Things We Should Take Away from Ecclesiastes

As with the optics displayed on the background of these slides, one of the most important thing to remember about Qoheleth, the wise person of Ecclesiastes, is that he or she is calling them as she or he sees them. Ecclesiastes is not about speculation or imagination; it is about observation. As a result, even what the wise man says about faith must be somewhat guarded.

Qoheleth’s view is that: “God has put you here where you are. It is the only place you know or can know. You are not going to be able to untangle the knots of inequity and unfairness that anyone can see if he looks for them. You have only this life.” [Johnson, L.D., *Israel’s Wisdom: Learn and Live: Introducing the Wisdom Books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1975), p. 124.]

DEATH

Even when Qoheleth speaks of the limitations of life, such as when he speaks of life as a breath, a vapor, a mist, a wisp, or as absurd, he is only talking about the portion of life that he can see. He admits that whether the breath of life returns to God can’t be known from observation (see 3:21 and 12:7. He is true to his method of observation and only allows his underlying faith to show occasionally.

Naturally, we have more hope due to our belief in the bodily resurrection, but notice how James echoes Ecclesiastes in James 4:14. James 4:14 – What is your life? It is a vapor that appears for a short while and vanishes. **James uses the word άτμις or “AT-mees.” The same word is used in many Greek translations of Ecclesiastes where we see breath, vapor, vanity, etc. So, both the OT wise person and the NT leader remind us that life is short and we can’t be certain of our future, humanly speaking (see James 4:16).**

**“Acceptance of death marks the supreme surrender of control for Qoheleth. Death is the altar upon which all ambition and pride are sacrificed. Particularly in a death-defying culture such as ours, the surrender to death, and thus to God, is nothing less than a theological imperative.” [Brown, William P. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ecclesiastes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 124.].**

**We can also look at Ecclesiastes 7 where Qoheleth tells us that Death is not only a great leveler, but also a great teacher. Both Eugene Peterson who wrote the paraphrase version of the Bible known as The Message and my former Old Testament professor at Golden Gate, Wayne Peterson, wrote that we learn more at a “funeral than a feast” and that observing death, the living will learn the meaning of life.**

HUMAN PURPOSE

Remember in Ecclesiastes 3 when the wise person observes that God has an eternal plan, but humans can’t know it. As a result of being unable to identify the end result, Qoheleth simply sees the overall flow of history as unintelligible (at least, from the human perspective). Interestingly, Paul uses the same Greek word for futility, wind, wisp, vapor as in many Greek translations of Ecclesiastes when he talks about how the entire creation is waiting and groaning in anticipation of God’s ultimate glory in Romans 8 (Longman, Tremper III, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 39-40.]

Taken at face value, here is what Qoheleth is saying about humans and nature from the purely physical standpoint.

* **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]**

But, thank God, we know that God has a plan and Jesus is coming again. If it weren’t for that, we would be in the same boat as Qoheleth. Life would truly feel meaningless. But I really liked the points I made when we studied Ecclesiastes 3 about the time for all things poem and Christopher J. H. Wright’s illustration of the tapestry for the following verses. Whenever you think that Qoheleth is being too pessimistic, remember that he knew even less of God’s redemptive plan than we do. From his perspective, he didn’t think that humans really were able to participate in the tapestry of God’s plan. At least, we know that we are part of God’s mission to reach the world.

TOIL AND PROFIT VERSUS JOY AND GIFT

Although Qoheleth asks what people gain from unsatisfying, meaningless work in Ecclesiastes 1:3 and the answer is clearly that they gain nothing (2:11), New Testament believers need to remember that Jesus warned about seeking possessions and generic wealth when it isn’t worth it (Matthew 6:19; 16:26). Ecclesiastes warns in Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 [English numeration] that wealth dissipates and is dangerous for distorting our focus on what needs attention. This should remind us that Jesus warned of the perils of wealth without putting God first (Matthew 6:24-34; Luke 12:22-30). The major difference is that Jesus challenged His hearers to strive for the Kingdom of God while the best Qoheleth could do is urge people to live so that they enjoy life as a gift under God.

In our original discussion, we looked a great quotation from John Stott: “Since our lives are spent between two moments of nakedness, it is best to travel light.” [quoted in Wright, p. 70.] I also provided two very nice quotations regarding 5:18-20. “To accept life as God has given it, and to respond positively to that gift of life is his [Qoheleth’s] form of faith.” [Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 187.] Not only is there nothing left for man but present enjoyment, but even for this he is dependent upon God.” [Longman, p. 168.]

Of course, just as the gospel writers described the futility of gaining wealth and neglecting what is important, we need to counterbalance Qoheleth’s warning with Paul’s testimony is Philippians 3:7-8. “Christ is the world’s true gain, a gain like no other, imperishable and undeserved, gifted and grace-filled, exposing all other gains as worthless objects of futile striving.” [Brown, p. 126.]

With regard to joy itself, I loved Brown’s observation: “Perhaps it takes, of all people, a dour sage to teach Christians a thing or two about joy.” [Brown, p. 127.]

“One must learn to live with both prosperity and adversity, for God is the author of both (7:14). Each has its special blessing and curse. Each can enrich life if we are willing to learn what it has to teach.” [Johnson, Wisdom, p. 125.]

EATING AND DRINKING

Just as Qoheleth emphasized that the ones who eat and drink in darkness experience vexation, sickness, and resentment for their efforts to eat in isolation (Ecclesiastes 5:15, 17 [English numeration], in the same way notice how Jesus treated table fellowship. Luke, for example, “…equates Jesus’ table fellowship with the eschatological kingdom of God (Luke 13:29; 22:30).” [Brown, p. 128.] Qoheleth taught about enjoying the simple things in life and receiving them as a gift from God. Doesn’t that remind you of what Jesus taught?

“Happily, Qoheleth thought that God was generous beyond comprehension. The only problem was that the gifts seemed to follow no identifiable pattern, so that an element of arbitrariness prevailed.” [Crenshaw, *Wisdom*, p. 136.] But even if we don’t recognize the tapestry of God’s design, we can celebrate what we can see. This attitude of gratitude in living life is similar to the Hispanic concept of “*buen provecho*.” As I pointed out when we were studying Ecclesiastes 8:15, the Spanish phrase comes from the verb*, aprovechar*, to approve. Thanking God, expressing joy, and living as God has instructed is a way of showing our approval in life. The following are six times that Qoheleth commanded this type of enjoyment and prioritization.

* **2:24-26 (eat, drink, gain satisfaction from work, and please God),**
* **3:13-14 (eat, drink, gain satisfaction from work, prioritize what God wants to last, and reverence [“fear”] God),**
* **5:18-20 (eat, drink, gain satisfaction from work, treat blessings as a gift, allow God to provide joy),**
* **8:15 (enjoy with eat, drink, pleasure to balance toil, and savor God’s gift of life), and**
* **9:7 *(Go, eat your food in pleasure, and drink your wine with a good heart [“Enjoy, but don’t overdo it!”] because God is already pleased with your accomplishments.* [PJT]).**

This attitude of gratitude should also apply to our business life and planning our life. You probably remember that I take the “casting bread” upon the waters (11:1) as an encouragement to invest, immediately followed by the idea of diversifying one’s investments (11:2). Other interpreters take it as a simple parable for demonstrating generosity, but while I think it includes generosity, I think it is significant for how we live our entire lives.

I want to remind you of my conclusion on these two verses and the few which follows. Even if you follow the rabbis and some of the early church fathers in believing these verses are about being generous, that it is not good to be stingy. Whatever resources you have (skills, talents, influence, time, strength, compassion, or money), don’t be afraid to put them out there in the world—even if there is risk.

The New Testament cross-reference would be Jesus’ parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27). Admittedly, this parable is about what we do with the Kingdom of God and, in Matthew, it is placed among judgment sayings so that the emphasis is on judging those who don’t invest their lives in God’s kingdom. But even with that understanding, I think that “The thrust of the parable is to challenge the disciples to make profitable use of all that Jesus has revealed to them about the kingdom.” [Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 252-253.] But since everything we do should be oriented to God’s glory (whether we eat or drink or whatever we do—1 Corinthians 10:31).

Second, because life is risky, diversify your portfolio of life. Don’t just be interested in one thing. Notice that some pastors can hardly get through a sermon without using a sports illustration. There’s nothing wrong with using a sports illustration; I use many myself. However, if those are the only analogies you can give, you’re not going to communicate with as many people as when you draw from science, literature, entertainment, folklore, finance, and work-life experiences. This is true for those of you who want to give your testimony and share the gospel, too.

And, a word of caution: don’t be like I’ve been too much of my life, too highly invested in one friend such that I missed out on others. And as a further word of caution, don’t invest so much time and effort in one person that you feel totally devastated if that person disappoints you. So, you can see that this can apply not only to generosity or investing, but to the way you serve in the church, the way you do your job, and even how you socialize.

YOUTH WASTED ON THE YOUNG?

As I was growing up, I would hear elderly folks complain with the cliché: “Youth is wasted on the young.” They had a point. After all, it isn’t until you get older and mature that you have an adequate foundation and perspective with which to discern what is important in life. However, it is important to live life with energy and openness to possibility while you are young to build that foundation. I truly believe that’s what a lot of interpreters of Ecclesiastes miss when they focus on Qoheleth’s emphasis on youth in both the last two verses of 11 and the famous verse at the beginning of 12.

Yes, as Brown wrote: “The reference to the youth in 11:9 fits well into Qoheleth’s commendation for it evokes the vital capacity to exhaust the joyous moment for all its edifying worth (see 6:4; 7:14; 9:11-12).” [Brown, p. 104.] And yes, 12:1 does talk about not being able to enjoy certain things in our old age that we could enjoy in our youth. I don’t expect to go snow skiing again because I don’t want to risk broken bones. And I don’t expect to fly an airplane or drive a race car again (which I was able to do under special circumstances and loved them). Yet, I still savor learning, travel, strategy games, and reading for pleasure. And I still vicariously enjoy watching auto racing or Olympic skiing, having only a modicum of experience with which to process what I’m seeing. So, I don’t feel like I wasted my youth.

And even though Qoheleth laments the diminishing strength and faculties of humanity as we get older, I don’t believe he would have been an advocate for euthanasia or insist that life is ONLY worth living while one is young. Rather, the admonition to remember one’s creator in one’s youth is about building patterns, habits if you will, of living a life dedicated to God who uniquely creates. I shared during our session on Chapter 12 that only God can “bah-RAH.” Remember God Who creates uniquely is not a matter of paying lip service or the occasional worship experience; it is a commitment to God in every aspect of one’s life.

I believe that human beings are pattern-making, habit-making people. Apparently, the basal ganglia stores habits while the rest of the brain works less and less <i>because</i> the “chunks” of actions stored in that section of the brain takes over (Duhigg, Robert. *The Power of Habits: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, p. 26). That means that much of what we do is automatic based on how we train ourselves. The patterns we build and the expectations we give ourselves actually guide us through both good times and bad times. Researchers have defined what is known as a “habit loop.” They noticed that a certain cue triggers a set of automatic reactions such that the being feels rewarded. As a result of being rewarded, there is an even stronger response to the same cue on the next occasion.” (p. 29) For example, a Scottish rehabilitation study where the elderly patients who were most successful in learning to walk again in spite of excruciating pain had identified potential obstacles in advance and created their own ways of dealing with them. “Put another way, the patients’ plans were built around inflection points when they knew their pain—and thus the temptation to quit—would be the strongest.” (Duhigg, p. 124)

I believe that remembering one’s Creator is both a way of inculcating a habit of praise, reverence, and thanksgiving for whatever kind of experiences we are to face. I see it as lining up with 1 Thessalonians and the admonition to “Rejoice always” and express one’s thanksgiving in everything (5:19). Personally, I am so thankful to have surrendered to God at an early age. There have been so many times that I couldn’t see any way out of a situation, but I had this assurance that God would show me what to do. That is remembering one’s Creator to me and it started as a pattern in my youth.

Patterns of prayer, Bible study, worship, gratitude, sharing, giving, and trusting can make all of the difference in life, even when the house begins to fall apart as we studied when we looked at the rabbinical allegory and as we see it in the more global, eschatological allegory which I didn’t cover in the session. Along with that slide, I show a ruined floor from Herod’s palace at Masada to illustrate that even a great house (civilization, kingdom, city, family, etc.) can fall (whether to marauders or decay from within). The second slide has a ruined section of a city building from the Israelite city of Beth-Shan (near where King Saul committed suicide).

Even in the modern world, scientists and philosophers observe the entropy (everything going downhill) in nature, in society, and in human health. So, we can’t really judge Qoheleth too much for his observation that life/health doesn’t last long and doesn’t seem to have a lasting impact. Of course, when Paul writes in Romans 8 that we have been called according to God’s purpose and continues by informing us that God’s purpose is glorification—our glorification to become more like Jesus and the glorification of all creation to be more worthy of Him—it gives us the insight that Qoheleth is missing. History does have a purpose and human life does have a purpose. God is making it so that we can be all that God wants for us.

Glory to God in the highest Who takes the time to be with us who are well below Him!