

Ecclesiastes Chapters 1:12-2:26

Brentwood Oaks Teacher Prep.

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I. 1:12-18: Royal autobiography: the pursuit of royal wisdom.

A. *Is this the true beginning to Qohelet's (the Preacher's or "gatherer's") words?*

This does not mean there are not authentic words of Solomon here, but if there are, it is unclear which of the words of Qohelet are his. It is more likely that the book is "Solomonic," meaning Solomon's wisdom is appealed to and Solomon is held up as the great exemplar of wisdom and also of futility (for all his wealth and wisdom, Solomon also failed to attain *yitrôn* (gain, advantage). Regardless, after chapter 2, Qohelet no longer maintains the *persona* of Solomon, but speaks from his own perspective and pursuit of wisdom.

B. *1:12-2:26 underscores that the effort and wisdom of the greatest wise man of all time was hebel (vapor).*

Considering the endless and futile repetition characteristic of humanity and the natural world, Qohelet "sets his heart," which means to direct his attention and concern, to "seek and explore." This is going to be done "with wisdom." It is important to remember that all the searchings which Qohelet conducts in these initial chapters are done "with wisdom," not out of hedonistic or selfish pursuit. The first thing Qohelet finds by wisdom is that humans have an "evil task" confronting them. This does not mean that God has somehow conspired to make people do evil things. The "evil business" here may mean nothing more than a "bad deal" (*rā'āh* in Hebrew has more than just moral connotations; even in English we say "that is one bad burger," not meaning it is morally corrupt).

Note also that what Qohelet explores is what is done "under the sun," in the realm of the repetitive cycles of the passing of time. From vv. 1-11 we already know that what is done under the sun is *'āmāl* (toil, trouble) and *hebel* (vapor, emptiness). Whatever God has given humans to do is going to be onerous, a "bad business" (see the curse in the garden in Genesis 3!). The term "evil business" (*'inyān rā'*) occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible, all in Ecclesiastes: 1:13, 4:8, and 5:14. In 4:8, the unhappy business is hard labor when you have no one for whom you are working or to whom you can leave your wealth. In 5:14, the bad business is an unlucky break in a business deal. Now, even though this father has children, he has no wealth to benefit them. The bad business in Ecclesiastes, therefore, may simply be 1) we are subject to nature, toil, and endless repetition under the sun; 2) hard labor done for one's sake alone is a bad deal; and 3) we are subject to risks and reversals which we have no control over.

C. *The futility of wisdom.*

1. He is king in Jerusalem, and intimately associated with wisdom, and so seeks to find if the pursuit of wisdom brings advantage.
 - a. His discovery is that *all* is vapor and *grazing on wind* (RSV: striving after wind).

- This phrase "(grazing on wind)" is generally paired with *hebel* (vapor, vanity) in the first half of the book. It is an important insight into what the book is about: if you want to know the meaning of "vanity," look at the term *hebel*. They are paired, so likely one helps us understand the other. The phrase seems to connote attempting to grasp something, to strive after something, which cannot be grasped.
 - Notice his assessment: *everything done under the sun* (bounded by time, mortal, subject to decay) is vapor, including the pursuit of wisdom.
 - V. 15 gives his proverbial assessment. This appears to be a maxim or proverb of wisdom. We might say, "Things are so screwed up, they'll never be straightened out."
- b. V. 16: Qohelet sets out to test what is done under the sun to see if there is indeed any advantage, or not. And he is qualified to do so: he is wiser and greater than anyone "before him in Jerusalem." If anyone can find where the good life is, and how to find the profitable life, it will be Qohelet/Solomon, but he finds that even the search for wisdom is the pursuit of wind (v. 17).
2. When he thought he would learn and improve, he found that he only increased sorrow.
 - a. Qohelet has discovered what students throughout the ages discover: increasing knowledge and wisdom increases vexation of the spirit. I believe it was Eusebius who said "Bible study gives you a headache and a stomach ache." The pursuit of wisdom achieves the opposite of what Qohelet intended: he strove for what profits, but he ends up actually hastening *‘āmāl* and *hebel*.
- D. *The point: the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, and even wisdom is "grazing on wind" if these are pursued for their own sake.*
- II. **2:1-11: Royal autobiography: the pursuit of pleasure.**
- A. *Royal autobiography, which began in 1:12: where does it end? Everyone agrees it ends with chapter 2, either 11 or 26. After chapter 2, most see the "autobiographical" part of Ecclesiastes as over.*
 - B. *The pursuit of pleasure (simha, joy).* After searching out wisdom, and finding it vapor in chapter one, Qohelet begins chapter two by searching pleasure in order to find advantage. He immediately tells us it is also vapor.
 1. It is *not* hedonism which he seeks, but the "good life." This is, I think, one of the main points of the book: Where may the good life be found?
 2. He tries wine (v. 3), and seeks to evaluate both wisdom and folly. But notice, it is not hedonistic pursuit: his mind "was guiding him with wisdom"). It is the pursuit of pleasure, perhaps, which is in view.
 3. He pursued building projects (vv. 4-5).
 4. He acquired servants (v. 7).
 5. He acquired much silver and gold (v. 8).

- a. Major translation difficulty here! Most translations suggests he acquired much wealth and concubines. The problem is, this is not the usual word for concubine. Ancient translations don't actually say this, but suggest it is still wealth which he is talking about: chests and chests of gold, or coffers and coffers.
 - 6. Aesthetic stuff: song (v. 8?)
 - 7. Qohelet is uniquely qualified to make judgments on where the good life may be found: he has excelled over everyone else in wisdom, wealth, and pleasure. It is important to remember that Qohelet is not suggesting that hedonism be followed as a personal philosophy--wisdom is guiding his "explorations."
 - C. *Shift from pleasure to toil (vv. 9-11).*
 - 1. V. 10: Kept no pleasure from myself/my heart found pleasure in my toil.
 - 2. He considers his works and the massive energy spent in doing them, and he says they are a "striving after wind."
 - a. No profit in the vain, useless, wearisome toil under the sun: doesn't get you anywhere.
 - b. But there *is* a kind of reward to labor (*amal*): it is the joy which is the portion or lot (*heleq*) of those who labor.
 - D. *The pursuit of the good life is often held up as shalom (peace, well-being) in the Old Testament. But here in Qohelet the best it can get you is "grazing on wind."*
- III. **2:12-17: The pursuit of wisdom and the first paradox.**
 - A. *Returns to 1:13.*
 - B. *Wisdom exceeds folly, but the same fate awaits everybody.*
 - 1. The superiority of wisdom is effectively canceled out by the same fate.
 - 2. Severe relativizing of the importance of wisdom.
 - C. *So, if wisdom doesn't really get you anywhere, why is wisdom good?*
 - 1. Wisdom is far better than folly, but the pursuit, the grasping after wisdom, is not one of the items in Qohelet which gives you an advantage or profit.
 - 2. Both are *hebel*, but the pursuit of wisdom is less *hebel* the pursuit of folly!
 - D. *Wise and fools are alike forgotten, so he hates life: sounds like the unfairness of life Job feels.*
 - E. *To Qohelet, death is the great sticking point and the great equalizer.*
 - 1. If a wise man can construct a lasting memorial, a legacy which will endure, surely *this* will be a *yitrôn*. But to Qohelet, no matter how hard we strive, already people are beginning to forget us, whether we are wise or foolish. Note the latter part of the verse, which is reminiscent of the Old Testament funeral dirge (i.e., "How are the mighty fallen...", 2 Sam. 1; also, Isa. 14). Nice touch.
- IV. **2:18-23: Human toil and despair.**
 - A. *Returns to all his labor from 2:1-11.*
 - 1. The noun *toil* occurs 11 times in this passage, very significant (toil is *amal*, "trouble" or "labor").
 - 2. Work tends to be a good word in the Old Testament; it is what God gave Adam and Eve to do in the garden. "Toil," on the other hand, is a result of the Fall. It is labor for labor's sake and it is a part of the curse.

3. Toil was already unprofitable earlier; now comes a different perspective: that of inheritance.
 - a. Neither in this life, nor in one's children can one find security and meaning in life.
 - b. Life is done too soon, and who knows if the guy who inherits it will be a goofball?
 - c. Yet, regardless, they will have *all* we have striven for.
 - d. Leaving your goods to an irresponsible party is one aspect of why everything is *hebel*. It is also the only thing which to Qohelet is a "great evil."
 4. V. 23: Great vapor of vapors: people work their entire lives and get pain and agony and then die.
- V. **2:24-26: The enjoyment of life.**
- A. *The redemption of Qohelet's pessimism: enjoy life, but know that there is a wild card: God's sovereignty.*
 - B. This is the first of several summary statements in the book. These are found here, **3:12-15, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10, and perhaps 11:9-12:8**. At last we are prepared to say something about what *does* provide gain/advantage: enjoying the things we have, as we have them, as gifts from God, our food and drink and our labor. There is nothing better than this "under the sun." Striving for what we do not have does not get us there; call it "sanctified *carpe diem*."
 - C. *True enjoyment from God.*
 1. eat, drink, and work--nothing better than this.
 2. But, be aware that the one God pleases he gives this stuff, and to whom he is not pleased, they are withheld.
 - a. Note and caveat: God is sovereign and may not be held by our standards of fairness.
 3. His recommendation: enjoy life, if you can.
 - D. *But, in the final analysis, even this enjoyment, if it is pursued for its own sake, is a striving after wind.*
 1. The point is, God is sovereign and we cannot get advantage by fretting, gathering, or striving.