

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Old Testament Literature,

Lecture 26, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs

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Good morning and the peace of Christ be with you. Everybody got their paper done? I've already gotten a number of them via email, so thank you. I've got my reading cut out for me over the weekend.

That's just fine. I don't think there's anything else I need to announce to you, so we're going to sing. We learned half, well, two-thirds of a song last time.

Do you remember where the passage was, where it came from, upon which this song is based? Beyond that, we'll have it. Let's take some time to pray together as we start.

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, we're thankful daily for all the wonderful gifts you bestow upon us and, most of all, for your gift of new life in Christ.

We're thankful for your word and the word incarnate. Father, in this Lenten season, as we approach Holy Week, even in spite of our busyness, dear Lord, please plant deep in our hearts the abundant love for you and gratitude for what you've done for us. Help us to see again the reality of Christ on the cross, then raised from the dead, and our sins conquered.

Father, may our lives be transformed. May we never be the same as a result of realizing the truths of these things. We pray for those around us that you would encourage those who are ill, restore them to health.

We pray for family members who wrestle with various great difficulties and challenges. By your tender spirit, minister with them. We pray for trouble spots around the world where your light is so desperately needed.

Please use your people, Lord. Help us all to be ready instruments not only to go and to speak, but also to pray earnestly. Lord, I would ask you to help me to teach with clarity today. May we learn in ways that will prepare us to be servants in your kingdom. We pray in Christ's name with thanksgiving. Amen.

Well, we are moving on to, we think, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs today. I have to do just a little bit of review, as always. So here are a couple of questions.

We're not going to spend a lot of time with this, but just put us back where we've been for the last couple of days. Remembering, by the way, that we're doing wisdom literature because we've dealt with Solomon in the historical framework, and three

of the four wisdom texts are in one way or another associated with Solomon. So, just to review, I'm not going to ask you to sort of spit this out, but you should have in your minds what we did as a process to try and arrive at a definition of biblical wisdom.

Thinking not only of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom, but also those things that are part of wisdom itself. The ability to choose wisely and make godly choices. Applying truth to life in light of experience.

I hope that one rings a little bit of a bell. We also addressed, I think, some principles for dealing with those speculative bits of wisdom. In other words, Job and Ecclesiastes.

When we deal with those particular ones, we want to be careful to read them in their wider contexts. In other words, when you read Job, it's not good simply to read one of the friend's statements and not understand how the whole picture unfolds. The same will be true of Ecclesiastes.

So, following the development of the entire argument is very important as we work our way through this. I'm going to spend most of our time today dealing with Ecclesiastes, trying to lay out some of the things that will affect how we read the book as a whole. So that's the objective for where we're going in that case.

But I've got a question for you. Why is this book in the Bible? If you've read it, you know it's not your standard. God is good and praised the Lord, and he's saved and delivered us from our sins. Why is it there? Rebecca.

I'm sorry, say it again. Oh, it's not a rhetorical question. Yeah, that's a good question.

Yeah, I'm actually looking for an answer. Okay, so good. These are issues that everybody deals with.

And, of course, the culminating one is death. We all have to come face to face with that. And that's one of the things that's going on in Ecclesiastes.

Good. Anything else? I mean, some people have called this book hedonistic and pessimistic. You know, all those kinds of nasty things.

Cassia. Okay, it brings everything together and puts life in perspective, particularly perspective, as you and I, even as redeemed people in Christ, find ourselves living day after day because our feet are on the ground. We live in a sinful world.

We live, as the author of Ecclesiastes says, under the sun. One of his favorite phrases. Well, how should we interpret the book? We're going to be moving on toward that in a moment.

Does anybody know what 12:12 says, the second half of the verse? It's a wonderful verse for students, especially at this time of the semester, especially when you're tired. Of making many books, there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Do you like that? Good.

You'll like what comes next, too. A little Calvin and Hobbes for our entertainment for the morning. But this is a wonderful Calvin and Hobbes for the book of Ecclesiastes, particularly for that frame right there.

And I'll let you sort of appreciate it. Can you in the back read the text? Can you see it? Okay, good. So I don't have to read every frame.

But notice the focus on transience, evanescence of life, and coming to grips with our own mortality. Kind of interesting, because that's precisely what we're doing in the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, once we've absorbed Calvin and Hobbes and we've enjoyed it a little bit, now back up to the top part of the screen, because there's something really important going on here.

The word that shows up over and over and over again in Ecclesiastes, it's the Hebrew word hebel. Hebel. Say it [pronounced, hevel].

Hevel. Especially with that H in the beginning of it. All right? Interestingly enough, unfortunately, it has been, in most translations, rendered meaningless or vanity of vanities if you're reading the King James, which is really unfortunate, I would suggest, imposition of meaning onto the word, because as I note for you here, the word itself simply means breath or vapor.

Or, that's what it means. And we'll say a little bit more about that in a moment. It might help us, and sometime I would encourage you to sit down and read the book of Ecclesiastes, and every one of the 30-some times that that word shows up as meaningless, make a mental note to yourself, I'm going to read this as transient.

I'm going to interpret it as transient or elusive. Maybe that will change our frame in terms of how to look at this book, and it may not then be so pessimistic. It may simply be realistic.

But let's see what we can do with that. Importance of hebel. As I said a moment ago, it's used more than 30 times in Ecclesiastes.

We'll see that it actually frames the book beginning and end. In fact, I think that's where we want to go next. Yes, good.

If you've got your text, turn first of all to Chapter 1, where Verse 2 says, and I'm not going to read it meaningless, even though the NIV translates it that way, I'm going to read elusive or transient. Or how about just hebel? Hevel, hebel, says the teacher or the preacher. Absolutely hebel.

Transient. Everything is transient. That's how the book starts out, after the little introduction in Verse 1. And then, of course, you flip on over to Chapter 12, Verse 8 precedes an epilogue, basically.

And it's our closing bookend, if you will. Again, hebel, hebel, says the teacher. Everything is hebel.

Everything is transient. And I want to just sort of plant that into your minds again. Try to remember it at least for the next exam, because I'm going to have a question on it probably.

But I do think it shapes how perhaps we understand this book. And I'll tell you right from the get-go that commentators have a good time with this book. Some people are going in this direction within the last 30 years or so of reading this as something that means transience or elusiveness or something.

There are others that are still holding very strongly to the fact that there is a negative quality that we would associate with meaninglessness in this word. So, you know, there's an ongoing debate in Ecclesiastes' studies right now. Having said that, if indeed we go the direction of translating this and understanding it as its Hebrew meaning implies, i.e., breath and vapor, then there are some interesting things that go on.

When you breathe, you breathe in and out and in and out, and there's a repetition to it. Isn't it fascinating that the book of Ecclesiastes repeats its themes over and over again? Did you notice that as you were reading it? The same things kind of come back, and it's a conceptual repetition, perhaps almost like breathing. The second thing we might want to think about is my second sub-bullet here.

Breath is indeed brief. I don't breathe in for three whole minutes and then just sort of exhale for three minutes. It's an ongoing breathing, but it sustains life.

And, of course, that's going to be the tension then in this book because the author of Ecclesiastes is wrestling with the reality of death, of his own mortality. And, of course, we're going to come back to that in a moment. The other thing I need to say to you is it's not up here, I don't think.

When we read the story of Cain and Abel back in Genesis 4, we read it in English as Cain and Abel. Do you know what Abel's name is in Hebrew? Hevel. That's his name in Hebrew.

And what's his life? Well, it's really transient because Cain is up and murdered him. So even in Abel's life or Hevel's life, we see this kind of frustration that death is cut way too short, something that is utterly valuable, and that is human life. All right, one more thing.

I've intimated this already, but let me just reiterate it because I think it's fairly important. If I say something is meaningless, I have made a value judgment on that something. Do you understand where I'm going with that? In other words, if it's meaningless, it isn't worth pursuing.

It's not anything that I would be at all concerned to have as part of my life. It's meaningless. Just get rid of it.

That's vastly different from saying something is transient. And I would suggest to you, then, that when the author of Ecclesiastes is talking about all these things that are Hebel or Habel, Habelim, ultimately transient, he's not saying they're meaningless. In fact, he's saying they are profoundly meaningful.

But the big problem is they're getting cut short. Death is cutting them short. So, I don't think he's dismissing the things that he's done, the relationships that he's had, and the work that he's been involved in.

I don't think he's dismissing that at all. Instead, he's saying, Boy, I've worked really hard on these things, but it's going to be gone. Death is going to take me, and therefore, I won't have those things anymore.

So, I would just pose that as at least one possible consideration as we move into more of this book. Am I speaking English so far? That's good to know. As I suggested a moment ago when I talked about under the sun, there are some other key phrases that show up in this book, and they show up repeatedly.

And I think they're instructive in terms of helping us understand what's going on for Kohelet, as he, that's the name of the author, does this. First of all, I saw. Over and over again, I saw.

I saw this, I saw that, I saw injustice, I saw this person trying to do that. We're seeing it through somebody's eyes who's living in the fallen world. And the fallen world is a big part of the framework, even in the book.

As you read Genesis, sorry, as you read Ecclesiastes 1, it's got Genesis 3 in mind. What happens in Genesis 3? The curse on the ground is the result of the fall, the fact that things are now going to be toil and labor and pain and anguish, right? That's being kind of mirrored and echoed in the first chapter, the poem of the first chapter of Ecclesiastes. So, we're going to see some very interesting things there.

This person knows, whoever the author is, that he's living in a fallen world. Same thing here with, sorry, I saw, I saw under the sun, I saw under heaven, a repeated phrase. Now, that's not all he sees, and I'm going to say more about that in a moment, but this is the perspective.

As Cassius said a moment ago, I guess it's a reality check. It's how we all have to live. Continuing on, chasing after the wind or striving after the wind.

Interestingly enough, again, if you look at that opening poem, the whole idea of sun and under the sun and wind and chasing after the wind, the stage is set for them right away in chapter 5, sorry, chapter 1, verses 5 and 6. The sun rises, the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the north and to the south, okay? Sun and wind, and then those become part of these phrases that indicate how it is that someone is living in this world and striving and striving and striving, but have you ever sat and tried to chase the wind? Well, you don't sit. Have you tried to chase the wind? I mean, the best experience you can do is chase leaves that are blowing in the wind and go on out to the quad. You can do it if you want an interesting exercise, but it's elusive.

It's elusive, it's transient, and that's probably what's being gotten at here. All these things, you know, we're trying very hard, but it's elusive. It would also be an interesting exercise because then you could see what your friends say about you when you start doing that.

It could be fun. You might get yourself in the Tartan, for whatever that's worth. Okay, I said this one already.

Oh, I'm sorry. Was that a nasty comment about the Tartan? Heaven forfend. Please don't quote me.

I hope nobody here is writing for the Tartan. Anyway, never mind. Let's get off the Tartan, all right? Which, of course, leads us right onto what profit or what good, doesn't it? Oh, I'm sorry.

This is getting worse. I didn't plan that. This is another very fascinating phrase that shows up repeatedly.

What profit is it to do it? He's asking himself the question. Why is it that I invest so much in these things? Death, as we said a moment ago, is going to end it all. What profit do we have? What good? What ultimate advantage lies in all these pursuits? All right? Now, having said that this is where a lot of people come and say, well, it's just hedonism.

Nothing better than to eat, drink, and be merry, or eat, drink, and be satisfied. But let me suggest something else for you here. This nothing better than to do these things is usually in the context of, these are gifts from God.

And so, my suggestion is going to be, and I'm going to get back to this in a moment, we have what we might call large-scale parallelism here. Remember our parallelism? You know, one line of poetry, you do something with it in the next line, either a synthetic or a synonymous or an antithetical reflection. I'm going to suggest in the poetry of Ecclesiastes, we have this large-scale thing going on where the author is representing what it's like for you and me as we live, day after day, dealing with the frustrations of finitude, fallenness, and yet the author of Ecclesiastes knows, and you know, and I know, that there's another perspective.

And that is, God has given us the things that we can enjoy. End of chapter 2. Chapter 5. Chapter 6. You know, that little refrain, every once in a while, kind of the heaven opens up for you and me, and we say, hey, there's a different perspective, even on this thing that's so frustrating to me right now. It's sort of our Easter perspective.

It's sort of the perspective you get when you contemplate the reality of the resurrection and the Holy Spirit really dwelling within you. But the truth of the matter is, I don't always live that way, think that way, or deal with my anxieties that way, and I bet you don't either if you're honest. The book is saying to us that when we step back and get to this perspective where we recognize God has given these things as gifts, we should enjoy them.

Okay, so eat, drink, and be merry is not hedonism. It's saying take advantage of the gifts of God, whether they be our work, whether they be our relationships. Ecclesiastes talks about that as well.

These are gifts from God. And so, a large-scale conceptual parallelism, most of it, again, representing how it is we function on a daily basis, but also acknowledging the other, if you want to call it heavenly perspective. Anyway, it's part of the possibility that we might look at it that way.

Do you have any questions? Yeah, Sarah. I was just wondering what the difference between the ancient Jewish perception of heaven and ours was. Yeah, that's a good question.

What was the Jewish perception of heaven in contrast to ours? Boy, it's a huge question, so I'm just going to do it really quickly, as usual. The word heaven simply means sky. One of its meanings is simply the sky.

On the other hand, when Solomon, for example, is praying his prayer, he's talking about the heavens and above the heavens, the heavens of the heavens, actually. So there's a recognition that there's something even more complex there. So that's point number one.

The second point is that most of what the Old Testament is saying to us is dealing with life here and now, and of course, Dr. Wilson's book makes that eminently clear. When they're talking about salvation and deliverance, it's in their lives now, and I suggested that with Job chapter 19 as well. Having said that, there are some places where the scriptures clearly talk about heaven.

Ezekiel sees into something that's the heavenly realms. We're going to come to it, I think, on Wednesday of next week, where Micaiah sees God in his heavenly throne. We saw it in the book of Job as well in the beginning chapters.

But, you know, we know precious little about it. In the intertestamental period, the whole idea of multiple layers or levels of heaven gets developed, and that actually underlies some of our New Testament thinking, I would suggest because Paul talks about the third level of heaven in 2 Corinthians 12, and that's linked right in with 2 Enoch and some of that intertestamental stuff. But that's my quick answer for you.

And in some ways, that's a good question because that might help us understand a little bit. The author of this book is just doing what the rest of the people do, which is to focus on life here and now, and yet he knows that these are gifts of God, and so there's something else going on. You know, it might be better to simply translate that under the heavens thing as a parallel to under the sun, under the sky, since Shemiah means sky as well as heaven.

Coming back to the original part of my answer to you, it's a much more complicated thing, and I probably haven't done it justice, but there we are. Let's talk a little bit about structure of this book. As I mentioned a moment ago, that expression, habel habelim, kind of bookends the book, and that's helpful to know.

Prior to that, you have a prologue, chapter 1, verse 1. The words of the teacher or the preacher, we're going to talk about what that might mean in a moment, our son of David came in Jerusalem, which could refer to Solomon. Say more about that a little bit later on. And as you go to chapter 12, after that particular habel habelim, we have an epilogue, and it talks about Kohelet's wisdom.

It has that verse I just read to you about study wearying the body. And then it's got verses 13 and 14, which are important because we're going to return to them in a moment. All has been heard.

Here's the conclusion. Fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of humankind.

God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. So, it's kind of a challenge about judgment. And again, I'm going to return to that in a moment, but that's part of the epilogue.

Also, as we think of this framework and its structure, and this bookends idea, as I go on to suggest to you, the poem in chapter 1, following verse 2, brings up the agony, the repetitiousness, the apparent monotony of life, and the hard work and labor that's part of it. Again, that reflects what we have in Genesis. Likewise, at the end of the book, one of the most poignant poems in all of Scripture is in chapter 12, verses 1 through 8. Well, 7, excuse me.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and then what shows up next? Do you remember that poem when you read it? What does the poem describe? The author's been talking about death all the way through, and now what does he do in this short, as I said, really compelling, poignant, heartbreaking poem? Let me read it for you. Remember your creator. Before the sun and the light of the moon and the stars grow dark, verse 3, when the keepers of the house tremble, and strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, those looking through the windows grow dim, the doors to the street are closed, and the sound of grinding fades.

What's going on there? Is he just chattering away about grinding and windows and lattices and all that sort of stuff? Shake your head no if you think no. Nod your head yes if you think yes. Most of you are doing little infinitesimal no's.

And you're right. Something else is going on. This is a metaphor, isn't it? And it's a metaphor for the absolute dissolution of the human body in old age right before you die.

And so, this person can't see anymore, can't hear, and the noise of the street is going down.

Deafness is setting in. No teeth. Grinders are few.

The limbs don't hold you up anymore. You're bent over, stooped. So, as you read that poem, you're seeing this incredible description of how death is nibbling slowly away at this person before it finally takes him in his entirety.

And we have that last statement before the silver cord is severed and the golden bowl is broken before the pitcher is shattered at the spring or the wheel is broken at the well.

And the dust returns to the ground from which it came. Genesis all over again. Chapter three.

So, do you see how the structure even of this book as a whole is going to bookend and help us to think a little bit about mortality and the effects of the impact of the curse and the results of sin on humankind? So that's helpful. Beyond that, we have something I've mentioned already in terms of our structure. There is this constant, and I'm calling it a constant, constant counterpoint between life under the sun on the one hand.

And I've said enough about that, so I think you get where I'm going with that, and then you recognize that God is giving so much, so much, and such richness, too, when you stop and think about it. God's gifts and his presence.

And, of course, in chapter five, we'll say a little bit more about the presence of God. All right, but that's the second thing we want to think of structurally. I've also mentioned the importance of repetitions.

It doesn't just say the whole thing once. It keeps coming back to the fact there's work. It's toil and labor, but it's a gift of God.

There's work. You work for your money. You're going to have to give it to somebody else.

Toil and labor. But, you know, these things are a gift of God. So, get the sense of repetitions.

They're there for a reason. And it also gives us, as I indicate, the unity that we experience in our lives. You know, we go through things over and over again.

Sometimes, we have to learn our lessons multiple times, and we live in this world with the kinds of things that are part of being sinful human beings. Having said that, the repetitions don't just whine on endlessly. And here's what I mean by slow evolution of thought, if this will make sense for you.

When you first start out, the author of Ecclesiastes is finding this stuff hebel, and he says so. But the next time you read the book, look for the increasing occurrence of the expression grievous evil. It shows up in chapter 4, and it's going to kind of be there as a powerful thing.

He gets a bigger sense as life goes on that there's something really evil about this stuff, too. So, there's an evolution of thought. And I would suggest that it happens particularly in relationship to his coming into the presence of God, which is chapter 5. Not central to the book, but sort of central to the book.

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools. But coming into God's presence is going to kind of drive this sense of the author's perception that there are some things that are really radically wrong.

Evil is the word he uses. The Hebrew word *ra* which simply means sin, evil, or that which is bad. It doesn't mean sin, sorry; it means evil.

The other thing that's very interesting and paradoxical, having said all that, I'm trying to get you to think of the ponderous, painful nature of evil. The other side of it is once you get towards the end of the book, especially in chapter 10, but a little bit of chapter 11 as well, there's almost a lighthearted presentation of his thinking. He's coming through with some proverbs that sound like the book of Proverbs, and they even have some funny aspects to them, such as observations about nature.

It's almost as if the author is kind of coming to grips with these things that are troubling him so much and recognizing that even in the midst of all of this weight that he's bearing, there's a place for good humor. There's a place for just observing life as it is. And sometimes, when you have a mature look on life, and I haven't gotten there yet, but I'm hoping that I get there at some point, when you get a real mature look on some of the frustrating things of life, you can actually see the funny side of them, even though they are painful.

People who have a gift of a sense of humor are blessed in that way. All right, so you get some sort of a sense of the structure here. There are different structural things that are part of this, framework, repetitions, conceptual developments, and then also an ongoing, I would say, maturing of his thoughts and perceptions.

Well, having said all that, who wrote this book anyway? How many of you think of Solomon? Why? Susanna, why? Son of David, king in Jerusalem, perhaps, right? And certainly, you know, when you read chapter two, it sounds like Solomon. He gets a harem. He builds all sorts of things.

Sounds like Solomon, possibly. Yeah, Nick. Yeah, he certainly has a sense of wisdom, and of course, that's one of the big Ws that we associated with Solomon.

And this is somebody who is pursuing wisdom, this Kohelet guy, right? *Kahal* is a Hebrew word that means congregation, and so a Kohelet is somebody who

addresses a congregation, apparently. So, some of your translations are going to call teacher. Some of them are going to call him preacher.

I'll just throw this out there, and you can do with it what you like. Maybe it has absolutely no significance whatsoever, but Kohelet is a feminine form of a noun, just for kicks, right? Son of David, king in Jerusalem, ruling over Israel, which implies united monarchy, because remember, after Solomon's time, we have a divided kingdom. We're going to see that on Monday when we start chatting together, all right? Great wisdom, great wealth, great building projects, great all these things.

Lifestyle sounds like Solomon. And verse 9 says I set, sorry, he; this is our third-person epilogue, set in order with many proverbs. Well, how many proverbs did Solomon write? Do you remember? 3,000, right.

So, it certainly sounds like Solomon. Now let me just lob this out there, and I'm not going to pressure you, press this on you. But the language of this text is very unusual.

The Hebrew language is very unusual. It doesn't really fit linguistically with some of the other Hebrew that we're aware of that would be earlier. And so, some people suggest, well, it's later than that, and it's somebody representing himself as if he is Solomon.

We're clearly supposed to be thinking of Solomon. That's a done deal. We're supposed to be thinking of Solomon.

That's pretty clear. But there are those who suggest it's written later and written as someone who is helping us to see the frustrations of Solomon, particularly in his later life. I mean, this sounds like Solomon is an old man who has made some really dumb mistakes and realizes it and knows that his pursuits of wisdom in some of these areas, such as the rather flagrant enjoyment of life, just weren't the right things to be doing.

If it's Solomon, why does he call himself Kohelet? I don't have an answer for that. I'm just sort of laying it out there for you. Again, if we've got somebody who was king of Israel, why label him as Kohelet, one who addresses the congregation either as a preacher or a teacher? It's an interesting issue.

I'm going to just leave it as a question because we need to be moving on. But again, feminine noun form for whatever that's worth. Here's the human crisis and here's kind of our summary of the kinds of things I've just been saying.

Now, we're just going to boil it all down into about four bullets in terms of how this theme keeps recurring throughout the book. First of all, Kohelet recognizes that the more you know, the more pain you have. Chapter 1, verse 18.

With much wisdom comes much... Well, the NIV says sorrow, but you know what? That's too soft. It's your garden-variety word for anger. With much wisdom comes much anger.

The more knowledge, the more pain. And you know that. If you watch the news, for example, and see what's going on around the world, these are painful things to bear.

It's a lot easier to just put our albatross heads in the sand and not even pay attention to it because sometimes you just get overwhelmed with the horror of the evil that's going on. Kohelet's exactly right. The more wisdom, the more pain, the more anger.

Anger at evil, especially. That which is indeed deemed substantial, as I've tried to say earlier, is really just hebel. It's here and gone.

Death is going to end it. And, of course, he has some things to say about death leveling everybody. No difference between the wise and the fool.

No difference between the righteous and the wicked when you get right down to the point of death. So, just these four things are kind of categories in which we can talk about substantial things. Everything you work hard for.

All those grades that you're just slaving to get so that you can get a good transcript so that you can get into graduate school so that you can get a good job so that you can make a lot of money so that you can retire comfortably. Hebel. That's what the author is saying.

It's all hebel. Pleasure. He explores pleasure with all his energy.

It's hebel. It's here and gone—even relationships.

Chapter 7, verses 26 through 28. Kohelet has had it with women. Now you might understand why if this is Solomon.

He hasn't developed a very close relationship, but you know, he's got a pained view of women and relationships. This is not the only place, but it's one of the places where it comes through with a fair amount of bitterness, actually.

Lack of personal importance. Nobody's going to remember you. There might be a tombstone, but so what? Very few people look at those anymore.

By the way, the study of epitaphs is a fascinating one. I hope you'll do it sometime. But that's a side track.

Mortality. Death is inevitable. Issue of uncertainty.

All this stuff keeps bothering us. So, this is a crisis. This is an existential crisis if you want to put it that way.

Worse yet, there's injustice. Lots of injustice. Not just Chapter 4, by the way.

These passages I've given you are simply representative samples. It's not an exhaustive listing. The injustice is pretty clear in Chapter 5, as well.

Chapter 8, too. Well, remember our conceptual parallelism. That's the human crisis.

But we also have the counterpoint. What God has given. And what God has given has got to be in our minds when we are overwhelmed, possibly to the point of depression, with these human crises.

God gives the perception of continuity. Stability. That's necessary in a world that feels like it's falling apart sometimes.

And in Chapter 3, and probably the poem that we know best, a time for everything. There's a time for everything. A season for every activity under heaven.

Now, I'm not going to pick this poem apart right now. I would invite you to take wisdom literature, because we'll spend a lot of time with Ecclesiastes. But in this poem, we have some very interesting things.

There's stability there. A time for this, a time for that. And those are counterpoints.

But don't think they're predictable counterpoints. It's not like that which is good, as I always mentioned first, and that which is bad, as I always mentioned last. There are places where they turn around a little bit.

So even with the stability that we have, and the assurance that God gives that, there's still a kind of a lovely unpredictability about it. And then, of course, Chapter 3, after the poem, in verse 11, God has made everything, well, yophe, nice, beautiful in its time. He set eternity in the hearts of humankind.

Now, that's something that is really profoundly meaningful. We have that compulsion in us to know beyond what we can know, to seek beyond what we can have, and to strive to know God. He set Olam, eternity, in our hearts.

But, of course, what does the second half of the verse say? It recognizes, again, our finitude, doesn't it? Yet, they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end, which is just as well. But God has given these things. They're tremendous gifts.

He's given enjoyment. The author of Ecclesiastes, Kohelet, enjoys life. He tells us to as well.

Yes, there have been some really vexatious things, but there are also some things to enjoy, and he certainly has enjoyed getting to know a lot. He enjoys work and pleasure, even after he says that they're hebel. Let me read these verses.

A man can do nothing better than to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in his work. It's from the hand of God. Without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? And relationships.

This is probably the best known. Most people try to avoid chapter seven with that bitterness that comes through in chapter seven, and instead, look at verses nine through 12 of chapter four. Two are better than one.

If one falls down, his friend can help him up. If two lie down together, they'll keep warm. Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.

It's good to have somebody to be with for all these different reasons. Relationships are important, and Kohelet recognizes that they are gifts from God. And then here, of course, is the rather interesting aspect of all this.

Something that's a little counterintuitive. Most of us are scared to death of judgment, and we ought to be. And yet, as this book moves towards its closure, already in chapter 11, he's going to say, be aware that there's a judgment coming.

And then, at the closure passage I read a moment ago, God will bring all things to judgment. The end of the matter is fear the Lord and keep his commandments, because he's going to bring things to judgment. And you're thinking, so what's so good about that message? Well, I'll tell you.

If he has observed injustice, and he has, because we read about it throughout this book, if he's observed the kinds of things of the finitude of humanity and the fact that there's all that frustration bound in that, everything's going to be set right. Everything's going to be set right. And so that's the hope.

As we make our way through this life that's so fraught with tension and stress and trial, there's hope in God's judgment because it's going to be a perfect judgment. And, of course, it's going to reestablish shalom, which, if you had been here last year for our convocation theme, you would know is the right order of things. All right, any questions before we move on? I think our next thing is Song of Songs.

Yes. Any questions on Ecclesiastes before we move on to Song of Songs? I know I've done this really, really fast. I'm aware of that.

But we have to give fair shake to Song of Songs, too. My last exhortation to you about Ecclesiastes is make a note to yourself at the beginning of the book. Write it in, that you're at least going to think about translating that meaningless phrase for yourselves next time you read it as elusive or transient.

Just try it. It might change how you think about it. Well, from there, we go to Song of Songs, which, in Hebrew, when you have this of that, like heavens of the heavens, song of songs, song of songs means the best song.

It's a way of saying superlative, the best song. And interestingly enough, if you've read Dr. Wilson on the stuff that you're supposed to read, you're aware that these five little books, Song of Songs is one of them, that are towards the end of the Hebrew Bible, they're called the five Megillot, the five scrolls, they're read at the festival times. And interestingly enough, Song of Songs is read at Passover, which is forthcoming fairly soon.

I think it's April, what, 20? No, that's earlier than that. Well, watch your calendar. Passover's coming soon.

Why, first of all, is this the best song? And why is it read at Passover, of all things? That's not a rhetorical question. I'm interested in your response. What makes this the best song? Go ahead, Susanna.

That's one way of reading it, that indeed this is a figuring, let's call it that, of God's love for Israel. And from the New Testament perspective, Christ's love for the church. That's one of the ways, in fact, for centuries, that this book was interpreted, for reasons we'll get to in a little bit.

And certainly, that's going to have some impact in terms of our Passover connection, isn't it? Because Passover and Mount Sinai two are related, and what happens at Mount Sinai? I think I heard it. The law is given, which means what? Covenant is established, and of course, what are we to see in that establishment of God's covenant for his people? The law is his expression of love, isn't it? The covenant establishes a relationship, and so often, God and his people are viewed as a marriage covenant. And human marriage, in some ways, is supposed to be a little tiny picture of that relationship between God and his people as well.

And we see it in Christ and the church later on. So yeah, that's a possibility. Is that the only reason it's the best song? Do you suppose Israelites and Jews were always reading this? They have been for a long time, by the way, because there are some very early rabbinic interpreters who read it exactly that way.

Most notably I think it's in chapter 2 where it talks about, My dove who is hid in the cleft of the rock. Do you remember reading that? My dove who is hid in the cleft of the rock is read as Israel at Mount Sinai, waiting for God's revelation. Or it also mentions the chariots of Pharaoh as well, and so that's giving it some sort of an Egypt connection.

Why else might this be the best song? Maybe I should ask it this way. How many of you have, in your youth group or your church or whatever, had sermons or presentations or studies of this book? Oh, good. Some of you are daring to raise your hand just a little bit.

Mary, what did that study focus on? Yeah, and sexuality, right? And Song of Songs is not ashamed of that issue and that topic and those expressions. Song of Songs is a celebration of human sexuality, and one of the fascinating things about it when you read this text, who's doing a lot of the talking and approach? It's the woman's voice, isn't it? You know, this is a mutual relationship in terms of sexual expression. Well, let's get on with that by doing a couple more things.

We do want to talk about the problem of how on earth to interpret this thing because for centuries, it's made people a little bit nervous. In fact, if your parents were in the church, I bet they rarely had any presentation of Song of Songs other than the first one, which is the allegorical one, which simply takes the lover on the one hand and reads that as God and then takes the beloved on the other hand and reads that as God's people, and then this is a beautiful picture, and there's no question about it. You know, it's a beautiful picture, the love relationship between God and his people, but it ceases to do anything with it other than that particular thing.

Now, I'm going to come back to that in a moment because I'm not in any way trying to completely rule that out, but I think we need to read it with some other suggestions as well. Earlier on in the last century, there were people who read it as sort of a ritual drama. In other words, this was a way that as you came into a worship, ritual, or cultic context, you expressed love for the deity.

And, of course, basically, what's this saying? It's saying that Israel's being influenced by a lot of this outside cultural stuff. In some ways, those two go together, and yet they really don't. I'm going to come back to the second one and look at it in a different context in a couple of minutes.

Third one, you know what? This is where I'm going to land, and this is where most people are landing right now in terms of how to interpret this. They are exquisite love poetry. Exquisite love poetry, and we're going to talk about its characteristics in a moment, expresses the heights of sexual enjoyment.

There's no shame about sex in this whole thing. And then maybe that has some overtones or some hints in terms of symbolizing, in some ways, the relationship between God and his people. What we do want to keep in mind as you read this book is that the garden is very important.

End of Chapter 4, going into Chapter 5, a little bit more in Chapter 6. In other words, pretty centrally located in the book is the garden, which is at first locked and guarded. Gardens back then had walls around them, okay? Representative of the young woman's virginity. And then the lover is allowed into that garden.

Very clear sexual overtones in the imagery that's there. But the key thing here is, it's hidden, it's protected. What else do I say? Hidden, protected, and intimate.

And sensuous. Again, start reading with Chapter, I think it's 4, Verse 12. The imagery there is intended to appeal to all of the senses because sexual expression is a very, well, it's a whole-body experience.

You can't get away from it. That's why that chorus keeps saying, be careful not to arouse love before it's time. Because, of course, it does otherwise whisk you away and swoop you up into dangerous territory.

I don't think we're also supposed to be ignorant of the connection with Genesis Chapter 2. I think we're supposed to be thinking of Adam and Eve in their pristine innocence and the intimacy that they had at the end of Chapter 2 in the garden as God gave them to one another. So, keep those kinds of things in mind. What's not in the song? Well, I mean, there are a lot of things not in the song, but two things in terms of our interpretive issue.

Did you read the name of God there? No. There may be a little allusion to Yahweh when it's talking about a mighty flame in the last chapter, but that's a stretch. God is not named in this song.

And there's no religious stuff in this song. No temple, no priesthood, no sacrifices, none of that is in this song. It's a very human expression.

If I can tie it all together, we're going to come back to why that's probably the case a little bit later on. Are we good so far? All right. Well, okay, I'm suggesting that this is basically a wonderful, wonderful portrayal of sexual love.

How is it described? Well, each of them describes each other with lots and lots of imagery, lots of imagery. I'm going to show you a little picture in a moment to look at some of that imagery. But they're looking at this beloved, and words aren't adequate.

If you really love somebody, words are not adequate to describe. Oh, your eyes are nice. Oh, your eyes are beautiful.

So what? Tell me something else. They're pushing the limits to try and get some way of expressing how absolutely, overwhelmingly beautiful this person is. And so, here's a whole list of stuff.

This gets wonderful here. Elaborate bird and animal imagery. You know, we don't exactly get turned on by somebody saying, your hair reminds me of a flock of goats coming down from Gilead.

And yet, if you've seen a flock of goats coming down a mountainside, how they just sort of wind and sinuously twist down, and I should have put a picture in here, but I didn't. You know, that gives you a little bit of a sense of the beauty of long, black, gorgeous hair just streaming down. Floral patterns, jewelry, spices, and choice foods, notably honey, milk, and wine.

Sun, moon, and stars. Even invoking those astronomical bodies to try and say something about how beautiful this person is. And even geographical references.

Gilead, Lebanon, Tirzah. Oh, no, you mean I have to know where those are? Notice even the Song of Songs, however, is located in a place, and it's drawing on the imagery that people would know. And Getty, that's in the Song of Songs.

Places that people knew. And then, of course, emphasis on the fruitfulness of nature because fertility is part of the issue here. When two people get together sexually, there's going to be some offspring.

And so, the fruitfulness of nature has some interesting symbolic overtones with this. Lots of outdoor imagery. I talked about the garden a moment ago.

And that garden is a secure place. And that's important to know. And the text is getting this across.

It doesn't talk about walls in the garden. It talks about a gate. And the *pardes*, the garden back then, did have walls.

We know that from looking at the wider cultural context. I mentioned the description of the beloved, who's in the cleft of the rock, a dove in the cleft of the rock. Again, security in that context, bless you.

And then, of course, the tower as well. You know, towers are not just towers. Towers are there because they're security installations.

That's important. Well, here is our imagery, and we're not going to spend a lot of time on it.

Probably in the back, you can't even read this stuff. But you know how beautiful you are. Your eyes are like doves behind your veil.

Well, here's a little dove right there. Your hair is like a flock of goats. Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn ewes.

All the little animals are now just without their wool. Your neck is like the Tower of David, built on rows of stones. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.

Your lips drip honey. Well, that's not exactly very nice, is it? And so forth and so on. Don't need to spend much time.

Oh, pomegranates. These are pomegranate temples. That's pretty cool, too. Just an interesting exercise in reading literally.

Now, let's get on to a couple more things. What are the purposes of this book? Is it just to celebrate sexual love? That might be a big part of it.

But might there be something else going on as well? No question. This is here. Unlike centuries of Christendom, which tried to downplay the importance of sexuality, Song of Songs makes it clear that intimate sexual expression is indeed a gift of God.

No question about it. But here's the other thing: This is something that's been suggested by a guy named George Schwab, and I think he's really on to something here. This book focuses on intimacy and privacy in terms of this wonderful sexual expression, and that may be intended as a polemic.

What's a polemic? We have to define our word here. What's a polemic? Yeah, it's basically an argument against. It comes from a Greek word, which means war.

Okay, so it's verbal warfare if you will. It's an argument against what was going on in the wider culture, which, as you know, was using sex in a very public prostitution way. Baal worship, you'd have those kinds of things going on, and that was part of invoking Baal's own presence and provision of fertility and agricultural stuff and all that.

The suggestion is that maybe this book is intended to privatize, probably shouldn't use that term that way, but to express how sexuality ought to be used and take it out of this rampant, sacred prostitution stuff that was going on that might be one of the

reasons why there's no ritual language in it—making sure that there's no connections between what's going on in this celebration of human, intimate, wonderful love, gift of God, and appealing to God to try and invoke his presence in any way. So maybe that's why his name's not there. Maybe that's why you don't have any of that other ritual kind of language.

It also celebrates physical beauty. Again, ways we might not use in our contemporary expression, but it does in a remarkable way.

And it recognizes that love is threatened. There are some points in this psalm when things get a little bit tenuous, as the beloved is feeling that her lover isn't there. She's seeking for him.

Other people come in. The watchmen the second time around are a little bit of a problem. So, some threats are posed and understood.

Well, let me take three more things. Chapter 8, verses 6 and 7, is a wonderful passage. You can read it on your own.

What this book does is demonstrate the power of love. And as I said a moment ago, how do you express that in words? It's really difficult. But it's really pushing the edge to try and do it.

The power of love means there's overwhelming attraction. Let me read that last passage for you, and then we'll stop. Love is as strong as death.

It's jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame, or the flame of Yah, maybe. Many waters cannot quench love.

Rivers can't wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned. All right, we need to stop with that because it's 10 past.

It's Friday. Shabbat shalom.