Preparing to Teach Ecclesiastes 2

In the introductory session, I suggested that Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) as like a quilt made from materials coming from disparate places but sewn together in interesting patterns. What I may not have emphasized is that these interesting patterns don’t always form a pattern which readily appears to fit together. There is significant inconsistency within the writing. Even among the rabbinic scholars of the Talmud, there are disagreements about the consistency of Ecclesiastes. The English translation of Shabbat 30b:3 reads:

**The Sages sought to suppress the book of Ecclesiastes** and declare it apocryphal **because its statements contradict each other** and it is liable to confuse its readers. **And why did they not suppress it? Because its beginning** consists of **matters of Torah and its end** consists of **matters of Torah.** The ostensibly contradictory details are secondary to the essence of the book, which is Torah.

In other words, even though the book seems full of cognitive dissonance, inconsistencies, cynicism, and paradox, it is a book of faith. And, as I pointed out in the introduction, there are many places where the author’s apparent doubt seems to point toward reserving one’s conclusion in view of the mysteries known only by God and the revelation to come from God. Through the Holy Spirit, New Testament believers have an advantage over Qoheleth’s understanding. Yet, even as important a theologian as the Apostle Paul knew enough to reserve his conclusions in awe of God’s mysteries and in anticipation of God’s revelation. This is what we must do in reading the book. Perhaps, the third century A.D. (C.E.) theologian, Gregory Thaumaturgus was correct when he wrote in his commentary (prior to 270) that the purpose of the book was to show that all human pursuits and accomplishments are futile enough to lead us to the contemplation of heavenly things [cited by Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 171.].

Some scholars have attempted to deal with the apparent inconsistencies by identifying the materials as being from different time periods. Unfortunately, the suggestions made by these scholars tend to leave logical and grammatical gaps when supposed extraneous material is removed [Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1997), p. 39.] I personally believe that they are collected from different time periods, but that still doesn’t explain why the finished book as edited would simply be full of seeming contradictions if it had a plan [Miller, Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), p. 158.] for unity. Others have tried to isolate the sayings as being directed to different groups with different needs (Miller, p. 159), but that doesn’t work because there aren’t any labels or cues pointing us as readers to those different groups.

Another approach is to suggest that the lines which make us uncomfortable are “yes, but” arguments which make bold generalizations and then, qualify them to refine them (Miller, p. 159). Others see Qoheleth as including quotations to spur additional thinking. Robert Gordis and Norman Whybray isolated about eight (8) quotations that were possibly from earlier wisdom [Crenshaw, James L., *The Old Testament Library: Ecclesiastes* (Philadephia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 36.], but it isn’t clear that the quotations are in place or serve a purpose (Seow, p. 40).

Both James Loader in 1979 and Norman Gottwald in 1984 emphasize that these opposites are polarities upon which the book is built (Loader cited in Crenshaw, p. 40). Gottwald writes: “The sage works with polar thought structures of life and death, the gains and losses in labor, love, wealth, and wisdom, political power, and powerlessness, security and insecurity, and so forth. In each case, he comes down heavily on the negative pole, but without totally surrendering the continued tension with the positive pole.” [Gottwald, Norman K., *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 580.]

Frankly, many of us believe that the roller-coaster ride from one perspective to another is a vital part of the experience (Seow, p. 41). “Qoheleth seems to say things that are contradictory. At times he contradicts himself; at other times he seems to contradict core parts of Israel’s faith. And we need to understand that this is almost certainly conscious and *deliberate*. He is forcing his readers to *think*.” [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2023), p. xxi.]. We need these stark contrasts to be found in the book. A magisterial student (at Trinity Evangelical in 1985) sifted all of the positive affirmations about God out of context, but this undermines Qoheleth’s point that even though God is good, life is confusing [Longman, Tremper III, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 35.]

All of which demonstrates to us, once again, that the Bible is an honest, realistic book which simultaneously gives us God’s perspective while we as human beings struggle to understand what we can. As with every attempt to understand the Bible, we need to hold our feelings and prejudices in check as we await guidance from the Holy Spirit. So, with the Holy Spirit’s help, let’s get into the text.

**The Frame (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 and 12:8-14)**

Even though I introduced Norbert Lohfink’s arrangement of the structure of Ecclesiastes in the introductory session, and I really like the idea that the centerpiece becomes the demand to hold ourselves in certain resolve for God’s mysteries to be unveiled in revelation, his approach is not currently the most popular (see Slide 5). Yet, this idea of “bookends” or a “frame” is something that we saw a lot in the Bible. It is also something that helps us in our interpretation of biblical books and passages.

So, let’s look at another approach to the framework or bookends that lead us into the text of Ecclesiastes. Tremper Longman III sees Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 as initial framing because it tells us about Qoheleth from a third-person perspective (instead of the usual first-person) and gives us an external look at his message. Then, starting in verse 12, we hear wisdom presented as an autobiographical journey until we get to the final framework or bookend in Ecclesiastes 12:8-20 when the text returns to the third-person perspective (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 19, Wright, *Hearing*, p. xviii). It should also be noted that the narrative (3rd Person) voice reappears briefly to make a point in Ecclesiastes 7:27 but immediately returns to the 1st Person (Miller, p. 22). However, this framing technique is traditional in many Ancient Near Eastern texts and doesn’t suggest that the framing device is a different viewpoint from the rest of the book (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 38.).

We begin with verse 1, the superscription that sets the scene. We know that these are the words of someone who goes by the title Qoheleth. As you know, the Hebrew word translated as words can also be translated as actions, commands/instructions, deeds, events, sayings, and things. Since this biblical book is more about words that reflect upon deeds, we should probably understand this as an autobiographical lecture (even if collected in writing) from this mysterious Qoheleth.

At first, we don’t see anything mysterious about this fellow. Qoheleth comes from the Hebrew verb to assemble or gather, so the title would refer to the individual who gathered a congregation together. Since said individual would join the congregation together, he would most likely organize the meeting, preside over the assembly, and deliver some form of instruction or inspiration. If we go further, we also see him as son of David. Since Solomon is the most famous son of David and associated with wisdom, we automatically assume that this was Solomon. Our assumption is quickly undergirded by the fact that this Qoheleth ruled in Jerusalem, as did Solomon.

But if we only read a few more verses, we quickly discover that our assumptions have bitten us. In verse 12, Qoheleth tells us that he had been king over Israel in Jerusalem—PAST TENSE. The rabbis wanted this to be Solomon so badly that they added a section in the Targums stated that Solomon retired from the throne before he physically died. So, this could have been written during that time. The big problem is that 1 Kings 11:41-43 tells us that Solomon ruled until he died and Rehoboam ascended the throne (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 5).

Further, when we get to verse 16, we are told by a “modest” Qoheleth himself that he amassed more wisdom than ALL the rulers in Jerusalem before him. The trouble is that, if this was Solomon, there was only one ruler in Jerusalem before him, and it seems very disrespectful toward his father should that be the case (Longman, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 5, Wright, *Hearing*, p. xix.). Of course, as I also mentioned last week, Qoheleth uses some words from Persia like the word for “parks” from which we get “paradise” (*pardesim*) in Ecclesiastes 2:5 (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 37). This would have had to be after, at least, mid-4th century for its final form.

So, we recognize the author and/or editor of the book as someone who pulls things, ideas, and people together, has some dynastic connection to King David, and was familiar with the royal court at Jerusalem. But regardless of the speaker’s personal identity, we know that he is the keynote speaker in the book and, just as we might anticipate a major keynote address from an “insider” on a subject of which we are interested, so we should be prepared to hear Qoheleth, now.

**What Does This Word Mean? (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)**

Because of its position and emphasis, most people consider this verse to be Qoheleth’s theme song. We see the emphasis from the fact that the word appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes, more than half the 73 in the Hebrew Bible (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 101). We also know that it’s important because of the “x of x” formula equivalent to “King of Kings,” “Lord of Lords,” and “Song of Songs,” the repetition of the phrase, and the summary use of “ALL” [William LaSor (et. al*.), Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 501.]. Yet, the word, *hevel*, equivalent to the Genesis character, Abel, is difficult to translate.

Does its root in the idea of a wisp or vapor merely represent the transitory nature of human concerns? Does its idea as emptiness or worthlessness comes from the fact that the vapor doesn’t last? Does the obscuring nature of a cloud, smoke, or vapor suggest mystery of something obscured so that it is no longer intelligible?

Typical translations are: “vapor, futile, empty, nothing, ridiculous, incongruous, transitory, illusory, insignificant, vain, incomprehensible, …” [Fox, Michael V. “The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/3 (September, 1986), 409-427, p. 411.] In Psalm 39:5-6 [English #s], v. 5 translates it as breath or vapor and v. 6 has shadow or reflection in parallel to it. So, it’s something that is not very substantial. In Zechariah 10:2, it is translated empty for “empty dreams” and parallel to false comfort. This is the useless result of worshipping false gods in Zechariah’s prophecy. In Psalm 144:4, we once again have man as a “breath” in parallel with “passing shadow.”

Other translations might be empty, transient, deceptive, frustrating, or baffling (Wright, *Hearing*, p. 2). Popular modern English translations veer away from the King James’ “vanity” to opt for: fruitless, useless, profitless, and unproductive, while modern German translations opt for *sinnlos* (without meaning), *vergeblich* (purposeless), *Nichts* (nothing), and *gehen schnell* (going fast) [Miller, p. 8.]. For Graham S. Ogden, hebel is used by Qoheleth to indicate “…that life is enigmatic and mysterious.” [Miller, p. 3.] Edwin S. Good suggest its meaning as “ironic or incongruous” while Michael V. Fox defines it as “absurd,” a topsy-turvy observation over what humans would normally think [Fox, “Meaning,” p. 410, and “On הבל in Qoheleth: A Reply to Mark Sneed” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138/3 (September, 2019), p. 559.]

That leaves us with a lot of options for looking at Ecclesiastes 1:2. But as we do so, keep in mind that when the verse ends with ALL or EVERYTHING that: whenever the term “all” (using כל) is used in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to everything in its immediate context (Miller, p. 98). Since the rhetorical question that immediately follows in verse 3 is about human beings, work, and profit, this is what is so ephemeral or fleeting, too mysterious to understand, or worthless.

We know it’s significant because the repetition is interrupted by the speaker, providing sense of suspense. It’s like the crowd wants to ask, “What do you mean by that?” but before they can, the Master of Ceremonies announces, “Here to answer your questions is…Qoheleth!” He repeats the phrase again and then, makes that sweeping summary statement that everything is somehow lacking. But what is worthless, meaningless, confusing, mysterious, or frustrating? Some say that all we get is another question and an eventual, indirect answer [Good, Edwin M. “The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11” in Gammie, John G. (et al.—eds*.), Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 59-73, pp. 63, 72.] I agree with those who argue: “The rhetorical question of 1:3 explains and justifies the assessment of reality in 1:2 as futility.” [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 59.]

So, Qoheleth’s primary subject for the first half of the book is going to be human toil (the Hebrew word usually indicates “hard work” or “drudgery”) [Longman, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 65]. The Hebrew word for human in this book is Adam, the same as the character in Genesis. Since Qoheleth is dealing with the idea of unfulfilling work, it almost begs a comparison with the account of the Fall and having to work by the sweat of one’s brow. As a rhetorical question, you know the answer is negative, even though Qoheleth doesn’t give us an immediate answer. No, there’s no profit for drudgery, for work that doesn’t satisfy. “So, the question in verse 3, even though it focuses on human *work*, is probably asking at a deeper level about human *life*, since we have to work to live.” (Wright, *Hearing*, pp. 4-5)

The Hebrew word for profit used here could also be translated as surplus (bonus?) or as rabbinic literature used it “advantage” (edge?). Interestingly, it balances nicely with verse 15’s emphasis on “deficit” later in the chapter. The question then seems less like concluding that work is bad, but that work you don’t get anything out of is bad. There ought to be some fulfillment. But Qoheleth is observing a population where work was drudgery and didn’t seem to offer any advantage to the workers.

Some people, particularly those concerned about the book’s place in the Bible, like to take the phrase “under the sun” as meaning strict attention to earthbound affairs (cited by Longman, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 66, Wright, *Hearing*, p. 5). One of my late seminary professors wrote of “under the sun,” “under heaven,” and “on earth:” “These all indicate Koheleth’s sphere of vision—man’s life on earth.” [Peterson, Wayne H., “Ecclesiastes” in Allen, Clifton J. (et al.—eds.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 108.]

Although my photograph is an Egyptian sarcophagi rather than a Phoenician one, two of the Phoenician kings, Tabnit and his son, had inscriptions with a curse that any tomb robbers would have no progeny under the sun. Hence, a way of saying, “living.” And yes, Qoheleth knows that God becomes involved in this life, but he is only observing what he can and that often looks unfulfilling. My perspective is that Qoheleth is telling us what he can observe in the normal physical realm as we experience it. He doesn’t bring God directly into the equation until the last few verses of Chapter 2.

**A Limited Poem of Life (1:4-11)**

But before we get overly negative, let’s notice all the figures of speech that our sage is giving us to help us understand what he means. Assuming that we see the elements in nature in vv. 4-7 as the ancients did, we could see these as earth, fire, air, and water—the four constitutive elements of nature [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 62.] Indeed, Gerhard von Rad suggested that these verses may have originally been a poem designed to teach science, but he goes on to write that now: “It lays open the whole human area in which human life operates…” [Rad, Gerhard von, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 121.]

The images are so active that one devotional writer described it as “Life on a Treadmill” [Johnson, L. D., *Israel’s Wisdom: Learn and Live: Introducing the Wisdom Books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1975), p. 117.] This message is undergirded by the two present participles (“going”) and “coming”) in verse 4. This is ongoing, ceaseless activity. Combined with the idea of the sun returning to its origin at a breathless pace (the Hebrew word is panting like a runner putting out great effort). [Fausset, A. R., “Ecclesiastes” in Jamieson, Robert (et al. –eds.) *Critical and Experimental Commentary: III: Job-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967—original, 1866), p. 514.] “The flurry of activity continues in v. 6…” where the particle “going” is used for “blowing.” (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 115). Then, transitionally, v. 7 has the rivers flowing to the sea, but the sea is never “filled up.”

In fact, even if we look at the way the content balances in this poem, we end up with a negative, materialistic view of life that is both superseded by some of the conclusions Qoheleth makes later in the book (and throughout the book) and by our privileged New Testament perspective. Taken at face value, here is what Qoheleth is saying about humans and nature from the purely physical standpoint. [Note: I neglected to make this slide before the session.]

* **A. Life (including human) short compared to earth’s lifespan (v. 4)**
* **B. Everything in nature goes round-and-round (vv. 5-6)**
* **C. Nothing in Nature gets filled or finished (vv. 7-8)**
* **B’. Everything in history goes round-and-round, too (vv. 9-10)**
* **A’. Everyone is forgotten in the end; history is a black hole (v. 11)**

**[adapted from Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), pp. 7-8]**

Remember, though, this is what Qoheleth claims to have observed with the limited physical senses that we have as human beings. He admits in verse 8 that it’s beyond his words and that he can’t take enough in visually or aurally to make sense of it all. Any purely physical calculations of the universe and history is going to come up short like this. Of course, a cyclical view of nature and a parallel cyclical view of history is not a Christian perspective, either. We follow a prophetic and revelatory word that tells us that instead of going in circles, God is going to break in on nature and history so that both can reach God’s goal of a new heaven and new earth with holy believers experiencing eternity with God. Qoheleth doesn’t have our advantage, but he is going to point us to God and God’s plan at various points in the book. In fact, before this session is finished, we will see something of a confession of God’s grace and goodness.

As you can tell from the slide on which we spent so much time, I really like the following analysis. “Qoheleth 1:12-2:26 contains four interlocking units. Qoheleth 1:12-15 serves as an introduction to 2:1-11. Both units end with ‘vanity and chasing after wind.’” [Ceresko, Anthony R., *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 105.] This first unit is primarily about whether pleasure can “fill up” the unfillable life implied in the poem found in 1:4-7. Qoheleth engages in an experiment on living life with gusto, the pursuit of pleasure if you will—both in sensuality and accomplishment.

The introduction lets us know that even though Qoheleth was successful, he recognized that there were parts of life that just don’t work for us. The Hebrew idea of “burden” in v. 13 could be translated as “bad” or “evil” business. In Hebrew writing later than the Bible, it has the idea of “business” or “case.” However, the word is closely related to an Arabic word for being restless and having anxiety. So, it could very well mean “obsession,” “worry,” or “listlessness/dissatisfaction.” [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 121.] The sage goes into his experiment with a lose-lose feeling hanging over him. But we don’t need to think for a moment that he did a half-hearted job. Verse 13 tells us that he “gave his heart.” That means that he willfully gave it all he had [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 78.]. And “under the heavens” is a spatial cue that he searched the known world over for his answers [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 121.] Notice that he didn’t search the heavens because he didn’t have that kind of access.

Moving to the interlocking piece, try to ask your students to list all of the things the sage tried to do in order to find fulfillment and satisfaction (perhaps): laughter, sensuality, wine (connoisseur or drunk?) aficionado, party animal (my idea of folly), building accomplishments, human power, increased wealth, reputation. Then, ask them to read the following scripture passages from the New Testament and see if they can decide what was missing in Qoheleth’s experiment: Luke 12:13-21, Matthew 22:39, 1 Corinthians 10:24. Hint: “Note the self-centeredness of Koheleth’s way of living in this experiment. His building operations, slaves, singers, concubines, and wealth were all for his personal pleasure.” [Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 110.]

In fact, we might even need to question his whole experiment. “Ironically, Qoheleth tells us he embraced *folly* while letting his mind still be guided by *wisdom*. It seems that he allowed himself to experience depths of inebriation and mental dissolution—while still somehow observing himself with some kind of analytical reflection on the experience.” [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 15.] I had to laugh when I read that description because it really takes note of the fact that there seem to have been times when Qoheleth became so full of himself that he lost perspective.

But regardless of the problems with this experiment, please notice the beautiful literary style here. In verse 15 of Chapter 1 that I suggested was an introduction to this first experiment, Qoheleth wrote: “The crooked cannot turn straight nor can the lack be made good.” [Alter, Robert, *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010), p. 348.] Alter’s paraphrase here, as he points out in a footnote, grabs that idea of not being able to make up a deficit. The verb literally means to count money or inventory that is not there. Remember than in 1:3, there was a question of the profit for toiling under the sun? Now, in this passage and in the first experiment, we’re no longer dealing with profit, but deficit. [I didn’t make this clear in the session.]

The second interlocking section is introduced as an experiment on wisdom [Ceresko, *Introduction*, p. 105.] but it goes beyond that to consider one’s legacy [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 21]. Specifically, it considers how one’s successor(s) can easily erode and undo whatever one has learned and/or accomplished. 1:16-18 sets up what I call the Wisdom/Folly experiment. Despite all of his knowledge and life-experience, Qoheleth set out to explore the full intellectual landscape since he studied both wisdom and folly (v. 17). Some translators suggest that “folly” was miscopied and should really be something like prudence [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 125.] because it belongs with wisdom more than folly. Personally, I agree with those who believe: “Perhaps he studied both in order to differentiate wisdom from folly and follow the former. Or perhaps he is attempting to be truly objective, or to get the full picture since wisdom and folly are two sides of the same coin.” [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 84.] Sadly, though, he discovers: “Even the attempt to understand the process of thinking is self-defeating, ‘For with more wisdom comes more worry, and he who adds to his knowledge adds to his pain.’” [Scott, *Way*, p. 179].

So, one would think that, since Ecclesiastes is a collection of wisdom, wisdom would be the key to everything. If Qoheleth was merely trying to reiterate Proverbs, it might be the key. However, Qoheleth is giving us a picture of what he observed (and that is not necessarily the same as what he believes). And what he observed was that wisdom can’t even secure one’s legacy. So, when the second piece of the puzzle segues to the second experiment of Chapter 2, we have a repetition in verse 12 of “madness and folly,” the counterparts to wisdom that he explored in 1:17. But it is immediately followed up with one of those rhetorical questions in 2:13: “What more can the one do who comes after the king? Just what he (the king) has already done.”

I was taught when I was growing up that the good teacher’s goal was for the pupil to surpass the master. If that’s so (and that’s what I wanted), can you imagine how disappointed Qoheleth must have been? As I pointed out in the session, this would be particularly true if we associated Qoheleth with Solomon because Solomon’s successor, Rehoboam, ignored wise counsel and stoked his own ego such that he divided the kingdom. Perhaps, Qoheleth knows what happened to Solomon and is putting himself in Solomon’s place. If that’s all there is to life, says Qoheleth, “I hate life.”

Remember, Proverbs 10:7 talks about the names or memories of the righteous being remembered, even used in blessings, while the memories of the wicked would rot. But Qoheleth is saying that both the wise and the fool face the same extinction, the same erasure from awareness (vv. 15-16). Worse, despite building up a wisdom school and providing tutoring for his successor, he says that has no idea what kind of character that successor will have (vv. 18-19).

So now, in verse 22, he comes back to the question of 1:3. Where’s the edge? Where’s the advantage, the profit, the bonus, the surplus for human drudgery? And the answer in verse 23, as we expected in 1:3 is, “Nothing!” There is no profit based on human drudgery. “22) For what does a man have from all his toil and from his heart’s care that he toils under the sun? 23) For all his days are pain, and worry is his business. At night, as well, his heart does not rest. This too is breath.” [Alter, *Wisdom*, pp. 351-352.]

Seems fatalistic, doesn’t it? The truth is, if we try to base our lives merely on what we can accomplish in the prime of our knowledge, strength, and resources, as well as the short length of our lifespans, things don’t look meaningful, significant, or hopeful. If I were the Apostle Paul, though, I would jump into a “Thanks be to God!” here. Here, for the first time in the book, Qoheleth is going to help us see beyond the obvious, the observable, the manipulable.

“In view of the ambiguities of life he can only point to a better way, not the best or a completely satisfying way of living.” [Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 112.] Each time we see this better way or “better than” form, it “…is followed by a clause which makes specific reference to the God-givenness of the human situation (cf. 2:25-26; 3:13, 22; 8:15).” [Ogden, Graham S., “Qoheleth’s Use of the “Nothing is Better” Form” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/3 (September, 1979) 339-350, p. 341.] Pay attention to that word “God-givenness” because that is synonymous with grace.

With all of his human limitations, what does Qoheleth tell us? He tells us to enjoy life as it has been given to us by God. We don’t get to determine why God gave us the life and whatever blessings we have; we get to accept them with gratitude and live our life or to reject them and resent life. I liked Ogden’s summary of what this “Nothing better than” teaches us in the last part of Ecclesiastes 2. “Only God knows all, and despite man’s intense and prolonged efforts to come to a fuller understanding of life, such is not available to him in absolute terms. What he can do, however, is to affirm life available to him and seek the pleasure which God provides.” [Ogden, “Qoheleth’s,” p. 341.]

As I noted in the session, Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 is the first of seven (7) times that Qoheleth shifts gears from his grim assessment of humanity and points toward something of hope in transcendent God. In this case, we know he sees God as sovereign because he talks about receiving these elements of life as a matter of grace from God’s hand.

Well, isn’t Qoheleth being inconsistent here? Well, yes and no. In terms of his observations and experiments, he is consistent. He doesn’t see any hope in the accomplishments of humanity, even his own not-insignificant accomplishments. But, he does recognize that there is a way to enjoy life (literally, “look to the good”] and that is to graciously and consistently receive the good from God’s hand [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 108.]. But it’s not something you can control or plan for. “The ability to enjoy life is not in anyone’s power, coming as a gift from God. Qohelet relates his own discovery that one cannot enjoy life unless God makes it possible.” [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 90.]

Don’t get this wrong. He’s not talking about eating and drinking too much. He’s not talking about giving into hedonism and sensuality, a pure pursuit of pleasure. He’s already seen that that doesn’t work. He’s no longer seeking that universal solution on how to live. Rather, he is going to enjoy the simple routines of life and be thankful that God has provided them for him. [Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 112.]

It messes with our minds. It’s almost like looking at a scoreboard at a sports event. On the one side is a BIG ZERO, but on the other side is a considerably larger score. The ZERO is what we get from pure human thought and effort. It’s the chasing after the wind. The larger score is the satisfaction that Qoheleth and we can experience in this life, despite our limited understanding and our awareness of things that seem absurd, topsy-turvy, and wrong, as long as we learn to accept the aspects of life that God gives us by His grace. And for the New Testament believer? It isn’t just a larger score than the ZERO; it’s INFINITY. That’s how much better God’s way is than what we understand by our own effort and initiative.

Ecclesiastes helps us to verbalize a lot of questions that occur naturally to human beings. Yet the purpose isn’t to give us all the answers; it’s to point us to receiving God’s grace. Sometimes, we have to accept that our world is lacking, not because God wants it so, but because we stubbornly defy God. Yet, the best thing we can do is to receive what God has for us. But even that takes a willingness NOT to be in control.

**A Thought Question**

Christopher J. H. Wright had a discussion question at the end of his chapter on Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 that I really liked, so I’m sharing it with you. “There is a tension between Qoheleth’s emotions in 2:17-18 and his convictions in 2:24-25. Do you ever feel the same tension? Do you know people who express the same kind of tension and confusion? How can we live with it?” [p. 27]

The video for the last session is available directly on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/T0RlBmzH66k> but it is also available with revised slides and notes on the church website: