

The Wisdom of KOHELTH

Studies in the Book of
Ecclesiastes

By Geoffrey Bingham

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Ecclesiastes

A FOREWORD TO THE BOOK

For many years I have wanted to write something from or about the book of Ecclesiastes. I know that readers of the Scriptures get most when they read a book for themselves, particularly if they read and re-read the text, discovering what they can, especially if they ultimately seek help from wise scholars and students of the sacred text. In every generation we need teachers who will themselves first go to the text and allow it to speak to them before they even think of speaking to others. Once grounded in the truth of the text they can then be most helpful to others, who do not, perhaps, have the same gifts of penetration and understanding.

Simply to write on any subject for the sake of writing is a dull form of professionalism. I can honestly say this is not what has prompted me to write in relation to the book of Ecclesiastes. From a boy I was intrigued by the book. I was greatly disappointed to read in a dispensational Bible—which a dear godly aunt had given to me—that the writer was really ‘a natural man’. The editor of this Bible commented, ‘Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the reasonings and conclusions are, after all, man’s.’

After reading that comment I steered clear of the book for years, wondering—probably because of the dispensational editor’s brilliant rationalization—how it came to be included in the canon of Scripture. Ecclesiastes may seem to be a skilful description of how the natural man approaches living in this world, but I have since discovered that the writer of the book was far from being a natural man. He despised the wisdom of the natural man, seeing it as ‘no-wisdom’. In fact it seems to me that the whole book is to counter the so-called wisdom of the natural man.

Having expounded much of the book to audiences from time to time, I was opening its meaning to an interested audience in the northern Australian city of Darwin. The group was composed of a bunch of hippies and the era was the early seventies. These vagrants lived in and on one Darwin’s beaches, and a team working with me called them out of their hidey-holes to come and hear this modern-day preacher. Much to my delight and joy they swarmed up to me after the meeting, hugging me and saying they never knew it was like that! The book seemed to speak of their life.

I decided then it was a book for hippies—as well as it may be. However I came later to see that the sermon—i.e. the whole book—was originally preached to a very orthodox congregation. Their orthodoxy need not be held against them, but for them it was dead, although they knew it not. They were more like yuppies than hippies! They were materialists, unconsciously disguised as godly worshippers.

There is nothing more difficult than preaching to those who think they are the converted! How many times I have realized that. The traditional nodding at what you are saying—as a preacher—can be close to infuriating. They are applying what you are saying to others—of course! Never mind, some will actually hear you, and be stunned.

Indeed they will be shocked beyond measure. Were some in Jerusalem shocked by Koheleth? Did they see—to their horror—that they were materialists of the first order, disguised as religious persons?

Is there anything worse than a materialist? I would think so. I would think that the person who asks no questions of life, who does not seek to see purpose, meaning and goal in living must be close to being a zombie. The person who simply accepts things as they are and gladly lives in them because he (or she) believes God is sovereign and controls all things, is another kind of person, and is no zombie. The zombie must be one who mechanically goes through the motions of life, yet without living that life. I doubt whether there are ‘pure’ zombies, but materialists come close to being consumerists, i.e. they are ‘things’-oriented, and merely existing in a world of five senses and three dimensions. Some would say they are close to being conditioned in their reflexes, rather than thinking through—in depth—the vital issues of life.

Some of us have had the agonizing experiences of being caught in a group of empty talkers, people who earnestly discuss nothing, who see great significance in trivia and delight in pointless speculation. If one could turn off the sound—as one can do with television by a remote control—then the emptiness of the speakers would be underlined. I honestly think that Koheleth faced similar people. They saw vanity in nothing, i.e. nothing was vain! This, itself, is painful to record, but it is more painful to witness. I have already said that to live life simply to the full without questions and debate can be a very beautiful way of life, yet it is not empty.

The Preacher spoke to persons who, anyway, were in danger of becoming empty if they were not already so. He wished to waken them to the realities of life—to what were later called ‘the great eternities’. As we go through the book you can judge whether my claim is justified. Because the book has spoken so powerfully to me—and continues to do so—I greatly desire that it should speak to others. That alone can clear me of the charge of professionalism—writing a book for the sake of writing—and that alone can make the venture useful and fruitful. So be it!

THE MATTER OF METHOD

Good commentators of the Bible will have deep reverence for the text, refusing to read their own ideas into it, or out of it. I am not following the way in which commentators generally work, for I believe the book will not lose by the kind of running commentary which shows the relevance of the text for us, today. For this reason I will often refer to elements to which the Writer does not refer. To give an example; in 1:3 the Preacher asks, ‘What does man gain by all his toil at which he toils under the sun?’ The answer is intended to be, ‘Nothing, since all is vanity.’ I would want to answer the question by saying, ‘Much as the person has purpose in work, is a steward of the Creator, and is thankful for toil—seeing its purpose and meaning.’ Now that is the kind of answer Koheleth did not expect. The empty man just lives emptily and vaporously so that all his toil amounts to a nothing—it is just something he does, almost mindlessly. That is its emptiness.

Even so I believe our little commentary on the text will not be overloaded by taking up some of the things the Preacher is saying, for obviously he is trying to drive his readers to cease their mindlessness and emerge into reality. We can almost assume that some of things we will say are what Koheleth himself believed—otherwise why would he call all our actions ‘a vapour’? Rightly understood they are far from being a vapour, but the Preacher is trying to shake his audience out of its orthodox thinking—

as they supposed it to be. For Koheleth, their thinking was almost a mindless stupor. The observations I make will be in the form of specified comments so that they do not interrupt the flow of the Preacher and his words. The reader can pass over them, at wish.

Geoffrey Bingham, February 1990

Note: This present printing has been made in order to put study material into the hands of those who are attending studies in 'Ecclesiastes' I am at present giving at the New Creation Teaching Centre at Coromandel East in Adelaide, South Australia. It is intended to publish this Commentary in a better bound edition and a different format at a later date.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

THE BOOK ITSELF

At first sight the book purports to be written by Solomon, king of Israel, and appears to be his accumulated wisdom which he desires to pass on to his readers. For many centuries this was the view of most scholars, and is still the view of many of them. Other scholars-and many of them conservative-believe, because of linguistic and other reasons, that the book is of comparatively late origin B.C. Some see linguistic similarities with Malachi and Ecclesiastes, so that either it must have been written about this date, or was revised by someone of the Malachi era. Whilst the book was generally accepted as canonical by the Jews, later Jewish pietists such as those of the narrow exclusive school of Shammai objected to it because it maintained that 'the creatures of God are vain'. We will see that the reading of this book could lead many to think of it as sceptical and pessimistic, whereas, in fact, it is far from being that. It is not to be wondered at that Christians too have questioned its inclusion in the canon of Scripture. That it has nevertheless been included in both Jewish and Christian canons testifies to the quality of the book.

THE AUTHOR OF ECCLESIASTES

The word 'Ecclesiastes' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title 'Koheleth' or 'Qohelet', and has been translated (i.e. transliterated) into English from the Greek of the LXX (the Greek Old Testament). The word Koheleth means 'Preacher'. It has been debated whether the word means 'one who gathers', or 'one who is gathered', although the former seems the best meaning. The word derives from the Hebrew qahal which in Greek is ekklesia and which means 'congregation', and is technically the 'called out' or 'called together' people. The Preacher was one who spoke to the qahal and so was called Qohelet or Koheleth. We will use the latter English spelling-Koheleth-from this point onwards.

Who, then, was the Preacher? It is about the person of the Preacher that the debate ensues. A preacher of this kind, i.e. a koheleth was one who lectured or taught an assembly of people. The preacher of this kind was not a priest as such, and so was not concerned with the opening up the truth as a priest might teach it, i.e. from the given Scriptures that obtained at the time. Such a koheleth would speak in the outer court, as being one of the people, and addressing them with ideas and exhortation that would be helpful to them. He was a non-priestly person speaking to his fellow-creatures.

Those who hold that this Koheleth was Solomon believe this was the king in his old age. We know from history that Solomon was a man deeply involved in idolatry, especially through his foreign wives. It is thought that Solomon repented in his later

years, and in fact this sermon-or series of sermons-springs from that repentance, and is, in fact the confession of his sin, and an exhortation to others not to follow his way. It is doubtful that any repentance can be found within the text. Certainly there is no indication of it in the books of the Kings or Chronicles.

Others assume that the Preacher is not Solomon but one who stands in Solomon's place much as Shakespeare has dramatized the life and sayings of kings such as Richard II, Henry V and Macbeth. It is not that the dramatist is falsifying history but is using the situation of a famed person to give forth the richness of that one. Indeed it is difficult for us to see the great personages that Shakespeare has dramatized as other than he has portrayed them, and we are the richer for his creative portrayal of them.

Whatever may be the views of various scholars the fact is that a person who is the Preacher-whoever he may be-presents a most powerful sermon to us. Doubtless the Preacher is strongly manifested to us by the sermon, as also the sermon is by the Preacher, and it is not difficult to trace the life of the Preacher from the many autobiographical details he has given. Indeed no other books-not even the Psalms-presents such autobiographical detail.

THE MESSAGE OF THE PREACHER

As we have indicated, the message of this sermon springs from the experience of the Preacher. It is interesting to note the many criticisms of the sermon. Some criticisms arise because the material is read superficially, but others because the exhortation itself provokes a reaction which can only be said to indicate the mind of the reader. Thus the Preacher has been accused of a secular mind, of being cynical, disillusioned with life and pessimistic-a nihilist in fact. He is supposed-by some-to be satiated with life, but seeking as an Epicurean to squeeze the last drops of pleasure from it. The Preacher is supposed to be a sceptic, preaching despair, because constantly he says, 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!'. He seems to say there is nothing good under the sun, and pleasure will only, ultimately, bring pain and dissolution of the human body, with no goal for the next life. Indeed for him-it would seem-there is no next life! And so on. None of these interpretations is correct.

The sermon is nothing if not realism. The term 'under the sun' speaks of the universal experience of man. It is not confined to the spiritual idealism of a regular preacher. The speaker is facing life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. He obviously has no illusions as to what life can bring or destroy, yet he is not disillusioned with it. In fact we gather that his audience itself might be a gathering of sceptical, disillusioned and cynical persons who, being religious, have not yet understood life. Indeed their religiosity is itself a form of secularism. Note the fact that they purport to be religious for they are in the Temple court and are worshipping adherents and are listening to a well-known Preacher. Is he exhorting them to religious practices? Yes, and no, for it is they who are secular, they who see life sourly-with all their experience of material success. He is exhorting them to see the false views they hold as a result of their experience of life to renounce such views and practices, and to break through to a richer understanding of all things.

It is best to see the sermon as a realistic probing of life, as a discerning of what is the true and false way of approaching God, the creation and man. If the whole of man is to 'fear God and keep His commandments', then there can be little in the Preacher's

thinking that is deficient. If we are troubled by his seeming pessimism when it is only realism, and if he refuses idealism because it is an evasion of the facts of life and a hindrance to the true ways of living, then we will have missed the value of the wisdom of Koheleth. For the rest, we shall seek to understand this wisdom as we study closely the Sermon itself.

Koheleth's Teaching

What is Koheleth teaching in his sermons and book? After a thorough reading of the book the elements of his instruction emerge and can be formalized. They are as follows:

- (i) *The created world cannot be an end in itself*, and must not be seen as such. Therefore any examination of it along these lines cannot succeed. Human knowledge has God-given limits to its exercise (Eccl. 8:7; 10:14); man is mortal (3:19–22 12:7; cf. Gen. 1:27; 2:21–25) and is limited, e.g. life is tiring in its toil (1:3; 2:22). Man can never be sure what might happen—it evades his categorizing predictive wisdom, as in 10:5–15.
- (ii) *Creation is not God, so we cannot know God by looking at the creation*, even though the action of God in creation and providence may be seen within the creation (cf. Ps. 19 where creation declares God, and Rom. 1:19–20 where God is made known to the man who already knows God—1:23). Our proneness is to absolutize the creation, or things within it, and then to work upon, and by what we think to be absolute. When we try to do that then the thing becomes futility.

Examples of absolutizing are:

- (a) nature (1:5–7),
- (b) history (1:8–11),
- (c) knowledge (1:12–18),
- (d) pleasure (2:1–3),
- (e) wealth (2:4–11), and
- (f) work (2:18).

All of these lead to, and prove to be, vanity.

- (iii) *If we view creation 'on the horizontal', then we do not understand it*. By 'on the horizontal' we mean 'under the sun' and 'under heaven'. The pattern of man's thinking is to obtain all the knowledge he can, all principles by which things appear to work, and so with this so-called knowledge man accumulates a certain wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to live and move in this world to the best advantage, but it is still wisdom 'on the horizontal'. This can be seen in Koheleth's deliberate experiences, i.e. of his world (1:12–2:18)—experiences that to be done with his mind. He ends up by hating everything.
- (iv) *Man is not meant to see everything as only 'under heaven', i.e. 'under the sun', for God has 'put eternity into his heart' (3:11)*, therefore his orientation is not wholly horizontal, though it always must relate to it. His orientation must also be vertical, i.e. arrive at some revelation of the transcendental God, who—as other Scriptures tell us—is also immanent.

On this score nature, history, knowledge, pleasure, wealth and work have their place. In the horizontal-vertical orientation man can enjoy this life if he is essentially creaturely, i.e. fears and pleases God (8:12; 12:13; 2:26). He can enjoy what is given to him in this world (2:24; 3:12; 5:18–20; 9:7–10). This is because God is in the action and man has not determined it.

Man cannot understand all happenings when he looks at things on the horizontal, but (a) all that God does endures for ever (3:14), (b) this fact causes man to fear God (3:14), (c) no man can alter what God does (3:14), and (d) everything happens under God's determination 'in its own time' (3:1–9). When man looks horizontally at what God does it baffles him, he feels caught up in a fatalistic set of actions, feels helpless, and hates 'everything under the sun'. This is because he (a) cannot order it, and (b) cannot cause it to be as he thinks it should happen in accordance with his (horizontal) wisdom. This to him is unscientific, or the premisses he has used are false.

- (v) From the vantage point that is 'under the sun' man is no better than the animals (3:19–22). Koheleth would seem to be pessimistic. The fate of beasts and man is the same—death, the loss of vital breath, crumbling back to dust. This is brought out in Psalm 49:10–14, but in that Psalm—verse 15—the writer says that God will ransom him from the grave. In Ecclesiastes 3:17; 11:9; 12:14; cf. 8:12–13, God will judge men, and such judgement has little sense apart from life beyond death. Likewise man is not a brute though his end seems to be the same. Again, for Koheleth to speak of 'vanity' is to posit a situation which is not vain, e.g. 3:1–11.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude, then, that Koheleth has great faith in God, and in God as Creator (cf. 12:1ff.). He wants to show that man's search for rationality and purpose by an 'under the sun' wisdom, will always lead him to futility. If, however, he sees God as Creator, and King over all things, then he will have a humility, a fear and a dependence which will give him another view of life altogether. He will see life as under God's hands, and in spite of the many strange things which happen within human existence he will not be appalled, disillusioned but will enjoy what God has given him, and the close of his life will not be desultory but rich. Koheleth is warning his listeners against absolutizing anything in this world, this creation, for creation must always be contingent upon the Creator. God has true wisdom. Man cannot devise a key to his situation. He must let God open His 'mystery of godliness' to us, and if the Preacher in any way be God's locksmith, then they ought to listen to what he has to say.

We could do no better than close with a reading of Proverbs 30:2–4:

Surely I am too stupid to be a man.
I have not the understanding of a man.
I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind in his fists?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is his son's name?
Surely you know!

Koheleth and The Congregation

Note: This study may seem to be a strange choice for today's pastoral ministry, but was written originally for a Pastors' Study Group and given to the members of that Group. It was received warmly as being quite relevant for us today, as also to the needs of congregations. I felt it would be good to share with readers of this little Commentary.

INTRODUCTION TO KOHELETH AND HIS CONGREGATION

In the Book of Ecclesiastes the main character is the one was known as 'The Preacher' (English), 'Koheleth' (Hebrew), and 'Ecclesiastes' (Greek). One thing he had in common with us was that he preached to a congregation. Technically he was not a pastor as some of us are pastors, for his role was more that of a lecturer talking to people who had come to hear him because he was most interesting, and could be quiet informative, and thus helpful. His modern equivalent today would be a layman invited to speak who had had rich experience of life, and who had gathered wisdom in the process, and who-being a person of integrity and intelligence-would be gladly listened to. The difference in Koheleth's case was that he was not invited by the hierarchy at the Temple. People wanted to listen to him because he had experienced life so much, was well-known, and respected. Hearers thought they would learn something from him. Possibly he taught in the Temple court much as, later, Jesus and others did similarly.

Since Koheleth was not a pastor, as such, the teaching of the law, and the leading of the worship, and the personal instruction in spiritual life would be given by the priest or priests. We have evidence that this was the case. Even so the Temple congregation did not approximate to our modern cathedral congregation, as worshippers flowed backwards and forward from all parts of the country to be present at the various festivals and to attend to such matters as circumcision of a newly born boy, of certain sacrifices relating to guilt and thanksgiving, and to worship the Lord. All Israel really constituted the one congregation (*qahal*), and this was under one king who was supposed to be the shepherd (pastor) of his people, whilst the high priest would represent that congregation to God. The later development of the synagogue was a ready model for the new Christian church, and since it had elders and not priests, there was scope for (so-called) laymen to contribute their gifts in worship, and in commentary upon the lections. It is clear from the New Testament that there were local congregations and that their synagogues had a social function to play.

Koheleth's congregation then was partly 'by the way', although it was Preacher's steady and studied intention to get his truth across to people. This man was truly a man of the world, as well as a man of faith, and hard-headed professionals and tradesmen would be eager enough to hear him. In this sense he was fairly close to the lecturers of our day who speak on business principles, professional acumen, and who give expensive lectures on organization, promotion of oneself, salesmanship, facing the

contemporary tensions and stresses that come upon one, and learning to mix vocation with psychology and religion to get the best results. The difference between the Preacher and his modern equivalent was that Koheleth had had an objective and intelligent enquiry into life and faith, and had arrived at a distinctive and dynamic view of God, man, God's law, morality, life and death. His was not a psycho-religious schema or methodology for making the most of life.

When it comes to the constitution of his congregation I believe he spoke to people who appreciated wisdom, although their motives may have been quite worldly. I have seen hippies entranced by Koheleth's reasonings, for hippies are generally of a high intellectual strata of life. Even so, I think Koheleth spoke to people who were both religious and worldly-wise. Doubtless their religion was part of their culture, and they may well have been regular worshippers, but were seeing everything from a utilitarian point of view. If they had religious devotion, then it would presumably have been part of a way of life which they were tempted to regard as they did other parts of life, life being the sum of those parts. It seems to me that it would have been very hard to break through their fairly case-hardened ideas of life, to bring them to the more dynamic view that Koheleth had discovered. In any case what he had to say is essential for all persons in all ages to know, but especially for those whose religion blinds them to reality.

KOHELETH-THE MAN QUALIFIED TO TEACH

Koheleth has been the centre of much enquiry and study. He has always intrigued the man in the street as much as the scholars who have tried to analyse his sermons. The book opens with the identification of the writer-preacher, 'The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.' He is evidently King Solomon. In 1:12 he claims, 'I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.' In 2:9 he said he had become great and surpassed all who were before him in Jerusalem. The comment on him in 12:9-10 is,

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find pleasing words, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

Scholars both of Jewish and Christian persuasion do not think Koheleth was King Solomon. This conviction is based on a number of factors which we cannot enter into here. Linguistic evidence points to a much later date than the time of Solomon's monarchy. Solomon himself, although reputedly a wise man, had come to the end of his days in the midst of idolatry, mainly through his many foreign wives and their worship systems, as also his own politics whereby he maintained international power and esteem. There is no evidence that Solomon repented of his involvement in idolatry.

It seems then that Koheleth was a man of the world himself, and was recognized as such. He was a man who had made his way to a dynamic faith in God, as the internal evidence of the book would indicate. He had studied Solomon thoroughly, and found him to be a good model for his thesis or philosophy of the successful man who also knew God. In one sense Koheleth acted his life out as though it were Solomon's for purposes of preaching. We could almost say that Koheleth worked empathically with his model. As in plays of Shakespeare that bard wrote of real men and women but built them up to his personal image of them, so did Koheleth with Solomon. As with the characters of Shakespeare an actor may use the image the playwright has created—

i.e. often beyond the person himself-so, too, the actor can enter into the character he is portraying and make him live, so much so that he almost becomes the alter ego of that one. It seems that Koheleth had utilized the life, experience, and times of Solomon to be the metier of his own understanding and philosophy of life.

Some Attitudes to Koheleth

Being brought up to believe that the Preacher was ‘the natural man’, i.e. one who did not understand the things of the Spirit, I was inclined to write off the book as my mentors did. It was-they said-given to us as an example of the worldly man’s view of life-cynical, sterile and unworthy of true life as it is lived in God. One commentator has called him ‘the gentle cynic’. It was included in the canon only in order to show how not to see life, for the new covenant was to hold better things. No wonder, then, that a battle was fought regarding its quality and its inclusion-or otherwise-into the canon of the Bible. Others see Koheleth as a mixture of worldliness and religion, cynicism and yet sensible joy in living that will terminate with the grave. For some there is nihilism with worldly wisdom-an expedient to help us to cope with this futile mortality which is ours. So run the many views.

I have been surprised, recently, to find how many folk believe it is unprofitable even to study the book. It is there like a foreign object within the otherwise warm and useful canon. In the case of the Book of the Revelation many think it to be a sombre book, dealing with judgements, conflict and gloom, so that they deliberately stay away from it. In the case of Ecclesiastes they feel it is a pot-pourri of undelectable things, and is better left untasted. That is a pity since the book speaks plainly enough, and is valuable for all times. Of course it requires steady reading and attention to see what the Preacher is really saying, since so many views obtain on the substance of the text, and we could be misled as to its true meaning. Study of the book will be rewarding if we assume that it must be of value since it is in the canon of Scripture, and as such-rightly understood-is the word of God.

The Principle by Which Koheleth Writes His Sermon

We take it that the sermon was delivered by mouth. Maybe it was a series of sermons. Also it has been written down, but was not purely a literary exercise-a piece of valuable prose-poetry. Great value lies in delivering the truth to a congregation of living people. One is put on his metal more than is a writer. Karl Marx spoke from his ivory tower but did not go where men were worked, where they were workers. Koheleth addressed a congregation, as we address one. In their eyes he was authentic in that he had had experience of this world. In that sense his sermon was a witness to what he had done, what he had learned, and what he had discovered about the journey of man through life both ‘under the sun’, and ‘with God’. ‘Says the Preacher’ (1:2, 7:27, 12:9-14) shows that it is the one man who understands himself to be the preacher who speaks out of his life’s experience, albeit he incorporates the history of ‘the king over Israel in Jerusalem’.

What Koheleth Saw

The Preacher had set out deliberately to view, experience and understand everything ‘under the sun’ (1:12-4;16). Some men see, experience and understand in an arbitrary way. They follow their own wills either existentially or deliberately. They adduce conclusions from that they have experienced. They do this in a sort of ‘flat-earth’ ontology, i.e. they deduce principles of human living from their experience, i.e. ‘I have been through it, and I know it’. Nobody can shift such dogmatizers from their stated dogmatic positions.

Koheleth was different. ‘I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under the sun.’ He partly assumed that he had wisdom by which he could do this, and partly-we suppose-augmented that wisdom as he sought out things. ‘I have acquired greater wisdom, surpassing all that were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’ He appears to claim that of anyone in this world he was most qualified to research the matter of human living, and to come to conclusions regarding it. He added, ‘I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.’ In other words he did not merely experience these things, but wanted to get to the essence of them. He assumed he could draw a conclusion-or conclusions-from his intelligent research.

Again he said to himself, ‘Come now and I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ He sought to understand laughter and pleasure. ‘I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine-my mind still guiding me with wisdom-and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for men to do under heaven during the few days of their life.’ Koheleth was not simply abandoning himself to the things with which he experienced. He was rational about all of them, seeking to understand them, not allowing himself to become the object of them.

In this vein he researched the experiences of becoming rich, having great possessions, having great power and authority, and having varied experience in sex-‘concubines, man’s delight’. When full experiment had been made he had not been diverted by passion or lust, or the absolutizing of any one thing, i.e. he had not been caught into idolizing any particular person, position or thing. He claimed, ‘So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me.’ He came to the conclusion that ‘wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.’ That is, he did not denigrate the wisdom he had.

The Conclusion of Utilized Wisdom

Naturally we are eager to know what conclusions Koheleth drew from his research. His evaluation of life, his research and his efforts are as follows,

- ◆ ‘Everything done under the sun is vanity and striving after wind’.
- ◆ Knowing wisdom, madness and folly ‘is but a striving after wind’
- ◆ Pleasure, enjoying oneself is vanity.
- ◆ Laughter is mad, and pleasure is useless.
- ◆ The building of great works, the acquiring of wealth, vast possessions, slaves and concubines, power and authority are all ‘vanity and a striving after wind’.
- ◆ All acquiring is but vanity because having done this ‘who knows whether a fool will not inherit it all?’

- ◆ There is no ultimate difference between the fate of a wise and rich man, and of a fool, because both die. In this sense a man is not better off than a beast, since both come to death. ‘All go to one place; all are from the dust and all turn to dust again.’

The results of this experimentation-with wisdom-are as follows,

- ◆ ‘I hated life.’
- ◆ ‘I hated toil.’
- ◆ ‘I turned about and gave up my heart to despair.’
- ◆ ‘I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.’
- ◆ He saw of a man who has toiled that ‘all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation.’

The Seeming Conclusion of the Preacher

We say ‘seeming’ because the ultimate conclusion of Koheleth is not what we have just recorded, above. His conclusion is firmly that everything-repeat, everything-is ‘vanity and a striving after wind.’ What does he mean by ‘vanity’ and ‘a striving after wind’? Vanity is a word we find in the New Testament in Romans 8:20-21 where the creation is subjected to vanity, i.e. futility, i.e. inability to exercise its true functional fulness which inability is linked with corruption and decay. The opposite of vanity is living in ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God’, i.e. where there is no pointlessness to life and existence.

Vanity is much like this in the Old Testament. Job chapter 7 shows the insubstantiality and mortality of man. His days are ‘a breath’, i.e. ‘vanity’ (v.16), his life is but a breath, i.e. ‘wind’ (v.7), life is but a cloud that vanishes and fades (v.9). Vanity then is insubstantiality, emptiness, temporality, pointlessness and untrustworthiness. We are tempted to say it is ‘nothingness’ but unfortunately it is actually something, which being something is as nothing because it is empty, futile, pointless-and so on.

Nihilism would claim all things to be vanity and ‘trying to catch the wind’, but would see the creation as essentially pointless and futile. That is not the case with the Preacher who sees it as vanity by comparing it with that which is not vain. You cannot speak of vanity unless there is that which is not vain. The existentialist who says, ‘This life is absurd’, has in mind something which is not absurd, and is positing it as the true thing. Koheleth does not hold to nihilistic philosophy. As we will see, he thinks there is more to life than vanity.

Koheleth’s Basic Understanding of All Things

The Preacher gives his powerful conclusion to everything in 12:13-14,

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

We will deal with this conclusion later. At first sight it appears to be a matter of works, and even of legal obedience to God. It is not, but for the moment we can see what is in the Preacher's mind, i.e. the whole of man is to fear God and keep His commandments. There is no suggestion that this is 'vanity and a striving after wind'. Why then does he insist that all things are 'vanity and a striving after wind'?

Much of the answer lies in the four phrases he uses, 'under the sun', 'beneath the sun', 'under heaven' and 'on the earth'. These terms are used for what we might call 'horizontal life'. The Preacher had tried to develop a rationale for life on the earth. His view was purely horizontal. Whilst we are aware he had a knowledge of God this was not mentioned whilst he was evaluating life 'under the sun'. At that stage might have called him 'the secular man'. He was looking for meaning and purpose-i.e. true wisdom-on the secular plane. He found none. He was sure everything was 'vanity and a striving after wind'.

The Significance of Vanity

Vanity has no significance except to show that what seems to be substantial is really empty, that what appears to be life is nothing. Its tragedy lies in that it purports to be what is not. If all is vanity then the implications are enormous, particularly with a view to the entire creation. Creation has no essential reality, so that its Maker must be impugned for creating what is senseless. Indeed on this score 'the heavens declare the emptiness of God, and firmament shows His senselessness'. Thus everything is stripped of any meaning. Intellectual life has no authentic reality, and sensual life is without point. No wonder Koheleth thinks man's end can be no better than that of the beast.

On the other hand the emptiness of all things teaches man to give no great allegiance to the creation, to expect nothing of life, so that idolatry proves equally insubstantial. We might think-on this score-that this seeming pessimism of Koheleth is a good thing. Disabusing man of any trust in anything he may now be ready to trust God. Having no idol that is substantial he may now look to the Eternal God.

Not so, for the Eternal God would be of no consequence. He could not be called 'faithful Creator' for what He has created yields nothing but vanity when man tries it out. No, we have to look again at Koheleth and mark him down as a cynic, or a nihilist, or just a plain pessimist. A cynic is one who has been disillusioned of his expectation; a nihilist is one who is positive there is nothing that essentially has being in the universe, and a pessimist is one who thinks nothing will come his way.

Koheleth the Man of Faith

It is no wonder the book of the Preacher has puzzled people. It seems Koheleth is either a mixture of two things-cynicism and faith-or the book has different sources and has been edited from time to time in an endeavour to give it some semblance of unity. It might even seem to be two jig-saw sets of pictures which have never really been worked out, and could not be, by nature of the case, much less reconciled in the one frame.

In fact the book is the description of two views we can have of life. The first-with which we have partly dealt-is that of seeing everything in this world on the horizontal. On this horizontal everything is vanity and a striving after wind. The other

view is when man knows God, and looks at the horizontal via a true relationship with the vertical. When we know God and know Him as Creator- 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth'; 'He has made everything beautiful in its time'-then you look at this world with different eyes. To see it, and live in it, and experiment in it only on the horizontal plane is to do it despite. The horizontal and the vertical-rightly understood-are one, as we will shortly see. Thus to horizontalize all things is not only to put them out of perspective, but is to attempt an impossible task. Nothing God creates is vain nor its true use vanity, since He has made everything beautiful in its own time (appropriate, functional; cf. Gen. 1:31 and Eccl. 7:29), and what we do is in accordance with its appropriate time.

An Evaluation of Horizontal Living and Wisdom

By 'wisdom' we do not merely mean knowledge. The most informed scientist may not be a wise person. Nor for the matter the most informed theologian. Both are observers of the phenomenology of things, but it does not mean they are wise regarding these things. Anyone who moves skilfully on the horizontal is regarded as wise, and so he is-in regard to these horizontal things. He works out on ontology, such as, say, the eco-system. Roughly speaking his reasoning must be limited to the three dimensions and the five senses. He works out the functional nature of things on this plane. In fact there is no other plane for him, for if there were he would view it all differently.

People caught in the idolatry of some person or thing tend to absolutize that thing. There can be no question of anything having essential being as an idol. Hence the attempt to gain satisfaction from anything-or even all things-of the creation is doomed to failure. We must all end up as cynics, or as angry and disappointed. Seen and experienced from this point of view everything must be vanity. I believe Koheleth knew this very well, and felt he was doing a service to convince others they were on a foolish quest. He tried to arrest them in their tracks, and turn them into a more fruitful path.

The Pastoral Value of Koheleth's Evaluation of the Horizontal

I believe it is fair to say that the Preacher's immediate audience could approximate to our congregations. In the West we are mainly concerned with security, enjoyment of things, and obtaining goals. Short-term goals do away with the need for long-term ones. We can become occupied with the horizontal-as was Koheleth-and derive some intellectual and sensual satisfaction from it. It is only when we stop and think, or compare it with godly living and reality that we see how empty it is.

Koheleth was trying to debunk the horizontal as such. The religious conditioning, culture and training of his audience would have led them to believe they were not merely horizontal. This was a great delusion. We can easily secularize God, worship and religion. In fact I believe many dislike the book of Ecclesiastes because they unconsciously fear the unmasking of their secularity. If we can show the Preacher's valuable understanding to our congregations it could make a vast difference to them. Their ontology would then have to move out to a wider perspective. An ontology of the horizontal cannot be a true one, and will not ultimately answer to man's ancient knowledge of God-the innate knowledge he keeps unsuccessfully trying to push away.

The Dynamic Faith and True Wisdom of Koheleth

Whilst much of Ecclesiastes is autobiographical, Koheleth does not tell us in so many words, how (i) he could, firstly, simply pursue a horizontal investigation into the nature of things, and then (ii) how he came to change from that to a 'horizontal-vertical' understanding of life through some dynamic experience of God. We have seen in history that men like Enoch, Abraham, Jacob, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John and Paul-to name only a few-all received revelations of God, and so henceforth refused to look at things from a horizontal perspective. Job is a case in point: whilst he did not have a 'horizontal' perspective, yet, as he confessed, he had known God 'with the hearing of the ear', but that changed to 'a seeing of the eyes' so that his wisdom expanded enormously and he came to peace of heart.

What Koheleth's experience of God was we do not know, but we see his knowledge of God in a number of statements-some of which are paraphrased-and these tell us of a strong faith in God:

- ◆ Apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment, for to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy. (2:24-25)
- ◆ I have seen the business God has given to the sons of men to be busy with (3:10).
- ◆ He has made everything beautiful [appropriate, functional] in its own time (3:11)
- ◆ It is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil (3:13).
- ◆ Whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it nor anything be taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men should fear before him (3:14).
- ◆ He who fears God shall come forth from them all i.e. things which may normally destroy a man (7:15-18).
- ◆ God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for ever work (3:17).
- ◆ God is testing the sons of men to show them that they are but beasts (3:18).
- ◆ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Don't let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in the heaven, and you upon the earth (5:1-3).
- ◆ When dreams increase, empty words grow many: but do you fear God (5:7).
- ◆ It is good for a man to enjoy his days upon the earth, for these God has given him. He also give a man wealth and possession to envy, for this is the gift of God (5:18-19).
- ◆ God gives to another wealth, possessions and honour, but God does not give him the power to enjoy them, which is a painful thing-an evil-(6:1-2).
- ◆ We should enjoy the day of prosperity and ponder the day of adversity since God gives us both (7:14).
- ◆ Though a sinner does evil a thousand times and prolongs his life it will be well with those who fear God, but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, *because he does not fear before God* (8:12-13).

- ◆ Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do (9:7).
- ◆ As you do not know how the Spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything (11:5).
- ◆ The youth is to rejoice in all that he does, 'but know for all these things God will bring you into judgement (11:9).
- ◆ Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth (12:1).
- ◆ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (12:13-14).

Now all these elements-along with the rest of the text not devoted to the horizontal perspective-help us to see the theology of the Preacher. Roughly it can be summarized as follows,

- (a) God is sovereign. He has created all things appropriately as 3:11 and Genesis 1:31 shows. The world (or eternity) has been put into our heart by God, hence we have an eternal and not a horizontal perspective by nature.
- (b) Men should always keep in mind that He is Creator, and so they should live according to the ontological principles of creation (3:11; cf. Gen. 1:31). Those who do not will have a sad end, especially in old age.
- (c) God in His sovereignty has ordained all times and seasons, and whatever happens-good or bad-comes from His hands. And so we are to accept the fact of a time for this and a time for that, not absolutizing any 'this' or 'that', knowing God controls all things. This means the world is not an end in itself. Satisfying life cannot be found on 'the horizontal' ('under the sun') as such.
- (d) All God does endures forever, and the knowledge of this brings proper fear of God-as He intends. Man ought to fear God. Fear of God is always good (3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 8:13; 12:13).
- (e) God is the Giver (1:13; 2:26; 3:10; 5:18; 5:19; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9). On the one hand He gives wealth to one person, but not the power to enjoy it. Others He does not make wealthy but they enjoy their state of life-and this is a gift. He gives power to enjoy wealth, and power to enjoy humble existence as a labourer. Not to enjoy what God has given is to reject the gifts and so, too, to denigrate the generous nature of God. It is to do what a man decides for himself-on the horizontal plane, of course. Hence the sinner seeks all things 'horizontally', by his own efforts.
- (f) The world is a moral place. Man must keep God's commandments. He judges the rebellious sinner, but blesses the man who pleases Him, i.e. the man who fears Him and keeps His commandments. The sinner, if he is not immediately reprov'd (judged) will think he can get away with his sin, but this is not so.
- (g) Worship of God is to be a thing of reverence ('guard your steps when you go to the house of God'), since He is in is heaven (transcendent), and we on earth

(i.e. are creatures). For this reason we should not ‘offer the sacrifice of fools’, i.e. downgrade the solemn and wonderful means of salvation, offering emptily and presumptuously (cf. Ps. 51:17; cf. I Sam. 15:22; Amos 5:24-25; Mic. 6:7-8). We ought not to make vows to Him that we will not keep, or be foolishly talkative before Him.

Conclusion to Koheleth’s Faith and Wisdom

If we sift the sayings of Koheleth we see he has knowledge of Genesis chapters 1 to 11. He has a strong doctrine of God as Creator, as Provider and His redemptive power via the sacrifices. He has a knowledge of the creation as functional. He has a doctrine of man as a creature, mortal, sinful, under judgement, and whilst certain men are evil in their thrust, yet others are righteous and good, but only as they fear God and keep His commandments, and rightly worship Him. The latter know the gift of God’s pleasure and can enjoy living in His creation. The whole of man is to fear God and keep His commandments. We take it that this was both Koheleth’s theology and his experience. He who knows and does similarly may enjoy life and family, though there be great injustices and suffering upon earth, for God’s sovereignty holds the answer to these things.

The Pastoral Value of the Teaching of Ecclesiastes

Koheleth set out to show the futility of living only on and in the horizontal plane. He had done this, had seen the true nature of God, and come to know the eternal frame of reference in which God has placed man, so that man cannot be satisfied apart from it. Man seeks to absolutize the things of creation, including religion itself. Was this so with many in the Preacher’s audience? Is it so with our people? Do our people know that ‘the whole of man is to fear God and keep His commandments’? Do they know the powerful truth of Psalms such as 1, 19 and 119, i.e. the dynamic nature of God’s word, precepts, laws, commandments, light and truth, so that in following these man lives up to fully what he is in God? Can we draw our people on to this? Do we live thus?

What we must recognize is that Ecclesiastes is one book of the canon, and as such must be seen in context of all other scriptures (cf. II Tim. 3:15-17), for no book should ever be seen on its own otherwise we absolutize its message. It is true that the rich matters of God’s covenantal glory do not come to us in full bloom in Ecclesiastes, but even the writer’s mention of sacrifice and his reverent regard for it indicate something of that covenantal grace. It is true that there is not a developed doctrine of wonderful life beyond the grave, but then that is not the thrust of the book. Incidentally commentators differ over 3:21, and it seems there is good textual evidence to say that the spirit of man flies upward to God whilst the spirit of the beast goes downward to the soil. If this is so, then Koheleth may well have the view expressed in psalm 49 which, though it seems to speak of cessation of being at death, or at the most-the shadowy existence of man in Sheol-yet rises to say, ‘But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me,’ which, again, is in line with Psalm 16:9-11,

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices,
my body also dwells secure.

For thou dost not give me up to Sheol,
or let thy godly one see the Pit.
Thou dost show me the path of life;
in thy presence is fulness of joy,
in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.

If we, as pastors, see and teach the truth of Ecclesiastes in the context of all Scripture then it will be immensely valuable. It will be valuable to show the pessimist, the nihilist, the hedonist and the secular man that things are not as they appear to be to them, and that there is a purpose in life since God has created us for such living. All is not vanity when we fear God and keep His commandments. True knowledge of God is not merely utilitarian-i.e. we can enjoy life if we do so-and-so-but is the true way of man, the functional way of living, and therefore the only way.

As pastors we must see that we absolutize nothing, that we do not fall back into horizontal perspectives, that we understand the delight of doing God's will, and that we do not fail to enjoy what God has given, shunning asceticism, and being grateful for that enjoyment of life which comes to us gift-wise from heaven. We, too, must understand the dynamics of obedience and the fulfilment of our lives as creatures of the Creator, children of the Father and subjects of the great King. We will then know we have come to the true wisdom of God. That is why we must keep asking ourselves whether we have not horizontalized the vertical, and whether or not, therefore, the hunger of our hearts remains unappeased.

Note 1: Whilst it is true that man lives on the horizontal level, and cannot have full knowledge and true wisdom because of his failure to think and live vertically as well, yet we ought not to despise man, or estimate his vast accumulation of knowledge as pointless, frivolous and empty. What man discovers as he tries 'to find out the end from the beginning' is certainly valuable, and makes a great contribution to the human race. If this same knowledge were to be put into true perspective-the eternal perspective-then it would be ever so much more valuable. Horizontal wisdom cannot be full wisdom. If man ontologizes the horizontal, then his wisdom will be inadequate. If he comes to know God and to live within Him, then he will discover that horizontal-vertical ontology which will cause him to rejoice and enjoy life immensely. His previous insights will now become wonderful.

Note 2: The Scriptures show us that the Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 19:10), i.e. all prophecy relates to Christ (Luke 24:25-27), who himself has been made unto us the wisdom of God in righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Cor. 1:30-31), hence we boast not in ourselves but in the Lord. Colossians 1:19 and 2:3 show us all God's wisdom is hidden in Christ so that he is, indeed, God's wisdom. Whilst the lawyers may have taken away 'the key of knowledge' (Luke 11:52), i.e. the revelation of God by which men enter the Kingdom, yet Christ gave the keys of the Kingdom to his disciples. They may now open the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4, 9; Col. 1:26-27) and his gospel (I Cor. 4:1) and so the whole mystery of life. People talk about 'the enigma of Ecclesiastes' but there is no enigma when a person is born from above, sees and enters the Kingdom, for then he is not the natural man but the spiritual, and knows all things (I Cor. 2:10-14; I John 2:20-27). Christ is the Key. With him life is no enigma. He is the revelation of the Father. It is this revelation

CHAPTER ONE

KOHELETH, THE PREACHER, OPENS HIS ADDRESS TO THE CONGREGATION :

Text: Chapter One verses One to eleven

- 1 The words of the Preacher, the
son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- 3 What does a man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
- 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.
- 5 The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.
- 6 The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
- 7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.
- 8 All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
- 9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.
- 10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
'See, this is new'? It has been already,
in the ages before us.
- 11 There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to happen
among those who come after

A Paraphrase, Explanation And Running Commentary On The Text

Verse 1 'The words of the Preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem' [*if taken at face value must mean Solomon, but we have discussed this in our introduction.*]

This preacher, if not Solomon, is then a man cast much in his mould].

Verses 2-3 In this passage—which follows his famous exclamation—'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,' the Preacher is saying how things appear when we view them as 'under the sun'. The term 'under the sun' appears 35 times in the book, and is a key to the mind of Koheleth. It is a term which shows things only as they have reference to themselves. In 3:11 the Preacher says, 'He (God) has made everything beautiful (apt or appropriate) in its [own] time,' so that in fact nothing is vain or empty. He gives the meaning of life in 12:13, 'Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.' Literally it means, 'What man is about—and he is about nothing else—is to fear God and keep his commandments'. The book, then, has a high view when we look at the true meaning of life, but then—when we ponder the matter—who looks at the true meaning of life? How many do we know who are occupied with this pursuit?

Here the writer is saying, 'By under the sun,' I mean that when you come upon the world, and make no reference to God and His wisdom but just stare at what is before your eyes, what conclusion do you come to? You conclude that there is a permanent repeated activity which you can record with your eyes and thought, but which tells you nothing other than what it is doing. If, then, you are looking to what you see for the meaning to life, or to give an answer to your questioning then you will not find it that way.'

When the preacher says 'Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities!' he is making a superlative exclamation. Something is drawn out of him because he contemplates what he is going to say about life 'under the sun'. The utter transitoriness of it all causes him to speak strongly—not in pessimism but realistically—because the audience before him is addicted to vanity, though it knows it not. The word vanity can mean 'empty' or 'a vapour' or 'a breath', for the Hebrew word *hebel*—i.e. Abel—means that which is transitory. Was Abel called 'a breath' or 'transitory' before or after his death? Did his parents bring him forth in the futility of life that comes from the human fall when things lose their true meaning ('they exchanged the truth of God for a lie' and so could not understand the world about them). If so, then the exclamation of the Preacher is both significant and revealing. He is saying, 'Vapour of vapours!' and he adds, 'All is vaporous!'

Comment on Verses 2-3 : We are reminded of Paul's own saying, 'We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal' (II Cor. 4:18). Paul was not a dualist who saw the material world as useless and even evil any more than the Preacher thought that. Paul—like the Preacher—is saying that the significance of things is not found in themselves.

Now a vapour is a vapour, it is something, but it is something which is not substantial, so when the Preacher says, 'All is vanity!' he is not saying, 'All is nothing!' but he is saying, 'All things, of themselves, are pointless!' Such a statement would doubtless have astonished many of Koheleth's hearers. They seem to have been materialists of the first order, just as are many of us today. We gather—as we go through the writings of Koheleth—that the days in Israel were bad ones. In bad days men become fierce materialists, seeking in competition to keep alive and get ahead. The same bad days are days of 'contemplation for those who do not just look at things 'under the sun', but look at things as being under heaven, i.e. under God's control and in His purpose and there they find meaning. However, our Preacher has not yet made this point. Through his book he is tirelessly showing the emptiness of things as they are

seen and utilized by human beings. Why, then, is he so tireless? The answer is because he has an audience of seemingly religious people. In their self-deception they would not dream there was anything lacking in them. They would not see themselves as materialists. Probably they were good Israelites in regard to worship and outward morality, but all of it was unreal and empty and the Preacher was stirring them-stirring with all his might, trying to shock them out of their complacent self-assurance as surely as Christ sought-though on a different plane-to awaken the self-righteous Pharisees to their dreadful and hypocritical state.

If then, they can truly hear they will be shocked, for he is attacking their cherished way of life, i.e. they are living for the day, they are seeing all things as ever they were, and they take comfort in this 'fixed order' of things. Life is so stable. The very things that the Preacher seems to attack are their favoured things-things which seemingly give them their stability of life. Yet, even as he speaks, they may be having dreadful misgivings for this wise old man is saying that the lot of it is *hebel*, i.e. a breath, a vapour, a matter that is transitory and without meaning. The substance it seems to have is no enduring substance, but a delusion.

Of course that is the claim of the nihilist. Nothing has meaning. All is pointless. Nihilism is an attack upon God and the rich reality of His creation. Is, then, the Preacher a nihilist? To the contrary he is the most substantial of realists, but he is attacking the emptiness of life which makes what it sees the reality when-simply as it is seen-it is nothing. That is not to say everything is nothing, for the Preacher will say in 3:1-11 that at any point of time what God has made is always apt-for its time-and is functional. He will say man is about something of the highest order of human action and endeavour, i.e. 'to fear God and keep His commands'. He will also say that God has made man upright, i.e. of a special order (7:29).

Verses 4-11: resumed Let us look again at the text which speaks of the *hebel* of things, the ceaseless round that has no meaning,

4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.

5 The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

7 All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.

8 All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
'See, this is new'?

It has been already, in the ages before us.

11 There is no remembrance of former things,

nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to happen
among those who come after.

All that the Preacher now describes is vanity, emptiness, a vapour. But is it? Not really, but the way in which the mindless person sees it establishes it as vanity-not that the mindless one thinks of it as vanity. Those religions and philosophies which hold that all that is material is but an illusion and unreality, will agree heartily with Koheleth. 'Quite right!' they will say, 'What people see is an illusion, but behind the illusion is the real world. That is what we must see!'

This, however is not Koheleth's mind. As an Israelite he would have had a good doctrine of creation. In fact in his sermon he has no actual criticism of creation. His criticism is for those who live in creation mindlessly. They do not see its reality. This deadening approach to life makes all things seem pointless and fruitless. When we use the words 'mindlessly' and 'deadenng' we must not think that Koheleth's audience viewed them this way: for the most part they were realist-materialists, not recognizing the vanity of such an approach. If one sees the 'all things' as fruitless and deadening *of themselves* then there is hope for that one. He has penetrated to the fact of pointlessness. He may then press ahead to discover whether in fact this is the case. He might then find the truth behind this seemingly empty life 'under the sun'. It is when things are pointless and we do not think they are, that is the real problem. When we accept the seeming pointlessness as the ways things are, then we are truly in a dreadful way-*without knowing it!*

Verses 4-11 'Think of it!' the Preacher is saying, 'Nothing changes. This is the way things have always been. A man toils and it effects nothing. Men come and go, but the earth remains as ever: it does not cease. The sun has its round each day and covers it in unchanging manner. When you have seen it once you have seen all of it. The wind does not do anything novel for it patiently and regularly takes the same course. The ocean never gets filled up although rivers empty their contents into it, and the rivers themselves flow endlessly from their same sources.'

At this point the Preacher comes to some kind of conclusion. In saying, 'All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it,' he means, 'Everything does its rounds-but to no great purpose. Surely the eyes see continually, the ears hear continually but no fulfilment comes from such-the eyes have to go on seeing and the ears hearing, but everything will remain the same, no new thing will appear. Being satiated we are far from satiated. We have seen it all and will see it thus again. What we may think new has already shown itself, and what will show itself in the future will also not be memorable. All is monotonously the same; is monochrome; is dull, and is futile.'

[See Appendix at the end of this chapter for an exegesis of verses 4-11](#)

Comment : Is the Preacher right? Yes, 'under the sun' he is correct. 'Under the sun' seems static; present but without stated meaning. This is far from Psalm 19:1-4,

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard.

Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world,

where the very creation wonderfully beats out the message of God, and of the new and different things He is doing, so were all this Koheleth sees ‘under God’s heaven and God’s hand’, none of it need be seen like this. Nothing of it is monotonous. God’s creative action is not a recorded repetition of a stereotype. God is always doing new things so that there are always beautiful surprises among God’s creatures and His other orders of things. Creation has a great function for God’s invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity’ are perceivable by creation, so that the ocean that rolls, the rivers that run, the sun that does its daily course and the wind that blows are all to some purpose-some great purpose (cf. Prov. 16:4). As we keep on saying, if Koheleth’s audience could see this they would not see it as vain. When, however it is vain to them because of their secular attitude to it, and yet without them seeing it as vanity but approach it on the lowest level with a supine satisfaction, then they are low indeed. They need the unmasking words of the Preacher, the words he is about to bring to them.

THE WISE KING INVESTIGATES LIFE

Ch. 1:12 - Ch. 2:11: ‘I have seen everything that is done under the sun’

- 12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.
13 And I have applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given the sons of men to be busy with.
14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.
15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.
16 I said to myself, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’
17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived this also is but a striving after wind.
18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

The Congregation Listens Further

What is the congregation thinking? The Preacher seems to have given them little value to anything in life, since all things are as a vapour.

1: Verse 12 Now he is telling them that he has authority. Not only has he been king over Israel in Jerusalem, but he has set his heart to find wisdom. Why then does he tell them?

Is it to boast? No, it is to let them know that one who has been a king-especially a king as great as Solomon-will surely have accumulated great wisdom. At the least he will have faced the great mixture of life and experience, and will surely have done so from a vantage point that very few human beings may do, seeing there are few of them who become kings.

If he were Solomon then this would surely have been so for Solomon desired wisdom above all things-and was given it (I Kings 3:12). Whilst Solomon's wisdom drew many admirers to his land-the Queen of Sheba among them-yet we know that Solomon's brilliant wisdom did not save him from a life that was eventually caught up into idolatry, with the consequent decay of his moral being-for idolatry inevitably does that to human beings. Is then Solomon speaking, or is Koheleth a brilliant impersonator? As we have suggested in our Introduction an impersonation may be wrong and even immoral, but for one who identifies with the person he is playing-that is another matter. It is not he who is the person, but it is he who is one with the person. Whatever may be the case, the Preacher assumes his role as king, and shares his questing for understanding all that is within the experience of man. Certainly Solomon not only tried wisdom but other elements as well such as knowledge, madness and folly.

1: Verse 13 Here Koheleth speaks of the experiment of researching life in order to understand wisdom. He applies his mind to seek and search out wisdom. To apply the mind is not to experiment but to go about the matter wisely and rationally. As a matter of fact, he is saying that there is a drive in man to know wisdom. In 3:11 he says to God, 'You have put eternity (or 'the world') into man's heart so that he cannot find out the end from the beginning'. Koheleth suggests that 'it is an unhappy business for men to be busy with', i.e. far from giving them the reason for life, and giving them contentment it increases their problems. They 'cannot find out the end from the beginning', i.e. they cannot get a full perspective of it all-of life, purpose, and so on. As for the drive we have mentioned, Paul (Acts 17:27) seems to infer that this drive was built into humanity, at least at the time of the division of humanity into tribes within set boundaries-'that they should seek God, in the hope that they may feel after him and find him.' The difference in this verse is that Koheleth is not seeking after God. He is talking of a man seeking after wisdom, and the two are not synonymous.

An Excursus on Wisdom

The wisdom and of man and of God is quite diverse. There is what we might call 'a natural wisdom of man' which is not evil-as such-but lacks the understanding of God and His creation (e.g. here in Ecclesiastes) There is also a wisdom of the natural man which is perverse and evil (cf. James 3:13f.). When it comes to the wisdom of God which wisdom itself would teach to man we need to read Proverbs 8. The creation comes out of wisdom (Jer. 10:12; 51:15), and therefore is a wise creation. Koheleth would seem to make it a pointless creation, but what he is really saying is that it is man's dealings with creation which lack point, understanding and wisdom. Man needs wisdom and just as Solomon asked for it as a gift so man, too, should ask for it (James 1:5; 3:17). In the NT Christ is God's wisdom (I Cor. 1:24, 31; cf. Col. 2:3), for not only what Christ does is wise, but it is the outworking of God's plan, i.e. 'the counsel of His will'. We repeat that Koheleth's wisdom which he uses at first to discover meaning and purpose is not true wisdom. In exhausting this inadequate 'natural' wisdom he is led to abandon it for the true wisdom of God. Jeremiah 9:23 shows the greatest thing to know is God, His nature, and what He is doing. Elsewhere in Scripture divine wisdom is highly exalted (Proverbs 8; cf. James 1:5; 3:17) and men are urged to ask it from God, but to think that wisdom per se-i.e. wisdom which comes through a man's mind-can give man an answer to life is folly.

1: Verse 14 Koheleth is saying when you look at things ‘under heaven’ and ‘under the sun’-parallel ideas-then you will not discover wisdom. True wisdom is not futile but to try to work it out of all one sees happening under the sun is ‘vanity and a striving after wind’. This being so there can be no true understanding of the human scene: not, anyway, by this method.

Comment : What, incidentally, is meant by ‘a striving after wind’ (cf. 1:14; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 4:4; 4:6; 6:9)? It can be translated ‘desire of mind’, i.e. an unsatisfying desire (Barton) or ‘chasing after wind’ (J.B.) or as we might say, ‘insubstantial, nothing which can be grasped’. The Preacher is thus saying that the human endeavour to embrace all knowing and rationalize it as a human wisdom is folly. This leads on naturally to,

1: Verse 15 where Koheleth is virtually saying, ‘When you seek after wisdom you realize that nothing can come of it which can change anything, and besides so many things are lacking in order to make the universal situation complete-as you would think it should be. You hoped discovered wisdom would straighten things out, or supply a deficiency, but such cannot be the case for things continue the same.’

1: Verse 16 Koheleth adds, ‘Even though I saw this vexing reality I nevertheless continued to seek after both knowledge and wisdom, knowing that I had acquired these above all others.’ In other words, if Koheleth-or Solomon-had attained to the highest in wisdom then the matter ought to be seen as settled. To the contrary: education-as such-provides no substantial answer to man’s quest for reality and meaning.

1: Verse 17 ‘Perhaps,’ Koheleth surmised, ‘the answer might lie in that which is opposite to learning, i.e. ‘madness and folly’ but no: it too is insubstantial, a vaporous dream which provides no answer. Nor is this the end of the matter. The vexing fact is that the more wisdom one acquires the more grief, and the more knowledge one stores up, the more sorrow. One is forced, then, to agree with **Thomas Gray**, ‘Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise.’

Comment : Imagine, then, if you will, the listening audience-the rich, the learned, the wise, and the mindless materialists-as they hear the Preacher’s words. Their foundational assurance-experience and learning-is said to count for nothing. They will get nothing out of that endeavour of life! The Preacher must seem mad to them-and they know he is not-or what he says must be heard, and they must come to some conclusion about life.

APPENDIX

These notes are missing were missing from the original hardcopy and included here for reference.

1: Verse 4 -11 [‘Think of it!’ the Preacher is saying over verses 2 to 11, ‘nothing changes. This is the way things have always been. The monotonous round of all things leads us nowhere. Vanity it is!’ In verse 3 he has pointed out that man toils and it effects nothing. In fact he mentions ‘toil’ 35 times in his sermon, for he has been greatly occupied with toil, but ‘under the sun’ seems to make nonsense of a rationale of work.] One generation comes and another generation goes. [This not only intrigues Koheleth but it disheartens him. Again there is no rhyme or reason to it all, for whilst man is mortal the earth remains for ever: it does not cease. The contrast of man and the earth is disheartening, but then why is this? Is there something wrong with creation, and so, wrong with the Creator?]

1: Verse 5 The sun has its round each day and covers it in unchanging manner. [In fact there is the suggestion that even the sun comes puffing and panting to its place of rest, and this by contrast with the beautiful and robust picture of the sun as a bridegroom in Psalm 19:4-6. Even the passage of the sun has a certain monotony to Koheleth.]

1: Verse 6 The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. The wind does not do anything novel for it patiently and regularly takes the same course. [Psalm 148:5-6 (cf. Jer. 31:35-36) speaks of a ‘fixed order’ which here seems to spell monotony, but monotony is a subjective impression of the watcher, not of the order of itself as sun, wind and water are in themselves quite dynamic. Everything (‘beauty’) is in the eye of the beholder.]

1: Verse 7 ‘All streams run to the sea but the sea is not full’ [suggests the speaker is looking towards some goal, but no summation happens in history, and so the idea is given up, cynically. The round endlessly repeats itself, the rivers running their regular course. The same phenomena could be a cause for surprise and delight-so stable they are!-but the Preacher seems not to think so.]

1: Verse 8 ‘All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it,’ [means that the phenomena weary one beyond description. The modern word is ‘boredom’, i.e. finding no purpose in anything. Hence no matter what one sees or hears, no satisfaction or fulness comes. Yet the use of the senses ought to be satisfying. See 12:1-8 where life is even more miserable when the senses fail folk in their old age.]

1: Verse 9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be, [so that the old monotonous round rolls on. Things always take the same pattern. Again the key is provided for us, i.e. ‘under the sun’ and this shows the thinking of the man the Preacher presents-secular man who does not know he is secular. We see, later, that Koheleth has a doctrine or philosophy of nature (creation) which is a true Israelite would hold. Man certainly wants ‘new things under the sun’, but the dimension prevents this. There are many ‘new things’ but not ‘under the sun’ That (horizontal) dimension cannot reveal a ‘new thing’, for in it all things are old, i.e. secular, i.e. regular and explainable.]

1: Verse 10 When Koheleth asks the question, ‘Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See this is new?’ [the reply must be ‘No.’ Does this mean there are no new things, or that all things take on the dull appearance of all other things? What is earth-bound is never new. Even if it is new

it is rationalized as not new because it is seen and understood only in the horizontal dimension, i.e. no interpretation of it comes from outside the 'secular' mind. Anything-everything-that is going to happen is not new or significant because it has already happened in time.]

1: Verse 11 There is no remembrance of former things, [i.e. past events not being significant are already forgotten and this will be the case with future events. One does not, therefore, look to the past to relieve the nothingness of creation and events, nor does one look to the future for anything new and unique. Nothing is ever new and unique. The 'fixed' nature of things presupposes no dynamic within them. Of course all of this secular thinking is an indictment upon the wisdom and counsel and plan of God. To the Israelites history was everything. They could tie God down to repeat action He had done, and even improve on it (e.g. Hab 3:2 which amounts to 'Do it again, Lord! But better, and with mercy to us!') The great remembrance Psalms were intended not only to keep themselves in remembrance of what God had done in events such as the Exodus, but to keep God in that remembrance. Such a view of history was the antithesis to the one found here in verses 9-11.]

CHAPTER TWO

THE WISE KING TRIES EVERYTHING THERE IS

Ch. 2 : 1-11: 'Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep it from them'

- 1 I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; Enjoy yourself.' But behold, this also was vanity.
- 2 I said of laughter, 'It is mad,' and of pleasure, 'What use is it?'
- 3 I searched with my mind to cheer my body with wine-my mind still guiding me with wisdom-and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven during the few days of their life.
- 4 I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself;
- 5 I made gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.
- 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forests of the growing trees.
- 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.
- 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasures of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight.
- 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me.
- 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.
- 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

We see now, that the king communes with himself. The successful farmer of Jesus's parable did the same. He decided he would pull down his barns and build bigger. He had all he needed. He would take his ease henceforth, and enjoy the fruits of his labour. Whilst judgement may have come to him that foolish night, it did not come this way to Koheleth. In this section of the book he does his methodical research into all that seems to be offering to the human race. In verse one it is pleasure, i.e. personal enjoyment. This proves to vaporous. Pleasure has no satisfying enjoyment to offer. This is simply the fact of the case, and the Preacher makes no explanation.

Comment : Is it because there is a curse across the creation, and everything is subjected to vanity-though not of its own will but by the will of Him Who subjects it-that pleasure is empty because man's fulness is only in God. Koheleth does not say, but we can see this is so. Koheleth will say, 'This is the whole of man—to fear God and keep

His commandments.’ If we do not know the truth that brings true delight—’I delight to do thy will, O Lord’, then to read the Preacher is to sink into despair and be caught up in emptiness.

2: Verse 1 The Preacher is not out to experiment, but to test, and there is a difference. Does pleasure have the meaning of life? If so the Preacher will give himself the utmost of pleasure. However it also proved to be vanity-as it was just another thing under the sun’, i.e. only on a horizontal level.

2: Verse 2 Koheleth says that laughter is mad, and pleasure is useless. Perhaps some answer lies in stimulants. So far wisdom and knowledge-and even pleasure-have not sufficiently stimulated him. Pleasure comes through the senses, what they anticipate and feel. Even so pleasure resolves nothing.

One, then, needs a stimulant. A stimulant comes in from the outside and does its own work. Even so it must be controlled so that the mind-in the midst of stimulation-utilizes sensation in its desire to use ‘the cup that cheers’. None of this overboard, lust or evil, such as criticized in Proverbs 20:1-’Wine is a mocker’-and 23:29-35-’At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder.’ It is the stimulation and pleasure which is available, legitimately, to all humanity. Even when it comes to folly it is not the folly of evil so much as the abandonment man has to exercise which is not thought out wisely. The Preacher had imbibed but wisely, rationally-’my mind still guiding me with wisdom’-Koheleth wants to see what is good for the sons of men to do ‘under heaven’, i.e. according to their own decisions in the world they have made and use for themselves. By good he does not mean morally good, but that which makes man happy as he does it. We might say by ‘good’, ‘functional, pleasurable, profitable, and not harmful.’

The term *‘few days of their life’* points again to the transitory nature of man. What he does to bring pleasure will not be lasting anyway, and certainly it will not be foundational to greatness. These can even be called ‘folly done through wisdom’. The wisdom of Koheleth must be called ‘worldly sagacity’. What he does is calculated, for the man has control of his situation and is researching what is ‘good’ for man.

2: Verses 4-8 So we have list of things-’great works, houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, functional pools, forests which are an investment’. The labour situation is highly organized. Possessions and flocks surpass all that a man has had before him. His treasures are fabulous both as an art collection and as solid capital. With all these possessions he has also moved into the realm of direct pleasure from musician and women, who-note-are legitimate because they are concubines and fit the morals of the Preacher’s society.

Comment : The Preacher is saying to his worldly-wise, get-rich-quick, seek-pleasure-where-you-can congregation-who are perhaps agog with interest and envy-that if they think they have yet further to go on their ventures, then they might as well forget it-has been there, done all, and without it being other than vanity. He is still stressing the ‘under the sun’ dimension, i.e. the horizontal dimension. As yet he has not come to the vertical dimension, or-better still-the horizontal-vertical perspective.

2: Verses 9-10 The Preacher tells his listeners that he achieved greatness in the eyes of society. Solomon, of course, was unsurpassed for his achievements, and for his wisdom, but is Koheleth beyond even Solomon? He lays claim to the fact that none of

this success spoiled his wisdom, yet it is clear that his wisdom is ‘under the sun’, i.e. the wisdom a man gains by his efforts. He does not claim it is the wisdom which comes from above, but it certainly a wisdom his hearers greatly respect. In fact this is the only kind of wisdom that makes sense in the conversation. If it is a ‘worldly’ wisdom then he is showing that by such wisdom nothing is achieved, especially in seeking to know what life is about. In verse 10 he is saying that there is no pleasure available to man of which he did not avail himself. No one could claim to go further than he had. He had tasted pleasure, and he had pleasure from toil.

2: Verse 11 spells out Koheleth’s considered evaluation of all that he had done, all sensual pleasures he had tasted, all possessions he had acquired. The evaluation? *‘All was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun’!*

Comment : Had we been listening doubtless a sort of envy and desire for similar experience would be in our minds and hearts. What of the audience-the qahal-which listened to the Preacher? Utter unbelief, utter disillusionment, utter scandal would be their experience. If the Preacher had tried it all and he was a wise man-even a worldly wise man-he was saying categorically that there is nothing ‘under the sun’ which will bring genuine satisfaction to a man. Such does not exist.

It would be easy for us to press the fingers of both hands-tips to tips-give a sigh, draw our gaze upwards, and say knowingly, and piously, ‘Ah! But of course!’ when in fact all we desire would be to have the same opportunity as Koheleth, in which case we would prove him to be wrong. Hope dies hard, belief of what we hear is set aside in the interests of self-accomplishment. The audience dare not believe Koheleth to be right.

THE WISE KING COMES TO CONSIDERED CONCLUSIONS

Ch. 2 : 12 - 23 : ‘All man’s days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation’

12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what he has already done.

13 Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

14 The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them.

15 Then I said to myself, ‘What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?’ and I said to myself that this also is vanity.

16 For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like the fool!

17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,

19 and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

20 So I turned about and gave up my heart to despair over all the toil of my labours under the sun,

21 because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

22 What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. This also is vanity.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

2:Verse 12 Koheleth now analyzes the tests he has made, in order to come to some conclusion about ‘wisdom and madness and folly’. What then, were the results of this investigative experiment-this experiment which took up the major part of man’s life, and drew upon his wisdom and his skill? By saying, ‘I turned,’ Koheleth is doubtless indicating that he has turned from what he was doing prior to this investigation. It was another thing before he had tested wisdom and pleasure and folly, but now he is looking for the rationale of these things, i.e. their meaning, significance and purpose. He wants to know these in the light of the fact that another will come after him-the king-and what can he do who comes? Only that which men have done ‘long ago’, i.e. nothing new, and certainly nothing more than the king has done, whose experiences were long and taught all that one such as the king could know.

2: Verse 13 Thinking over these things Koheleth says that wisdom far surpasses folly. We might think of this wisdom as being only worldly-i.e. ‘under the sun’-but it is a practical wisdom, i.e. how to live in this world, especially how to live as a king. Light is better than darkness. The foolish man is blind but the wise man sees. It is better to see than not to see. One will derive much from seeing, but one does not derive anything from not seeing. To this extent wisdom is better. This might end the matter, but then the matter is not yet ended, for even wisdom does not guarantee anything.

2: Verse 14 The Preacher sees that although wisdom surpasses folly, to what point has life been lived, anyway, when the wise man and the fool both come to an end in death? If this, then, is the case then everything is vain and pointless. One-in the ultimate-gains nothing by wisdom, i.e. when all is said and done one is not better off than the foolish man. Whist this may seem to be pessimism, it is not: it is simply realism!

2: Verse 15 Koheleth asks himself why he has expended so much time, thought and effort on being ‘so very wise’ when his end and the end of the fool are no different, i.e. death! This giving over to effort then has no special outcome and so is vanity.

Comment : In fact one gains much by wisdom that is not ‘natural’. There is an end to the foolish man, but it is not the same end for the wise and foolish man alike. The wise man in God is moving towards the fulfilment of his destiny, and the fool to his miserable retribution for having squandered the gifts of God. Even so, in this passage this is not quite the point of the Preacher for he is saying that the end is not changed by the wisdom of man. His observation has nothing in it of the deep wisdom of God, shown and explained in the person of Christ, but at this juncture none of this sort of thinking is to the point. Later in Koheleth’s sermon we see he does point to a different wisdom, and a good one. Here he is trying to convince his audience that this kind of

wisdom is not profitable-it is part of the horizontal way of life, i.e. 'under the sun', but not necessarily in fear of God and in keeping of His commandments (cf. 12:13).

2: Verse 16 Koheleth is saying that ultimately the wise man-as a wise man-and the fool-as a fool-are both alike forgotten, probably because man is about his business and has not time nor inclination for remembering. All that the wise man laboured at, and all that the fool squandered will both alike be forgotten. If this is the case, said Koheleth, then I find the whole thing hateful. What was the point of labouring at wisdom? All that is done under the sun grieves me, for all is but a vapour-'striving after wind'.

2: Verse 17 It is interesting to know that Koheleth-as he saw life-hated it. There is some kind of anger here, as though the situation is not fair and just, yet at least he is alive, and at least he can hate. He not dead, obliterated. His hatred is even a sign of life! He does not say that the sheer enjoyment of what he has done-'under the sun'-is some compensation for the idiocy of the end. It would seem that the enjoyment of the natural even heightens its stupidity in the light of death.

Comment : The Christian view of death that it has no sting, and in fact that a man never actually see death since the believer is already in life and will only go more deeply into at death, is wholly missing here from Koheleth's reckoning. He is a realist-death is death, and the end of the matter! Christian hope is a beautiful and wholesome thing.

2: Verse 18 - 19 Doubtless Koheleth sees the stupidity of all the labour he has done, and he hates what he has done. He sees only a probable inane result. Who can be sure what the man will be who inherits all the king has toiled at doing and accomplishing? He is likely to be a fool, and although he has done nothing he gets everything and then uses it in his foolishness. For all this Koheleth has used his 'wisdom under the sun', i.e. his human wisdom, acquired through much study and experience.

2: Verse 20 Koheleth shows us-as in verses 18 and 19-that he is not impervious to the vanity of things. He does not take them philosophically, and doubtless he intends his audience to see this and to know that they can only walk into anger and hatred if they do the same as he had done. They irritate him, and unless they are dull and dumb these things will also irritate them. He says, 'So I turned about and gave up my heart to despair,' and we can see that this is another act, but it is the act of bitterness. It is a deliberate feeding upon bitterness. It is an affirmation that life per se is empty, utterly empty

2: Verse 21 Here the Preacher is saying that the fool will enjoy the inheritance for which he has not worked, but death will have come to the achiever who cannot enjoy the fruit of his labours for himself. In this sense his labour has been in vain. All of this is not only vanity; it is, in fact an evil thing-'a great evil'! It is evil in the sense that genuine toil and planning and patient working will be for nothing-the fruits of them will be squandered foolishly. This can only be seen as evil.

2: Verses 22-23 These spell out the conclusion that the Preacher comes to in his bitterness. He did not toil at labour merely as an experiment. It was all his life. Far from just being a thing of pleasure it called for pain and suffering-by nature of the case.

To any viewer it may have appeared to be an enviable life, but it hadn't been. In it had been frustrations and troubles-but to what end? The daily demands have ever been painful, and such a person can scarcely sleep-his thoughts and troubles are so many. Even in the night his mind had had to be busy about the whole matter, and now he sees it for what it was-and is-i.e. all vanity.

THE WISE KING COMES TO THE BASIC TRUTH OF THINGS

Ch. 2:12 - 26 : 'That is good which is from the hand of God'

24 There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;

25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

26 For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This is vanity and a striving after wind.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

2: Verse 24 The Preacher is faced with a conclusion other than his previous one. Previously he thought a man could do as he wished, seem by his own action to be moving to a worthwhile point, only to find the whole matter pointless and empty. Now he perceives that the simple man who is not going about it the way he was so doing, is a person who can enjoy the things he-Koheleth-had come to hate. It would seem, almost, that the sum of life is eating, drinking and working and finding enjoyment in it. This was not so with him for he had a different motive and a different goal.

2: Verse 25 It is important to see that the ordinary living of life is not vanity. In fact life can be enjoyed to the full-food, drink and work-but only when it all stems from the hand of God. Koheleth sees now that God supplies to a man what he needs, and indeed man is dependent upon Him, and has joy within that dependency. Within it he is content.

2: Verse 26 Here there seems to be a radical switch in Koheleth's thinking and understanding. Everything comes back to God, and must not just be viewed as from 'under the sun'. The man who pleases God will receive wisdom and knowledge and joy-though not as through some questing, but through trusting and obeying God. It is not so with the sinner. His work of 'gathering and heaping only to give to one who pleases God' is certainly vanity from that sinner's point of view, but then all the sinner's acts are without reference to God. No wonder all ends in vanity.

In this, then, Koheleth has made a great point-don't seek and test and operate things for one's own pleasure. Don't do them all from the horizontal perspective of life. What we do should be from the hand of God-in fellowship with Him-and the outcome will be good.

Comment : Only at the end of this chapter does the Preacher mention God, and then three times within a few verses. It is obvious he has been leading up to a different dimension in thinking-the dimension all should acknowledge, namely that of God. The seeming pessimism and nihilism disappear. Life can be very rich-under the hand of God: otherwise not. 'Under the sun'-the flat horizontal mode of living-offers nothing but 'vanity and a striving after wind'.

CHAPTER THREE

KOHELETH IS CONVINCED OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN ALL THINGS

Ch. 3 : 1-15: 'The Times and Seasons'

- 1 For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven;
- 2 A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant, and time to pluck up what is planted;
- 3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- 4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- 5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- 6 A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- 7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- 8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.
- 9 What gain has the worker from his toil?
- 10 I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with.
- 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
- 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live;
- 13 Also that it is God's gift to man that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil.
- 14 I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men may fear before him.
- 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

Comment : The Hebrew words here are much the same as the New Testament Greek words as, *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* carries the idea of a period of time, and *kairos* of a point in time, i.e. the appointed time. Koheleth is saying that we ought to know the season of a thing, and the point in time in that season where the event takes place. The word 'matter' here in verse 1 is translated 'purpose' in the A.V., 'activity' in the N.I.V. and 'event' in the N.A.S.B. which has a marginal translation 'delight' (cf. 3:17; 8:6).

In verse 17 we really have a commentary on verses 1-9, i.e. we are responsible for the events, matters, activities in which we are involved, 'I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time in every matter, and for every work.' These times are not arbitrary but set (cf. Ps. 102:13; 75:2). Often in the N.T. 'at the right time' or 'when the time was fully come', or 'my time is not yet' and 'now is the appointed time' are statements made in regard to the kairos which has come in the chronos. Genesis 15:12-16 is a good example. In other words we must do appropriately according to the times and seasons.

3: Verse 1 For us this is a statement that everything has its own purpose (Prov. 16:4), and so what happens 'under heaven' is not at all futile. The whole passage is really a statement of the sovereignty of God in all things, and that we should shape our lives according to His purposes, His plan, i.e. 'the counsel of His will'.

Comment : When we look at the action of the times we have to decide whether God is the Prime Mover, or whether we are. For example we cannot decide to be born or even to die-apart from suicide for the latter. It must be then that God moves, but it is imperative that we be in that movement, of it, and that we accede to it, even if in most cases we cannot effect it-of ourselves. Of course it can mean that we have times of fruitfulness and times when fruitfulness ceases for the particular reasons which obtain at that point of time.

We now have various ways of dealing with the text from verses 2 to 9. We can take them literally, in which case we will have great difficulties; we can take them in a spiritualizing way, i.e. use them figuratively, trying to find spiritual occasions and spiritual meanings, or we can take them as events which happen in life to all men, and in particular to the godly.

3: Verse 2 In this case-a time to be born and a time to die-we can say that to be born is to realize we are in this world, live in it and come to a point when death approaches and we are content to know it is God's kairos when we die. Armed with this principle we can see that the verses may cover a variety of things. We ought not to confine it to one thing only.

A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted may simply mean that everything is seasonal, begins somewhere-one kairos-and comes to completion at another kairos-the time of being plucked up. Planting and plucking may mean many things, such as to do with crops, with the people of God, Israel, nations and the church (cf. Jer. 1:10; Zeph. 2:4; Ps. 80:8; 80:12; 44:2;).

3: Verse 3 *A time to kill and a time to heal*, may not refer to actual killing. This seems to refer to Deuteronomy 32:39 where God says, 'I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal'. Israel-if it breaks covenant-can be 'killed', i.e. taken down into a sort of death as a nation. It can also be brought to life again (cf. Hos. 6:1; Ezek. 37:1-14). A time to break down, and a time to build up is a similar figure to killing and healing, to planting and plucking up. Coming at the principle from different points of view will help those in the congregation who cannot understand these experiences in their own lives. They may take them as an offence, or as a mystery, instead of seeing this is how they will be when in the hand of God. The thread running through it all is, 'This is what God does. Accept the fact. Be one with it. See it is all planned and functional: be part of it deliberately. Neither leap ahead nor lag behind.'

3: Verse 4 A time to weep and time to laugh tells us that there is not one duration of weeping or laughing. Each to its own time and season. Life has its joys and sorrows. Weeping endures for a night but joy comes in the morning. It is clear that when we try to make the times of joy to defeat weeping that we may be wrong. They all have their point and purpose. In Luke 6:21 and John 16:20 weeping is followed by joy. A time to mourn and a time to dance are not times arranged by us. We can refuse mourning and we can refuse dancing-if we will, but tension will arise at this unnatural arrangement. The word 'dancing' does not refer to dancing as an art or practice, but rather to 'skipping', the expression of spontaneity. There will be births, and marriages, tragedies and funerals, and similar matters. All of them relate in some way to our destiny.

3: Verse 5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones could have many meanings. Stones were often scattered to prevent easy access by enemy armies (II Kings 3:19) and stones were gathered to make cultivation easier, or they were used to build, so that casting them away might mean breaking down houses. Each statement simply shows that what we do not expect to be a chronos or a kairos will often come without warning and be essential to the passage of our lives.

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing is taken by moderns to refer to times of love, and this may well be a general principle. In the East embracing was a cordial welcome and acceptance of another, but refusal to embrace was a cautionary measure against deceit and betrayal. In any case it shows us that each chronos and kairos would be seen in its own context and purpose.

Comment : In our living we tend to ask, 'Is this good, or is it bad?' meaning 'good for me' or 'bad for me'. We tend to value things and events by a utility measure. We do not see that all things will ultimately be for good for us because they are in God's hands. Our evaluating them is what makes us chafe when they are not good and overly be delighted when they are 'useful'. This means we do not value the sovereignty of God in all matters.

3: Verse 6 A time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away is another double precept which can be applied in so many ways, covering getting, keeping, hoarding and getting rid of unneeded accumulation. This can refer to material things and to things of the mind and heart. God kept Israel and when she sinned he cast her off (cf. II Kings 13:23; Jer. 7:15; Ps. 71:9), but just as a time of casting off follows a time of keeping, so a time of keeping can follow a time of casting off.

3: Verse 7 A time to rend, and a time to sew . The rending of garments was for anger, distress, mourning (Gen. 37:29; 44:12; II Sam. 1:11), and even of divisions (I Sam 15:27-28; I Kings 11:30). Sewing was for renewal after such events. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak can mean the silence of sorrow (II Kings 18:36; Job 2:13) and the utterance of joy (Isa 58:1; Ps. 26:7; 126:2). It can also mean that speech can be foolish-'a prating fool will come to ruin' (Prov. 10:8)-or wise-'To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!' (Prov. 15:23).

3: Verse 8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace, are similar. It is not just that Koheleth comes to terms with these realities so much as he sees them as essential parts of life. Love of what is good is necessary, but love of the

world is destructive. Hatred of evil and injustice is natural and right, but self-righteous hatred is dangerous. Probably Koheleth is also saying that times of hatred will give way to times of love-this will be the flow of life. Wars will come and go; peace will come and go. One must not despair in the ebb and flow of times and seasons

3: Verse 9 What gain has the worker from his toil? This verse takes us back to 1:3, 'What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?' Note the significant 'under the sun'. If a man looks at the good times and the bad, the serendipities and the vicissitudes, how can he assess the reason, value and gains-or losses-of all 'the matters'?

3: Verse 10 says, 'I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with,' meaning that man is occupied with all he does. He has just described that business (toil, travail) and we can see it is not just 'one foot after another' but a sequence of events arranged by God (cf. 1:13 for the negative).

3: Verse 11 is one of the most significant statements in Koheleth's whole preaching. It means, 'God has made everything appropriate'-on kairos as to event and position-so that all things function properly together. If a man looks over it all to ask the question, 'What do I gain by all this toil?' the answer is that he cannot assess the matter. God has put the entirety of it into a man's heart, so that it is too much for him ever to cover and get into proper perspective, and also he is oriented that he cannot find his answer 'under the sun' but only in perspective of eternity. He cannot reach back to the beginning-in entirety-nor follow it fully to the end. The beginning, the present portion and the end are all there, however. Ordinarily man would see everything from a limited perspective, and would miss the eternal nature and purpose which God has for all things.

3: Verses 12-13 Koheleth says he knows-i.e. has recognized out of his observations-that there is nothing better for men than to live this life and enjoy. That is how God has given it to them. This is not mindless enjoyment so that they live animal-like, but it is also not a wholly rationalized life, that they may know it all. Let man therefore enjoy it all without plaguing himself with such thoughts. If God has set the order of times and seasons then it cannot be harmful

3: Verse 14-15 the Preacher is saying that the order of things as God has placed them is immutable. Nothing that man does can add to or take away from that functional whole. All has been done in this way that men should learn respect and awe of God, and not be liable to tamper with any of it. 'What has been driven away' has had various translations. N.I.V has 'God will call the past to account'. J.B. has 'God cares for the persecuted'. N.A.S.B has 'God seeks what has passed by'. N.E.B has 'God summons each event back in its turn'. Other translations are 'God seeks after that which is put to flight' (Cambridge Commentary on Eccles.) and 'God seeks after that which has been crowded out' (Keil-Delitzsch Commentary on Eccles). The sense of these translations seems to be that something has gone amiss in this whole situation, not because God has failed, but because somewhere some folk have suffered injustice, as the result of the evil of others-presumably those who did not flow in harmony with the appointed times and seasons, but sought their own benefit at the expense of others. God then will bring the past to the present to have it manifested and He will do justice in the matter. No one can hide anything, and none will suffer without God properly requiring the

suffering, that is by bringing judgement to the evildoers.

KOHELETH SEES THE EVIL OF MAN AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Ch. 3 : 16 - 22: 'Present Suffering and the End For All'

16 Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.

18 I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts.

19 For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity.

20 All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. 21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?

22 So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

3: Verse 16 That there is evil in the affairs of men now preoccupies the mind of Koheleth. He has barely referred to evil up to this point (cf. 2:26b), but now (verse 16) the whole atmosphere of the pursuit of happiness and significance is coloured with this matter of wickedness. He sees that 'in the place of justice' (mishpat; objective justice), i.e. the halls of justice, the judgement seat of rulers and authorities, there is, in fact not justice, but crime, and 'in the place of righteousness (tsedek; subjective righteousness) there is not piety but wickedness.

3: Verse 17 Koheleth, then, is not speaking about man's general depravity, but the unfair exercise of it in particular cases-the situations where both justice and righteousness should obtain. In verse 17 the Preacher encourages himself with the thought that God will eventually judge both the truly righteous and the wicked, and undoubtedly justice will be done-'for he has appointed a time for every matter and every work'. Yet, for the moment, that judgement has not taken place.

3: Verse 18 What, then, lies behind it all? Koheleth thinks that God is testing-other translations have 'may purify', 'show them up', 'winnow', 'prove' and 'sieve'-man to show him what he is, i.e. no better than the beasts. The thought may be that one who comes out well will see what he is, and another may see he is no better than the beasts. Whatever the purpose it will certainly test or winnow out what is good from the bad.

3: Verse 19 We know that men are men and beasts are beasts, but when men are like beasts then they are not better than the beasts. Indeed it is unfair to beasts to declare men are as they! However in what way are men like beasts? They are alike because the end of both is physical death. Psalm 49:12 and 20 say, 'Man cannot abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish.'

We now look at what Koheleth calls ‘the same breath’ which in Hebrew is ruach or ‘spirit’. In Genesis 2:7 we are told that God breathed into man the breath of life (nishma) and he became a living soul’ (nephesh). A man’s body needs ruach for its continuance, but when he continues he continues as a nephesh, i.e. a soul or personality, and this nephesh needs ruach. For continuous life. In Ecclesiastes 2:24; 4:8; 6:2-3 and 7:28 nephesh is soul and not breath, so what Koheleth is not saying is that man’s soul (nephesh) disappears with death but the ruach that sustained it is withdrawn to God. The Preacher does not go into the matter of after-life, since he is very much concerned with this life. It does not really matter where-in what direction, up or down-that ruach goes since it is from God, and returns to him.

3: Verses 20-21 The point the Preacher is making is that both men and beasts come from the same dust (cf. Job 10:9; 34:15; Ps. 104:29; 146:4) and since this is their essential origin they do not differ. Therefore man is not superior to the beasts in these senses. When one psalmist asks, ‘Dost thou work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise thee?’ (Ps. 88:10), and another says, ‘The dead do not praise the Lord’ (Ps. 115:17) he is simply saying, ‘What the living do now they do now; death means that they will do nothing more in this life, and we are only concerned with this life.’ When men are dead and animals are dead, then both are dead.

Comment : What we can observe is that man is superior to the beasts, by creation. This can be seen in that man is made in the image of God, and has been set above the animals (Gen. 1:26f.; 9:1-7; Ps. 8:3f.; I Cor. 11:7). Whilst it is true that the ruach (spirit) may depart from the nephesh (person) it does not mean the dissolution of the person. The Scriptures make it generally clear that man continues his existence beyond this life, and his end will be either the second death or eternal life. None of this can be said of animals who do not sin, do not have guilt, and are not destined to be to the praise of God’s glory.

The knowledge that man is but flesh which is ordained to turn back to dust is very humbling to man. To turn to dust is not ‘vanity’ (verse 19), but to live in a world of injustice, of God’s sifting is vanity if it seems to lead to nowhere but dust itself.

Verse 22 Koheleth now returns to his thesis of the first three chapters, namely, ‘If we live this life, let us not be worried about anything. Let us concentrate on the living itself without trying to develop a philosophy of it. God has made us to enjoy toil and pleasure, therefore let us so do.’ A man cannot know what will happen in this world after he dies, so that there is no point in thinking or worrying about it, as-say-in 2:18-19.

CHAPTER FOUR

KOHELETH CLAIMS IT IS BEST OF ALL NOT TO HAVE BEEN BORN

Ch. 4 : 1- 3: ‘Oppression and Oppressors’

- 3 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them.
- 3 And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive;
- 3 but better than both is he who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

- 4: **Verse 1** Here, in 4:1-3 the Preacher returns to the sad fact that because of wickedness, some people suffer. He has seen every kind of oppression and all forms of suffering. This covers quite a range. This oppression and suffering are, of course, facts of life. Nothing can be done about them. One thing that had always been a part of Eastern culture was the ritual of sympathy. Friends would come at times of crisis, times of sickness and death and would spend time in comforting the sufferers. Koheleth sees many occasions when no one would comfort.
- 4: **Verse 2** Who, then, would want to be alive in such misery, particularly when the power lies in the hands of the oppressor. Better not to be alive: better to be dead. Best of all would be never to have been born, in which case one would never see such suffering. We need to consider the strange matter of men having power over other men. This has a long history, and a sad one. People in power can be cruel, and when they are they do not bring comfort with their oppression.
Of course, we can demolish such arguments with the biblical teaching that suffering builds character, shapes us up to glory, and is never lost. Indeed it is a gift. The way one receives suffering determines whether the recipient will be twisted and embittered, or enriched and matured. However Koheleth is not on this tack at all.
- 4: **Verse 3** Koheleth is simply saying that suffering is a hard matter and it were better not to have it, or to have had it. To face the evil of this world is a distasteful thing-even traumatic-and with this statement most would agree. Of course there is no way out of it if we would live in this world.

KOHELETH'S APHORISMS

Ch. 4 : 4 - 16: 'Vanity and Wise Counsel'

- 4 Then I saw that all toil; and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour. This is also vanity and a striving after wind.
- 5 The fool folds his hands, and eats his own flesh.
- 6 Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.
- 7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun:
- 8 a person, who has no one, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is vanity and an unhappy business.
- 9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.
- 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow, but woe to him who falls alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up.
- 11 Again, if two lie together they are warm; but how can one be warm alone?
- 12 And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.
- 13 Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, who will no longer take advice, 14 even though he had gone from the prison to the throne or in his own kingdom had been born poor. 15 I saw all the living who move about under the sun, as well as that youth who was to stand in his place; 16 there was no end of all the people; he was over them all. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

- 4: Verse 4** It is patently clear-human hearts are such that all our toil comes from 'mutual jealousy' (J.B.). That is we have that quality of envy-qinah-mentioned in Proverbs 14:30, 'A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but passion (qinah) rots the bones.' Again in Proverbs 27:4 the writer tells us Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming; but who can stand before jealousy?

This qinah is an intensity of feeling, a drive of jealousy, a matter of strong passion. The person who is trying to get rich is driven by it, and knows he is in competition with others who likewise seek the same goal. The matter of toil-endeavour- and skill-achievement-brings no joy. The verse seems to indicate that the man achieves riches but does so not by deceit but in moral rectitude. Even so they are not satisfying. It is unsatisfying for the passion of it all leaves one empty.

- 4: Verse 5** is capable of two different meanings. The one on the surface seems to be that when one is a fool one lives by his own stored resources, but since these must give out a man is consumed of himself, and becomes nothing-all of which is true. The other meaning-which seems to be the correct one-is that a man who is not caught up in qinah,

although he be not intelligent, can enjoy the food he eats because he is not fretted by ambition, the compulsive drive of qinah.

4: Verse 6 moves on in the same vein as the two former verses. It is better to have much less of what an ambitious man has and to enjoy it in the serenity of life, than to seem to have so much more, when having that, one has only a compulsive drive and no satisfaction in what one obtains. Simply put, a bird in the hand in quietness is better than a thousand in the bush of compulsive acquisitiveness. Proverbs 15:16-17 are much along the same line, especially, 'Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.' We have been to great parties where the anger and envy and bitterness of people make the food stick in our throats. Enjoy what you have and don't morbidly think about what you do not have, but which you think you will get.

4: Verse 7-8 must be looked at by the sad principle Koheleth is always holding forth, namely 'under the sun'. This limiting of true life to secular dimensions is what makes it all seem tasteless. Here is a man who is a loner, a free-lance operator in life. He has no one else, and seems to like it better that way. Even so, he wishes to set up a safe and secure structure for himself. At present he is alone, but he will seek to set up a dynasty for himself, for a dynasty seems to perpetuate a man. Alone he struggles- and such loneliness is unnatural to man, even secular man. So he toils, denying himself the constant pleasure that comes to one who eats the little he has in quietness of spirit. Having denied himself such pleasures he feels justified in asking a lot of life, especially as he achieves his goal-driven on as he is by 'fame as [is] the spur'. To his disgust and anger, it all turns out to be empty. Even so he presses on, and on, and on, for the man who heaps up riches never has a heap big enough, i.e. There is no end to his toil'. He is compelled to go on and on. The illusion under which he suffers is that when the pile is huge so will his enjoyment be. Alas! If ever that were to seem to happen, he would, anyway, hear the voice, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' To which the Lord will add, 'So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God' (Luke 12:20-21). Psalm 39:6 is also apt,

Surely man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nought are they in turmoil;
man heaps up, and knows not who will gather.

Comment : The Scriptures have plenty to say about riches, and people who seek to be rich towards themselves. Paul's statement is a good summary, 'There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.'

4: Verses 9-12 Koheleth reverts to the picture he has in verse seven, 'a person who has no one'. Just from a utilitarian point of view it is better to have two. Mutual security is safer than individual autonomy and self-endeavour. Companionate life is rich. The man who works from qinah will scarcely be able to have another, since he works from rivalry and will think all others do likewise. 'It takes two to tango' presupposes the joy of tango-ing. The three-fold cord was the strongest cord known in Israel, and three, anyway, spoke of completeness, to say nothing of the Christian doctrine of the Triune God.

4: Verses 13-16 show the pageant of life. The old king-now unable to take advice-is foolish in the eyes of his subjects. He may even retain his throne-but to what purpose? Waiting in the wings-by reason of the sovereignty of history-stands a young man who is wise. He may even have been put in prison for his wisdom, but he will emerge, go straight to the throne, and become the new king. This shows the vanity of the old king, but the new king will one day become old. The romance of his enthronement will mean nothing to a new generation. They will regard him little. Such is the cavalcade of time, and such the emptiness when anything seeks to be a thing in itself, and an end in it. No matter what man tries he is faced with the futility of human endeavour. Time will always demonstrate this fact.

CHAPTER FIVE

KOHELETH'S APHORISMS-CONTINUED

Ch. 5 :1 - 7 : Koheleth Gives Good Advice on the Matter of Worship

- 1 Guard your steps, when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil.
- 2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to offer a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.
- 3 For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.
- 4 When you vow a vow to God, do not delay in paying it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow.
- 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.
- 6 Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?
- 7 For when dreams increase, empty words grow many: but do you fear God.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

5: Verse 1 is really saying 'Watch your step when you go to the house of God,' literally 'Keep a straight foot' (cf. Ps. 119:32, 101, 105). That is, do not go thoughtlessly. Koheleth's congregation would think they did this, but as the Preacher proceeds they are seeing themselves reflected in a mirror. If so they may be surprised. Regularity in worship can bring a familiarity which dims awe and reverence, and makes worship mindless. Formalism in religion is proverbial. 'The house of God' is generally a term for the Temple (cf. II Sam. 12:20; Ezra 1:4; I Chron. 9:11; Isa. 37:1), although it can be used for a synagogue. Religion is secularized without one knowing it. Men seek to use God for their own purposes of prosperity, power, moral assurance, emotional fulfilment and escape from conscience. All of this is utilizing God, not worshipping Him, i.e. giving Him his worth.

'*Draw near to listen*' tells us that there was teaching in the house of God. The priests were supposed to teach the people (cf. Hos. 4:6; cf. Ezra 8:1f.), and by the time of Koheleth there may have been lections, and even commentaries or homilies on the lections. One could, of course, listen to the worship, the singing, and look at the actions of worshippers. In any case it was better to come to the Temple to hear than to rush in with rash talk and the making of vows.

'The sacrifice of fools' must mean 'thoughtless sacrifice'. The famous statement of Samuel (I Sam. 15:22)-'To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat

of rams'-as also the two statements of Amos 5:24-25 and Micah 6:7-8. David's saying that 'the sacrifice of God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart', leads us to solemnity and responsibility of offering sacrifices. In Israel all the tabernacle and the furniture had to be purified by the blood of sacrifice before general sacrifices could be offered-sacrifice was a very solemn matter. The sacrifice of Christ was a sacred thing (Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:26; 10:12-14). Thus in the NT sacrifice is a special thing as we see in I Peter 2:4-5; Heb.12:28; 13:15. Thus those who treat the house of God with familiarity and offer mindless sacrifice are doing evil, even without knowing it (cf. Heb. 3:13: 'the deceit of sin'). Who would think he was doing evil when he offered sacrifice. In one way sacrifice is for evil!
See

Leviticus chapters 1 to 6 for the principle of sacrifice. Of course whilst worship was a matter of reverence it was also a matter of joy, and even of delight. Often prophesying sprang from the use of music (1 Sam. 10:5; II Kings 3:15; I Chron. 25:1).

5: Verse 2 The advice of this verse, 'Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be true' means that one ought not to talk as 'under the sun', but looking to heaven itself. Man is man and God is God, so what are we about talking to Him? Just as Jesus (Matt. 23:9) told his hearers they had one Father-'in heaven', so here Koheleth is telling them to come under awe, and not be rash in utterance. See Proverbs 15:2. Notice the warning against vain repetition in Matthew 6:7. This indicates an uneasy brash kind of worship and utterance. Talkative people tend to say little that is of much worth.

5:Verse 3 - with verse 7 - seems strange. J.B. translates it, **Dreaming comes from much worrying, foolish talk from a multiplicity of words.** The thought is that excessive occupation with business keeps a person tired, worried and lacking simple and sweet sleep. A thought is contained in Psalm 127:1-2. People who talk away for the sake of talking talk in a senseless way-to no point-'**blustering and bawling without sense and intelligence**' (Delitzch). We are reminded of Mr. Talkative in 'Pilgrim's Progress'.

5:Verses 4-5 seem to be in the same vein as verse two, i.e. mindlessly uttering words before God: see Deuteronomy 23:22-24; Numbers 30:1f; Psalm 50:14. For various vows-some of them foolish, or ill considered-see Genesis 28:11-22 (Jacob); Judges 11:30f. (Jephthah); I Samuel 14:24 (Saul). When we ask why people make vows, e.g. Saul and his foolish vows, it is often from guilt and a view of God that seeks to buy His favour.

5: Verse 6 The advice of this verse,'Let not your mouth lead you into sin', could refer to a foolish vow, or a vow that brings problems that are unnecessary, e.g. taking the vow of a Nazarite. It could mean, 'Don't say that which will bring guilt upon you and the need for expiation by you.' An example of this is seen in Acts 5:1ff. where Ananias and Sapphira did not have to vow thus. Here the word 'messenger' could be 'angel' as often a messenger is called (Hag. 1:13; Mal. 2:7; II Cor. 8:23; Rev. 1:20). He is God's representative. In Judaism an angel was supposed to preside over the altar so that it accords well here with verse two. Again true awe is lacking, so that foolishness and wildness of utterance lead into judgement.

5: Verse 7 naturally follows on. It is part of this wild spirit to dream fantasies and make wild schemes and statements. The antidote to this, says Koheleth is to fear God (cf. 12:13-14).

KOHELETH'S APHORISMS-CONT'D

Ch. 5 : 8 - 20 : Koheleth Gives Good Advice on the Matter Simplicity and Riches

8 If you see in a province the poor oppressed and justice and right taken violently away, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

9 But in all, a king is an advantage to a land with cultivated fields.

10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth, with gain: this is also vanity.

11 When goods increase, they increase who eat them: and what gain has their owner to see them with his eyes?

12 Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep.

13 There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt,

14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture; and he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand.

15 As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil, which he may carry away in his hand.

16 This is also a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go; and what gain has he that he has toiled for the wind,

17 and spent all his days in darkness and grief, in much vexation and sickness and resentment?

18 Behold, what I have seen to be good and to be fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot.

19 Every man also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and find enjoyment in his toil-this is the gift of God.

20 For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

5: Verses 8-9 Koheleth now speaks of the oppression of the poor. The poor themselves are prone to despair, but despair does not help. Koheleth is enjoining realism. He is saying that this oppression has always obtained. It is a matter of grade. The one who is above another uses his position to advantage. One official is above another, watching for his advantage. This is the way it has always been. Justice (*mishpat*) is objective-that which is the right of all men, and right (*tsedek*) is righteousness that is subjective, i.e. proper living. These two the poor man is denied, but none ought to be amazed, for this is how things are where there is officialdom. Of course poverty and oppression of the poor were forbidden by law in Israel, but it seems Koheleth is using human 'wisdom', i.e. he is saying this is how things are de facto even if they ought not to be this way de jure. His reference to the king could mean that in the ultimate a country is better off for a king. Perhaps he will see some justice done, and the oppressing profiteers curbed.

5: Verse 10-12 The Preacher is saying that the desire to possess money is insatiable, and the rich man is driven compulsively to acquire more. Being a wealthy man he will not be satisfied. Money can give him no essential satisfaction. So then this is vanity, i.e. pointless action and possession. He is saying in verse eleven that if a person's wealth increases, then he will have many retainers he is bound to employ, and they will eat much of what he acquires. So, though a man make much profit, in what has he-as a person-profited? Simply that he has more money to look at than others. The simple fact is that a labourer does not have all this bother. He enjoys what he has, and sleeps well, but the rich man has sleepless nights caused by what he owns, and the care of it.

5:Verse 13-17 Koheleth continues the problems of riches. It is one thing to possess riches, it is another not to suffer by reason of them. A man who hopes to found or continue a family dynasty may lose his riches in a venture, and then where is he? His son will be a pauper, and he himself will go as naked to death as he came into life, so there has been nothing of true wisdom in his efforts. He has painfully tried to acquire the wealth he eventually lost, and in the acquiring of he has suffered much, emotionally, i.e. 'vexation, sickness and resentment'.

Comment : Koheleth is careful to show the inane nature of life which comes from 'vanity and a striving after wind'. Nothing substantial resolves itself. So in 2:21 the earning of what seems to be substantial patrimony and leaving it to someone who did not toil for it is 'a great evil'. Here (verse 16 shows a man can 'toil for wind') a man can spend all his life in the suffering which comes from vanity, namely 'darkness and grief, vexation, sickness and resentment'. On the surface-the open appearance-it seems that the vanities give man something to occupy him. To the contrary-the so-called life of vanity is a painful thing. 'Grief, vexation, sickness and resentment' have a strong and horrible modern ring about them.

5: 18-20 Koheleth turns to the matter of enjoying what one has in this world-'under the sun'. The best thing is just to enjoy what one has in eating, drinking and working. This is not just a 'counsel of compensation', i.e. making the best of a bad or indifferent world. To the contrary: the time a person has in this world is given by God, so ought to enjoy what he has in that time. To some God has given 'wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them'. That is they would not have this wealth, or, having it, they would not enjoy it, unless God were also to give the ability to enjoy it. Enjoyment is a gift of God. This takes the 'flat earth' or 'horizontal'-i.e. the autonomous endeavour of man-to be futile, but the life given as a gift by God to be enjoyable. The man who knows this sort of life will scarcely notice time pass, for it will never drag. Again it is God who has 'kept him occupied with joy in his heart'. God in His goodness has made life good for the man who will receive it all from Him.

CHAPTER SIX

KOHELETH'S APHORISMS-CONTINUED

Ch. 6 : 1 - 12 : Koheleth Talks of Men Who Do Not Have the Gift of Enjoyment From God

- 1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it lies heavy upon men:
- 2 a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them; this is vanity; it is a sore affliction.
- 3 If a man begets a hundred children, and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but he does not enjoy life's good things, and also has no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better off than he.
- 4 For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered;
- 5 moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he.
- 6 Even though he should live a thousand years twice told, yet enjoy no good-do not all go to the one place?
- 7 All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.
- 8 For what advantage has the wise man over the fool? And what does the poor man have who knows how to conduct himself before the living?
- 9 Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a striving after wind.
- 10 Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.
- 11 The more words, the more vanity, and what is man the better?
- 12 For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun.

This chapter constitutes the one whole, taking up the subject of the man who does not enjoy life.

- 6: Verse 1** Koheleth speaks of an evil which man knows and which lies heavily upon him. This evil of which man cannot divest himself is that a man cannot enjoy the riches he has.
- 6: Verse 2** We notice that God gives the wealth, by which we may understand that God permits a man the accumulation of riches, but God does not give the gift of enjoying them (cf. 5:19). To have riches and not to be able to enjoy them is 'a sore affliction'.
- 6: Verses 3-6** Another matter mentioned is '*having no burial*'. This seems bit mysterious, but somehow the thought is present to the man of riches that he will not be given an honourable family burial and sleep with his ancestors. Perhaps more than anything this

was the desired end of the Eastern man. When the writer speaks of having many children, and living long he is saying, virtually, it were better for a man never have to be born-or to be stillborn-than to come into this world for the 'evil' which will always lie 'heavy upon him', i.e. non-enjoyment of acquired riches and invested toil. The stillborn foetus has gone into death without the moiling and toiling of this life with its '*no-enjoyment*'. The stillborn one goes to exactly the same place-and goes directly, without suffering-to the same place as the deceased rich man. Notice, too, that Koheleth speaks of the stillborn one finding rest rather than the rich man. Does he not find rest beyond this life?

Much of this may seem to be unnecessarily sad until we remember that it is 'under the sun' (verse 1). The rich person has regard, simply, for this life, and not for the eternal dimensions within his own heart (3:11). It is not really immortality about which he is thinking.

6: Verse 7 Koheleth tells us that man puts everything into preserving himself, working hard at it, but never reaching satisfaction. Something in man (cf. 3:11) is not satisfied with himself when he thinks in terms of his appetite. Actually the word can be translated 'longing'. If this be the case then Koheleth is saying that what man wants is fulfilment, the satiation of his longing, and perhaps in the sense that Augustine spoke of man being made for God.

6: Verse 8 Man may be wise in this world, but if that is his thrust then he is no better off than the fool, who probably is no different in this one respect. The poor man appears here to be one who conducts himself as though he is rich or has sufficient, when underneath he is starving. He wants to give the appearance to the world of success.

6: Verse 9 could almost be translated, 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush', i.e. be content with what you have, and don't always see the grass in the next paddock is greenest, i.e. learn to enjoy what you have. Always wanting more for the maw is futile and vanity. This, again, is man never satisfied with what he sees, always looking for other and for more. This is vanity-the emptiness and insubstantiality of life of which Koheleth constantly speaks, but man keeps desiring, thinking this will fulfil him, when the very desire is itself counter-productive..

6:Verse 10 really draws our attention to the fact that 'under the sun' is a flat existence, whilst reference to God-'the one stronger than he' shows man's frailty. Verse 10 is really saying two things,

- (i) man has been named man-of the earth, an earthling' (Gen. 2:7; cf. Eccl. 3:20),
- (ii) that man is thus known for what he is, i.e. his limitations, his inability to change anything essentially and
- (iii) that what happens to him is the destiny chosen by God for him (cf. 1:15), and cannot be a cause for his complaint, i.e. he cannot complain about the creation and the events of his life (cf. Isa. 64:8; Rom. 9:19-24; cf. Isa. 46:8-11; 48:3-5, 12-16).

6: Verse 11 means 'the more things accumulated, or the more words uttered-both possibly a form of self-vindication-far from accomplishing more, are vanity and emptiness, accomplishing nothing'. This is underlined in 12:11b, where Koheleth says that the reading and writing of man's books (i.e. the use and study of endless words) does not get us any closer to the matter or its meaning. We note it is still 'under the sun'.

6: Verse 12 The words of this verse may seem to be extremely pessimistic, but they are not. Koheleth is saying that man cannot know, let alone determine what is ahead of him. If he thinks he knows what is best for himself, and seeks to put these things into fulfillment he will find they evade him, have no substance, and prove to be vanity and a striving after wind, i.e. 'passes like a show', and is not the substance. The fact that his days are 'the few days of his vain life' means that their number is fixed anyway. The nature of their vanity is what-in one sense-man fixes for Koheleth shows elsewhere that our days do not need to be vain. We do not have to live life as a shadow. So he concludes by saying that man doesn't know what is ahead of him, let alone what will obtain here-'under the sun'-when he has gone from this world. We see throughout the book that it is important to a man to know what will happen after he has gone. Is this because he senses he ought to be a person of destiny, and thus influence-for good-the destiny of others, or is it just his constant anxiety that everything will have proved the vanity of life under the sun'?

CHAPTER SEVEN

KOHELETH'S APHORISMS-CONTINUED

Ch. 7:1- 14: Koheleth Dispenses Useful and Thoughtful Proverbs

- 1 A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death, than the day of birth.
- 2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart.
- 3 Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.
- 4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
- 5 It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.
- 6 For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is vanity.
- 7 Surely oppression makes the wise man foolish, and a bribe corrupts the mind.
- 8 Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.
- 9 Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.
- 10 Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?' for it is not from wisdom that you ask this.
- 11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.
- 12 For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.
- 13 Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?
- 14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

- 7: Verse 1** Koheleth is saying that as ointment is a precious commodity so is the day of death, i.e. more than the day of birth, and in doing so he is not even concerned about a good name or reputation. He is simply making use of a comparison. Is a reputation more precious than a valuable ointment? Yes! Then so is a death-day more to be regarded than a birth-day. Why? Because we need to look at things thoughtfully. Why would he say such a thing? The Preacher is saying that a serious look at life is better than inanity and frivolity.

- 7: Verse 2** In this verse the Preacher carries on the principle. He is saying that it is salutary to go to the house of mourning than to be light-hearted and mindless in the place of feasting. When we realize that the mourning lasted for at least 7 days and often up to 30 days, people were thoughtful, even if grieved. They ate the bread and wine 'of affliction' (Jer. 16:7). Seriousness would lead them into contemplation, and death would be faced for what it is, and not be ignored mindlessly.
- 7: Verse 3** Other ideas naturally follow, i.e. 'Sorrow is better than laughter for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad,' meaning that when laughter is shallow and sorrow leads to reality then the heart benefits. Of course Koheleth is speaking on a plane that transcends vanity.
- 7: Verse 4** Again the Preacher is contrasting empty mirth with the thoughtful seriousness of the wise. This is not our modern way of thinking, which is to protect ourselves from any form of suffering. 'Amusing Ourselves to Death' is the title of a modern book, reflecting our hedonistic view of life.
- 7: Verse 5** So the rebuke that comes from wisdom-though no one likes rebukes-is to be preferred to the vapid songs of mere merry-makers.
- 7: Verse 6** As 'crackling nettles under kettles' burn quickly, achieve no fruitful result and leave the kettle cold so is the laughter of fools-pretending reality but achieving nothing.
- 7: Verse 7** The Preacher states a fact of life-'oppression makes the wise man foolish'. A little oppression can be withstood. A lot is disastrous. Is Koheleth warning the wise or rebuking the oppressor? In the midst of serious-mindedness let one remember the way a bribe can corrupt the mind of even a good man.
- 7: Verse 8** Things may look good enough in the early stages but it is the last chapter that counts; steadfastness of spirit guards against the foolishness which can come from a proud spirit. In the end it will be seen what was the better course.
- 7: Verse 9** Koheleth now gives some sanctions, advice against certain habits or actions. 'Quick to anger' equals 'hasty in spirit', i.e. impatient and given over to vexation. The Book of Proverbs constantly refers to this weakness and folly (e.g. 14:29-31), or it is the pursuit of fools.
- 7: Verse 10** Don't speak about 'the good old days' or complain about the present ones, for such questioning does not arise from wisdom. Obviously it arises from foolishness. This does not mean that present times are good. Perhaps they were bad in Koheleth's time, but comparisons of the past with the present will prove to no point, and so, be profitless.
- 7: Verses 11-12** An inheritance is something which comes to us, not having been earned, and is delightful. As delightful is wisdom to those who are alive in this world. There is also the understanding that an inheritance is something we receive, and then hold-

having benefited from it-to pass on to our children. This, too, is a delight. To have wisdom must be one of the richest gifts we receive, and it gives security and protection in life. In Proverbs 13:8 money ransoms a life, but in Eccl. 9:11 Koheleth gives us the quaint and moving story of wisdom that delivers a city. Here wisdom and knowledge are synonyms, so that both combine to make a good defence in life against the things which might threaten it.

7: Verses 13-14 ‘Consider the work of God’ would seem to issue from the wisdom one now has. One contemplates all things so that when what is ‘crooked’ happens one does not seek to straighten it out. God has His purpose in it. Koheleth has spoken of things which are ‘evil’ to a person, yet everything has its purpose (Prov. 4). God has made what is crooked and what is straight, i.e. everything is under His sovereignty and it is best recognized, enjoyed when it is good, accepted when it is not and so left that way. Indeed God does all things deliberately to conceal our destiny.

KOHELETH BRINGS FRESH USEFUL ADVICE

Ch. 7 : 15 - Ch. 8 : 1: Koheleth Dispenses Useful Advice on How to Live What is Otherwise ‘a Vain Life’

15 In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing.

16 Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself otherwise; why should you destroy yourself?

17 Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time? **18** It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all.

19 Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers that are in a city.

20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

21 Do not give heed to all the things that men say, lest you hear your servant cursing you;

22 your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.

23 All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, ‘I will be wise’; but it was far from me.

24 That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?

25 I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness.

26 And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

27 Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, adding one thing to another to find the sum, **28** which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.

29 Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices.

Ch. 8 :1 Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his countenance is changed.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

7: Verse 15 Koheleth commences a new section. He first of all speaks about 'my vain life'. How are we to take this? We have seen his enquiries into life in the first few chapters and these brought him to see that everything was vanity and a striving after wind. Yet he has indicated that the man who fears God does not live a vain life (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 12:13). Life is only vain when it is 'under the sun', or horizontal. Is he then speaking to horizontal listeners (readers) and giving them advice. It would seem so. He is telling them how to cope with horizontal life, perhaps if they simply persist in this kind of life.

7: Verses 15-18 The passage from verse fifteen to eighteen may appear to be calling for moderation, i.e. don't be overmuch a righteous man, a wicked man or a fool,' i.e. be temperate in whatever direction you are headed. This can hardly be the case. The Preacher says in verse fifteen, 'There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness'. Is this because the righteous man absolutizes his righteousness? Certainly the wicked man absolutizes his wicked life. Surely being 'overmuch righteous' is making a fetish of that disposition-it is an absolutizing of the one thing, whether it be good or bad. It is suggested that Naboth (I Kings 21) was a righteous man but perished because of his insistence on retaining his vineyard, and that Jezebel triumphed over him in her wickedness only to perish-in turn-because of her 'overmuch wickedness'. Even so, it would seem that there is strong 'self-righteousness' here as well as strong 'self-wickedness' and in both cases the bent of the person is self-destructive. The key to true living-not being immoderate in disposition and intention, and not absolutizing anything-is to fear God. This is one of the keys to the book (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13), and so in Proverbs 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', and 'the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life'. The man who fears God emerges from the problems of excessive emphasis on one thing or another.

7: Verse 19 The single wise man-the one who fears God-has more practical wisdom than the collective wisdom of the eldership of a city, since the wisdom of the first issues from God, and of the second may simply derive from human calculation.

7: Verse 20 is very much in the vein of I Kings 8:46ff. where Solomon recognizes man's thrust to sinfulness-'there is no man that does not sin'. A wise man will not ever be nagging at the person who fails, but will take that one's failure in his stride, i.e. come to terms with it. Enormous human anger exists against human sinfulness, but it is best to recognize the reality and not be phased by it. This does not mean indifference to it.

7: Verses 21-22 Koheleth is then saying

- (a) do not always be concentrating on the sinfulness of a person, and
- (b) don't be over-worried when you are criticized, i.e. do not take it to heart, for you must remember you have done the same. It is the way of humanity so do not be disturbed by it.

7: Verses 23-25 The Preacher is recommending the advice he has given because it has come out of wisdom: even so whilst he determined to be wise he saw that reality evaded him. In verse 24 he acknowledges things are too deep for him to understand. The Jerusalem Bible has, 'Reality is beyond my grasp; and deep, so deep. Who can discover it?'. We have seen something of this in 1:12-2:23. His wisdom is useful for men who live on the human plane-it is human wisdom. He reiterates the fact that human research cannot answer the ultimate question of life and death. On the one hand a man cannot know 'the sum of things', i.e. cannot properly rationalize all things (cf. 3:11-by searching he cannot find out the end from the beginning). Nor can he know and understand the irrationality found amongst men. No one really understands human madness.

7: Verses 26-28 In these verses Koheleth opens up surprisingly on women, especially the promiscuous one-the dangerous one. In 2:8 he briefly mentioned women-'concubines, man's delight'. Here in verses 26-28 we might think Koheleth is disillusioned with women, is a misogynist or even a masculist, but we would be wrong. Ecclesiastes 9:9 (cf. 6:12; 7:15) makes it clear that marriage is rich to the Preacher, amongst the other good things of life. He is speaking about a certain kind of woman-not all women. To begin with the woman is not a wise woman, but a deceitful trickster who enchains her captive. She can do nothing to the man who pleases God. See 2:26. The man who pleases God is the one who fears Him (12:13), i.e. the one who is in the will of God-this man will escape the woman, but none other. He simply chronicles the fact. Doubtless the man-woman question exercises him deeply and he is trying to make a whole out of the parts he has discovered but sheer addition or aggregation does not present him with the answer. Koheleth admits that he has found one man in a thousand better than the rest, but to date no woman who was such. Koheleth is not summing up man and woman as such, but simply saying what they lack-with rare exceptions.

7: Verse 29 Notice that in verses 26-29 he uses the term 'found' seven times. Koheleth can only state what he has found, not what his wisdom has worked out. Verse 29 is about the only thing he has truly found, namely that man as created was an upright (uncomplicated) creature, but all that has changed. Man continually devises, rather than remains attuned to his first state-the state in which he was created. The Jerusalem Bible has a fine translation of this last verse of the chapter, 'This, however, you must know: I find that God made man simple; man's complex problems are of his own devising.

8: Verse 1 Finally-here-Koheleth is asking whether there is, in fact, anyone like the wise man. Is he, possibly, the 'one man among a thousand', or is he simply making a call for comparison? Who is like the wise man and can interpret things in order to make them known, so much so that his newly discovered understanding makes him cheerful, and the hardness which comes from cynicism or disillusionment is absent, or, perhaps, dissipated? Well, there is no one-it seems-who is like the wise man. He is the one who can understand all that Koheleth puzzles over. Can he be Koheleth himself, who having gone through some dark tunnel of not-understanding, now comes out in the end, so that his assessment of man-as in verse 29-explains to him all the elements 'under the sun' which have puzzled him? Whatever may be the case, Koheleth is

- (i) asking whether there is a wise man who can understand all things, and
- (ii) is saying that wisdom softens the face of a man when it comes to him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KOHELETH BRINGS FRESH USEFUL ADVICE

Ch. 8 : 2 - 8: Koheleth Dispenses Useful Advice on How to Live What is Otherwise 'a Vain Life'

- 2 Keep the king's command, and because of your sacred oath be not dismayed;
3 go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases.
4 For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say unto him, 'What are you doing?'
5 He who obeys a command will meet no harm, and the mind of a wise man will know the time and way. 6
For every matter has its time and way, although man's trouble lies heavy upon him.
7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?
8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or authority over the day of death; there is no discharge from war, nor
will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.
9 All this I observed while applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while man lords it over man to
his hurt.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

- 8: Verse 2** The Preacher is still dispensing wisdom as how to live on the human plane. One of the matters he faces is authority-here represented by the king-and how one should act in the face of authority. Doubtless Romans 13: 1ff. would have been valuable for Koheleth to refer to, but he is simply saying, 'When you go into the presence of the king, and especially as you have shown obedience to him, do not be dismayed the way things work out.'
- 8: Verse 3** One should then be prepared to leave the king's presence without waiting for any reasons, knowing that he does what he wishes.
- 8: Verse 4** The king is supreme in authority, and none may question him. Israel was a theocracy, but rulers stand on their rights, often without reference to God Who instituted them. I Samuel 8:18-22 deals with the beginning of Israel's royal government, a government which was distasteful to Samuel the prophet-priest-judge. Koheleth is saying rulership cannot be fought. As in other cases he is counselling realistic acceptance of a situation, however unpalatable it may be to his readers/hearers.
- 8: Verse 5** If you obey his command-difficult as it may seem to you- then in the ultimate you

will meet no harm.’ In the last half of the verse Koheleth says, ‘for the mind of a wise man will know the time and the way,’ by which he means things may not always appear right, but the time will come for the change of these elements. Examples of this are Jonathan’s perception of his father’s-Saul’s-wrong injunction not to eat food whilst the battle was in progress (I Sam. 19:4-6), and Nathan’s eventual confrontation of David for his sin relating to Bathsheba and Uriah her husband (II Sam. 12:1-14). In the latter case the prophet was careful how he brought God’s rebuke to the king. In Esther 7:2-4 Esther was able to know ‘the time and way’ and so approach the king.

8: Verses 6-7 Koheleth encourages the man who may have suffered under the king that God’s times come to fulfilment in due course, even though a man may seem under calamity at the time. No one-perhaps here Koheleth means both king and troubled one-knows what may happen, for (verse 7) man cannot order such times-not even the king.

8: Verses 8-9 continue the argument and thought. The power of a person-even the king-is limited because

- (i) no one has power to imprison the spirit of a man. Even in a physical prison he needs to be imprisoned-his spirit can be free,
- (ii) no one-save God-has authority over death. God alone has that, so that even if a king kills a man it is not he who has decided that time of death,
- (iii) there is no discharge from this war of death: each man must face it himself, and no other, and
- (iv) wickedness for all its seeming power, cannot discharge a man from death.

Koheleth sums up this section on the reign of kings and their decisions by saying he rationally observed all that is done ‘under the sun’ and had seen the outcome when one man lords it over another to his hurt. The conclusion is really what is contained in verses 5 to 8, i.e. if a man obeys a command that will be best. The times and events are all in the sovereign hand of God, and not in the hands of the king, or even in one who might wish to rebel.

KOHELETH CONTINUES HIS USEFUL ADVICE

Ch. 8 : 10 - 17: Koheleth Discusses The Matter of Wicked People, God-Given Enjoyment and the Inability to Rationalize God’s Work ‘Under the Sun’

10 Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.

11 Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set to do evil.

12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those that fear God, because they fear before him;

13 but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

14 There is a vanity which takes place on earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said this also is vanity.

15 And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat, and drink, and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.

16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see what is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep;

17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

8: Verses 10-13 Koheleth makes a contrast between the wicked person, and the man who fears God. In his usual realistic way he discerns the irony of life. The wicked have been wicked yet it was their custom to go 'in and out of the holy place', i.e. worship at the Temple, and make sacrifices, and so be accepted as part of the congregation. They were even 'praised in the city', i.e. in Jerusalem. Not to be buried was a deep disgrace; even criminals, suicides and enemies of Israel were given the honour of burial (cf. Jer. 16:6; 22:19; Deut. 21:22f; II Sam. 17:23; Josh. 8:29; Amos 2:1). These wicked however were given honourable burials and were praised. Doubtless some of these may been in the Preacher's congregation. Doubtless many of the wicked think they are not, this being the deceit of sin (Heb. 3:13; cf. II Pet. 3:3-4). Koheleth says, 'This is vanity', his usual statement for something that is wrong, mindless and empty.

8: Verses 11-13 Here the Preacher is denying that the wicked get away with their evil-doing, even though that is how it appears on the surface. If we look at 9:3 we will see his conclusion about evil-doers. Scripture often points to God's judgement and even the immediacy of it, e.g. Psalm 7:11 (cf. 10:1-18; 90:9; Rom. 1:18, 32). The seeming dilatoriness of God to judge and punish (Rom. 3:25b; Acts 17:30; cf. Gen. 15:16; Luke 18:7-8) encourages the evil person so that the heart is 'fully set to do evil', which corresponds with Romans 1:28ff. Yet the thrust of the verses is that even though the wicked man seems to get away with it, he will not (cf. 9:3) It is here that the subject of the fear of God is again brought into view. As we have seen in 12:13 'The whole of man is to fear God and keep his commandments'. So, 'it will be well with those that fear God' even though it may often seem not to be so, and the wicked may seem to prosper. He shall not prolong his days 'which are but a shadow', i.e. have no substance to them and are thus 'vanity'. Whilst his years may seem to be more than the life of some righteous men, in the long run it will be shown that the wicked do not escape punishment. They cannot-of themselves-prolong their days beyond this life, nor continue in their evil after the reckoning of God's judgement!

Still realistic the Preacher recognizes that often the righteous seem to suffer as though they were the ones under judgement, and the wicked as though they were the righteous (verse 14). This to him-at face value-is vanity. He does not attempt to explain it because 'vanity' means that as things appear such makes no sense.

This leads him to the thought of verse 15 that the functional thing for man to do 'under the sun' is to enjoy life to the full. Notice that it is God who gives him the ability to do this, i.e. in both toil and eating and drinking. God gives it to him 'under the sun', i.e. where man is on the horizontal he can have enjoyment and pleasure. He has said this before in 2:24-26a and 5:18-20.

8: Verses 16-17 Koheleth here goes over old ground, possibly on the basis of repetitive teaching, seeking to drive home the fact that he presents, namely when one seeks to develop a rationale of life he is unable to do so. He may keep awake to do this-putting all his energies into the research-or he may be unable to sleep because the mass of thinking never lets him rest (see 2:1-23; 3:11). He know that man 'cannot find out the end from the beginning', i.e. cannot absolutize all that is in the universe, comprehend it it, develop a conclusive philosophy and so know what it is all about. The wisest man is unable to do so, even if he claims he can do it, or has done it.

CHAPTER NINE

KOHELETH CONTINUES HIS USEFUL ADVICE

Ch. 9 : 1 - 17 : Koheleth Continues Discussing The Enigma of Life, the Many Matters Which Keep Confronting Man in This Life

- 1 But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate man does not know. Everything before them is vanity,
- 2 since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good man, so is the sinner; and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath.
- 3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate comes to all; also the hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts whilst they live, and after that they go to the dead.
- 4 But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.
- 5 For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost.
- 6 Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more for ever any share in all that is done under the sun.
- 7 Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do.
- 8 Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head.
- 9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.
- 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.
- 11 Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.
- 12 For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.
- 13 I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.
- 14 There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it.
- 15 But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor wise man.
- 16 But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.
- 17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

9: Verse 1 The Preacher states that he has kept all these things in his mind, not losing them, and has seen that whether we are good or bad we are in the hand of God-but what the outcome will be, or what will happen to us-love or hate-we do not know. Everything before both the righteous and the evil is vanity. Man cannot control it or utilize it for his good. Koheleth speaks of 'one fate', and most likely means not only ultimate death, but the progress towards it.

9: Verses 2-6 In these verses he is showing that all things are in God's hands and whether one is good or evil, and does things good or evil our human effort will not-of itself-determine what happens in life, or the outcome at the end. In verse 3 he says, 'this is an evil', i.e. not just what happens to us at the end, but the fact that it inevitably will. This is the way God determines it. It is 'an evil' in the sense that no one can change what God will do.

In verse 5 he is really saying it is better to be regarded as very little in this world rather than having been someone outstanding only to die and be forgotten. It is almost like 'While there's life there's hope', though one can only anticipate death. At least it has not yet come! Whilst we may have rewards in this life for our actions, yet it is better to be alive without rewards than to be dead with them, even if such language seems somewhat contradictory. In verse 6 we are shown that love, hate and envy alike are transient and will have vanished with death, so that they that have done them will have no participation in further living-'all that is done under the sun'.

Comment : Koheleth underlines this by saying that through death all the things of love and hate and envy have been finished. To see this now is to see them as vanity, vain entities, seeing we cannot go back to them. It does not seem that the Preacher is saying being good or evil, sacrificing or not sacrificing, swearing vows or not swearing vows are inconsequential. No: he is saying that we all meet the same end eventually, cannot know the outcome of our lives, and must remember all things are in the hand of God.

9: Verse 7 then, is concluding or reiterating what Koheleth has said so many times before (2:24; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18; 6:12; 8:15), i.e. 'Don't be moved by the workings of life-towards death and the end of things 'under the sun'. Enjoy these things you do now since all is in God's hands. Just enjoy what you have.'

9: Verse 8 The idea of white garments and the use of oil on the head is that of happy prosperity and ways of enjoying life.

9: Verse 9 takes the practical matter of being married-spouses should enjoy each other, in conformity with what is said in verse 8-not worrying about the outcome of life, so that whatever one is about at any given point of life he should do it with enthusiasm, not phased by the vanity of all things, especially death.

9: Verse 10 The conclusion of all of this section is that one should attend to life now, as one lives it, doing it with enthusiasm and vim for in Sheol-the grave- there is no place for these. This, as we have seen before, is not a comment on death and the existence beyond death, but a comment about concentrating on the present and its life and action.

9: Verses 11-12 What Koheleth has said in verses 2-10 he repeats in principle in verses 11 and 12. In line with his ‘under the sun’ reasoning he says it is no ultimate advantage in being highly skilled in anything when it comes to the matter of life’s outcome—the grave. Death comes suddenly to all of us, and what we have been or done in life does not cancel that out. ‘A fish taken in an evil net’ is one illustration of how death comes. A net is not in itself evil, but it appears evil to the fish. Death, of itself is not evil to a person, but it seems to be so to the one confronted by it. Even I Corinthians 15:28 says, ‘the last enemy . . . is death’. We might misunderstand Koheleth if we were not careful. His might seems to be a counsel of despair, and one which gives no values to life. What he is trying to get us to avoid doing is to give values to what we do in this world as though our actions intrinsically have such value—i.e. of themselves. We should live life to the full knowing God has approved of us, and so we ought not to go on trying to work everything out. We must leave that to God for we are all-righteous and evil alike—in His hands, as indeed are all our times.

9: Verses 13-16 Koheleth is certainly not cynical of the events of life. He gives true value to genuine wisdom and authentic action stemming from such wisdom. His fine story of the poor wise man who saved a city by his wisdom is an example of something very wonderful. If this wisdom had profited the man it might seem to have deeper value, but the Preacher simply concludes that such wisdom is a very good thing, and certainly much better than might. Might did not win the city for the enemy, nor save it for the leaders of the city: only true wisdom could do that.

9: Verses 17-18 So then, ‘wisdom is better than weapons of war’. ‘The shouting of a ruler among fools’ may seem impressive to the fools, but words of wisdom spoken in quietness are genuine and of practical value. This is a good saying. Koheleth, nevertheless, drops in a warning. Whilst wisdom may obtain, yet a sinner can destroy good, even the good wisdom would bring.

CHAPTER TEN

KOHELETH FURTHER CONTINUES HIS USEFUL ADVICE

Ch. 10 : 1 - 20: Koheleth Continues Discussing the Matters of Wisdom and Folly in both Low and High Places

- 1 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off an evil odour; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.
- 2 A wise man's heart inclines him towards the right, but a fool's heart towards the left.
- 3 Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.
- 4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for deference will make great amends for great offences.
- 5 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler:
- 6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.
- 7 I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on foot like slaves.
- 8 He who digs a pit will fall into it; and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.
- 9 He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them
- 10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, he must put forth more strength; but wisdom helps one to succeed.
- 11 If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer.
- 12 The words of a wise man's mouth win him favour, but the lips of a fool consume him.
- 13 The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is wicked madness.
- 14 A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?
- 15 The toil of a fool wearies him, so that he does not know the way to the city.
- 16 Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!
- 17 Happy are you, O land, where your king is the son of free men, and your princes feast at the proper time, or strength, and not for drunkenness!
- 18 Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.
- 19 Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything.
- 20 Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bedchamber curse the rich; for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

- 10: Verse 1** This verse really belongs to the end of chapter 10. Just as 'one sinner destroys much good', so beautiful perfume is spoiled by dead flies embedded in it. Perfume is highly prized, but better no perfume than spoiled perfume! On this basis a little folly makes wisdom and honour to be discredited, when they ought to be held in high esteem. Koheleth may be having a criticism of human wisdom-it is so fragile-but foolishness is not merely silliness. It is sinfulness, wrong doing.
- 10: Verse 2** commences a critique of folly or the foolish man. Here 4:4-9 needs to be read again, in order to understand the fool (Cf. Ps. 14:1). The heart is where wisdom on the one hand and folly on the other originates. The 'right' is for dexterity, competence, 'right' thinking and action. The left represents folly (cf. Ps. 16:8; Matt 25:33.)
- 10: Verse 3** Here either the fool is set on a right path and spoils his walk, or he is on the road where foolishness and mischief are normally absent, but by the way he walks he shows to all the fool that he is. Conduct is the measure of our wisdom or folly. Some translations have 'He says of everyone, he is a fool' (cf. Titus 1:15).
- 10: Verse 4** commences observations of folly in high places. If one is in a position to be in the presence of a despotic ruler, or working for that one, then when the ruler is angry with you don't react against his attitude, and so protest, leave, or resign. Be mature, letting the moment pass without comment on the principle of 'Least said, soonest ended'. Doubtless one is in 'the right' but lacks wisdom if he insists upon his right.
- 10: Verses 5-7** In these verses Koheleth continues speaking about folly in high places. The evil (cf. 5:12; 6:1) is that the ruler, through misjudgment, sets up an incompetent person in a place of authority, but does not use one who has the needed ability (cf. 9:11). Verse 7 repeats the same idea as 6. Riding on horses is normally the lot of high-born people.
- 10: Verses 8-11** Here in these 4 verses we have a section on man's folly in action, although it is difficult to know whether the actions are at the behest of the ruler, and show his folly, or those of any foolish person. In modern terms it would seem to be some one who is accident-prone! In verse 8 digging a pit could simply be an exercise in which one injures oneself, or it could be the digging of a pit for another, as breaking through a wall could be to do harm to another, only to meet with hurt to oneself. One might start a task without wisdom. In the East snakes find a hiding place in mud walls. In verse 9 the same principle obtains-one sets out to do a certain task, but, because of folly, is injured. Verse 10 shows that brute strength is required if one's tools are not prepared. Wisdom, then, would be to prepare them, or to find another way of accomplishing the same ends. Often a person with a blunt axe will waste his strength out of sheer obstinacy. Verse 11 is saying that a snake will bite unless charmed, but will not wait to be charmed. One must be prepared, and get in quickly, or not venture in that direction at all.

10: Verses 12-15 speak of a fool and his words. In verse 12 right-speaking wins acceptance, and proceeds from wisdom, but a fool when he speaks brings about his own downfall-something that need not have happened had he remained quiet. In verse 13 we see that the foolish man starts off babbling away, making statements which he then has to vindicate and he is taken on and on until he creates 'wicked madness', i.e. a wicked irrationality. The person who is thus carried by his own foolish eloquence destroys himself. Verse 14 says the babbler speaks without wisdom-like 'Mr Talkative' in Pilgrim's Progress. Because he does not understand the future-where everything is going-he does not even understand the present. He has no clear line of thinking. As for what will be in posterity he is totally clueless. Verse 15 sums up the fool who works hard at what he is doing, but not hard at knowing wisdom. He can direct no one anywhere, i.e. 'He does not have the sense to come in out of the rain', or, 'He does not know what day it is'.

10: Verses 16-20 What follows in verses 16 to 20 could be called 'General folly in society'. Verses 16 and 17 show the foolish and wise kinds of government which may come through circumstances, either because that the king is immature, and his nobles who should be governing usefully are intent on feasting, or there is a king who is 'the son of free men', i.e. well-born, and he has excellent courtiers, to whom food is for nourishment with a view to executing government properly.

10: Verse 18 is a general statement, namely that just as a building needs maintenance to remain ship-shape and useful, so neglect brings ruin, i.e. 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance'. Koheleth may be referring to the indolent rulers of verse 16.

10: Verse 19 can mean that a person who has bread, wine and money can enjoy life. 'Money answers everything' means that 'there is nothing money cannot buy'. Is Koheleth again urging enjoyment of life, or is he saying that the slothful, self-centred immature king and his courtiers are simply self-indulgent, and have this materialistic philosophy of life? Probably the latter. All things of foolishness are not simply to be laughed at, or even scorned. They are 'wicked madness' (verse 13). It may well be then that verse 20 aligns with verse 4, namely that the subjects of the king will be angry with the inadequate ruler, and being critical of him will voice their dislike of the indolent rich. It is better not to do so, for there are spies everywhere. The place is bugged! 'A little bird told me is also proverbial in English.

CHAPTER 11

KOHELETH CONTINUES HIS USEFUL EXHORTATION

Ch. 11 : 1 - 10 : In Verses 1-7 Koheleth Makes a Call to Exercise Faith, In Verses 7-10 He Issues an Exhortation to have Joy

- 1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.
- 2 Give a portion to seven or even to eight, for you know not what evil may happen on earth.
- 3 If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place when the tree falls, there it will lie.
- 4 He who observes the wind will not sow; and he who regards the clouds will not reap.
- 5 As you do not know how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.
- 6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.
- 7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant to the eyes to behold the sun.
- 8 For if a man lives many years let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.
- 9 Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know for all these things God will bring you into judgement.
- 10 Remove vexation from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

11: Verse 1 These first few verses-to 4-have been read so many times, and understood in certain ways, that it is difficult for us to see them without the interpretations human usage has put on them. Verse 1 has generally been understood as an exhortation to go ahead and be active and a good useful result will come from it. It may parallel 'drawing a bow at a venture', i.e. the act may be fruitful although you do not necessarily direct the arrow with foresight of where it will land and be effective. It may fit the exhortation, 'Have go, mate!' meaning, 'Do something for goodness sake, and something will happen.' Many theories naturally exist to interpret the verse. 'Bread' may be 'corn', i.e. 'seed', and one may cast into shallow waters or a later flood and eventually have grain growing. Perhaps the closest is Luke 6:35, 'Lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great'. Sowing does not guarantee a calculated reward or response. The following verses carry the idea of doing something which is not wholly calculated. In the verse 'bread' is not something of which you have a surplus, but is your life, your possessions. Whereas some would see this as a venture into lack, and a gamble, others would see it as a venture of faith, knowing God is in control of all things, and the act of faith will surely bring a useful result.

11: Verse 2 again exhorts us not to be calculated, doing things to a nicety, with an astute eye to the outcome. This utilitarian way of life brings no special joy, for, Kind heaven disdains the lore of nicely calculated less or more.

One should not even limit giving to a specific number of persons but be generous, i.e. prodigal. The time will come when one will not be able to be generous. Koheleth does not say that the giver will be rewarded, but the principle is innate, nevertheless. For this see II Corinthians 8:6-14, although we should not credit Koheleth with all its sentiments. Giving should be spontaneous in times of prosperity. Depression and calamity will come then the opportunity will be gone.

11: Verse 3 This verse may be regarded as ‘what will be, will be’, and it could be thought of either as helpful or unhelpful. That is, the clouds being filled with rain the earth will be watered at a precise point in time, and where a tree will fall it will fall, and lie thus. If Koheleth is speaking a judgement to come then he may be saying, ‘Give while you have time: the time is coming when irrevocable disaster may strike-the cloud empty, the tree fall in the destined manner-and your opportunity to give will be past.’ Thus Koheleth may be saying, God is in control of everything, and you are not, so just go ahead and give, for all things will work themselves out, anyway.’ He may simply be saying that nothing happens without principle, i.e. clouds fill with rain and dispense their contents, trees naturally fall in a certain direction, the proof of which is that they then lie thus accordingly. One should give according to this principle of giving.

11: Verse 4 is in the same metier. He who calculates everything cannot be assured he will achieve a calculated result. That is, if one is so cautious that one will do nothing except in ideal conditions, then one may never have a true result. The time of wind is not ideal for scattering seed, and if one will not sow unless rain seems to be coming, then no crop may result. Some see ‘who regards the clouds will not reap’ to mean this particular man will not cut his crop if there are clouds about, and this may be correct, but it seems that Koheleth is saying, ‘Go ahead. Be bold. Do something and something will result, but if you do nothing, nothing will result.

11: Verse 5 This verse has two elements to it, i.e. knowledge of the spirit of a human being coming to it in the womb, and ‘the work of God who makes everything’. We know from Genesis 2:7 and other passages (cf. Job 33:4; Ps. 104:29-30), that God lives the life or personality of a person by His Spirit (ruach), so that the spirit of a man (ruach) comes to be. The time or way of it in a woman’s womb is not know for the Spirit (Wind: ruach) blows where it wills (John 3:8). We need not worry about this matter (cf. Ps. 139:13-18; Job 10:11-12), for we will never understand it. Nor will we understand all God’s work, Who ‘makes everything’ Koheleth is simple saying as in previous verses that if we act according to our knowledge and only according to it, then we will always be deficient in action.

11: Verse 6 On this principle verse 6 then follows naturally, i.e. ‘When it is the time of sowing then sow from morning to evening. Go about the matter resolutely, for as I have said you cannot so know and calculate matters that you can determine the outcome of what you do, that is know whether it will be good or bad.’ Some see ‘sowing’ as procreating children, the ‘morning’ as the youth of life, and the ‘evening’ as old age. Perhaps some have taken this impression from the passages that follow regarding youth and old age.

Comment : Verses 1-6, then, have spoken about being adventurous and resolute about what you do in life.

11: Verses 7-10 continue the same idea but are an exposition of the enjoyment which can- and should-come from life. We have seen this in previous passages, but with this section comes the warning that how we will live in enjoyment determines its outcome.

11: Verses 7-8 state that it is good to be alive, to be a human, to live in God’s world, and to see the sun. Life is genuine, authentic and to be lived. There is nothing deceptive, delusive or terrible about it. Verse 8 naturally follows on: man should enjoy life to the full. Even if he lives to old age he should enjoy it to the full. Yet all the time he must keep in mind that there will be many ‘dark days’. Dark days could mean either that in the midst of enjoyable times there will be difficult times-by nature of the case, or it could mean ‘the days of death are coming’. Only will man then enter into death, and whilst this is in mind there will be a conditioning of enjoyment. Koheleth seems to be saying that because all we experience-though it be of genuine joy-is not substantial, but will prove to be vanity. If he means this then we must keep in mind that whilst everything is vanity-seen and lived only on the horizontal plane-yet in the light of 12:13 nothing need be vanity.

11: Verse 9 This verse encourages youth to enjoy itself, in its time. Youth, according to its own powers, abilities, thrusts and desires should ‘live it up’. Yes, but it must keep in mind that there will be a judgement (some commentators speak, linguistically, of the judgement). In other words youth should not be promiscuous, doing its ‘own thing’, but keeping in mind the principle Koheleth sets forth in 12:13.

11: Verse 10 is telling man-especially in his youth-not to come into vexation (worry, concern, distasteful experience) by any means-i.e. such as sin, wrong doing, conflicts with others-and if one experiences vexation, then not to let it lodge in the heart and become a determining factor in one’s experience of life. Live life without vexation. ‘Put away’ means man can determine his attitude to vexation, and be finished with it. Putting away pain from the body must refer to refusing to come into those experiences which will cause bodily pain. There can be many causes of pain, i.e. physical conflicts, over exertion, unnecessary asceticism, but one should not subject oneself to them. The reason for refusing vexation and bodily pain is that youth and the dawn of life are set for emptiness so that one should enjoy what one can of it, keeping in mind that youth-of itself-is vanity.

CHAPTER 12

KOHELETH BRINGS HIS SERMON AND EXHORTATION TO A CONCLUSION

Ch. 12 : 1 - 14 : Koheleth Speaks of the coming of Old Age, of the Impossibility of Rationalizing all of Life, and of the One Great Principle of Being Truly Human

- 1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them';
- 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain;
- 3 in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed,
- 4 and the doors on the street are shut when the sound of the grinders is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low;
- 5 they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets;
- 6 before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,
- 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.
- 8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.
- 9 Besides being wise the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging proverbs with great care.
- 10 The preacher sought to find pleasing words, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.
- 11 The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings which are given by one Shepherd.
- 12 My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.
- 13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.
- 14 For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

A Paraphrase, Explanation and Running Commentary on the Text

Comment : Koheleth is saying, in essence, 'If you remember your Creator all the days of your life, and walk in His laws (cf. 12:13), then you can enjoy your youth, and be trained in and by obedience (cf. Lam. 3:27), so that when you come to old age it will not be a burden to you. If you do not remember your Creator you will come to a sad dissolution of life.'

- 12: Verse 1** enjoins continual remembering of God, Who He is, what He commands, how His laws are, and thus how life should be lived in youth, for ‘the child is father of the man’. References to evil in youth are Genesis 8:21; Job 13:26; Ps. 25:7; Isa. 48:8. Lamentations 3:27 shows that a disciplined youth shapes a good adult character. The ‘evil days’ in terms of Koheleth’s thinking are not so much moral as calamitous, and catastrophic. Such days build up when one does not remember. Remembering God is of course, keeping His laws, which are functional to, and within, the created universe. The evil days will be unpleasurable. Koheleth now proceeds to show how they will lack pleasure.
- 12: Verse 2** indicates the inevitable coming of the cessation of light and joy, as known in good weather-with brilliant sunshine or moon-lit nights. All is now darkness. Though rain ceases, yet clouds continually form. Gloom is over all.
- 12: Verse 3** From verse 3 begins the description of old age-the pleasureless days. ‘the keepers of the house’ are the limb by which-in Eastern martial arts-the body is defended. Youthful energy and strength are gone. ‘The strong men’ are primarily the legs which are strongest of the ‘keeper’. With the decline of the body the legs begin to bow. The ‘grinders cease’ means the teeth are worn down and a only a few remain. Some translations have ‘the women grinding’ for women did the grinding of grain between the millstones, but in this case the grinders have been the teeth. Thus weakness is increased by not eating good meals. ‘Those that look through the windows’ evidently refers to the eyes. Sight diminishes, even to failing to see all things clearly.
- 12: Verse 4** In verse 4 ‘the doors on the street are shut’ would seem to refer to the ears if windows are the eyes. So deafness develops. The ‘sound of the grinding is low’ may refer to inability to hear what is a somewhat noisy operation of grinding grain, but probably means the sound of eating and chewing. To ‘rise up at the voice of a bird’ may mean that noises of high frequency can be heard in certain forms of deafness, and that such is irritating. However ‘the daughters of song’ may refer to a singing troupe, and the verse would then mean, ‘Although there is a form of deafness, any sound heard may become exceedingly irritating.’ This seems to be borne out by
- 12: Verse 5** which speaks of the fears of old age, particularly of heights. Fear of heights generally relates to inner instability. The ‘almond tree blossoms’ refers to white hair which comes in extreme old age, and is weak and fluffy-as are the white flowers of some almonds. Other almond blossoms have a tinge of pink, but at a distance look white. ‘The grasshopper drags itself along’ is refers to the stiff and awkward action of a grass hopper when it edges its way along-walking. If the grasshopper itself has lost its energy then it is indeed a good picture of human old-age. The statement ‘desire fails’ means possibly ‘lust’ but seems to refer to all pleasures one has known by the five senses. These are dulled and pleasures of touch, taste, sight and sex are diminished. Where life has depended upon sensual pleasure it is now, indeed, very dull and insipid.
- ‘Because man goes to his eternal home’ (verse 5) is now speaking of death. Genesis 2:7 says God breathed into man the breath of life, i.e. he has become a living being, a person. Whatever are the views of life-beyond-death in the OT-often strongly debated by scholars -it is clear that death brings one to a home, and that home is eternal. Doubtless John 14:1-4 illuminates all this, but we do not know how Koheleth and others viewed such a home. The mourners going about the street may

refer to professional mourners, or it may refer to general mourning. Man seems always to feel the going of any human being, i.e. 'when the bell tolls it tolls for thee'.

12: Verse 6 The silver cord has been seen by some as the chain which holds the golden bowl which has been seen to be the skull, so that the silver cord is the vertebrae which support it. When the chain snaps the bowl is broken, just as a pitcher may be inadvertently smashed when drawing water, and the very wheel itself break and crash into the well. In other words life is snapped off.

12: Verse 7 This verse speaks of the spirit returning to God who gave it. We saw previously that the spirit of man goes upward-presumably to God-and the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth (3:19-21).

12: Verse 8 Looked at from the point of view as anything being an end in itself, then everything is pointless and empty. It is doubtful that Koheleth is saying that everything is necessarily vanity, but he is saying the life lived without remembering God shows itself in the ultimate to be vanity. The signs of the declensions of man certainly prove this. Whilst Koheleth does not speak of the one who remembers God it seems to be inferred that this one does not come to the dark days of old age, such as is the lot of the non-rememberers.

Comment : Verses 9 to 14 form a sort of epilogue, a summary of what he has been about. He shows that the Preacher set out as wisely as possible to communicate what he had learned of life and death. In his sermon there has been nothing of a hasty spirit, a thoughtless analysis, a careless summing up. He thinks the exhortations and aphorisms of genuine value, but he is wary of any other kind of wisdom. He brings all things to the powerful conclusion of verse 13-to fear God and keep His commandments, for God observes the actions of man.

12: Verses 9-10 We have followed the sermon (or sermons) of Koheleth as he taught the people in the temple courtyard, and have seen his varied wisdom. He must, then, rank among the great teachers such as Moses (Deut. 6:1f.), David (II Sam. 1:18) and Ezra (Ezra 7:10). His selection from his knowledge and the collation of his materials were all with a view to bringing through the truth, i.e. such exhortation and information as would lead people into the practice of righteousness and godliness.

12: Verse 11-12 In these verses he shows the usefulness of the wisdom he has taught. Goads urge on a recalcitrant animal. Strong nails hold an edifice together. In Matthew 7:24-28 Jesus taught that true hearing-with obedience-would bring stability in crises, and so obedience was valuable. This is Koheleth's point. 'By one Shepherd' seems to refer to God Himself-cf. Ezekiel 34 as a passage referring to God as Shepherd. See also John 10:8, 11; I Peter 5:4; Psalm 23. It may have referred to the contemporary king, or the Preacher may be claiming his authority to write such wisdom. It does not matter-the idea of sheep needing a shepherd is present. A sheep should recognize and obey its master, the one who cares for it. In verse 12 Koheleth warns his readers against so-called truth other than the substance of the 'pleasing words' and 'the words of truth'. In any case his listeners are not to go beyond the wisdom he has taught them-i.e. into other ideas which are not consistent with such teaching. The latter part of verse 12 has been much quoted by teachers and students who refer to it humorously, but this is not Koheleth's

meaning. He is saying, 'You may read all the books you can, and write as many as possible, but none of them will yield the answer.' To try to solve 'the mystery of life' is impossible. As we have seen it is all 'vanity' when perused for itself, but makes sense when it is seen in the light of God as Creator, as Sovereign King, as the One Who appoints a time for everything, and Who ultimately judges all things.

12: Verse 13 This verse comes as one of the most important of all wisdom that he has uttered, and indeed, is the climax-'Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole [duty] of man'. The Hebrew does not have 'whole', although it fits the idea. 'The whole of man' is in fact a Hebraism meaning 'this is for every man'. Even so the 'whole of man' is to fear God and keep His commandments, and the one who fears will remember His Creator, and will keep His commandments. Fearing God is having reverence for God, being awed by His Person, and fearing to do other than He would require in accordance with His Being. The Preacher reiterates this theme -3:13; 5:6-7; 7:19; 8:12. Proverbs often mentions it-1:7; 10:27; 14:27, as the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and is a fountain of life. Man, fearing God, hears and obeys Him, and is in the good way of life. See also Psalm 130:3.

Keeping God's commandments has been God's will from the beginning. His commandments are the expression of His own righteousness, and the way of life for man (cf. Deut. 4:7; Ps 1:1-3; 19:7-10; 105:45; 119-the whole; cf. I Cor. 7:19;).

12: Verse 14 flows from 13, '*for God will bring every deed into judgement*'. In other words all life is moral, all is judged by the law of God, and everything is brought into judgement. Thus the creation is truly moral: nothing is left unrequited. This is seen in Ecclesiastes 3:17; 11:9; Matthew 10:26; Romans 2:16; I Corinthians 4:5; Revelation 20:12f.
