**Notes on Ecclesiastes 5 and 6**

Unlike much of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 5 quickly establishes the theological center for what Qoheleth is going to teach. Although, technically, verse 1 in our Bible is 4:17 in the Hebrew Bible, we can tell that a new section has started here because the teacher opts for the command form rather than the observations and reports in previous chapters. Later in the chapter, there is some observation and a parable, but right at the beginning, the teacher gives us straight talk, particularly about worship and God. As William P. Brown wrote: “Here one also finds a concentration of references to God, indicating the sage’s theocentric basis for ethical refection and conduct.” [P. Brown, William. *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 54.]

If there really is an emphasis on God in this chapter, I would start by asking the class to discover how many times God is mentioned in this chapter. [English = 11 (Message, NASB, NEB), 10 (KJV, NIV, RSV) / Hebrew 10, but Targums have 11, as does Latin Vulgate.] The eleventh reference was probably a clarification added later to be certain people knew that the vow in verse 5 was being made to God.

I would also point out that the teacher uses the generic name for God, “Elohim,” throughout this chapter. This is different from “Yahweh,” the personal name for God. I would ask the students to suggest why Qoheleth might have chosen this name for God. Then, I would point out that “Elohim” is the name for God used in Genesis 1 where the emphasis is on God’s transcendence, His distance above and beyond His creation. “Yahweh” is the name used in Genesis 2 and beyond whenever God is personally involved with humans. As I’ve always said, if we only had “Elohim” of Genesis 1, God would be so distant He would almost be irrelevant, but if we only had “Yahweh” of Genesis 2, He would be so familiar that, like Adam and Eve, we would take Him for granted.

Qoheleth deliberately chooses the idea of God Who is transcendent to emphasize the importance of respecting the distance between God and humanity [Miller, Douglas B., *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002, p. 121.] “The common issue in these verses is one’s attitude before God, with Qohelet[h] counseling caution, reverence, restraint, and sincerity.” [Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1997, p. 197.]

**Watch Your Step [Ecclesiastes 5:1-9 [English], 4:17-5:8 [Hebrew]]**

Literally, the Hebrew says to pay attention to your steps. Some manuscripts use the singular “step” instead of steps, so “Watch your step” would be a solid translation. In the scriptures, the idea of guarding, watching, observing one’s foot or one’s feet can be either positive or negative. I’ve provided a Word document for you with a list of scripture verses that talk about guarding one’s steps, path, or way. See if your students can decide if these are positive or negative references. HINT: These are fairly evenly balanced between positive and negative so that students can learn by doing to realize that “being careful” in one’s whole life is important but even more important in the context of worship.

This warning about watching one’s step as one goes to the House of God is much like when we begin our worship services by singing that the “Lord is in His holy temple.” We don’t literally mean that the Lord is in His holy temple because God’s temple in Jerusalem was likely destroyed before Ecclesiastes was written down in its final form. [Longman, Tremper III, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 150.] Also, we don’t literally believe that God inhabits buildings today. We know God can be anywhere. Yet, even for us, we need to show carefulness, respect, and sincerity when we “draw near” for worship. [During the session, Dr. Wong noted that the Chinese translations invariably translate the phrase “House of God” as “Temple,” even when the temple hadn’t been built (so that they were worshipping in a tabernacle/tent) or had been destroyed (such that any place one gathered to worship was the “House of God”). Clearly, it is better to retain the idea of “House of God” as meaning wherever one seeks God’s Presence. In the same vein, one must not take God for granted as one seeks Him.]

The idea of course is to be careful. Watch where we’re going, our intentions and goals as we approach God, lest we face-plant ourselves because we weren’t paying adequate attention to what God wants. And when we get to the last part of the verse, we read that when we draw near to listen and respond to God that it is worth more than the fool’s sacrifice.

It’s true that the wise man is drawing from the sanctuary of silence tradition that said, “Within the sanctuary, while sacrifices were conducted, silence reigned, fostering a sense of divine presence and human receptivity.” [P. Brown, William. *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 55.] However, I think modern worshippers, especially those in performance-oriented churches, need to pay attention to this admonition. We should come to church expecting to be challenged by God instead of being focused on our ability to perform and entertain. Church isn’t supposed to be community theater for frustrated actors. Church is supposed to be an encounter with God.

I agree with Seow that the problem isn’t approaching God. Qoheleth isn’t against that. The problem is approaching God without preparing and approaching God without paying attention to what God said [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 198.] There is a double tragedy in this: 1) We miss out on gaining precious insight from God and 2) we make ourselves look foolish and God seem trivial [Brown*, Ecclesiastes*, p. 55.] I like this summary statement of this idea: “If you are going to plant your literal feet in the place where God is worshipped, you’d better make sure that your metaphorical feet have been walking in the ways that God has commanded.” [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), p. 64.]

We could probably also be safe in tying this sacrifice of the fool to other scriptures. **Psalm 40:6-8 tells us it is sacrificing things without having God’s will in one’s heart. In Samuel 15:22, Samuel rebukes King Saul by saying God values obedience more than sacrifice. Hosea 6:6 says God values loyalty over sacrifice and the knowledge of God over burnt offerings. Micah 6:6-8 talks about doing right to both humanity and God as being preferable to sacrifice. Even in the 19th century, a commentator observed of this verse, “The warning is about mere ceremonial self-righteousness.”** [Fausset, A. R., “Ecclesiastes” in Jamieson, Robert (et. al., eds.) *A Critical and Experimental Commentary: Volume III: Job-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967 (original, 1866)), p. 524.]

**As for needing to listen rather than making worship about ourselves, I want to share a personal experience.** I had the privilege, or possibly the ordeal, of sitting in on several meetings regarding start-up companies, mergers, and licensing when I was in the magazine business. In one such meeting, one of my partners was asked a question of what he saw in the future if the acquisition went through. Not hearing the real question, which was what we would be able to accomplish together that we couldn’t apart, he answered with a tone-deaf response about what this would do for his financial security and his personal future. I quickly jumped in with a vision of where the magazine could go and how it would help other units in the larger corporation. The CEO and COO with whom we were negotiating looked strangely uncomfortable when my partner was answering the question personally and were visibly relieved when I turned to the discussion back to the future of the business. If I hadn’t done that, I don’t believe the deal would have gone through. Well, if “reading the room” is vital in human interaction, just imagine how vital it is for finding out what God wants. That’s why the wise man goes on to say that the fools don’t even know that they are doing evil. Fools think they are okay and enter God’s presence with overconfidence. The wise prepare carefully to enter God’s presence. The fool speaks too quickly without adequate preparation for thought. The fool is impulsive, speaking up without thinking of the cost or implications. I wish I had a dollar for every time I’ve seen a church conflict develop when a member, without thinking about what may have happened before or who would actually do the work, said, “You know what? We should do this!” The fool also speaks too much.

Did you ever watch an interview on television where you really wanted to hear what the person being interviewed had to say but the interviewer kept interrupting to make his or her points? It’s frustrating isn’t it? You wonder why they brought the interviewee in as an expert in the field or a celebrity people wanted to know more about if they were going to waste time with the host’s interjections. I really hate it when the guest clearly knows more than the interviewer but the interviewer still acts like the animal Balaam rode in the Book of Numbers.

Qoheleth is making the point that God from His heavenly perspective knows far more about what we need and what we’re facing than we do. So, why should we squander our time at worship by running off at the mouth rather than listening? Qoheleth’s emphasis on the disparity between our earthly perspective and God’s heavenly perspective is intended to remind us of the need for humility in worship.

**Be Careful What You Pray For [5:4-7]**

The next four verses are going to have a lot in common with the New Testament, even though they may not sound like it at first. Verses 4-5 correspond rather nicely to Deuteronomy 23:21-22. Notice that both Deuteronomy and the wise man discourage offering a vow rather than defaulting on one. People have a tendency to get emotional when they are worshipping and, often, end up promising more than they can deliver. Qoheleth uses one of his “better than” sayings in verse 5 to let us know that vows can become self-entangling. Jesus even told us not to vow or swear in Matthew 5:34.

I can’t help it. I think the best illustration of this is my Dad’s old preacher story about the farmer who got excited in a revival meeting and pledge to sell the first calf that was birthed in the Spring and donate all of the proceeds to the church. When Spring came and the pledged calf arrived, he decided that he needed the proceeds to invest in the farm. But, he didn’t want to face up to his broken promise so he quit going to church altogether. Many years later, one of the brothers visited him and asked him to come to a revival meeting. He agreed and hitched up his wagon to go to church that very night.

He was a little late getting there, though, and the singing had already started. In fact, what they were actually singing was a gospel hymn that went, “There is joy unspeakable and full of glory, and the half has never yet been told.” But because of his guilt, he heard “the calf has never yet been sold.” He was so ashamed that he turned his team around and headed home, wondering why those people couldn’t forgive and forget after all these years.

For me, though, the real danger of vowing is that we don’t know what things are going to be like when the bill comes due. So, we may be being as presumptuous as that businessman in James 4:13-15. Remember?

***13) Come on, [lit. “Come, now”] those saying, “Today [or] tomorrow we will go into this city and we will accomplish a year there and sell and profit.”***

***14) However, you don’t know what tomorrow will accomplish. What is your life? Because it is vapor, visible for a little while, then it isn’t visible.***

***15) Against this, you should say, “If the Lord desires, then we shall live and accomplish this or that.”* [PJT]**

Notice how that idea of the vapor and what we don’t know fits right in with the ideas in Ecclesiastes?

We just can’t know what’s going to happen. But, we shouldn’t use that for an excuse.

Now, remember at the first of our study tonight when I said that some versions mention God 11 times in this chapter and some only 10? Well, verse 6 is the one where that happens. The Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek translated “messenger” as “God.” Other Greek translations like Symmachus and Theodotion weren’t quite so bold, making it “messenger of God.” That, of course, could also be an angel.

We’re told that: “Apparently, in Qoheleth’s time there were people whose duty it was to check up on those who had not fulfilled their public vows, a religious bill collector.” [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 154.] Maybe this would have been the priest in charge of hearing confessions as in Numbers 15:22-31 or Leviticus 4:2 in the event of an unintentional sin. So, the temptation would be to tell them that you just miscalculated or business hadn’t lived up to your expectations this year, etc. But Qoheleth implies that this makes things worse.

Since God is so much higher than ordinary humanity, Qoheleth wants us to realize: “God’s transcendence counters the vain tendency to proliferate “weasel words,” words by which human beings cleverly shirk their moral responsibility or leave room for manipulating the Deity in consonance with their own selfish goals.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 56.] God isn’t playing games with us, so Qoheleth shuts that door by urging us to keep God in awe, awe enough to realize the destructiveness of ignoring God’s will. The destruction isn’t God just stomping on our toys like an angry parent when we’ve left them lying in the way. Rather, the destruction comes about as a result of ignoring the truth of God’s reality and trying to make our own.

To underscore that point, verse 7 (verse 6 in the Hebrew) begins with the conjunction BECAUSE that sounds like “key.” Many translations handle it as “for,” but BECAUSE makes a better emphasis. The connection between the BECAUSE clause (or “for” clause) and the command to “fear God” isn’t clear in the Hebrew. Commentators have tried to solve it many ways, but I think my old professor offered a slice of wisdom when he wrote: “The first part of v. 7 is very difficult to interpret. It seems to be a warning against a religion which consists in a multitude of futile dreams and words…” [Peterson, Wayne H. “Ecclesiastes” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.) *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 116.]

There was a musical on Broadway about gangsters in New York City of the early 20th century. At one point, one of the toughest gangsters who has been losing a dice all night states that he will only pay up after playing a round with his dice. When the others see the dice, they protest that the dice are blank. There are no numbers on the dice. Big Julie says that this is no problem because he has the dice memorized.

The audience laughs because they know that there is no way that anyone can know what the real dice rolls would be if the sides are blank. The other gangsters are required to pay up or receive money based on whatever Big Julie says.

It seems like Qoheleth is giving us a little bit of skepticism on other religions and the interpretation of dreams can be wordy and contradictory. One is often at the mercy of the interpreter. For example, in Hindu interpretation of dreams, flying birds are unlucky but singing birds are an omen of good things to come. Who is to say? It’s like looking at modern art. One critic thinks it means one thing and another something else. So, Qoheleth brings us back to something foundational, something we can depend upon—trust in Holy God.

**Bureaucracies Cannibalize Through Injustice (Ecclesiastes 5:8-9)**

But just because we trust God doesn’t mean that we necessarily trust the bureaucracies of human governments. “Violations of justice are seemingly routine at any level of human governance. They are part and parcel of a socially stratified existence sustained by bureaucratic indifference and complicity. …Qoheleth may be claiming that if there were any avenue of appeal or advocacy on behalf of the poor, it would simply dissipate in a bureaucratic quagmire, as some interpreters have suggested.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 58]

But it’s even worse than that because the Hebrew word גבה (=”gah-BOH-ah”) doesn’t simply mean “high one,” suggestive of a bureaucrat, but it can also mean “arrogant one” (suggesting a corrupt oppressor of any angle) or a “payment taker” (whether a legitimate collector or a taker of bribes). [Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 203] If it means a government official, it suggests layers and layers where everyone gets their cut. It’s like Seneca’s “Who is watching the watchers?” If it’s arrogant ones, it suggests that human greed just goes on and on. Without God’s intervention, it’s hard to argue with that. If it’s a “payment taker,” it suggests bribes upon bribes.

That is the usual state, but apparently Qoheleth has seen some examples of good governance because verse 9 says that a king who cultivates the land, actually contributes to production is an advantage to the land. And guess what that word “advantage” is? It’s the word for “profit” or “advantage” or “edge” that Qoheleth has used in questions like the one in 1:3 and the reprise of it in verse 16 of this chapter. The suggestion seems to be that advantage is a matter of serving one other than yourself. In this case, the king advances the prospects of the land. Presumably, this helps more than the king.

**The Problem of Riches (Ecclesiastes 5:10-17)**

This section begins with three proverbs in three verses and they all seem to have a cycle of futility involved. Verse 10 tells us that the one who loves money can’t be satisfied with money nor what the money can buy. It’s absurdity; it’s emptiness; it doesn’t last. Verse 11 is a proverb on economic futility. You might even see the wage-price spiral and consumer-inflation cycle in it. When there is a growing supply, there is a greater audience of consumers. Of course, if supply is greater than demand, prices go down and the owners don’t really gain anything from the extra. Qoheleth says that you become a helpless bystander instead of a mover and a shaker. But verse 12 is positive. It notes that work is meaningful, even if you aren’t appreciated. It notes that you are better off working, even if you don’t feel well-off. On the other hand, “Wealth can of course be a form of security, but for some it only increases anxiety and worries compared to a simple, uncomplicated working life. The more you have, the more you worry. And that produces sleepless nights, perhaps (in view of the second line of the proverb) caused by indigestion after overeating!” [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 69.]

**A Cautionary Parable (Ecclesiastes 5:13-17)**

Verses 13-15 serve together as a parable. One does well to read the 15th verse first. It sounds like a prose restatement of Job 1:21. As verse 16 will recap that this story is a grievous evil, it seems very unfair that humans go from nakedness to nakedness, helplessness to helplessness—often with little to show for it. But in this case, we have a person with a hoarding problem.

There was a case of two brothers named Collyer in New York City who owned a multistory building and didn’t have to work. In fact, they didn’t need to leave the building. And, as you can see on the slide, they couldn’t let anything go. In fact, one brother was crushed and died under one of these newspaper stacks and some other junk. It was days before they found him. Let’s face it. Too much is too much.

Worse than that, the desire to acquire more leads to trying to take short cuts and that can lead either to bad investments because they were premature or leaving you open to fraud. We don’t know what this was in verse 14, but we know that he had no legacy to offer his heir. And in the ancient world, that was a tragedy because the worth of your life was judged on what you passed on to your male offspring.

Verses 15 and 16 epitomize the statement of the late John Stott where he paraphrases those verses, saying: “Since our lives are spent between two moments of nakedness, it is best to travel light.” [quoted in Wright, *Hearing*, p. 70.]

As I noted before, it seems unfair to come full circle in life as it says in verse 16 and verse 17 sums up what happens when one labors for the wrong priorities. One is often unaware of good things because one is in the darkness of one’s obsession. In addition, one is easily irritated because, as in the verses we quoted from James earlier, one can’t be sure of what’s going to happen. And, since things seem so unfair, one ends up resenting the things and people that cannot be manipulated to one’s advantage. Darkness, irritation, and anger/resentment are spelled out in verse 17.

The Antidote? (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)

But fortunately, Qoheleth suggests an antidote in the final verses of the chapter before he goes into a very skeptical section in Chapter 6. It may seem too superficial for us, but these verses certainly affirm R. B. Y. Scott’s position. He wrote: “To accept life as God has given it, and to respond positively to that gift of life is his form of faith.” [Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 187.] Or, as Christian Ginsburg was quoted by Tremper Longmann III: “Not only is there nothing left for man but present enjoyment, but even for this he is dependent upon God.” [quoted in Tremper III, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 168.]

At the end of the session, we were talking about the Hebrew versification being different from the English versification (starting at 4:17 in the Hebrew with that verse being the same as 5:1 in the English and Chinese). Pastor Johnny noted that division into chapters didn’t occur until much later in the process (actually, chapters in Hebrew texts were adapted from the Latin Vulgate in the 14th century [Würthwein, Ernst, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 21.] Prior to that, the text of the Old Testament was divided by paragraphs marked at the ends of lines with the Hebrew characters פ and ס with the first indicating an opening line and the second indicating a closing line. Other divisions included *Sedarim* (meaning sequence or order and the root of the word סדר from which we get the word for the Jewish ceremonial meal (“seder”). [Würthwein, *Text*, p. 21.]

I said that I preferred the English versification in this case. Here’s a scholar who agrees: “The English versification corrected what was surely a slight error in the Hebrew breakup of the chapters, since 4:17 clearly begins a new topic that focuses on issues surrounding the formal religious institutions (or cult) of Israel.” [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 148.] Most commentaries note the change of topic to concerns about God, worship, and ethics, as well as the change in style to the imperative. My Old Testament Survey textbook from the early 1970s didn’t even address this issue. Walter Harrelson did, however, make the interesting suggestion that Chapters 5-11 of the English version serve as “The author’s own wisdom collection.” [Harrelson, Walter*, Interpreting the Old Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 442.] After the question at the end of the session, I decided I should try to address it.

Additional material on Chapter 6 to come.