

THE URGENT NEED TO PREACH ECCLESIASTES
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INTRODUCTION

From a preaching side, few books have prompted such a strong reaction as Ecclesiastes, both positive and negative. When I preached this book in Europe, I was astonished at the range of responses. Some loved its candor, its relevance to life's situations, and its guidance in godly living. Others were deeply offended, believing its message to be inappropriate for a Christian pulpit. For them, Ecclesiastes was nothing more than the musings of a quirky eccentric, a book that is nothing more than the rant of a dissatisfied narcissist. They would have likely agreed with an ancient rabbi, who once quipped, "...Solomon wrote Song of Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Qoheleth in his senility"¹. Before this particular series was over, my fitness for preaching was questioned, my salvation was suspect, and my board had a special meeting to request I not cease preaching from it. One board member even resigned and left the church!

This much is for sure--Ecclesiastes is an unnerving book, just by its sheer homiletic challenges. Kreeft comments: "Compared with the neat little nostrums of comfort-mongering minds who cross our t's and dot our i's, Ecclesiastes is as great, as deep, and as terrifying as the ocean."² The themes and structure tend to scare off both preacher and congregant. Its message can seem unfocused and its relationship to other Old Testament traditions strained.

Added to the homiletic challenge is the negative tone. As Curtis puts it, "...one might suppose that he would just give up on life or opt for some of the depressing conclusions of philosophers such as Camus."³ Others read Qoheleth as "a pathological doubter of everything", stemming from some drastic emotional experience, perhaps a psychic disturbance!⁴ Who needs to hear this from the pulpit? There is about as much hope in this book as there is in Woody Allen's famous statement: "More than any time in human history, humankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."⁵

The complexity and tone, as well as the message, have discouraged both preachers and listeners. Ecclesiastes remains part of the clean pages of Scripture. Older Bibles seem to have had the same clean pages. Luther lamented that the book in his time "has lain in miserable neglect, so that today we have neither the use nor the benefit from it that we should."⁶ Calvin referred to Ecclesiastes only a few times in his writings. Zwingli paid little attention to it. Spurgeon, out of his thousands of sermons, preached only a handful

¹ James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 54

² Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life*, 16

³ Edward Curtis and John Brugaletta, *Discovering the Way of Wisdom*, 204

⁴ Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 42

⁵ John Ortberg, *Faith & Doubt*, 33

⁶ James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, 1

from Ecclesiastes. In most theologies, it is rarely referenced. This has only reinforced a tendency to avoid preaching the book.⁷

This paper is written to challenge many of these assumptions. I believe Ecclesiastes is one of the more important books for our times. Congregants need to be exposed to its careful exposition.

WHY WE MUST PREACH ECCLESIASTES

There are a number of reasons why we must preach this book, and preach it in these times. The following begin with basics that move to compelling reasons.

1-ITS FORM TELLS US IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN TO BE PREACHED

We must preach this book because it is a sermon. The very title suggests that it was composed as a lecture to be preached. Luther gave the book the title, *Der Prediger*, The Preacher, for Qoheleth is the title of a convener, someone who assembles the community. He has convened an assembly (qahal, “assemble, gather”) to preach to a gathered, holy community.

2-IT IS THE WORD OF GOD

We must preach Ecclesiastes because it is a part of the counsel of God. Part of the reason Ecclesiastes has not made the preaching calendar goes back to a long held suspicion it doesn't really belong in Scripture. For some, Ecclesiastes has been viewed as a “canonical misfit”, a book lacking any gospel. Some have even accused the book of being the Bible's resident alien/Black Sheep/problem child, the “low point” of the Bible, and its most heretical book. It so unnerved earlier Rabbis that they actually believed the book defiled their hands when they touched it.

Nonetheless, it was recognized as an integral part of God's Word as early as the second century BC. Delitzsch makes the comment that if one were to view Ecclesiastes as any less than Scripture, it would be to read the book without intelligence.⁸ The writer's faith in God stands “firm as a rock, against which all the waves dash themselves into foam.”⁹ Hence, even in the patristic period, various fathers held to the legitimacy of the book, including Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, and Augustine.¹⁰ Early on, Origen set the standard for exegesis in Ecclesiastes.

Like every book of Scripture, it has been given to us to make the man of God complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16). Hence, one cannot close one's eyes or ears to its statements. If we are listening to the listeners, conforming our preaching strategies to their whims, we may never preach this book (It is this preoccupation that is the

⁷ Bartholomew, 36

⁸ C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol VI, 183

⁹ Ibid, 183

¹⁰ J. Robert Wright, editor, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, xxiii.

impoverishment of contemporary preaching¹¹). But given this is God’s word, it requires a hearing, and we must be bold to preach it. If it offends, it is God’s problem, not ours!

3-IT IS GREAT LITERATURE

We must preach Ecclesiastes because there is a beauty in its form to embrace. While there is no clear literary structure, no single genre that governs the book, there is a profound splendor in its literary style that sets Ecclesiastes apart from most books in Scripture. It is a variety of autobiographical references, theological reflections, philosophical musings, and proverbial instructions—sui generis in the literary landscape.¹² There is a rhythmical prose which repeatedly soars to the level of poetic form.¹³ Themes are unpacked by means of stunning poetry, the kind of language best described as intestinal. The words dive beneath the surface of prose into the depths of reality, grabbing for the jugular, the gut. The author thickens the language, using metaphors of bread and water to talk about risk, flies and oil to talk about sin, and almond blossoms and shattered jars to talk about aging.

George Bernard Shaw once compared it to Shakespeare. Novelist Thomas Wolfe put it this way: “Of all that I have seen or learned, that book seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man’s life upon this earth, and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence and truth...I could only say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.”¹⁴

4-IT IS NECESSARY FOR PASTORAL WORK

We must preach Ecclesiastes because it is a vital part of pastoral work. Peterson, in his Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work, refers to Ecclesiastes as one of these necessary stones for doing ministry. He writes: “...pastoral work gathers expertise not by acquiring new knowledge but by assimilating old wisdom, not by reading the latest books but by digesting the oldest ones.”¹⁵ Ecclesiastes is part of that older wisdom, words critical to the pastoral vocation.

This pastoral work begins with the preacher. We preachers preach this book because we, as much as anyone, need its wisdom. In the experience of exegeting the book, we are cleansed, purged, and moved to repentance. As Peterson puts it, “The pastor reads Ecclesiastes to get scrubbed clean from illusion and sentiment.”¹⁶ Only then can he pastor, declaring its message, challenging naïve optimism, training people in the skills of living, and demonstrating the vanity of anything that is severed from God.

¹¹ William Willimon, Conversation with Barth on Preaching, 84

¹² See William Brown, Ecclesiastes, 17

¹³ H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Ecclesiastes, 22

¹⁴ Thomas Wolfe, You Can’t Go Home, chap 47

¹⁵ Peterson, 10

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 155

5-IT SPEAKS TO OUR TIMES

We must preach Ecclesiastes because it speaks to our bewildering moment. Ecclesiastes was composed when a modern/postmodern shift of its own was taking place. The writer clearly had modernist instincts, for he was a man obsessed with achievement, wealth, and status. If it was written by Solomon, it was authored in a golden age of advancement, a world caught up with itself and its attainments, burdened by its successes and excesses. But as with lots of modernists, it all left the writer skeptical, shriveled in his soul, confronted by the painful emptiness of it all, and humbled by the reality that success is not ours to command. Rather than a book full of answers, Ecclesiastes is a work full of questions.

In each chapter the author exposes the “fractures in the modern edifice”, unmasking the claims of progress, the assumptions that we can manage the vapor of time, the complexities of society, and the laws of nature. Like other deconstructionists, the writer swings a huge ax at life and its structures, exposing the shortcomings of modernity.¹⁷ He reinforces what we keep learning—that we can make state of the art vehicles run by computer chips, but they still end up with sticking accelerators that make them lethal. We can market powerful wonder drugs that bring relief to painful symptoms, but with each commercial, there is an extended warning of possible side effects—liver damage, extreme vomiting, and sudden death.

Ecclesiastes is the clearest biblical statement that we are not gods who control the events. We can’t change global warming; we can’t even really predict it. As chap 1 painfully declares--the world goes its own way, is carried by its own laws. In His time, in His way, God rules over all. We thought we did, but like an ancient Wizard of Oz, the book pulls back the curtain to find a little old man running the show.

This is why there is an urgent need to hear its message. It calls for certain, needed humility. “Ecclesiastes is a John the Baptist kind of book. It functions not as a meal but as a bath. It is not nourishment; it is cleansing. It is repentance. It is purging...an expose and rejection of every pretentious and presumptuous expectation aimed at God and routed through the pastor.”¹⁸

6-IT IS A REALISTIC APPRAISAL OF LIFE

We must preach Ecclesiastes because it holds up life before us. It tells us what we already know down deep—that life is a profound mystery. It points out many things we neither understand nor control.¹⁹ It exposes what is sometimes hidden; rips away some of our romantic notions. Some like to believe the myth that the grass is greener on the other side, but Ecclesiastes confronts us with the reality that there are patches of brown on both.

Qoheleth is a realist who tells us what the lies won’t--that while adultery appears alluring, it is a forbidden fruit that also has its brown spots; that for evil to do its worst—it must

¹⁷ Peter Leithart, Solomon Among the Postmoderns, makes a helpful contribution on this subject

¹⁸ Eugen Peterson, Five Smooth Stones, 156-57

¹⁹ Curtis, 196

look its best; that if you scratch certain itches—they will only itch more; that the more self-absorbed we become—the less there is to find absorbing. This is the nature of wisdom.²⁰

Qoheleth takes us to the edge, putting into words some of our deeper bewilderments. If wisdom is base camp, Qoheleth is an explorer willing to go beyond to the dangerous summit.²¹ He tells us that training a child in the way he should go doesn't necessarily mean he will go that way; that life is a strange mixture of unexpected delights and bitter disappointments, profound discoveries and overwhelming disillusionments. Our days are a combination of serenity and anxiety, life and death, joy and grief. There is something vaporous about human achievement, elusive about the world. Our ability to take control is limited. As Leithart puts it, "...this windy little world will not stay put in the little labeled file boxes we make for it."²² We are constantly forced to live by faith.

Ecclesiastes shows us the hard, paradoxical reality of life. It asks unnerving questions like "What does a laborer gain from his struggles?" (3:9). If we're honest, sometimes we ask the same questions. We've poured out our souls on Sunday morning, challenged our people to be missional, and we drive home wondering—did it really matter? Has anything really changed? Have all of the hours of exegesis counted, the time spent in discipling this soul, the energy spent counseling this parishioner, the endless hours in elder meetings, made a difference?

Solomon reveals life as it really is—its joys as well as its sorrows. No wonder the words of the wise are likened to painful goads, embedded nails (12:11). They comfort, and yet they can rip. They goad us to keep moving along on the journey towards wisdom.²³ No wonder Melville called Ecclesiastes "the truest of all books". Ruthlessly the convener moves from one theme to the next, from one reality to the next. He is affirming uncertainty in hopes of enticing the reader to address his doubts to God. He is forcing us to face life head on, so that our gospel witness will have credibility.

CLUES TO PREACHING

1-COMMIT TO WORK HARD

Ecclesiastes is as demanding as any book to preach. One must do the necessary exegesis, immersing oneself into the whole flow of the book and its ultimate destination. Each part can only be understood in the context of the whole, for it is an intellectual search for meaning, and most of the search is aiming towards the end, where the true meaning is discovered.²⁴ Hence, one must warn the congregation that this is a train one must stay on until the end.

²⁰ See Cornelius Plantinga's chapter on Wisdom and Folly, Not the Way it is Supposed to Be.

²¹ Derek Kidner, A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance, 13

²² Leithart, 165

²³ Brown, 18

²⁴ Terry Carter, Preaching God's Word, 277

2-READ IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WIDER WISDOM BOOKS

Preaching wisdom literature effectively takes into consideration the message of all of the wisdom books. Each make a different contribution, but they also integrate into a whole message. Proverbs presents a more rational, ordered approach to life, while Job and Ecclesiastes present the exception.²⁵ Think of Ecclesiastes as postmodernism reacting to the nice neat modernistic boxes of Proverbs. It broadens out the observations of Proverbs, observations that were not meant to be promises in the first place.

3-WELCOME RATHER THAN AVOID THE CONFLICTS AND APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS

It will be necessary to maintain a certain discipline when preaching Ecclesiastes. We will want to move to resolve the tension, or worse, push the text to say the things we want it to say. He tells in one part of the book that the dead are more fortunate than the living; later we are told a living dog is better off than a dead lion (4:2; 9:4). Which is it? He affirms the value of wisdom over folly (2:12-14), but then he comes back and cautions against being too wise (3:15). These contradictions are real and intended, “the starting point of interpretation.”²⁶ He is not contradicting himself so much as he is observing contradictions in the world. His intent is not to resolve; rather, he describes and bemoans, searching for the wisdom to navigate through them.

Another way to make this third point is to look for trouble. Lowry actually encourages preachers to find the weird, the strange, the sentence that does not flow easily, the “something that just feels wrong.”²⁷ That’s not hard to do in Ecclesiastes. Mine the conflict—the complications, the things that turn sideways, the mystery and doubt—for all they are worth. This is when Ecclesiastes becomes both unnerving and yet a thrilling experience. A true preacher, like an artist, must have a thirst for chaos and conflict, for living life on the edge of the abyss.²⁸

He doesn’t avoid this by running to commentaries like someone running to the medicine cabinet for relief. He is not put off by the discrepancies, slight dents in the image, but sees it as a great homiletic challenge—not so much to fix—but to expound on and discover where Qoheleth is taking us and what is the aim of the text and hence the sermon. But as Lowry notes, it is our tendency to want to stop the bleeding and relieve the pain.²⁹ But not everything gets resolved so neatly from week to week, and there’s no guarantee that, for every one of us, it will in the end. And that might be okay. As Stackhouse put it, “if our congregations go away somewhat bemused by the message, this may be no bad thing. The greater danger is that they will go away with everything intact.”³⁰

²⁵ Ibid, 274

²⁶ Michael Fox, A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up, 3

²⁷ Eugene Lowry, The Sermon, 94

²⁸ Ibid, 64

²⁹ Lowry 68

³⁰ Ian Stackhouse, quoted in The Gospel Driven Church, 91.

In sum, when preaching the book, guard against trying to tame the radical features of the book. It is not our task to resolve the tension, align the Scripture with our expectations, our needs, our understandings. We come to Ecclesiastes intent upon aligning with and submitting to the text. As Murphy underscores, “The cutting edge of the book has to be retained.”³¹

4-FIND THE EXHORTATION

A key part of the work of preaching is summoning the listener to action. Ecclesiastes, like all of Scripture, is written to persuade. So look for the imperative. Even in the self reflections and the proverbial sayings, the writer is being directive. The preacher must therefore discern where the text is going, the sequence, the “direction of the interior energy”, the challenge being given to the heart.³² Ecclesiastes was not written to inform but transform. Behind the realities of time (chap 3) is the exhortation to seize the moment. Within the proverbial fly in the ointment is a call to watch for the little things that can trip up life.

5-MOVE FROM THEME TO THEME

This may be the best way to preach the book, for there is no clear flow. It is nearly impossible to find two commentaries that agree on the structure. Murphy describes Qoheleth’s thought as “torturous.”³³ Crenshaw writes, “In my judgment no one has succeeded in delineating the plan of the book, for it certainly has characteristics inherent to a collection of sentences.”³⁴ Brown adds, “Seeking structure in Qoheleth’s turbid discourse is, frankly, an exercise in frustration.”³⁵ Rather than some hierarchical flow, it is a kind of wandering among several topics, doubling back on himself.³⁶

Yet, this is not a book slapped together. There is a leitmotif (hebel) that each sermon must pay attention to. There is a design and flow underneath it all, as well as an intended destination. Each theme should be read in the broader context and preached accordingly. As I have preached the book, here are some of the significant themes, urgent themes that need to be addressed to our age—

A-PLEASURE-2:1-11

Few passages are as relevant to our age as Ecclesiastes 2. Many are on the hedonic treadmill, seeking to find ultimate meaning in wealth and pleasure. If anyone plumbed the depths looking for satisfaction at every level, it was Solomon. As chapter two makes clear, he approached pleasure like a scientist, researching to find out if happiness and wealth live up to their promises. His access to assets and power enabled him to not only be the researcher, but the researched (the lab rat) He had a portfolio that would have impressed Bill Gates and Paul Allen. In all he did, he was not surpassed by any other

³¹ Roland Murphy, The Tree of Life, 53

³² Lowry, 55

³³ Murphy, lviii

³⁴ Crenshaw, 47

³⁵ Brown, 15

³⁶ Duane Garrett, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, 270

king (vs 9). Silver was so common it was used for trash receptacles ash trays, white elephant gifts.

Solomon built amazing projects. His own palace took thirteen years to build. He experimented with drugs and hired servants to take care of his paradise. But as Solomon ran the data and amassed his findings, he discovered the all too painful truth that the more you have, the more you want. Running on this treadmill hollowed out his soul and created disabling attachments.

To the Donald Trumps of the world, his conclusion is simple: it's all futile. It's chasing after the wind (vs 11). What satisfaction we find this side of eternity has all the permanence of sandcastles on a beach. No, wait--that is too permanent; it's more like *cloud* castles on a windy day.³⁷ It is futility, absurdness, and profitless.

B-TIME-3:1-15

Like most in our culture, impressed with time management seminars and measureables, Solomon may have assumed time was his to control. Looking back, he realized it wasn't so. God has ordained all things to its right time and place. The most momentous moments are completely beyond our control. They are His to set. Time is a series of give and take: birth and death, planting and plucking. For every positive, there is a negative: a time to dance, a time to weep; a time to search for a missing hiker, a time to give up the search. The real story about time is that it all amounts to a zero sum game; for every gain there is a loss. We celebrate one's birth, and mourn the passing of one's life. Yet, each has a purpose, specifically designed by God.

The writer is profoundly aware that these moments move in a timely manner. Time waits for no one, consuming choices left unmade. Moments come and go in rapid fashion. Our days are as a handbreadth. Hence, life can feel as substantial as a wisp of steam—*an enigmatic blur*. I teach my classes, run my route, see my patients, make my quotas, preach my sermon, raise my kids, and prepare for retirement. And before I know it, it all dissolves as quickly as the mist in the morning sun.

What complicates all of this is that amidst the transience, there is something of the transcendent, something of eternity in us, placed there by God (3:11). Someone once referred to this as *divine sabotage*. We are confined by transience, yet something has been planted that tells us that we are more than merely time bound. There is something that leaves us restless, compelled to seize what moments we have, and let something of the eternal, shalom, joy, define them.

C-RELATIONSHIPS-4:7-12

The recurrence of hebel (vs 7) is a marker to describe another investigative feature that has not measured up. One could describe this passage as Solomon's "Cats in the Cradle" song. He sees what we often see—the emptiness that comes when a man is obsessed with his work at the expense of relationships. It could have been autobiographical, for Solomon's life is portrayed as all about career, ministry, and the pursuit of success.

³⁷ Leithart

There is no rest. You give yourself to the chase, and you wake up one day and realize you are a very lonely person. Your kids hardly know you. There is a distance between you and your spouse, and you are hard pressed to identify who is really your friend.

So the real story is this. When it comes to bottom lines and profits, relationships may turn up the thermostat, get us up in the middle of the night, and drain our bank account. But in the end, two are far better than one. To have a son who can aid you when he is grown—and to whom you can leave your estate—is better than life alone. To know someone is there to lift you when you fall is a great comfort. To be more than two promises great endurance.

D-POLITICS-4:13-16

Ecclesiastes gets past the comforting bromides and gets right to the issue. Will someone speak to the craziness of our age of endless political commentary, the daily rants on talk radio? People seem to need a daily political fix, be it of Rush, Hannity, O'Reilly, or Beck. Solomon comes along and tells us a story.

It is here in this passage he unmask the pretensions and tells us what we need to hear. Much of this attention and money to sustain the political election machine is a massively doomed effort at shepherding the wind, and here's why. We have this mindless tendency to prop people up, only to tear them down. Look around you and read the papers. It's all very clear. Today's heroes are tomorrow's discards. Time and familiarity have a way of taking their toll. Today's audacious hope is tomorrow's call for change. Obama, Palin are so...yesterday.

Here's the real story for both politicians and pastors—and every other leader. Don't get too caught up in your self importance. People quickly tire, as they do. Position and age have a way of changing kings into old fools. Successors come, loved by the masses, but all too soon, affections fade. The smart money is on a new rising star. Solomon is again pointing out the ephemeral character of life, the fleetingness of popular acclaim. We're really like ants on a rock that in the end leave little trace.

E-MORTALITY-7:2-4

This is a central text, one that confronts us with one of life's most painful realities. It was the text I preached the weekend after 9/11. At first the words strike us as odd; "Better to be in a house of mourning" (7:2). Who wants to hang out in a funeral home? Mourning in this culture was a very elaborate affair—grief, wailing, tearing of clothes, and sitting on ashes. It seems odd that one should rather be here than a place of celebration.

But there is an important reality underscored here. There is actually something beneficial about the place of grief. Life is better appreciated and evaluated with the grave in mind. It is here we come to grips with our own frailty, our own fragility and finitude. In this context, we more easily discern what is substantive and what is superficial. We become painfully aware of wasted moments. We are reminded that life is not a dress rehearsal.

Reminded of our mortality, self-importance is replaced with God-importance. Wisdom overtakes folly. We listen and ponder and ask necessary questions like, “What will be said at my service?” Will they have to embellish my accomplishments, spin the truth? Will words have to be overstated to cover my thinness? The passage probes, forces reflection—just like the bumper sticker: “Live So The Pastor Won’t Have To Lie At your Funeral”

F-WISDOM-9:13-18

Because Ecclesiastes is part of the sapiential collection in Scripture, we expect the writer to speak about wisdom. This is base camp, his natural habitat. We assume he will convince us that wisdom is the pinnacle, the apex, the end point of the journey. And he does, with a story.

In this story, he makes the case that wisdom has its own power. It is a force that can take on the world. However, before we become too impressed with its might, he includes the painful reality--it only takes a bit of folly to cancel wisdom out (9:18). One inappropriate touch, one poor choice, and one badly chosen word can ruin years of faithful ministry. One fly can ruin the ointment (10:1). All the wisdom of the world can be spoiled by just a little bit of impatience, irritability, cynicism, procrastination, and moodiness. Just one impulsive moment cost Moses his leadership.

Wisdom has both a certain vulnerability and a limitation. While wisdom sheds needed light, enables us to walk as if in well lit rooms, give us the skills to navigate through life, help us avoid banging our shins and scraping our elbows, the reality is that wisdom can take us only so far. It cannot explain everything; it is not a divine warranty against pain. Wisdom can give us success, but it cannot save us from death.

G-RISK-11:1-6

Ecclesiastes does more than inform; it inspires. Here is a passage that compels us to go after life, live large on the stage God gives. Cast your bread upon the waters. Here is an ancient saying from a background no longer known to us. Behind the metaphorical language might be a sermon saying--don’t stay in the harbor; don’t wait for life to come to you. Don’t live like a show waiting to be canceled. If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.

If you insist on seeing everything first, you will end up in paralysis (vs 4). Storms happen, calamities strike, crops fail, pirates steal, economies tank, and health goes. Life is a combination of smooth sailing and tough sledding. You might lose it all. But if you play it safe, stay stuck in risk lock, if you become professional cloud watchers waiting for the perfect moment, you will have little to show for life. So do something. Don’t get side-tracked. Make a constant, diligent effort. Diversify your investment of energy and resources, recognizing that all is in God’s sovereign control.

H-AGING-12:1-8

It is here Ecclesiastes grabs us around the emotional throat and warns us of the worst sort of procrastination of all (12:1). Rather, remember, ponder, God while youthful idealism is strong. Live for Him while the heart is robust the mind is clear, and the body can soar and go at full tilt.

For the time will come when you can't remember. Gradually, days will come, when the calcium will flow from your bones and into your tissues, leaving the bones thin and everything else hard. A time will come when the wear and tear of age will set in, and life will be one physical setback after another. Mortality will seem to stalk your life. To everyone who says, "When I finish my goals, I want to get serious for God", this is Solomon's saying—don't put off God!

I-GOD-12:13-14

Every book is ultimately about God. He is the center of every book, and He is the center of this one. Qoheleth has explored life carefully, and now, at the end of this long journey, he ties the knot which secures all the threads. To use the language of Lowry, he has finally moved from itch to scratch.

When all has been said, here is the conclusion, the end of the matter, the final resolution of life's complications: Fear God and keep his commands. This is what really matters in the end. This is the totality of life, the summation of man—to hold God with reverence and awe. This is the essence of wisdom (cf Ps 111:10; Pro 9:10). The fear of God is what makes a man truly human.

There is a time after the time under the sun, when we all will have to give an account. God will bring every act into judgment. On this day, everything that has been upside down will be right side up. Meaningless will be replaced with meaning, mercy shall purge out the oppression, and the righteous will flourish. The curse will be behind us.

So live as if the future matters, as if what choices we make on this side have great implications, for they do.

6-MOVE TO THE GOSPEL

Ecclesiastes is bringing out the hopelessness that is a result of the curse, of the impossibility of finding ultimate satisfaction and meaning in a fallen world. "Qoheleth, from amid his heaps of ruins, shows how necessary it is that the heavens should now soon open above the earth."³⁸ Ultimately, God writes this book to push us to Jesus, who redeems us from this life's futility (Rom 1:18-23). The light of Jesus removes the shadow of hebel.

³⁸ Delitzsch, 184

