



# THE PROBLEM OF ANGST: ANSWERS FROM THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

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## About the Series

The Greater Heritage *Ministry Helps* series of booklets teach important and relevant biblical topics in practical ways to help ministry professionals and believers grow spiritually and walk closer with Christ.

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*The Problem of Angst: Answers from the Book of Ecclesiastes*  
by Kim Guilliams

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## Contents

- Introduction 1
- 1 The Problem of Angst 2
- 2 Why Ecclesiastes? 4
- 3 Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes 5
- 4 The Angst of *Hebel* “Under the Sun” 9
- How is Life *Habel*? 12
- 5 The Opposite of *Hebel*: Eternal *Shalom* 17
- 6 Ecclesiastes’ Wisdom for Daily Living in Light of the Angst of  
    *Hebel* and the *Shalom* of Eternity 22
- 7 The Church’s Response to *Hebel* 28
- 8 Qoheleth’s Conclusion 39
- References 45



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**-Introduction-**

I looked at the *New York Times* website today. The news articles on the main page addressed worldwide issues—civil war, riots, mass shootings, artificial intelligence, debt-ridden countries, war, immigration law, governmental spyware, financial collapse, pandemic repercussions, and rising levels of anxiety and stress in the United States. These topics are just one day’s worth of news from one news outlet, yet they cause gut-wrenching, adrenaline-pumping stress in the reader’s mind and body. Unless we live off-grid and completely alone, these are the kinds of topics we encounter all day every day. We read about them on Twitter. We see the video footage on YouTube. We discuss these topics with our coworkers and families. We watch talking-head news hosts yell at one another in an endless 24-hour news cycle.

But stress doesn't end there. People are facing their own personal stressors—loss of a job, a loved-one's death, divorce, financial stress, health scares, and lack of purpose. Sometimes it seems like it's more than we can face. It's all too much. Too much anxiety. Too much stress. Too much pain.

If you've picked up this booklet, my guess is that you or someone you know is struggling with these stressful issues. It is my prayer that this booklet will help you identify the ever-lurking presence of angst, acknowledge its legitimacy, and alleviate it by pointing you to God's answers to angst from the book of Ecclesiastes.

## I

### **-The Problem of Angst-**

D. A. Carson wrote in his book *How Long, O Lord?* that “one of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that our expectations are false. We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy.”<sup>1</sup> Too often, we overlook sin, sickness, and oppression in the world as long as they don't touch our own lives, mistakenly believing that we have been promised a sort of charmed life.

Things change when we are suddenly confronted with a crisis. All crises, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, also touch our spiritual lives. Suffering people ask hard questions about God and eventually stop accepting “mechanistic and moral explanations.”<sup>2</sup> They ask whether their catastrophe took God by surprise. Does he not care that his children are suffering? Or does he care but is powerless to change the circumstances? If people don’t have a biblical foundation of God’s character, it becomes difficult to function when suffering besets them. D. A. Carson says that “it is important to try to establish Christian structures of thought that are already ‘givens’ before pain and bereavement strike.”<sup>3</sup> Once the tragedies start, if people’s beliefs about God are “out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible, . . . then the pain from personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as [they] begin to question the very foundations of [their] faith.”<sup>4</sup>

The daily troubles of life in our modern world are stressful enough. Adding physical, emotional, or spiritual crises leads many people to a dreadful overwhelming feeling that we can sum up in one word: *angst*. Theologian F. P. Kruger describes *angst* as:

A feeling or mood . . . which indicates an encounter with nothing or nothingness . . . . In and through the experience of angst, a person, in fact, is confronted with the feeling of losing their grip on relationships, workplaces and daily life. An all-pervasive feeling of dread or anxiety arises when the world that is usually experienced as a safe space, associated with a familiar and comfortable lifestyle, suddenly begins to feel strangely unsettling and even alien.<sup>5</sup>

Too many people are living with angst, “an all-pervasive feeling of dread.”<sup>6</sup> But there is hope! The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes addresses this feeling of angst and offers solutions to it.

## 2

### **-Why Ecclesiastes?-**

On March 22, 2017, I received a phone call from my doctor that changed my life. Routine blood tests had shown my white blood cell count to be at 233,000, which is over 23 times higher than it should be. I was hospitalized the next day, and a bone marrow biopsy confirmed that I had chronic myeloid leukemia.

At the time, I was thirty-three years old. I was strong and energetic—my nurses all initially thought I had been



misdiagnosed because I looked so healthy. I was very active in my local church. I had been married for ten years and had two elementary-aged children. It didn't seem possible that my life could change so quickly when I was young, following the Lord, and had children depending on me for their own physical and emotional growth and happiness. Nothing seemed to make sense.

After my diagnosis, my health struggles began. The daily medication I needed to suppress the leukemia caused other health issues which required additional medication with their own side effects. Although my initial reaction to my diagnosis was faith and acceptance, the long-term issues that come alongside chronic leukemia began to weigh me down. This is when I discovered the balm of the book of Ecclesiastes. The message of its wise sage, the Qoheleth, became the message I wanted to pass on to others in the hopes that they, too, could find rest from angst.

### 3

#### **-Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes-**

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by Qoheleth,<sup>7</sup> an “untranslatable title” that is similar to “the Hebrew for assembling, and . . . suggests some kind of office-bearer.”<sup>8</sup> Today, the religious word for assembling is “church,” and the

office-bearer in the church is a pastor, preacher, or priest. So, in English Bibles, the title Qoheleth is most often translated as the Preacher or the Teacher. Some translations, however, do not attempt to translate the word at all, calling the author Qoheleth or “Ecclesiastes,” which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth.<sup>9</sup>

This author calls himself “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). He further clarifies that he was “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:12). This would appear to be referring to King Solomon, the only son of David who ruled over the united kingdom of Israel from the city of Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> However, some scholars are skeptical that Solomon wrote this book. After all, the books of Proverbs and Song of Songs both announce Solomon’s authorship by name, so why would the author of Ecclesiastes not clearly state that Solomon was the author?<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, not all of the book is written from the perspective of a king, but also from oppressed and impoverished groups. Some scholars, therefore, believe that Qoheleth was using a persona of sorts, telling a fictional story of life under the sun from the most privileged position ever imagined, about a wise man who “would still return empty-handed from the quest for self-fulfillment.”<sup>12</sup> A suggested date of authorship would help us determine whether King Solomon wrote the book. However, a look at the Hebrew linguistic

features of Ecclesiastes is unhelpful in determining its date. “A comprehensive survey of all the linguistic data, including vocabulary, morphology, syntax and style, yields the result that the text of *Eccles.* fits into no known period in the history of the Heb. language.”<sup>13</sup>

It seems likely to me that Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, but for the purposes of our discussion, it is not necessary to choose a side of the debate which has been ongoing for the last few centuries. It is enough for us to envision the Qoheleth as a wise, rich, influential teacher or philosopher through whom God brought a message of wisdom.

Often Christians are uncomfortable with the book of Ecclesiastes—it feels confusing or even downright sacrilegious. “Ecclesiastes sounds like a crazed man downtown,” writes one author.<sup>14</sup> “A skeptic and a pessimist,” says another.<sup>15</sup> The modern Western reader may feel far removed from the message of this gloomy, dispirited book. We are drawn to pithy positive soundbites and moralistic proverbs rather than the pessimistic ramblings of a philosopher poet. Yet the message God has given his people to combat angst is the message of the Qoheleth.

But before angst can be soothed, our problems must be accurately identified. The evangelical church has done a poor

job of identifying our actual problem. One extreme minimizes real problems by ignoring them or offering simplistic solutions to them. *Other people have it worse*, someone may counsel. *Just pray and everything will be fine. Just have faith.* Some religious teachers insist that people can manifest anything they want into reality merely by positive thinking. *You are in control of your own destiny*, they say.<sup>16</sup> The other extreme is overemphasizing things that are not actual problems, declaring every obstacle in life a sign of persecution, every minute opposition an issue of primary gospel importance, and every problem a sign of a world spiraling into tribulation chaos. This religious pessimism becomes “a fatalism that leads to ‘resignation’ or ‘recklessness.’”<sup>17</sup>

Neither of these extremes are helpful. Wendell Berry said that “it’s a bad move to get into a contest between optimism and pessimism. The steadying requirement is for hope.”<sup>18</sup> We must be able to both accurately state the truth of what is wrong and at the same time remember the hope of the gospel. The Qoheleth places his finger firmly on the true problem of angst, but then he offers hope outside of our current circumstances.

## 4

-The Angst of *Hebel* “Under the Sun”-

*All we have to do is live long enough, and we will be bereaved.*

*All we have to do is live long enough, and we will die.*<sup>19</sup>

Ecclesiastes addresses the chaos of the contemporary culture by acknowledging the *hebel* of life “under the sun.” The Qoheleth does not mince words when he describes the evils that the sons of men face on earth. His ongoing refrain is “*hebel of hebel*”—“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). The author continues: “I have seen **everything** that is done under the sun, and behold, **all** is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14, *emphasis mine*). Qoheleth accurately pinpoints the overriding issue that causes angst in our society today. Everything we do is *hebel*, or “vanity.” What does this mean?

*Hebel* is a Hebrew word, often translated as “vanity,” “empty,” “meaningless,” “breath,” or “breeze.”<sup>20</sup> The Qoheleth uses this word “to unite a number of metaphors into a single system that is emblematic of his view of the human condition and its temporal uncertainties.”<sup>21</sup> David Gibson, author of *Living Life Backwards*, suggests that the most accurate translation is that “everything is a mist, a vapor, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke.”<sup>22</sup>

He uses the analogy of breathing-like life, a breath is short, elusive, and repetitive. It is necessary but seemingly insignificant and can be cut off in death at any time.

American culture has trouble contemplating death. We live as though we could thwart it with the right recipe of right-eating and right-living (others live wild and eat gluttonously only to die young or defy the odds and live a long life—which nevertheless still ends in death). We distract ourselves from death’s inevitability. People who pass away are covered and whisked off to a mortuary to be prepared for burial or cremation. Many people have never seen a dead person until they have been embalmed, carefully dressed, and painted to look life-like for an open casket. There is even an emphasis on “celebration of life” services rather than funerals to avoid the ritual of mourning. Susan Windley-Daoust, author of “American Culture Christianity and the God of Death-Denial,” says:

Americans live as though we will always be a simple step away from the perfect body, perfect family, perfect career—as if death were foreign to life. . . . Our ethics are controlled by ‘the belief that American initiative or American know-how, American technology or American unselfishness is such that we in this country

can really remove all poverty, all misery, and all suffering.<sup>23</sup>

This American idealism surrounding health and death does not just happen in secular spheres. Prosperity preachers like Joel Osteen and Kenneth Copeland preach a so-called gospel that ignores the elusive nature of life. With a single prayer or a strong will, all viruses, fevers, job losses, and relationship struggles are banished. Randy Clark, leader of the charismatic healing group *Global Awakening* and co-author of *The Essential Guide to Healing: Equipping All Christians to Pray for the Sick*, claims that he has “been used to bring healing to thousands of others.”<sup>24</sup> Bill Johnson, leader of the charismatic Bethel church group, leads healing classes and is so fervent in his teachings on physical healing that one family from his church prayed for seven days for their dead daughter to be resurrected before finally acknowledging that she was not coming back.<sup>25</sup> These Christian leaders seem convinced that they could pray their way into physical immortality in this life, ignoring the diseases and accidents which can kill anyone at any moment.

However, the book of Ecclesiastes instead establishes that “it is unavoidably true that we live in a world where we will soon be dead.”<sup>26</sup> Qoheleth wisely said, “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 mankind, and the living will lay it to heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). Joyous festivities allow us to celebrate new beginnings and our current joys; funerals remind us of the end. If we only consider this life, as the fool does, we will not live how we ought to.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the Qoheleth teaches us to “number our days,” as the prophet Moses also said in Psalm 90.<sup>28</sup> *Life is fleeting*, the Qoheleth is saying. *Take it to heart. Your death is coming. Don’t put your confidence in the things of this life. Enjoy them, but remember they are hebel.*

### **How is Life *Hebel*?**

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes spends a significant portion of his book explaining the ways in which life is *hebel*. We will look at the six most prominent ways he addresses this. First, toil is *hebel*. The Preacher addresses the problem of toil twenty-two times in his book. He asks the question, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:3). On the one hand, toil, or labor, is *hebel* because the reason for the toil is worthless. The Qoheleth explains that many people only toil in order to keep up with their neighbors (Ecclesiastes 4:4) or to attempt to satisfy a never-satiated appetite (Ecclesiastes 4:8, 5:10, 6:7). Toil is also *hebel* because the reward for the toil is not guaranteed. When you die, the gains from your toil go to others who did not work for it (Ecclesiastes 2:18-21). However, just because toil is *hebel* doesn’t mean that it’s



useless. The moments may be fleeting, but there are some benefits of toil—we receive pleasure for the moment. While we are here, we spend our time eating, drinking, and enjoying the rewards of our labor with those we love (Ecclesiastes 2:10, 24; 3:13, 5:18-19; 8:15). *Hebel* doesn't mean that something is sinful or empty—only that it is short-lived and cannot be held on to. It can be enjoyable but is ultimately unreliable.

Secondly, the Qoheleth uses his immense wisdom and impressive wealth to pursue pleasure, but he discovers that our enjoyment is *hebel*. “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself’” (Ecclesiastes 2:1). He chooses to “plunge into frivolity” to test whether hedonism fulfills the longing heart.<sup>29</sup> He gives himself over to wisdom, to real estate, to wine, and to women, and he discovers that enjoyment is short-lived. If the wisest and richest man in the world has pursued hedonism, what is left for the rest of us? “What can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done” (Ecclesiastes 2:12). Once again the Qoheleth is emphasizing that there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>30</sup> If you have done it, someone wealthier and more connected than you has certainly already done it. Qoheleth fulfilled every craving and pursued every pleasure. But at the end of his test, what did he say? “Behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” (Ecclesiastes 2:2).

Enjoyment is fleeting, if one finds it at all. An evil that “lies heavy on mankind” (Ecclesiastes 6:1) is for a man to obtain wealth and honor yet not be able to enjoy what he has. Some never find that joy at all before they die and leave their possessions to strangers. “This is vanity; it is a grievous evil” (Ecclesiastes 6:2).

Third, wisdom is *hebel*. After he fails to find satisfaction in pursuing pleasure, Qoheleth looks ahead to the end of the wise and foolish man. “I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 2:15). Qoheleth asks himself, *what is the purpose of wise living?* “If one fate comes to all, and that fate is extinction, it robs every man of his dignity and every project of its point.”<sup>31</sup> *What is the point of knowledge?* Too much knowledge only leads to sorrow<sup>32</sup> and to weariness.<sup>33</sup>

Fourth, our spans of life are *hebel*. “Youth and the dawn of life are vanity,” says the Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes 11:10). I will turn forty this year, and although my inner self feels as young as I did in my college days, my body says something different. It seems only yesterday that I studied British literature by streetlight, lying far above the ground in the crook of an oak tree branch, but I certainly don’t have the dexterity or desire to

climb trees anymore. The plethora of pills in my nightly medicine cup remind me of my failing body. Even if my health complications disappeared today and I exercised my body into peak condition, in the grand scheme, my life is only a tiny dot on the timetable of cosmic history. Life is so short. “If a person 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” (Ecclesiastes 11:8). Death is coming—to the good and the bad; to mankind as well as animals; to those who are praised and adored; to those who slowly waste away.<sup>34</sup> No one can cling to life forever. It is *hebel*—a vapor.

Fifth, fairness is *hebel*. “There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 8:14). This sense of injustice causes great frustration to the Qoheleth.<sup>35</sup> “One of the deepest longings of the human heart” is “an end to all the unfairness.”<sup>36</sup> Yet when he looks around, he only sees that “the wicked are flourishing, and the righteous are crushed under their feet.”<sup>37</sup> He laments that no one can offer comfort to the oppressed.<sup>38</sup> On this earth, justice cannot be held on to. It is fleeting—sometimes there, but then quickly vanishes.

Sixth, our legacy is *hebel*. Few of us can name our great-grandparents. Perhaps we've been handed down the occasional myth-like story of one ancestor. But we don't really know any of our ancestors. They are lost to time and history. The Qoheleth recounts a story of two kings—one was “an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice” (Ecclesiastes 4:13). The other was a young, poor, imprisoned man who eventually ascended to the throne to the great applause of all the citizens of the kingdom. This story sounds like an inspirational Hollywood film. But the Qoheleth doesn't end the story there. Soon, the novelty of the new king wears off. He loses his audience. He becomes out of touch and eventually dies. And who will remember him? No one. “Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 4:16). The Qoheleth also describes a wicked man who at one point “used to go in and out of the holy place and [was] praised in the city. . . . This also is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 8:10). What use was the praise while the man was alive? In spite of the fact that he was known in the holy place, he was a wicked man who now lies dead and whose praise has ended. How quickly after death our lives are forgotten!<sup>39</sup>

The Qoheleth addressed these six causes of angst over three thousand years ago, and nothing has changed. The sayings of this wise teacher could have been written to our culture today.

There truly is nothing new under the sun. So, after reading all of the Qoheleth's thoughts on the pervasiveness of *hebel*, one might ask, what's the point of living? "Why bother? This is the question that Ecclesiastes throws in our faces."<sup>40</sup> The answers that the Qoheleth gives his readers are the same answers that we need today.

## 5

### **-The Opposite of *Hebel*: Eternal *Shalom*-**

The Psalmist David wrote that "man is like a breath [*hebel*]; his days are like a passing shadow" (Psalm 144:4). No one knows this better than the one who is in the midst of a crisis. Those who feel the angst of fleeting life understand that it is *hebel*. But this is only the starting point for the Qoheleth. Ecclesiastes uses the phrase "under the sun" more than twenty times. This phrase describes looking at things "from the ground level, taking an earthly point of view."<sup>41</sup> But because we believe in a God who is in heaven, outside of the constraints of time and place, we don't have to rely merely on our senses and earthly wisdom. The Qoheleth points out "the weariness of our existence so that we will not expect to find meaning and satisfaction in earthly things, but only in God above."<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the angst of *hebel* that comes from a view of life "under the sun," we find God's *shalom*, his peace and wholeness, in the Qoheleth's discussion of eternity.

What is *shalom*? The Hebrew word is often translated “peace,” but “shalom actually goes much further, denoting a sense of overall well-being. This includes not only peaceful relationships with one’s neighbors, but also good health, economic security, loving families, and so on.”<sup>43</sup> Because the word is broader and more robust than the modern notions of peace (lack of war, lack of arguments, lack of tension), scholars today suggest that it ought to be translated as “wholeness.” And *shalom* is not just referring to a personal wholeness because individual wholeness “can never be realized apart from wholeness in community, thus linking individual and communal wholeness.”<sup>44</sup>

But how can we have both personal and communal wholeness? We currently live in the angst of *hebel* in this life under the sun. Not just humanity was corrupted by sin—all of creation is groaning under its weight. Everything needs to be made whole.<sup>45</sup> How can we obtain this wholeness? Our *shalom* comes through life in the kingdom of God. This kingdom was announced when Jesus began his earthly ministry. “The kingdom of God is at hand,” he said.<sup>46</sup> His kingdom “in a profound sense represents the actualization of Old Testament Shalom.”<sup>47</sup> Although this kingdom will not be wholly instated until Jesus’ return, we can look forward to that perfect kingdom and, while we wait, do what we can to bring its influence into

the world of *hebel*. We can pray as Jesus taught us: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). One day the Lord will answer that prayer in all its fullness: “A vision of the kingdom of God is a vision of a creation brought to wholeness, that is, to a state of *shalom*.”<sup>48</sup>

Until Jesus’ return, the things of this life are fleeting. We see glimpses of *shalom*, of God’s kingdom. But the angst of this fleeting life will not be fully remedied until eternity. In our future hope, we find *shalom* for now and forever. The book of Ecclesiastes is bookended (1:4 and 12:5) with the idea of eternity—the Hebrew word *‘ôlām*, which refers to something that existed from a long time ago (even before time itself) and continues on in perpetuity forever. This word stands in opposition to the fleeting vapor of *hebel*.<sup>49</sup> Ecclesiastes teaches us four truths about eternity.

First, Qoheleth uses the concept of longevity/eternity as a contrast to the brief human experience of life under the sun. “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever (*‘ôlām*)” (Ecclesiastes 1:4). The one constant in all human history has been the earth that we live on. Since the time when God spun the world into existence, he has continued to uphold it “by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Ecclesiastes teaches us that the existence of the vast created

world around us reminds us of the brief, insignificant flicker of human life. The Psalmist David said the same thing in Psalm 8: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:3-4). When we study the ancient majesty of the heavens and earth, human life seems unfairly brief and intangible in contrast to the earth which continues on just as it did thousands of years before.

Second, Qoheleth explains that, not only God’s work of creation, but “whatever God does endures forever” (Ecclesiastes 3:14). All of his purposes are fulfilled, his plans are carried out, and his decrees are obeyed. Unlike human toil, which is *hebel*, and earthly rewards, which are *hebel*, God’s toil has lasting reward, and his works endure forever. “Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him” (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

Third, Qoheleth explains that the same eternity that God enjoys he has put into our hearts. Unlike the plants and animals which have life but no knowledge of life’s vapor, mankind knows and feels *hebel*. We don’t feel like this life is enough—it seems essential that we continue to exist, that we were born for something better than eighty years of life followed by



extinction and decomposition. No matter how old a loved one is when he or she dies, family and friends feel cheated by the arrival of death. We have this feeling because, as Qoheleth says, God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). All of us have an innate understanding that we were not made to be cut off, to wither away, to disappear. But the Fall of mankind through Adam brought with it the terrible consequence of death. The tension between the eternity in our hearts and the Fall of mankind into death produces the angst of *hebel*.

Yet the Qoheleth reminds us that death is not the end, for at death “man is going to his eternal home” (Ecclesiastes 12:5). Our restless hearts, which were given eternity, will at last find rest in eternity, the way things were meant to be before the Fall. The things that remain unrealized in this life—the activities we cannot complete, the places we don’t have time to visit, the people we can no longer talk to—will be realized in eternity. “Christians . . . entertain no dreamy-eyed hope that utopia is possible down here. They acknowledge that even the best efforts are only palliatives: the final ‘cure’ awaits the new heaven and the new earth.”<sup>50</sup> Christian music artist Trip Lee, who wrote the song “Sweet Victory” about his chronic illness, puts it this way: “When I say I win, I don't mean this day I'm in / I mean that day when the gray skies fade out then / I'm winning 'cause I reign with Him.”<sup>51</sup> In our eternal home, the

angst of *hebel* falls away, and we live in perfect *shalom* alongside the God who set eternity in our hearts.

So, in spite of his refrain of *hebel*, the Qoheleth comforts us by pointing us to an eternal God who has given us a desire for eternity and has prepared for us an eternal home. Based on this new perspective of the *shalom* of eternity, Qoheleth offers practical advice for daily living while we await our final eternal state.

## 6

### **-Ecclesiastes' Wisdom for Daily Living in Light of the Angst of *Hebel* and the *Shalom* of Eternity-**

Qoheleth's refrain of wisdom as *hebel* does not negate the fact that wisdom is important. The book of Ecclesiastes is classified as a wisdom book for a reason, and the author makes it very clear that, while wisdom is a fleeting vapor, it is still better to be wise than to be a fool.<sup>52</sup> He references the Hebrew words for wisdom twenty times, the wise twenty times, and the fool eighteen times in these twelve chapters. But if both the wise and the foolish come to the same end (as we discussed earlier), why is wisdom better than folly? Qoheleth uses a picture to illustrate his answer.

Imagine waking up one morning only to discover that you're in a pitch-dark room. You wave your hand in front of your face and can't see any movement. You quickly reach for your bedside lamp, but it's not there. Fear mounts as you roll off the bed and begin frantically feeling around a strange room. Finally, you find a light switch and click it on—but nothing happens. You are in a foreign room in complete darkness with no map to reference, no guide for what to do next. This is a picture of a fool. “There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has eyes in his head, but the foolish walks in darkness” (Ecclesiastes 2:13-14). When we are born, we enter a world that we do not understand. Apart from God's wisdom, mankind flounders in darkness trying to determine rules and meaning for living. But the lamp of God's Word shows the wise the right path.<sup>53</sup> So although the wise and foolish person come to the same end (death), wisdom gives us a light for how we ought to live in this strange, dark vapor of life we've been given.

Qoheleth weaves a tapestry of what the lives of foolish people looks like, those who live in darkness. Fools may work hard, but their work is worthless because they don't know the purpose of their labor (10:5). Anger dwells in their hearts (7:9). Fools cannot control their mouths. They don't know when to stop talking but begin speaking foolishness and end speaking “evil madness”

(Ecclesiastes 10:12-14). Fools laugh and sing at all the wrong times, ignoring advice and rebuke (Ecclesiastes 4:13; 7:4-6). Because they do not listen to advice, they are ungovernable (9:17) and end up destroying themselves (4:5). They do the exact opposite of what a wise person would do, giving off such a stench in such an open and blatant way that their lives broadcast to everyone how foolish they are (10:1-3).

In contrast, what do wise people look like, according to Qoheleth? The wise make good judgments (8:5-6) which preserve their lives (7:12). They remember their mortality and live accordingly (7:2-4). Wisdom shines openly from their lives (8:2). They are not afraid to rebuke those who are walking in darkness (7:5). Those who listen to them find light for their own lives—their wisdom is more important and powerful than wealth or position, individual might or weapons of war (9:14-18). And God holds the wise and righteous in his hands (9:1).

The rest of the book of Ecclesiastes seeks to teach lessons to the wise man (or to the fool who wants wisdom). We have looked at his concepts of *hebel* and eternity. We will look at three other lessons that the Qoheleth teaches. First, he teaches us not to try to figure out the mysteries of God; second, he teaches us to enjoy what God has given us while we are here; and third, he offers general proverbs to guide us toward moral living.

The first lesson to the wise is that we ought not to try to figure everything out. Instead, we need to leave room for God's plans to work themselves out. Probably the most famous passage in the book of Ecclesiastes is chapter 3:1-8, popularized in 1965 by American folk group *The Birds*, who sang "Turn, Turn, Turn" written verbatim from the King James Version of this passage. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," it begins. What follows next is a list of every kind of event a person can face, both good and bad.<sup>54</sup> And this list is not a list of things we ought to do, a group of commands, but rather a recognition that all of these things are possible events in our lives. We cannot control the time of our birth, our own healing, circumstances that would make us mourn, or a country going to war. Only God can know all of these things—man "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to end" (3:11). The Qoheleth knows this is true from his extensive experience. Using his "heart to know wisdom," he said that he "saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17). We face all the times and seasons of life but cannot "know the work of God who makes everything" (Ecclesiastes 11:4).

Because man cannot understand the mysteries of God, we have to relinquish our desires to understand and control our lives. We must hold our possessions, our health, and our lives loosely

and with gratitude. God gives wealth, powers, and possessions to some and not to others, Qoheleth says. At the same time, God can give or take away enjoyment of those things (Ecclesiastes 5:19-6:2). God is the one who gives prosperity and adversity. Qoheleth laments that “there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous” (Ecclesiastes 8:14). We often have little control over the good and bad circumstances we face. “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” (Ecclesiastes 7:14). We must give ourselves over to the sovereignty of the Lord, who knows what we cannot.

The second lesson the Qoheleth wants to teach us is to rejoice in the blessings we have while we are here. “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (Ecclesiastes 2:24). Why? Because it “is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (Ecclesiastes 2:25). This is a refrain that he returns to throughout his book.<sup>55</sup> “Rejoice!” “Have joy!” “Be joyful!” “Enjoy!” He commends joy to his readers as God’s gift to man while we are on this earth. The fleeting earthly pleasures of life cannot satiate us on their own, but upon

turning to God, we discover that “the very pleasures that failed to satisfy us now help us to find even greater joy in the goodness of God.”<sup>56</sup>

The third bit of advice that the Qoheleth teaches us are compilations of proverbs—short pithy statements that encourage wise behavior. Ecclesiastes enlightens the reader with practical advice. Ecclesiastes 12:9 tells us that the author “taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.” To follow his advice is to walk in the light rather than in darkness like fools.

What are some of these wise “lamps” that guide the way of the wise person?

- We need companionship in life—living apart from family or friends is *hebel*.<sup>57</sup>
- Be slow to make vows; keep the ones you make.<sup>58</sup>
- Be content with what you have.<sup>59</sup>
- Patience to see something through to the end is better than proud beginnings.<sup>60</sup>
- Avoid the woman who would ensnare you to sin.<sup>61</sup>
- Obey those who have authority over you.<sup>62</sup>
- Don’t be lazy.<sup>63</sup>
- Be generous with what you’ve been given.<sup>64</sup>

- Diversify your activities because you never know which ones will succeed.<sup>65</sup>
- Don't over-complicate life by endless seeking out new revelations of wisdom.<sup>66</sup>

Qoheleth's final admonition before the epilogue to his book is a reminder to remember your creator now, while you still can, because your body is failing and death is coming. He vividly and morbidly describes a somber picture of the "evil days" of aging and death using metaphors (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8).<sup>67</sup> *Hebel* of *hebels*, he reminds us. All is *hebel*.

## 7

### **-The Church's Response to *Hebel*-**

One of the biggest crises of our contemporary world was the COVID-19 pandemic. Our society saw first-hand the angst of *hebel* as 6,950,655 (upon the writing of this booklet) have died of the virus.<sup>68</sup> Theologian N. T. Wright wrote of the pandemic:

There hasn't been a moment like this in my lifetime. It is taking its toll not only in many thousands of deaths, but in the stress and distress of millions who are shut in without company or help, or at the mercy of abusive partners, or losing jobs and livelihoods; or simply those whose temperament plunges them into gloom after a



few days of being confined to the house. We all know that. **So where should the Church be in the middle of it?**<sup>69</sup>

This is the question we must ask whenever we are faced with crises. What ought to be the church's response to a depressed member of the congregation, a hungry neighbor, a citizen of a war-torn country, or a distracted and disconnected tech-savvy population?

First, the church must acknowledge the angst around us. The book of Ecclesiastes gives an authentic reflection of the broken world around us and "helps us to be honest about the troubles of life."<sup>70</sup> It does no good to pretend that things are okay, or to pretend that we have nothing to fear, or to only answer easy questions about God's sovereignty, or to ignore or mock the pain of those around us. We have to acknowledge the mess our church and society are in before we can move forward. We can do this by listening empathetically and by speaking truthfully.

In order to acknowledge angst, we must first listen carefully to what people are saying—what they are fed up with, what they are crying out for. We must understand their pain before we can speak into that pain. Upon seeing the anguished cry of the world during the pandemic, for example, N.T. Wright declared

that “the world is weeping right now; the calling of the Church, first and foremost, is to take our place humbly among the mourners.”<sup>71</sup> Martyn Percy, the Dean of Christ-Church, Oxford, theologian, and Anglican priest, prayed for “a more open church to emerge out of the COVID-19 crisis, . . . a church that listens, and instead of constantly being stuck in ‘broadcast mode’ becomes more genuine and perceptive in ‘reception mode’.”<sup>72</sup> And F. P. Kruger, Professor of Practical Theology at North-West University in South Africa, wrote that the church’s duty was “the naming of listeners’ sighs.”<sup>73</sup> According to these theologians, the church must be silent and listen to the heart-cries of people’s pain before “naming” or diagnosing their illnesses. Instead of immediately trying to control the situation by laying out what we think people ought to do, we need to learn “how to hear, to sit, and to wait.”<sup>74</sup> This is part of the wisdom that Qoheleth taught us—wisdom that “makes us quicker to listen and slower to speak.”<sup>75</sup>

Pastor and author Zack Eswine uses the book of Ecclesiastes to outline how the church can empathize with the people around us: “From [the Preacher] we learn to listen; to represent without spin how people think, feel, and act; to admit that we ourselves must weather the same conditions, and that we too long to recover for ourselves a credible and honest answer to what troubles us.”<sup>76</sup> We see that by listening, we are then able to

accurately address the issues of our culture and the true struggles of our community.

Eswine continues: “After meditating and sifting, we speak.”<sup>77</sup> The second way to acknowledge the angst of those around us is to speak truthfully and prophetically about it. Kruger suggests that we can speak truthfully by addressing both angst and *shalom*, both *hebel* and eternity – “the paradox of nothingness on the one hand, but not without the anchor of hope on the other . . . . Hope is possible even in a hopeless situation filled with angst.”<sup>78</sup> The church doesn’t have to ignore the legitimate concerns about life “under the sun” but can acknowledge them and point to hope. Kruger suggests using the “already and not yet” dichotomy as “a vessel of hope. How? By acknowledging that all the paradoxes, described in Romans 8:21–29<sup>79</sup> are a reality of daily life.”<sup>80</sup> What are these paradoxes? That we are both in bondage to corruption and yet have obtained freedom through the firstfruits of the Spirit. That we are adopted as sons of God and yet await the adoption of sons through the redemption of our bodies. That we await our salvation which we cannot see, and yet we know we will obtain it. We are already and not yet freed, redeemed, adopted, and resurrected. We suffer, and yet we have hope. “There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God’s people when they undergo suffering. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed

stoicism, but a faith so robust it wrestles with God.”<sup>81</sup> This kind of robust faith is a testimony we can display to the world.

Peter Marty, a Lutheran theologian, pastor, radio host, and editor, continues with recommendations for how churches ought to speak out. “Churches can be committed to speaking the truth, displaying constancy, addressing paranoia, denouncing cults, and elevating the gospel above every nefarious claim that demonizes others or sows chaos.”<sup>82</sup> We must speak truthfully about the struggles and paradoxes of life in the kingdom while under the sun, and we must denounce falsehoods that pull us apart or tear us away from the gospel.

After acknowledging angst, the second thing the church must do is to expound on the person and works of God. It does us no good to commiserate about the problems we encounter in earthly life if we do not then point to our God who has the answer. The book of Ecclesiastes exposes “failed attempts to meet needs” and points people to our Savior who is the only one who can truly meet needs.<sup>83</sup> Eswine tells us the book “confronts us with our own ills in order that by knowing ourselves as we are we might come to know God as he is.”<sup>84</sup> The church must use the lessons of suffering as a tool to bring people to understand the loving, gracious, longsuffering, just, and holy character of God. If we do not teach who God is, how can

people trust him? “Faith that depends on a God who is a cruel tyrant or a cheap trickster will be bitterly disappointed in the end. For faith to be praiseworthy, it must repose in a faithful God.”<sup>85</sup> No matter how dire the situation, how confusingly difficult life is, we must remind people that God is real, he is loving, he is just, he is powerful, and he cares about them.

Once we teach the character of God, knowing who God is, Kruger says that the church ought to “start with the idea of God’s presence” in crises “rather than seeking reasons, blaming others and oversimplistic predictions.”<sup>86</sup> No problem, no suffering, no calamity took God by surprise. In the face of suffering, we must not downplay the presence or sovereignty of God but must “focus on God’s involvement in the predicament of human suffering.”<sup>87</sup> God is with us, even in the midst of tragedies. D. A. Carson’s rich and pastoral book on suffering spends multiple chapters unpacking the Scriptures that teach that “God is absolutely sovereign.”<sup>88</sup> Our foundation for trusting God in the midst of our suffering is that “despite . . . the limitless reaches of God’s sovereignty, the Bible insists again and again on God’s unblemished goodness.”<sup>89</sup> Kruger continues: “God is working in and through people’s experiences of angst and nothingness. . . . God does not stand powerless against people’s angst and their suffering.”<sup>90</sup> We may not understand how God is sovereign amid our suffering, but

we can trust in Him to powerfully work everything out because we know His character.

The third thing the church must do is to tell people God's grand narrative that makes sense of the world and our place in it. When we can only see our own perspectives and experience our own lives, we are sometimes unable to see a grander purpose for our existence and our pain. It's possible to "get so close to something we cannot see it properly."<sup>91</sup> For people to be able to experience the *shalom* of eternity while living in the angst of *hebel*, they must be able to see the big picture outside the realm of "under the sun." The Psalmist Asaph describes such a thing in Psalm 73, in which "the wicked are flourishing, and the righteous are crushed under their feet. It's only when the poet goes into God's temple that a larger, healing viewpoint can be glimpsed."<sup>92</sup> Asaph had to be pulled out of his limited perspective and into an eternal perspective in order to understand why his life had been difficult when the wicked people around him seemed to flourish.

So, what is the big story that people need to find their place in? It's the "biblical drama . . . [that] moves from a creation story through a drama of sin and redemption to a consummation in a new a restored creation."<sup>93</sup> According to Albert M. Wolters,

the biblical story is one grand narrative which ought to shape our lives. This story is “a drama that unfolds in six acts:”<sup>94</sup>

- First, God created the world, including humans who were made in the image of God and called “to develop and care for the creation in communion with God.”
- Second, God’s creation was contaminated by the sin of “human rebellion,” from which evil entered the world.
- Third, God resolved to destroy sin and its effects, choosing a people-group from whom would come a Deliverer, living in covenantal community with them, and promising a Savior who will rule an eternal and perfect kingdom on a renewed earth.
- Fourth, Jesus Christ came to earth as the fulfillment of God’s promises. “His death accomplishes the victory of the kingdom,” and “his resurrection guarantees the reality of kingdom.”
- Fifth, the church is called to be a missional community, testifying to the kingdom of God that is already here and yet to come.
- Finally, God will judge and renew all of creation.

In light of this narrative, we must encourage people to remember that we were made in the image of God and are of great value. We must remind people that the fall of mankind

introduced sin and death into the perfect Garden of Eden. We must help people understand how God covenanted to save his people since the serpent first tricked Eve (Genesis 3:15), and how all of the Bible shows the outworking of his redemption through Jesus Christ. “Jesus and the good news that he announces are the fulfilment of the long *story* that is unfolded in the Old Testament.”<sup>95</sup> This focus “simultaneously points us *backward* to the story told in the Old Testament, and *forward* to the end of the story.”<sup>96</sup> Why? Because people “live our lives in light of our projected futures,...it’s important to tell people how things end. When we learn the goal toward which the biblical story moves, we understand the scope of God’s redemptive and covenantal concern.”<sup>97</sup> And what is our future? It’s the fully-realized kingdom of God—“The believer’s hope is the new heaven and earth where neither sin nor sorrow will ever be experienced again.”<sup>98</sup>

Finally, the church must help people discern what faithful living looks like in the “new normal” in the midst of or following difficult circumstances. It’s up to the church to provide “discernment about where we go from here.”<sup>99</sup> What does faithful living look like after a cancer diagnosis, after the death of a loved one, after a job loss, or after a worldwide pandemic? It looks like the incarnational life of Jesus Christ. He became embodied in the same life of suffering as his creatures,



choosing to love and heal and and preach to and pray for and eat with and care for people in the middle of this crooked world. Faithful living is not to withdraw from pain but to redeem it. We are the hands and feet of Christ in this world. We have the responsibility “to care for people who are suffering or struggling...to roll up [our] sleeves in order to become sign-producers that are committed to erecting signposts that could help people see that life is meaningful.”<sup>100</sup>

The church must practice “kenotic ecclesiology,” as Martyn Percy called it—a humble church that loves and serves the community.<sup>101</sup> “The church stands or falls with the doctrine of the incarnation. ‘Jesus drew near to them,’ scripture reports. Intimacy, proximity, and personal presence will carry more genuine authority...than touting a large platform.”<sup>102</sup> The church dare not become an insular, self-sustaining and selfish unit but must pour herself out on behalf of others, as Christ did. As N. T. Wright says of the church’s responsibility: “God’s justice and mercy, his faithfulness to the covenant and to creation, are displayed before the world in tears and toil, lament and labor. That is our vocation in the present time.”<sup>103</sup> Tears. Toil. Lament. Labor. These are the *hebel* things of Ecclesiastes which are redeemed because of our eternal purpose and destiny through Christ.

When people look out on the world and its disasters they wonder, why God doesn't just march in and take over. Why, they ask, does he permit it? Why doesn't he send a thunderbolt . . . and put things right? The answer is that God *does* send thunderbolts - human ones. He sends the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hungry-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act in his world. They are more effective than any lightning flashes or actual thunderbolts. They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are and go to meet them. They will weep at the tomb of their friends. At the tomb of their enemies....There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purpose will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful will be the answer, not to the question Why? But to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send?<sup>104</sup>

The church is the medium through which "God's purpose will come." We acknowledge the angst in the world, assure the world of God's character and his care for them, remind people of who they are in the grand redemption narrative, and then roll up our sleeves and get to work, taking "action in the world, sustained by hope."<sup>105</sup>

## 8

**-Qoheleth's Conclusion-**

At the end of the book of Ecclesiastes is a brief saying that explains the purpose of the Qoheleth's teaching: "The words of the wise are like goads" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). A goad is a stick used to poke stubborn livestock to get them to move where they are supposed to. A wise shepherd herds his sheep away from thorns and cliffs and other dangers, instead pointing them toward pasture, clean water, shelter, and safety. Like a shepherd's goad, the wise sayings of the Qoheleth ought to spur us on, away from the things of life that do not satisfy and into the arms of the Lord. "The Preacher's words push us to expect lasting satisfaction not in money or pleasure, but only in the goodness of God."<sup>106</sup> The refrain that bookends Ecclesiastes - "*Hebel of hebel*, all is *hebel*"—is not meant to lead us to depression, hedonism, or fatalism, but to point us away from the *hebel* of life and into the *shalom* of eternity with a loving God.

The final two verses of the book of Ecclesiastes are the conclusion of the author based on everything that has come before. After an explanation of the hardships and pleasures of this life, of their meaning and lack of meaning, and of the blessing and futility of wisdom, he gives his final summation: "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 judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). After discussing in detail the vanity, the fleetingness, of this life and the things in this life, Qoheleth points us to how we ought to live. Our “whole duty” is to fear the Lord and obey him.

When I was a child, I was terrified of the dark. I saw shadows float across my open doorway and skeletal hands crawling up the sides of my bed. In fact, my fear continued into my adulthood to the point that I still turned the bedroom light on to use the bathroom during the night, even though my husband was sleeping. It wasn’t until my first child was born that I overcame my fear of the dark because I had to care for my son quietly in the middle of the night. But my former irrational fear of the dark is not the kind of fear that Qoheleth means when he tells his readers to fear the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is not a feeling of terror but one of reverence and honor.<sup>107</sup> This humble fear that is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10) is a “governing regard for God amid the vanities under the sun.”<sup>108</sup> The Qoheleth speaks about this fear throughout this book. First, he explains that this fear should stem from the eternal works of God that he has shown us. When he says that “whatever God does endures forever,” he concludes that “God has done it, so people fear before him”

(Ecclesiastes 3:14). God's sovereignty and his lasting good works ought to goad us into reverence of him. Secondly, this fear stands in opposition to fools who run their mouths with hasty speech. Ecclesiastes 5:3-7 describes a fool who lets his mouth lead him to sin by hastily making vows before the Lord that he does not repay. Qoheleth judges that fool by explaining that where "words grow many, there is vanity, but God is the one you must fear" (Ecclesiastes 5:7). The foolish man's lying promises are contrasted with the wisdom of fearing the Lord.

Qoheleth continues his theme of fearing the Lord by admonishing the wise man again, counseling him not to be overly ambitious to seize either joy or adversity or to pursue perfect sinlessness or rampant wickedness (Ecclesiastes 7:14-18). Instead, he says to take hold of what the Lord has put in front of you and live in light of the fear of the Lord, and you will safely avoid the pitfalls of the foolish man. However, those who do not fear the Lord are not merely called foolish. Qoheleth calls them wicked sinners in chapter 8. "It will not be well with the wicked . . . because he does not fear before God" (Ecclesiastes 8:13). In contrast to these sinners, "it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him" (Ecclesiastes 8:12). Qoheleth teaches us the wisdom of "interpreting our lives in the fear of God."<sup>109</sup> It is only the wicked fool who attempts to live life apart from the fear of God

(Ecclesiastes 8:13), instead “look[ing] to other commands, other explanations, and other responses to the lots, seasons, circumstances, and uses of our lives under the sun.”<sup>110</sup>

Qoheleth continues: “Fear God and *keep his commandments*.” The one naturally leads to the other. If one has honor and respect for the Lord, one will do what he says. Qoheleth says nothing else about obeying the Lord or following his commandments in the entire book, but he does discuss keeping the command of the king in chapter 8:4-5. He tells us that “the word of the king is supreme,” and no one can demand an account of his behavior; therefore, the one who “keeps a command will know no evil thing.” If this is true of an earthly king, how much more would it be true of a heavenly one! We fear God, who is supreme, to whom no one can say, “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:3). Therefore, we ought to do his will.

The final words of Ecclesiastes tell us why we ought to fear God and keep his commandments—because God will judge every deed, even the secret ones.<sup>111</sup> The idea of judgment can be both something that makes us afraid and something that comforts us. For many, the word “judge” can call up images of terror. If God sees all deeds, even our secret ones, he will see our secret sins. “Nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light” (Luke

8:17). Even for those who love the Lord, we all are unable to completely obey his commandments. This can lead to fear of judgment.

But we can take great comfort in God's judgment, for two reasons. The first is that, for those of us who are in Christ, he has already been judged on our account. Yes, our own righteousness is as filthy rags. But "the one clothed in the righteousness of Christ will be able to stand before holy God in full acceptance and approval."<sup>112</sup> We do not need to fear the judgment of God.

Secondly, God's judgment exposes everyone equally, so that all are fully known. His judgment reminds you that no one gets away with anything, good or bad. God has seen it all. Author Derek Kidner sums up the judgment of God with this beautiful statement: "If God cares as much as this, nothing can be pointless."<sup>113</sup> When have you been sinned against? When have you done a good deed and not let your left hand know what your right hand was doing? Where did someone promise you something and not keep their word? When were you misunderstood and your good deed was seen as evil? In this life, no one will ever fully know you. But God does. He has seen it all, and he will deal fairly with everything in the end. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:5).

Because God cares about every little thing in everyone's life, then nothing that has happened to you is pointless. Not when you were overlooked for a job promotion. Not when you unexpectedly lost a family member to violence. Not when you struggled to pay your bills or didn't have enough to eat. Somehow, at the end of all things, everything will be made right.

For now, we live these lives of vapor. But this life is not all there is. The Apostle John was given a vision of the throne of God, from which he heard these words. Meditate on our eternal destiny—our eternal *shalom*.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:3-5).



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- <sup>2</sup> Kruger, "Practical Theological Perspectives," 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 98.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Kruger, "Practical Theological Perspectives," 2.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Although it is customary to italicize foreign words, Qoheleth is commonly used in many languages to refer to the author of Ecclesiastes, and I have chosen not to italicize it in this paper.
- <sup>8</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1976), 13.
- <sup>9</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. "Ecclesiastes," accessed March 1, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Ecclesiastes>.
- <sup>10</sup> Randy Jaeggli, *Embrace Life Under the Sun: God's Wisdom for Today from Ecclesiastes* (Greenville: JourneyForth Academic, 2015), 5.
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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>13</sup> Gleason Leonard Archer, Jr., "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12 (3), 1969: 168.
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- <sup>15</sup> Kidner, *Message*, 13.
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- <sup>18</sup> Stashwick, Sasha. "More 'eyes to acres'--and grocery aisles, dinner plates, and lunchboxes." Natural Resources Defense Council. October 3, 2012. Accessed April 4, 2023 at <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/sasha-stashwick/more-eyes-acres-and-grocery-aisles-dinner-plates-and-lunchboxes>.
- <sup>19</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 97.
- <sup>20</sup> Gibson, *Living Life Backwards*, 19.
- <sup>21</sup> Andrew Steinmann, "Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work," *Review of Biblical Literature* 5 (January): 321.
- <sup>22</sup> Gibson, *Living Life Backwards*, 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Susan Windley-Daoust, "Success, Shame, and Illusion: American Culture Christianity and the God of Death-Denial," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 26 no 1 Fall 1996: 56.
- <sup>24</sup> Randy Clark and Bill Johnson, *The Essential Guide to Healing: Equipping All Christians to Pray for the Sick* (Ada, MI: Chosen Books Publisher, 2011), 9.
- <sup>25</sup> Mike Chapman, "'Olive hasn't been raised': After praying for miracle, girl's family now plans memorial," *USA Today*. December 21, 2019. Accessed on March 25, 2023 from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/12/21/bethel-church-prayer-hasnt-brought-olive-back-life/2724417001/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Gibson, *Living Life Backwards*, 28.
- <sup>27</sup> "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 mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 7:2-6).
- <sup>28</sup> "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).
- <sup>29</sup> Kidner, *Meaning*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 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. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us” (Ecclesiastes 1:4-10).

<sup>31</sup> Kidner, *Meaning*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

<sup>33</sup> “My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is weariness of the flesh” (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

<sup>34</sup> “They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:19). “No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death” (Ecclesiastes 8:8). “It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all” (Ecclesiastes 9:2-3).

<sup>35</sup> “I hated all my toil in which I toil 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 wise 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” (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19). “Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them” (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

<sup>36</sup> Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, 76.

<sup>39</sup> “For of the wise 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 dies just like the fool!” (Ecclesiastes 2:16).

<sup>40</sup> Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Herbst, “Lasting Shalom,” 7.

<sup>44</sup> Erland Waltner, “Shalom and Wholeness,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 29, no. 3 (Sum 1984): 146.

<sup>45</sup> “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:19-23).

<sup>46</sup> “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel!” (Mark 1:14-15).

<sup>47</sup> Waltner, “Shalom,” 149.

<sup>48</sup> Apolos Landa. “Shalom & Eirene: Fully Caring for the Afflicted Person,” *Christian Journal for Global Health* 1, no. 2 (2014): 17.

<sup>49</sup> George Schwab, “More Than a Puff of Air,” (course handout for Old Testament II, Erskine Theological Seminary, Due West, SC, received September 15, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> “Sweet Victory (featuring Dimitri McDowell and Leah Smith),” track #14 on Trip Lee, *Rise*, 2014 Reach Records, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> “There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has eyes in his head, but the foolish walks in darkness” (Ecclesiastes 2:13-14).

<sup>55</sup> “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

<sup>54</sup> “A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace” (Ecclesiastes 3:2-8).

<sup>55</sup> “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be **joyful** and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man” (Ecclesiastes 2:12-13). “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should **rejoice** in his work, for that is his lot” (Ecclesiastes 3:22). “Behold, what I have seen to be good and 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 that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to **enjoy** them, and to accept his lot and **rejoice** in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with **joy** in his heart” (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20). “And I commend **joy**, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be **joyful**, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 8:15). “Go, eat your bread with **joy**, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. **Enjoy** life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that 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” (Ecclesiastes 9:7-9).

<sup>56</sup> Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, 41.

<sup>57</sup> “Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, 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. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12).

<sup>58</sup> “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 are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. 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?” (Ecclesiastes 5:2-6).

<sup>59</sup> “If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life’s good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he. Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?” (Ecclesiastes 6:3-6).

<sup>60</sup> “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

<sup>61</sup> “And I find something 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” (Ecclesiastes 7:26).

<sup>62</sup> “I say: Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” (Ecclesiastes 8:2-4).

<sup>63</sup> “Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks” (Ecclesiastes 10:18).

<sup>64</sup> “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth” (Ecclesiastes 11:1-2).

<sup>65</sup> “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” (Ecclesiastes 11:6).

<sup>66</sup> “The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12).

<sup>67</sup> “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, 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, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— 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 is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8).

<sup>68</sup> WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. Accessed on 7/19/2023 at <https://covid19.who.int/?mapFilter=deaths>.

<sup>69</sup> Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 42. (emphasis mine)

<sup>70</sup> Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 53.

<sup>72</sup> Percy, “Kenotic Ecclesiology,” 346.

<sup>73</sup> Kruger, “Practical Theological Perspectives,” 7.

<sup>74</sup> Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 224.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>78</sup> Kruger, “Practical Theological Perspectives,” 6.

<sup>79</sup> “That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:21-29).

<sup>80</sup> Kruger, “Practical Theological Perspectives,” 6.

<sup>81</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 67.

<sup>82</sup> Marty, “The Post-Pandemic Church,” 3.

<sup>83</sup> George M. Schwab, “Ecclesiastes and Counsel Under the Sun,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* vol 15, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 7.

<sup>84</sup> Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 159.

<sup>86</sup> Kruger, “Practical Theological Perspectives,” 7.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 179.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>90</sup> Kruger, "Practical Theological Perspectives," 7.

<sup>91</sup> Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 10.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 274.

<sup>94</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 123-124.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>97</sup> Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found*, 271.

<sup>98</sup> Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 43.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Kruger, "Practical Theological Perspectives," 7.

<sup>101</sup> "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

<sup>102</sup> Marty, "The Post-Pandemic Church," 3.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 51.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>105</sup> Kruger, "Practical Theological Perspectives," 8.

<sup>106</sup> Ryken, *Why Everything Matters*, 134.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>108</sup> Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 214.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>111</sup> "I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work" (Ecclesiastes 3:17). "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 that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

<sup>112</sup> Daniel L. Akin and Jonathan Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016), 132.

<sup>113</sup> Kidner, *Meaning*, 107.

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