

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

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1 of 7

July 2007

Introduction

So far we have learnt some important lessons from Qohelet. Let me summarise them for you.

1. **Wisdom** is the supreme skill in the Bible and should be sought after by everyone who wants to please God.

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:

2. Life “*under the sun*” is of itself meaningless unless we have a perspective that is “beyond the sun.”
3. The conclusion to the first section of Qohelet said, literally translated, “*ein tov ba adam אין-טוב באדם* There is nothing good in man.” The appreciation of the good things of life is a gift of God.

The Threat of Futility and the Pursuit of Happiness

A Midrash or commentary on the second verse of Qohelet 1 says that the seven *hebels* (meaningless NIV) are indicator of the seven stages of a man’s life. Now if you are really awake you will have noticed that **there are only five hebels.**

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

John Atkinson

2 of 7

July 2007

הַבָּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קִהְלֵת, הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל.
5 4 3 2 1

The Rabbis point out that two of them are in the plural form which must indicate at least two, hence there are seven in total. This midrash of life anticipates Shakespeare's seven stages of life from “As you like it”

1. The first commences in the first year of human existence, when the **infant** lies like a king on a soft couch, with numerous attendants about him, all ready to serve him, and eager to testify their love and attachment by kisses and embraces.
2. The second commences about the age of two or three years, when **the darling child** is permitted to crawl on the ground, and, like an unclean animal, delights in dirt and filth.
3. Then at the age of ten, **the thoughtless boy**, without reflecting on the past or caring for the future, jumps and skips about like a young kid on the green, contented to enjoy the present moment.
4. The fourth stage begins about the age of twenty, when **the young man**, full of vanity and pride, begins to set off his person by dress; and, like a young unbroken horse, prances and gallops about in search of a wife.

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

John Atkinson

3 of 7

July 2007

5. Then comes **the matrimonial state**, when the poor *man*, like a patient ass, is obliged, however reluctantly, to toil and labour for a living.
6. In the sixth stage we behold him now in **the parental state**, when surrounded by helpless children craving his support and looking to him for bread. He is as bold, as vigilant, and as fawning, too, as the faithful dog; guarding his little flock, and snatching at everything that comes in his way, in order to provide for his offspring.
7. At last comes the final stage, when **the frail old man**, like the unwieldy though most sagacious elephant, becomes grave, sedate, and distrustful. He then begins to hang down his head towards the ground, as if surveying the place where all his vast schemes must terminate, and where ambition and vanity are finally humbled to the dust.

This pre-occupation with the cyclic nature of life is repeated over and over in Qoheleth. We will see next week how Qoheleth gives an ingenious description of the passage to the grave.

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

John Atkinson

4 of 7

July 2007

The threat of Futility

Our lives are what we make of them. There are many opportunities for creating meaningful relationships and for doing meaningful acts that improve the lives of those around us and add significance to our own existence. Qohelet demonstrates the fundamental prerequisite for futility. It is such a short word that we all find it far too easy to use. It's the word "I". If you count the number of times "I" and "My" are used in Qoheleth you will be surprised. There are 222 verses in the book - so how many times do you think "I" and "My" are used? "I" is used 88 times and "My" is used 25 times giving a total of 113. Here is the secret of the way to futility – self centeredness and self absorption. When I become the centre of my universe, when my will becomes more important than any others, and when my life is lived for my own gratification the end result is futility.

The lesson that Qoheleth teaches us that thinking about himself made king Solomon very rich and powerful. He had everything that life under the sun could offer – but it all seemed futile because it did not address the deepest need of his soul. **If you want to self actualise – don't focus on your - self.**

This is why Jesus taught the principle:

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

John Atkinson

5 of 7

July 2007

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?

A rabbi was once asked why the Bar Mitzvah, at which a young person takes on the responsibility of obeying the 613 commands of the Torah, takes place at the onset of adolescence. Surely the onset of adolescence is complicated enough without adding the burden of **613** commandments? To which the rabbi replied. At 12 or 13 the person is able for the first time to conceptualise futility and the possibility of their own life being futile. For this reason we give them the greatest antidote to futility – the Torah.

There is great wisdom in this statement. The commandments of God force us to look beyond ourselves and our own gratification. In this way we are guided into meaningful lives that make an impact on our community and indirectly ourselves.

The Pursuit of Happiness

The pursuit of happiness is very closely related to the threat of futility. Many of the same truths apply.

Qohelet describes a man's life as a shadow in **Qoheleth 6:12**

*“For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? **He will spend them like a shadow.** For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?”*

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

John Atkinson

6 of 7

July 2007

Solomon and Job use the same metaphor.

- 1 Chron 29:14** 14 "But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You.
- 15 "For we are sojourners before You, and tenants, as all our fathers were; our days on the earth are **like a shadow**, and there is no hope.
- 16 "O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided to build You a house for Your holy name, it is from Your hand, and all is Yours.

Job 14:1

- 1 "Man, who is born of woman, Is short-lived and full of turmoil.
- 2 "Like a flower he comes forth and withers.
He also flees **like a shadow** and does not remain.

The Talmud picks up this metaphor as well.

“Would that life were like the shadow cast on a wall by a tree, but it is like the shadow of a bird in flight.”

Linked to this view of the transitory nature of life is the reflection on the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is not achieved by pursuing it – despite what the American constitution says.

Happiness is a by-product of a life well lived.

This is the great failure of the prosperity gospel preachers who preach that God is powerless apart from your power-filled thoughts and words, that you have to think big. To quote Joel Osteen, “Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough”

No one can legitimately claim that God never blesses Christians with financial and material abundance. Even Paul wrote about Christians who were “rich in this present world” (**1 Tim. 6:17**). But these preachers do not merely acknowledge the fact that God blesses some

Qoheleth 3 – The Threat of Futility and The Pursuit of Happiness

John Atkinson

7 of 7

July 2007

with wealth. Their message is that God wants to bless everyone with financial and material abundance. The inference is, of course, that if you are not “blessed” with financial abundance you must be doing something wrong.

However, if you desire a deeper and more biblical understanding of God and His ways, if you desire to see Jesus Christ exalted in your life as you follow His pattern of humility and self-denial, if you believe a Christian’s greatest hunger should be for righteousness (**Matt. 5:6**) and not for money, health, or easy living, then you understand with Qoheleth the bankruptcy of their message.

The Apostle Paul, that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6)

Jonathan Sacks has this to say about happiness. “There is an art of happiness. It has something to do with striving, with ideals, with moral principle; and it has to do with the moments when we relax that striving and take pleasure in what we are and what we have.”