

Introduction

In the last session I introduced the book by saying that it was a strange and difficult book to understand and that only those who apply themselves energetically to the task will reap the rewards.

Read and interpreted with care this book has a great deal to say about some of the false thinking and bankrupt values of our time. It is written in the wisdom genre of literature which means that it demands careful study and disciplined thinking.

Whether Solomon was the author or not he is, without doubt, the inspiration and life behind the text. The book is a reflection on his life.

Dwight Pryor describes Solomon as simultaneously the paragon of wisdom and the paradigm of vanity and meaninglessness.¹

The reason we study this book is חֵכְמָה *chokmâh* wisdom. Wisdom, and the book of Qoheleth are about perspective - gaining a godly perspective on life so that we can enjoy what God has given without losing meaning by focusing on the gift rather than the Giver.

Wisdom is the supreme skill in the Bible and we saw in the last study how important it was to seek after wisdom as an essential part of our lives.

Proverbs 3:13-18

- 13 *Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding,*
14 *for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.*
15 *She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.*
16 *Long life is in her **right** hand; in her **left** hand are riches and honor.*
17 *Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.*

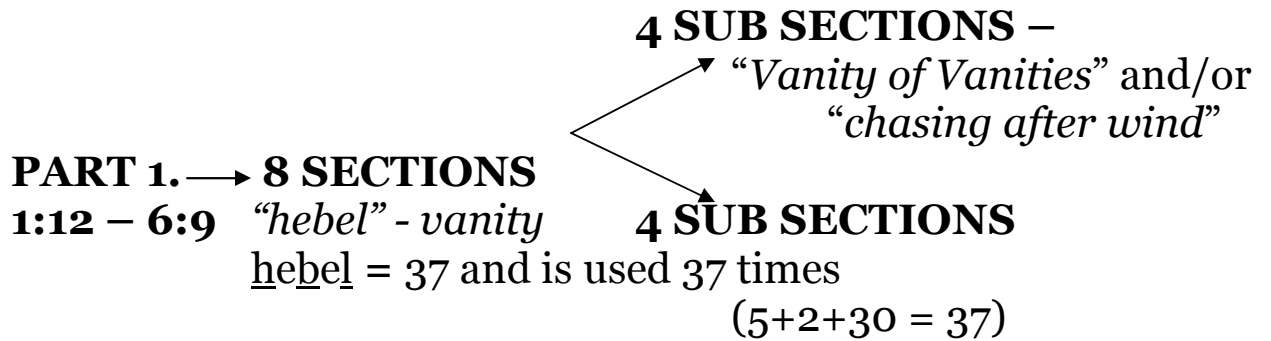
18 *She is a tree of life* to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

Etz-chayim hi lama-chazikim bah, vetom-kheyha me 'ushar.

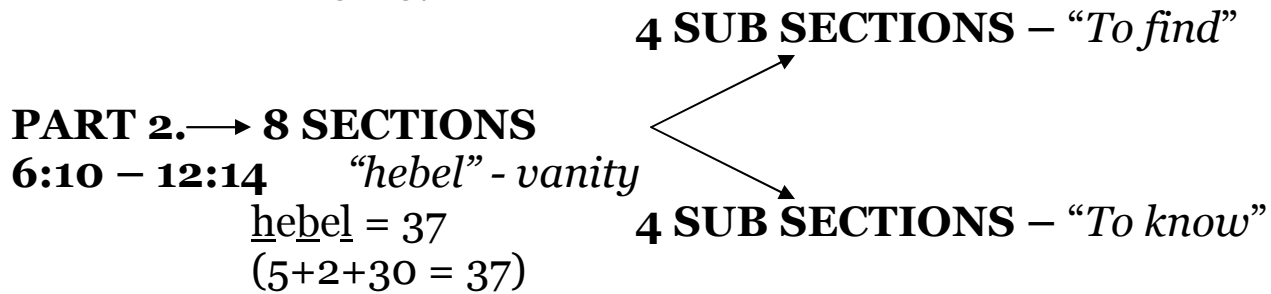
עֵץ-חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחַזְקִים בָּהּ וְתַמְכִּיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר:

The "Tree of Life," *etz chayim*, is mentioned ten times in the Scriptures.

The Structure of Qoheleth²



Part 1.
111 verses (3 x 37 = 111)



Part 2.
111 verses (3 x 37 = 111)

* The refrains in the introduction (1:2) and at the conclusion (12:8) each contain three *hebels* indicating the structure to come.

4. Its Language

The final preparation for studying this book is a survey⁶ of the more common terms used by Qoheleth.

1. VANITY – *hebel* הֶבֶל Vapour or breath; Emptiness or futility;
Meaningless or worthless.

James 4:14 *Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.
You are just a vapour that appears for a little while and then
vanishes away.*

2. PROFIT יִתְרוֹן Yitron - Advantage or gain; wage or reward;

3. UNDER THE SUN (vs. 2) under תַּתָּהּ sun שֶׁמֶשׁ

Not everything – but everything in the world, from a human point
of view.

There is not only the human point of view - there is a the Divine
point of view.

To all the striving of life under the sun Qohelet concludes;

הֶבֶל הֶבְלִים הַכֹּל הֶבֶל Hevel Hevalim hakhol Hevel.

Qoheleth 1:12-26

The writer has asked the question (1:3) Ma yitron – what's the profit?

Life itself under the sun is repetitious and wearisome. He illustrates
his point by referring to **the cyclic nature of life**.

- The passing of generations
- The rising and setting of the sun
- The whirling cycles of the wind
- The water cycle, from rain to sea back to rain **Qoheleth 1:4-7**

Even worldly wisdom is worthless and in the process we become worthless ourselves.

Who better to comment on these things than a king who has had everything.

1:12 To seek the root of the matter

To investigate the subject on all sides.

Livneh ha adam – the sons of Adam Gen 3:17-19 sweat of your brow.

Desire and lust after the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 3:17 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life.

3:18 "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field;

3:19 By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."

1:14 What is twisted cannot be changed – in the natural there is no way of changing these things

1:16-18

Philosophers have delved into these issues for centuries. The Existentialist conclusion that suicide was the only meaningful conclusion to life is one example of the consensus of meaninglessness. The vision of the "postmodern man," a conformist who has become dehumanized and alienated by the nature of modern industrial and consumer society. Political and social conditions have rendered him indifferent and even baffled, causing him to direct his energy towards hedonistic narcissism or simply a resentment that might explode in violent behaviour.

Christians don't like to hear this message. You need to be depressed about the state of the world – and the church in some places. The world offers only counterfeits of the real thing.

Qoheleth 2

2:1 Pleasure. The extent to which Solomon experimented is recorded (1 Kings 4:20-23).

2:2 Laughter - ever watched the same comedy twice?

2:3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely. This is an ancient example of mind altering through substance abuse. The Hebrew word used which is translated stimulate is מָשַׁח *mashak* to draw, deferred, delayed, prolong, stimulate

2:4-6 Building projects. Some people try to immortalise themselves by building and associating their names with buildings. Solomon built buildings which are still spoken about today.

2:7-8. The combination of Money, Sex and Power are described here. This combination has corrupted people in every walk of life including the church. Centuries ago this combination was recognised as dangerous to even the most stable characters. Solomon appears to have been obsessed by sex. Each of these, money, sex and power has the capacity to overwhelm us and take control of our lives.

2:9. Competitiveness which is often a characteristic of “successful people”.

2:10-11. Hedonism – a slave to his eyes. (Summary of what went before.)

Gen 3:6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a **delight to the eyes**, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

Deut 16:19 "You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe **blinds the eyes of the wise** and perverts the words of the righteous.

Matt 18:9 "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.

2:11-16 Wisdom is better foolishness. Even if it is just human wisdom it is better than human foolishness. All end up sharing the grave as equals. But the major issue here is remembrance.

2:16-23 I don't get it and then others will get what I earn. The word here (vs 20) is despair **יָאֵשׁ** *yaash* to *despair*, hopeless.

A Rabbinic Midrash (Commentary) on Qohelet 2:18 "...I must leave them to the one who comes after me..." is as follows.

There was a rabbi who said "This is the way of the world." He explained it with a parable. "It's like a fox who found a vineyard which was fenced in on all sides. There was one hole through which he wanted to enter but he was unable to do so. What did the fox do? He fasted for three days after which he became lean and frail and so he was able to get through the hole in the fence. Then he ate of the grapes and became fat again so that when he wished to go out he couldn't pass through the hole. So he again fasted for three days after which he

became lean and frail, as had been his former condition. And so he was able to get through the hole in the fence again. When he was outside the fence he turned his gaze again at the vineyard and said, O Vineyard, O Vineyard, how good are you and the fruits inside, all that is inside is beautiful and commendable but what enjoyment has one from you? As one enters you so he comes out. Such is the world.

Rabbi Meir added to this, “When a person enters the world his hands are clenched as though to say the whole world is mine - I shall inherit it but when he takes leave of it [the world] his hands are spread open as though to say I have inherited nothing from the world. (Rabbi Meir.)

24-26 Conclusion.

This first sub-conclusion in Qoheleth is very important. Usually the opening phrase is translated “A man can do nothing better than...”(NIV). Dwight Pryor questions this translation and his reservations are supported by Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible³. There are two reasons for this objection.

First the conclusion is weak and does not reflect much wisdom.

Second it does not reflect a literal translation of the Hebrew.

ein tov ba adam אֵין-טוֹב בְּאָדָם There is nothing good in man – as we shall see this makes more sense in the light of the rest of the conclusion.

The translation “A man can do nothing better than...” is based on two similar statements in Qoheleth 3:12 and 8:15. These verses are substantially different in that the Hebrew is *ein tov ki* אין טוב כי-כי 3:12 There is nothing good for them..”

אין im *nothing*

כי ki *for*,

אין ayin, *nothing*

Even our capacity to enjoy life is a gift from God.

The Jewish view is not an ascetic withdrawn negative view

The Jewish view of life is full and abundant if you operate above the sun and not under the sun.

1. The possession of the goods of life is a gift from God

Matt 7 :9 Ask seek Knock

9 *"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?*

10 *Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?*

11 *If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

12 *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*

Kal ver omer – simple to complex

* Enjoyed

* Appreciated

* Used productively as stewards

2. He will give us the ability to enjoy them without giving in to the meaninglessness of life under the sun.

3. To whom does God these things?

To the man who pleases him God gives wisdom

Qoheleth 7:26 Avoiding sin

12:13 Fear of God is the key to pleasing God.

Fear of the Lord.

Qoheleth 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13

What is it?

It is not an attitude of terror. (12:13) fear *before* Him. An attitude of appreciation, perspective of the awesomeness of God total commitment of yourself because you know to whom your life and the things of your life belong.

Prov 8:13 The fear of the Lord is to hate evil.

God is who gives meaning – not things, or labour, or achievement.

1 Cor 1:26 -31

James 1:5 If anyone lacks wisdom he should ask God

2 Cor 4:6-7

Happiness or joy. Happiness can be acquired by pursuing it. It is a by-product of a life well lived.

Luke 12:15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

Luke 12:22 And He said to His disciples, "For this reason I say to you, do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on.

Luke 12:23 "For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

14:18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Luke 9:24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

Luke 9:25 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?

¹ Pryor, Dwight A. 2005 Abounding Emptiness, Abundant Living : The Challenge of Qoheleth. Sermon series available from www.jcstudies.com

² Ceresko, Anthony R. 1999 Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation. Orbis : New York.

³ Young's Literal Translation of the Bible. 1998, Parsons Technology, Inc.