

As we draw to the end of Qohelet's quest for meaning he has plumbed the depths of the possibility of human understanding and experience and found everything wanting. Wisdom and understanding evade humanity's grasp and the absurdities within human experience make it equally "vacuous." Thus far the only footing he is able to find is in honoring God and enjoying the brief time God has given us "under the sun."

This final section of Ecclesiastes finds Qohelet summarizing his experience, doing a bit more digging, and wrapping up with some wise counsel based on his journey. With Qohelet's findings fully laid out before us, it remains to us as fellow travelers on a similar quest to discern with wisdom the enduring value of his insight and counsel.

9.1-10: Enjoy Life To The Fullest

In this summary reflection upon his experiences, Qohelet sees that death is not only the great equalizer between persons of different social and economic statuses (5.8-6.9) but is the fate that all face (9.2). He deems this common fate "vacuous" because relative to the way we value things within the course of human existence (love/hate, good/evil, righteous/wicked, clean/unclean, religious/secular) death seems unjust because it makes all of these "important to us" distinctions meaningless (9.2-3). What death does, however, is enhance the value of living and "all that happens under the sun" (9.4-6).

The common reality of death is the reason Qohelet repeatedly affirms digging deep into enjoying the most basic dimensions of human existence. In his most exuberant call to embrace life in Ecclesiastes, he counsels enjoying eating, merrily drinking wine, dressing to the nines, marrying well, working diligently, and embracing the life of the mind to seek wisdom (9.7-10). People should wholeheartedly engage life because "God has long approved what you do" (9.7) and absolutely none of these things are possible "in Sheol, to which you are going" (9.10). It is important to note that Qohelet is not coming to this counsel from the perspective of the despair so common in our era. He affirms the positive value of life as God's gift to humanity and calling his hearers to enjoy all that God offers humanity within its created intents and purposes. In this way God "has long approved" enjoying life in all of its fullness.

9.11-10.15: Further Explorations & Insights Under the Sun

Having found some ground for hopeful meaning in human existence, Qohelet explores the realm "under the sun" a bit further to highlight the risks people face as they enjoy life.

First, life is filled with absurdities. The fastest person doesn't always win the race, the strongest force doesn't always win the battle, the most wise and intelligent people do not necessarily come out on top, and even highly skilled people do not succeed as we assume (9.11). The whims of "time and fate" are perilously at work in the realm of human being and like prey falling into the hands of the hunter, no one can anticipate when disaster may strike (9.12).

Second, wise people don't always get the credit they deserve. Here, Qohelet recounts the story of a small city that avoided being overtaken by a "great king" through the counsel of a "poor wise man" (9.14-15). Especially given the overwhelming odds assumed in the story, the wise person who helped them avoid calamity

should have been paraded down the streets in celebration. However, due to his social standing in the community, "no one remembered that poor man" (9.15). Based on the story Qohelet surprisingly affirms that "wisdom is better than might" (9.16). Given his track record, we might anticipate that he would use the story to demonstrate the absurdity of the value of wisdom being overwhelmed by social status. While this note is certainly assumed within the story, he uses 9.17-10.4 to extol the power of "the quiet words of the wise" (9.17) and to draw a contrast to the loud, boisterous ramblings of the fool. He concludes with a contemporary example of quiet wisdom in remaining calm when "the anger of the ruler rises against you" (10.4).

Third, Qohelet gathers insights on wisdom and folly from a broad range of experiences that are impossible to neatly package and tie up with a bow. As in prior sections, he highlights "an evil" which in this case is that poor fools find their way into positions of political power as opposed to wealthy, but more importantly, wise people (10.5-6). Qohelet assumes here that wealth is a sign of wisdom, which we know of course is not always the case. Also in the course of life, people will experience a wide variety of vagaries. While digging a pit, you might fall into it (10.8a).

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When you are knocking down an unhewn stone wall, you might get bit by a snake whose den is between two rocks (10.8b). Also, while quarrying stones or splitting logs the sheer weight and texture of the materials might lead to injury (10.9). Further, while splitting wood, if the iron is not sharpened before the job it takes more strength to get it done (10.10). Snake charmers sometimes get bit (10.11). These situations and others like them that we encounter in the course of life can, of course, be mitigated with wisdom that can "help one to succeed" (10.10).

This section concludes with a re-affirmation that "words spoken by the wise" (and spoken with wisdom) will bring the wise person favor (10.12). By contrast, the words fools bring about self-destruction, madness, chaos, and misdirection (10.12-15).

10.16-11.6 Additional Instruction for Wise Living

Turning explicitly back to moral instruction, Qohelet opens 10.16 with a prophetic "woe" statement addressed to the "Land." As he noted in 10.5-6, having fools in positions of authority is problematic for human society. Things are much more "happy" when the "king is a nobleman" and invites princes to eat at the "proper time" as opposed to when slaves eat ("in the morning") and for the proper reason ("for strength") (10.17). Qohelet here assumes a particular political framework based on a benevolent king and equally charitable princes. For this reason Ecclesiastes fits nicely during the post-exilic period under Persian rule when this kind of positive kingship was the order of the day in a resettled Israel. In the periods prior to and beyond, Israel found itself at odds with its internal and external rulers and texts from these eras do not reflect as positively on the kingship. Given the political tradition of liberalism in the modern west, the emphasis of Qohelet's counsel would fall more toward the strength of wisdom than the necessity of wealth.

The points of moral inquiry that follow characterize wise and foolish living under a benevolent kingship. A wise person - whether noble or commoner - takes care of their house, both literally and metaphorically, and does not let it fall into ruin (10.18). Wise people understand that feasts are special occasions that intend to celebrate the goodness of the life God has given us together "under the sun" (10.19). Wise people honor the benevolent king and do not speak ill of him, even in the privacy of their own homes (10.20). Wise people are generous with their "bread" and manage their finances well relative to the uncertainty of the future (11.1-2). Wise people continue to work (in this case nurture their farm and other industry) regardless of the time of day or the perceived weather conditions because humans do not have the capacity to know the future, which is the "work of God, who makes

everything" (11.3-6).

11.7-12.8: Conclusion

Qohelet concludes his quest with some stark meditations and instructions on navigating the course of human existence. Those who live a long life should enjoy all of their days, remembering that "all that comes is vacuous," by which he means that "all the experiences of life, and life itself...are all ephemeral and beyond human ability to control" (Seow, 348). Young people should also enjoy their days to the full by "follow[ing] the inclination of [their] heart(s) and the desires of [their] eyes" while remaining aware of God's righteousness (11.9). Everyone should "banish anxiety" and "put away pain" while they can (11.10). While it is commonplace that young people avoid the anxiety and pain common to being human, Qohelet holds (rightly) that they come upon all of us at some point in the course of existence.

Qohelet appears to rehearse the course of these days in 12.2-7. The imagery of the darkening of the sun (12.2), strong men who are bent (12.3), women who look through windows with dim eyes (12.3), developing a fear of heights (12.5), the anticipation of an eternal home and a band of mourners (12.5), and dust returning to dust all lend credence to the idea that Qohelet is tracing the arc of human existence. However, there are intervening images that paint a picture of a deteriorating structure ("guards of the house" (12.3), "doors on the street are shut" (12.4), the mention of dim windows (12.3)) and even some traditional apocalyptic imagery (darkening heavenly luminaries (12.2)). Cumulatively, these threads weave together to paint a clear picture of the devolution of all of creation. Whether we are discussing human existence, structures created by human hands, or the frameworks of Creation itself, they are all in a state of gradual (and in some cases rapid) decay and are clearly beyond the realm of our control. For this reason it is vital that young people remain cognizant that they are God's creatures given the gift of a brief space in time to live (12.1) and that during the course of life we all remember Qohelet's insight that everything is vacuous, which means that nothing in the realm of human experience has the capacity for eternally enduring value other than God who creates and manages everything.

12.9-14: Epilogue

With the sage uttering his final word that "all is vacuous" (12.8), the final editor of Ecclesiastes takes up the pen one final time to draw the book to a close. He (likely) tells us that Qohelet was a sage who "taught the people knowledge," "listened and deliberated," "edited many proverbs," "sought to find pleasing words," and "wrote words

of truth plainly" (12.9-10). He then pictures the words of the sage as a spiked metal prodding stick used by a shepherd to herd their flocks (12.11) and gives a traditional warning (also in Revelation 22.18) about going beyond them. The authority of the sage is established in this warning and extended with the refrain about "making many books" and the diligent effort Qohelet put into his quest and his writing (2.12).

The editor then attempts to summarize Ecclesiastes for the hearers: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone" (12.13). What is interesting about his summary is that while Qohelet counseled the fear of God in a few places, this is the first reference to God's commandments in all of Ecclesiastes. As in 7.27-28, the editor "goes beyond" the words of Qohelet to interject counsel, likely out of a contemporary concern about how the sage was being understood at the time when Ecclesiastes reached its final form. What is ironic is that while the refrain, "Fear God and keep His commandments" is an editorial addition, it is the traditional way that readers of Ecclesiastes summarize the book. So, as it turns out, the editor's assumed intent was effective.

Ecclesiastes closes with a warning that properly echoes Qohelet. While his quest resolved into the vacuousness of all things, Qohelet never operated from a position of existential despair as many other modern (and ancient) people who have undertaken similar quests for ultimate meaning and understanding. Qohelet, rather, accepts with a measure of joy the understanding that God the Creator frames all human existence. Because this is his theological foundation he can exhort people to enjoy every moment of life's brief journey in all of its fulness. If he did not have this theological foundation, human existence would be "nothingness" and he would echo classical skeptics and modern philosophers who work from this assumption to deconstruct all meaning and value. And since Qohelet operates from a theological foundation grounded in a traditional, Israelite comprehension of God, he has a moral foundation that is established in God's judgment of all humanity, which is the substance of the editor's closing warning to Ecclesiastes (12.14).