed on the planet, Mars, to collect data for two years (in spite of all the other data-collecting projects on Mars for the last 10 years or so. One commentator on *Aljazeera* quipped, "It's getting crowded up there [Mars]"). The stated goal is to determine the existence of biological life on Mars. Since the Bible says nothing about Mars, I suppose any evidence of life would, in their thinking, discredit the Bible. Would it? But the Bible was written for men on planet Earth, not Mars. Men who are intent on getting rid of God must invent new ways of doing it.

Ideas always have consequences, and bad ideas always have bad consequences. Our starting point will guide us to our destination, whether good or bad.

> The thesis that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God….contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge.…There lies behind the statement an awareness of the fact that the search for knowledge can go wrong…because of one single mistake at the beginning. To this extent, Israel attributes to the fear of God, to belief in God, a highly important function in respect of human knowledge. She was in all seriousness, of the opinion that effective knowledge of God is the only thing that puts a man into a right relationship with the objects of his perception.[386]

Von Rad's statement is consistent with the apologetical method of Cornelius Van Til who said that there is no such thing as "brute fact" in the universe. Every fact must be an "interpreted fact", and men interpret the facts according to their system of faith, biblical or unbiblical. Human reasoning without the boundaries of divine revelation—the fear of God—will lead inevitably to consumerism/materialism, convenience-driven abortion, euthanasia, the exploitation of women and the weak, world wars, genocide, tyranny, and eventually, despair. The latter part of the 20th Century and now into the 21st Century is the era of philosophical despair (see Bartholomew's quote above).

Out of sheer practical necessity the world keeps barreling along, seeking for solutions to peripheral (surface) problems—like the problem of hunger. I hesitantly include hunger as a surface problem, but it is; and it could have been eliminated long ago if the human race as a whole shared the biblical view of man. It doesn't, and this is the root problem. But philosophers have run out of ultimate solutions. The bigger questions of man's meaning and worth, or even the meaning of meaning, have eluded him; and he has nowhere to go and no place to hide from the gnawing enigma of his own existence. But is this new? Is there anything new "under the sun"? It is not new, but mankind is now becoming more self-conscious of the problem. Hence, the age of despair.

Appendix C

John Frame shows us how God's goodness is vindicated through a new look at history. God allows human suffering to be spread out over a long period of time which accounts for much of the mystery of evil in this world. Two thousand years passed between the promise to Abraham and the coming of the Redeemer. Why did God wait so long to send the Messiah, and why has He waited so long between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ?

[386] Bartholomew, p. 134, quoting from G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*.

> Certainly a great part of the problem of suffering lies in the fact that our suffering is drawn out in time. We cry out to God, and he does not seem to hear. Or, rather, he in effect tells us to wait and wait and wait.
>
> Scripture tells us a great deal about this waiting process. It shows us how God's people are tested by the passage of time over and over again. But it also shows us, again and again, how God brings the waiting periods to an end, vindicating himself and ending the sufferings of his people.[387]

Frame supplies the following examples: There is no word from God to Israel from the death of Joseph until the exodus event, a period of over 300 years. Moses, hand-selected by God to deliver Israel, must wait 40 years in the wilderness before he is allowed to come back to Egypt. The wilderness journey from Egypt to the Promised Land lasts 40 years because of Israel's faithlessness and disobedience. Even after Joshua brings the people into the land, they fail to completely conquer it thus exposing themselves to idolatry and earning a vicious cycle of God's judgment (Judges). God graciously provides the people with judges, concluding with the prophet Samuel and later a king after His own heart, David. Yet, because of the failure of Solomon, who allowed the influence of false gods, and his son Rehoboam who accepted unwise counsel, Israel is divided and suffers under the poor leadership of ungodly kings—with a few notable exceptions in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Even the Promised Land does not completely fulfill God's promise to Abraham. The unending requirements of animal sacrifice indicate that full atonement for sin has not been achieved. The blood of mere animals cannot take away the guilt and penalty of sin; and thus, the consciences of the people were never fully cleansed and at ease with the holy God who had delivered them (Heb. 10: 1-2).

Throughout the OT period there exists the apparent contradiction between justice and mercy. How can God show mercy to a sinful and rebellious people? To do so would sacrifice His justice. Yet how can God not show mercy if He fulfills His promises to Abraham that through him all the nations will be blessed? How can a "just" God be a "justifier" of sinful people? The resolution comes in the person of Jesus Christ. Through the sacrifice of Christ, God can not only judge sin, but He can show mercy to His people and fulfill His promises to Abraham. He can be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3: 26).

Frame concedes that this historical perspective does not answer all the problems. It does not answer the question of why children suffer malnutrition or die in violent storms. However, it does offer us hope that the same God who resolves the problem of justice and mercy in the past can also resolve the problem of evil in the present day. The apparent contradiction between God's justice and mercy in the OT seemed to be an impossible problem of good and evil. God took His time in resolving it, although He could have resolved it immediately. And just as this problem is ultimately resolved in Christ after so long a waiting period, we can expect Him to resolve other problems of evil—but not immediately. He will do so in His own good time, and we must wait for the answer even as the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 had to wait for the fulfillment of the promise in Christ.

[387] Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God,* p. 180

From this historical perspective, we have the "lens" through which we can partially understand our present experience of suffering. As God used evil in the past to accomplish the "greater good" of demonstrating the glory of His justice and mercy, He can do the same today. God uses evil for various purposes. He uses it to discipline His children and promote holiness (Heb. 12; Ps. 119: 67, 71; Rom. 8: 28-30), to warn unbelievers of the wrath to come (Lk. 13: 1-5; Jn. 5: 14), to bring sinners to himself through the suffering of His saints (Col. 1:24), etc. To be fair with Adams,[388] we must acknowledge the merit of his argument which says that many of God's perfections are demonstrated through the existence of evil. This is the "greater-good" defence which is the only classical defence of a good and all-powerful God which has scriptural support.[389] Christian churches and relief organizations throughout the world daily demonstrate the love and mercy of God by relieving human suffering. But again, this is not pretended to be a final answer to this problem. The question Frame asks is: Why can't God demonstrate his eternal attributes without employing evil? This is a mystery, and we must wait for the final answer.

That answer will possibly come at the climax of human history at the return of Christ. At that time the righteous deeds of God will be revealed to everyone's satisfaction—even if not exhaustively. Frame cites the following passage.

> And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! [4] "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED." (Revelation 15:3-4 NASB)

At this point, there will be no doubt about the "righteous ways" of God in dealing with mankind throughout history. He will be completely justified in everything He has done so that "remaining doubts concerning God's goodness will be entirely taken away from us.[390]

Appendix D

Most working people seem to have little understanding of how the market works. Recently, Barack Obama defeated Mitt Romney for the presidency of the United States. The Democrats now continue their monotonous mantra about raising the taxes on the rich—people like Romney—in order to decrease the national debt. They will not admit that the top 10% of income earners in the US shoulder 45% of the tax burden (source, the Tax Foundation), nor will they admit that if people like Romney cannot keep a large percent of their income, they will not have this money to invest in the economy, thus producing jobs for average wage earners—like me. They also do not admit that they have no real interest in decreasing the national debt, but wish to continue proliferating (increasing) the many public programs which spend tax dollars needlessly and unwisely. Increased tax revenues from the rich will not decrease the national debt; Democrats, and many Republicans, will simply spend it on more public programs which accomplish little or nothing—except buying them votes from ignorant constituents.

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[388] Jay Adams, *The Grand Demonstration—A Biblical Study of the So-Called Problem of Evil*
[389] Frame, p. 184
[390] Frame, p. 189

Appendix E

Bartholomew, citing Wendell Berry, draws attention to the fact that competition unmitigated (unhindered) by a sense of corporate community will continue producing two classes—winners and losers—who are increasingly isolated from one another.[391] The escalating sense of class warfare in the US seems to support this. Only in mid-age have I seen the growth of "gated neighborhoods" consisting of relatively homogeneous (characterized by sameness) groups of people with high incomes. When I was growing up in a rural town in Mississippi, I lived right across the street from one of the wealthiest men in town while my father was a lower middle income blue collar worker. My parents didn't socialize with him, but it didn't seem to trouble him that he lived in the same neighborhood with people who made one-twentieth of his income. I even played with his children and had no sense of any class distinctions. The opposite of community is individualism, and while there is certainly a place for the expression of individual talent and enterprise (contra Marxism), absolute individualism has no consideration of those who are down and out. (I would not say down on their luck, because I don't believe in luck.) While many of these down-and-outers are lazy fools (Ecc. 4: 5), there are others who work hard but find it difficult to make ends meet.[392] I should know; I was on the edge of being the working poor myself, struggling 60 hours a week remodeling houses for resale only to give away large portions of my earnings to the banks (at 8-9 % interest) and realtors (earning 6% of the sales price).

But how does one build an economy of community rather than competition and rivalry (while acknowledging the necessity of some competition)? Building community in the general population must start with the church. Christians with access to wealth can be of incalculable help (actually, you would be able to calculate it) by making low interest business loans to budding entrepreneurs who are just getting started or those who have had some setbacks who cannot get a loan from the bank. Carpenters, plumbers, electricians, cabinet makers, etc. with teachable skills could hire unskilled Christians who could learn valuable trades rather than working minimum wage jobs with little prospect for upward economic mobility. Meanwhile, those minimum wage jobs, which are necessary to any economy, would be available to young workers entering the market place for the first time. I have learned in Africa that tradesmen often do not pass on their skills to others because they don't want to train their future competitors. Yet, apprenticeship has been shown historically to be the best way to train a future work force—much better than vocational programs which often lack the practical transfer of a broad range of skills. Vocational programs in the US have been expensive and ineffective. I once taught cabinet-making in a vocational school, an experience which opened my eyes to the superiority of apprenticeships.

The result of this ultra-competitive, uncooperative, and non-communal spirit is the lack of skilled labor in the whole economy. This lack, in turn, results in a small and stagnant middle class that generally consists of entrepreneurs and skilled labor (not government employees, as in many developing countries whose anti-business policies have stifled the *real* middle class). Alternatively, the increase in the number of skilled laborers produces a developing middle class (economically speaking) that is capable of purchasing more goods and services from lower wage earners—e.g. beef and poultry products. Lower-wage earners who work hard soon become

[391] Bartholomew, pp. 196-197
[392] See David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor—Invisible in America*.

middle-wage earners, and so on. Eventually, most people in society will fit into the class of middle wage earners who live comfortably and who are capable of purchasing a large number of goods and services. Skilled workers who are afraid of losing customers to a growing number of skilled-labor competitors don't seem to realize that the number of people capable of purchasing their services will grow as the result of sharing their skills with others. If the reader does not believe what I have just described, he is trapped by the fallacy "zero-sum" economics which believes that the economic "pie" is just so big and cannot get any bigger.[393]
One could think of multiple examples of how we could help one another without resorting to the government non-solution of welfare, unemployment payments, and non-productive government jobs which produce no tangible products. The challenge is to find people who are reliable workers and people who will repay their loans (Ps. 37: 21a) as well as finding people who are not con artists (swindlers), a sizable "industry" I have discovered in Uganda—the hard way. Again, the church is the answer if it is willing to practice church discipline upon slackers who will not work or pay their debts or outright cheats. In order to build incentive for those who wish to help others, there must be sufficient discipline, punishments, and rewards to make it work. But often, the well-meaning laborer/entrepreneur is defeated before he ever gets started. The bureaucracy of corporate banks and city licensing requirements minimize the opportunities of those who would otherwise learn to be productive businessmen and women and skilled laborers.

Interest rates on loans in Uganda and Kenya, and I suspect elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, exceed 20%, making repayment and profit-making very difficult. With lenders, as well as with many other businesses in Africa, it's all about making money as quickly as possible rather than genuinely helping other human beings. Even many who are making micro loans to the poor turn out to be "sharks" devouring the poor at 25 to 30% interest. Lenders in Africa don't realize that *more* money could be made in the long run if interest rates were lower, thus encouraging sustained expansion in the economy by a greater number of borrowers.

What about those outside the church? We can help them, too, but the risks are far greater. Better to start with those in the church who need our help (Gal. 6: 10), thereby showing those outside the church that we are not only concerned about a person's soul, but his body as well. We care that our fellow believer has a decent house to live in, food on his table, and health insurance to help him and his family survive a serious illness. When unbelievers see this, maybe they will start paying more attention to what we say about the gospel. So far, it may seem only empty words. I would not agree with Bartholomew that new monastic orders may be "an important way forward" for rebuilding the community of God's people (Bartholomew, p. 198). Jesus was clear when He said, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. (John 17:15-16 NASB). The world outside the church needs an opportunity to witness the reality of community inside the church without having to become part of it first.[394]

Appendix F

[393] For a refutation of this fallacy, see Darrow Miller with Marit Newton, *LifeWork*, as well as *Against All Hope—Hope for Africa* by Darrow Miller and Scott Allen.

[394] For an excellent series of books tackling the problems of living in the marketplace, see Richard C. Chewning, editor, *Biblical Principles and Business—The Foundations. Christians in the Marketplace Series*, Vol. 1).

Take common sand, as an example. By itself, sand is so common that it is practically worthless. We sweep it out of our house every day. But sand is silicon, and silicon can be used to make computer microchips which are sold by the millions around the world. The real resource in this example is not the sand but the human mind who conceived the idea of making microchips from silicon. The point is: the inventors of microchips made the economic pie bigger by using the resource of their minds. They not only became rich, but those who manufactured and sold their microchips also became rich.[395]

But the same spirit of innovation can be attributed to the industrious vegetable salesman who travels door to door in Mbarara with his bicycle loaded with fresh vegetables. Without his resourcefulness in growing the vegetables and finding a market for them, his slice of the pie would be much smaller.

Even President Musevini has implied that some Africans are lazy. The people have warm weather year-round and most have some land to plant crops. It is so easy to survive (unless he is including northern Uganda, war-torn Congo or Sudan) that many do not struggle any further to get ahead in life. "Even a fool can survive in Africa which is not possible in other continents," Musevini said. He has a point, and in the case of many Ugandans—certainly not all—he is telling the truth. They get by with as little work as possible just to stay alive.[396] On the other hand, the professional Ugandans I personally know work all hours of the day and have little time off. But professional jobs are scarce.

Another example of poverty of mind is the case of a village in Uganda which I will not name. The piped water system built by the NGO, Oxfam, was in need of repairs less than a year ago. The elders of the village advised the residents to contribute 500 Ush per month (less than 25 cents) to repair the damage and extend the water pipes throughout the village to reduce the walking distance to the communal water taps. The villagers claimed that this was too much and refused, although reluctantly agreeing to pay for the repairs alone when a couple of families persisted. The blog's (a site on the internet) author, who is Ugandan, remarks, "The villagers never paid a shilling to bring the water to the area and are not willing to pay a shilling to maintain it." Earlier he asks, "How do you end the culture of a lounging population, that does so little, drinks too much and procreate too much while expecting someone else to pick up the bill?[397]

Appendix G

Proceeding to the absurd, political races in the US, to me at least, have been a joke for many decades. Campaigns are run on personalities, not substantial issues and policy debates which will affect the American people. Sad to say, most races are won or lost on "swing voters" who are undecided until the day the votes are cast. One political pundit, Ann Coulter, put it well, "Swing

[395] My thanks to Bruce Sinclair, a fellow colleague in MTW, for this example.

[396] UgandanAndProud.com; "Uganda at 50: UPE, USE Leading Ugandans to a Life of Laziness, More Alcohol and More Babies", July, 2012

[397] UgandanAndProud.com; "Uganda at 50: UPE, USE Leading Ugandans to a Life of Laziness, More Alcohol and More Babies", July, 2012

voters have no convictions." The millions of dollars spent on lawn posters with computer-enhanced pictures of the candidates hints that the American public is not thinking too much. Should I vote for a candidate on the basis of how many times I see his mug-shot (photograph) on people's lawns? Is he campaigning for president or "Lawn of the Month"? The American people love "winners", often regardless of what they stand for. I am reminded of Jesus' "Year of Popularity" in which many were observing his miracles and believing in Him. He was a "winner". But Jesus never got enthusiastic about His popularity, for "He himself knew what was in man" (Jn. 2: 23-25). Within one week, the last week of His sojourn on earth, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" turned into "Crucify Him!"

Appendix H

Modern-day "Ahabs" include the likes of Robert Mugabe who within the past few years has bull-dozed to the ground thousands of houses of the poor, some of whom opposed him in the last election. Another example includes many struggling occupants in Rwanda who have been informed that they must sell their homes to the government (presumably at "market price") and build new, government-approved houses. Where will they get the difference in price between what they lost and what they are required to build? Many have already been removed from their hill-side homes and moved to settlements in the valleys allegedly to prevent death from mudslides. Stateside, some African-American families near Jackson, MS recently won a court case against the large car-manufacturing facility, Nissan. Nissan purchased family lands against the will of the owners through eminent domain laws allowing the county to seize private land for the "public good" as long as market price is paid. The arm of the government is long and powerful, and it is just as true that we need protection from the government as that we need protection by the government.

Quite the contrary, the common citizen in pursuit of justice is commonly caught up in an endless quagmire of bureaucratic obstructionism. Obstruction of justice through judicial bribery hardly needs explanation, but I have witnessed personally the lack of access to competent legal protection. Many years ago I taught a weekly Bible study in a small county jail in Mississippi. For about an hour or so, I was locked up in a 10 x 10 cell with accused and already convicted rapists, murderers, and thieves, some of whom had not seen their legal counsel for six months. Unable to afford high-priced lawyers with experience, they were given legal counsel appointed and paid by the State of Mississippi. The problem was that these state-appointed lawyers were poorly paid, tempting them to spend very little time defending poor convicts and more time researching lucrative cases. Money can, indeed, purchase justice, as the history of the world testifies.

Other forms of obstruction are less egregious (outstanding in a negative way) but affect far more people. As a general rule, Africa has an abysmal record for promoting small business. Each year the World Bank *Doing Business* report tracks ten elements which determine the difficulty or ease of "doing business" in a particular country or city. Considered together, these ten elements will present a reliable yardstick (measurement) helping corporations choose where to do business and which countries to avoid. The ten elements are as follows[398]

1. Starting a business.

[398] Hubbard and Duggan, p. 12.

2. Dealing with licenses.
3. Employing workers.
4. Registering property.
5. Getting credit.
6. Protecting investors.
7. Paying taxes.
8. Trading across borders.
9. Enforcing contracts.
10. Closing a business.

In 2008, Singapore ranked first on the list for ease in starting and operating a business. Not surprisingly, Singapore's economy has been booming for many years. The Democratic Republic of Congo ranked last. As an example of the difficulty of doing business in Kinshasa, Congo, the *Doing Business* report indicates that 89 tax payments are required annually resulting in 106 working days filling out the necessary paperwork and hours of waiting in lines. Such useless activity eats up 65.4 percent of a business' profits.[399] Obtaining a permit to build a house in Egypt requires getting permits from 30 other government agencies. I visited Cairo in 2009, and its landscape is cluttered with unpainted, dreary-looking high-rise apartments. Since the government charges exorbitant property taxes on completed buildings, the astute property owners never paint (translated: "complete") their buildings in order to save on taxes. Getting a license to import a commodity in Ghana requires approval from the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Finance, and the Bank of Ghana.[400]

In 2004, starting a business took 153 days in Mozambique and 155 days in Congo. Registering a business took 21 procedures in Nigeria, 19 procedures in Chad, but only three procedures in Finland. In 2004 it took three years in Angola to enforce a contract. (Even renewing a simple driver's license in Kampala required two trips and driving to three different government buildings along with the usual waiting in line.) The World Bank says that of all the countries in the world whose governments create hindrances in operating businesses, 80% are in Africa[401]. There are many ways for a government to steal from its citizens. Putting road blocks in the way of progress and prosperity is one of them.

As for outright theft, the African-despot variety is endemic (widespread). African heads of state are among the richest men in the world, making Donald Trump look destitute by comparison. George Ayittey, an African economist from Ghana living in the US, makes note of this remarkable phenomenon.[402]

> The fortunes of African heads of state were published by French Weekly (May, 1997) and reprinted in the Nigerian newspaper. The News (Aug. 17, 1998):
>
> - General Sani Abacha of Nigeria…($20 billion)
> - President H. Boigny of Ivory Coast…($6 billion)
> - General Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria…($5 billion)
> - President Mobutu of Zaire ($4 billion, [estimated at $8 billion by some sources])

[399] Hubbard and Duggan, p. 19
[400] Ayittey, p. 183
[401] Martin Plaut, *BBC Africa* analyst; Sept. 8, 2004; cited in Ayittey, p. 184
[402] Ayittey, pp. 406-407

- President Mousa Traore of Mali…($2 billion)
- President Henri Bedie of Ivory Coast…($ 300 million)
- President Dennis N'guesso of Congo…($200 million)
- President Omar Bongo of Gabon…($80 million)
- President Paul Biya of Cameroon…($70 million)
- President Mengistu Haile Miriam of Ethiopia…($30 million)
- President Hissene Habre of Chad…($3 million)

Ayittey does not mention Daniel arap Moi, Robert Mugabe, or numbers of other African heads of state, not because he is unaware of them, but because the figures were not available when the French article was published in 1997. Moi, a professing Christian "converted" in the Africa Inland Church, is reported to have stolen over $2 billion. (As I have heard it said, "The wallet is the last thing converted.") Mugabe, the last I heard, was building himself a $20 million house for his remaining years. (He is now 84(?), so he needs to enjoy it quickly.) Needless to say, African heads of state are very reluctant to leave their posts. From 1960 to 2003—roughly 40 years since the independence of many African nations—only 19 heads of state have retired; nineteen others have lost elections. From 1960 to 1989, only one African head of state lost an election in contrast to 12 who lost elections between 1990 and 1999. Eleven have lost elections since 1999.[403] What happened to the rest? Quoting *The Economist* (Jan. 17, 2004), Ayittey writes,

> Of the 107 African leaders overthrown between 1960 and 2003, two-thirds were killed, jailed or driven into exile. This combination of risks and rewards gave African leaders a compelling reason to cling to power. They gagged the press, banned dissent, and turned the security services into private militias.[404]

Although the "kleptocracies" (Ayittey's term) would be wrong in any sense, the situation would be helped if African kleptocrats (bureaucrats who steal) [405] would spend their loot inside Africa. I can't say for sure that the following anecdote (short story) is true, but I heard the rumor that Musevini requested that the members of parliament spend their stolen money in Uganda rather than sending it to foreign bank accounts. For politicians who are going to steal anyway, this is "good" advice, but it has limitations. It's much easier to stash it than to spend it. *The Economist* (Jan 17, 2004) reported that

> For every dollar that foolish northerners lent Africa between 1970 and 1996, 80 cents flowed out as
>
> capital flight in the same year, typically into Swiss bank accounts or to buy mansions on the Cote d' Azur.[406]

Do African despots really care about their people? If so, they could spend foreign aid on roads and bridges thus promoting business and commerce in the private sector. They could also spend it on medical care, hospitals, and education. They could streamline the endless bureaucracy involved in starting and maintaining a normal business. Nothing I have said here is news even for the average

[403] Ayittey, p. 405.
[404] Ayittey, p. 405
[405] Ayittey also calls them "suitcase bandits"
[406] Ayittey, p. 324.

peasant farmer. What may be news is the sheer magnitude of wealth siphoned every year from Western foreign aid, thus emboldening many economists to call for its demise.[407]

Appendix I

From a biblical point of view, I don't believe indiscriminate, ongoing charity to the same people is the solution. Short-term charity is often needed as emergency relief, but a better solution is enablement through micro-economic development—providing people with micro-loans at reasonable interest or no interest to start small businesses (see Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* and Lois Ooms, Transformational Community Health and Development, unpublished). But even micro-economic development person to person is not the total answer unless we expect Africa to develop a prosperous economy selling tomatoes and hand-made furniture on the streets. Macro-economic development must be encouraged through reduction of income taxes and customs taxes on raw materials and machinery—thus encouraging manufacturing and corporate investment. One Ugandan businessman I talked with said that 43% of the price of every piece of machinery in his store was government taxes. Moreover, he said that raw materials like steel and aluminum were taxed at even higher rates than manufactured goods. Thus, the manufacturing sector and the jobs it creates (or *would* create) are suppressed and entry level workers are still roaming the streets looking for jobs. We are now back to Ecc. 5: 8-9 and a government that is insensitive to the needs of the people, ignorant of basic economic principles, or both. For more on this subject, especially as it applies to Africa, see my Doctrine of Man and the references cited there.)

Appendix J

I am reminded of the story of Catherine Parr, the last queen of Henry VIII. A protestant woman of learning and intelligence, she was able to engage the king in many enjoyable private theological discussions. However, Catherine crossed the line one day when she assumed that she could pursue these discussions with the king in the presence of two Catholic leaders—particularly when she introduced the subject of reforming the church. Henry was embarrassed at her boldness and changed the subject. After she left their company, the two Catholics expressed dismay that anyone, the Queen included, would question the king's wisdom on matters of profound ecclesiological importance. Picking up on the hint but oblivious to the motive, Henry wondered out loud to his guests whether Catherine had ever violated any ecclesiastical regulations. The officials were soon at work preparing a case against her. You would think that any woman acquainted with Henry's marriage history would have kept her mouth shut. The only thing that saved her was her admission of grief that she had lost the king's affection. From that point on, whenever the king pontificated (to speak dogmatically) on matters of religion, Catherine stared at the floor and confessed that the king's arguments were irrefutable. She had learned her lesson that Henry's "conceit had no limits."[408]

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[407] See Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid*; R. Glenn Hubbard and William Duggan, *The Aid Trap—Hard Truths about Ending Poverty*. For other references, see McNeill, "The Doctrine of Man", in which I attempt to make relevant applications of anthropology to the doctrine of creation and dominion.

[408] Otto Scott, *The Great Christian Revolution—How Christianity Transformed the World*, pp. 54-55.

Appendix K

The limits of civil resistance to established authority is a subject of intense debate among evangelicals.[409] There is nothing new about it. Augustine, bishop of Hippo (Northern Africa) struggled with the legitimacy of the Donatist rebellion against the Roman church (and the military forces it mustered) which began early in the 4th century during the reign of Constantine and continued into the early part of the 5th century. Martin Luther, following Augustine's theory of the "just war", came to the conclusion that the general population can never declare a "just war" against the existing civil authority. Contrarily, the existing civil authority has the right to declare war against rebelling subjects. The practical outworking of this theory led to the massacre of over 100,000 German peasants by German princes and their armies during the Peasants' Revolt of 1524-25.[410] Quite obviously, there was a theological divide between the Lutheran and Augustinian theory, on the one hand, and the Reformed tradition that spawned the political theory of John Knox of Scotland and later Samuel Rutherford (*Lex Rex*), one of the framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Rutherford taught that the king (or any civil authority) was not above the law but subject to the law as a social contract between the civil authority and the people. If the king violates the contract through political oppression, the people have a right to rebel, even using military means, if necessary. The American Revolution of the late 18th century was the result of this new biblical perspective.

[409] See Bartholomew, pp. 284-85.
[410] See Leonard Verduin, *Reformers and Their Stepchildren*. For an abbreviated treatment, see also McNeill, "Religious Persecution during the 16th Century Reformation"

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Instructor's Manual

Lesson One Questions and Answers

1. Give three main reasons why the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes is seriously questioned by modern scholars. (any three)

(1) Solomon's name is not mentioned in the whole book. If Solomon is the author, why would he use the fictitious name of Qohelet when there would be no advantage to using this name?
(2) Qohelet uses the past tense "was king" or "have been king". But Solomon was king in Israel until his death and would not have had the occasion to say, "I have been king over Israel in Jerusalem." After becoming king, Solomon never lived a second of his life as anyone but the king of Israel.
(3) Qohelet makes other statements which would not have been true if he were actually Solomon. For example, in 1: 16, he says that he has "increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me". But there was only one king in Jerusalem before Solomon and that was his father David (King Saul never ruled in Jerusalem). He also laments the ill-treatment of the oppressed and says that there was no one to comfort them; but as one of the two most powerful and wealthiest kings in Israel, Solomon had adequate power and resources to help whomever he wished (see 4: 1). Further, in 5: 8-9, Qohelet makes comments about kings which are negative. We would not expect Solomon to criticized himself.
(4) The close association between Qohelet and Solomon actually ends after chapter 3

2. Discuss different translations of hebel. How does the translation of hebel affect the one's interpretation?

(1) "Meaninglessness" or "meaningless"
(2) "Enigmatic" or "confusing"
(3) "Absurd"
(4) "Unsubstantial", "fleeting"

If Qohelet has come to the settled conclusion that life is meaningless, then he has closed off any discussion or debate about life's struggles. Thus, the "there is nothing better…than" passages (the carpe diem) passages must be interpreted as sarcastic resignations. "Life is meaningless, so enjoy as many material pleasures as you can, because this is as good as it gets." Carrying this interpretation to its logical conclusion, Qohelet is a cynic whose "wisdom" must be corrected by the narrator at the end of the book.

On the other hand, if life is "enigmatic" or confusing, then Qohelet is not discarding the possibility that the traditional wisdom is correct in spite of his experience—in spite of what he sees that seems to contradict the ancient wisdom. Thus, the carpe diem sections are honest recommendations of traditional wisdom—that there is meaning in work and life which should be enjoyed to the fullest in spite of life's seeming absurdities. Interpreting hebel from this perspective, we see that the whole book is about the tension in Qohelet's mind between what he believes about traditional wisdom and what he sees empirically.

3. In what way does Qohelet acquire knowledge? That is, what is his "epistemological" method?

Autonomous observation, experience, and reasoning. "Autonomous" is defined as "independent of God's word".

4. What is the main tension (contradictory ideas) of Ecclesiastes?

The tension between what he believes from traditional wisdom (the word of God written and passed down through oral communication) and what he sees with his own eyes which seems to contradict traditional wisdom.

5. What is the general structure or outline of Ecclesiastes?

I. Prologue (chap. 1: 1-11)
II. Monologue by the Preacher (1: 12—12: 7)
III. Epilogue (12: 8-14)

6. Why does the author allude (hint) to Solomon as the preacher?

Solomon was known for his wisdom, wealth, wives, building projects, etc. If anyone could find meaning and happiness in life with such things, Solomon should have been able to do so. But since he didn't succeed in finding happiness in these things, no one else with fewer resources should consider this possibility.

7. Briefly discuss the author's allusion (indirect reference) to Genesis 1 and 2 and its significance for the message of Ecclesiastes.

With all his building projects and lavish gardens, Qohelet may have been trying to return to the ideal "garden" environment of the Garden of Eden when man was fulfilled in his cultural pursuits. Ever since the fall, men have been trying to build heaven on earth for themselves, but one that omits the inconvenience of having a God who demands obedience. Ecclesiastes disproves the idea that sinful man can return to the Garden through his own autonomous, independent efforts. Rather, he must fear God, keep his commandments, and submit to God's sometimes mysterious providence in ruling the world.

8. What is the "programmatic question" of Ecclesiastes and what is its significance for interpretation? (Hint: Be sure to read the footnotes.)

"What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3) The programmatic question guides the reader through the book. This is the question Qohelet attempts to answer throughout the whole book.

9. How does Qohelet illustrate the answer to the programmatic question?

Sun, wind, rivers, etc. all run their courses, but nothing ever changes and no gain is accomplished. In the same way, men go about their endless labors without any gain or profit.

10. Give three possibilities of the author's purpose in writing Ecclesiastes?

(1) To expose the futility of finding meaning in worldliness or in worldly pursuits—in a word, secularism.
(2) A warning against simplistic solutions to life's mysteries, leaving us open to having the lessons of our experience contradicted by further experience
(3) To warn us against unrealistic expectations of attaining wisdom
(4) To show the triumph of faith over skepticism by means of a debate between the them with faith winning out in the end.

Lesson Two Questions and Answers

1. What do I mean by Ecclesiastes being a "fictional" account of Solomon's life?

It is created or made up by the author. It is not a factual account.

2. Is Qohelet's use of the word "wisdom" the same as that of Proverbs? Explain your answer.

Qohelet's wisdom is not the wisdom of Proverbs which begins with the fear of the Lord. Qohelet's wisdom begins with man's independent observation and reasoning. He uses the word "wisdom" to describe his empirical method of observation and uses it ironically (saying one thing but meaning another) to stimulate the reader to question his methodology and his claim to wisdom. He wants the reader to ask, "Is this really the wisdom of the Scriptures?"

3. Is the wisdom of the Bible only moral wisdom, or does it include anything else? Explain your answer, citing some Scriptures to illustrate.

If there is any truth (wisdom) about anything—carpentry, metallurgy, or nuclear physics—it belongs to God who bestows this wisdom to men by His grace—either special grace given only to believers or common grace given in different measure to all men. In the Bible there is no compartmentalizing (putting things neatly into boxes) of truth into "spiritual" truth or "secular" truth. Bezalel was given wisdom in craftsmanship (Ex. 28: 3; 31: 3; 35: 31), and the wisdom of Solomon became famous relative to (in comparison with) the wisdom of others (1 Kings 10; 1 Kings 4: 30). This implies that these other men were also wise.

4. What do I mean by the statement, "All knowledge is derivative"?

All true knowledge finds its origin in God. Even if men discover truth from observation and reasoning, God must supply the necessary opportunities and abilities to make these discoveries and to use them. God's knowledge is original, derived from nothing but Himself. Man's knowledge is dependent upon the God who gave it.

5. Explain Qohelet's independent reasoning by relating it to the fall of Adam and Eve.

Rather than starting from God's self-revelation: "In the day you eat of it you will die", Adam and Eve wanted to test this revelation with independent observation. They would find out for

themselves whether God's word was accurate. The standard of truth then became man's autonomous, independent reason, not God's self-revelation. Man has been making this same mistake since the fall with disastrous results.

6. How does the proper "starting point" help us avoid Qohelet's mistake in determining truth merely from observation?
As sinners with flawed thinking, we cannot rely on observation and experimentation as a starting point to distinguish between good and bad. We must distrust our ability to sort out the data and come to the correct conclusions. Thus, experimentation with what God has forbidden (e.g. promiscuous sex) may seem a pleasurable experiment, but it will end in brokenness. Rather than being broken and damaged by sexual immorality, it would be much easier simply to rely on God's word rather than experiment with it and see what happens. God has told us what is good for us and what is bad for us. He knows what is good and bad because He is omniscient and holy.

7. What grammatical clue do we have to prove that Qohelet's quest for knowledge was selfish?

Everything he pursues is "for myself", a phrase which is repeated in 2: 4, 5, 6, 8a, 8b. He uses the word "I" from v. 4 through v. 11 fourteen times.

8. Explain the reference to paradise in Eden found in Ecc. 2: 4-6.

With all his building projects and lavish gardens, Qohelet may have been trying to return to the ideal "garden" environment of the Garden of Eden when man was fulfilled in his cultural pursuits. Ever since the fall, men have been trying to build heaven on earth for themselves, but one that omits the inconvenience of having a God who demands obedience. Ecclesiastes disproves the idea that sinful man can return to the Garden through his own autonomous, independent efforts. Rather, he must fear God, keep his commandments, and submit to God's sometimes mysterious providence in ruling the world.

9. Discuss two interpretations of the *carpe diem* sections in Ecclesiastes.

(1) Longman believes that the *carpe diem* sections are ironic or sarcastic statements of resignation. The idea is that the enjoyment of labor is the best we can get in this meaningless world. Although we cannot find any lasting meaning in our labor, and even though all our efforts will be forgotten at death and passed on to others who do not deserve them, we might as well make the best of it—eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

(2) Bartholomew believes that the *carpe diem* sections are honest expressions of joy in the midst of life's confusion. Although Qohelet's empirical observations don't seem to be consistent with Biblical wisdom (Proverbs); nevertheless, there are times in his speech when his ultimate faith in traditional wisdom—against his observations—shines through and overcomes his despair. At the end of the book, his final conclusion is to remember one's Creator, showing that at the end of the book, Qohelet decides to put his trust in what God's word says rather than his interpretation of what he sees. He chooses to walk by faith rather than by sight.

10. What is the relationship of work to creation implied in Ecc. 2: 24-25?

Our work is our connection with creation, particularly our eating and drinking. As we eat and drink to the glory of God, we should recognize and acknowledge the God-ordained forces of creation (the laws of growth and agriculture) that He has set in motion which are ultimately incomprehensible to us. In Col. 3 we are taught to do our work—no matter what kind of work it is—for the glory of God. When we work we are performing an act of worship before the Lord acknowledging that He is the primary receiver of our labor and the product of our labor. In a brief moment of joy, Qohelet acknowledges that labor itself is still a good gift to be enjoyed in the context of one's relationship to the Lord.

Lesson Three Questions and Answers

1. Explain Ecc. 3: 1-8 in terms of God's providence.

There is a time for everything because God is in control of all His creatures (including humans) and their actions. He has ordained every event that comes to past from the beginning of creation (and the beginning of time itself) until now. Even sinful activities (and the original sin of Adam and Eve) are subject to the ordained will and control of God who has declared the end from the beginning (Isa. 46: 9-10; Lam. 3: 37-38).

2. Briefly explain Delitzsch's interpretation of Ecc. 3: 11.

Man instinctively looks beyond this temporal world—the world which is passing—to another world which lasts forever. He is not content with that which is merely temporal or bound by time. Although himself limited by time, man knows intuitively that he is supposed to have some kind of participation in an eternal world. However, he cannot grasp or comprehend this eternal world or understand God's eternal plan for the world or for him personally. Thus, the relation of man living in time to an eternal world remains beyond his grasp and a source of frustration.

3. Briefly discuss the difference between Longman's view and Bartholomew's view of Ecc. 3: 1-8.

Longman—God will not allow us to find the meaning and purpose of everything God is doing in its appropriate time even though He has given us the appetite for understanding the grand scheme of things. Thus, Qohelet's "time-for-everything" speech is one of resignation and despair, not enthusiasm for God's providence. God is teasing us with desires He will not fulfill.

Bartholomew—Apart from birth and death, all the activities listed are within the realm of responsible human activity. Although God has ordained every event under heaven, man has the responsibility to plant, to preserve life, to protect life, to wage war only when necessary, to speak or to be silent at the right time, etc. God's sovereign providence does not eliminate human responsibility to do the right thing at the right time. The question of v. 9 is rhetorical and left open-ended. Qohelet cannot perceive the profit of one's labor, but he is not necessarily saying that there is none (although he has implied this earlier; 2: 11).

4. What is the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility?

God declares the end from the beginning, and His decree ensures that what He has spoken beforehand will certainly come to pass. The works of men are contingent (dependent) first upon the primary cause of God's will and secondly upon the secondary causes which God ordains—e.g. the forces of nature (floods), the activity of other men, their own abilities or liabilities which bring success or failure.

5. Explain the difference between primary cause and secondary cause.

The primary cause of anything is the will of God who ordains everything that comes to pass (Eph. 1: 11). The secondary causes are men's actions, abilities, external circumstances (e.g. floods), etc. which God normally employs to accomplish His ordained will. The secondary causes are "caused" by the primary cause of God's will.

6. Discuss Qohelet's view of the afterlife.

From one viewpoint, he is cynical about the prospect of life after death and shrugs off the possibility. From the other point of view, he doesn't know what to believe since he has never met anyone who came back from the dead. At the very least, Qohelet cannot be expected to have as strong a view of the afterlife as the NT believer, even though there was ample evidence of it in the OT scriptures at the time the author was writing. Thus, the narrator is not presenting Qohelet in a very positive light at this point. He is ignoring the special revelation God has already provided (cf. Dan. 12: 2; Isa. 25: 8; 26: 19) while depending purely on empirical methodology.

7. Is mankind's demand for justice an argument for the existence of God? Explain.

Because men are made in the image of God, they demand the punishment of evil-doers. Even those who deny the existence of God or absolute moral principles would agree that there is injustice in the world which must be redressed (requited or made up for). If they openly deny this, they would quickly change their minds if someone stole their money or threatened to put a bullet in their heads. Moral relativists are notoriously inconsistent in practice. But the very idea of justice against evil presupposes (assumes) the ideas of right and wrong, good and evil—terms which the unbeliever has no right to use in a world produced by chance. If there is no God, then life on earth is the evolutionary survival of the fittest in which the strong have an obligation to subdue and exterminate the weak to make a stronger species. Contrary to this is a world created by God in which believers are instructed to help the weak by fighting against injustice.

8. Did the Mosaic Law make provisions for the poor Israelite? Explain.

The laws of gleaning were instituted for the poor who were able to work in the fields gathering grain left purposely by landowners (Lev. 19: 10; 25: 35; Ruth 2). Special provision was made in the tithing laws for the orphan and widow whose circumstances rendered them landless. The tithe of the third year was stored in each town for their consumption, as well as for the Levite and sojourner who had no land to produce crops (Deut. 14: 28-29). Those who loaned to the poor were forbidden to charge interest, and God promised the lender (or those who gave outright) that they would be duly blessed for their generosity (Ex. 22: 25; Prov. 19: 17). Poor Hebrews who sold themselves into indentured (contracted) slavery for six years were allowed to go free on the seventh

year without payment (Ex. 21: 2). Mosaic Law forbade bribery in the courts which would essentially deprive the poor of legal justice (Ex. 23: 6-8).

9. How do Adams and Frame answer the question of the problem of evil? Whose argument do you accept?

Jay Adams argues from Paul's statement in Rom. 9: 22-23 that God endures the evil of this world for the time being in order to demonstrate the glory of His wrath and power against unbelievers and the glory of his grace to believers. Evil is therefore necessary to demonstrate the glory of God's power and grace.

Frame answers that there has always been a delay in God's answers to difficult questions. The gospel of grace demonstrated in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ is God's delayed answer to the question: How can God be just while justifying sinners? (see Appendix C). God waited some 4000 years from the time of Abraham before He provided the definitive answer to this all-important question. In answer to Adam's solution, Frame asks the question: Why can't God display His power and good name without using evil?

10. How do process theologians fail to provide biblical answers to the problem of evil?

To protect the goodness of God, they sacrifice His omnipotence (His all-powerfulness). This solution fails from the very start since it fails to answer why God allowed sin into the world in the first place. They also fail to answer the question of why we should serve a God who is powerless to help us. How do we know that this impotent God can save us in the end?

Lesson Four Questions and Answers

1. According to Qohelet, what is the motivation for most labor?

From his perspective, the motivation of work is to compete with others and build personal reputations for success.

2. What texts in the OT gives us the starting point for understanding our labor?

The Biblical perspective of labor is found in Genesis 1 and 2 and the example of Bezalel in Ex. 31who crafted beautiful items for the temple. Bezalel was specifically called and commissioned to work for the glory of God. He (along with Adam and Eve) is therefore, the prototype of all of God's people who are called to work in the "garden-temple" for God's glory.

3. Although profits are essential, as well as healthy competition, what are the negative consequences of cutthroat competition and the lack of communal spirit?

Human relationships become expendable as friends betray friends as a means of moving up the corporate ladder. Healthy marriages succumb to the collateral damage of the husband or wife being "married" to the corporation—a kind of "corporate adultery"—or through the extended separation of husbands and wives who work in different cities. Excessive competition can also hinder helping

other members of society who are not as skillful in manual labor or gifted in entrepreneurial activities. Rather than helping others create their own businesses or learn new skills, excessive competition looks out for only one person—me.

4. How does Qohelet balance the excesses of the lonely miser?

He calls the sluggard a fool who consumes his own flesh. The fool values leisure above all else, but the life of leisure he enjoys is lost through starvation. Actually, both the lonely and the sluggard are fools.

5. What is the worst kind of poverty? Explain your answer.

The poverty of the mind. Some people are poor not because of insurmountable political and economic forces, or even natural causes, but because of poor attitudes and poor choices. This is the worst poverty of all because the person lives in the prison of his own sinful mind and heart.

6. In 4: 9-12, how does Qohelet include the aspect of community in business enterprise?

It is valuable to have help in our labor. What we lack in skills, analysis, and intuitions, our working companion may be able to supply. In addition to this, a working companion can supply needed encouragement in our work, especially when things get tough.

7. Why is political power tenuous (fragile)?

Political power is founded upon people's perceptions; and these perceptions may be based on fact or on fiction (wrong information). Moreover, perceptions can change quickly even from one day to the next based upon faulty information or truth that is inadequately processed. In addition, if someone stays in power long enough, the people who put him in power may not be the same people who now compose the present population. One other reason for the tenuousness of political power is that people who stay in power a long time often become arrogant, cease listening to sound advice, and fail to adapt to the changing political demands of their people.

8. Besides not really thinking about the words we are singing or praying, how else may we become hypocritical and formal in our worship?

Using many words in prayer; using the name of God many times in our prayers; praying loudly; using a very pious tone of voice—anything which is used to manipulate God to do something for us.

9. How may emotionalism become another form of religious formalism?

While worship should appeal not only to the mind but the heart and the emotions, we must avoid an appeal only to the emotions without directing the mind to the claims of Scripture. The theology of our faith should be carefully and systematically taught so that the heart has something to rejoice about. The Psalms, which clearly appeal to the emotions, nevertheless focus on the attributes of

God and the work of God in creation and salvation. In order for the heart to be engaged emotionally, the mind must also be focused on the works and attributes of God.

10. What does Qohelet say about political leaders and their cronies? (p. 49)

They are watching out for one another as they systematically confiscate the hard-earned wages of the common people. The common people who have no power feel helpless to do anything about it.

Lesson Five Questions and Answers

1. Why does money not satisfy?

Man was created to find fulfillment and satisfaction in God alone. When we pursue wealth as the goal in life, money then displaces God as an idol to be worshipped; and since man is created in God's image, nothing else but God will satisfy his deepest desires. For the one who pursues money or material wealth as an end in itself, the possession of money will simply result in the sinful desire for more money. It will never bring true contentment. Besides, money always comes with the persistent efforts of those who are themselves pursuing more money. They will pursue you not for genuine friendships, but for your money.

2. Qohelet learned from experience that riches would not make him happy. How can the Christian know this from traditional wisdom?

By reading what the Proverbs have to say about wealth and riches. It is plain for all to see.

3. Are riches evil in themselves? What is the key word in 5: 10 for understanding the place of riches in one's life?

Riches are not evil in themselves. The ***love*** of wealth is evil because the love of wealth can displace the love of God. Of all the gods of this world, the closest competitor to God is money (cf. Matt. 6: 24). See also 1 Tim. 6: 10.

4. How do the "better—than" proverbs help us understand the relative value of money (i.e. the value of riches in comparison with other things)?

Proverbs is clear about the relative worth of money (that is, the value of money compared to other things like wisdom, the fear of God, love, peace among family members, and a good name). All the things mentioned have more value than money, and these "better—than" proverbs help us keep the value of money in proper perspective. These "better" things should be pursued more than money, but often aren't.

5. Does money alone produce genuine friendships? Explain your answer.

Money alone cannot produce genuine friendships; however, generosity shown to those who have needs may be the occasion of initiating a life-long friendship. The Proverbs often mention the

value of helping others with our money and possessions (Prov. 14: 21, 31; 19: 4, 17; 22: 9; 28: 8, 27; 29: 14; 31: 20); and Jesus gives us a parable illustrating the potential of making genuine friendships with generosity (Lk. 16). Such friendships, however, must be sustained with something more than money, or else they are not genuine friendships.

6. Explain this statement: Wise use of money depends on the proper sense of ownership.

The Jubilee principle and the tithe in the OT teach us that God is the absolute owner of everything. We are but stewards who use His wealth during our stay on earth. If God is the owner, then we must consider how He would have us use our money—all of it. Although only a tithe was required, the tithe represented the whole; therefore, when the Israelite tithed his grain and animals, he acknowledged that the other nine-tenths also belonged to God, and that God was allowing him to use it in other ways appropriate as a steward, not as an absolute owner. All the land also belonged to God, and the poor Israelite family dispossessed from the land through draught or indebtedness would have the land returned to them during the Jubilee. The Israelite slave would receive his freedom after serving his earthly master 6 years since he ultimately belonged to God.

7. Is 5: 18-20 positive or negative? Explain two views.

From Longman's and Fox's perspective, it is negative resignation. Man has only a little time on earth to enjoy the few things God has given him, but God may not let him enjoy them. God is distant and sometimes cold.
The other view (Kidner, Eaton, et al) maintains that God allows man to enjoy His good gifts if he enjoys them to His glory, on His terms. Men fail to enjoy life because they refuse to acknowledge God as the giver of life and all things.

8. What is the connection between 5: 13 and Jesus' wisdom in Luke 12, the parable of the rich fool?

The rich fool of Luke 12 never considered using his wealth to "store up riches in heaven" (Matt. 6: 20) by helping others with his wealth. Therefore, God held his riches against him and judged him for being selfish. The rich man in 5: 13 does the same thing. He hoards his money to his own hurt because God will judge him for selfishness. When he dies, he will have nothing in his hand to show God for the money entrusted him.

9. Explain the divine and human dimension of enjoying wealth.

God distributes His gifts sovereignly according to His will, but we are responsible to use them and enjoy them to His glory ("coram deo" before the face of God).

10. Discuss the phrase, "the enjoyment of life is not an entitlement". Related to this is the statement, "life must be enjoyed on God's terms".

God is not obligated to give us enjoyment in life. We are fallen creatures rebelling against His word. Thus, if we enjoy anything in life, we must do it on God's terms according to the boundaries

given to us. If we refuse to use what He has given us in ways that please Him, why should we be surprised if God withholds enjoyment?

Lesson Six Questions and Answers

1. What are some of the internal contradictions in vv. 1-6 compared to what Qohelet has said earlier?

In 5: 18, the reader is encouraged to enjoy eating and drinking, and there is no clue from the context that this same eating and drinking would not be appropriate with a larger group of people looking for a legitimately good time (as in 7: 2, 4). Furthermore, the concern for a good reputation (7: 1) seems out of place for someone who believes that the day of death is better than the day of birth or for someone who believes that more wisdom brings additional pain (1: 18). Just a few verses later, Qohelet advises restraint in the pursuit of wickedness (7: 17) but also advises restraint in the pursuit of righteousness and wisdom (7: 16).

2. How does Qohelet demonstrate his familiarity with Proverbs?

> Many of his statements in this section resemble those we find in Proverbs (for example, Proverbs 17:10; 13:1;14:29;15:1, 18; 16:32).

3. Why should we not be confused with Qohelet's vacillation (movement back and forth) between human reasoning and God's wisdom?

We must distinguish between the wisdom of Proverbs with its starting point in the fear of the Lord and the kind of "wisdom" Qohelet is talking about with its starting point in human observation and human reasoning. Qohelet vacillates back and forth between the two sources of knowledge—and so do we. It's part of the sinful human condition.

4. Is Qohelet merely being pragmatic about wisdom in 7: 11-12? Explain.

Although the verses seem similar to Proverbs, the book of Proverbs never places wisdom and money at the same level of importance. Besides, the remark, "And an advantage to those who see the sun" may be taken ironically to remind us that the advantage of wisdom, like money, has a time limit—life on earth. There is no advantage to wisdom once a person dies.

5. How would you answer Qohelet's call for moderation in righteousness and wickedness in vv. 15-18)?

His advice in these verses is pragmatic but not biblical. Although some commentators have attempted to interpret them as a discouragement to self-righteousness and sham religion, this interpretation does not follow logically. Qohelet is not doubtful about the value of insincere religion or self-righteousness, but about the value of true religion and true righteousness. There would be no argument in saying that *hypocrites* die young, but that *wicked* people prolong their lives, as there is little essential difference between the hypocrite and the wicked. The force of his

argument is that even truly righteous people die early while those who pursue wicked practices die of old age.
6. Discuss the similarity and difference between the comments of Job and Qohelet concerning wisdom.

Qohelet admits that he could not achieve wisdom. Job admits the same thing in Job 28. One can mine for silver and gold, but no one can find wisdom? But the wisdom Job speaks of is a different kind from the wisdom of Qohelet. Wisdom in the Bible is the body of objective revelation from God, while wisdom for Qohelet is knowledge accumulated from autonomous (independent) observation and interpreted through autonomous reason.

7. How do unbelievers reason in a circle?

They begin with themselves and end with themselves. In other words, they begin with their independent observation and reasoning, and then they form a conclusion on the basis of this independent reasoning. In doing so, they do not take into account other important information (data) which is only attainable from the Word of God. By ignoring this data, their research on any subject remains incomplete. They are working in the closed system of man's autonomous mind, measuring themselves with themselves (2 Cor. 10: 12).

8. How do believers reason in a circle?

The Christian is also reasoning in a circle, but his circle is much bigger, existing in the *open* system of the special revelation of God in the Scriptures. The Christian uses this special revelation to properly interpret the general revelation of creation in all areas of life—science, literature, ethics, etc. The Christian, therefore, reasons dependently upon God while investigating the universe of data. Every fact of the universe is interpreted through the fact of Scripture.

9. Who is the woman who is more bitter than death (v. 26)? Give reasons for your answer.

The woman more bitter than death is "woman folly". Supporting this view is the similarity of language describing the adulterous woman of Prov. 2: 16-19 and the woman mentioned in Ecc. 7: 26. Both passages describe this woman as a deadly foe from whose clutches there is little chance of escape. The significance of this comparison lies in the fact that Woman Folly in Prov. 9 is closely related to the adulterous woman of Prov. 2 through the imagery of sexual immorality.
Both of these women, in turn, represent something more than immoral women. Rather, they represent a philosophy of life juxtaposed (set side by side) with Lady Wisdom who also offers her invitation to whoever will accept it (Prov. 1: 20-33; Prov. 9: 1-12).

10. Is it Qohelet's own fault that he has not found wisdom? Explain your answer.

Yes, it is his own fault since he has chosen to ignore "Lady Wisdom", the wisdom of the Word of God, although she is easily found by those searching for her. The "many devices" (v. 29) that men have sought include the device of sinful, independent reasoning which scorns divine revelation as the starting point of any legitimate investigation of the universe. Thus, in vv. 23-29, Qohelet

confesses the irony of the quest to find truth on his own terms—leading him not to wisdom, but to folly.

Lesson Seven Questions and Answers

1. How was Israel unique in checking the power and authority of kings? Give biblical examples.

Only Israel had prophets who were ordained directly by God to condemn the covenant violations of powerful kings. The entire history of the prophetic office proves that Israel's kings were subject to the law of God and could not act independently of it without certain consequences—the final consequences culminating in the exiles of both the northern and southern kingdoms. Saul was called to account by Samuel, David by Nathan, Ahab by Elijah, Solomon by Ahijah.

2. How is Qohelet's wisdom in v. 11 relevant for modern-day courts?

Because there is delayed judgment of the wicked, or no judgment at all, wicked people are encouraged to continue their evil ways. In many countries, seemingly endless appeals may give the criminal considerably more time before the final verdict and prison time. On the other hand, if criminals knew that justice would be carried out quickly, they would be less likely to commit crimes.

3. Where does Qohelet make his epistemological problem evident? That is, where does his self-contradiction alert us to the fact that he is making his own confusion obvious to us?

In 8: 12-14, he gives the two opposing views—traditional vs. empirical—very close together in order to clearly indicate that he knew that he was being inconsistent. He wanted the reader to know that he was aware of how inconsistent he was being and to feel the same confusion and frustration which he felt.

4. What does Qohelet say about the unpredictability of the love of God?

Our actions, whether good or bad, give us no predictability of the way God is going to treat us during this life. In other words, Qohelet is questioning the retributive justice of Proverbs and the wisdom Psalms (cf. Ps. 1and 37, two of many psalms teaching retributive justice).

5. How does Qohelet define "love" or "hatred" in 9: 1-10, and how is this passage relevant for Christians struggling with severe difficulties?

Love or hatred in this section is not defined as what God will do with us after death, but what He does for us, or to us, now in the present life. If this life turns out badly, Qohelet reasons from the empirical evidence that God must not love us. He is not thinking biblically at this point.

6. What does Qohelet have to say about life after death?

Full of contradictions, Qohelet says that even a miserable life is better than death (a live dog is better than a dead lion). In other words, it is better to be a miserable, worthless creature like a dog

than to be a dead lion. Previously he had congratulated the dead (4: 2). At death, man becomes unconscious of everything, and he is forgotten by others. The tragedy of death overshadows any value to life. Qohelet has no confidence is life after death at this point in his autobiography.

7. Why is the carpe diem section of 9: 7-10 unconvincing? Why does it fail to inspire a sense of joy?

In v. 10 he says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going." The reader fails to respond in joy to the suggestion that it is better to live as a dog rather than to be a dead lion. Moreover, Sheol may have a universally negative connotation (meaning) for Qohelet's readers. It was recognized not merely as a place for the dead, but a place of judgment (see quotation). But even if Sheol is seen neutrally as a place for all the dead, righteous and unrighteous, it is a place where there is no activity to enjoy. The tension in Qohelet's mind is thus not resolved with this latest *carpe diem* section. Death still looms on the horizon threatening and challenging the possibility of meaning and purpose.

8. Discuss how the unpredictability of time and "chance" affect people's lives.

No matter how much a person is endowed with gifts and abilities—either physical or intellectual—the unpredictability of life may prevent success or the opportunities to use these gifts. For example, a person who is an exceptional runner training for the Olympic races may one day trip over a dog who runs across his path just at the wrong moment. This "chance" occurrence causes him to break his leg and permanently injure his leg, destroying all possibilities of Olympic greatness. The lesser athlete may take his place and win the gold. A person with exceptional intellectual gifts may never get the opportunities for an education which would increase his possibilities in the market place, or he may lack concerned teachers or parents who notice his potential. Those who work hard do not necessarily succeed in the market place because they did not make those "chance" connections with business people who could have helped them succeed. Moreover, an energetic, gifted person may die early in life, preventing him from reaching his goals. No one knows when he will die; therefore, the prospect of an early death will discourage some people from trying to achieve their potential.

9. How does 9: 13-18 apply to the course of human history?

Historically, wise men and their works have been easily forgotten, making the value of wisdom questionable. Moreover, any gains made by wise men can easily be undone by the stupidity of one fool. The wiser men of a country, if heeded, would have prevented wars and loss of life, but because they did not have popular support, the nations they lived in followed the hot-heads who were able to rouse them to a spirit of nationalistic pride—Hitler's Germany, for example, or Amin's Uganda, for another example).

10. Is Qohelet correct when he attributes historical and life events to chance? What attitude should the Christian have to his statements in vv. 9: 13-18? Explain.

What Qohelet calls “chance”, we call providence—albeit sometimes a severe providence. There is no such thing as “chance,” only God’s wise ordering of all events and all people for His own glory. Considering the fact that there is no such thing as chance, the Christian must move forward with his whole effort, leaving the future in God’s hands. Nothing that we do for the Lord will be wasted. Yet, we must admit that Qohelet’s frustration with the unpredictability of life is painfully real, even if we don’t believe in chance occurrences. Much of what God does with our lives is an enigma.

Lesson Eight Questions and Answers

1. What is the meaning of v. 2 and what is its connection with v. 3?

The thoughts and actions of a fool and a wise man run in opposite directions, one to the left and one to the right. What’s more, a fool’s actions are easily recognized; he does not have “walking-around-sense” (common sense)

2. What is the general principle taught in 10: 8-11?

We must not only work hard, but we must work smart (more intelligently) as well. Hard effort alone will not be rewarded.

3. Explain Qohelet’s aversion (opposition) to the rule of non-wealthy people who rise to power. Interact with my interpretation and feel free to disagree with me. (10: 5-7)

A person with little or no formal or self-education, low social standing and no money (noting some exceptions, like King David, the shepherd boy) who rises quickly to power with little previous leadership experience will generally be ill-equipped to handle it—like a baby handling dynamite. In other words, unless this person has grown up in circles of power and is given the experience of leading people from an early age, he may not be able to handle a lot of power dumped in his lap all at once. Pride will get the better of him, and he will turn out to be a greater tyrant than the tyrant he displaced. The world has witnessed this problem many times, and generally it turns out badly for the country whose leader lacks the customary restraints of the wealthy and educated. However, this by no means implies that such wealthy, educated leaders are without fault or that they generally turn out to be good leaders. Qohelet himself was skeptical of the ruling class (4: 1-3, 13-14).

4. In 10: 16-19, how does Qohelet demonstrate the traditional belief in predictable cause and effect?

While Qohelet has questioned the value of hard labor as opposed to excessive leisure (4: 6), he knows intuitively that virtue and integrity are the best course of action for successful and worthwhile living despite the fact that the consequences of one’s actions do not always match the activity, making cause and effect become seemingly unpredictable. The wise often suffer the calamities belonging to fools (8: 12-14; 9: 1-5). Nevertheless, at the end of the day, he knows that individual or national prosperity ordinarily results from wise management, not revelry. One cannot effectively function in this world without assuming some predictability.

5. What is the meaning of the metaphor in 10: 18?
The neglected house with sagging rafters represents a kingdom without wise management and leadership.

6. Why is freedom of speech difficult to achieve in a society ruled by a tyrant?

The idea is that powerful men have complicated networks of people who are paid to keep them informed. Were they not so informed, they would not be able to maintain their power and status. Therefore, it is difficult to keep secrets from tyrants, making it wise to keep your mouth shut.

7. What is the meaning of the metaphor, "cast your bread upon the waters", and how does this fit with the fiction that Solomon is the author?

"Cast your bread upon the waters" is metaphor for maritime trade (shipping trade). It fits well with the Solomonic fiction since Solomon established alliances with the Phoenicians who were expert sailors and ship-builders.

8. Is it admissible for us to take risks? Explain.

Life itself is a risk. We can fail by doing nothing as well as attempting something. Jesus chided the servant who did nothing with the money entrusted to him because he was unwilling to take a risk. If we wait for the perfect time and conditions for planting or starting a business, we will never begin. From the perspective of the NT believer, God's sovereign control more than compensates for our lack of control. Success is not guaranteed to the believer, but at least the believer trusts in God's sovereign providence to bless his efforts in some way (Rom. 8: 28). God never wastes time. From this perspective, the believer cannot ultimately lose.

9. Is there a major shift in Qohelet's thinking beginning in 11: 7? Explain.

In the other *carpe diem* passages, joy is set in the context of enigma. Stated another way, the encouragement to joy comes after the passages stating the enigma—the confusion of life. In 11: 7-10, Qohelet tells us to enjoy life (*carpe diem*), followed by the inevitable enigmas of old age. The order is reversed and this reversal may signal a major shift in Qohelet's thinking which ends in resolution. Moreover, the statement to remember one's Creator is contrary to Qohelet's autonomous epistemology of independent observation. The fear of God becomes foundational to his search for wisdom.

10. Discuss two different views of the narrator's opinion of Qohelet.
(1) Just as there were false prophets and true prophets in the history of Israel, there were also wise men in Israel who were not necessarily wise in the ways of God—Ahithophel being one notable example. Qohelet is one such fictitious wise man whose advise was sought after, but which failed to measure up to the tradition of wisdom found in the OT. The narrator gives Qohelet only marginal (partial) approval, saying that he attempted to teach the truth, but implying that he failed to achieve this goal. Moreover, his words were often even harmful, like goads and nails. He warns his son that the writing of books—books like Qohelet's—has very limited value. Turning away from wise

men like Qohelet, the son must fear God and keep his commandments, something Qohelet never advised anyone to do.

(2) Bartholomew does not believe that the narrator "distances himself from Qohelet"; but, rather, presents him positively as an orthodox wise man (although not suggesting that everything Qohelet says is orthodox). At the end of his monologue, Qohelet succeeds in resolving his struggle with the enigma of life and comes to a conclusion consistent with the traditional wisdom of Israel—"Remember your Creator." In other words, he does not merely seek wisdom, he actually finds it. The narrator's epilogue shows that he affirms Qohelet's struggles (even as God affirms Job's struggles) before coming to the conclusion of remembering his Creator. Like the book of Job, Ecclesiastes gives hope to those who are struggling with life's agonizing enigmas. Such enigmas are a necessary part of the Christian life.

Examinations

80% of the exam questions will come from the Lesson Questions. In addition to these, the instructor will select 20% of the exam questions from other parts of the lectures.