

1. INTRODUCTION:

- a. **Author and Date of writing** – There are at least two individuals identified in the writing of Ecclesiastes – the “Preacher” [Qoheleth] who is credited with the bulk of the work, and “an unnamed author/editor” who has gathered these words together into a cohesive document. 10:9-10 appears to be this editor’s comments on the Preacher’s work. The reality is that the author and editor could well be the same person writing at different times. The time of writing is no less murky. Tradition holds that the author is Solomon who is also credited with the Proverbs and Song of Solomon which would provide a date during Solomon’s rule of 970-930 BC. Some believe there could be a later date in the Post-Exilic period after 538 BC when Jerusalem was being rebuilt. One thing is certain, that the author was well schooled in the Wisdom Tradition established by Solomon. There really is no good reason not to accept Solomon as the author.
- b. Professor Brian Morgan in our class session stated that “Proverbs is building the Seven Pillar House” and it sets the stage of what is meant by “knowing” in general in terms of wisdom and in particular what may be achieved by knowing God. Ecclesiastes in contrast, gives voice to the tension of humanities choice between God’s purpose [where ultimate meaning resides], and the chances that emerge in the real world [where meaningless often resides]. The tension between God’s Sovereignty and humanities free will, are at the heart of this conflict between meaning and meaningless. This close tie with Proverbs in my view helps support the Solomon authorship of Ecclesiastes.
- c. **Wisdom is described as a Person in Hebrew Scripture and is now understood by Christians as being the Person of the Holy Spirit.** Scripture describes the “Seven Pillars” of Wisdom that are discussed in Proverbs 8 which are the ideal to be sought by the serious student seeking to know and please God. It should be understood that this ideal is a goal that we as fallen humanity will never achieve this side of eternity. However, it is our goal to know God and to grow spiritually maturing in character. The Seven Pillars are described accordingly:
 - i. **Prudence** – meaning that wisdom is evidenced in wise judgement exercised in demonstrating common sense. Prudence is the demonstration of wise restraint where Godly human character is demonstrated. It is being innocent but not naïve; being grounded in Scripture not in the ways of the world; choosing to serve and honor God not submission to the ways of the prevailing cultural norms of self-interest.

Hosea 14:9 - Who is wise? He will realize these things.
 Who is discerning? He will understand them.
 The ways of the LORD are right;
 the righteous walk in them,
 but the rebellious stumble in them.
 - ii. **Knowledge and Discretion** – the Hebrew word for discretion is *mezimmaḥ*, which means the power of forming plans. In this context, it means using wisdom to devise, imagine,

plan or conceive of something... especially a course of action. By understanding the reality in which we operate guided by the internal compass of Godly character [Biblical integrity and morality], a person is actively guided by “Godly Principled Truth of Scripture” rather than “situational ethics of secular humanism,” the latter which seeks the easiest way forward guided by the practicalities of our own individual self-interest. Truth in contrast is shown to be authoritative and absolute.

Proverbs 8:12 I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion.

- iii. **Fear of God – this does not mean “to be in fear or terror” but rather to “to be in awe and wonder” of God. It is a positive reaction relative to “Who God is” rather than a negative reaction of “what God may do.” Being in awe of the greatness and wonder of a limitless God who loves me and wants the best for me changes everything about how I think and live. For more on this topic check out this quick link to the AD website:**

<http://www.authenticdiscipleship.org/pdfs/3-leadership-dev/LD%20-%206.5%20-%20On%20Developing%20a%20Spirit%20Driven%20Life.pdf>

Proverbs 8:13 To fear the LORD is to hate evil;
I hate pride and arrogance,
evil behavior and perverse speech.

Psalms 111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
A good understanding have all those who do *His commandments*;
His praise endures forever.

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

- iv. **Wise Counsel – Seeking, accepting, and giving Godly counsel is the fourth pillar of wisdom. No person is immune to self-deception; and no person can see all aspects of a situation they are involved in because of their own self-interest often both motivates and deceives us. Having people of noble character that we can rely on to help guide us in our choices and course of action is a key aspect of Biblical maturity as a disciple of Christ.**

Proverbs 8:14-17 Counsel and sound judgment are mine;
I have understanding and power.
By me kings reign
and rulers make laws that are just;
by me princes govern
and all nobles who rule on earth.
I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.

- v. **Wise Behavior – such behavior is based upon sound judgment emanating from practical**

Biblical guidance. Scripture is a long love-letter from God where humanity may come into relational intimacy with a personal God who loves us. Here we learn the standard of human behavior from the Person and Character of God who is our Creator and loving Father.

Proverbs 1:1-7 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
for attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight;
for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair;
for giving prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Romans 8:15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”

Galatians 4:6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

- vi. **Understanding – This is the Sixth Pillar of Wisdom listed in Proverbs 8:14. To understand means we must do three things:**
- 1. We need to know the source of all wisdom. We must understand that all wisdom comes from only one source who is our Heavenly Father.**
 - 2. We must receive instruction from God through His authoritative source of Truth we call the Bible. It requires not casual detached study, but rather a disciplined study and application. Knowledge and learning are the keys to being and acting in wisdom and in truth.**
 - 3. We must learn to discern [interpret] wisely. Like Solomon’s Wisdom Tradition commends us toward, we need to be able to discern between what is good and what is evil. Noted author CS Lewis’ in his appraisal of the Spiritual Discernment Tradition, commends us to recognize what is “Good, Better and Best.” Lewis argues that good and bad are often fairly easy to discern, but choosing the best over the good is usually much more difficult.**
- vii. **Principled Action – The final pillar is having the courage and conviction to act upon what you know to be right and true, trusting that God’s power will both support and sustain**

you. Action without principled understanding is foolishness as is principled understanding without determined action. These Seven Pillars are an integrated call into discipleship. Messiah Jesus was the standard of these seven pillars by which His disciples continue His Mission:

Isaiah 11:1-5 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

Luke 2:40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and
the grace of God was upon him.

2. STRUCTURE:

- a. Longman in his book titled The Book of Ecclesiastes identifies three main sections of Ecclesiastes. The first and third sections are written from the narrator's perspective and forms a frame for the much longer second section written as the Preacher's autobiographical speech.
 - i. The First Section – 1:1-11
 - ii. The Second Section – 1:12-12:7
 - iii. The Third Section – 12:8-14
- b. Bruce Waltke in his book Ecclesiastes, an Exegetical Old Testament Theology notes the use of the context of the Hebrew word *hebel* meaning Vapor. The first half of Ecclesiastes has an identifiable focus on "chasing after the wind" while the second half focuses on humanities inability to find certainty "under the sun." Waltke identifies 6:10 as the mid-point of the book.
- c. C.L. Seow in his book Ecclesiastes, a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary proposes the following Outline:
 - i. 1:1 – Superscription
 - ii. Part 1A – Reflection – Everything is Ephemeral and Unreliable
 1. 1:2-11 – Preface
 2. 1:12-2:26 – Nothing is Ultimately Reliable
 3. 3:1-22 – Everything is in the Hand of God
 4. 4:1-16 – Relative Good is Not Good Enough
 - iii. Part 1B – Ethics – Coping with Uncertainty

1. 5:1-7 – Attitude Before God
2. 5:8-6:9 – Enjoyment as a Gift from God, not Greed
- iv. Part 2A – Reflection – Everything is Elusive
 1. 6:10-7:14 – No One Knows what is Good
 2. 7:15-29 – Righteousness and Wisdom are Elusive
 3. 8:1-17 – The World is Arbitrary
- v. Part 2B – Ethics – Coping with Risks and Death
 1. 9:1-10 – Carpe Diem... seize the day!
 2. 9:11-10:15 – The World is Full of Risks
 3. 10:16-11:6 – Living with the Reality of Risk
 4. 11:7-12:8 – Conclusion
- vi. Epilogue – 12:9-14
 1. 12:9-12 – Qoheleth and the Wise
 2. 12:13-14 – Summary

3. THEOLOGICAL THEMES:

- a. **Everything is Vapor:** *Hebel* [“vapor”] refers to the visible puff of moisture of a warm breath expelled on a cold night, or a that of a cloud in the sky. To try to capture it is futile, hence it is meaningless. This is the vanity the author speaks of. The disturbing side of this thought is not just about this airy nothingness, it is the potential sum total of what all life is about.
 - i. The question that this thought process invites is that this emptiness stands in mute contrast to God’s utter Holiness... that reality that gives life and shape to all the traditional piety of Israel. The Preacher catalogs every human activity as either temporarily fleeting or intellectually futile.
 - ii. The backdrop for this is the realization that humanity on their own is incapable of discovering let alone understanding eternal Truth. Humanity is completely dependent upon God’s revelation of Truth.
 - iii. Scholars Gordis Crenshaw and R.B. Scott have interpreted the Teacher’s dilemma as being caught between hope and pessimism. Traditional Jewish faith taught by the prophets hoped for the triumph of justice in this world or in the redress in eternity. This represents the forerunner of Pharisaic Judaism. But what if God isn’t Just and Good after all? Maybe life itself isn’t inherently good and there really is no meaning to it? What then? “Eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die” makes sense only if life is ultimately futile.
 - iv. This back and forth pull between the despair of meaninglessness and the hope of justice are key elements of Ecclesiastes.
- b. **Death is the ultimate equalizer:** Death renders all human activity finite. In light of the certain

reality that every individual will die, humanity is invited to accept and enjoy life in the present in Hope for a certain future. The way of life recommended by Ecclesiastes is being faithful and joyful in the moment before God. Therefore, the pursuit of wisdom, wealth, or any other human goal is shown to be chasing after the wind.

- i. Death brings the wise and the fool in the end to the same place – 2:12-16; and it renders futile a life devoted to the accumulation of wealth – 2:17-23.
 - ii. Death, which lies in everyone’s future, should persuade a person to embrace life in the present – 11:7-12:8.
 - iii. Theologian Ian Provan states, “It is the reality of death that makes rational the way of life that Qoheleth commends to his readers, with its focus on living each moment of life joyfully before God rather than on the pursuit of wisdom, wealth, or any other human end that comes under the heading ‘chasing after the wind’.”
 - iv. The Apostle Paul says that all creation is subject to futility – Romans 8:19-21. Sociologist Peter Berger says, “there is a fundamental human need for meaning, and without a framework of meaning neither collective nor individual life is possible.”
 - v. T.S. Elliott captures this quest in his poem “Four Quartets”

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
- c. **Life should be enjoyed as a gift from God:** Although everything is meaningless under the sun, there is a life that exists beyond the sun. God’s existence and entrance into a relational connection with God is the only thing that makes sense in light of eternity. The Preacher identifies God as *Elohim*... the transcendent Ruler of the World. The Preacher believes that Elohim is wise, good, and just. He trusts that God will make everything beautiful in its prescribed time – 3:11. God’s justice will ultimately prevail – 8:11-13. God’s inherent Goodness is the reason humanity can enjoy life in confidence amid the apparent meaningless humanity observes – 2:24.
- i. From this train of thought, some theologians identify the Teacher’s approach as a “Philosophy of Rationalism.” The teacher argues in Ecclesiastes that humanity apart from God is helpless to understand the eternal, thus we should surrender to the eventualities of life knowing that the pursuit of wisdom and hope for a future is preferred to the folly and chaos of bestial animal nature. Thus, Ecclesiastes is a reasoned argument against secularism and a positive assessment and encouragement of faith.
 - ii. The result of this dilemma affirms faith in a generous God is reasonable because of the grimness of the alternative. Wisdom is preferred over folly as light is preferred over

darkness, as love and kindness are preferred over hate and destruction. Seen in this perspective, Ecclesiastes is “an agonizing debate between skepticism and faith, with faith winning out.”

4. CONCLUSION – PERSONAL ASSESSMENT:

- a. Ecclesiastes speaks to the transience of things – life is short and man is weak and inconsequential compared to the eternal nature and incomparable strength of God. Ecclesiastes could seem to mock God and man with a rather cavalier attitude, rather than promoting the understanding that man’s best efforts are simply inadequate. Nothing we can do will endure – it is all in the final analysis “a chasing after vapor, it is meaningless.” The only relevant conclusion is in the context of God where meaning and purpose are found. Moreover, humanity is incapable of discovering God’s eternal truth on their own; it is only through Divine revelation that we can come to know and understand eternal truth.
- b. Also, death is the great equalizer of Ecclesiastes – everyone born will die – no one gets off the planet alive... it is only a matter of “how and when” and not “if.” I watched my parents struggle with their failing health and faculties, especially as their mortality began to loom large before them. My Dad had symptoms of Alzheimer’s, and my Mom of heart disease. My Dad was physically strong, but mentally he was weakening, while my mother was the reverse. My dad faced his uncertain future with his characteristic good humor and faith. He had a great heart that was loving and compassionate, and he trusted God. My mom faced her uncertain future with trepidation and fear. She worried about anything she was unable to control, not realizing she was really in control of nothing. She finally came to a place of desperation and was forced to let go of her burden and trust God. But unfortunately, she often escaped the immediate crisis only to take up her burden again. The writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that all “human activity is either temporarily fleeting or intellectually futile,” that “death renders all human activity meaningless.” Therefore, “life should be enjoyed as a gift from God.”¹ My dad even in his diminished state seemed to intuitively understand this, while its truth continued to elude my mom.
- c. One of my favorite verses from Ecclesiastes is 1:9, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” Each generation believes they have discovered something new – new sins, new entertainment, new knowledge, new experiences – when in fact they have been experienced by each generation before. The repeated phrases of “find/not find” and “know/not know” is the writer’s attempt to “explore the question of human knowledge, that knowing if there is an adequate compensation to wisdom, it is not

¹ Ecclesiastes Study Notes – OTII, Western Seminary Spring 2005, Brian Morgan, pages 8-9

located in this world... meaning ‘under the sun’ [2:11].”² The unstated inference is not about solving the problem here and now, but instead points us to a better future beyond the sun... a future not under the “sun” but under the “Son.”

- d. Ecclesiastes probes and explores the nature of reason, truth and knowledge, both what may and what may not be known. Reason is both seductive and provocative, and I think we intuitively understand its value over vanity and self-indulgence. Meaning is both defined for us and defined by us, but Scripture maintains there is an eternal Truth written into the fabric of creation. The Apostle Paul I think captures much of this dynamic in Romans 1:18-25 from the New Living Version:

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who push the truth away from themselves. For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature [written in the fabric of creation]. So, they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes. So, God let them go ahead and do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other’s bodies. Instead of believing what they knew was the truth about God, they deliberately chose to believe lies. So, they worshiped the things God made but not the Creator himself, who is to be praised forever. Amen.

- e. **I believe God created humanity to be explorers. There is something that drives us to ask and receive, to seek and find, to knock and open – Matthew 7:7-12:**

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

- f. **I found Ecclesiastes’ understated conclusion to be that we should not rely on ourselves or even upon others, but wisdom insists that instead of our own devices, that we should rely personally and corporately upon God. Although Ecclesiastes is not quoted in the New Testament, it lands**

² Ecclesiastes Study Notes – OTII, Western Seminary Spring 2005, Brian Morgan, page 12

fairly squarely in Romans 8:14-25:

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons and daughters of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons and daughters by which we cry out, “ Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. 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. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 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. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

Interestingly, Professor Brian Morgan made the observation that the Greek word translated as *futility* in in this passage is the word *mataiotes*. This is the same word used in the LLX translation of the Hebrew to the Greek for *hebel*, the Hebrew word for *vapor* found in Ecclesiastes.

- 5. PASTORAL THOUGHT ON ECCLESIASTES – This week I found that a good friend had a mild stroke, he’s OK but it was a very real scare for his wife and friends. A friend of a friend had a stroke and spent a week in a coma, she’s recovering. My dear friend’s daughter had extensive cancer surgery, she’s recovering. Another friend had thyroid cancer surgery, she’s recuperating. My pastor’s oldest daughter has Celiac Disease, a painful auto-immune disorder with no known cure...she suffers daily. An old UCSB friend and bandmate is struggling with Parkinson’s Disease... he’s twenty years into the disorder. A neighbor’s only son complained of intense abdominal pain and exploratory surgery was recommended but was inconclusive and caused additional long-term issues. And the list goes on in my local circle of friends. Local pastor Andy Lewis in his blog below [edited for clarity] wrote:**

King Solomon rightly observed in Ecclesiastes, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” In the original Hebrew language it more literally reads “Breath of breaths... All of life is but a breath.” In other words, life is but a puff of air [VAPOR]... and it is in vain to chase your own breath.

Life goes by really quickly and we don’t know when our days in this life will end. That’s why Solomon makes this important observation that I’m trying to take to heart this morning, “*I know that there is nothing better... than to rejoice and to do good in one’s lifetime. Moreover, that every [person] who*

eats and drinks also sees good in all [their] labor... knowing it is a gift from God. 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 [all] should [serve and respect] Him"- Ecclesiastes 3: 12-14.

There are people in my life who I need to tell "I love you" today. There are people in my life I need to tell about the glorious hope of eternity with Jesus today. There are steps I need to keep taking to seek reconciliation in broken relationships because I don't know how many days I'll have left to reconcile them. Ecclesiastes is an invitation to walk out this reality today... because today could be it.