

In the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet embarked on his quest to discover a ground of meaning for human existence. As we saw, his quest is guided by wisdom as he experiences growth in knowledge within the context of faithfulness to God. In Ecclesiastes 4, Qohelet continues his philosophical meditations on being in the world and reports his findings. In 5.1-6.9, Qohelet provides some initial moral instruction for the reader based on his discoveries.

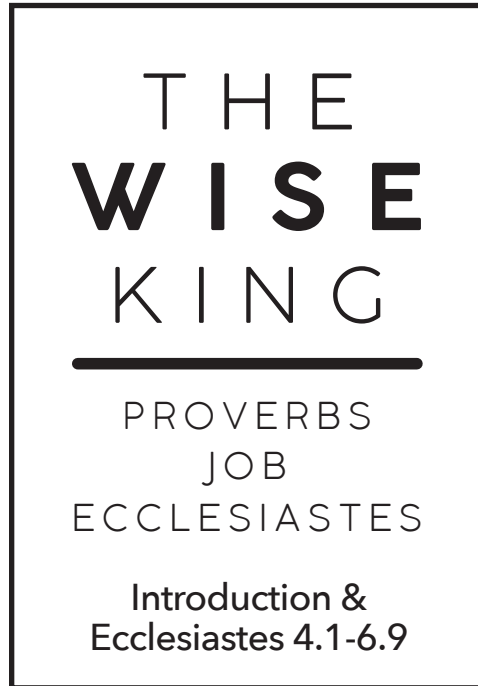
4.1-16: Final Initial Meditations

Qohelet reports on more happenings “under the sun” (4.1). First, he considers the condition of people being oppressed by those with power. He marvels at the starkness of the fact that people suffer at the hands of those more powerful and that there is “no one to comfort them!” (4.1) In light of this observed injustice, Qohelet proposes the first of many “better than” sayings. In 4.2, he initially asserts that the dead are better off than the living because the dead do not have to endure unjust suffering. However, then Qohelet sees that someone “who has not yet been” (4.3) has it “better than” either a living person or a once-having-lived person. So, it is better to have never been (a thought that echoes Job’s lament) than to have ever lived to see the “evil deeds” that are done under the sun. (4.3)

In a second observation, Qohelet furthers his earlier thoughts on the vacuousness of human labor, this time positing that “all toil and all skill in work” results from a competitive culture with envy at its heart. While many Westerners embrace an economy based on competition, Qohelet unveils its destructiveness. Pitting people against one another in competition drives people to be “better than” others and capture more wealth, power, and influence. Such a culture creates the scenario of the oppressed and the powerful in 4.1-3 and expressed in 4.5 with the image of the “fool” who does not participate in this culture and ends up having to “consume [his] own flesh” to survive. Qohelet declares all of this “vacuous” and “a chasing after wind” (4.4) and in 4.6 offers a “better than” alternative in living simply with less (“a handful with quiet”) as opposed to grasping after more and more to keep up with the Jones’ (“two handfuls with toil”).

His third observation takes up “the case of solitary individuals” (4.8) who are toiling but have no family to whom to

pass along their wealth. This image reflects back on 4.4-6 and confronts the reader with the ridiculousness of a single person who is working diligently to acquire great wealth. And while his wealth is building and building, he is working so hard he cannot enjoy it. Since he has nobody who will be able to enjoy his wealth in the future (“sons or brothers”) all of his labor seems “vacuous” and, as Qohelet says, “an unhappy business.” (4.8).



This meditation on those who are alone compels Qohelet to affirm the value of companionship in 4.9-12. “Two are better than one” (4.9) because they (a) mutually enjoy the results of their labor, (b) can help one another out in the wilderness if they happen to fall into a pit intended to trap an animal or if they cannot light a fire to stay warm and have to huddle close together, and (c) can more easily overwhelm a marauder. The “threefold cord” image demonstrates the strength of companionship. The number three is not a literalism, but intended to reinforce the idea that there is strength in numbers. While the “two are better than one” meditation of Qohelet is often invoked at weddings, its scope goes well beyond the marriage relationship.

Reflecting back on 4.4-6, the “two” (or more) are more than likely a person’s immediate family, extended family, and friends.

Qohelet closes this first series of meditations upon existence by deconstructing the value of political power. He imagines a scenario where a poor, but young and wise person is elevated to the kingship (4.15). On top of that, Qohelet affirms that the “poor” person in question could have been recently released from prison. And while so many follow this young, wise person and leave behind the “old but foolish king” in the present, down the road the same condition will repeat itself and later generations “will not rejoice in him” (4.16). So, Qohelet concludes that this too “is vacuous and a chasing after the wind” (4.16).

5.1-6.9

The tone of Ecclesiastes shifts in chapter 5 from philosophical meditation to the language of moral instruction. Having reflected upon his experience in life, Qohelet now offers wisdom on proper living. This movement within the text will unfold in two sections.

5.1-7: Watch Your Words!

This section opens with a generic ethical warning to “watch how you walk” when in the presence of the Lord in the Temple (5.1). This reference more than likely refers to the Second Temple built in Jerusalem after the return from Babylonian exile and not the Solomonic Temple, although as noted previously the attribution of Qohelet to Solomon may lead the reader to believe that the reference is to the First Temple period. The call to “listen” (5.1) sets the framework for the contrast throughout the passage of dream-ridden “fools” who are “rash with [their] mouth” (5.2), “quick[ly] utter a word before God” (5.2), speak “many words” (5.3), make “a vow to God” thus “let[ting their] mouth lead [them] into sin” (5.6), and ultimately speak “a multitude of words” (5.7). Instead, Qohelet counsels the wise person to “fear God” (5.7) by remaining silent before the Lord while in the temple courts, choosing to listen, as opposed to speaking quickly and thereby making commitments before the Lord that have not been thoroughly considered.

5.8-6.9: Be Content!

This section returns to a theme Qohelet meditated upon at length in the opening section: the problem of wealth and social power. 5.8 quickly constructs a social power hierarchy with which we are very familiar: “the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.” In this view of the world, the endless pursuit of greater wealth and social status simply reinforces the stratification of society that ultimately brings about “the oppression of the poor and violation of justice and righteousness” (5.8). Qohelet says that we should “not be amazed” (5.8) when we encounter this sort of social gradation in “a province,” or urbanized center.

Ecclesiastes 5.9 is exceedingly difficult to translate, let alone interpret. According to C.L. Seow, if we accept a post-exilic context for Ecclesiastes and a shift during this era from an agrarian society to one with emerging urban centers then the idea communicated in the verse is that “land is intended only for the sustenance it provides: it should neither be abandoned nor misappropriated” (Seow, 219). In sum, since the urban “province” by its nature favors the wealthy and segments humanity into rich and poor while violating God’s justice and righteousness, people should not be too quick to abandon the “cultivated fields” through which God ultimately provides sustenance.

Qohelet punctuates this point with a proverb in 5.10: “The lover of money will not be satisfied; nor the lover of wealth, with gain.” As Qohelet previously stated, the pursuit of wealth is “vacuous” both in the obsessive dis-

traction it creates in life and in the realization that wealth passes to the next generation to no benefit of the one who earned it. 5.11 plays this out further with its vision of the wealthy person sits back and watches as an increasing number of people literally eat his wealth. The obsessiveness of the acquisition and maintenance of wealth creates an endless restlessness (5.12b) among the rich, whereas the comparatively wise “laborer” sleeps sweetly (5.12).

In 5.13-17 Qohelet reiterates that those who are caught up in the pursuit of wealth spend their days in “much vexation and sickness and resentment” (5.17). On the one hand they live under constant pressure to maintain wealth (and power and social status) (5.13) and on the other there is always the looming possibility that they could lose all of their wealth in a bad business deal (or, in our time, in the market) (5.14). In this latter circumstance, what then was the value of all of the toil that led to the accumulation of riches? (5.16) For Qohelet, it is easy to look through the lens of the vacuousness of the pursuit of great wealth to the reality that people are born and die naked and empty-handed (5.15). What then is the value of toil?

In contrast to the endless pursuit of wealth and its perceived benefits, Qohelet offers what he sees as good: “to eat and drink and find enjoyment” in the entire, brief course of “the life God gives us” (5.18). If God happens to grant “wealth and possessions,” these should be enjoyed as God’s gift along with the labor involved in obtaining and sustaining this wealth (5.19). Qohelet believes this is a healthier approach to life because the emphasis is on contentment with God’s gifts and genuine enjoyment of God’s benefits.

Qohelet closes his encouragement to be content with two, additional negative moral examples. The first imagines the vacuousness of the wealthy person who never enjoys their riches (6.2-6). The second considers that whether wise or foolish, poor or rich, everyone faces the reality that we work to satisfy an appetite (for food or wealth or so many other things) that is never able to be satisfied (6.7-8). Ecclesiastes 6.9 is also a very difficult verse to interpret, but its sense is that “it is better to have what is before the eyes, what is present, rather than to die on account of one’s insatiability” (Seow, 228). Whether rich or poor, people should be content with God’s present provision and enjoy all that God provides during the brief course of human life.

Having offered two, clear points of moral instruction, Qohelet shifts back to philosophical meditation for the remainder of Ecclesiastes 6 and on through chapter 8. This section will be the subject of next week’s class on Ecclesiastes.